African Union (AU)

The situation in the Sahel region

Research Report

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"Out of this world"

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Introduction

The Sahel region, spanning parts of West and Central Africa, faces ongoing and complex challenges shaped by historical, political, and environmental issues. Since the mid-20th century, the area has been impacted by various factors that fuel instability, including colonial legacies, poverty, weak governance, and harsh climate conditions. When many Sahelian nations gained independence in the 1960s, they inherited borders and structures that did not always reflect local cultural and ethnic realities. Over time, these nations struggled to establish stable governance, creating an environment where rebellion and violence might arise.

One significant factor contributing to instability in the Sahel has been the struggle for autonomy by the Tuareg people, particularly in northern Mali. The Tuareg, a nomadic ethnic group, have launched several uprisings since the 1960s, with notable rebellions occurring in 1990, 2006, and 2012. These conflicts revealed deep-rooted tensions between northern populations and central governments, often centred around political representation and access to resources.

The fall of Libya's government in 2011 escalated security challenges in the Sahel. Libya's collapse released a large number of weapons and experienced fighters into neighbouring regions, worsening an already unstable environment. This increase strengthened various armed groups, including Islamist guerrillas, who were able to expand their influence and power. In Mali, a 2012 rebellion by Tuareg groups initially aimed to create an independent state but soon fractured, allowing Islamist rivals to gain control over parts of northern Mali. The situation was worsened by a military coup in Mali's capital, Bamako, which weakened the central government and created further openings for extremist groups.

To counter the expanding influence of Islamist groups, France launched *Operation Serval* in 2013, initially targeting militants in Mali. This intervention later grew into *Operation Barkhane*, a broader mission aimed at stabilising the Sahel and combating extremist violence across the region. However, despite these efforts, insurgent groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS have continued to grow, gaining footholds in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and beyond. These groups' presence has driven violence and chaos across the region.

More recently, international responses have faced setbacks, with regional partners withdrawing and France ending its operation in 2022. Given the ongoing violence and the difficulties in fostering regional cooperation, the Sahel is at a turning point, especially in light of the recent regimes in Mali,

Burkina Faso, and Niger.

Definition of Key Terms

Sahel Region

The Sahel is a large and challenging region in Africa that stretches across the continent from Senegal in the west to Eritrea in the east. It lies between the Sahara Desert to the north and tropical savannas to the south, giving it a unique climate and ecology. The Sahel faces significant challenges, such as severe droughts, poverty, and increasing instability. Climate change, weak governance, and economic hardship have made the region particularly vulnerable to conflict, food shortages, and humanitarian crises. These pressures also contribute to the spread of violent extremism and displacement of communities across the region.

Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs)

Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) are groups that use terror and violence to pursue radical political, religious, or ideological goals, often against civilians and governments. In the Sahel, prominent VEOs include Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Boko Haram. These groups often recruit from deprived communities, taking advantage of local issues such as poverty and lack of security. Their actions include armed attacks, kidnappings, and destabilising political structures, which harm development efforts and worsen regional security challenges.

Liptako-Gourma Region

The Liptako-Gourma region is a conflict-prone area that overlaps the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in the central Sahel. Historically, the region is home to diverse ethnic groups and has been economically significant, but nowadays it faces instability due to violent extremist activities. Armed groups and criminals have taken advantage of weak state presence, making Liptako-Gourma a hotspot for violence. Frequent attacks in the area disrupt communities, displace people, and make development difficult. Efforts to stabilise Liptako-Gourma are ongoing, but limited resources and security challenges complicate the process.

Islamist Militancy

Islamist militancy refers to groups or individuals who use violence to promote an extremist interpretation of Islam, often rejecting state authority and aiming to impose strict religious governance. In the Sahel, such militancy is primarily driven by groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS. These groups carry out attacks against military and civilian targets and seek control over territory. The rise of Islamist militancy in the Sahel has worsened the tensions, as weak state security and scarce resources make it hard to prevent these groups from expanding their influence across borders and threatening communities.

Operation Barkhane

Operation Barkhane was a French-led military operation launched in 2014 aimed at combating Islamist rebellions across the Sahel. It focused on supporting local governments in fighting extremist groups and stabilising the region. Despite some success, Barkhane faced criticism over its long duration, significant costs, and perceived inability to curb growing extremism. France ended the operation in 2022 after facing both local opposition and strained resources, underscoring the complexity of managing counterinsurgency operations in the Sahel. Barkhane's end has led to shifts in the region's security strategy, with other international actors now playing larger roles.

Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism refers to strategies and actions designed to prevent, detect, and respond to acts of terrorism. It encompasses a wide range of efforts, from military operations and intelligence gathering to law enforcement and community engagement. In the Sahel, counterterrorism involves both local and international actors working to contain and dismantle extremist groups. The complexity of the Sahel's terrain, political issues, and cross-border nature of threats make counterterrorism operations particularly challenging. Coordinated regional and international efforts are seen as essential to addressing the root causes of extremism and enhancing security.

Major Parties Involved

G5 Sahel Force

The G5 Sahel Force is a regional coalition created in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to counter violent extremism and promote security. The alliance aimed to provide a coordinated response to the spread of terrorism and global crime. Despite achieving some important victories, the G5 Sahel Force faces serious challenges, such as funding shortages, logistical issues, and limited resources. Political instability within member states also affects its effectiveness. The alliance continues to work with international partners to strengthen its capacity, although its future remains uncertain amidst ongoing regional instability.

Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is a regional military coalition that includes troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, focusing on the Lake Chad Basin area. Originally created to combat Boko Haram, MNJTF now addresses broader security challenges, including violent extremism and cross-border crime. The coalition works to protect civilians, prevent terrorist activities, and stabilise the area, but it faces challenges due to limited resources and frequent attacks by extremist groups. While the MNJTF has made progress in disrupting Boko Haram, maintaining sustained peace and security remains a major task.

Wagner Group

The Wagner Group is a private Russian paramilitary organisation involved in various international conflicts. In the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Wagner Group operatives support local government forces. Their presence is controversial, with accusations of human rights abuses, and their involvement often brings concerns about Russia's political influence in Africa. Wagner's activities have shifted regional dynamics, as some governments have turned to them instead of Western allies. However, this has also led to increased criticism over the use of foreign private military forces in managing local conflicts, especially given concerns about their methods and long-term impact.

Tuareg Rebellion

The Tuareg Rebellions are a series of uprisings led by the Tuareg people, a nomadic ethnic group in the Sahara, who have long fought for greater autonomy or independence in northern Mali and Niger. The rebellions are based on historical grievances over marginalisation and limited access to resources. These uprisings have been a central factor in destabilising Mali, especially when combined with Islamist groups who sometimes align with Tuareg factions. Efforts to address the problems of the Tuareg through peace agreements have had mixed success, and the issue remains a significant source of conflict and insecurity in the Sahel..

The African Union (AU)

The African Union, a continental organisation consisting of 55 African states, is deeply invested in the security and stability of the Sahel. The AU collaborates with the G5 Sahel and other international

partners to promote political solutions, peace-building efforts, and developmental aid. In addition to supporting military operations, the AU provides a platform for African leaders to coordinate anti-terrorism measures and address root causes of insecurity in the Sahel, such as economic disparities and governance challenges.

The United Nations (UN)

The United Nations, through its peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), has been involved in the Sahel since 2013. MINUSMA is tasked with stabilising Mali by supporting its government, promoting human rights, protecting civilians, and fostering political dialogue. The UN also coordinates humanitarian aid to address the region's high levels of displacement, food insecurity, and human rights challenges, playing a central role in the overall humanitarian response in the Sahel.

France

France has been a primary security partner in the Sahel, notably through Operation Barkhane, which aimed to combat terrorism across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Although it has recently reduced its direct military engagement, France continues to support Sahelian forces with training, intelligence, and logistical assistance. France's involvement reflects its interest in stabilising the Sahel as part of its broader strategy for regional security, as instability here could impact French territories and interests abroad.

United States

The United States, primarily through AFRICOM (U.S. Africa Command), focuses on counterterrorism and stability initiatives in the Sahel. U.S. involvement includes providing intelligence, funding, and training to Sahelian security forces and supporting initiatives that address the socioeconomic roots of regional instability. By promoting stability in the Sahel, the U.S. aims to prevent extremist groups from establishing strongholds that could threaten both regional and international security.

European Union (EU)

The European Union plays a major role in the Sahel's development and security initiatives. Through its EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the EU provides funding for economic growth projects, anti-human trafficking efforts, and security reforms in the Sahel. This involvement highlights the EU's commitment to fostering long-term stability through socioeconomic development, which is seen as key to reducing migration pressures and countering terrorism in the region.

