

MILITARY ENTRENCHMENT IN MALI AND NIGER

Praetorianism in Retrospect

VIRGINIE BAUDAIS

**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

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October 2024



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Executive summary

There has been a return of the military to power in the Sahel region since 2020. However, the conditions that have led to the militarization of power are different in each context and are the result of specific socio-historical conditions. In Mali and Niger, where SIPRI works within the framework of the Just Future programme, politics and the military have been inextricably linked for decades. Both countries have long been ruled by the military and, even in periods of democratic governance, the military is never far from politics. These internal factors are compounded by the deteriorating security situation in large parts of their territories, which are plagued by the expansion of armed jihadist groups.

The deterioration of the security situation has put the populations of these two countries into a situation of widespread impoverishment and, above all, violence from both armed jihadist groups and national armies engaged in a total war against terrorism, supported by Russian soldiers from the former Wagner paramilitary group. The reorientation of the ruling juntas from the traditional partners towards China, Russia and Turkey is based on a desire to change the terms of multilateral cooperation and to assert sovereignty. It is also underpinned by a strong reaffirmation of nationalism. These juntas seek to rely on popular legitimacy, which they have to create in the absence of democratic legitimacy.

Since 2021, SIPRI and its partners LASDEL (Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development, Niger) and POINT SUD (Mali) have been conducting perceptions surveys among the populations of the regions of Bandiagara, Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu in Mali and the regions of Maradi, Tahoua and Tillabéri in Niger. The surveys look at the perception of the security situation at the national and local level, the relationships with the actors involved in security and insecurity, the relationships between the population and the defence and security forces, and the role of civil society in a context of insecurity. The aims of these surveys are to identify, over the long term (2021–25), the security actors and to gain a better understanding of relations between the civilian population and the defence and security forces in the regions of interest for the Just Future programme and its partners.

This report first explores the links between the military and politics, the root causes and the factors underlying the military coups that have taken place in Mali and Niger. The most recent coup d'état in Mali, which occurred on 18–19 August 2020, marked the beginning of a new wave of remilitarization of power in the Sahel region. The report discusses the causes put forward by the military—lack of resources, corruption within the civilian (former) authorities and the inability of the civilian authorities to restore security—in relation to the decisions taken by the military juntas now in power. In particular, the preservation of the interests of the military elite seems to remain a major concern under the guise of fighting corruption and reforming the institutions. Furthermore, the militarization of the states' institutions is a characteristic of the military regimes, in which the military takes precedence over all other concerns.

The desire for independence may be supported by the population, but it comes at a price. The military juntas assert their desire for independence from traditional western partners, while they place their security—and some natural resources—in the hands of Russia. In this context, the report examines people's perceptions of recent changes such as the end of the agreement for peace and reconciliation in Mali and Mali and Niger's exit from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) but also the populations' perceptions of the security situation in regard to the realities of security and the humanitarian situation.

Another characteristic of military regimes is their isolation on the international and regional stage. Mali and Niger, together with Burkina Faso, have therefore created a new alliance, the ‘Alliance of Sahel States (AES)’. While this alliance was intended to be mainly defensive in 2023, the juntas now want to turn it into an economic and political union. These military governments are increasingly coercive, limiting freedom of expression, restricting civic space and muzzling opposition. The civilian populations of Mali and Niger, especially those living in rural areas in the regions most affected by insecurity, are victims both of armed groups and of the violence of their armed forces.

The ‘epidemic’ of coups d’état shows how, despite the level of international economic, political and military investment, imposing change from outside has had limited effects. This is further illustrated by the ever-increasing duration of proposed transitions, which are extended despite international protest. ECOWAS failed to mediate and reach agreement on the duration of transitions, which significantly undermined its ability to promote the restoration of civilian regimes. The establishment of the AES by the military juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger illustrates the will of the new regimes to bypass established multilateral cooperation mechanisms and impose their own timing. Military regimes are acting to change outcomes and rules.

The desire for change the new authorities in Mali and Niger claim to want should lead the traditional partners to reassess their approaches to cooperation. The failure of international military operations to stabilize the situation in Mali and the destabilization of the Liptako-Gourma region are other sources of concern. It is important to understand the root causes of these coups and to gain a better understanding of the contexts in which we work. Today, however, the most urgent need is to help the civilian populations who are the victims of indiscriminate violence.

The report concludes with six recommendations for the international community:

1. More flexible approaches to negotiating transition timetables and promoting inclusive dialogue between political, military and civil society organizations would facilitate the establishment of mutually acceptable roadmaps for transitions and a return to democracy.
2. The international community should continue to support security sector reform to make the security sector more accountable and focused on protecting citizens while limiting the political role of the military.
3. Priority must be given to local approaches that take account of knowledge of each specific context.
4. Elections should serve as the compass of the international community if and when they can be held under free and democratic conditions and not used to ‘civilianize’ military regimes.
5. Addressing the root causes of instability should be a priority.
6. The international community must continue to provide substantial humanitarian assistance to populations caught up in indiscriminate violence, while also supporting economic initiatives.

1. Introduction

Political developments in the Sahel region have moved quickly since SIPRI started conducting perception surveys in Mali and Niger in 2021 as part of the Just Future Alliance framework.¹ The military took power in Mali in August 2020 and in Niger in July 2023. The people of Burkina Faso, Guinea and, a little further away, Gabon, are also now governed by military regimes. In Mali and Niger, these changes have gone hand in hand with a strong reaffirmation of sovereignty and nationalism, a rejection of regional and international rules, and the withdrawal of all western and international forces from their territories. These changes have led to a breakdown in relationships with traditional partners and have taken place against a backdrop of a diversification of alliances and partnerships—to the benefit of Russia in particular. The situation is extremely concerning. Security continues to deteriorate, the civic space is shrinking, military regimes are silencing opposition, and civilians have become the victims of violence by armed groups and the national armies engaged in a total war against terrorism. All these transformations in the Sahel region reflect a world in transition, the nature of today's wars and the emergence of a new balance of power.

Working in the Sahel region has become increasingly difficult and requires constant adaptation. Access to information has been severely restricted because many parts of Mali and Niger are either inaccessible due to the high levels of insecurity or have been declared 'military operation zones'. Where they are not simply banned, media outlets, both national and international, face restrictions. Researchers mainly work by proxy in collaboration with partners from areas considered safe, forced to rely on 'local facilitators' within communities, which exposes those individuals to significant risks.² However, although all the research is based on data collected in these countries, regions and communities, restricted access to the research areas de facto limits the understanding of the context. Conflict-affected areas are high-risk zones for external actors such as humanitarian workers, researchers and journalists. However, these areas are precisely where development or humanitarian aid programmes are most needed, and from where voices must be heard and relayed. This requires access to objective, evidence-based information. Data collection is crucial for mapping, monitoring and analysing the evolution of situations, for project planning and evaluation, and for publicizing atrocities committed against populations in areas of restricted access. Understanding the complexity of conflicts requires a local approach grounded in the local production of knowledge and data on conflict-affected areas.

Since 2021, SIPRI and its partners LASDEL (Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local development, Niger) and POINT SUD (Mali) have been conducting perception surveys among the populations of Mali and Niger. SIPRI is a member of the Just Future Alliance, a consortium led by CORDAID that brings together international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations. Just Future aims to establish a global strategic partnership with civil society organizations to 'improve the accessibility, responsiveness and accountability of security and justice institutions' by 'mobilizing civil society for collective action and advocacy' in fragile contexts.³ Of the six fragile contexts—Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger and South Sudan—SIPRI conducts

¹ Just Future, 'Welcome to the Just Future Alliance', [n.d.].

² Baudais, V. and Deb, S., 'The challenges of data collection in conflict-affected areas: A case study in the Liptako-Gourma region', *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, 2022/7 (Oct. 2022); and Dunia, O. A., Toppo, A. O. M. and Vincent, J. (eds), *Facilitating Researchers in Insecure Zones: Towards a More Equitable Knowledge Production* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2023).

³ Just Future (note 1).

Baseline study	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
October 2021	March 2022	October 2022	March 2023	October 2023	April 2024

Figure 1.1. Timeline of surveys conducted by SIPRI, POINT SUD and LASDEL in Mali and Niger

Q = Survey.

perception surveys twice a year in the regions of Bandiagara, Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu in Mali, and Maradi, Tahoua and Tillabery in Niger. SIPRI has conducted five perceptions surveys since 2021 (see figure 1.1), in addition to the baseline study.⁴ This research paper is based on the author’s knowledge of the context and the data collected since 2021 as part of the Just Future project.⁵

This SIPRI report analyses the changes that have affected Mali and Niger since 2020. The focus is on Mali and Niger, where data has been collected, but other countries are also referenced, particularly Burkina Faso, which is part of the same regional dynamic, as the Liptako-Gourma region is the region most affected by the presence of jihadi groups in West Africa. The paper first examines how praetorianism—the intrusion of the armed forces into the political sphere—is intrinsically linked to the political history of both countries. It then analyses how the military authorities use sovereignty as a political resource and base their legitimacy on popular support. Finally, it shows how the fight against terrorism has provided a pretext for restrictions on freedom, led to indiscriminate violence against civilians and severely endangered their daily lives. The report concludes with six recommendations for the international community.

⁴ This research project aims to understand how perceptions of security and insecurity vary across demographic cohorts and to highlight changes in the habits and daily lives of the population linked to security conditions. Each survey was conducted with a representative sample of approximately 530 respondents in Mali and 710 respondents in Niger (see figure 1.1).

⁵ Just Future country briefs and infographics are available at <https://justfuturealliance.org/fr/research/>.

2. Army and politics: A shared history

There are many reasons for military coups and, despite certain commonalities, each coup is deeply rooted in its specific context. This chapter reviews the long history of military intervention in the political arena in Mali and Niger and explains how the deteriorating security situation along with the pressure on the military as an institution played a key role in the coups in Mali and Niger. These coups were facilitated by internal and external factors: the routinization of praetorian intervention in the political arena and the prevailing level of insecurity.

Praetorianism: The routinization of a recurrent practice

Praetorianism is nothing new in Mali and Niger.⁶ It refers to the intrusion of the armed forces into the political sphere, which in the case of both Mali and Niger reflects the significant political influence the armed forces have maintained since independence in 1960. The army and politics are inextricably intertwined in both states.

Following the wave of independence in 1960, West Africa's first civilian regimes were short-lived. A coup d'état in Togo on 13 January 1963 ushered in a long period of praetorianism. Apart from in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, the militarization of power became the norm. Mali has been under military rule for 28 years (1968–91, 2012 and 2020–to date) and Niger for 24 years (1974–93, 1996–99, 2010 and 2023–to date) since 1960. In the 1980s, authoritarian regimes faced financial and economic crises that undermined their clientelist redistributive systems, as well as political crises where demands for freedom were driven by social and political movements.⁷ After a long period of authoritarianism—under General Moussa Traoré (1968–91) in Mali, and Seyni Kountché (1974–87) and Ali Saïbou (1987–93) in Niger—the organization of national conferences in the early 1990s was intended to mark the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes and ensure a peaceful and democratic transfer of power.⁸

This wave of democratization did not go as expected. Mali experienced a lengthier period of civilian rule (1992–2012), but in 2012 a coup d'état overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré, who had led the transition to democracy in 1991. The coup took place a few days before the presidential election, in which Touré was not a candidate in accordance with the Constitution, having served two terms.⁹ In Mali, the military had been in power for 23 years and the transition to democracy did not reduced its influence. Rather, military personnel were appointed ambassadors by civilian regimes and had a continued presence in civilian governments in key positions.¹⁰

⁶ McGowan, P. J., 'African military coups d'état 1956–2001: Frequency, trends and distribution', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2003); and Institute for Security Studies, 'Rethinking responses to unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa', *West Africa Report* no. 50 (June 2024).

⁷ In the 1980s, financial and economic crises undermined authoritarian and military regimes. Di Palma, G., *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1990); and Bratton, M and Van de Walle, N., 'Neopatrimonial regimes and political transitions in Africa', *World Politics*, no. 46 (July 1994), pp. 453–80.

⁸ Doorenspleet, R., 'Reassessing the three waves of democratization', *World Politics*, vol. 52 (Apr. 2000), pp. 384–406; and Lynch G. and Crawford G., 'Democratization in Africa, 1990–2010: An assessment', *Democratization*, vol. 18 (2011), pp. 275–310.

⁹ International Crisis Group, 'Mali: Avoiding escalation', *Africa Report*, 18 July 2012.

¹⁰ Savané, L. and Touré, F., 'Transition Malienne: Politisation de l'armée ou militarisation du politique?' [Malian transition: Politicization of the military or militarization of politics?], *The Conversation*, 23 Feb. 2021; and *The Conversation*, 'Le pouvoir militaire est-il une solution durable au Mali?' [Is military power a lasting solution in Mali?], 27 June 2021.

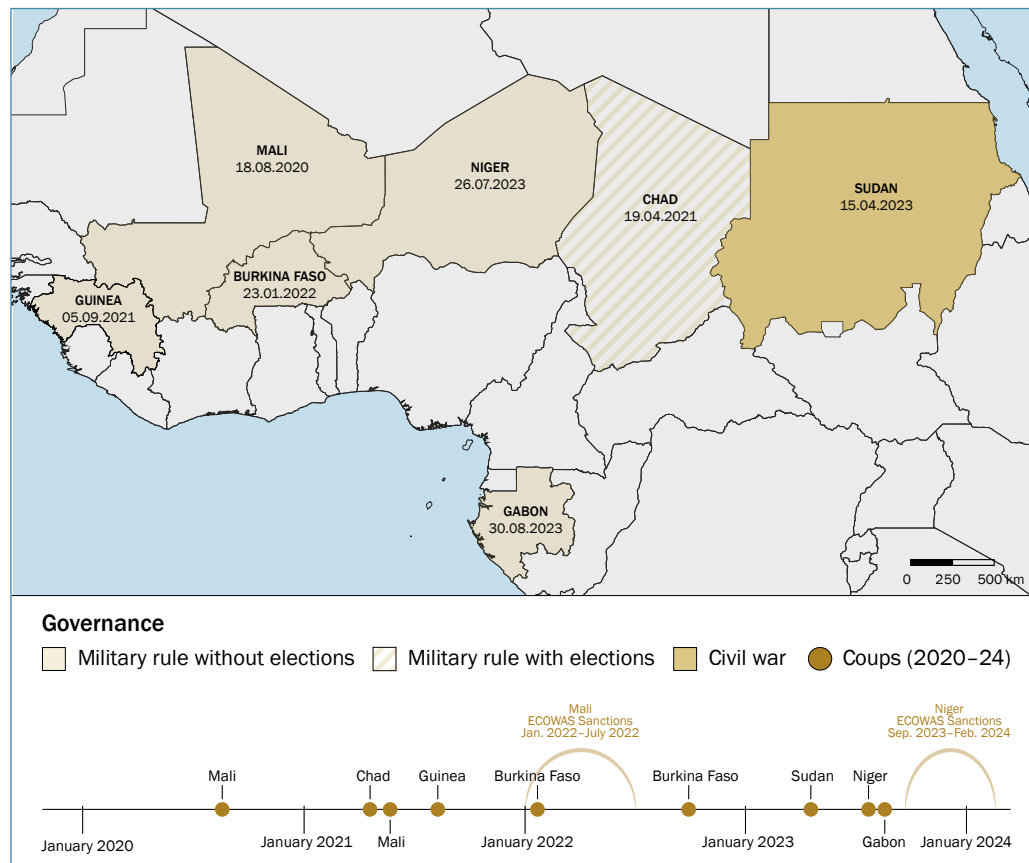


Figure 2.1. Coups d'état in African states since January 2020

ECOWAS = Economic Community of West African States.

