



Reorienting Europe's Approach in the Sahel

Military regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are putting civilians at risk with the tactics of their campaigns against jihadists. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024, Crisis Group identifies how the EU can recalibrate its policies to promote stability and human rights in the Sahel.

Each of three countries of the central Sahel – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – has seen major upheaval in the years since 2021, bringing the region into a new chapter. Army officers in all three have seized power through bloodless coups, alienating France, the states' chief foreign patron, and forging links among one another to better resist external pressure. These regimes, bent on, as they see it, restoring sovereignty over all their territory and doubling down on operations against jihadist militants that have bedevilled the Sahel in recent decades, are channelling scant resources to military campaigns at the expense of delivering basic public services. In the rural areas where most fighting takes place, residents are increasingly exposed to abuses, whether at the hands of government troops, jihadists or other armed groups. At the same time, the French troops that were battling militants alongside Sahelian armies have departed, as have UN peacekeepers. Wagner Group mercenaries have deployed in Mali, while Russia has reinforced its security ties with the authorities in Niger and Burkina Faso, adding a patina of geopolitical competition to the picture. The European Union, which maintains its relations with the central Sahelian states, has a dilemma: the

juntas are far from ideal partners, but they are likely to remain their main interlocutors for the foreseeable future. Europe needs a thorough overhaul of its regional strategy.

To that end, the EU and its member states should:

- Limit security cooperation to keeping military-to-military channels open while urging the Sahel's new authorities to explore non-military solutions to insecurity, including dialogue with disaffected communities and groups.
- Reorient their policies toward the long term in three domains: 1) strengthening the capacity of governments to provide basic services, notably in education and health; 2) supporting local efforts to create fairer and more equitable societies, particularly for women and politically underrepresented groups; and 3) combating the impact of climate change.
- Press for initiatives to protect vulnerable civilians such as the displaced and those who have suffered the most from deadly violence.
- Consider linking long-term investment with a requirement that partner governments pursue counter-insurgency strategies that show a minimum of respect for human rights.

A Single-minded Military Approach

The military regimes that seized power in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) have turned their backs on France, the former colonial power which until recently was the driving force of international efforts to fight jihadists in the Sahel. They have also dismissed the multi-dimensional approaches – based on security, development and governance – promoted, at least in principle, by Western partners and the UN. All three have stepped up military operations against jihadists – and, in Mali, against non-jihadist former rebel groups that signed a 2015 peace deal with Bamako. They are courting new security partners, Russia in particular. Egged on by Mali, which contracted with the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked outfit, in 2021, Burkina Faso and Niger are now strengthening links to Russia.

Although the departure of Western and UN forces has not brought about the state collapse that some observers had anticipated, the three countries' new defence policies have yet to translate into security gains. The recapture of Kidal, in northern Mali, from rebels in November 2023 by the Malian army and its Russian backers lent credence to the authorities' talk that their forces are gaining ground. But insecurity remains rampant across the region. Mass killings occur with alarming frequency in the countryside, with photographs of dead women and children appearing regularly on social media. According to the Armed Conflict

Location & Event Data Project, 2023 was the region's deadliest year since militants first overran northern Mali in 2012. All the warring parties, including the national armies, have attacked civilians. In Burkina Faso, jihadists have laid siege to several towns, slowly starving residents who are unable to work their fields. The UN refugee agency puts the number of displaced persons at a record 2.7 million, the bulk in Burkina Faso, where jihadists allegedly control over 40 per cent of the territory. Military regimes are not the only ones to blame for this situation, but their determination to wage brutal warfare contributes to worsening violence against civilians.

The new regimes' single-minded military orientation has cemented ties among the new authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In September 2023, the three countries launched the Alliance of Sahel States, partly in response to a threat by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to reverse the previous month's coup in Niger. The Alliance was conceived primarily as a mutual defence arrangement, but the officers are already mulling a political and even monetary union. Though ECOWAS is considering softening the sanctions it imposed on Niger after the junta seized power there, animosity toward the regional bloc, which continues to press for a return to constitutional rule in all three countries, remains high.

The EU's Bind

Despite their hostility toward France, junta leaders thus far have stopped short of openly antagonising the EU itself. They are still open to diplomatic relations with European countries, and they still receive humanitarian and development aid from Western countries, but they are ready to reject this assistance if they dislike the conditions. In Burkina Faso, they have also submitted requests for military equipment such

as automatic rifles to the EU. At the same time, the officers are well aware that other foreign powers – Russia in particular but also China, Iran and Türkiye – see opportunities in the Sahel. Their stance toward the EU is hardening as a result. In November 2023, Niger's generals repealed a law – viewed by the EU as a landmark measure – that had been instrumental in curbing migration to Europe from Africa. The

following month, Niamey terminated its security and defence agreements with the EU.

The EU is in a bind. Member states are discussing where to go from here, including at an EU foreign ministers' meeting coming up on 19 February. Paris hopes to isolate the new regimes until they become more conciliatory with their former allies and agree to reinstate some form of democratic rule. France's ouster from the central Sahel has deprived European security cooperation there of its centre of gravity. EU states, divided over how to deal with the new circumstances, may now see the mechanisms through which the bloc has channelled its money and efforts dismantled. One such mechanism is the G5 Sahel, a coalition of five Sahelian countries that was to enhance border patrols and coordinate development policies. After Burkina Faso and Niger pulled out in late 2023 – Mali had already quit the previous year – remaining members Chad and Mauritania suggested they would accept the alliance's dissolution.