Germany

As part of the EU and independently, Germany is involved in supporting security and development programs across the Sahel. Germany provides training and logistical support to Sahelian security forces and contributes to non-combat humanitarian assistance. By funding infrastructure projects and supporting governance reforms, Germany's approach to involvement in the Sahel aligns with its commitment to a stabilised, secure region that can reduce migration pressures and address regional security concerns.

China

China's engagement in the Sahel is primarily economic, with investments through the Belt and Road Initiative focused on infrastructure, energy, and trade. China's strategy involves building roads, energy grids, and other infrastructure to support long-term economic development and stability in the region. Although not heavily involved militarily, China views economic growth as a means to stabilise

the Sahel and create new trade routes, with infrastructure projects seen as a stabilising force in the long term.

General Overview

The Geography and Climate of the Sahel

The Sahel is a huge, drought-prone belt that stretches across the African continent from Senegal and Mauritania in the west to Sudan in the east. It serves as a transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and more humid regions to the south. This geographical positioning means the Sahel experiences extremely hot and dry conditions with unpredictable, seasonal rains that are often insufficient for consistent agriculture. Due to these harsh environmental conditions, much of the region relies on rain-fed farming and livestock herding as primary livelihoods. Climate change has worsened these environmental challenges, leading to prolonged droughts, desertification, and reduced agricultural yields.

These environmental stressors have placed a significant burden on communities in the Sahel, particularly those who depend on the land to support themselves. Unpredictable weather patterns, including increasingly frequent droughts, make it difficult to grow crops and raise animals, which worsens food insecurity and increases poverty. This situation forces many people to migrate within or outside their countries, searching for more stable environments and economic opportunities. Environmental degradation and climate change, therefore, serve as underlying factors that contribute to many of the Sahel's most pressing problems.

Social and Economic Challenges in the Sahel

The Sahel has one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the world. This demographic characteristic presents both opportunities and challenges. While a large youth population can drive economic growth, it also places pressure on limited resources and services, especially when opportunities for education, employment, and healthcare are scarce. High levels of poverty, limited access to quality education, and widespread unemployment make it difficult for young people to thrive. This lack of opportunity, combined with frustration over limited government services, creates a sense of frustration that has led some young people to join armed groups or migrate.

Economic instability is another significant issue in the Sahel. Despite the region's vast natural resources, including gold, oil, and uranium, these resources are often underutilised or poorly managed due to corruption, weak governance, and security issues. Governments in the Sahel struggle to provide basic infrastructure, such as roads, schools, and healthcare facilities, and many communities lack access to clean water and electricity. Rural areas, in particular, are severely underdeveloped, with limited economic activities beyond basic farming. In some cases, resource scarcity has led to conflict, especially over access to water and agricultural land, worsening tensions between communities and growing insecurity.

Rising Insecurity and Extremism

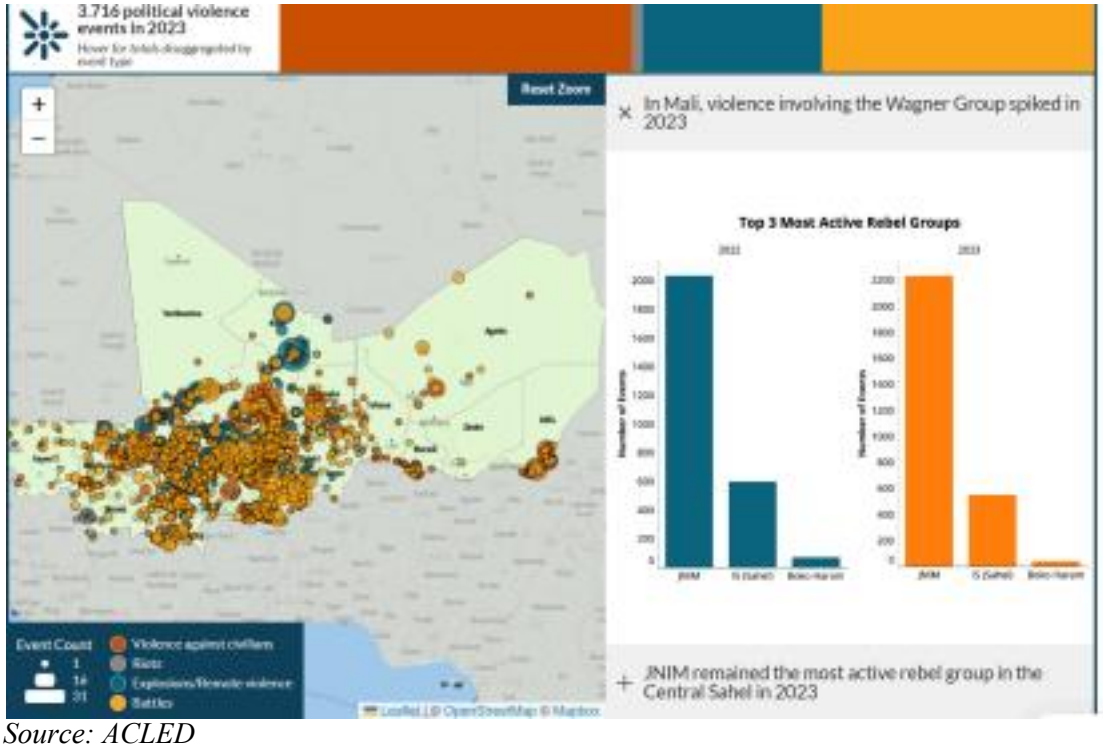
The Sahel is currently experiencing a significant security crisis, with violent extremism, organised crime, and armed conflicts affecting several countries. Groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram operate in the region, targeting civilians, government forces, and international peacekeepers. This insecurity has escalated dramatically since 2012, when a separatist movement in northern Mali led to a full-scale revolt. Although various peace agreements have been attempted, instability has continued, spreading from Mali into neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