Credit: Joseph Benita, independent cartographer and analyst.

Political tensions led to three military coups in Niger, in 1996, 1999 and again in 2010.¹¹ This was followed by a period of democratic governance, during which the same political party (Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism-Tarayya) remained in power under Mahamadou Issoufou (2011–21) and Mohamed Bazoum (2021–23).¹²

In Mali, the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in 2013 symbolized a return to democracy and raised expectations.¹³ However, his inaction and the rapid deterioration in the security situation paved the way for the military to return to power in 2020—just two years after Keïta's election for a second term.¹⁴ The most recent coup d'état in Mali, which occurred on 18–19 August 2020, marked the beginning of a new wave of remilitarization of power in the Sahel region (see figure 2.1).¹⁵ Although each coup had its own roots, each seemed to be a precursor to the next, in what the United Nations secretary-general described as an 'epidemic'.¹⁶

¹¹ Idrissa, K., *Armée et politique au Niger* [Army and politics in Niger], CODESRIA, Dakar, 2008; and Baudais, V. and Chauzal, G., 'The 2010 coup d'état in Niger: A praetorian regulation of politics?', *African Affairs*, vol. 110, no. 439 (2011), pp. 295–304.

¹² Boubacar, I. A., *Crise Institutionnelle et Démocratisation au Niger* [Institutional crisis and democratization in Niger] (CNRS/CEAN: Bordeaux/Paris, 1996). President Mohamed Bazoum has been detained since the coup but has not resigned.

¹³ Baudais, V., 'Mali: Fragmented territorial sovereignty and contested political space', SIPRI Topical Backgrounder, June 2020.

¹⁴ Baudais, V. and Chauzal, G., 'Mali's transition: High expectations and little time', SIPRI WritePeace Blog, Sep. 2020.

¹⁵ Bulletin FrancoPaix, 'Coups d'état en Afrique: le retour de l'uniforme en politique' [Coups d'état in Africa: The return of military rule], vol. 7, nos 1–2 (Jan.–Feb. 2022).

¹⁶ Nichols, M., '“An epidemic” of coups: UN chief laments, urging Security Council to act', Reuters, 26 Oct. 2021.

This remilitarization of power highlights how weak state institutions are. The military is often critical of civilian regimes for their economic failures, corruption and bad governance. Factors such as the absence of economic opportunities, a lack of legitimacy and the fragility of the post-colonial states have been identified as coup triggers.¹⁷ Others insist that there is a 'structural civil-military imbalance plaguing the continent'.¹⁸

The military has always been intertwined with politics in the region, however, whether through election to office following a military career, as in the case of Touré in Mali or Mamadou Tandja in Niger, serving in an administration or participating in diplomacy.¹⁹ The interweaving of military and political careers is a characteristic of Mali's and Niger's political systems.

When a coup d'état occurs, it reduces the chances of consolidating institutions. Thus, such praetorian interventions in the political arena obstruct the institutionalization of the state.²⁰ Since 1960, Nigeriens have experienced five coups and five political transitions and have voted on seven constitutions. In July 2023, Mali adopted a fourth constitution.

When domestic factors have played a significant role in the remilitarization of power, the worsening security situation and the resulting pressure on the armed forces has also led the military to take power.

Self-preservation through coup d'état: A political strategy

The military justify their coups in several ways. Some factors are specific to the military institution itself, which is on the front line in the fight against armed groups. Civilian authorities are often accused of corruption and mismanaging the resources allocated to the armed forces. Coupled with military defeats, it becomes a source of humiliation, as their essential needs—whether in terms of equipment or training—are not being adequately addressed. However, the armed forces are comparatively well resourced (see figure 2.2) and the defence sector is also heavily affected by corruption. Another essential factor is the internationalization of the security sector, which has fuelled sovereigntist narratives.

In January 2012, following clashes between the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Malian army in northern Mali,²¹ Mali's northern regions were occupied by Tuaregs and jihadi groups.²² The defeat of the Malian army in 2012, and again in 2014 during a visit to Kidal by Prime Minister Moussa Mara, had a profound impact on the military as an institution. These setbacks contributed to a perception that it had been provided with no means to combat armed groups effectively.

¹⁷ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* (UNDP: New York, 2023).

¹⁸ Wilén N., 'Contagious coups in Africa? History of civil-military imbalance', *African Affairs*, vol. 123, no. 491, p. 245.

¹⁹ Gregoire, E., 'Niger: Anatomie d'une junte' [Niger: Anatomy of a junta], French Institute of Geopolitics, 1 July 2024.

²⁰ Berger, P. and Luckmann, T., *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Anchor, 1966).

²¹ Mali has experienced several rebellions in the north since the 1960s. Klute, G., 'Hostilities and alliances: Archaeology of Tuareg dissent in Mali', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 35, no. 137 (1995), pp. 55–71; Gregoire, E., 'Islamists and Tuareg rebels in Mali: Alliances, rivalries and ruptures', *EchoGeo*, 2013; Klute, G., 'Postface: Emerging orders in the Sahel?', *International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2020), pp. 133–36; and Bencherif, A., 'For a (re-)reading of the Tuareg rebellions in Mali: Memories and representations in the Tuareg political assemblage', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2019), pp. 195–214.

²² Shaw, S., 'Fallout in the Sahel: The geographic spread of conflict from Libya to Mali', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2013), pp. 199–210; Chebli, D., 'From MNA to the MNLA: The shift to armed struggle', Network of Researchers in International Affairs (NORIA), 10 June 2014; and Lacher, W., *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, Carnegie Papers, Sep. 2012.

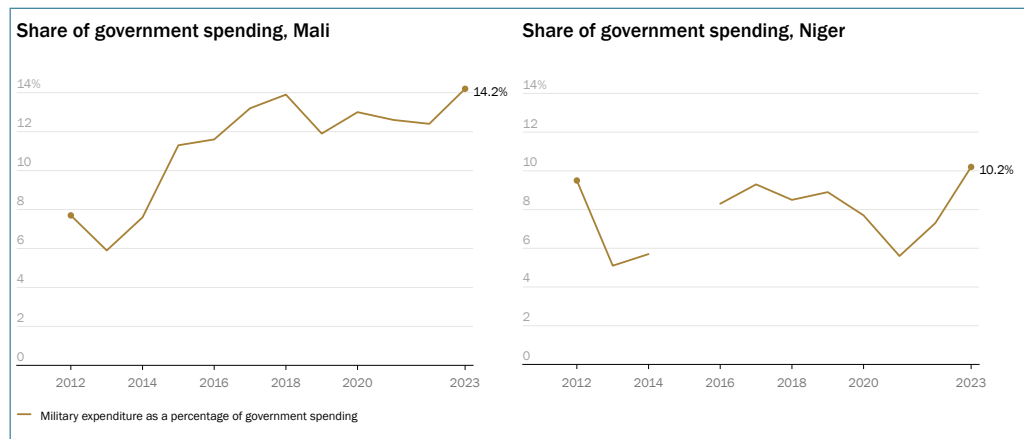


Figure 2.2. Military expenditure as a share of government spending in Mali and Niger, 2012–23

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Sep. 2024.

At the time, the Malian army was poorly equipped and insufficiently trained, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among soldiers. They demanded improved conditions and equipment, and more resources to combat the insurgency in the north.²³ Soldiers also denounced the corruption among the army's top-ranking officers, not least Army Chief-of-Staff General Gabriel Poudiougou who was known as the 'salon general'.²⁴ In 2020, although the army was better trained and better equipped, corruption among the elites, including the military, was a significant factor in the coup.²⁵

The security situation in northern Mali stabilized following the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (the Bamako Agreement), as a result of the Algiers process, in May and June 2015.²⁶ The situation in central Mali, however, started to deteriorate.²⁷ The rapid expansion of jihadi groups has made the Liptako-Gourma region an epicentre for violence in the Sahel.²⁸ After 2013, the degraded security situation led to a takeover of the security sector by international partners such as France, the UN, the European Union (EU) and the United States through multilateral peace operations.²⁹ Despite these efforts, such security initiatives failed to protect civilians or to prevent the spread of armed groups and violence in the Liptako-Gourma region.³⁰ The Malian Armed Forces are regularly accused of human rights violations, contributing to insecurity and discrimination against certain communities, and being an obstacle to achieving sustainable peace.³¹

²³ Baudais, V. and Maïga, S., *The European Union Training Mission in Mali: An Assessment* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Apr. 2022).

²⁴ Grogga-Bada, M., 'Décès d'Amadou Toumani Touré: le 21 mars 2012, le jour où ATT a été renversé' [Death of Amadou Toumani Touré: 21 March 2012, the day ATT was overthrown], *Jeune Afrique*, 10 Nov. 2020.

²⁵ Déclaration du CNSP sur l'ORTM suite au coup d'état du 18 août 2020 [Statement by the CNSP on ORTM following the coup d'état of 18 Aug. 2020], Youtube [n.d.].

²⁶ A ceasefire and preliminary peace agreement was signed in Ouagadougou on 18 June 2013. Boutellis, A. and Zahar, M.-J., 'A process in search for peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement', New York, International Peace Institute, 2017.

²⁷ Tobie, A., 'Central Mali: Violence, local perspectives and diverging narratives', *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, no. 2017/5, (Dec. 2017).

²⁸ Institute for Security Studies, 'Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma', West Africa report, 10 Dec. 2019.

²⁹ Tull, D. M., *The European Union Training Mission and the Struggle for a New Model Army in Mali*, IRSEM, Research Paper no. 89 (2020); and Cold-Ravnkilde, S. M. and Jacobsen, K. L., 'Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: Constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism', *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 4 (July 2020), pp. 855–74.

³⁰ Amnesty International, '“They executed some and brought the rest with them”: Human Rights Violations by Security Forces in the Sahel', London, 2020.

³¹ Goxho, D., 'Protecting civilians from those who should protect them', *Egmont Policy Brief* no. 274 (Apr. 2022).

In Niger, in his first speech as the new head of state on 28 July 2023, General Abdourahmane Tiani cited the deadly attacks on Nigerien armed forces in Bosso, Inatès and Chingodiar.³² He questioned the response of President Bazoum's government to the insecurity.³³ The escalating death toll among soldiers had significantly strained relations and trust between the army and the civilian authorities. However, this cannot conceal the fragility of the military as an institution, which is riven by internal opposition but determined to stay in power. Indeed, among other reasons, the planned or rumoured replacement of General Tiani as head of the Presidential Guard was an important personal motive that precipitated the coup.³⁴ Tiani had been appointed by President Bazoum's predecessor, Mahamadou Issoufou, but relations with Bazoum had deteriorated.³⁵

The unfolding of the coup d'état in Niger on 26 July revealed the disunity within the military, as it was initially uncertain whether the armed forces would support Tiani in the hours after Bazoum's arrest. It took two days for Tiani to secure his position as head of state. Niamey was the scene of various protests following the coup. Pro-Bazoum demonstrations were dispersed by the National Guard and there were rallies in support of the coup and opposing the French presence, during which Russian flags were displayed.

The redeployment of the French Operation Barkhane and the EU task force Takuba from Mali to Niger contributed to a deterioration in relations with the military and led to tensions with some segments of the population and civil society organizations. Bazoum had obtained parliamentary approval for the deployment of foreign forces in Niger in April 2022.³⁶ However, opposition and civil society organizations denounced the growing influence of foreign forces.³⁷ Nor did this meet with the approval of the wider population. During the redeployment in November 2021, a French army convoy was blocked by protestors. Two people were killed and 12 injured.³⁸ In July 2022, the M62 Movement: Sacred Union for the Safeguarding of the Sovereignty and Dignity of the People was created by a coalition of civil society organizations in reaction to the presence of Operation Barkhane. This political movement became the first opposition to Bazoum's presidency and later supported the coup d'état.³⁹

The deteriorating security situation and poor economic and social governance have been cited in both countries as triggers for their coups. The military seized power by promising to clean up public life and address the insecurity and inefficiency of the civilian regimes. In Mali, a few days after the coup d'état, the junta ordered former ministers and parliamentarians to return their official vehicles.⁴⁰ Corruption was widespread

³² The Nigerien army has suffered heavy attacks since 2016, the most violent of which were at Bosso in 2016, 32 soldiers killed; Inatès in 2019, 71 soldiers killed; and Chingodiar in 2020, 89 soldiers killed. All the attacks mentioned as the justification for the coup took place under Issoufou's presidency.

³³ YouTube, 'Coup d'état: le general Tiani officialise sa prise de pouvoir' [Coup d'état: General Tiani officialises his seizure of power].

³⁴ This was denied by Prime Minister Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou in an interview with *Le Monde*. See *Le Monde*, 'Niger: Six questions to understand the situation after the coup', 10 Aug. 2023.

³⁵ Jeune Afrique, 'Au Niger, Bazoum, Tiani et les milliards de la discorde' [In Niger, Bazoum, Tiani and the billions of discord], 22 Aug. 2023.

³⁶ Studio Kalangou, 'Le parlement nigérien autorise le redéploiement de Barkhane et Takuba' [Niger's parliament authorizes the redeployment of Barkhane and Takuba], 23 Apr. 2022.

³⁷ RFI, 'Le Niger autorise la présence de forces étrangères sur son territoire' [Niger authorises the presence of foreign forces on its territory], 23 Apr. 2022.

³⁸ France 24, 'Un convoi militaire français bloqué par des manifestants au Niger' [Protesters in Niger block French military convoy], 27 Nov. 2021.

