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Yago Alonso-Alegre Sustacha\*

## Is the multiplicity of actors the fuel of the conflict in the Sahel?

### *Is the multiplicity of actors the fuel of the conflict in the Sahel?*

#### Abstract:

*The conflict in the Sahel is at a point where peace seems almost impossible. What started in 2012 with a Tuareg rebellion in the north of the country has turned into an all-out war, where the number of actors involved has multiplied over the years, due to their multiple interests in the region. The excessive number of these, local, state and international, has caused the conflict to drag on to the present day. All of them, each seeking their own ends, have made a peace agreement practically impossible, with no clear sides or common objectives.*

#### Keywords:

*Sahel, terrorism, interests, conflict, multiplicity of actors*

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## Introduction

The Sahel, that region to the south that seems so remote but which, on the contrary, is so close. That region is considered the southern flank of Europe. What happens there directly affects the European continent. The Sahel means ‘shore’ or ‘coast’ in Arabic. It is a semi-arid region linking the southern part of the Sahara Desert with the fertile territories of Sub-Saharan Africa. Although it is difficult to measure its exact extent, the Sahel is approximately 5,500 kilometers long and 400 kilometers wide<sup>1</sup>. This territory is home to more than 150 million people, approximately<sup>2</sup>, comprising a huge territory from Mauritania, in the far west of the African continent, to Eritrea in the far east.

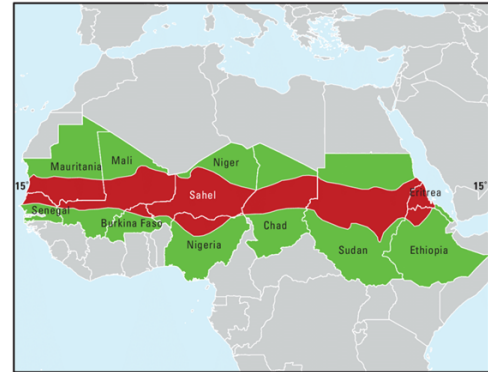


Fig. 1: El Sahel  
 Fuente: "Córdoba Global"

The Sahel is a complicated region, “a place characterized by largely Islamic nations, with weak governments and significant political disaffection, countries with vast borders and little security. In short, an extremely unstable area, where major governments struggle to exercise control and governance over the entire territory”<sup>3</sup>.

As mentioned above, the Sahel is a region of enormous importance to Spain and Europe, given its geographical proximity and their interests in the area. Everything that happens in the region affects the old continent almost directly.

Currently, the Sahel is suffering from a major conflict. It began in 2012 and has undergone many changes over the years, dragging on with no easy solution in sight. One of the main reasons for the complexity of this conflict is the large number of different actors involved.

<sup>1</sup> SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, P. “Sahel: ¡tormenta perfecta de amplitud e intensidad creciente!”, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2021. Disponible en: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8330775> Nota: todos los vínculos del presente documento activos a fecha de cierre del mismo, 9 de enero de 2025.

<sup>2</sup> ÇONKAR Ahmet Berat, “Development and security challenges in the Sahel Region”, Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM) NATO, 15 November 2020. Disponible en: <https://ahmetberatconkar.com/storage/2021/01/SAHEL-RAPOR.-Final-rev.-CHALLENGES-IN-THE-SAHEL-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> ECHARANDIO, Virginia Lastra. "La conflictividad en el Sahel: una amenaza para la seguridad de los países europeos." *Derecho y Cambio Social* 01/02/2016. Disponible en: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5456270>

This conflict does not extend across the entire Sahel (although the whole region is unstable) but is mainly centered on the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad, known as the Sahel G5<sup>4</sup> or institutional Sahel, and this analysis will focus on them.

This paper will discuss the different actors involved in this conflict, and, precisely, the existence of multiple actors exercising violence in the region has led to a complete de-monopoly of violence, where the state cannot maintain order or guarantee security for its population, leading to a cycle of destabilization, where insecurity results in poor governance, which affects economic development and generates further instability<sup>5</sup>.

### **The beginning of what did not end: the start of the conflict**

One of the most characteristic aspects of this situation is its immense complexity, which is the main reason for its duration. Over time, the conflict has changed and varied in its intensity. And, as previously mentioned, one of the most changing and complicated aspects of the conflict is the number of actors present, making the possibility of a stable, firm and lasting peace extremely difficult. Each actor operates with different objectives and interests, and ones who are allies today can become enemies tomorrow. However, although it has evolved into one of the most complex conflicts on Earth, it began in a “simpler” way, involving only two main actors: the Malian state and the Tuareg rebels. However, like almost every war, the one in the Sahel has deep historical precedents.

To understand the causes of the problem, it is necessary to go back to 22 September 1960—the date of Mali's independence from France. Since Mali's independence, the Tuareg community has staged several revolts to gain independence for what they call “Azawad”<sup>6</sup>: a territory in the north of Mali that occupies approximately two-thirds of the

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<sup>4</sup> INTERPOL, “Integration for Impact: INTERPOL and the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force – Police Component”. Disponible en: <https://www.interpol.int/es/Delitos/Terrorismo/Proyectos-de-lucha-contra-el-terrorismo/G5-Sahel>

<sup>5</sup> ALONSO-ALEGRE SUSTACHA, Yago, “El Sahel: ¿inestable por la existencia de un desmonopolio de la violencia?”, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE), (pendiente de publicación).

