



GEOPOLITICS IN THE SAHEL REGION: ROLE OF DIFFERENT INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERREGIONAL STABILITY

BACHELOR THESIS - INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS GLOBAL BACHELOR'S DEGREE

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the Sahel region has emerged as a critical geopolitical arena due to the strategic location, the richness of natural resources, the problematic of demographic trends and finally the persistent instability. This thesis aims to explore which are the main reasons for the region's increase importance in global geopolitics and whether it can become an unfilled geopolitical actor or remain as a space influenced by external powers. A qualitative analysis of historical legacies, socio-economic dynamics, governance structures, and security challenges reveals how post-colonial structures, migration patterns, jihadist insurgencies, and regional fragmentation have shaped the Sahel's current landscape. Particular attention is given to the roles and strategies of international actors, like the European Union, United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, as well as regional players like Morocco and Algeria. After conducting the research, it is clear that while the Sahel's strategic importance continues to draw foreign involvement, achieving full autonomy remains a distant prospect due to ongoing internal divisions and inadequate governance.

Key Words: Sahel, Geopolitics, Security, Governance, Migration, Jihadism, Post-colonial, International Actor

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, la región del Sahel se ha convertido en un escenario geopolítico crítico debido a su situación estratégica, la riqueza de sus recursos naturales, la problemática de las tendencias demográficas y, por último, la persistente inestabilidad. Esta tesis pretende explorar cuáles son las principales razones del aumento de la importancia de la región en la geopolítica mundial y si puede convertirse en un actor geopolítico coordinado o permanecer como un espacio influido por potencias externas. Un análisis cualitativo de los legados históricos, las dinámicas socioeconómicas, las estructuras de gobernanza y los retos en materia de seguridad revela cómo las estructuras poscoloniales, los patrones migratorios, las insurgencias yihadistas y la fragmentación regional han configurado el panorama actual del Sahel. Se presta especial atención a las funciones y estrategias de actores internacionales como la Unión Europea, Estados Unidos, Rusia, China y Turquía, así como de actores regionales como Marruecos y Argelia. Tras realizar la investigación, queda claro que, aunque la importancia

estratégica del Sahel sigue atrayendo la participación extranjera, alcanzar la plena autonomía sigue siendo una perspectiva lejana debido a las continuas divisiones internas y a una gobernanza inadecuada.

Palabras Clave: Sahel, Geopolítica, Seguridad, Gobiernos, Migración, Yihadismo, Postcolonial, Actor Internacional

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AQUI	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CES	Confederation of Sahel States
CFA franc	Colonies Françaises d’Afrique franc, currency
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy (EU)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EUCAP Sahel	EU Capacity Building Mission in the Sahel
EUTM Mali	EU Training Mission in Mali
FC-G5S	G5 Sahel Joint Force
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
IMF	International Monetary Bank
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (Al-Qaeda affiliate)
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Tuareg)
NDICI	Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

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Introduction

a. Justification of the Study

In modern international relations, the Sahel region has become a location of significant geopolitical importance. Numerous international and regional actors have disputed the region's control over the last few years. This is mainly due to its strategic location, the wealth of natural resources, security issues, and demographic shifts. Moreover, the region's rising instability poses a serious threat to international security and interregional stability characterized by military seizures of power, jihadist rebellions and moving international alliances. To understand the geopolitical strategies pursued by regional actors such as Morocco, Algeria, and Turkey, but also by major international powers such as the United States, China, Russia, Turkey and the European Union, is needed to understand the broader context of these dynamics.

The current rise of jihadist groups and international terrorism in the region has also made the Sahel region of such importance. Controversy on border control and rise in humanitarian crisis has also attracted international attention to the existing migration movements from the Sahel to Europe, as a product of political unrest and economic difficulties.

The aim of the current study is to analyze some of the main geopolitical aspects at play in the Sahel and to argue, finally, what drives international involvement in there, and what are the likely future impacts on regional and international security. It seeks to offer a comprehensive explanation of the geopolitical transformation of the Sahel and its long-term implications.

b. Research objectives and limitations

The primary objective of this research is to provide an answer to the fundamental question of "why the Sahel region is of such significant geopolitical importance?" From a geopolitical perspective, the significance of the Sahel region extends beyond mere geographical considerations. This prompts the following question: "Can the Sahel region act as a region and a coordinated geopolitical actor, or is it simply a geographical region?". Furthermore, it seeks to examine the roles played by various international and regional actors, and the implications for interregional stability.

The present study is guided by four key themes: historical and post-colonial legacies, socio-economic factors, security and governance, and geopolitical competition. A comprehensive examination of colonial and postcolonial structures, encompassing France's military presence and the CFA franc, illuminates the genesis of contemporary instability. Furthermore, the study will examine the role of demographic shifts, resource scarcity, and migration patterns in contributing to regional instability and its external implications. Furthermore, an analysis of the interplay between jihadist insurgencies, military coups, and weak state institutions is conducted to explain the region's persistent insecurity. Finally, an assessment of the strategies employed by global powers such as the EU, the U.S., China, Russia, and Turkey, along with regional actors including Morocco and Algeria, is conducted to provide insight into their influence in the Sahel.

c. Sustainable Development Goals

This research topic is relevant to the SDGs of the 2030 agenda for several reasons.

- **SDG 1 No Poverty**

With a special emphasis in goals 1.1. “Eradicate extreme poverty” and 1.4 “Ensure equal rights to economic resources for everyone”. The Sahel faces major poverty problems, causing migration fuels, radicalization and instability, which gives an understanding that poverty is the origin of most regional challenges.

- **SDG 2 Zero Hunger**

With a special emphasis in goals 2.1 “Eradicate extreme poverty” and 2.4 “Sustainable food production systems”. Challenges in the Sahel like climate change, conflict and weak governances create food insecurity.

- **SDG 4 Quality education**

With a special emphasis on goals 4.1 “all children complete primary and secondary school” and 4.4 “increase skill for employment”. Sahel population has mainly low education rates having consequences high rates of unemployment and radicalization.

- **SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth**

With a special emphasis on goals 8.3 “Promote inclusive economic growth” and 8.6 “Reduce youth unemployment”. The Sahel region suffers a phenome called “youth budge” where the majority of the population is below 24 years suffering unemployment leading them to be recruited by armed groups.

- **SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**

With a special emphasis on goals 16.1 “Reduce all forms of violence and death rates” and 16.6 “Create effective and accountable institutions”. The Sahel is a region with a wide range of regional issues due to weak governance, political coups, insurgencies and fragile state institutions.

- **SDG 17 Partnership for the goals**

With special emphasis on goal 17.9 “Enhance international support for capacity-building” and 17.16 “Enhance Global multi stakeholder partnership”. The Sahle, seen as a geopolitical region, is influenced by diverse international cooperation or competition among actors like the UE, US, Russia, China and Turkey.