³⁹ BBC News Afrique, 'Coup d'Etat au Niger: M62, le Mouvement nigérien appelant à l'expulsion des forces françaises' [Coup d'état in Niger: M62, the Niger Movement calling for the expulsion of French forces], 16 Aug. 2023.

⁴⁰ *Liberation*, 'Transition au Mali: opération lendemains propres?' [Transition in Mali: A clean future?], Sep. 2020; and Radio France, 'Le Mali n'est pas pauvre, le Mali est pauvrement géré' [Mali is not a poor country: Mali is poorly managed], 13 May 2021.

under President Keïta and concerning in particular his entourage. Combating corruption was made a priority by the new authorities. This led to the prosecution and imprisonment of some politicians and business leaders involved in the embezzlement of public funds and financial crime.⁴¹ In Niger, less than two months after assuming power, General Tiani announced the creation of an anti-corruption commission with a mission to recover all illegally acquired and/or misappropriated public assets.⁴²

However, under the guise of fighting corruption, the ruling juntas are consolidating their control over the state and its resources through the militarization of power and institutions. In both countries, the military has flouted established rules.

The militarization of state institutions

In both countries, the state apparatus, including key ministries and territorial administration, is in the hands of the military. This situation is not entirely new. As mentioned above, the military has always been at the centre of power in Mali and Niger, but the commandeering of politics becomes increasingly significant as its time in power extends. These transitions are no exception.

Within a few days of the coup, the Malian junta provided assurances of its willingness to respect international commitments, ensure a short-term transition and hand over power to a civilian administration. These assurances were intended to reassure both their partners and the population of their intentions. On 19 August 2020, the Malian junta, in its first public statement, called for support from all partners and asserted that ‘all past agreements’ would be respected, including the Algiers process.⁴³ The first Fundamental Act was adopted on 24 August 2020, confirming the seizure of power by the National Committee for the Salvation of the People. A Charter of Transition was then adopted on 12 September 2020, specifying in Article 22 that the transition would last 18 months from the investiture of the President of the Transition.⁴⁴

On 21 September, Bah N'Daw, a retired colonel, was appointed interim president and Colonel Assimi Goïta, head of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (Comité national pour le salut du peuple, CNSP), was made vice president. On 27 September, Moctar Ouane was designated prime minister. In May 2021, when the president and prime minister attempted to reshuffle the government and replace Colonel Sadio Camara, who is close to Russia, as minister of defence and veterans, the military seized control of the transition, which led to a remilitarization of the transition. Camara was reinstated as minister of defence and Colonel Goïta became the head of state.⁴⁵ At the end of 2021, the National Transition Council (NTC), the legislative body, proposed extending the transition period from six months to five years. The Malian authorities then presented a proposal to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to extend the transition by up to five years from 1 January 2022, de facto cancelling the elections scheduled for February 2022.⁴⁶ This extension was opposed by some political parties and organizations. On 9 January 2022, in response to the junta's proposal, ECOWAS imposed additional economic sanctions, which included

⁴¹ Jeune Afrique, ‘La junte de Goïta arrête d’anciens ministres d’IBK’ [Goïta's junta arrests IBK's former ministers], Mali, 1 Sep. 2023.

⁴² KOACI, ‘Niger: Le CNSP annonce la création d’une commission anti-corruption’ [Niger: The CNSP announces the creation of an anti-corruption commission], 21 Sep. 2023.

⁴³ YouTube, ‘Coup d’état au Mali: Un président de transition sera mis en place affirme la junte’ [Coup d’état in Mali: A transitional president will be put in place, junta announces], 19 Aug. 2020.

⁴⁴ Acte Fondamental 001/CNSP 24, Aug. 2020.

⁴⁵ Decree 2021-PT-RM of 11 June 2021 on nomination of members of the government.

⁴⁶ RFI, ‘Mali: le détail de la transition proposé à la Cédéao par les autorités’ [Mali: Details of the transition proposal to ECOWAS by the authorities], 3 Jan. 2022.

suspending all trade with the region. France and the EU also imposed economic sanctions and asset freezes.⁴⁷

After the coup d'état in July 2023, the Nigerien junta also reaffirmed its willingness to honour the international commitments made by Niger.⁴⁸ Initially, the military takeover was marked by brief and terse statements. Nigerien junta leader Colonel-major Amadou Abdouramane confirmed the seizure of power in less than a minute. Two days later, General Tiani, the new head of the state, appeared on national television for 10 minutes to justify the coup.⁴⁹

Learning from Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger's junta has been less open to discussions on the duration of the transition. In August 2023, the junta declared that the transition would 'not exceed three years' and would be determined by 'an inclusive national dialogue'. In early October, Algeria proposed a six-month transition, which the junta rejected.⁵⁰ The detention of the former president, Bazoum, was a major factor in the strong reaction from ECOWAS, which included a threat of military intervention.⁵¹

In neither Mali nor Niger did the sanctions have the expected outcome. Elections are yet to be organized in Mali, Bazoum remains in detention, and no transition timeline has been agreed in Niger. Eventually, after Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their intention to leave ECOWAS in January 2024, the regional organization tried to ease tensions and prevent its disintegration. In February 2024, ECOWAS lifted sanctions on Niger (on humanitarian grounds) and Mali. However, the juntas are no longer bound by their transition timetables and negotiations.⁵²

Although both juntas initially claimed to be leading a transition to a civilian government, the establishment of civil-military governments in which the military retains key positions reveals a significant militarization of state institutions. In Mali, the CNSP at first complied with the international community's injunctions to appoint a civilian president (N'Daw) and prime minister (Ouane). However, the defence, territorial administration, security and civil protection, and national reconciliation ministries in the Ouane government were led by military personnel. Colonel Goïta, head of the now-dissolved CNSP, was appointed vice-president in charge of defence and security. Colonel Malick Diaw—the former first vice-president of the CNSP—was appointed head of the NTC. Colonel Camara, previously second vice-president of the CNSP, became minister of defence. Lieutenant-Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga took charge of territorial administration and decentralization. Colonel Modibo Koné, third CNSP vice-president, was appointed minister of security and civil protection and Colonel Major Ismaël Wagué, who acted as spokesperson for the junta, was named minister of national reconciliation.

Less than four months after the coup d'état, the junta implemented the territorial administration reform proposed during the Touré presidency.⁵³ It redrew the country's territorial boundaries, increasing the number of regions from 15 to 20. Senior military

⁴⁷ The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions on Mali after the coup d'état but lifted them on 6 Oct. 2020 following the appointment of a civilian president and prime minister. Following the sidelining of the civilian authorities in May 2021, ECOWAS imposed new sanctions. ECOWAS lifted all the sanctions on Mali, Niger and Guinea on 24 Feb. 2024. ECOWAS Commission, Extraordinary Summit of the Conference of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS on the Political Situation, Peace and Security in the Region, Final Communiqué, Abuja, 24 Feb. 2024.

⁴⁸ Ouest-France, 'Niger: Des militaires prennent le pouvoir' [Niger: Military take power], YouTube, 26 July 2023.

⁴⁹ YouTube, 'Coup d'État au Niger: le général Tchiani officialise sa prise du pouvoir' [Coup in Niger: General Tchiani makes his seizure of power official].

⁵⁰ Reuters, 'Algeria proposes transition to resolve Niger crisis', 29 Aug. 2023.

⁵¹ International Crisis Group, 'ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate', 13 Dec. 2023.

⁵² Institute for Security Studies, 'Transition in Niger: Avoiding the dangers of stagnation', 14 Mar. 2024.

⁵³ Law no. 2012-017 of 2 Mar. 2012 concerning the creation of administrative districts in the Republic of Mali.

personnel close to Colonel Goïta, who was now president, were appointed to lead 13 of the regions.⁵⁴ The NTC held its inaugural session in December 2020. All of its 121 members were appointed by President Goïta and 22 of them were military personnel. The heavy militarization of the transition drew criticism from political parties. Choguel Kokalla Maïga—a prominent member of the Movement of 5 June RFP (M5-RFP), which had led the coup against President Keïta in early 2020, a long-time Malian politician and former member of the governing party under the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré—was also critical, although he was later appointed prime minister in June 2021. Mali's July 2023 Constitution has not altered the military nature of power.⁵⁵

In Niger, the military had seized power in 1999 to end General Baré Maïnassara's military rule (1996–99).⁵⁶ In 2010, it intervened again to prevent unconstitutional changes proposed by former President Tandja (1999–2010) and organized a short-term transition of 11 months in February 2010 to January 2011. However, the current military leadership shows no sign of handing over power to a civilian government. Six of the 21 ministers in Lamine Zeine's government nominated on 9 August 2023 are military personnel, and they run the key departments of defence, the interior, water resources, transport, health, and youth and sport. General Salifou Mody, the defence minister, has been involved in all the coups since the National Conference.⁵⁷ He was appointed chief-of-staff of the Niger Armed Forces by President Issoufou after the attack in Chinedogar and on 1 June 2023 refused President Bazoum's nomination as ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.⁵⁸ General Mohamed Toumba, who was also involved in the coup, is minister for the interior, public security and territorial administration. The close ties between the junta and former President Issoufou raise questions about the role of the former president in the overthrow of his successor.⁵⁹

The juntas organized national dialogue sessions, which have served to justify prolonging the transitions. In Mali, a National Inter-Malian Dialogue organized by the military regime in May 2024 recommended prolonging the transition from two to five years 'until the stabilization of the country' and promoting the colonels in charge of the transition to the rank of general. In Niger, regional consultations have been launched, but a transition roadmap is still awaited a year after the coup. Former president Bazoum is still in custody. The dialogue organized in Burkina Faso has recommended extending the transition there until 2029.

The indefinite extension of these transition periods reveals political motives and a desire by the military to maintain power and eliminate political competition. However, the most dangerous opposition often comes from within the military itself, as internal rivalries and factions can lead to splits and power struggles. It is not uncommon for soldiers to succeed soldiers. Studies indicate that the Nigerien junta is not a homogeneous entity but marked by enmities, and regional and military rivalries.⁶⁰ In addition, repeated attacks on the armed forces by jihadist groups in both countries provoke discontent among soldiers sent to the front by military leaders.

⁵⁴ RFI, 'Mali: Nomination massive de militaires à la tête des régions' [Mali: Large-scale appointment of military to head regions], 26 Nov. 2020.

⁵⁵ Decree 2023-0401/PT-RM of 22 July 2023 on promulgation of the constitution.

⁵⁶ Issa, B. A., 'Alternances militaires au Niger' [Military changeover in Niger], *Politique Africaine*, vol. 2, no. 74, (1999), pp. 85–94.

⁵⁷ Grégoire, E., *Niger: Anatomie d'une Junte* [Niger: Anatomy of a Junta], Institut Français de Géopolitique, 1 July 2024, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Agence Afrique, 'Diplomatie l'officier Salifou Mody nouvel ambassadeur plenipotentiaire du Niger aux Emirats Arabes Unis' [Diplomacy: Officer Salifou Mody is Niger's new plenipotentiary ambassador to the United Arab Emirates], 2 June 2023.

⁵⁹ RFI, 'Niger: "Mahamadou Issoufou a trahi tout un peuple", dit la fille de Mohamed Bazoum' [Niger: 'Mahamadou Issoufou has betrayed an entire people', says Mohamed Bazoum's daughter], 7 May 2024.

⁶⁰ Grégoire (note 57).

Breaking with the previous regime is a common theme of military rhetoric, but in practice there is continuity and a need to protect the interests of a small military elite. This is particularly evident in appointments to administrative and territorial positions. The Malian junta started to militarize the territorial administration in November 2020 by appointing military governors in 13 of the 20 regions.⁶¹ This trend continued with additional military appointments in September 2021 and June 2024.⁶² In October 2022, policing and civil protection were also militarized. In Niger, on 24 August 2023, less than a month after the coup, General Tiani appointed 41 new prefects at the department level, all of them from the defence and security forces.⁶³ A month later, 22 additional prefects were appointed.⁶⁴

Both governments have enacted major revisions of the mining codes. In Mali, the new mining code allows the state to run up to 30 per cent of new projects, with the objective of increasing revenues for the national economy.⁶⁵ In Niger, the Ministry of Mines announced the creation of an ad hoc committee to review the tax provisions in mining law on 5 April 2024.⁶⁶ On 18 July 2024, Burkina Faso adopted a new mining code that allows the state up to a 15 per cent stake in new mining projects.⁶⁷

The military is often critical of its lack of resources but the proportion of the state budget allocated to the army in Mali has increased since 2012 (see figure 2.2). During 2017 and 2018, there was an increase in the share of government spending on the military, which dipped just before the coup and has hit historical highs post-coup. A similar trend is observed in Niger. For both Mali and Niger, the share of government spending in military expenditure is at its highest level.⁶⁸ The spending patterns indicate the junta's funding priorities for the military. The fight against corruption does not seem to concern the army in Niger, however, where General Tiani has just repealed the law on the control of defence spending. Defence purchases and spending will now be kept secret and will not be subject to any monitoring.⁶⁹

Under the pretext of combating insecurity and armed groups, military juntas are implementing emergency regimes and muzzling all forms of opposition. To gain popular support, these regimes justify their actions by claiming a desire to regain political, economic and military sovereignty.

⁶¹ The junta's creation of 20 regions is the implementation of a 2012 law passed under the ATT administration.

⁶² Mali, Press release from the Council of Ministers, 26 June 2024.

⁶³ Agence Nigérienne de Presse, 'Nomination de 41 préfets à la tête des départements du pays' [Appointment of 41 prefects to head the country's departments], 25 Aug. 2023.

⁶⁴ Agence Nigérienne de Presse, 'Le gouvernement nomme une vingtaine de Préfets à la tête des départements du pays' [The government appoints around twenty prefects to head the country's department], 21 Sep. 2023.

⁶⁵ Jeune Afrique, 'Avec un nouveau code minier, le Mali se réapproprie son or' [Mali reclaims its gold with new mining code], 30 Aug. 2023.

⁶⁶ The law had already been revised in 2022 and approved by parliament. Aïr Info, 'Le ministre des mines lance un comité pour réviser le régime fiscal minier' [Mines minister launches committee to review mining tax regime], 15 Apr. 2024.

⁶⁷ Africa Intelligence, 'Burkina Faso: Outcry from foreign companies over new mining code', 21 June 2024.

⁶⁸ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Sep. 2024; and Wezeman, P., 'The complex trends and patterns in arms transfers to sub-Saharan Africa', Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 30 Sep. 2024.

⁶⁹ Ordinance 2024-05 du 23 février 2024; and DW, 'Le budget de la défense au Niger va échapper à tout contrôle' [Niger's out-of-control defence budget], 11 Mar. 2023.