<sup>6</sup> NIEVAS, David. “Rebelión y Sharía en el Sahel: Una aproximación al estallido de la rebelión tuareg y la ocupación del norte de Mali por grupos yihadistas e islamistas armados”. UNISCI Discussion Papers, Universidad Autónoma Madrid. (2014). Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76729583008.pdf>

country (mainly the administrative regions of Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao), as well as a small part of Niger<sup>7</sup>. Despite its size, the region is home to only 10% of the Malian population.

Following Mali's independence and France's withdrawal, the territory where the Tuareg community is located came under the rule of what is now the State of Mali. The Tuareg, lacking representation in the new government formed by other communities and ethnic groups, did not accept its authority and staged several revolts throughout the second half of the 20th century. The Tuareg community became progressively isolated and marginalized by the government<sup>8</sup> with the government focusing its economic and development policies on the south of the country—partly due to better climatic conditions as it was further away from the desert, and partly because of continuing insurrections. However, despite its continuous failed revolts, the Tuareg community is today in the midst of a latest insurgency that has been going on since 2012 and seems different from the previous ones that led to its further isolation.

### Why is this latest revolt different?

Although the Tuareg community had been isolated and marginalized, Muammar Gaddafi saw it as an opportunity and welcomed the Tuaregs into his army<sup>9</sup>, where they received weapons and training. After the fall of Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011, the Tuaregs who had served in his ranks returned to Mali trained and with large quantities of weapons,

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<sup>7</sup> GAUTIER KOMENAN, D. G. "Azawad, medio siglo de independentismo tuareg". Un Continente en Transformación, Universidad de Valladolid, 2013. Disponible en: [https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/64009991/Libro\\_Africa-Enfoques-Interdisciplinarios-libre.pdf?1595609740=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DAfrica\\_Enfoques\\_Interdisciplinarios.pdf&Expires=1732014341&Signature=FOVG17gFADdlu8XLMZPV92d-Qhj-AyPzaDNIH0J7IrYTEv9RjBtOry8PxHP2Hb2vj7yC2QsvSAOzf-sWwGWSQatbYQb75rMDh4bjhbedb3DR8rgNXCXteA36WP0DznOqB4hovFjmtC8nUQTV-e6NcC5BMLAYy-DVBYkiHXjKY5YzivQcKlcl-HRwUTFjE9zqgFvoDCzj0zo35-jjg09bgQx2XIsxM112hIPZzrn8S-EA8LQZ25K1erpavdT BmXG3DHECellZgcncqTlwaJx82VNwfMasiZ7WQ80flpBqg6WJpSaV-UKY1KNO7trcuBW6w4mbYUaasfk3PEPKM5asGA\\_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA#page=67](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/64009991/Libro_Africa-Enfoques-Interdisciplinarios-libre.pdf?1595609740=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DAfrica_Enfoques_Interdisciplinarios.pdf&Expires=1732014341&Signature=FOVG17gFADdlu8XLMZPV92d-Qhj-AyPzaDNIH0J7IrYTEv9RjBtOry8PxHP2Hb2vj7yC2QsvSAOzf-sWwGWSQatbYQb75rMDh4bjhbedb3DR8rgNXCXteA36WP0DznOqB4hovFjmtC8nUQTV-e6NcC5BMLAYy-DVBYkiHXjKY5YzivQcKlcl-HRwUTFjE9zqgFvoDCzj0zo35-jjg09bgQx2XIsxM112hIPZzrn8S-EA8LQZ25K1erpavdT BmXG3DHECellZgcncqTlwaJx82VNwfMasiZ7WQ80flpBqg6WJpSaV-UKY1KNO7trcuBW6w4mbYUaasfk3PEPKM5asGA_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA#page=67)