Armed groups have taken advantage of the weak state presence in remote areas, using the lack

of governance to establish territories and expand their influence. These groups often exploit ethnic and social disagreements, encouraging community conflict. For instance, tensions between herders and farmers over land and resources have been manipulated by extremists to fuel cycles of violence. As a result, attacks on villages, kidnappings, and other violent incidents are now frequent across the Sahel, with civilians bearing the majority of these conflicts.

The main threat comes from jihadist groups, particularly JNIM and IS Sahel, which have increasingly targeted both military bases and local communities. In 2023, attacks in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso rose, with bombings and armed assaults becoming common. Ethnic tensions add to this crisis, as conflicts between militias, such as Dogon and Fulani groups, fuel violence and deepen divisions.

The presence of Russian troops like the Wagner Group has intensified the conflict, especially in Mali, where their operations alongside national forces have increased civilian risk. Drones and airstrikes, now widely used by state forces, contribute to the escalating violence. The map[1] below highlights key conflict zones in the Sahel, showing how violence has spread across the region, affecting millions of people.



Source: ACLED

[1] For the interactive map: https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/

Political Instability and Weak Governance

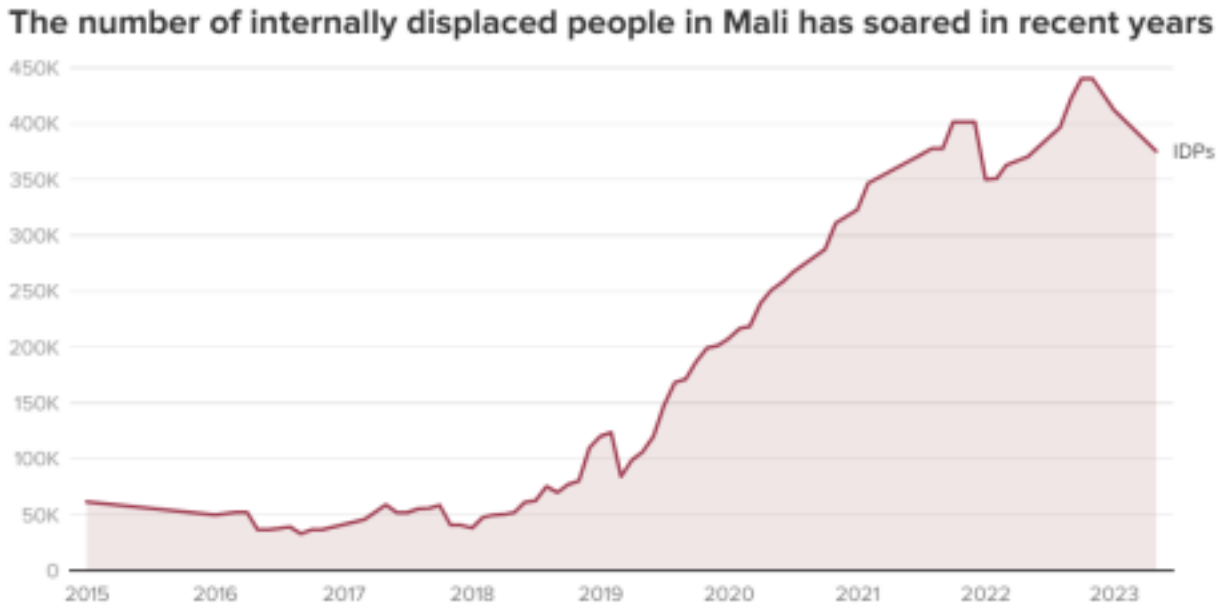
Political instability and weak governance are key factors behind the ongoing crisis in the Sahel. Many countries in the region have experienced revolts, political unrest, and weak central governments that struggle to maintain control over their territories. Mali, for example, has undergone several revolts in the last decade, with frequent government changes disrupting efforts to build stable institutions and address security threats. Political instability weakens the capacity of states to provide essential services, enforce the rule of law, and manage security, leaving vast areas vulnerable to the influence of armed groups and criminal networks.