3. Independence at a price: Questioning nationalism and sovereignty

Military juntas justify their actions by strongly affirming national sovereignty, independence and nationalism. Military regimes need to build their legitimacy on popular support. To hide the illegitimate nature of the preservation of power, such juntas do not plan to organize elections but instead base their legitimacy on ‘communion’ with their populations.⁷⁰ A martial discourse based on an all-out war against terrorism and the need to protect the country against terrorist groups, where the end justifies the means, has serious implications—not least a disregard for international, regional and national norms and rules, and for fundamental freedoms. This chapter first analyses how these juntas free themselves from regional and international rules; and then, on the pretext of taking back control of national security, how they have increased their dependence on Russia.

Respecting choice and sovereignty

Independence, nationalism and sovereignty are classic justifications for military coups. Both the Malian and the Nigerien juntas have followed the same lines as their military predecessors. In Niger, the ‘coup leaders promoted powerful ideological messages to garner support’.⁷¹ Local populations may initially have welcomed such coups because of the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, as well as issues such as manipulated legislative elections and corruption in Mali, manipulated elections in Gabon or attempts at unconstitutional change in Guinea. The promise of a ‘second independence’ can be a powerful driver of popular support.⁷²

International aid has been identified as having ‘contrasting effects’.⁷³ Economic and financial dependence, the involvement of international forces in national defence and the exploitation of natural resources by transnational companies are increasingly perceived as violations of national sovereignty. Long-standing economic and security dependency on international partners and the former colonial power has weakened the legitimacy of successive governments while also fuelling widespread mistrust of the ruling classes and the international community. Although international partners have historically influenced political arenas, there has been a shift in how development cooperation is perceived. Sovereignist discourses affect not only elites, but also civil society organizations, which criticize how aid is delivered and argue that it often fails to address local needs due to insufficient understanding of local contexts. This growing discourse has contributed to a rejection of the West, primarily France in the Sahel, and of international military operations, the failures of which are not specific to the Sahel (see box 3.1).⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Boubacar, H., ‘Popular support: The only basis of legitimacy for West Africa’s new military regimes’, *Africa Today*, vol. 70, no. 4 (summer 2024), pp. 97–104.

⁷¹ McCullough, A. and Sandor, A., ‘How a mutiny became a(nother) coup: The politics of counterinsurgency and international military partnerships in Niger’, *African Affairs*, vol. 122, no. 489, pp. 587–601.

⁷² Antil, A., ‘Coups d’Etat en Afrique: «Les putschistes promettent une deuxième indépendance»’ [Coups d’état in Africa: Coup plotters promise a second independence], IFRI, 6 Sep. 2023.

⁷³ Moss, T., Pettersson, G. and van de Walle, N., ‘An aid-institutions paradox? A review essay on aid dependency and state building in sub-Saharan Africa’, Working Paper no. 74 (Jan. 2006); Lavigne, D. P. and Tidjani, A. M., ‘Niger: l’aide internationale a des effets contrastés’ [Niger: The contrasting effects of international aid], GRET, Collection Débats et controverses, no. 5 (Nov. 2011); Bergamaschi, I., ‘The fall of a donor darling: The role of aid in Mali’s crisis’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 52, no 3 (Sep. 2014), pp. 347–78; and Dorronsoro, G. and Baczko, A., ‘Une révolution bureaucratique avortée: Les énarques et l’État au Mali’ contrastés’ [An aborted bureaucratic revolution: The école nationale d’administration graduates and the state in Mali], *Politique Africaine* no. 167 (2022/3), pp. 75–96.

⁷⁴ Dorronsoro, G., ‘Afghanistan: Such a predictable defeat’, *Defis Humanitaires*, 2 Aug. 2021.

Box 3.1. Rejection of link with former colonial power

Rejection of the link with the former colonial power is nothing new. Back in the 1970s in Niger, one of the first measures taken by Seyni Kountché, President of the Supreme Military Council (1974–87), was to call for the departure of the French troops stationed in Niamey, which he considered to be an attack on national sovereignty: ‘A government that claims to be based on the will of the people cannot flatter itself that it needs external support to guarantee the security of its people’.^a On the economic front, several Nigerien presidents, such as Diori Hamani, Kountché and Mamadou Tandja, have tried to renegotiate the purchase price of uranium to finance Niger’s economic development.^b In Mali in 1962, the creation of a new national currency, the Malian franc, by Mali’s first president, Modibo Keita (1960–68), was also a reaction to French post-colonial control over the economy.

^a Cited in van Walraven, K., ‘Operation Somme: The French connection and Seyni Kountché’s coup d’État in Niger, April 1974’, *Politique Africaine*, vol. 134, no. 2 (2014), pp. 133–54.

^b Grégoire, E., ‘Niger: A state rich in uranium’, *Herodote*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2011), pp. 206–25.

This is particularly the case in the defence sector.⁷⁵ As a direct consequence of the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali and the rise of jihadi groups, Mali reached the top of the international agenda, and international military operations dominated the security landscape.⁷⁶ However, there was a growing perception of dispossession and being ignored by international partners.⁷⁷ The presence of international forces in their secure headquarters created a physical and symbolic distance between international and national forces and, as in other contexts, included a ‘relation of domination’.⁷⁸ Despite plans to place the French Operation Barkhane under Nigerien command, and for better consideration of partners’ needs and priorities, the development of this new approach came too late to prevent the withdrawal of French troops from Mali and Niger.⁷⁹

The military regimes in Mali and Niger have taken radical decisions since 2021. The French ambassadors were forced to leave in January 2022 and September 2023, respectively, and both countries renounced their defence agreements with France (Mali in May 2022 and Niger in March 2024), leading to the withdrawal of French troops. Mali requested the departure of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2023.⁸⁰ This was achieved under challenging conditions.⁸¹ Following Mali’s lead, Burkina Faso and Niger left the G5 Sahel Joint Force in November 2023. Tensions between the military authorities and their traditional partners continued to escalate. On 4 December 2023, Niger’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the termination of the agreement between the State of Niger and the EU training mission, which covered the EU Capacity-building Mission in Sahel Niger and the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger. On the same day, a Russian delegation led by Deputy Defence Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov made its first official visit to Niger since the coup. More recently, Niger has requested the departure of US troops after years of cooperation.⁸² Germany, which initially planned to keep its

⁷⁵ Guiryanan, O., Montanaro, L. and Rätty, T., ‘European security assistance: The search for stability in the Sahel’, Saferworld (Sep. 2021).

⁷⁶ Tull, D. M., ‘Rebuilding Mali’s army: The dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners’, *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 2 (2019).

⁷⁷ Tull (note 29).

⁷⁸ Bacsko, A. and Dorronsoro, G., ‘La souveraineté fragmentée: Intervention internationale et guerre civile en Afghanistan après 2001’ [Fragmented sovereignty: International intervention and civil war in Afghanistan after 2001], *Sociétés Politiques Comparées*, vol. 50 (Jan.–Apr. 2020), p. 4.

⁷⁹ Bakayoko, N., ‘What went wrong in Mali? The future of France’s presence in the Sahel’, ISPI, 7 Apr. 2022.

⁸⁰ United Nations, ‘Security Council terminates mandate of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, unanimously adopting resolution 2690 (2023)’, Press release, SC/15341, 30 June 2023.

⁸¹ Wilén, N., *Procurement by Proxy: How Sahelian Juntas Acquire Equipment from Ousted Security Partners*, Africa Policy Brief, Egmont Institute, 26 Mar. 2024.

⁸² Reuters, ‘US to withdraw military personnel from Niger, source says’, 19 Apr. 2024.

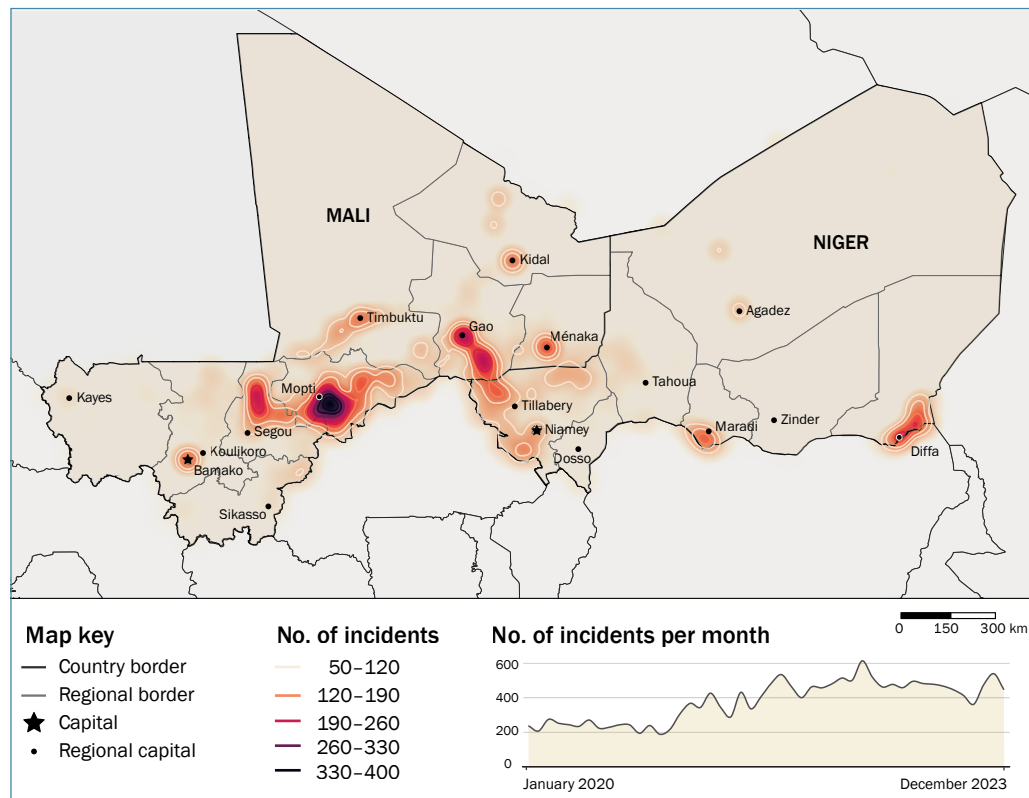


Figure 3.1. Evolution of insecurity in Mali and Niger, 2020–23

Credit: Joseph Benita, Independent cartographer and analyst.

Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘Data and tools’, [n.d.].

military air transport hub in Niamey open even after the EU announced the end of its military mission by 30 June, ultimately decided to end its military presence in Niger by 31 August 2024.⁸³

The strong international presence in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, reshaped the region’s security landscape but also fuelled resentment against the presence of foreign armies. The performance of international military missions is mainly evaluated internally by the UN and its member states or by research institutes, with little consideration given to the perspectives of host country governments or local populations. Their impact on local populations, however, should not be underestimated. Military operations and increased identity checks, for example, have restricted population movements in many areas, leading to changes in local dynamics and attitudes.

The quest for popular legitimacy: Understanding the perceptions

The work carried out by SIPRI in Mali and Niger as part of the Just Future programme is based on the collection of the perceptions of the population through quantitative interviews (perception surveys) and qualitative interviews. The fieldwork that began in 2021 allows the project to measure the evolution of perceptions and, in particular, to compare how populations perceive their environment in a post-coup context. The research is conducted in a highly complex environment where communication is manipulated, particularly by the military authorities, and disseminated through social media and local radio stations. This is taken into account in the data analysis, which

⁸³ Reuters, ‘EU to end military mission to Niger by June 30’, 27 May 2024; and Voice of America, ‘German army to vacate Niger air base in August’, 6 July 2024.

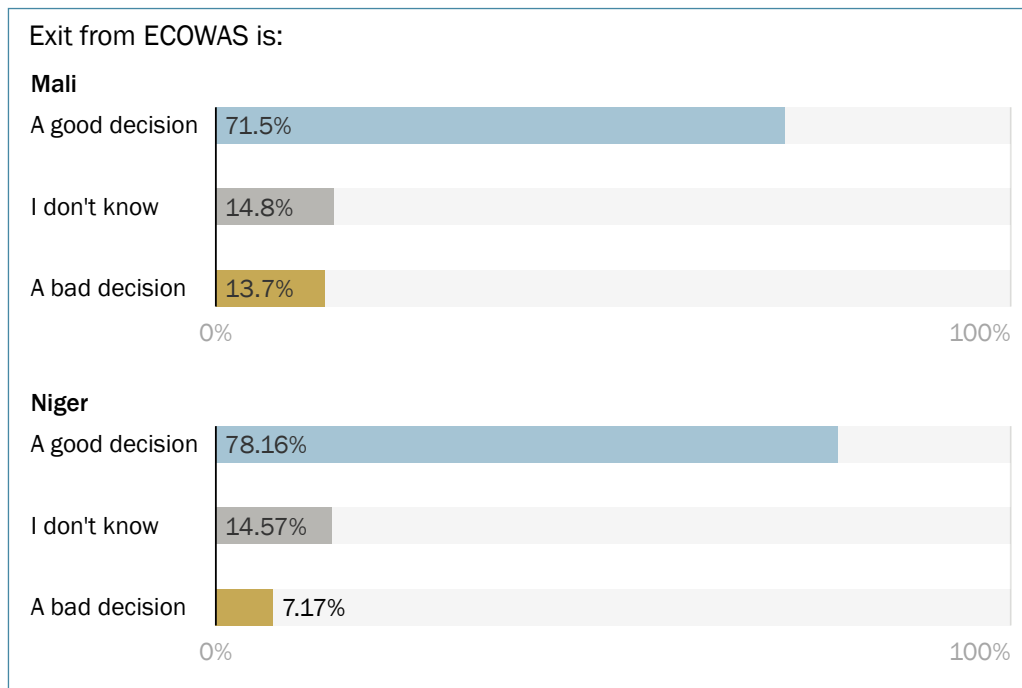


Figure 3.2. Survey respondents' perceptions of the decision to leave ECOWAS

ECOWAS = Economic Community of West African States.

Source: SIPRI, POINT SUD and LASDEL, Perception survey, Apr. 2024.

is triangulated with qualitative interviews and in-depth knowledge of the areas of research, as well as collaboration with Malian and Nigerien researchers.