<sup>8</sup> NIEVAS, David. "Rebelión y Sharía en el Sahel: Una aproximación al estallido de la rebelión tuareg y la ocupación del norte de Mali por grupos yihadistas e islamistas armados" UNISCI Discussion Papers, Universidad Autónoma Madrid. (2014). Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76729583008.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> DELMONTE, Luis Mesa. "El conflicto en Libia y su impacto sobre la crisis en Malí. La interconexión militar." Alter Enfoques Críticos, Junio 2013. Disponible en: [https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/38517322/ALTER7-libre.pdf?1440007937=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DCrisis\\_en\\_Africa\\_Occidental\\_Mali.pdf&Expires=1731502639&Signature=c1gdL-C5-TDMLVvCj8APb2v1IfvQfC1znH4U3TVL9jPsdSsBcuJKQk4FM-6WhPFZnraUP-jvSIY75-CWewJOSWTqxhabEceq-lkCldminGOHQ8~bQNLWeexCXZiX7txLT~J3bN~GOS9lqnkypIlszV3hpOUvMvTvEqyYCH3BfgeO6yf3e67fFY0UKjJhdkbvb4LxFzWgKi~mfqJwO6JfcgXnrq5LGH7xFhguA4VNBFqvGHBI7F-dbf1orFrf486sW7pWuPHZLkr2DeP85SnWFSbCcuVANokqDrMbkJRaPAwGdBMDir8LmcXRvnVlh1lbWpt-Bd~dcDlq5pZWrf3uqhA\\_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA#page=49](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/38517322/ALTER7-libre.pdf?1440007937=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DCrisis_en_Africa_Occidental_Mali.pdf&Expires=1731502639&Signature=c1gdL-C5-TDMLVvCj8APb2v1IfvQfC1znH4U3TVL9jPsdSsBcuJKQk4FM-6WhPFZnraUP-jvSIY75-CWewJOSWTqxhabEceq-lkCldminGOHQ8~bQNLWeexCXZiX7txLT~J3bN~GOS9lqnkypIlszV3hpOUvMvTvEqyYCH3BfgeO6yf3e67fFY0UKjJhdkbvb4LxFzWgKi~mfqJwO6JfcgXnrq5LGH7xFhguA4VNBFqvGHBI7F-dbf1orFrf486sW7pWuPHZLkr2DeP85SnWFSbCcuVANokqDrMbkJRaPAwGdBMDir8LmcXRvnVlh1lbWpt-Bd~dcDlq5pZWrf3uqhA_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA#page=49)

superior to those of the Malian army itself. The Tuareg rebels staged a new insurrection under the leadership of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)<sup>10</sup>. Subsequently, different actors with diverse interests entered the conflict, exponentially widening and complicating it. These actors can be categorized as non-state, state, and international actors.

## **Non-state actors.**

### ***Jihadist groups***

Jihadist groups in the Sahel region are particularly relevant due to their prominence and intense activity. They are a large part of the reason why the conflict has become so protracted and complicated, in addition to causing, like the other actors, numerous deaths, both among rivals and the population.

The jihadist groups involved in the conflict have their origins in the Algerian civil war of 1992. Following the Algerian authorities' decision to ban the political party of the Islamic Salvation Front, a radicalized faction founded the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1994. After years of fighting, the Algerian armed forces managed to expel the terrorist group from the country, forcing them to flee to the Sahel region.

There, due to the region's instability and poorly equipped security forces, they were able to operate more freely. There, the terrorist group, now GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), allied itself with the abundant organized crime in the area and exponentially increased its resources, operational capacity and territorial control, as well as its influence in the region. While the traffickers provided the terrorists with all the means necessary for their operations, the terrorists provided them with military capacity or even protection<sup>11</sup>.

The GSPC later became an Al-Qaeda affiliate, renaming itself AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). It began to prey on the local population, exploiting ethnic divisions, spreading hate speech and victimization, and promising them better living conditions.

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<sup>10</sup> SIMMS, Kiango D. "Mali: dos golpes de Estado en un contexto de inseguridad regional." Anuario en Relaciones Internacionales del IRI 2021. Disponible en: [https://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/bitstream/handle/10915/126685/Documento\\_completo.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/bitstream/handle/10915/126685/Documento_completo.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>11</sup> ÇONKAR Ahmet Berat, "Development and security challenges in the Sahel Region", Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM) NATO, 15 November 2020. Disponible en: <https://ahmetberatconkar.com/storage/2021/01/SAHEL-RAPOR.-Final-rev.-CHALLENGES-IN-THE-SAHEL-2.pdf>

When the Tuareg rebels under the MNLA rebelled against the Malian government to claim independence for 'Azawad', terrorist groups Ansar Dine and MUYAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa)—both offshoots of AQIM—joined the rebels to expel the Malian government from the region, strengthen their influence, and establish an emirate of its own<sup>12</sup>. This alliance proved superior to the state's own army, and cities such as Kidal and Galo quickly fell. However, when the MNLA rejected the implementation of Islamic law, the jihadist groups decided to put an end to the alliance.

Despite this rupture, jihadist groups continued to gain considerable influence in the region, allying themselves with various local tribes and ethnic groups, sometimes providing the population with more or less basic state services, such as healthcare, mobile telephony or a minimal sense of "security"<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to highlight the growing operational capacity of jihadist groups, clearly seen in the increase in the number of terrorist attacks, especially after the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. This can be seen, for instance, in Burkina Faso, where the number of people killed by jihadist attacks tripled compared to the year and a half before the January 2022 coup, bringing the country to the brink of collapse<sup>14</sup>.

Not only has the number of attacks increased, but also their lethality, sophistication (use of drones) and the territory in which they operate, highlighting the lack of capacity of Sahel states to control them, as violence has also increased in Niger and Mali<sup>15</sup>. Jihadist groups are even encircling populations and cutting off supply routes, causing widespread famine<sup>16</sup>.