Looking ahead, the EU will struggle to compete with security partners like Wagner, Russia and even Türkiye, whose industries supply arms that Sahelian capitals deem suited to their needs and means. The EU has sought to adapt its security offer, notably through the European Peace Facility, which provides military equipment, among other things. Niger was to be the first Sahelian country to benefit from this instrument until the coup halted

these discussions. The EU's military missions on the ground have also lost their purpose. The EU has suspended its training mission in Mali given Russia's growing presence. After the coup in Niamey, the EU likewise placed the Military Partnership Mission Niger on hold, and later in the year the new authorities withdrew consent for its deployment, thus putting an end to it.

France aside, almost all EU member states want to stay engaged diplomatically in the central Sahel. But their strategy for the Sahel, defined in the previous decade, is no longer appropriate, and they are struggling to adjust it to changed circumstances. Most members states are ready to engage with imperfect democracies, and even with leaders drawing closer to Moscow, but they have a red line: they refuse to support regimes if they prove too repressive and commit massacres. Some EU member states, are leaning toward drastically scaling back ties with Sahelian regimes, partly because the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East are higher priorities. Others want to continue supporting civil society and spending on development and humanitarian aid as part of efforts to curb irregular migration to Europe. Still others want to jostle with the new non-Western security partners for influence in the region. They advocate maintaining state-to-state links, including in the security field, even if they want to define red lines such as violence against civilians or deals with Wagner.

Redrawing the EU's Policy Lines in the Sahel

In her State of the Union speech in September 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen floated a plan to work with EU High Representative Josep Borrell on a new European strategic approach for Africa, which would focus on cooperation with legitimate governments and regional organisations. But in the Sahel, this call comes at a time when the EU seems to be losing momentum in attempts to affect regional developments. Although in a difficult situation, the EU is not condemned to play a marginal role watching the region further

plunging into chaos. An in-depth review of its Sahel strategy could set a new course, restore coherence to its actions and regain its dwindling influence in the central Sahel.

All this requires that member states set aside, as best possible, their differences on their approach to the new authorities in the Sahel. Each member state is entitled to articulate its own priorities. But the EU remains a forum in which member states can and should make compromises to preserve their common interests, notably that of a strategic union that

offers an attractive governance model and is a credible partner in the eyes of the world. To this end, member states must agree to a common, pragmatic course in the Sahel. France is going through a difficult ordeal in the region. Paris is right to take the time to reconsider the ties it wants to maintain with Sahelian states. At the same time, it should not stand in the way of European member states willing to maintain Europe's commitment to the central Sahel, which would be better for France than opening even more space for its most serious rivals to consolidate their influence in the region. As the EU is recalibrating its policy in the Sahel, the EU should therefore consider an approach along the following lines:

First, the EU should tamp down its security focus, which has been front and centre of previous policies aimed at combating jihadist groups and stemming migration. Conditions no longer allow for cooperation with military regimes, given their partnerships with Wagner that are incompatible with EU norms and/or given the conduct of military operations that are turning increasingly abusive toward their own citizens. Security cooperation remains possible, but ambitions should be limited to promoting military-to-military contacts and pressing the governments to protect civilians and explore non-military solutions to insecurity, including through dialogue with disaffected communities and groups.

Secondly, and more importantly, the EU should develop a new narrative for its regional ambitions by shifting its focus from immediate security issues to structural causes of Sahelian crises. One task is to combat the effects of climate change, which has had a particularly severe impact on the region and fuelled in subtle ways violent competition over resources. Another is to strengthen governments' capacity to respond to the needs of populations that are among the world's youngest, but also poorest, especially in education and health. The EU has long invested in these domains, but in recent years, its actions had been too tightly

subordinated to consolidating immediate security gains in vulnerable regions with very limited and often unsustainable impact. Improving governance and delivery of public services requires a longer-term approach. Lastly, the EU should support efforts of vulnerable civil society groups striving to create fairer and more equitable societies, particularly for women and politically repressed groups.

Reorienting the EU's action toward these long-term issues must, however, surmount several major challenges. Investing in long-term issues is hard enough, but doing so with governments less inclined to cooperate with the EU makes it even harder. There is no easy answer to this conundrum, but the Union has tools at its disposal. The EU and its member states should maintain their diplomatic and operational ties with the Sahelian governments and remind them that nationalist rhetoric and security-oriented policies are insufficient to stabilise states. Europeans especially need to urge Sahelian authorities to improve basic service delivery (something the EU had rightly identified as one of the root causes of conflict in the past) and offer continued funding for these efforts. But they should do so in a more transactional fashion, linking EU long-term investment to an obligation for partner states to ensure that counter-insurgency policies comply with a minimum of respect for fundamental human rights. Since the EU retains an undeniable advantage over the Sahelian states' authorities, whose finances are limited, it should use this leverage to work toward ending the spiral of deadly violence the populations suffer from, including at the hands of government actors.

"The Sahel is a test for the EU", High Representative Borrell declared in September 2023, referring to the need for member states to restore the community's solidarity and capacity for joint action. The region is also – perhaps above all – testing the EU's ability to strike a better balance between short-term approach of security with longer-term policies adapted to structural challenges. ■