Observations show that local populations appear to support the juntas and to perceive that military regimes can do better than civilian regimes at restoring security. Despite that this is contradicted by the security situation on the ground (see figure 3.1), the armed forces still enjoy support. Although the most recent research in Mali (April 2024) showed that the behaviour of the armed forces and Russian forces is increasingly under criticism and some populations have reported they have been 'betrayed' by their behaviour and accuse them of committing abuses, confidence in the armed forces remains significant.⁸⁴

The research in April 2024 focused on perceptions of the recent decisions made by the juntas. SIPRI's research shows the level of support among the surveyed population for the decisions taken by the military to leave ECOWAS and abandon the peace agreement (see figures 3.2 and 3.3).⁸⁵

The evidence suggests that externalization of governance is experienced as a form of dispossession. The military is able to develop sovereigntist and nationalist narratives, which give the population hope that these leaders will address their problems. Paradoxically, however, the juntas' alignment with Russia contradicts their claim to independence. However, they justify this by claiming a more equitable partnership and a degree of respect not offered by traditional partners.

The Malian transitional government has also shifted its stance on the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation, which was signed in 2015.⁸⁶ The junta initially pledged to respect the agreement but later announced its replacement with a 'direct inter-Malian

⁸⁴ SIPRI, POINT SUD and LASDEL, 'Enquête sur les perceptions relatives à la sécurité dans les régions de Mopti, Tombouctou, Gao au Mali', Apr. 2024.

⁸⁵ According to ECOWAS rules, Mali's exit from ECOWAS will only become effective in the first quarter of 2025.

⁸⁶ It is worth noting that the integration of former combatants into the armed forces was never truly accepted by the military and was one reason behind the rejection of the Algiers Agreement.

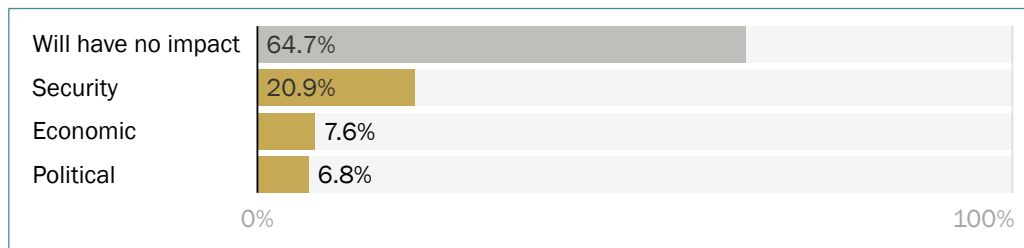


Figure 3.3. Survey respondents' perceptions of the impact of the decision to abandon the Mali peace agreement

Source: SIPRI and POINT SUD, Perception survey, Apr. 2024.

dialogue for peace and reconciliation', calling on groups 'not involved in terrorism' to join the initiative, which was rejected by Tuareg groups.⁸⁷ The junta also declared that the fight against 'armed terrorist groups' would extend to rebel factions and continue until the country was 'completely pacified'.

The UN Security Council had emphasized the importance of the 2015 Accord.⁸⁸ However, the pro-junta M5-RFP supported its abandonment.⁸⁹ The Malian government announced the end of the Accord on 25 January 2024, the day after the creation of a Steering Committee for Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation.⁹⁰ The abandonment of the agreement was preceded by the military reconquest of the north. It confirms that the 'question of northern Mali' is a national issue after years of attempts at international mediation by Algeria, Burkina Faso and the UN.⁹¹ In the survey, 65 per cent of the respondents believed that abandoning the peace agreement would have no impact (see figure 3.3).

Since 2021, the perception survey has focused on the Malian population's attitude to MINUSMA in the regions where the mission was deployed: Gao, Timbuktu and Mopti.⁹² The findings show that the main consequence listed by the population is the economic impact and not the impact on security (see figures 3.4 and 3.5). In the three regions where MINUSMA was present, people expressed greater concerns about the economic impact of its departure, as it provided a large number of jobs, than about a deterioration in the security situation.

Mali's government has been critical of the international operations, arguing that their mandates failed to address threats and needs on the ground. The minister of foreign affairs denounced MINUSMA as 'seemingly becoming part of the problem'.⁹³ Unlike

⁸⁷ According to President Goïta, the 'direct inter-Malian dialogue for peace and reconciliation' should make it possible to 'eliminate the roots of community and inter-community conflicts' and 'promote national ownership of the peace process'. *Le Monde*, 'Mali: les séparatistes touareg rejettent l'annonce d'un dialogue « inter-malien » pour la paix', [Mali: Tuareg separatists reject announcement of 'inter-Malian' dialogue for peace], 3 Jan. 2024.

⁸⁸ United Nations, 'Déclaration à la presse faite par le Conseil de sécurité sur la fermeture de la MINUSMA' [Press statement by the Security Council on the closure of MINUSMA], Press release, SC/15557, 5 Jan. 2014.

⁸⁹ West Africa Democracy Radio, 'Mali: Le M5-RFP demande l'abandon pur et simple de l'Accord de paix d'Alger' [Mali: The M5-RFP calls for the Algiers Peace Agreement to be abandoned outright], 6 Jan. 2024.

⁹⁰ Moreau, E., 'Au Mali, ouverture d'une enquête judiciaire contre des chefs d'Al-Qaïda et des séparatistes touaregs' [Judicial enquiry opens in Mali against al-Qaeda leaders and Tuareg separatists], *Jeune Afrique*, 29 Nov. 2023.

⁹¹ In Apr. 2024, the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development (CSP-PSD), created in 2021, became the Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA), led by Bilal Ag Acherif, the leader of the MNLA. The CSP continues to fight for the recognition of AZAWAD as a political entity within Mali. This change unifies all the armed movements against the Malian state and its Russian allies. RFI, 'Mali: les rebelles du Nord créent le Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad' [Mali: Northern rebels create the Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad], 25 Apr. 2024.

⁹² The Kidal region is not part of the Just Future programme so no perception surveys were conducted in Kidal or the region.

⁹³ 'To speak only of the specific case of my country, I must say that international prescriptions, particularly those provided by MINUSMA since its creation in 2013, have clearly shown their limits. Otherwise, how can we explain

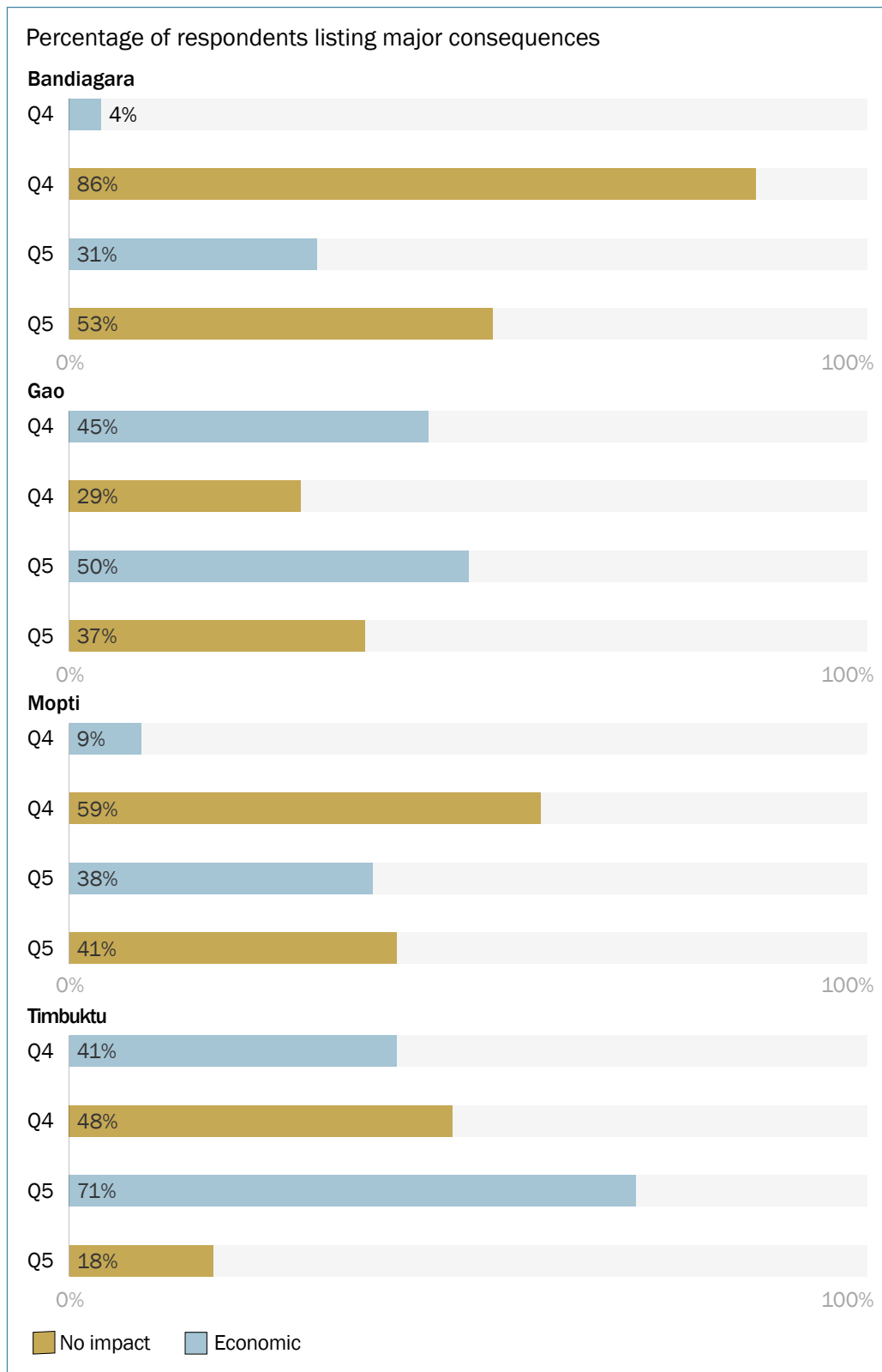


Figure 3.4. Perceptions of the impact of the departure of MINUSMA, October 2023 and April 2024, by region

MINUSMA = United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali; and Q = Survey.

Source: SIPRI and POINT SUD, Perception survey.

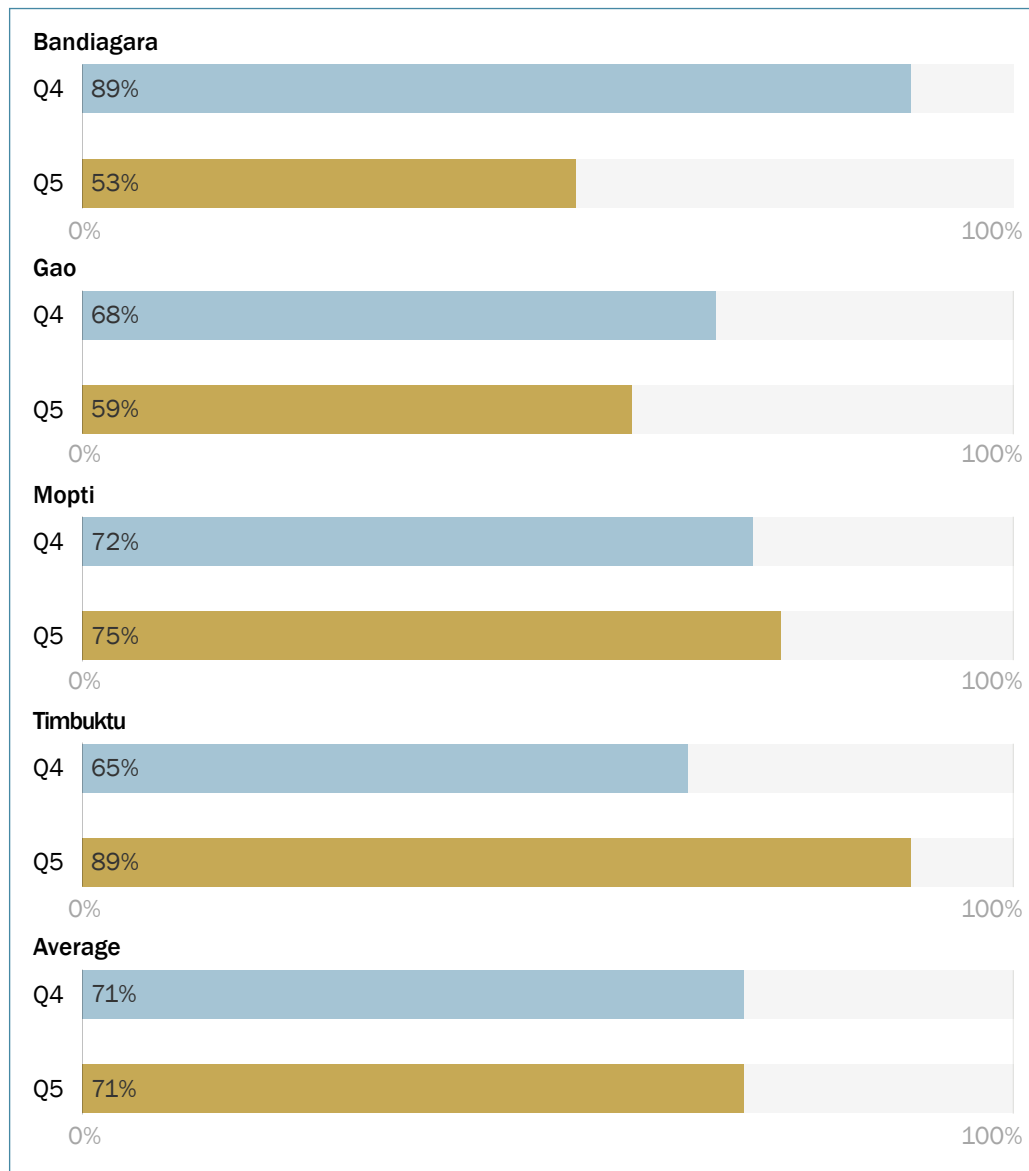


Figure 3.5. Confidence in security conditions following departure of MINUSMA, by region

MINUSMA = United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali; Q = Survey.

Source: SIPRI and POINT SUD, Perception survey, Apr. 2024.

in recent decades, Mali and Niger now claim to be able to rely on their own armies to combat terrorism with mutual support from each other as well as Burkina Faso. The rejection of an international military presence has led to the formalization of a new military alliance in the Sahel, albeit one underpinned by Russian support.

The partnership with Russia is appealing because Russia provides direct military support. Russian personnel are actively fighting alongside the Malian army, sharing military camps, supplying lethal equipment and protecting the juntas. Turkey is also providing drones, which has enabled the Malian army to repel attacks by jihadist

that the security situation in Mali in 2013 was much better than what we are experiencing today? Realism necessitates acknowledging the failure of MINUSMA, whose mandate does not address the security challenges', Speech by HE Mr A. Diop on the occasion of the Security Council's examination of the secretary-general's quarterly report on the situation in Mali, New York, 16 June 2023.