In addition, jihadists deepen and use divisions between ethnic groups (mainly the Peul, also called Fulani, and Dogon) to recruit fighters who see these terrorist groups as a just

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<sup>12</sup> MONTERO, M. S. "Enfrentamientos entre el JNIM y EIGS. Cambios en el equilibrio terrorista del Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 6 de julio de 2020. Disponible en: [https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin\\_ieee\\_19.pdf](https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin_ieee_19.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> MONTERO, M. S. "Enfrentamientos entre el JNIM y EIGS. Cambios en el equilibrio terrorista del Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 6 de julio de 2020. Disponible en: [https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin\\_ieee\\_19.pdf](https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin_ieee_19.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> CENTRE D'ÉTUDES STRATÉGIQUES DE L'AFRIQUE, "La crise au Burkina Faso continue son engrenage", 12 de septembre de 2023. Disponible en: <https://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/la-crise-au-burkina-faso-continue-son-engrenage/>

<sup>15</sup> ECSAHARAUI, "Estos son los grupos terroristas que operan en el Sahel", 22 de septiembre de 2024. Disponible en: <https://ecsaharaiui.com/09/2024/estos-son-los-grupos-terroristas-que-operan-en-el-sahel/>

<sup>16</sup> CENTRE D'ÉTUDES STRATÉGIQUES DE L'AFRIQUE, "La crise au Burkina Faso continue son engrenage", 12 de septembre de 2023. Disponible en: <https://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/la-crise-au-burkina-faso-continue-son-engrenage/>

cause to fight for and claim their rights. The jihadists spread a social, political and religious discourse centered on the victimization of different ethnic groups<sup>17</sup>. They target the richer and more powerful classes, selling a freedom and protection under their rule that appeals to a population hard hit by the conflict. Moreover, for young people, joining the ranks of the jihadists is often one of the few livelihood options, earning very attractive salaries compared to other scarce job opportunities. Therefore, with the discourse of victimization and the attractiveness of salaries, in many places' jihadist groups are welcomed rather than rejected, gaining the support of the population—a prerequisite for success.

### **Self-defense militias**

On the other hand, there is another actor whose main objective is its own security and survival: the local population. The population suffers the most in this conflict, as they endure attacks from multiple factions, each pursuing their own interests. For this reason, people have formed their own self-defense groups or militias to protect themselves against aggression from any of the numerous actors involved. These militias were initially fostered by the Malian government of Touré during the Tuareg uprisings<sup>18</sup>. By doing so, he managed to counter the Tuareg claims with the opposition of the local population and to keep them divided, with only a minimal presence of the state. Subsequently, with the emergence of jihadist groups, the government continued to support the creation of such militias to fight terrorism.

However, these self-defense militias are mainly divided along ethnic lines in the region. This causes existing ethnic disputes to escalate into violent conflicts between them, as they have powerful arsenals of weapons<sup>19</sup>. Self-defense militias cease to serve the purpose of counter-terrorism and turn against each other in an endless inter-ethnic

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<sup>17</sup> DE LEÓN COBO, B. RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, P., “La captación y radicalización de los peul por los grupos terroristas en el Sahel”, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 12 de octubre de 2020. Disponible en: [https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin\\_ieee\\_20.pdf](https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin_ieee_20.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> HERMES KALAMOS, “Mali y la Operación Serval: el preludio a Barkhane (2013-2014)”, 22 de octubre de 2021. Disponible en: <https://www.hermes-kalamos.eu/mali-y-la-operacion-serval-el-preludio-a-barkhane-2013-2014/>

<sup>19</sup> DE LEÓN COBO, Beatriz. “El problema de la “etnización” de las milicias de autodefensa en el Sahel, los principales autores de la violencia en Burkina Faso y Mali”, Atalayar, 5 de octubre de 2020. Disponible en: <https://www.atalayar.com/articulo/politica/problema-etnizacion-milicias-autodefensa-sahel-principales/20201002144600147767.html>

conflict, while the state is unable to control them and has to deal with jihadist groups at the same time.

One of the most important ethnic divisions is between the Dogon and the Peul, where violence has reached the highest intensity. In 2016, the Dogon self-defense militia 'Dan Na Ambassagou' (Hunters who trust in God)<sup>20</sup> was created. The militia accuses the Peul ethnic group of supporting terrorists and its operations have resulted in violent attacks on Peul villages, where hundreds of people have been killed. Peul self-defense militias have acted in the same way, attacking other villages, causing the conflict to escalate into inter-ethnic fighting and grow exponentially. There are also many other militias, such as 'Koglweogo' (Bush guardians)<sup>21</sup> or 'Ganda Koy' (Lords of the land)<sup>22</sup>.

In addition, the troops and weapons of these militias need to be paid for, and they do not receive funds from the state. Therefore, they look for alternative ways to raise revenue, often through criminal activities or by positioning themselves in place of the state, raising funds from the population, under the pretext of guaranteeing their security.

As a result, self-defense militias not only fail to provide a solution but, in many cases, become a major part of the problem, further complicating the situation. What initially seemed like a promising idea to support the state in counterterrorism efforts has turned into one of the primary sources of violence in the region, making conflict resolution and peace even more elusive.

Russia, Turkey and Ukraine are also involved in the conflict. These countries, for certain reasons, consider the Sahel region vital to their interests. However, they act unofficially and through paramilitary bodies, trying to maintain their presence in an informal, if not somewhat covert, manner. They could therefore be considered non-state actors.

