



Maintaining Relations with Transitional Regimes in Bamako and Ouagadougou

From Sudan to Ukraine, crises brew, calling for renewed attention and action. In her introduction to the [Watch List 2023 – Spring Update](#), Crisis Group President & CEO Comfort Ero identifies ways the EU and its member states can prevent and resolve conflict around the globe.

The past year was the deadliest on record in [Mali](#) and [Burkina Faso](#), where military transitional governments have struggled to turn back jihadist insurgencies. Although Bamako and Ouagadougou have made significant efforts, particularly in terms of recruiting and equipping their respective armies, which are now in a more offensive posture, the situation continues to be precarious. Jihadist violence persists across northern and central Mali, and it has spread across much of Burkina Faso. Despite triumphalist rhetoric from Bamako and Ouagadougou, it is unclear whether either has made strategic gains against the jihadists over the past few months. State presence is still close to non-existent in rural areas like Ménaka in north-eastern Mali or northern Soum province in Burkina Faso. The two governments have, at best, limited control of their territory outside urban areas, where jihadists remain reluctant to venture. But even those areas are not necessarily secure; many have fallen under protracted jihadist blockades, particularly in Burkina Faso.

Amid this insecurity, as well as political instability and shifting strategic alliances,

increasing violence against civilians by all sides, and uncertainty about transitions back to civilian rule, there are major obstacles to cooperation between the European Union and its member states, on one hand, and the two African neighbours, on the other. Still, the EU and its member states may be able to play a constructive role if they prioritise maintaining engagement with the two countries. To this end, they will need to resist the temptation to view relationships with Bamako and Ouagadougou exclusively through the prism of relations with Russia. They will also need to appreciate that isolating either regime risks entrenching hardliners to the detriment of both local civilians and European interests.

Concretely, the EU and its member states should:

- Maintain dialogue about the transition back to civilian rule with the authorities in both Mali and Burkina Faso, while minimising public disputes, notably on choices of diplomatic and security partnerships, as these present a significant risk of backlash and are unlikely to change the authorities' behaviour.

- Recognise that opportunities to partner on security with either Mali or Burkina Faso are scant at present, focusing instead on keeping military-military channels open (Mali) and civilian protection initiatives going (Burkina Faso), as well as on pressing the governments to explore non-military solutions to insecurity, including through dialogue with disaffected communities and groups.
- In both countries, help preserve political space through financial and technical support to vulnerable civil society activists and organisations – including women’s and youth groups – with a particular focus on developing programming that can help these activists operate safely and securely, as well as on taking appropriate precautions to avoid creating added risks for the beneficiaries.
- In both countries, explore ways to support the transition back to civilian rule, including (in Mali) through the operationalisation of the *Autorité Indépendante de Gestion des Elections*, the independent electoral management body.
- In Burkina Faso, continue to help humanitarian actors and relevant ministries provide humanitarian assistance to populations in need, notably internally displaced people, and promote dialogue in an effort to heal intercommunal rifts.

Striking Parallels

As Mali and Burkina Faso continue to fight jihadists moving south through the Sahel, the parallels between the two neighbours are striking, although imperfect. Partly due to the resulting insecurity, both have experienced two military coup d’états in the past three years. The current regimes in Bamako and Ouagadougou have, to different degrees, sought to win public support through self-aggrandising and sovereignist rhetoric. Both have expelled the troops that France (the former colonial power in the region) sent to assist in the anti-jihadist battle. The Malian authorities have invited in the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group as a new security partner, and the Burkinabé government could eventually do the same, as it appears to be drawing closer to Moscow.

The parallels also relate to the growing vulnerability of civilians in the two countries. In both Mali and Burkina Faso, military operations against jihadists have led to increased violence against civilians by both state forces and their allies, as well as by jihadist groups. There have been frequent allegations by national and

international human rights organisations of abuses including arrests, executions and torture of civilians by national armed forces, jihadists, the Wagner Group in Mali and pro-government self-defence groups (known as *Dan Na Ambassagou* in Mali and *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, or VDPs, in Burkina Faso). Meanwhile, it is unclear whether the authorities in either country intend to give power back to civilians along the timeline each agreed to with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an important regional bloc, in 2022. The Malian government’s announcement that it will hold a constitutional referendum on 18 June is a positive development, but it is not enough to dispel doubt about the authorities’ ability to organise the presidential election scheduled for February 2024.

A Polarising Regime in Bamako

In Mali, the colonels who organised the country's 2020 and 2021 coups seem to have more or less unified the security establishment behind them and remain broadly popular, even as they gear up for what appears to be a wave of repression of their critics. As dissonant voices from Malian politics and civil society begin to make themselves heard, the regime can look to a legion of activists ready to harass perceived detractors. One example is the backlash to civil society representative Aminata Dicko's [intervention](#) at the UN Security Council in January 2023. Dicko denounced human rights abuses committed by Malian and Russian forces in the country, stating (contrary to Bamako's official line) that the security situation in the country had not improved since Wagner's arrival in late 2021. On 5 February, not long after she spoke, the Malian government declared Guillaume Ngefa-Atondoko Andali, head of the human rights division of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), [persona non grata](#), asking him to leave the country within 48 hours. The announcement referred specifically to his role in selecting Dicko to appear at the UN. The government also recently [arrested two civil society activists](#), a man and a woman, a few days after they had made perceived criticisms of the transition.