1. Theoretical Framework

a. Sahel's region history and instability

The Sahel, otherwise referred to as the "coast" of the Sahara, is a vast transitional zone going from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, comprising 12 countries. The term "Sahel" is not uniformly defined in political discourse. However, a prevailing interpretation encompasses countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania, which collectively constitute the core of the Sahel region, also referred to as the G5 Sahel. Other political definitions extend the term to include Senegal, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea. The region functions as a cultural and economic bridge between North and sub-Saharan Africa and is home to over 400 million people. The region has played a pivotal role in African history, serving as a center for trade, empire-building, and geopolitical shifts.

Historically, the region was the heartland of powerful West African empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, which controlled trans-Saharan trade routes, facilitating the exchange of gold, salt, and slaves with the Mediterranean world (*The Sahel Region*, n.d.). Timbuktu, in present-day Mali, emerged as a renowned center of Islamic scholarship and commerce, cementing the region's cultural and intellectual significance.

However, the region subsequently experienced profound disruption to its traditional governance structures, the division of ethnic groups, and the imposition of economic systems that continue to exert a significant influence on the region to the present day. Despite the formal abolition of slavery in 1905, colonial administrations perpetuated forced labor, thereby reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies that persisted into the post-independence era. The combined impact of these legacies and the deficiencies in governance has resulted in an ongoing state of instability (Cooper, B., 2018).

Contemporary Challenges

The Sahel is currently facing a number of severe environmental challenges, including desertification, droughts, and erratic rainfall, which have had a significant impact on food insecurity ¹, displacement, and competition over scarce resources. The encroachment of the desert has led to southward migration, resulting in the intensification of ethnic and resource-based conflicts. The region is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, such as the Tuareg, Fulani, Hausa, and Songhai, which have a long history of competition over land and political power.

The region has become a focal point for international security efforts from different international actors like, France with Operation Barkhane, the United States, and Russia through the Wagner Group, now rebranded as Africa Corps. As well as international organizations like the United Nations with the mission MINUSMA, that took place between the years 2013 and 2023. Moreover, regional organizations such as the G5 Sahel at first and then the Confederation of the Sahel States also aimed to enhance security and economic resilience. (IFAD, n.d.).

Persistent Instability

The Sahel is known for being one the most unstable regions globally, facing an ongoing political, economic, and security crises. Weak governance, democratic regression, armed conflicts, and external interventions promote instability. Ongoing military coups since the year 2020 in Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Niger have shown the fragility of democratic institutions. In response, the AU and ECOWAS have imposed sanctions and suspensions, however, these measures have largely failed to prevent further instability (IEEE, 2024).

Furthermore, jihadist insurgencies, linked to terrorist groups based in the region like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and the presence of private military actors such as Russia's Wagner Group, create security threats in the region, such as intercommunal violence. Also, western actors such as France and the EU made constant efforts to provide military assistance, yet they have failed in achieving a sustainable security, leading to withdrawals from key regions. The presence of weak state structures and

¹ SDG 2

an exclusive governance have created an environment favorable to the proliferation of insurgencies and conflicts.

From an economic perspective, the Sahel, despite its abundant natural resources, remains stagnant due to pervasive corruption, inadequate governance, and a reliance on extractive industries. Numerous governments depend on resource revenues rather than taxation, thereby limiting their accountability to the population. The nexus between political instability, legal insecurity, and foreign investment is further magnified by the intensity of poverty and unemployment that characterize the region, thereby driving migration and radicalization (*IEEE, 2024*).

The Sahel's ongoing instability has far-reaching consequences for Africa and beyond, giving rise to migration crises, terrorist activities, and shifts in geopolitical allegiances. As Western influence diminishes, alternative partnerships, notably with Russia, China and Turkey, are redefining the region's global engagements. While the African continent is progressively advocating for "African solutions to African problems," regional organizations have encountered challenges in effectively addressing security and governance issues. The evolving power dynamics points to a fundamental shift in global geopolitics.

b. The Region's Role in Global Geopolitics

The Sahel region has emerged as a critical area of concern in the contemporary geopolitical landscape due to its strategic location between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Historically, the region has been a pivotal hub for trans-Saharan trade and cultural exchange (Sánchez Herráez, 2025). Presently, it has evolved into a critical nexus for migration, security, and competition over natural resources.

The ongoing instability in the region, driven by factors such as weak governance, jihadist insurgency, and interethnic conflict, has attracted the attention of both regional and international actors (GIS Reports, 2025). France and the European Union have historically functioned as external powers in the region, implementing military initiatives such as Operation Barkhane and EU training programs. However, mounting anti-Western sentiment, allegations of neocolonialism, and limited success precipitated a precipitous decline in influence, particularly following the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from 2020 to 2024 (NAVI, 2024). Also, the European continent is currently facing two significant security challenges: terrorism and migration. These phenomena pose a direct threat to the region, and the ongoing presence of global actors in the region is a matter of concern.

In response to this shift, Russia has strategically employed the Wagner Group, now operating under the name Africa Corps, to provide military support in exchange for mining concessions and political influence. This strategy is notable for its dualistic nature, serving both to weaken Western influence and to strengthen Moscow's position in Africa. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of international sanctions related to the Ukraine conflict, where Russia is seeking to expand its influence while navigating the complex geopolitical landscape. Notwithstanding concerns regarding violations of human rights, Sahelian regimes have agreed to the exchange of immediate military backing.

In contrast, China has prioritized economic engagement over security involvement. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a primary instrument through which the Chinese government has invested in infrastructure and resource access across the region. Nevertheless, its reluctance to serve as a security guarantor has constrained

its strategic depth (ACCORD, 2021). While Sahelian governments acknowledge the merits of Chinese development financing, they also recognize the necessity of diversifying their partnerships, striking a balance between economic and security interests.

The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger signifies a deviation from conventional regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Despite its promotion as a pan-African alternative, the African Union (AU) has, in practice, deepened its reliance on Russian military support. Conversely, coastal states such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire maintain their alignment with Western actors, who express concern over the potential spread of instability (Sánchez Herráez, 2025).

The geopolitical significance of the Sahel is attributable to its dual role as a zone of insecurity and strategic competition. The evolution of the Sahel, whether it becomes a more autonomous regional player or remains a contested space for great-power rivalry, will depend on the capacity of African institutions to foster long-term stability (GIS Reports, 2025).

2. Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the geopolitical dynamics of the Sahel region and the roles of various international actors. In light of the intricacies and rapidly evolving character of the Sahel's political and security landscape, the present study undertakes a meticulous examination of extant sources to furnish a nuanced comprehension of the region's predicaments and the strategic interests of external and regional stakeholders.

The research draws on a wide range of materials, including academic literature, policy reports, news articles, government documents, and datasets. The analysis is grounded in peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports from institutions specializing in African studies and international relations. In addition, publications from think tanks and international organizations offer insights into regional security, governance, and development strategies. Reputable news outlets provide real-time updates on political developments, and official statements from governments and regional bodies help contextualize the actions of key players. Maps and datasets are employed to facilitate the visualization of trends in conflict, migration, and resource distribution.