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<sup>20</sup> DE LEÓN COBO, Beatriz. "El problema de la "etnización" de las milicias de autodefensa en el Sahel, los principales autores de la violencia en Burkina Faso y Mali", Atalayar, 5 de octubre de 2020. Disponible en: <https://www.atalayar.com/articulo/politica/problema-etnizacion-milicias-autodefensa-sahel-principales/20201002144600147767.html>

<sup>21</sup> NAVARRO, V. G., "La desestabilización de Burkina Faso", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 31 de julio de 2018. Disponible en: <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/boletin-ieee-11-revistas-ibd.html>

<sup>22</sup> RODRÍGUEZ, M. P., "Mali: Razones profundas del conflicto en el Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 21 de noviembre de 2012.

### ***Russia (Wagner Group)***

Another key player in the conflict is Russia, acting through the Wagner Group, now renamed "Africa Corps" after its reorganization following the death of its former leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin. The Wagner Group is a Russian paramilitary group that has operated in conflictive zones such as Crimea (2014), Syria, and the current war in Ukraine, among others, to unofficially defend Russian interests. This group is notorious for carrying out missions with extreme violence and for being a destabilizing factor in the territory in which they operate<sup>23</sup>.

Russia has been gaining influence in the region in recent years, taking advantage of the vacuum left by the West after being ousted by the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger<sup>24</sup>. These three military juntas came to power after the coups in their respective countries (Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022 and 2022, and Niger in 2023) and since then have progressively drawn closer to Russia, to the point of having members of the Wagner Group or Africa Corps among their ranks. This military support is in return for mining concessions (an abundant resource in the region)<sup>25</sup>. Not only that, but Russia has also backed the creation of the Alliance of Sahelian States, a coalition among these three nations aimed at mutual defense, counterterrorism cooperation, and fostering trade agreements. This alliance serves as an alternative to any organization or state that does not align with their policies and worldview.

However, it must be said that Russia's presence in the Sahel has not been a sudden event, but rather the result of a long process by the Kremlin to gain influence on the African continent, trying to regain the prominence that the Soviet Union once enjoyed<sup>26</sup>. In recent years Russia has sought an increasingly important place in African politics and

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<sup>23</sup> BBC NEWS MUNDO, "Cómo opera el Grupo Wagner, el "brutal" ejército privado de mercenarios rusos", 15 de julio de 2020. Disponible en: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-53344507>

<sup>24</sup> CONCEPCIÓN, Anguita. "Gobernanza en el Sahel por actores armados no estatales: un modelo teórico y aplicado." Revista Científica General José María Córdova, 1 de julio de 2023. Disponible en: [http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?pid=S1900-65862023000300601&script=sci\\_arttext](http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?pid=S1900-65862023000300601&script=sci_arttext)

<sup>25</sup> ECSAHARAUI, "Un momento crítico para la seguridad en el Sahel y su impacto en la región", 26 de septiembre de 2024. Disponible en: <https://ecsaharai.com/09/2024/un-momento-critico-para-la-seguridad-en-el-sahel-y-su-impacto-en-la-region/>

<sup>26</sup> RUIZ-CABRERA, Sebastián. "Rusia en África. Nuevas dinámicas desde el Kremlin", Revista UNISCI, octubre de 2022. Disponible en: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sebastian-Ruiz-Cabrera/publication/365248051\\_Rusia\\_en\\_Africa\\_Nuevas\\_dinamicas\\_desde\\_el\\_Kremlin/links/63ee081551d7af05402e2e53/Rusia-en-Africa-Nuevas-dinamicas-desde-el-Kremlin.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sebastian-Ruiz-Cabrera/publication/365248051_Rusia_en_Africa_Nuevas_dinamicas_desde_el_Kremlin/links/63ee081551d7af05402e2e53/Rusia-en-Africa-Nuevas-dinamicas-desde-el-Kremlin.pdf)

economy through anti-Western propaganda, arms trade and the deployment of mercenaries.

### ***Turkey (Sadat Group)***

As a non-state actor and private security group, the Turkish Sadat Group is also active in the region. Similar to the Wagner Group, Sadat is a private security group with little transparency, aiming to defend Turkey's interests in the most sensitive and preferential areas for the Turkish government.

This private security company has begun to have a growing and very considerable presence in the area, which means that Turkey also has important interests in the region<sup>27</sup>. In early 2024, a large deployment of mostly Syrian mercenaries from this group was recorded in Niger to protect Turkish interests in the area, specifically in the mining sector<sup>28</sup>. This deployment took place at the same time as France and the United States withdrew from the area, leaving a power vacuum<sup>29</sup> following the coup d'état in the country, which led to a change of government and a shift towards Russia, so everything suggests that Turkey is taking advantage of this change of trend to secure its place in the area.

It must be said that Turkey's presence in Africa has been growing in recent years. Turkey has been investing significant amounts of money and obtaining large mining concessions on the African continent. However, one of the most important modes of Turkish engagement in Africa is the sale of drones<sup>30</sup>. Turkish drones, known for their cost-effectiveness and performance, have been the subject of large purchases by African states.