Bamako's authoritarian drift has contributed to concerns that the current authorities may seek to remain in power. These fears are growing due to the government's desire to tighten control of civic space, its attempts to sideline the old political class and the proliferation of initiatives aimed at consolidating the transitional president's political base.

As for Mali's foreign policy, the authorities chose Russia as their main military partner in 2021, turning their backs on France. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Mali has also fallen out with its other Western partners. Moreover, the Wagner

Group as well as the government and local militias are increasingly [accused](#) of abuses against civilians, including [sexual violence](#), in conjunction with their intensive operations against jihadists in the country's centre. The state has denied the charges, while refusing to let MINUSMA, on which the regime has imposed a number of restrictions, investigate alleged abuses. Nevertheless, these operations have bolstered the regime's popularity in Bamako, and the regime appears to see its new partnership with Russia as helping stabilise its power. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Bamako in February, and the transitional authorities more than ever seem to view Russia as a key partner and their principal global ally.

At the same time, Bamako's relations with traditional partners in its neighbourhood are rocky. Mali is suspended from ECOWAS, and its relations with key allies, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, remain tense, as Bamako [reorients](#) its diplomacy toward transitional regimes in Ouagadougou and Conakry. It has even clashed with neighbours and long-time partners, notably detaining 49 soldiers from Côte d'Ivoire for around six months, accusing them of being mercenaries intent on destabilising the regime.

Internally, implementation of the 2015 peace agreement between the government and separatist non-state armed groups in Mali's north appears to have stalled. Tensions between the signatory armed groups and the government are at a high, with the two sides [accusing](#) each other of abandoning the treaty, and the government recently [flying](#) military planes over Kidal, the armed groups' headquarters. The overflight was widely viewed as a provocation, and some suspect that Bamako's colonels, several of whom fought in the 2012 rebellion, are eager for a rematch against the groups. In February, a member of the transitional legislature said war with the armed groups was ["inevitable"](#).

Meanwhile, security in the north continues to deteriorate. The state has little presence in the region, where jihadists affiliated with the rival Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel)

coalitions regularly clash with each other as well as the signatory armed groups. It is difficult to tell who has the upper hand in this fighting, although IS Sahel seems to have made significant gains, particularly in the Ménaka region.

A Fragile Regime in Ouagadougou

In Burkina Faso, President Ibrahim Traoré remains vulnerable to some of the same dynamics that brought down his predecessors, including divisions within the armed forces, and has attracted increasing concern from national and international observers regarding his authoritarian management of the transition. Ouagadougou has also clashed with France and the [UN](#), even if it has not become embroiled in disputes with them or (at least yet) embraced Russia to the same degree as Bamako.

As concerns governance, the transitional authorities have taken an authoritarian approach. Having made the reconquest of territory their overwhelming priority, they consider the state and the population to be in a posture of total war, permitting them to subordinate respect for civil rights to the imperative of recapturing territory lost to the jihadists. A “[general mobilisation](#)” announced in April gives the president wide-ranging legal latitude to do whatever he deems necessary to curb insecurity, including requisitioning people and goods and restricting basic freedoms. The authorities have arrested several civil society activists and expelled two French journalists reporting on human rights abuses. Meanwhile, it is unclear whether the authorities are willing or able to respect the July 2024 deadline for a presidential election, agreed on with ECOWAS, given persistent insecurity.

The Ouagadougou regime is less stable than its counterpart in Bamako. One explanation may be that the regime in Bamako is composed of actors more or less representative of the Malian armed forces. By contrast, President Traoré is much younger and, as a captain, lower in rank than Bamako's colonels. He enjoys only

shaky support from within the strongly divided Burkinabé military. Traoré's two [predecessors both](#) fell following deadly jihadist attacks on the army, and the military is now suffering its highest death toll since the beginning of the conflict, with at least five massive assaults on state forces between February and April in the Nord, Centre-Nord, Sahel and Est regions. Traoré thus remains vulnerable to internal military rivalries threatening the stability of his regime.

On the international front, the Burkinabé transitional authorities have (like their Malian counterparts) ruptured relations with France – in December 2022 [requesting](#) that Paris recall its ambassador and in February 2023 asking the French Operation Sabre to leave the country. While they have drawn closer to non-Western partners such as Türkiye and Russia, they have not as of this writing contracted with the Wagner Group, and it remains unclear if they plan to do so. Several Burkinabé officials, including the defence minister on 3 May, have suggested that Moscow's help is not yet needed, saying [the VDPs are the Wagner of Burkina Faso](#). But if the security situation does not improve soon, Ouagadougou may look to external military support and find it with a private military company, perhaps Wagner.