However, the research is subject to several limitations. The Sahel's dynamic environment implies that certain findings may become outdated as new coups, alliances, or conflicts emerge. Data concerning sensitive subjects, such as military operations or covert diplomacy, is frequently limited or unreliable. To ensure accuracy, cross-referencing with multiple sources is often necessary. Due to practical constraints, including security risks and logistical challenges, primary fieldwork was not feasible. Consequently, reliance on verified secondary data was necessary.

3. Internal Importance as a Geopolitical Region

In contemporary geopolitics, the Sahel region occupies a key position shaped by its historical legacy, strategic location and dynamic population trends. Its strategic importance is due to the region's abundance of natural resources, its role as a nexus of cultural exchange and commercial activity, and its rapidly expanding demographic and economic potential. The Sahel region presents a surprising paradox, characterized by the presence of considerable potential and, at the same time, by the many challenges facing its population. This section therefore provides a comprehensive analysis focusing on three key dimensions: the enduring influence of post-colonial structures, the region's wealth of natural resources, and its demographic and migration challenges.

a. Influence of post-colonial structures

It is not possible to comprehend the geopolitical significance of the Sahel region in its entirety without conducting a thorough investigation into the lasting impact of postcolonial structures. The colonial legacy of French imperialism continues to influence state formation, military relations, and economic dependencies in the region. Despite the formal attainment of independence in the 1960s, the institutions, monetary systems, and security arrangements established during colonial rule have persisted in various neocolonial forms, thereby restricting the sovereignty and self-determination of Sahelian states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

A critical aspect of this postcolonial dynamic is the persistent military presence of France. Operation Barkhane, initiated in 2014, has emerged as a significant expansion of earlier initiatives, such as Operation Serval, rapidly becoming France's most extensive overseas operation, with over 4,500 troops deployed across the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (ECFR, n.d.). While the operation has been stated as a counterterrorism initiative targeting jihadist groups such as JNIM and ISGS, it has also come to symbolize the persistent geopolitical interests of the French government. The ongoing presence of foreign military forces, particularly in former colonies, is frequently interpreted by local populations as a perpetuation of colonial dominance rather than a neutral contribution to security.

The presence of neocolonial governance is also evidenced by the institutional weaknesses of Sahelian states. The administrative systems that were in place in the post-independence governments were designed with the purpose of exploiting the colonies and exercising central control, rather than facilitating participatory governance or regional inclusion. Consequently, national institutions have frequently fallen short in their responsibility to ensure inclusive development, provide security, and offer legitimate representation. This has enabled non-state actors, such as insurgents and separatist groups, to fill governance vacuums and capitalize on local grievances (M. Doucouré, 2024).

The economic interdependency with France serves to reinforce the postcolonial hierarchies that persist in the region. The CFA franc, which was introduced during the colonial period as the "Colonies Françaises d'Afrique" currency, continues to bind numerous West African economies to the French Treasury. Although the CFA franc system is formally voluntary, historical evidence indicates that participation has been coercive in practice. Despite the passage of time, the monetary union persists in functioning as a means of perpetuating French economic preeminence. This phenomenon manifests in the inhibition of domestic industrialization and the redirection of wealth extraction to French companies, particularly in the mining and energy sectors (M. Doucouré, 2024).

This legacy has incited waves of resistance and popular discontent. Across cities in the region, mass protests have emerged against the perceived continuation of "Françafrique," a term denoting the informal empire of French influence in Africa. These sentiments have manifested in political action, evidenced by the expulsion of French troops by military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, the revocation of military agreements, and the increasing alignment with Russia as an alternative security partner. Although this realignment is frequently justified through anti-colonial rhetoric, it poses a significant risk of supplanting one form of external domination with another. This is evidenced by the increasing integration of Russian private military actors, such as the Wagner Group, into local security and economic frameworks.

b. Physical factors for geopolitical importance

Another fact of the Sahel geopolitical importance is abundance of natural resources, including oil, gold, and uranium. This fact positions the region among the most resource-rich regions globally. This includes Niger's uranium, a critical component in the global supply of nuclear energy, Mali and Burkina Faso's gold reserves, and Chad's oil reserves. Nevertheless, these factors attract international players while at the same time aggravating domestic instability. Resources frequently engender more conflict than they do development due to governance failures and exploitative foreign interventions.

The ongoing tensions in the region are intensified by the presence of extractive industries. Niger is responsible for supplying one-third of France's uranium requirements through AREVA, a French company that specializes in uranium mining and processing. Nonetheless, the terms of the contracts are regarded as inequitable, and there is mismanagement of revenue, which curtails the local benefits (Volberding & Warner, 2018).

In a similar context, the IMF 2023 Article IV Consultation reports that gold continues to be Mali's predominant export, accounting for over 75% of total export earnings. However, the sector continues to experience substantial revenue losses due to inadequate fiscal governance. The IMF has observed that "enhancing transparency and governance in the mining sector is imperative to ensure Mali maximizes the benefits of its natural resource wealth." (IMF, 2023).

In addition, Chad's oil sector, which was previously a significant revenue generator, has been severely impacted by opaque financial transactions. A notable example of this is Glencore's oil prepayment scheme, which was funded by debt and resulted in a redirection of profits toward debt repayment (IMF, 2024).

Moreover, renewable resources are equally contested. Agriculture is the primary means of subsistence for a considerable proportion of the global population. However, climate change and land degradation have worsened tensions between farmers and pastoralists, leading to an increase in conflict. For instance, over 4,000 such conflicts occurred in Burkina Faso between 2005 and 2011 (USAID, 2017).

Lake Chad, a vital water source, has undergone a significant decrease in size, amounting to 90% since the 1950s. This decline has had profound consequences, leading to the displacement of millions and the increasing of regional tensions (World Bank, 2015).

The regional landscape is further complicated by international engagement. France, for instance, prioritizes uranium security in Niger, while China secures oil and minerals through infrastructure deals that often bypass local regulations (IFRI, 2014). Multilateral initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) have encountered challenges, as evidenced by Niger's withdrawal in 2017, which underscores governance deficiencies (EITI, 2018). Despite the mobilization of €26 billion for development purposes, the Sahel Alliance confronts obstacles during implementation due to prevailing security concerns (Sahel Alliance, 2025).

The inefficient allocation of resources has been demonstrated to engender instability. A case in point is Mali, where marginalized pastoralists have been observed joining jihadist groups. However, cooperative initiatives, such as the World Bank's pastoralism projects and Niger's successful land regeneration programs, demonstrate potential pathways to stability (McLean, 2018).