Turkey therefore continues to acquire a growing presence and prominence in the geopolitics of the region, especially through the private security group. However, its

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<sup>27</sup> KAJJO, Sirwan. "Turkey sends Syrian mercenaries to Niger to secure strategic interests", Voice of America, 17 de mayo de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-sends-syrian-mercenaries-to-niger-to-secure-strategic-interests-/7616771.html>

<sup>28</sup> Observatorio Sirio de Derechos Humanos. "Pro-Turkey Syria mercenaries head to Niger to earn cash", 18 de mayo de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.syriahr.com/en/333879/>

<sup>29</sup> LAWAL, Shola. "Can the US find new partners in West Africa after Niger exit?", Aljazeera, 15 de septiembre de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/15/can-the-us-find-new-partners-in-west-africa-after-niger-exit>

<sup>30</sup> AHMED, A. "Preocupación occidental por la creciente influencia turca en el Sahel africano", Instituto para el Desarrollo de Sociedades Humanas, 27 de junio de 2024. Disponible en: <https://idhus.org/preocupacion-occidental-por-la-creciente-influencia-turca-en-el-sahel-africano/>

presence does not yet appear to be on a par with Russia's, although it remains to be seen how this situation evolves, as this shift from West to East is not bringing increased security in the region, but rather the opposite.

### **Ukraine**

Ukraine in the Sahel. It would not be unreasonable to say that this is something few would have imagined, since apart from Ukraine's large grain supply to Africa<sup>31</sup>, there seems little that this Eastern European country has to do with the African continent. Nor does Ukraine seem to have the capacity of the great powers to expand their interests to the rest of the world and establish a significant presence, as the US, Russia, China or the EU, do. Yet, today, Ukraine considers the Sahel a vital region and is much more present than it might seem, since they make efforts to keep it secret.

Why is Ukraine focused on such a remote and unstable region of the African continent?

Russia's economy is highly diversified (gas exports, arms trade, grain exports, etc.) that it is very difficult to suffocate it, as it has several revenue streams<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, even if economic sanctions are imposed by the West, the country has many other ways to receive money, and a very important region in this regard is the Sahel. In return for the deployment of Russian mercenaries in the Sahel protecting the military juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and their fight against terrorists, Russia receives important mining concessions in the region.

As Russia's declared enemy, Ukraine, in a strategic move, is moving into those areas where Russia obtains important funding streams in an attempt to curb revenues and stifle Russia economically. But to do so, Ukraine must move out of Europe and into remote

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<sup>31</sup> LA VANGUARDIA, "El hambre de los cultivos rotos". Disponible en: <https://stories.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20220527/53251/africa-impacto-guerra-ucrania-1-economia>

<sup>32</sup> RUIZ-CABRERA, Sebastián. "Rusia en África. Nuevas dinámicas desde el Kremlin", Revista UNISCI, octubre de 2022. Disponible en: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sebastian-Ruiz-Cabrera/publication/365248051\\_Rusia\\_en\\_Africa\\_Nuevas\\_dinamicas\\_desde\\_el\\_Kremlin/links/63ee081551d7af05402e2e53/Rusia-en-Africa-Nuevas-dinamicas-desde-el-Kremlin.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sebastian-Ruiz-Cabrera/publication/365248051_Rusia_en_Africa_Nuevas_dinamicas_desde_el_Kremlin/links/63ee081551d7af05402e2e53/Rusia-en-Africa-Nuevas-dinamicas-desde-el-Kremlin.pdf)

regions such as the Sahel, where Russia already has a significant presence and strong profits.

Russia supports the military juntas in the Sahel and thus aims to wipe out terrorists and rebels in the region<sup>33</sup>. Ukraine, in order to hinder Russia's efforts and discredit its military capability vis-à-vis these military juntas, is apparently, in these surprising geopolitical paradoxes, supporting the terrorists and rebels by providing them with training and weaponry, namely drones. In this way, the insurgents are becoming increasingly operationally capable and are putting Russia and the military juntas in greater trouble, calling into question the meaning of the Russian presence, as it is failing to achieve its goal of wiping out the insurgents.

## **International and state actors**

### ***The West (France, EU and US)***

The Sahel has been considered by the European Union and NATO as the southern flank to protect—a priority region for the security of the old continent<sup>34</sup>. Everything that happens in the Sahel affects Europe in one way or another. This is why several international missions have been deployed since 2012 with the aim of helping to put an end to the conflict and restore peace and stability to the region, apparently with little success.