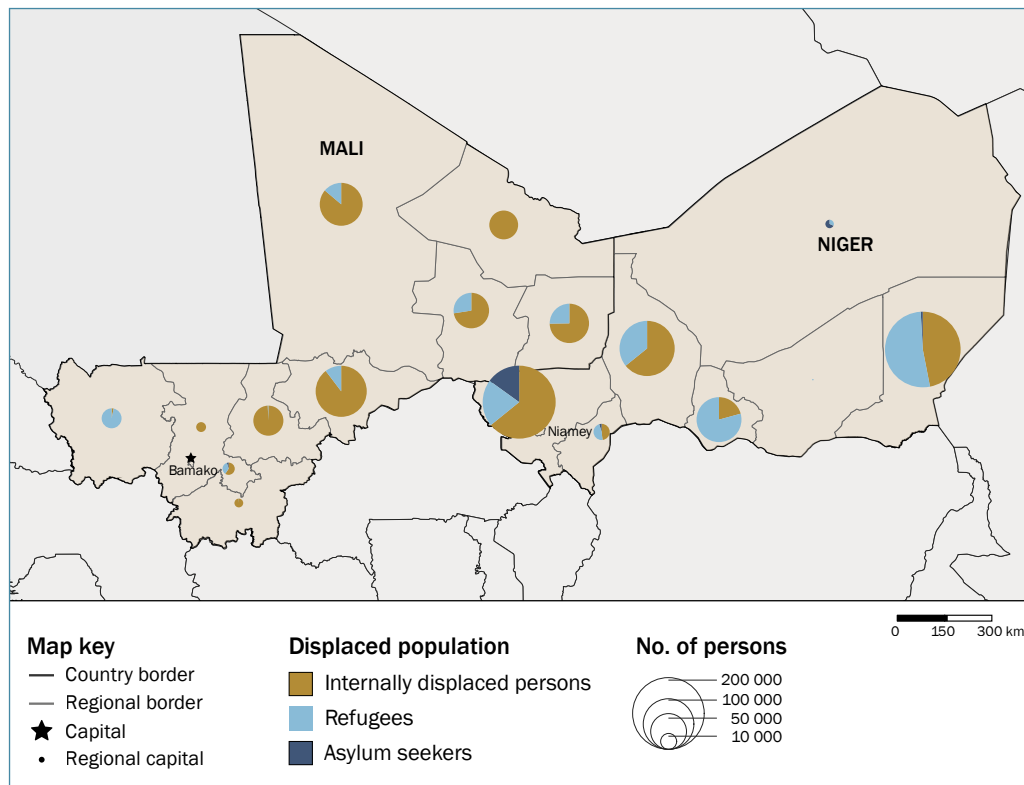


Figure 3.6. Displaced populations in Mali and Niger, December 2023

Credit: Joseph Benita, independent cartographer and analyst.

Source: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Displacement tracking base, [n.d.].

groups.⁹⁴ The army's new air capabilities, visible to the populations, have given renewed hope to the army in its fight against jihadist groups.

The recent coups have exposed a significant gap between local/national perceptions and international reactions, fuelling anti-international rhetoric, particularly among young urban populations. Trust in the capabilities of national armed forces is shaped by the perceived failures of international efforts to restore security and ensure stabilization.⁹⁵ Military regimes have developed counternarratives whose main function is to make the populations believe that the situation is improving and to reassure them of the army's commitment to fight against terrorist groups—even though these narratives are not borne out by reality (see figures 3.1 and 3.6). The survey results indicate that local populations are placing their trust in the ability of military regimes to restore security (see figure 3.7). Government propaganda plays a key role in shaping public perceptions. Officials portray those killed in 'counterterrorist operations' as jihadists and 'many people perceive these mass killings as [an indication of] the effectiveness of the fight against jihadism'.⁹⁶ Government propaganda is used to spread messages of popular support, as was the case with the massacre in Mourah which resulted in over 500 deaths.⁹⁷ A government-staged event broadcast on television showed 'the people of Mourah' coming to support the government during a meeting with the prime minis-

⁹⁴ Military Africa, 'Mali boosts its drone fleet with new Bayraktar TB2s from Turkey', 9 Jan. 2024.

⁹⁵ Franco, A. C., 'External interventions in Mali and its borderlands: A case for stabilisation', *Janus.net*, e-journal of international relations, vol. 12, no. 2 (Nov. 2021–Apr. 2022).

⁹⁶ Boubacar (note 70), p. 101.

⁹⁷ OHCHR, 'Malian troops, foreign military personnel killed over 500 people during military operation in Moura in March 2022, UN human rights report', Press release, 12 Mar. 2023.

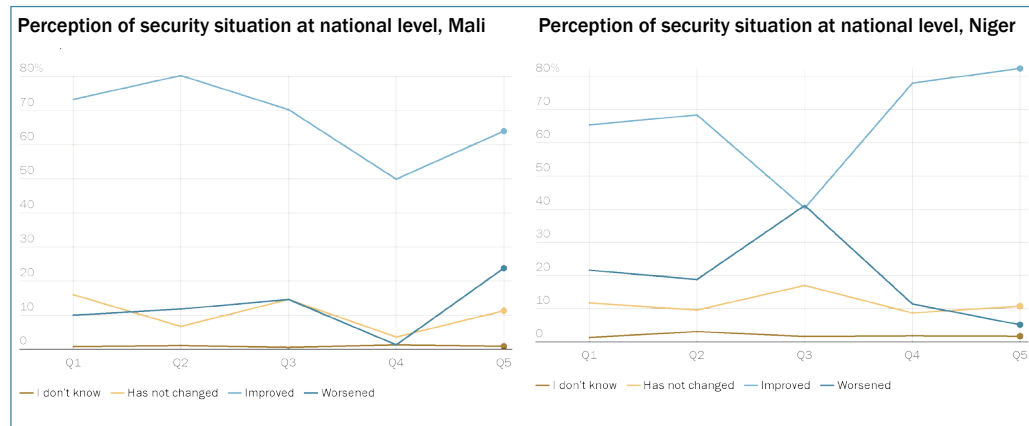


Figure 3.7 Perception of the security situation at the national level in Mali and Niger

Sources: SIPRI, POINT SUD and LASDEL, Perception surveys, 2021–24.

ter.⁹⁸ However, junta narratives have been contradicted by eyewitness accounts and human rights organizations.⁹⁹ The publication of a UN report on the massacre played a role in the deterioration in relations between MINUSMA and the military authorities, which had already expelled the director of the human rights division.¹⁰⁰ MINUSMA was asked to leave a month later. On 17 September 2024, the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) launched a major attack on the gendarmerie school and nearby airport complex in Bamako.¹⁰¹ This attack in the heart of the capital, following an earlier attack on the military base in Kati, a garrison town 15 kilometres from Bamako, in July 2022, has raised questions about the security of the capital itself.

A new military alliance and new partnerships

Sovereignty is a common foundation in Mali and Niger that is used by military leaders to justify their departure from national and international obligations. The request for MINUSMA's departure and the withdrawal from ECOWAS are signs that the rules of the game have changed.¹⁰² The international situation has weakened the EU's influence because of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and increased the influence of China, Russia and Turkey.

The abrupt withdrawal from ECOWAS in January 2024, without prior notice or respect for procedures, shows how military authorities prioritize new partnerships. First, the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the signing of the Liptako-Gourma Charter in September 2023 were a response to the threat of military intervention against Niger.¹⁰³ The mutual defence pact binds the three regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and to support one another in the event of a military attack. The decision to leave ECOWAS took the remaining member states by surprise and under-

⁹⁸ Maïga, C. K., 'Rapport sur Moura, nous savons ce qui se cache derrière' [Report on Moura: We know what's behind it], Facebook, 15 May 2023.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Massacre by army, foreign soldiers', 5 Apr. 2022; and Amnesty International, 'Mali: The perpetrators of the Moura massacre must be prosecuted and tried by a competent court', 17 May 2023.

¹⁰⁰ OHCHR (note 97); and UN News, 'UN human rights chief calls on Mali to reverse 'regrettable' expulsion order', 6 Feb. 2023.

¹⁰¹ 70 people were killed and more than 200 wounded. Lawal, S., 'More than 70 killed in Mali attack: What happened, why it matters', Aljazeera, 20 Sep. 2024.

¹⁰² Lebovich, A., "'Sovereignty' means never having to say you're sorry: The Sahel's new geopolitics", Clingendael, June 2024.

¹⁰³ Liptako-Gourma Charter establishing the Alliance of Sahel States between Burkina Faso, the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Niger.

scored the shift to an alliance driven by a new alignment based on the perceptions that these countries share the same security, social, political and economic concerns.

Rebranded as the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahelian States in Niamey on 6 July 2024, the AES is now positioned as an alternative to what General Tiani called, with reference to ECOWAS, a ‘fake regional organization’. Although negotiations are expected to be lengthy and challenging, particularly on issues such as the free movement of people and goods, the AES countries have expressed a firm commitment to strengthen their cooperation at the expense of ECOWAS.¹⁰⁴ The leaders claim to be achieving good results through their established military cooperation in the fight against terrorism, and have outlined plans for both military and economic collaboration within the AES. Nonetheless, the final communiqué from the summit remains largely a declaration of intent with technical details to be determined later.¹⁰⁵ Despite the unresolved economic issues, the AES leaders have made it clear that they have no intention of returning to ECOWAS.¹⁰⁶ In the same month, Burkina Faso’s Head of State, Ibrahim Traoré, and Diaw, President of Mali’s National Transition Council, discussed the possibility of creating a joint parliament for the three Sahel states.¹⁰⁷

The military takeovers have led to a reconfiguration of alliances in the region. All three countries have confirmed Russia as their preferred partner.¹⁰⁸ Deployment of the Wagner Group, now operating as the Africa Corps, must be analysed in the context of the competition between Russia and the West.¹⁰⁹ Russia’s strategy in the Sahel hinges on responding to African states’ requests for security assistance, particularly where traditional partners have fallen short in the areas of security cooperation, military sales or anti-terrorist operations. This suggests a need for international peace operations to adapt to non-traditional security challenges.¹¹⁰ However, insecurity is not just about a military dimension of the solution, but, as the analyses show, it has economic costs for the population.

Russia combines hard power through the deployment of troops with ‘soft power’.¹¹¹ There is also a communication strategy involving media outlets such as RT and Sputnik.¹¹² The campaign has been supported by widespread disinformation, particularly in Mali.¹¹³ In both countries, Russia has announced the construction of solar power plants, but it is also interested in Nigerien uranium.¹¹⁴ Russia is taking advantage of the vacuum left by the departure of traditional partners, in particular France, based on ‘anti-colonial’ rhetoric that fits the aspirations of the juntas.¹¹⁵ However, Russian

¹⁰⁴ Mid-Sep. 2024, the three countries announced to launch a new biometric passport under the AES.

¹⁰⁵ Sahel States Alliance, First Summit of the Heads of State of the Sahel States Alliance, Final Communiqué, Niamey, 6 July 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Sahel States alliance, Interview with A. Diop, 1 July 2024, ORTM.

¹⁰⁷ RFI, ‘Burkina Faso: discussions sur un projet de Parlement conjoint aux trois États de l’Alliance du Sahel’ [Burkina Faso: Discussions on a draft joint parliament for the three Sahel States Alliance], 28 July 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Ewonor, C. and Armstrong, K., ‘Russian troops arrive in Niger as agreement begins’, BBC News, 12 Apr. 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Bryjka, F. and Czerep, J., *Africa Corps: A New Iteration of Russia’s Old Military Presence in Africa* (Polish Institute of International Affairs: Warsaw, May 2024).

¹¹⁰ Van der Lijn, J., *Fit for Purpose: Effective Peace Operations, Partnerships in an Era of Non-traditional Security Challenges* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Feb. 2024).

¹¹¹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, ‘Russia’s growing footprints in Africa’s Sahel region’, 28 Feb. 2023.

¹¹² Audinet, M., ‘Le lion, l’ours et les hyènes: Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l’influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone’ [The lion, the bear and the hyenas: Actors, practices and narratives of Russian informational influence in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa], Paris, IRSEM, no. 83 (July 2021).

¹¹³ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping a surge in disinformation in Africa’, 13 Mar. 2024.

¹¹⁴ Agence France-Presse, ‘Mali, Russia start work on major solar plant’, VOA, 24 May 2024; and Laurent, B., ‘Au Niger, Moscou cherche à évincer la France de l’exploitation de l’uranium’ [Moscow seeks to oust France from uranium mining in Niger], GEO, 3 June 2024.

¹¹⁵ Jeune Afrique, ‘Au Mali, Wagner voit grand dans les mines d’or’ [In Mali, Wagner thinks big about gold mining], 6 Mar. 2024.

support comes with economic conditions, such as on control of gold mines.¹¹⁶ While no Malian industrial gold mine has been allocated to Russia thus far, Russian elements might still be benefiting from artisanal gold mining at the Intahaka gold mine and the significant pressure the junta is putting on mining companies to renegotiate existing concessions could pave the way for agreements with Russian companies.¹¹⁷

It is arguable that Russia's influence has been pivotal in supporting these developments and contributing to the intransigence of the juntas. Russia has been a serious 'disruptor'.¹¹⁸ Although internal conditions have facilitated the militarization of politics, Russian influence and the alternative it offers have allowed a departure from the conventional support of the international community. By protecting these regimes, Russia has so far helped them avoid the typical cycle of coup and counter-coup.

At the end of July 2024, the Malian Armed Forces alongside their Russian allies suffered a significant defeat in northern Mali, near the Algerian border, during an attack led by Tuareg and jihadist groups.¹¹⁹ Despite this setback, Russian military support in terms of personnel and equipment has helped the Malian army avoid further significant territorial losses. However, this support has been marked by widespread human rights violations and violence against civilians. Reports of extreme brutality, which have included allegations of cannibalism, have forced the general staff of the Malian and Burkinabe armies to issue public statements on future behaviour.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Jeune Afrique, 'Au Mali, plongée dans le système Wagner' [In Mali, a dive into the 'Wagner' system], 4 Jan. 2023.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, J. et al., *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin is Using Wagner to Launder Billions in African Gold* (21 Democracy: Washington, DC, Dec. 2023); and RFI, 'Mali: l'État veut exploiter la mine d'or artisanale d'Intahaka dans le Nord' (Mali: The government wants to exploit the Intahaka artisanal gold mine in the north of the country), 30 Aug. 2024.

¹¹⁸ Siegle, J. and Smith, J., 'Standing up to Africa's juntas', *Journal of Democracy*, May 2024.