The Sahel's abundant natural resources have proven to be a double-edged sword, serving as a catalyst for both geopolitical intrigue and conflict in the region. Achieving sustainable management in this context necessitates the implementation of robust governance frameworks, the establishment of equitable foreign partnerships, and the adoption of community-led solutions to mitigate instability in this strategically vital region.

c. Population Dynamics and Migration

The Sahel region is experiencing an unprecedented demographic explosion, with projections indicating that ten countries in the region will account for almost half of Africa's population growth by 2050. The following three factors are the primary contributors to the observed increase in instability: "The government's failure to furnish citizens with fundamental goods and services, pervasive insecurity, and substandard human development constitute salient issues" (Torres Saavedra, 2019).

In nations such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, a discernible demographic shift is evident, with over 60% of the population falling within the age bracket of below 24 years. This phenomenon, frequently referred to as a "youth bulge," is characterized by a significant increase in the proportion of young individuals within a given population. Concurrently, this demographic shift is accompanied by a limited access of economic opportunities ², which could result in a reduction of economic hardships and an improvement in overall well-being.

Furthermore, the issue of unemployment and underemployment among the youth is particularly noteworthy, as many are forced to engage in informal economic activities or engage in illicit practices. For instance, in Mauritania and Senegal, approximately 40% of individuals aged between 15 and 24 are neither employed nor in education (Torres Saavedra, 2019). This economic marginalization engenders a conducive environment for recruitment by armed groups, including jihadist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) ³. The absence of viable opportunities has been identified as a contributing factor to social discontent, which, in turn, has been linked to cycles of political instability and conflict. This phenomenon has been observed in Mali, where escalating intercommunal violence and jihadist insurgencies have coincided with increasing demographic pressures.

Additionally, education continues to be a significant impediment, with secondary school enrollment rates as low as 10% in South Sudan and 48% in Senegal (IEEE,

² SDG 1,2

³ SDG 8

2019)⁴. The ongoing disparity in human capital development not only perpetuates economic disadvantage but also constrains the region's potential for transitioning towards more stable and diversified economic structures. It is imperative to recognize the nexus between investment in education, vocational training, and job creation on the one hand, and the security and governance crises in the Sahel on the other. Without a substantial investment in these areas, the region's demographic trajectory is likely to aggravate existing challenges, thereby compounding the already dire circumstances.

Migration Flows and Their Geopolitical Consequences

The phenomenon of migration in the Sahel is driven by a confluence of factors, including economic deprivation, environmental degradation, and armed conflict. While the majority of movement persists within the region, facilitated by ECOWAS free movement protocols, trans-Saharan migration toward Europe has emerged as a significant geopolitical concern. Historically, cities such as Agadez in Niger functioned as pivotal transit points for migrants traveling to Libya and Algeria before undertaking Mediterranean crossings. Rigorous anti-smuggling legislation, exemplified by Niger's Law 2015-36 (for the Prevention and Prosecution of Migrant Smuggling), has effectively dismantled conventional trafficking routes, consequently compelling migration networks to operate in a clandestine manner and engendering elevated risks for migrants (UNODC, 2022).

Nevertheless, the reallocation of migratory flows has not led to a decrease in their overall magnitude; instead, it has resulted in a shift in their characteristics. In response to these challenges, smugglers have adapted by establishing new, more clandestine pathways, often in collaboration with armed groups and criminal networks. In Mali, for instance, smugglers operating along the Gao-Timbuktu axis pay fees to jihadist factions for safe passage, thereby effectively integrating migration economies into broader conflict economies (UNODC, 2022). Concurrently, within the borders of Chad, gold-mining regions such as Tibesti have emerged as transit zones where migrants are subjected to exploitation for labor or coerced into enlisting with armed groups. The nexus between migration, organized crime, and

⁴ SDG 4

insurgency creates a complex environment that challenges stabilization efforts and undermines state authority.

For Europe, the migration flows from the Sahel region present a confluence of security challenges and policy dilemmas. By the year 2050, it is estimated that as many as 200 million Africans may attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This scenario bears resemblance to past migration crises (IEEE, 2019). The European Union has adopted a multifaceted approach, encompassing border externalization measures, such as the provision of funding to Niger's security forces, and development aid. However, the efficacy of these measures has been varied. Although these measures have led to a decrease in smuggling in certain regions, they have also forced migrants to resort to more dangerous routes, thereby amplifying human rights violations without addressing the underlying causes of these issues.

Finally, it can be posited that the demographic and migratory challenges experienced by the Sahel region underscore the necessity of a multifaceted approach that harmoniously balances security concerns with considerations of long-term development. Policies that prioritize border control may amplify existing instability, while investments in education, job creation, and governance reform could mitigate the drivers of both conflict and migration. In order to effectively address the interconnected crises in the region, it is imperative to emphasize the significance of regional cooperation through established frameworks such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS. It is imperative to acknowledge that addressing the structural factors that perpetuate disappointment and displacement among youth in the Sahel is of vital importance to ensure stability in the region, which in turn will have a domino effect on Africa and Europe.

4. Internal Challenges for external implications

The Sahel region is confronted with significant internal challenges, including state fragility, communal violence, jihadist insurgencies, and political upheaval. These challenges are influenced and shaped by international geopolitical dynamics. This section examines the political instability inside the region with the rise of anti-colonial movements and the creation of military juntas, what jihadist groups are within the region as well as what internal organizations are created.

a. Political Instability and Internal Conflicts

As has been articulated throughout the course of this study, the Sahel region has long been characterized by its fragility and instability. However, a transformation in its political landscape has been witnessed in recent years due to two primary factors: the resurgence of nationalist and anti-colonial movements, with France as the primary target, and the establishment of military juntas as a political authority. The aforementioned developments have led to a reorganization of the nations' governance structures and a reconfiguration of the region's geopolitical orientation. This has provoked repercussions for the interregional stability, security cooperation, and global strategic competition.

Rise of Nationalism and Anti-Colonial movements

As delineated in the preceding section, entitled "The Impact of Postcolonial Structures," the escalating tide of anti-French sentiment that has emerged in various Sahel region countries can be attributed to a prolonged period of perceived economic exploitation, political marginalization, and military ineffectiveness under France's neocolonial influence. Since the 1960s, Sahelian nations have maintained a close relationship with France, primarily characterized by economic dependencies, such as the continued use of the CFA franc as the official currency, and security partnerships. Nevertheless, the failure of Operation Barkhane, a French-led counterterrorism initiative, to impede the expansion of jihadist groups has led to a decline in public trust in France's capacity to serve as a stabilizing force.

This dynamic has been exemplified by widespread public demonstrations in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, which have served as symbolic representations of this

societal shift. In the aftermath of the 2023 coup in Niger, a group of protesters entered the French embassy in Niamey, removed the placards bearing the French flag, and substituted them with national flags of Russia and Niger while chanting anti-colonial slogans (Samantha Bradshaw, 2025). Comparable scenes have been witnessed in Burkina Faso, where demonstrators have accused France of supporting jihadist activities and have demanded the prompt removal of its armed forces. These protests, however, were not merely spontaneous reactions; rather, they were the culmination of years of grassroots mobilization, significantly influenced by social media campaigns that pictured France as a persistent colonial oppressor (Beckmann, M., 2024).