First, the United Nations (UN) deployed the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), established by the Security Council in its S/RES/2100 of 25 April 2013<sup>35</sup>. The mission was tasked with “supporting political processes in the country and to carrying out a range of security-related tasks”<sup>36</sup> including stabilizing the country, ensuring the security of civilians, supporting national dialogue on politics and reconciliation, among others. The mission lasted 10 years, until the end of

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<sup>33</sup> FRANCE 24, “El conflicto ruso-ucraniano se extiende al Sahel: Mali rompe sus lazos con Kiev”, 9 de agosto de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.france24.com/es/%C3%A1frica/20240809-el-conflicto-ruso-ucraniano-se-extiende-al-sahel-mali-rompe-sus-lazos-con-kiev>

<sup>34</sup> 20 MINUTOS, “El Sahel, una de las prioridades de la OTAN: la Alianza reforzará su presencia en el flanco sur tras la Cumbre en Washington”, 9 de julio de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/5529233/0/sahel-una-las-prioridades-otan-alianza-reforzara-su-presencia-flanco-sur-tras-cumbre-washington/>

<sup>35</sup> ACNUR, “Resolución 2100 (2013)”, 25 de abril de 2013. <https://www.refworld.org/es/leg/resol/csonu/2013/es/93569>

<sup>36</sup> ORGANIZACIÓN DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS, “MINUSMA” <https://peacekeeping.un.org/es/mission/minusma>

2023, and involved more than 15,200 personnel, including more than 14,000 police and military personnel.

The EU has also conducted three separate missions in the region, two civilian and one military. The objective of the two civilian missions, EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012-2024) and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014-2025), was to support the development of the states of Niger and Mali, enhance their civilian and police capacities, control crime and irregular migration flows, and protect human rights<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, the EUTM Mali military mission (2013-2024) aimed to increase the military capabilities of the Malian army<sup>38</sup> through the deployment of European troops in the territory. Spain has played a special role in this mission, since in addition to being one of the countries with the most troops deployed (more than 8,300 military personnel)<sup>39</sup>, it has led it on three different occasions.

For its part, France, individually, has carried out two successive military missions in the Sahel, consisting not only of training the region's armies to improve their capabilities, but also of direct and active participation in the conflict with its own army. In 2012, after the Malian army's inability to contain the continued advance of rebel and jihadist insurgent groups became evident, the Malian government was forced to request international assistance to avoid complete collapse. France, partly out of self-interest and partly as a former colonial power in the region, carried out Operation Serval (January 2013-July 2014), where French soldiers fought directly against the rebels<sup>40</sup>. After pushing back the insurgents, recapturing lost territory and achieving the mission's objectives, Operation Serval was transformed into Operation Barkhane in 2014. It expanded its operational capability and presence to the territories of Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania.

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<sup>37</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, "European Union common security and defence policy mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger)" <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/ES/legal-content/summary/european-union-common-security-and-defence-policy-mission-in-niger-eucap-sahel-niger.html>

<sup>38</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, "EUTM Mali: European Union Training Mission in Mali - Military Mission", 30 de noviembre de 2020. Disponible en: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eutm-mali/eutm-mali-european-union-training-mission-mali-military-mission\\_und\\_en?s=341](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eutm-mali/eutm-mali-european-union-training-mission-mali-military-mission_und_en?s=341)

<sup>39</sup> DEFENSA.COM, "Más de 8.300 militares españoles han sido desplegados en la operación EUTM-Mali desde 2013", 17 de mayo de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.defensa.com/espana/mas-8-300-militares-espanoles-han-sido-desplegados-operacion#:~:text=M%C3%A1s%20de%208.300%20militares%20espa%C3%B1oles.operaci%C3%B3n%20EUTM%20Mali%20desde%202013>

<sup>40</sup> NIEVAS, D. "Rebelión y Sharía en el Sahel: una aproximación al estallido de la rebelión tuareg y la ocupación del norte de Mali por grupos yihadistas armados", 2014. UNISCI Discussion Papers. Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76729583008.pdf>

In addition, under the direction of Operation Barkhane, several European countries conducted Operation Takuba in 2020, where they deployed special operations forces to advise, train and accompany the armies of the Sahel states<sup>41</sup>. In 2022, however, France and many Western countries withdrew their troops from the region due to differences with the military juntas that emerged after the coups and their growing relationship with the Russian Wagner group<sup>42</sup>.

On the other hand, the Sahel states themselves have also pursued their own regional initiatives.

### ***Armies of the Sahel states - AES Alliance***

In 2017, the governments of the states most affected by the conflict in the Sahel, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso, created the G5 Sahel Joint Force with the aim of coordinating and intensifying the fight against jihadist groups undermining stability in these countries. Although the G5 Sahel alliance had already existed since 2014 to strengthen regional cooperation, with the establishment of the Joint Force it took on a more military character. With the support of the European Union and the United Nations, a “Compliance Framework” was created to “prevent, investigate, address and publicly report violations and breaches of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the FC-G5S”<sup>43</sup>. This would prevent civilians from being harmed during the conduct of offensive military counter-terrorism operations.