Corruption is another issue affecting governance in the Sahel. Widespread corruption erodes

public trust in government institutions, making it difficult for leaders to gain popular support for policies and reforms. In many cases, government officials and security forces are perceived as corrupt or ineffective, which makes it harder for them to address local grievances and work with communities to improve security. This lack of trust in government further alienates marginalised communities, creating conditions that allow extremist groups to gain support by presenting themselves as alternative sources of protection and justice.

In Mali, years of shifting leadership and governance challenges have weakened stability, especially in the north. Frequent government changes disrupt efforts to strengthen state institutions, creating large areas where the government struggles to enforce law and security. This weak presence allows armed groups to expand and control territory, deepening the crisis. Corruption further reduces trust in officials, driving some communities to see armed groups as alternative sources of security and justice.

Since 2012, these conditions have fueled a rise in violence, spreading instability across the Sahel. This prolonged conflict has driven a growing number of Malians from their homes, especially in rural areas. The graph below shows the rapid increase in internally displaced people in Mali over recent years, highlighting the severe impact of insecurity on everyday life for hundreds of thousands.



Source: UNHRC, Malian government

Humanitarian Crisis and Displacement

The ongoing violence and insecurity in the Sahel have resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of people displaced from their homes. According to estimates from humanitarian organisations, over 5 million people have been displaced within the Sahel due to conflict, while millions more require urgent humanitarian assistance. Displacement often leads to overcrowded camps and settlements where basic needs, such as food, water, and healthcare, are difficult to meet. This situation puts additional pressure on already stretched resources and leaves many people in desperate circumstances.

Food insecurity is one of the most pressing issues in the Sahel's humanitarian crisis. Droughts,

poor agricultural yields, and disrupted supply chains caused by insecurity have led to widespread hunger and malnutrition. The United Nations estimates that more than 29 million people across the Sahel are in need of food assistance, with children being particularly vulnerable. High levels of malnutrition among children have long-term impacts on their health and development, creating a cycle of poverty and hardship that is difficult to break.

Healthcare services in the Sahel are limited, especially in rural areas, where medical facilities are often understaffed and undersupplied. The COVID-19 pandemic has further strained healthcare systems, diverting resources away from other urgent needs and highlighting the region's exposure to health crises. In addition to food insecurity and healthcare challenges, education is another area of concern, with conflict and displacement disrupting schooling for millions of children. Without access to education, young people in the Sahel have limited opportunities, which create cycles of poverty and instability.

Climate Change and Environmental Stress

Climate change has had a significant impact on the Sahel, intensifying environmental challenges and worsening social and economic problems. Rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, and desertification threaten the region's agricultural productivity, making it increasingly difficult for communities to grow crops and raise livestock. As agricultural land decreases, competition for limited resources like water and fertile land has intensified, leading to conflicts between farmers and herders. These resource-based conflicts are a significant source of violence, as different groups struggle to survive in an increasingly hostile environment.

The impact of climate change in the Sahel is not limited to economic and environmental consequences; it also contributes to social tensions and migration. Many young people from the Sahel migrate to other regions or countries in search of better opportunities, often making dangerous journeys to Europe or other parts of Africa. This migration is driven by a lack of economic prospects and the desire to escape poverty and insecurity, but it also reflects the growing pressure that climate change places on communities in the region. Addressing climate change and promoting sustainable agricultural practices are crucial steps to improving the health of Sahelian communities and reducing the drivers of conflict and migration.