The profound influence of Russian disinformation in amplifying these narratives is of major importance. Pro-Kremlin networks, including those associated with Wagner and other entities with ties to the Russian military and intelligence apparatus, have engaged in systematic dissemination of disinformation portraying France as a destabilizing actor complicit in terrorism. A 2024 study by the African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) identified over 80 Russian disinformation campaigns targeting the African continent, with nearly half of these campaigns focusing on the Sahel region (ACSS, 2024). These campaigns are characterized by the exploitation of historical grievances, including France's extractive economic policies and its military interventions in the region, with the aim of reinforcing anti-Western sentiment. It is noteworthy that 78% of anti-French and anti-ECOWAS social media content is disseminated in French, ensuring resonance with local populations (S. Bradshaw, 2025).

The withdrawal of French forces from Mali (2022), Burkina Faso (2023), and Niger (2023) marked a substantial rupture in Franco-Sahelian relations. This departure cannot be considered a mere tactical retreat, rather, it was a symbolic rejection of Western hegemony. This rejection can be seen as part of a broader regional desire for sovereignty and self-determination. However, the vacuum created by France's exit has not been filled by effective local governance. Instead, the region has been filled by opportunistic external actors, most notably Russia. The long-term commitment of Russia to regional stability remains dubious.

The emerge of Military Juntas

The political trajectory of the Sahel region has undergone a fundamental transformation as a result of a series of military coups ⁵. Each of these coups has been justified as a necessary corrective to the perceived failures of civilian governance. The precedent was set in 2020–21 with a two-stage coup in Mali that ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, followed by Burkina Faso's twin coups in 2022 and Niger's takeover in 2023. In all three cases, military leaders cited ongoing insecurity, corruption, and Western interference as primary motivations for taking power.

In Niger, for instance, General Abdourahamane Tchiani presented his 2023 coup as a "liberation" from French domination and ECOWAS's alleged submission to Western interests (UNSC Report, 2025). Meanwhile, Mali's junta positioned itself as the vanguard of a new anti-imperialist order (Ndjerareou, D., 2025). Following their rise to power, military governments have methodically consolidated their authority. This consolidation has been achieved through a variety of means, including the dissolution of political parties (a notable example is the 2025 decree in Niger), the indefinite postponement of elections, and the suppression of dissent under the guise of national security.

The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023 has led to the institutionalization of a militarized governance model, resulting in the formation of a mutual defense pact that explicitly deviates from the democratic norms established by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, the organization's reliance on Russian security partnerships, particularly through the Africa Corps (formerly Wagner Group), has raised concerns over human rights abuses and escalating violence. Documentation of atrocities perpetrated by forces aligned with the junta reveals a pattern of targeted killings against ethnic groups in Mali and Burkina Faso. These operations have had a disproportionate impact on the Fulani and Tuareg communities, as reported by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P) in 2025.

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The convergence of anti-Western nationalism and military authoritarianism has major consequences for regional stability. The disagreement between ECOWAS and the AES has impeded economic integration, with sanctions and border closures that intensify humanitarian crises. Concurrently, the security vacuum engendered by Western withdrawal has enabled jihadist groups, such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), to expand their operations, including raids into coastal states such as Benin and Togo (UNSC Report, 2025). Despite Russia's growing influence being presented as an alternative to Western "imperialism," there has been no tangible improvement in security. Instead, the region's dependence on mercenary networks has deepened, and geopolitical rivalries have intensified.

b. Jihadism and Terrorism in the Sahel

The nexus of local grievances, transnational extremist networks, and geopolitical instability has elevated the Sahel region to a position of paramount importance in the global struggle against jihadist terrorism. The objective of this section is to examine the internal dynamics of the jihadist insurgency in this region through three primary aspects: the repercussions of external events, such as the collapse of Libya and the withdrawal from Afghanistan; the operational strategies employed by the primary jihadist groups that have established a presence there; and the alarming expansion of their activities throughout the region. The aforementioned factors have collectively engendered a persistent security threat in the Sahel region, exerting repercussions on regional and international stability.

Repercussion of external events

In order to comprehend the persistent jihadist threat in the Sahel, it is imperative to consider two pivotal geopolitical events: the dissolution of Libya in 2011 and the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan in 2021.

The collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 resulted in a security breach that precipitated an affluence of weapons and fighters into the region. These combatants were predominantly former members of Gaddafi's security forces. The return of these fighters, particularly Tuareg mercenaries, to northern Mali, proved instrumental in the 2012 rebellion that destabilized the country and created opportunities for

jihadist groups to establish footholds, such as AQIM (also known as AL-QA'IDA IN THE LANDS OF THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB). This group administered the northern and central regions of Mali (IEMed, 2018). The subsequent French-led intervention in Mali (Operation Serval) temporarily impeded the advance of extremist groups but failed to address the underlying conditions that facilitated their rise.

Furthermore, the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has had a dual effect on the security dynamics of the Sahel region. At the outset, the phenomenon indicated a potential diminution in Western counterterrorism commitments on a global scale. This development subsequently encouraged jihadist groups in the Sahel region. Secondly, it redirected international attention and resources from addressing Africa's pressing security concerns at a pivotal moment. This confluence of factors creates an environment favorable to the operation of transnational terrorist networks, which are able to operate with a high degree of impunity. The Sahel region is utilized by these networks as a sanctuary and a platform for regional expansion (FUENTE COBO, Ignacio, 2025). This geopolitical context fostered the rise of sophisticated jihadist coalitions that would come to dominate the region's security landscape.

The Competitive Landscape of Jihadist Groups

In order to comprehend the complex dynamics of jihadism in the Sahel, it is essential to examine the leading coalition that wields considerable influence over this ecosystem. This alliance comprises two primary entities that adopt disparate strategic approaches to insurgency and governance, as evidenced by the map presented in Annexes in Table I.

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), established in 2017 as an Al-Qaeda affiliate, exemplifies a more locally entrenched model of jihadist mobilization. The incorporation of various pre-existing groups, including Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front, has enabled JNIM to develop a flexible structure that allows regional factions to adapt to local conditions while maintaining ideological alignment with Al-Qaeda's global agenda (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019). The capacity to function as both a military force and a provider of governance has enabled them to achieve significant success by addressing the deficiencies caused by the absence of state institutions in rural areas.

In contrast, the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (IS Sahel) exemplifies a more aggressive and expansionist model of jihadism. Following a split within Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2015, the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Since then, it has pursued a strategy of territorial conquest and spectacular violence. The withdrawal of French forces in 2022 signified a pivotal moment for IS Sahel, which expeditiously augmented its operational scope within the tri-border region of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (LISA Institute, 2025). The ongoing competition between JNIM and IS Sahel has resulted in an escalating cycle of violence, as both groups compete for control of smuggling routes, natural resources, and local populations. This rivalry has, paradoxically, strengthened their overall impact on regional security. Each group seeks to demonstrate its capabilities by launching increasingly audacious attacks on the other.