¹¹⁹ BBC Afrique, 'Ce que l'on sait de la mort de dizaines d'anciens mercenaires de la compagnie "Wagner" au Mali, leurs pertes les plus importantes depuis le début de leur présence en Afrique' [What we know about the deaths of dozens of former mercenaries from the 'Wagner' company in Mali, their biggest losses since their presence in Africa began], 29 July 2024.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch, 'Burkina Faso: Video shows soldiers disembowelling body', 26 July 2024. In a circular on 'excessive use of social networks by certain members of the military' dated 15 July 2024, the Malian army general staff refers to the publication of images that may offend human sensibilities and announces the opening of an investigation. Reuters, 'Mali army chief launches investigation into video of soldier "cannibalism"', 17 July 2024.

4. State violence and food insecurity: The struggles of unprotected communities

Military rule leads to a shrinking of the civic space and the suppression of opposition. Such restrictions severely limit access to information and contribute to state-sponsored violence. A ban on the international and national press and self-censorship by critical voices due to the threat of arrest, imprisonment or disappearance grant states a high degree of impunity in their fight against terrorism. Rural populations have become increasingly isolated, as state institutions are essentially present in urban areas, leaving many populations vulnerable to the ideological pressure and economic extortion of armed groups. Armies engaged in intense conflicts with armed groups fail to protect civilians.

Increasingly coercive and isolated regimes

The sentiment ‘we don’t know who’s who anymore’ is found across the whole of Mali, but it is expressed in different ways by those in Bamako and those in the rest of Mali. In Bamako, since the military took power, there have been recurring reports of political figures and civil society representatives expressing themselves with caution, and of WhatsApp groups infiltrated by pro-regime members where administrators are threatened and citizens become suspicious.¹²¹ In rural areas, where counterterrorism operations are being carried out, local populations face a significant risk of being considered an informer either for the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) by jihadist groups or for the jihadists by the FDS. Behind the facade, the longer a military regime stays in power, the more coercive it becomes. The military must constantly maintain its authority, which often means muzzling the political class and restricting or banning the activities of political parties and civil society organizations.

All three juntas have severely limited party political activity.¹²² In Mali, political activity was officially suspended on 10 April 2024, which included an immediate media ban on coverage of political parties.¹²³ The decree banning political activities was later repealed but many arrested political leaders have not been released. Only a few political parties are cooperating, but repression prevents them from speaking out. Critical voices are often represented by prominent religious leaders such as Bayaya Haïdara and Mahmoud Dicko, although the latter has been residing in Algeria for several months fearing arrest.

In Niger, party political activities have been suspended since the coup d’état, sparking protests. Beyond political parties, the entire civic space has been affected by the arrest of opponents and disappearances.¹²⁴ In Burkina Faso, political activities have been suspended since the coup d’état by Captain Ibrahim Traoré on 30 September 2022. Civil society has been a particular target of arrests and forced disappearances. Civil society actors or civil servants are coerced into participating in counter-jihadist operations.¹²⁵

In Mali, various civil society organizations have been dissolved, such as the Coordination of Movements, associations and supporters of Dicko, the Observatory for Elec-

¹²¹ This has been reported in several interviews conducted by the author in Bamako since 2022.

¹²² Decree 2024-0230/PT-RM of 10 Apr. 2024.

¹²³ Communiqué de presse de la haute autorité de la communication relatif à la suspension des activités des partis politiques et des activités à caractère politique des associations [Press release from the High Authority for Communication regarding the suspension of political party activities and the political activities of associations].

¹²⁴ *Le Monde*, ‘Au Mali, la justice condamne à un an de prison ferme un universitaire critique de la junte’ [A Malian academic critical of the junta is sentenced to a year in prison], 21 May 2024.

¹²⁵ Human Rights Watch, ‘Burkina Faso: Conscription used to punish prosecutors, judges’, 21 Aug. 2024.

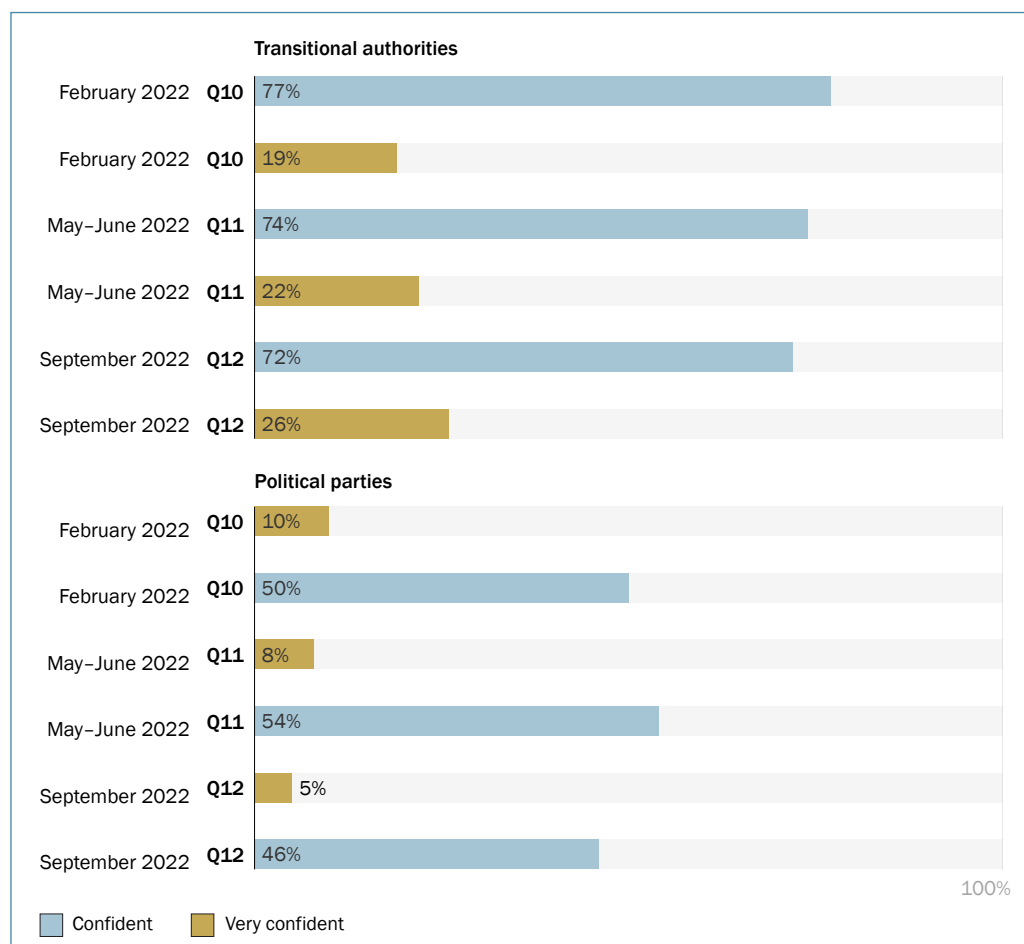


Figure 4.1. Level of confidence in transitional authorities and political parties in central Mali, 2022

Note: Q10–12 refer to surveys that were carried out between February and September 2022 within the Framework of the Central Mali Project for Security and Development.

Sources: SIPRI and POINT SUD, Perception survey, Feb., May–June and Sep. 2022; Central Mali for Security and Development database; and Baudais, V., ‘Listen to us!’, SIPRI, 2023.

tions and Good Governance, and the Association of Pupils and Students of Mali.¹²⁶ In Niger, the human rights situation has deteriorated and severe restrictions have been placed on media freedom. The authorities have threatened, harassed and arbitrarily arrested journalists, many of whom say they are self-censoring amid fear of reprisals.¹²⁷

Even though the population might initially welcome it, a military regime has no legitimacy. As soon as they take power, juntas invariably suspend the constitution, dissolve parliament and restrict the activities of political parties. In the Sahel, the three regimes are becoming increasingly isolated from the international community. In response to a coup, the international community typically limits interactions with the new de facto government, often implementing suspensions of budget support and military cooperation, while continuing to provide humanitarian aid. Regionally, both ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) mandate democratic governance for their members. The AU enforces a ‘zero tolerance policy’ of unconstitutional change and applies immediate sanctions.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘Mali deepens crackdown on civil society’, 15 Mar. 2024.

¹²⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘Niger: Rights in free fall a year after coup’, 25 July 2024.

¹²⁸ Constitutive Act of the African Union, 11 July 2011. Communique of the 1212th Meeting of the PSC held on 20 May 2024 on the updated briefing on the political transition in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Mali and Niger.

The sanctions that followed the coup in Niger were particularly severe. Once a key ally of the EU in combating terrorism and irregular migration, Niger became the coup-affected country most sanctioned and isolated.¹²⁹ ECOWAS imposed economic sanctions, which closed borders and reduced trade with Niger, as well as halted electricity exports from Nigeria. Banking operations were also restricted. These sanctions led to a rise in prices and a shortage of basic necessities.

As noted above, the threat of armed intervention against the Niger junta precipitated its break with ECOWAS. ‘Normalization’ is a label the international community uses when it seeks to bring a country back into international forums. In that regard, one of the main aims of the international community is the organization of elections. Despite the recurrent requests, there are no plans to hold elections in any of these countries.

International reactions to coups do not consider the deep-rooted causes of democratic disenchantment but advocate a return to previous political structures, such as reinstalling elected presidents and reinstating constitutional norms, as in the case of Chad where the president responded by organizing a ‘non-competitive election’. This approach tends to ignore popular aspirations for change and the public’s perception of the deposed regime. As noted above, the survey results show strong popular support for the transitional authorities (see figure 4.1). In Mali, the level of confidence in the transitional authorities was very high after February 2022 and it remains high, although it is declining. By contrast, confidence in political parties stands at around 50 per cent, a difference of more than 20 points. This reflects lower levels of trust in political parties than in military authorities, which claim to be ‘apolitical’ in addressing the country’s challenges. Such a contrast indicates a significant disconnect between international recommendations focused on reverting to the status quo and the underlying disenchantment with traditional political parties. It is crucial to address this disaffection, as it will influence the broader political landscape and the conduct of or turnout in future elections. Western actors have been called on to focus on improving the living conditions of populations, ‘backing governance reforms and boosting the kind of economic support that improves ordinary families’ chances of securing stable livelihoods’.¹³⁰

Nonetheless, the military authorities are becoming increasingly paranoid and their leaders fear coups. There has been a surge in rumours about attempted overthrows—such as those reported in Mali in May 2022, and Burkina Faso in September 2023 and January 2024—leading to the arrest of military and civilian figures and members of the media.¹³¹ Promoters of democracy are left with little space. The fight against terrorism leads to mass abuses against civilian populations. Human rights organizations have denounced abuses by the armed forces in Mali and Niger.¹³² In response, these regimes are increasingly restricting access to information. People fear reprisals not only from armed groups but also from the state armed forces.

Civilians trapped in war zones

The fight against terrorism is the basis on which the military regimes in the Sahel region build their legitimacy for remaining in power. The scale of violence is increas-

¹²⁹ European Commission, Press release, Brussels, 15 July 2022.

¹³⁰ Confort, E. and Murithi, M., ‘The crisis of African democracy: Coups are a symptom—not the cause—of political dysfunction’, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 Dec. 2023.

¹³¹ In Burkina Faso, lawyers took strike action following the imprisonment and indictment of a lawyer accused of conspiracy against the state. Lieutenant-col. E. Zoungara was imprisoned for attempting to destabilize state institutions. RFI, ‘Niger: le patron du quotidien «L’enquêteur» écroué pour «atteinte à la défense nationale»’, [Niger: Boss of the daily ‘L’Investigateur’ imprisoned for ‘attacks on national defense’], 30 Apr. 2023.

¹³² Among the most recent are Human Rights Watch, ‘Mali: Army, Wagner Group atrocities against civilians’, 28 Mar. 2024; and Human Rights Watch, ‘Burkina Faso: Army massacres 223 villagers’, 25 Apr. 2024.

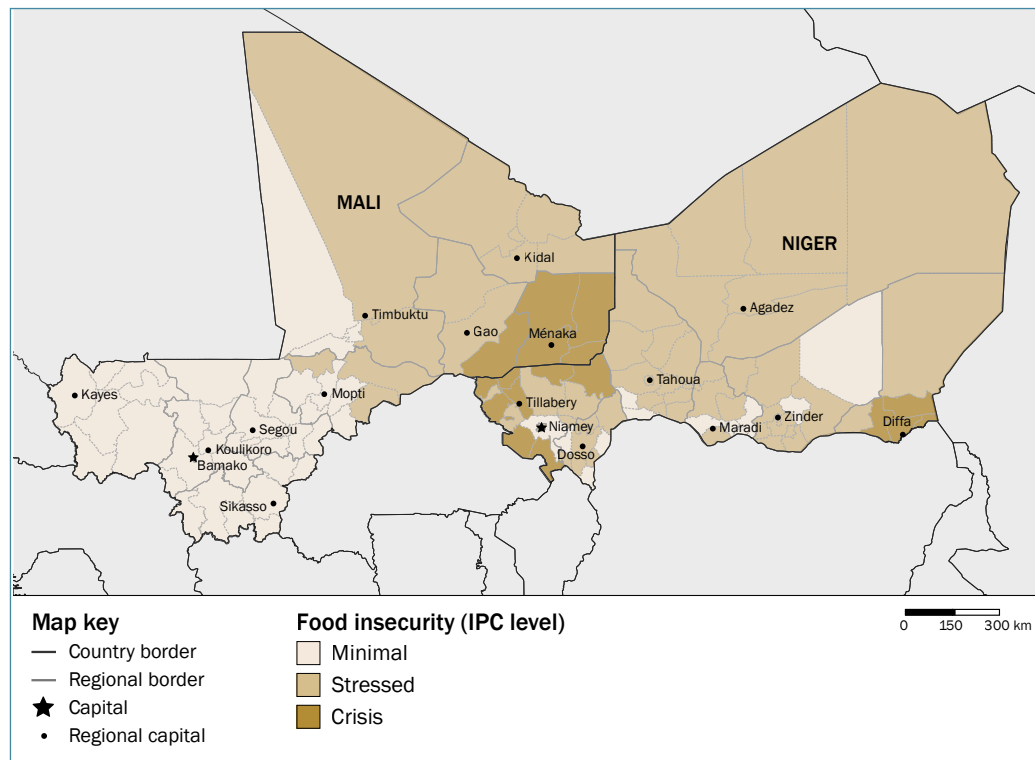


Figure 4.2. Levels of food insecurity in Mali and Niger, Sep.–Dec. 2023 (to date)

IPC = Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.