Timeline of Events

1960s - 2000s

Many countries in the Sahel gain independence, but weak governance, poverty, and climate challenges lead to instability and frequent insurgencies.

The Tuareg people, seeking autonomy in northern Mali, launch several rebellions in 1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012, pressuring the Malian government.

2011

Libya's government collapses, flooding the region with weapons and fighters. This influx fuels insecurity across the Sahel, especially in Mali.

2012

Tuareg rebels declare an independent state in northern Mali but split from their Islamist allies shortly after. A coup in Mali overthrows the government, deepening the crisis as Islamist groups expand.

2013

France intervenes with *Operation Serval* to push back Islamist forces in Mali.

This expands into *Operation Barkhane*, targeting violent extremist groups across the Sahel.

2014

Boko Haram intensifies its attacks in the Lake Chad Basin and later pledges allegiance to ISIS, rebranding itself as the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP).

2015–2017

Extremist groups increasingly collaborate: ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) appears in Burkina Faso, and several al-Qaeda-linked groups unite under the banner Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). Violence escalates, with extremists expanding into coastal West Africa.

2017

U.S. special forces are ambushed in Tongo Tongo, Niger, by an ISIS-affiliated group, underscoring the growing security threat in the region.

2019–2020

JNIM and ISGS clash but maintain control in parts of the Sahel, driving up violence, particularly in central Mali.

2021

Chad's President Idriss Déby dies, weakening regional counterterrorism efforts.

France announces plans to end *Operation Barkhane*, reducing its role in Mali by 2022.

Mali's military-led government turns to the Russian Wagner Group for security support as French troops prepare to exit.

2022

Mali requests the withdrawal of all French forces, further weakening regional security efforts. The UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, faces heavy violence, while attacks on civilians increase, especially in central Mali.

2023

Mali demands MINUSMA's complete withdrawal. Extremists like JNIM take advantage of the security gap, increasing the attacks in northern Mali.

In Niger, a coup ousts President Mohamed Bazoum, the latest in a series of military takeovers in the region. France withdraws its troops, ending its last significant presence in the Sahel. The U.S. maintains a smaller counterterrorism presence but reduces its involvement due to the coup.

Possible Solutions

Solution 1: Strengthening Local Governance and Communities

Strengthening local governance and increasing community involvement can address the core challenges in the Sahel by creating a foundation for stability. Many communities in the Sahel have little trust in their governments, due to corruption, inefficiency, and limited local representation. By developing policies that reflect the needs of local communities, governments can reduce social tensions, build trust, and create a more inclusive society. You could focus on increasing access to services such as education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure like water and sanitation, ensuring these are spread across urban and rural areas.

For instance, Niger has experimented with localised community programs that involve local leaders and stakeholders in managing resources and resolving conflicts, with promising outcomes. Governments can reduce extremist appeal by expanding similar programs across the Sahel. International partners can provide training, resources, and support to build local governments. This approach would benefit all Sahel countries and could be tailored to each government's priorities, making it broadly adaptable.

Solution 2: Regional Security Coordination and Military Reform

The Sahel's insecurity is largely due to extremist groups operating across porous borders, making regional cooperation essential. The G5 Sahel coalition, composed of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, has shown that countries can work together effectively to combat common threats. Expanding and strengthening this regional coordination through better-equipped and trained security forces is crucial. However, to be successful, security operations should be supported by improvements within each country's military and police forces.

For example, Burkina Faso and Niger have taken steps to include human rights training in military programs to improve relations with their inhabitants, which has shown some success in improving public views. International support from countries with different regional interests, like France and the United States, can provide further support. The European Union and African Union could also assist by providing funding and mediation support. This approach could help make security efforts more effective while reducing the risk of political favouritism and ensuring that all member states feel equally represented.

Solution 3: Addressing Climate Change and Food Security Through Sustainable Agriculture

The Sahel's extreme environmental conditions, worsened by climate change, are a major driver of conflict.. A solution could involve promoting sustainable agricultural methods that can withstand the region's unpredictable climate. Projects that improve soil quality, conserve water, and introduce drought-resistant produce can help communities in the Sahel become more self-reliant and reduce tensions over resources.

Countries like Senegal and Chad have started using sustainable practices, such as rainwater harvesting, with noticeable improvements in production and food security. Implementing these initiatives across the Sahel could lessen the reliance on aid from other countries. International organisations like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and World Bank could fund these projects.

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