Expansion of Jihadist Violence

Jihadist groups in the Sahel have exhibited remarkable adaptability in their operational methods, reflecting both local conditions and global jihadist trends. A distinguishing element of their strategy has been the "ruralization" of violence, which involves the avoidance of direct assaults on well-defended urban centers in favor of encircling and isolating state-controlled territories ⁶. This strategy enables militant groups to capitalize on the extensive, ungoverned regions of the Sahel, thereby reducing their vulnerability to conventional military forces (Fuente Cobo, Ignacio, 2025). The groups' adoption of modern technologies has also increased, particularly with the integration of commercial drones adapted for reconnaissance and attack missions. This technological adaptation signifies a substantial evolution in asymmetric warfare capabilities within the region.

Perhaps most alarming is the geographic expansion of jihadist activities observed in recent years, as evidenced by the map presented in Annexes in Table II. Initially appearing as a localized insurgency in northern Mali, this movement has since propagated throughout the central Sahel region, showing a pronounced pattern of escalating influence that now extends to coastal West African states. The JNIM has

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established operational cells in northern Benin and Togo, while IS Sahel has extended its influence toward Nigeria's northwest (Aguilera, A, 2025). This southward expansion follows predictable patterns, targeting border regions with weak governance and existing communal tensions. These groups have been known to exploit vulnerabilities in the system through a combination of coercion and co-optation. They offer protection to marginalized communities while systematically undermining state authority.

The ongoing and expanding jihadist insurgency in the Sahel poses a multifaceted challenge with implications that extend far beyond the region itself. In the local context, the persistent erosion of state authority engenders a protracted state of instability and humanitarian crisis. Regionally, the spread to the coastal states of West Africa, poses a threat to the destabilization of previously unaffected areas. The Sahel's role as a transit zone for migration and illicit trafficking, in conjunction with its potential to serve as a training ground for international terrorists, makes it a security concern of the highest priority on the global stage. In order to address the aforementioned challenges, a coordinated response is necessary that extends beyond military solutions. This response must address the governance failures and developmental deficits that contribute to jihadist recruitment.

c. Regional Governance and Internal Organizations

The geopolitical landscape of the Sahel region is characterized by a complex interplay of regional organizations that employ a significant influence on governance structures and stability. These include the G5 Sahel, the Confederation of Sahel States (or Sahel Alliance, CES/AES), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union. Each of these organizations has developed a distinct strategy in response to the challenges faced by the region. However, it is evident that regional organizations are not the sole actors that wield significant influence. Ethnic-based movements, such as the Tuareg (for example, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, MNLA), play substantial roles in local conflicts, often aligning with or resisting state authority, are also crucial factors in this context.

The G5 Sahel

Between the countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, a regional security alliance was established in 2014, called the G5 Sahel, in order to address the imminent growing threat of jihadist activities taking place in the region (INTERPOL, 2022). It was composed by a “a five-thousand-troop-strong counterterrorism force aimed at fighting militant groups with an expanded mandate to cross borders in the Sahel region” (Central for Preventing Action, 2024). France and the EU showed support to the Group’s Joint Force (FC-G5S), which had the aim of facilitating cross-border counterterrorism operations and strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms. However, structural weaknesses, including inconsistent funding, logistical deficiencies, and divergent national priorities, constrained its operational effectiveness (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The G5 Sahel framework final collapse was marked by the withdrawal from the alliance of Mali in 2022, followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. These strategic departures were accelerated by the military regimes' repudiation of Western predominance and their determination to develop alternative security collaborations (Elcano Royal Institute, 2024). The dissolution of the G5 Sahel Alliance highlights the difficulties inherent in maintaining multilateral security cooperation in a region where anti-colonial narratives and sovereignty concerns progressively determine policy choices.

ECOWAS and the African Union

To understand the functioning of the geopolitical landscape in the Sahel region, it also requires to comprehend how ECOWAS has functioned historically as the primary arbiter of political crises in West Africa. Employing a combination of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and (in extreme cases) military intervention to enforce constitutional order, and how they have now moved to having no countries in the region as members of the organization. This is mainly due to ECOWAS’s excessive reaction to the 2023 Niger coup, including the imposition of stringent sanctions and the threat of armed intervention, proved counterproductive. This reaction strengthened anti-ECOWAS sentiment and accelerated the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from the organization and created the AES (ICG, 2024). This has led to the bloc’s credibility to be further undermined by

inconsistencies in its democratic enforcement, as evidenced by the minimal repercussions experienced by certain member states (e.g., Togo, Guinea) for authoritarian practices (CFR, 2024).

In contrast, the African Union (AU) influence in the region has been constrained by resource limitations and bureaucratic inefficiencies, mainly due to the fact that ECOWAS has historically emerged as the dominant regional actor. This has led the AU to adopt only a more conciliatory approach, emphasizing dialogue and long-term governance reforms. The initiatives launched by the AU, The African Union's Nouakchott Process and African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) prioritize conflict prevention and regional cooperation (African Union, 2014).

The Confederation of Sahel States (CES/AES)

As mentioned above, the exit of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS, made the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023, which was later renamed as the Confederation of Sahel States (CES) in July 2024. This alliance signifies a strategic realignment among these three nations (Institute for the Study of War, 2024). This union, conceptualized as a mutual defense pact against external interference, explicitly repudiates ECOWAS' authority and Western-backed security frameworks (ICG, 2024). The founding documents of the CES place significant emphasis on collective sovereignty, economic self-sufficiency, and military cooperation, including the establishment of a joint security force and the eventual implementation of a monetary union (ISW, 2024).

The majority of the military support to the CES has directly been provided by Russia, with the Wagner Group (rebranded as Africa Corps). This includes troop training, drone warfare capabilities, and political backing in international forums (ISW, 2024). However, this partnership has given rise to significant human rights concerns, as evidenced by documented cases of Wagner-linked atrocities against civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The CES model, which prioritizes regime survival over democratic governance, poses a direct challenge to regional norms and exacerbates tensions with coastal West African states, making more complicated the stability of the region.

Subnational Actors: Ethnic Militias

Furthermore, ethnic militias and jihadist groups have exploited state weaknesses by shaping local conflicts. For example, The Tuareg-led MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad) in northern Mali and Fulani self-defense militias in central Mali and Burkina Faso who operate as parallel governance structures, alternately clashing and collaborating with state forces (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Also, Jihadist organizations such as JNIM and ISGS have established a presence within rural communities by offering dispute resolution services, basic amenities, and protection from state-sponsored violence.

