

# The Sahel: A region of constant instability

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**L**OCATED between the Sahara Desert to the north and the more humid regions of West Africa to the south, the strip of land known as the Sahel encompasses several countries, each with its own cultural, political and environmental characteristics, and its own historical and social context. Africa faces numerous and varied threats with a wide range of causes and consequences, particularly in the Sahel region. Let us attempt to briefly and concisely break down those that are considered most relevant.

First of all, we could mention the exponential growth of terrorism and organised crime, which have spread throughout all the Sahelian countries, leading to an increase in human trafficking, greater movement in terms of arms trafficking and a significant rise in armed incidents. A clear example of this is what is happening in Mali, where Al Qaeda terrorists, through their franchise for the Sahel, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), have been systematically attacking the tanker trucks that supply fuel to Bamako, the capital. The attacks, which include the burning of trucks escorted by military forces, occur almost every day. This fuel is imported by road from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania and Guinea. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are among the ten countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.

Coups d'état have significantly increased in recent years as a result of the challenging issue of lack of governance (Mali, Burkina

Faso, Guinea Conakry, Niger, Sudan, etc.), a high percentage of them leading to a change of political regime. This has led to serious internal conflicts for very young and inherently unstable democracies, giving rise to a multitude of different political leaders vying for power and creating a microcosm of factions unable to reach an agreement. Repeated and constant elections are not always sufficiently democratic and transparent. A clear example of this is the Central African Republic (CAR), where a crucial presidential election was held on 28 December 2025, the first since 1988. President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who was running for a third term, won by a large majority. However, the opposition denounced the results, describing them as election fraud. Following the imprisonment of numerous candidates throughout the campaign, the main opposition party (BRDC) boycotted the election on the grounds of oppressive government practices. Nevertheless, the Observer Mission of the African Union (AU) highlighted in its initial assessment that voting took place peacefully and in line with international standards.

**Exponential growth in terrorism and organised crime leads to an increase in human and arms trafficking**



Marco Dormino/UN

Cameroon, for its part, held elections on 12 October 2025, the results being announced on 27 October. According to the official results released by the Constitutional Council, 92-year-old Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon since 1982 and a candidate for re-election, was proclaimed the winner of the presidential election, sparking serious protests with the number of casualties yet to be determined.

Continuing with the analysis of conflicting situations, it should be noted that the Sahel is also a meeting point for different ethnic groups and cultures. The Tuareg, Fulani and Soninke are just some of the communities that live in this region. Each of these communities has its own traditions, languages and lifestyles, making it sometimes difficult for them to live together within borders that were established without considering these differences. Furthermore, the population of the Sahel countries, predominantly young and with a high demographic growth rate, represents both an opportunity and a challenge because, although it could become a driver of change and development, it also exacerbates problems such as resource scarcity, unemployment, inter-ethnic tensions, precarious socio-economic conditions and a lack of opportunities. Due to this, the Sahel has become a fertile ground for violent extremism, leading many young people to join armed groups. These groups often exploit already-existing tensions between different communities, triggering violent cycles that are difficult to end.

On the other hand, the Sahel has a predominantly arid and semi-arid climate. Water scarcity is one of the main challenges in the region. These endemic problems have been exacerbated by climate change, which is becoming a key destabilising factor, while droughts are becoming more frequent and severe, endangering the food security and livelihoods of millions of people. This region thus faces a double challenge: adapting to current weather conditions and getting ready for a future where these might get even worse.

In short, it could be said that the future of the region is being shaped by several destabilising factors: violent extremism marked by terrorism, political instability, inter-ethnic tensions, a predominantly young population with no clear future, socio-economic inequality, and an increasingly adverse climate that hinders sustainable development.

In 1993, British economist Richard M. Auty coined the term 'resource curse' to describe how resource-rich countries often develop more slowly, corruptly and violently. The Sahel has abundant mineral resources, but these have rarely been able to drive economic development.

#### **EXTERNAL ACTORS**

In addition to these threats, inherent to the countries comprising the Sahel, there are also external actors exercising varying degrees of influence over the region's political leaders. Broadly speaking, these



actors are countries such as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. The downsizing of Western presence, visibly evidenced by France's withdrawal or even by the United States' retreat from certain areas, has created a vacuum that has been quickly exploited by other powers to establish themselves on the front lines as essential collaborators with Sahelian governments.

Let us recall the withdrawal of US troops from their bases in Niger in April 2023. This withdrawal was conducted at the request of the country's ruling military junta, which seized power in a coup in July 2023, despite significant diplomatic efforts by Biden administration officials to maintain the two US bases on Nigerien soil. This movement took place after French troops left the country at the end of 2023.