Looking at the internal security situation, jihadist violence is at unprecedented intensity. It is widespread, afflicting all of Burkina Faso's regions except the capital. True, President Traoré inherited a difficult security situation, but he seems to have found no way to improve it since taking power. While the government has ramped up military operations, including those using [drones](#), the strategic impact has yet to

be felt and the security situation has continued to deteriorate. Meanwhile, the government's total war policy seems to have given rise to a degree of military licence and contributed to a spike in violence against civilians, with troops often targeting rural communities, mostly but not only Fulanis. A [massacre](#) in the village of Karma (Yatenga province, Nord region) on 20 April, where a statement by residents accused the armed forces of killing at least 147 civilians (including women and children, mainly from the country's majority Mossi ethnic group), is indicative of the escalation of violence against civilians.

The new authorities have made the VDP

paramilitaries the main pillar of their response to insecurity, [and are aiming to recruit](#) 50,000 new members. While this move is a response to the Burkinabé military's limited capacity to confront jihadist groups, the decision to lean heavily on the VDPs has been a factor in placing civilians at the centre of violence and exacerbated communal tensions. Jihadists have raided villages they accuse of supplying VDPs, while the authorities tend to suspect that those who do not suffer insurgent attacks or vocally support the VDPs are accomplices of the jihadists, reportedly making them personally or sometimes their villages military targets.

What the EU and Its Member States Can Do

Notwithstanding these challenges, the EU and member states will gain more by staying engaged with Mali and Burkina Faso than by pulling further back from them. Isolating the regimes in power could lead them to even more hardline positions, which could prove harmful for the two populations and will not serve European interests. At the same time, European actors must take a clear-eyed view of the region's dramatically changing political dynamics – both its increasing tendency toward authoritarian governance, and even mass abuse, and a tense socio-political climate around questions of sovereignty and Western partnerships. For these reasons, the EU's ability to influence the situations and regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso faces significant constraints. It should seek to work within these as follows:

Mali: In the security realm, only narrow military cooperation with Bamako remains possible. While the effectiveness of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali is limited, especially after it suspended the majority of its training activities given Wagner's growing presence, it still helps maintain a channel for dialogue between Malian and European

military officers. As the EU remains strongly committed to security in the Sahel, and particularly given Mali's central role therein, keeping this channel open should remain useful. That said, in light of the strategic choices made by the transitional authorities, the conditions are not in place to enhance European security assistance to Mali.

Instead, the EU should continue to engage in other sectors by supporting governance reforms, economic development, civil society and work to facilitate an effective transition back to civilian rule. This dialogue should be mostly conducted at the level of the EU delegation in Bamako, which has useful experience working with the current authorities. The EU should seek to combine short-term actions in support of the transition with a longer-term commitment to the country's economic development. It should consider investing in the operationalisation of the Autorité Indépendante de Gestion des Elections, the independent electoral management body. To help maintain space for political expression, the EU should also offer discreet financial and technical support to [vulnerable](#) civil society activists, journalists, and women's and youth groups, including

those working outside the capital. This support should focus on helping civil society operate more safely and securely; it should be offered in a way that does not itself increase the risks to beneficiaries.

Above all, the EU should avoid framing its engagement with Mali through the lens of competition with Russia. Bamako's privileged partnership with Paris seems at this moment to be a thing of the past. But it remains possible to maintain and nurture relations with other Western actors, such as Brussels. As Crisis Group laid out in a recent [briefing](#), the EU should encourage the transitional authorities to explore non-military solutions to insecurity. They might start by prioritising political dialogue, including potentially with the jihadists, so that the state can be deployed in rural areas, before undertaking broader governance reforms.

Burkina Faso: Concerning the security sector, while the EU's options will again be limited, it should explore cooperation with the ministries in charge of the VDPs, focusing on the development of coordination and monitoring mechanisms to better protect civilians (rather than on the delivery of equipment). Crisis Group will further examine the VDP question in a later report.

In the diplomatic realm, the EU should maintain engagement mostly through its Ouagadougou-based delegation, which has so far proven a more effective channel than

higher-level engagement. It should focus on privately convincing the authorities of the need to develop non-military solutions to insecurity, such as promoting social cohesion through community dialogue, and (as in Mali) encourage the transition back to civilian rule through support for the electoral process and other assistance. At the same time, it should avoid public criticism of the government's strategic choices, including with respect to external security partners, as it is unlikely to sway the authorities' thinking on these issues and risks provoking a backlash.

Finally, as the regime is increasingly isolated amid partial disengagement by its traditional partners, the EU should maintain its activities focused on supporting civilians, who are paying the highest price for the government's strategy of total war. Specifically, the EU should prioritise humanitarian assistance, taking into account that an estimated [10 per cent](#) of the population is internally displaced and violence against civilians is only escalating. The EU can also play an important role in promoting social cohesion, notably through the support of local organisations that work on non-violent conflict resolution and the promotion of community dialogue (especially between herders and farmers). Lastly, as in Mali, the EU should stand ready to offer discreet technical and financial support to civil society activists and organisations, subject to appropriate precautions, and with a focus on assistance that can help them operate more safely and securely.