These groups gain influence in regions where central governments lack legitimacy, thereby illustrating the limitations of purely military counterterrorism strategies. The aggravation of communal violence, particularly between herders and farmers, is further compounded by climate change-induced resource scarcity.

The Sahel's internal dynamics are a clear indicative of the region's undergoing significant transformation, characterized by the substitution of conventional governance models with militarized, sovereignty-focused alliances. The emergence of the CES/AES bloc has the potential to disrupt established regional architectures such as ECOWAS. Concurrently, the AU is grappling with the challenge of effectively implementing its mandate for conflict prevention. Subnational actors, ranging from ethnic militias to jihadist groups, further worsen the stabilization efforts by exploiting state fragility. This is the reason why external actors encounter a strategic dilemma in the Sahel when trying to establish their different policies.

5. Role of External Actors

After examining the factors that make the Sahel region important in the geopolitical landscape as well as regional actors trying to gain control and power in the region, it is essential to understand why international players like the EU, the US, Russia, China and Turkey, also seek to gain influence in this area. It is also important to understand their main interests and strategies they use to achieve them. Also, this section tries to examine two North African Powers with interest within the region, Morocco and Algeria as well as an international organization like the United Nations who also had missions and interest there.

a. International Actors and their Strategic Interests ⁷

European Union

The European Union has emerged as a prominent external actor in the Sahel region, operating in accordance with a multifaceted strategic agenda that encompasses counterterrorism, migration management, and the promotion of regional stability. The region's geographic position, which serves as a transit corridor between Sub-Saharan and North Africa, renders it a critical frontier for European security and foreign policy. Ongoing instability in the region has created concerns for the EU since it is perceived as a direct threat to its internal security. This is mainly due to the increase of terrorist activities and major migratory fluxes that go towards Europe and are uncontrolled (EPRS, 2021, p. 2).

The EU first started to be engaged with the Sahel by the year 2011 with the strategy called "Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel", which aimed to improve the security threats linked to underdevelopment. But, this was marked by a tendency of military interventions which proved the ineffectiveness of a long-term stability. By the year 2021, the European Union had acknowledged the limitations of this security-centric framework. In response, the EU launched a revised Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, which placed significant emphasis on state legitimacy, good governance, human rights, and inclusive development (EPRS, 2021, pp. 5–6). This leads to a conclusion that sustainable peace in the Sahel cannot be achieved without

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addressing the structural root causes of instability, including weak governance, endemic poverty, and social inequality.

The European Union also implemented a series of Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions. These include the EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali civilian missions, which provide capacity-building support in the areas of internal security and the rule of law. The EUTM Mali military training mission is another example of the EU's involvement in regional security. A regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC) was established by the EU in 2021 to promote regional collaborations, by serving as a nexus for the coordination between EU experts and G5 Sahel security structures (EPRS, 2021, p. 8).

Financially, the EU has committed over €2.6 billion through the Sahel Alliance to fund development initiatives in sectors such as agriculture, health, education, and governance (EPRS, 2021, p. 8). The EU's capacity to provide additional support is facilitated by the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe) and the European Peace Facility (EPF), which enables the EU to fund military equipment and capacity-building for partner countries (EPRS, 2021, p. 9). The coordination of diplomatic efforts is overseen by the European External Action Service (EEAS), which includes the EU Special Representative for the Sahel and local EU delegations that liaise with national governments and civil society actors.

Despite these extensive commitments, the EU's presence in the region has drawn criticism for its disproportionate emphasis on security measures, which have been seen as coming at the expense of governance and human rights. The persistent reliance on partnerships with unstable or undemocratic regimes, such as the transitional governments in Mali and Chad, has given rise to concerns regarding the EU's normative credibility and potential complicity in human rights abuses perpetrated by local security forces (EPRS, 2021, pp. 5, 10–11). In light of this understanding, the revised strategy places significant emphasis on enhancing accountability, the rule of law, and the active involvement of civil society and local communities in the governance process (EEAS, 2023).

United States

The US strategy in the Sahel region has mainly been driven by security concerns, humanitarian interests and geopolitical competition to be the main international actor with influence in the region. Its main mission is to promote "peace, prosperity, and stability" (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). However, as it happened to the EU, the US mission is also shaped by counterterrorism, containment of rival powers and migration crisis.

Counterterrorism continues to serve as a fundamental element of U.S. policy in the Sahel region, given the ongoing threat posed by jihadist groups. In an effort to overcome regional counterterrorism, the US government has implemented security assistance and military training programs. However, critics have listed that this militarized approach, without sufficient investments by the government, has made it unsuccessful in achieving results (Atlantic Council, 2023). The United States has endeavored to tackle this issue through multilateral frameworks, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Nevertheless, the persistent nature of violence casts doubts on the effectiveness of these measures.

Another fundamental element of U.S. engagement is the provision of humanitarian assistance. The US granted \$80 million in 2023, for emergency aid in order to address the situation of food insecurity and displacement (U.S. Mission to the UN in Rome, 2023). This has resulted to be of great importance in order to be able to support refugee responses in Chad (U.S. Embassy in Chad, 2023), as well as to underline that humanitarian crises can contribute to instabilities. These efforts are consistent with long-term stability objectives, yet they encounter impediments posed by cyclical violence and governance shortcomings.

In a diplomatic approach, the United States has maintained a balanced engagement with transitional governments, while concurrently advocating for the promotion of democratic norms. However, US influence has decreased due to recent military coups and the expansion of Russian presence (Atlantic Council, 2023). The current involvement of Wagner mercenaries has introduced a complex dynamic, mainly for

the US, as it has made to increase the anti-Western sentiment among Sahelian governments to advance with their own objectives.

China

China's involvement in the Sahel region is also driven by political and security purposes, but mainly by economic interests, as it is reflected in the country's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy. What differentiates China from Western actors, is the adoption of the policy of non-interference, prioritizing the cultivation of a partnership focused on development. This positions China as a neutral but still influential player within the region. However, the focus of China's involvement in facilitating much-needed infrastructure investment, creates a higher concern of debt sustainability, governance and long-term stability.

Being the region one of the richest worldwide in natural resources, makes China's primary objective to secure access to uranium, oil and gas, essential for their energy and industrial sectors. (Egmont Institute, 2023). For example, the investment in Niger's uranium mines creates a direct support for its domestic nuclear program, while at the same time infrastructure programs are taking place, like creating roads, railways and ports with the aim to integrate the region to global support chains for trade between Africa, Europe and Middle East (ACCORD, 2023). This example clearly shows how this partnership has double benefit, for China and at the same time for Sahelian countries. However, risks are also included, as the potential debt dependency, which can be seen in other African nations such as Zambia, where big loans have led to economic crises. (Egmont Institute, 2023).