The increasingly frequent military coups across the Sahel have disrupted Western counter-terrorism efforts, opening the door to the deployment of Russian mercenaries. Dozens of them arrived in Niger in 2024, repeating a pattern previously seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, where agents from the Wagner mercenary group (Africa Corps) descended on both countries shortly after France's withdrawal.

Russia has continued to increase its presence and economic commitment to the Sahel juntas (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso). A clear example of this is the meeting held by Malian junta leader Assimi Goïta with Russian President Vladimir Putin and other officials during his trip to Moscow in June 2025. Mali and Russia signed several agreements during this visit, including some on nuclear energy

cooperation and trade. Burkina Faso also signed an agreement with Russia on nuclear energy cooperation. This country has been working with the Russian state-owned nuclear energy company Rosatom since 2023 to build a power plant in Burkina Faso.

These agreements are the first major commitments between the Juntas and Russia since the foreign ministers of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)) met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in April 2025. The AES is a pro-Russian economic, military and political bloc that the Kremlin wants to use as a model and a means across the continent to draw other states in West Africa and the Sahel into Russia's sphere of influence. Within this dynamic, states such as Chad, Sudan and Togo are showing signs of rapprochement with Moscow as they grow closer to the AES. Russia is trying to supplant Western presence and influence in Africa through the AES, establishing itself as a revitalised great power by focusing its efforts on defence and security cooperation and attempting to replace existing Western military partnerships with AES states.

However, Russian trade and investment continue to lag behind those of China and EU member states, and this situation is likely to continue given the downward projections for the Russian economy. Nuclear energy projects aim to demonstrate that Russia can address Africa's energy needs, seeking to position itself on a par with other great powers such as China and the collective West. It remains to be seen if something as complex as a nuclear power plant can be feasible and sustainable in countries with limited technological and logistical capacity.

We have seen how Russia's influence is focused primarily on providing military and security assistance. China, in turn, has devoted itself to increasing its interests and influence in the socio-economic, financial and infrastructure spheres.

Beijing is very interested in mining activities in this region; an example of this is the Ganfeng Lithium company, currently working on lithium extraction at the Goulamina mine (Mali). Although the Malian authorities have tightened measures since the coup d'état with new provisions in the mining sector (the state must own up to 30% of the shares of each mine; all taxes have been increased significantly; and every company must deposit its earnings in a bank account in Mali), this Chinese company, which had already invested more than €100 million, continues with its mining operations. Assimi Goïta has described Beijing as a "strategic and sincere part-

ner that has significantly aided Mali in its pursuit of economic and political sovereignty".

On the other hand, Chinese interests in Mali's gold mines have also increased significantly since Goïta took office, displacing major Canadian and Australian-owned corporations such as Barrick Gold and Resolute Mining. There is already a noticeable Chinese presence in Bamako, the capital, particularly in the Niarela neighbourhood, as well as in the gold-bearing regions in the west and south of the country (the Kita region, 190 km west of Bamako, and the Kéniéba region, close to the border with Guinea).

At the same time, China's economic expansion has also kept a watchful eye on neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso. In the latter case, the government has granted prospection licences to Chinese company Yunhong International Holdings for the extraction of gold, copper and nickel from three mining areas: Somanguina, Paspanga, and Yelemassé.

In Niger, China is taking advantage of France's departure to squeeze into a strategic sector that is necessary for its development: uranium. Eager to expand its nuclear power plants, the demand for this material has grown exponentially, prompting a need for new supply chains. Nigerien officials announced that Azelik mining company (Somina) would resume its activities after ten years of inactivity due to the fall in world uranium prices. The mine is majority-owned by the China

National Nuclear Corporation.

As in Mali, Niger wants to review the exploitation of its raw materials by foreign companies. In June and July 2024, Niger revoked the operating licences of France's Orano and Canada's GoviEx for the Madaouéla and Imouraren mines. With 200,000 tonnes of reserves, Imouraren is considered one of the largest uranium deposits in the world.

Likewise, Türkiye is emerging as a significant player as a result of its active expansion, primarily concentrated in three areas: diplomacy, security and economy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has turned his attention to Africa, positioning Türkiye as an alternative to the traditional great powers (the United States, France, Russia and China) in terms of development, alliance building and military cooperation. It has thus become a major arms supplier, focusing its exports on drones and small arms, and its military presence (Turkish Armed Forces and private military companies) has expanded rapidly.

## **Russia has increased its presence and economic commitment to the military juntas in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso**

## ANALYSIS

According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute for 2024, Türkiye is on a par with Russia as the third largest arms supplier to West Africa. Military drones are central to this effort, Baykar Technology being Türkiye's leading drone manufacturer. Eighteen African states, more than half of them in North Africa and the Sahel, operate with Turkish combat drones. Ethiopia and Libya have used these drones in civil wars, and similar deployments in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel cannot be ruled out.