However, the G5 Sahel Joint Force had only 59,600 troops to cover a territory of approximately 5,094,859 km<sup>2</sup><sup>44</sup>. By comparison, Spain has a territory ten times smaller (505,990 km<sup>2</sup>), yet it has some 120,000 soldiers and 160,000 police and civil guards—280,000 force members, five times more than the G5 Sahel for a territory ten times

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<sup>41</sup> CHAMORRO, A. “Francia anuncia la finalización de la Task Force Takuba”, Descifrando la Guerra, 1 de julio de 2022. Disponible en: <https://www.descifrandola guerra.es/francia-anuncia-la-finalizacion-de-la-task-force-takuba/>

<sup>42</sup> FRANCE 24. “Fin oficial de la operación Barkhane: Francia promete repensar su estrategia militar en África”, 9 de noviembre de 2022. Disponible en: <https://www.france24.com/es/francia/20221109-fin-oficial-de-la-operaci%C3%B3n-barkhane-francia-promete-repensar-su-estrategia-militar-en-%C3%A1frica>

<sup>43</sup> NACIONES UNIDAS, “Proyecto de apoyo a la Fuerza Conjunta del Grupo de los Cinco del Sahel para la aplicación del marco de cumplimiento relativo a los derechos humanos y el derecho internacional humanitario”. Disponible en: <https://www.ohchr.org/es/countries/afrika-region/project-supporting-g5-sahel-joint-force-implementation-human-rights-and-international-humanitarian>

<sup>44</sup> DELGADO MECINAS, P. “Una aproximación al Sahel desde el G5S”, Descifrando la Guerra, 3 de abril de 2020. Disponible en: <https://www.descifrandola guerra.es/una-aproximacion-al-sahel-desde-el-g5s/>

smaller. This highlights the limited capacity of this organization to fight rebels and jihadists.

Following military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Niger (2023) and Burkina Faso (2022, 2022), the military juntas currently ruling these countries have sought to sever all relations with the West, expelling all civilian and military personnel from the US, the EU and France in particular. In addition, the three states, led by Mali, withdrew from the G5 Sahel alliance, following their respective coups d'état<sup>45</sup> and on 28 January 2024 the new military juntas of the three Sahelian states announced their exit from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), after the latter criticized the coups and threatened military intervention<sup>46</sup>.

On 6 July 2024, the military juntas of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso announced the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States, backed by Russia<sup>47</sup>. The goal of this regional organization is greater integration between the three countries in all areas. A single investment bank and stabilization fund have been created. In addition, free movement of goods and people, like that of the European Union, has been established. On the other hand, the leaders of the military juntas have expressed the need to establish coordinated diplomatic action in order to acquire greater influence and negotiation capacity<sup>48</sup>.

Although for the time being, and given the current situation, no significant progress has been made towards stability in the region (in fact, quite the contrary), the results will be analyzed with the passage of time.

## Conclusions

The conflict in the Sahel has persisted for far too long, with no clear end in sight. Moreover, the complexity of the conflict has also increased dramatically. It began as an insurgency by the northern Tuareg community and today the conflict involves numerous

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<sup>45</sup> DEPARTAMENTO SEGURIDAD NACIONAL. "G5 Sahel: Níger y Burkina Faso anuncian su retirada de la organización regional", 7 de diciembre de 2023. Disponible en: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/g5-sahel-n%C3%ADger-burkina-faso-anuncian-su-retirada-organizaci%C3%B3n-regional#:~:text=En%20mayo%20de%202022%2C%20Mali,Mali%20como%20presidencia%20del%20grupo>

<sup>46</sup> FRANCE 24. "Níger, Malí y Burkina Faso abandonan el bloque regional de la CEDEAO", 28 de enero de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.france24.com/es/%C3%A1frica/20240128-n%C3%ADger-mal%C3%AD-y-burkina-faso-abandonan-el-bloque-regional-de-la-cedeao>

<sup>47</sup> CHAMORRO, A. "Nace la Confederación de la Alianza de Estados del Sahel", Descifrando la Guerra, 7 de julio de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.descifrandola guerra.es/nace-la-confederacion-de-la-alianza-de-estados-del-sahel/>

<sup>48</sup> CHAMORRO, A. "Nace la Confederación de la Alianza de Estados del Sahel", Descifrando la Guerra, 7 de julio de 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.descifrandola guerra.es/nace-la-confederacion-de-la-alianza-de-estados-del-sahel/>

actors from different parts of the world, both official and unofficial. A conflict where more than 10,000 troops from the United Nations and other international organizations have been deployed over the years to try to bring it to an end. And yet the conflict continues.

The multiplicity of actors (local, national and especially international) is a large part of the reason for the protracted conflict. Each of these actors pursues its own interests in this troubled river and obeys its own bosses. Some even aim to prolong the conflict for their own benefit. Thus, where there are no clear sides or common goals, but rather divergent ones, achieving peace becomes almost impossible. Moreover, the local actors, who could possibly achieve peace more easily, are less powerful than those coming from outside, making it difficult for the former to prevail over the interests of the latter (who have no interest in the common good and stability of the region).

And as always, the local population suffered the most—protected by no one, attacked by everyone. This cycle of insecurity leads to poor governance, weaker economic development, and ultimately total instability. It would therefore be desirable to reduce the number of actors considerably and facilitate a possible peace agreement, thus helping to ensure greater stability in the region.

But as long as they are fighting their own battles and wars on Sahelian soil, peace and stability seems to be a dream. Therefore, to reduce conflict, the number of actors capable of violence in the region must be reduced as much as possible. Perhaps this could be an important step towards peace.

*Yago Alonso-Alegre Sustacha\**  
Pontifical University of Comillas  
Law + International Relations