Credit: Joseph Benita, independent cartographer and analyst.

Source: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, ‘IPC mapping tool’, [n.d.].

ing and reports from human rights organizations indicate that military forces in these countries have committed human rights violations against civilian populations. The withdrawal of monitoring organizations such as MINUSMA and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has exacerbated the situation. Without these entities, gathering accurate information about human rights abuses becomes increasingly challenging, creating a climate where impunity and arbitrary actions by the military can thrive. Civilians are suffering significantly at the hands of the military operations that seek to combat jihadist groups and bearing the brunt of the consequences of the conflict.

Beyond the political changes, the current crisis is reconfiguring the Sahelian space, accentuating territorial inequalities between rural and urban areas, and between regions where jihadist groups are present and those where they are not. This threatens cohesion between communities, and puts millions of lives at risk of human rights violations, as well as through an inability of millions of people to pursue economic activities. It also displaces populations in their own countries (see figure 3.6). Armed groups, notably JNIM and the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (EIGS), are terrorizing rural populations, forcing them to flee their homes.

Central Sahelian states can no longer control all of their territory, although the situation is nuanced. Despite the pressure from armed groups, the situation is more complex than a simple narrative of state failure. People in high-risk areas continue to manage their daily lives. Local perceptions of state legitimacy and authority are closely tied to security concerns. The respondents cited the state’s ability to guarantee the safety of people and their property as the strongest symbol of its presence. In Mali, for instance, the redeployment of armed forces and the acquisition of air assets are viewed positively by the population, as these actions are perceived as a reinforcement of the

state's authority. Amid the regime's propaganda on the improved capacities of the Malian Armed Forces, their tangible presence and enhanced capabilities contribute to favourable perceptions among the people.

Since 2022, however, violence has intensified in the Gao and Menaka regions due to offensives by the EIGS. The situation escalated further in August 2023 when conflict reignited in northern Mali between the armed groups aligned with the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement (CSP-PSD), which brings together most of the former rebel movements including the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and the Platform of the Movements of 14 June 2014 in Algiers, and the Malian army. This renewed conflict coincided with the withdrawal of MINUSMA from northern Mali, exacerbating the instability and contributing to the deteriorating security situation in the region. On 7 September, the JNIM claimed responsibility for an attack on a passenger boat bound for Gao, which killed more than 100 people, and for an attack on the Bamba military base, which was followed by a complex attack in Gao in the airport area and against a hospital on 8 September.¹³³ Continuing its offensive, the Malian Army reached the town of Anéfis on 7 October and Kidal on 14 November 2023. The junta presented the 'retaking of Kidal' as a reconquest, and therefore a symbol of its return to the north and its victory over rebel groups. This is part of the sovereigntist narrative and downplays the presence, albeit limited, of a 'reconstituted army' composed of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation signatory groups since February 2020. However, this victory will not be not enough to 'repair relations between the state and communities'.¹³⁴

The military operations in northern Mali have had a serious impact on the civilian population, causing mass displacement to Mauritania and Algeria.¹³⁵ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that Mauritania received more than 55 000 Malian refugees in 2023 compared to 12 000 in 2022, mainly from the regions of Timbuktu, Mopti and Segou.¹³⁶ Attacks on individuals, cattle rustling, banditry and hold-ups are common, and human rights violations have been reported in various localities, particularly during patrols by the Malian Armed Forces which are often accompanied by soldiers from the Wagner Group/Africa Corps.¹³⁷ Cities such as Timbuktu and Gao have introduced curfews, which has reduced the number of security incidents but also limits economic activity. One respondent told how, 'we feel like we are in prison in our own country; we can't even travel to Gao or Gourma because of the insecurity linked to the presence of jihadist armed groups'.¹³⁸

The situation worsened following the recapture of Kidal, leading to a more than doubling of the number of internally displaced persons between December 2022 and September 2023. Local reports indicate that around 70 per cent of the population of Kidal, Aghelhoc, Anéfis and Tessalit has been displaced.¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch has documented violations against civilians and restrictions on movement due to military operations conducted by the Malian army and Wagner Group/Africa Corps elements.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ *Le Monde*, 'Mali: Separate attacks by suspected jihadists kill 64 people', 8 Sep. 2023.

¹³⁴ Baldaro, E. and Sangaré, B., 'L'armée malienne prend Kidal: les répercussions d'une reconquête stratégique' [The Malian army takes Kidal: The repercussions of a strategic reconquest], *The Conversation*, 30 Nov. 2023.

¹³⁵ According to the UNHCR, as of 31 Jan. 2024 there were 216 412 Malian refugees and 354 739 IDPs.

¹³⁶ UNHCR, 'Fact sheet: Mauritania', Mar. 2024.

¹³⁷ Berger, F., 'Locked horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy', *Global Initiative Against Organized Crime*, 28 Mar. 2023.

¹³⁸ Based on a discussion with a young leader, Gao region, Apr. 2024.

¹³⁹ UN OCHA, 'Mali: Note on the humanitarian situation in Kidal region', Situation report 1–8 Nov. 2023.

¹⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Islamist armed groups, army target civilians', 1 Nov. 2023.

The Sahelian coups have unfolded in a region already grappling with severe crises, where nearly 33 million people are in urgent need of life-saving assistance.¹⁴¹ Local communities are deeply affected by rampant crime and banditry, which disrupt their economic and social stability. Jihadi groups have exacerbated these challenges by imposing restrictions on farming, burning fields, stealing cattle and extorting money under the guise of ‘supporting their war effort’.¹⁴² As a result, many have been forced to abandon their remote fields due to insecurity. Non-state armed groups prevent the cultivation of agricultural plots, undermining security and deepening the humanitarian crisis. These deprivations represent a profound form of human insecurity, stripping communities of their primary sources of livelihood and exacerbating their vulnerability: ‘We have abandoned our remote fields due to the level of insecurity. Non-state armed men forbid the development of fields and plots of agricultural production that are supposed to feed the population’.¹⁴³

All types of economic activity are affected, leading to the impoverishment of the population. The food insecurity that results is a significant threat. Comparing figure 4.2 with figures 3.1 and 3.6 shows that the areas with the highest levels of food insecurity are the areas with the greatest insecurity and the strongest presence of jihadist groups. The populations of central Sahel mainly rely on agriculture and pastoral activities. The restrictions imposed by jihadist groups affect the volume of crops grown and thus revenues.¹⁴⁴ Floods, drought and other climate change-related effects add another layer of uncertainty. Conversely, armed groups force mayors, teachers and community leaders to take refuge in the larger cities. The population is particularly targeted through attacks, livestock theft, rape and robbery on the main roads. Certain routes are frequently attacked and the transport companies have to pay an annual tax to the jihadists to be able to operate. The same applies to the few people who ‘have stayed behind, who pay zakat and obey the instructions of these occupiers’. ‘We can no longer travel without encountering jihadists on the road, who search vehicles and even pirogues to bring down or burn all the products we have’.¹⁴⁵

Social cohesion is being threatened by insecurity, leaving every part of the population with the impression that it can no longer trust anyone. Armed groups regularly sabotage communications infrastructure, isolating communities. Some areas are under an ‘information blackout’ with no news getting in or out and no access for NGOs, local civil society organizations or the armed forces. According to one respondent, ‘Terrorists send threatening voice messages all the time on WhatsApp’.¹⁴⁶ Accusations of ‘complicity’ with jihadist groups are used by the defence and security forces and self-defence groups to attack local communities with little or no distinction.¹⁴⁷ Populations also report that fear of reprisals prevents people from denouncing community members working with armed groups.

The human security situation in central Sahel is marked by several types of insecurity connected to armed violence and forced displacement, as well as malnutrition and other

¹⁴¹ UN OCHA, ‘Almost 33 million people in the Sahel need lifesaving humanitarian assistance and protection services’, 6 June 2024.

¹⁴² Zanoletti, G., ‘Fiscalité, ordre moral et prévisibilité: le gouvernement djihadiste du nord Mali au prisme des pratiques de prélèvements’ [Taxation, moral order and predictability: The jihadist government of northern Mali through the prism of tax collection practices], *Politique Africaine*, vol. 2, no. 166 (2022), pp. 173–91.

¹⁴³ Resident of Ayorou, Niger, interview with a facilitator, Oct. 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Guichaoua, Y. and Bouhlel, F., ‘Interactions between civilians and jihadists in Mali and Niger’, Kent Academic Repository, Mar. 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Observation in field diary, Ansongo, Oct. 2023; and Interview with an adult male resident, Timbuktu, 15 Oct. 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with a young woman resident, Timbuktu, 13 Oct. 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Poudiougou, I., ‘Dan Nan Ambassagou: un mouvement d’autodéfense armé en pays dogon’ [Dan Nan Ambassagou: An armed self-defence movement in Dogon country], *Anthropos*, no. 118 (2023), pp. 395–417.

aspects such as school closures.¹⁴⁸ Populations place unemployment, lack of economic opportunities and food insecurity at the top of their priorities.¹⁴⁹ Power cuts in Mali put the brakes on the economy and the country is receiving aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁵⁰ The IMF also approved a loan to Niger on 17 July 2024.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ APA News, 'Mali: Over 1000 schools shut down as insecurity rises', 18 Mar. 2024. In Niger, more than 880 schools had closed in the Tillabéri region by Apr. 2024, affecting over 70 000 students, which included '66,651 primary school learners'. REACH, 'Situation des écoles d'accueil dans les régions de Tillabéri et de Tahoua' [Situation of host schools in the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua], Niger, May 2024.

¹⁴⁹ Baudais, V. et al., 'Listen to us! Local perceptions of populations in Central Mali', SIPRI, Stockholm, May 2023.

¹⁵⁰ International Monetary Fund (IMF), 'IMF staff reaches staff-level agreement with Mali on Rapid Credit Facility and completes 2024 Article IV Mission', Press release, 30 Apr. 2024.

¹⁵¹ Africa News, 'Niger: IMF approves \$71 million disbursement', 19 July 2024.

5. Overcoming the challenges

The ‘epidemic’ of coups d’état shows how, despite the level of international economic, political and military investment, imposing change from outside has had limited effects. This is further illustrated by the ever-increasing duration of proposed transitions, which are extended despite international protest. ECOWAS failed to mediate and reach agreement on the duration of transitions, which significantly undermined its ability to promote the restoration of civilian regimes. The establishment of the AES by the military juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and illustrates the will of the new regimes to bypass established multilateral cooperation mechanisms and impose their own timing. Military regimes are acting to change outcomes and rules.

While the juntas first expressed an intention to organize elections, these are no longer on their agenda. A new praetorian succession is more likely than a succession through the ballot box. There has been a move from transitions of limited duration to ones of unlimited duration involving authoritarian hardening. The military authorities claim to want to be considered partners based on mutual respect, equity and a more equitable world order, and an end to paternalism or neocolonialism. They want to move away from a relationship of dependency to a situation where African state agencies can have their own agendas and identify their own needs and priorities. However, the inability to restore security and the deterioration in the living conditions of local populations, where the ability to survive is increasingly constrained, are significant causes for concern. The fight against armed groups, backed by sovereigntist narratives, is a major driver of military governance. However, authoritarian shifts, violence and economic fragility, as well as the absence of institutional checks and balances, are depriving the people of the Sahel of a future.

In conclusion, the intertwined relationship between the army and politics has a long and complex history, often driven by insecurity and institutional pressures. The coups in Mali and Niger differ in that one emerged from a long process of popular uprising, which was not the case with the other. While reflective of deeper historical trends of praetorianism and the militarization of the state, they also demonstrate the impact of deteriorating security conditions and external influences. Military regimes, seen in these and other contexts, tend to prioritize self-preservation and consolidating power at the expense of democratic processes. This results in a shrinking of the civic space, increased state-sponsorship of violence and the marginalization of civilian populations, particularly in rural areas.¹⁵² Limited access to information, growing levels of coercion and restrictions on freedoms mean that these regimes often deepen national crises rather than resolve them. This leaves civilians trapped in conflict zones and vulnerable to further exploitation by armed groups. In this sense, rather than achieving stability and democratic governance, military intervention in politics often perpetuates a cycle of instability, repression and insecurity.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at the international community.

1. The recent military coups in Mali and Niger have exposed the limitations of regional and international mediation mechanisms. More flexible approaches to negotiating transition timetables and promoting inclusive dialogue between political, military and civil society organizations would

¹⁵² de Jorio, R. and Hagberg, S., *Même Pas Peur! Ethnographies of Security in the Sahel* (Mande Studies, Indiana University Press, 2019), pp. 7–12.

facilitate the establishment of mutually acceptable roadmaps for transitions and a return to democracy. These approaches must be consistent with people's aspirations for change rather than a return to the status quo.

2. The intertwined relationship between the military and politics is deeply rooted in the region's history, but also influenced by insecurity and external factors. The international community should continue to support security sector reform to make the security sector more accountable and focused on protecting citizens while limiting the political role of the military. Strengthening the rule of law and institutional checks and balances would deter authoritarianism and provide a foundation for a democratic governance.
3. Priority must be given to local approaches that take account of knowledge of each specific context. Cases may seem similar but their historical trajectories are often different. International stakeholders should avoid imposing external or one-size-fits-all solutions and instead focus on supporting local governance models that respect the autonomy of states to define their own programmes and priorities, whilst taking into account the rule of law and checks and balances in line with what the societal composition requires.
4. Elections should serve as the compass of the international community if and when they can be held under free and democratic conditions and not used to 'civilianize' military regimes. This means supporting civilian alternatives—civil society organizations, political parties and movements, and human rights organizations—that reflect and represent the aspirations of the societies in all their diversity. Constitutions must be rooted in the socio-historical conditions of each state and in the societies they are intended to protect from violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms.
5. Addressing the root causes of instability should be a priority. International and regional organizations should address underlying factors such as economic fragility, undemocratic governance, corruption and insecurity, which fuel coups d'état and authoritarian entrenchment with all that they entail for the restriction of public freedoms.
6. The inability to restore security, protect civilians and improve living conditions increases the burden on local populations. The international community must continue to provide substantial humanitarian assistance to populations caught up in indiscriminate violence, while also supporting economic initiatives, without which generations will be left without hope and civilians will be left vulnerable to exploitation by armed groups.

Abbreviations

AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AU	African Union
CNSP	National Committee for the Salvation of the People
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EIGS	Islamic State of the Greater Sahara
EU	European Union
FDS	Defence and Security Forces
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
LASDEL	Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development, Niger
M5-RFP	Movement of 5 June RFP
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NTC	National Transition Council
UN	United Nations

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