### ACTIONS BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The instability in the area has prompted various meetings in international forums to address the situation in the Sahel. The third ministerial meeting between the European Union and the African Union took place in May 2025, serving as a preparatory meeting for the summit held in November 2025. The foreign ministers of the two organisations met to take stock of the progress made since the sixth EU-AU summit in February 2022. During the meeting, they exchanged views on the EU-AU partnership and on how to further strengthen cooperation in the historic year that marked the 25th anniversary of their long-standing and special partnership. Discussions focused on peace, security and governance; multilateralism; prosperity; people, migration and mobility.

The meeting was co-chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Angola, Tete António, who is also Chairman of the AU Executive Council. One of the main conclusions of this meeting was that Africa is a geopolitical priority for the EU at a time of increased geopolitical volatility. The EU and Africa can wield considerable political and economic clout if they act together. For most African countries, the EU and its member states are still the leading trading partner, the top investor and the major donor of humanitarian and official development aid, with €309 billion in foreign direct investment in Africa in 2022.

The year 2025 marked the 25th anniversary of the EU-AU partnership, a crucial year for testing its validity and strength. Against this backdrop of political instability, insecurity and economic hardship, the Sahel Governance Forum emerged as a critical platform for reshaping governance and promoting long-lasting solutions in the region. It was organised in collaboration with the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation (GJF), the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel (OSCDs) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The forum was presented as a turning point and a change of narrative that no longer sees the Sahel as a problem to be solved from outside but instead recognises it as a sub-region that can shape its own future. The Sahel Governance Forum is therefore making a defiant stand for inclusive governance, institutional strengthening and sustainable peace.



In this regard, hosting the Forum in The Gambia was highly symbolic, given the country's autocratic past. In recent years, The Gambia has emerged as a clear example of democratic renewal. Its peaceful transition of power in 2017 highlighted the supremacy of dialogue over violence. In Banjul, the region was reminded of what is possible when democracy is protected and nurtured, which is the clear objective of this Forum.

### CONCLUSION

The Sahel is a region of great importance to Western interests, where a number of intrinsic threats coexist alongside others imposed by external factors. Numerous and diverse external actors seek to exert their influence from different angles and with various objectives (as in the case of Russia and its military and security influence, or China, which is more focused on socio-economic issues).



Issiyou Djibo/EFE

Spain is not alien to these concerns, being one of the few nations that has shown great interest in trying to stabilise the region, highlighting the importance of the Sahel in all international forums in order to raise awareness among other European countries. With France's departure from this scenario, Spain is proving to be a reliable partner for the countries in the region, present as it is in multiple operations in the security and defence field. Examples include the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in the Central African Republic, EUTM in Somalia, and operational activities on the west coast of Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea. Within the framework of defence diplomacy, Spain has cooperat-

**It is imperative to have a comprehensive vision that tackles issues regarding education, governance and development**

ed on the African continent with military operations that contribute to Spanish foreign policy. This collaboration has mainly been reflected in the deployments of naval units that carry out maritime security and cooperative security operations with various West African countries. Countries such as Mauritania, Gabon, Ghana, Senegal and Cape Verde are clear examples of this contribution.

A military response alone is insufficient to effectively address the tensions present in this region. It is imperative to have a comprehensive vision that tackles issues regarding education, governance, development efforts and economic progress. The approach should not be from a 'Western' point of view, but rather take into account the idiosyncrasies, culture and traditions of the different peoples living in the Sahel, as well as their values and ways of thinking. In this respect, education and youth involvement are crucial, as is the participation of local communities, which is essential to ensure that these initiatives are effective and sustainable in the long term.

In several countries, young people have already voiced their discontent with the current state of affairs, and their protests have led to some notable political changes. The mobilisations of the so-called "Generation Z" around the world (Indonesia, Nepal, Morocco, Kenya, Peru, Bangladesh) are a factor to be taken into account for regional stability. However, they could also become a highly destabilising factor if the loss of educational opportunities, lack of prospects for the future, internal displacements due to the lack of resources and the growing poverty among families persist. The greatest risk is that this situation will encourage youth to engage in criminal activity and terrorism. The worsening of daily living conditions can only prolong the region's political and security crises and exacerbate its vulnerabilities.

However, not everything is negative, and there are signs indicating that improvement is possible. For example, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal have achieved significant economic growth in recent years. In order for the region's economic improvement to advance, external actors and international financial institutions need to consider the local context and the growing animosity towards externally driven interventions.

Cooperation should be based on prioritising investment and reform in education and vocational training, seeking a future for all those young people and stimulating the local economy (based on agricultural production, livestock farming and the sustainable exploitation of natural resources), thereby avoiding forced movements of people within the region and fostering hope for an attractive future.