In a diplomatic manner, China utilizes its policy of providing aid with no preconditions to establish alliances with governments in the Sahel region, particularly those facing criticism from Western nations concerning governance and human rights issues. By offering an alternative to Western conditional assistance, Beijing strengthens ties with regimes in Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso, securing long-term contracts and political support in international forums (Clingendael, 2023). Moreover, China employs soft power initiatives such as cultural exchanges, scholarships, and media

partnerships to bolster its image as a preferred partner in the Global South (ACCORD, 2023).

China's expanding economic and political influence in the Sahel region poses a problem. While the immediate economic impact of Chinese investments may be positive, the long-term implications remain ambiguous. On the one hand, infrastructure development has the potential to enhance regional connectivity and trade. Conversely, the utilization of debt traps, opaque contracts, and arms sales to unstable regimes has the potential to exacerbate governance challenges and conflict risks (Egmont Institute, 2023). Furthermore, China's inclination to engage with centralized governments has the potential to erode local governance frameworks, thereby contributing to the cultivation of resentment and instabilities (ACCORD, 2023).

Russia

Over the last few years, Russia has strategically expanded its influence in the Sahel. This is due Russia's strategic action of filling the security gaps left by the withdrawal of western forces while at the same time has benefited from regional anti-Western sentiment to be able to advance with its economic and geopolitical interests. This engagement is characterized by its complexity, manifesting in a variety of forms, including military collaborations, resource extraction activities, and the propagation of ideological discourses that position Russia as a viable alternative to established Western powers. Moscow's actions in the Sahel are consistent with its overarching foreign policy goals in Africa, which include securing strategic footholds, weakening Western influence, and gaining access to critical natural resources to bypass international sanctions (Understanding War, 2025; ISS Europa, 2024).

A fundamental element of Russia's strategic approach entails its military and security collaborations with Sahelian regimes, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The Wagner Group, rebranded as the Africa Corps, has emerged as a pivotal player in Russia's foreign policy. The group facilitates the provision of counterinsurgency support, arms deals, and military training in exchange for access to mining concessions and political leverage (Understanding War, 2025). This strategic maneuver has enabled Moscow to capitalize on the security vacancies that have

emerged following the withdrawal of French and EU forces, thereby consolidating its position as a sought-after security collaborator for military regimes that eschew Western involvement (ISS Europa, 2024). However, this reliance on Russian mercenaries has given rise to concerns regarding human rights abuses and the erosion of democratic governance, which may potentially exacerbate long-term instability (Wittman, D, 2024).

From an economic perspective, Russia's involvement in the Sahel is driven by resource extraction, particularly gold and uranium. These resources serve a dual purpose, providing both a financial lifeline for its struggling economy, which is under sanctions, and a means of sustaining its geopolitical endeavors (Understanding War, 2025). In contrast to China's state-sponsored infrastructure investments, Russia's strategy is characterized by a more transactional approach, frequently involving opaque agreements with military regimes that prioritize immediate gains over long-term sustainable development (Egmont Institute, 2024). However, this economic strategy also creates a further dependency, as Sahelian governments trade resource access for security guarantees, thereby deepening Moscow's influence.

Moreover, from a political standpoint, Russia has strategically leveraged anti-colonial discourses to subvert Western legitimacy within the region. Moscow has effectively utilized its anti-imperialist stance to establish alliances with Sahelian regimes, while concurrently discrediting France, the EU, and NATO as neocolonial actors (Wittman, D, 2024). The ideological campaign under discussion has been demonstrated to have two principal effects. First, it serves to strengthen Russia's diplomatic foothold. Second, it complicates the efforts of regional organizations, such as ECOWAS and the African Union, to stabilize the Sahel through unified governance frameworks (ISS Europa, 2024).

The ramifications of Russia's expanding presence in the Sahel region are of considerable significance. Moscow has achieved short-term gains by displacing Western influence; however, its reliance on militarized partnerships and exploitative economic practices risks perpetuating cycles of conflict and weak governance. Moreover, the Sahel has evolved into a theater for great power competition, with

Russia's actions inciting strategic responses from China and Turkey, all of which are contending for influence in the region (Egmont Institute, 2024). In essence, Russia's involvement in the Sahel is indicative of a comprehensive strategy of opportunistic expansion, which carries profound ramifications for regional stability and the evolving balance of power in Africa.

Turkey

Turkey's strategy to position itself as a key actor in the Global South, entails the involvement in the Sahel in order to be able to expand geopolitical influence and secure economic opportunities. What differentiates Turkey's strategy from Western powers is the approach of sort power, military cooperation and economic investment altogether, establishing by this a growing presence in the region (Egmont Institute, 2024; Geopolitical Futures, 2023). Creating a new alternative for Sahelian states seeking greater autonomy in foreign relations.

Turkey's strategic interests from an economic perspective, perceives the region as a promising market for its construction, manufacturing, and defense industries. In accordance with its "Africa Opening" policy, Turkey has experienced a substantial augmentation in trade with Sub-Saharan Africa, with exports demonstrating a notable increase in recent years (Geopolitical Futures, 2023). Moreover, the untapped energy and mineral resources of the Sahel, particularly in Niger and Burkina Faso, offer significant economic prospects for Turkish firms seeking to diversify their resource supplies (Egmont Institute, 2024). From a military perspective, Turkey has strategically exploited regional discontent with Western conditional aid by providing drones and other defense equipment to governments in the Sahel region. The enhancement of Ankara's role as an alternative security provider has been attributed to security partnerships, including training programs and bilateral agreements with countries such as Mali and Niger (Clingendael, 2023).

Beyond the pursuit of economic and military interests, Turkey employs soft power as a means to fortify its global influence. Institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) are instrumental in the allocation of funds by Ankara for mosques, schools, and

humanitarian projects, thereby fostering goodwill among the Sahel's predominantly Muslim populations (Egmont Institute, 2024). This cultural and religious outreach is complemented by efforts to replace earlier Gulenist educational networks with state-backed institutions, thereby reinforcing Turkey's ideological presence (Clingendael, 2023). Ankara's strategy is characterized by pragmatism and adaptability, enabling it to navigate the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Sahel region.

Turkey positions itself as a "non-colonial" partner, thereby appealing to Sahelian governments seeking to reduce their dependence on former colonial powers, particularly France (Geopolitical Futures, 2023). The emphasis on bilateral trade and infrastructure projects, including but not limited to airports and hospitals, ensures long-term economic ties while avoiding overtly securitized interventions. However, Turkey's escalating involvement concomitantly introduces potential hazards. Its transactional partnerships have the potential to reinforce authoritarian governance structures, and its competition with other external actors, such as Russia and the EU, could further fragment international stabilization efforts (Clingendael, 2023; Egmont Institute, 2024).

b. North African powers (Morocco & Algeria)

Morocco and Algeria, two key North African powers, who also have strategies to expand their political, economic and security influence, that shift the geopolitical dynamics of the Sahel. However, both countries differ on their approaches since each of them has different regional rivalries and strategic priorities. On one hand, Morocco is keener in emphasizing soft power, economic initiatives and counterterrorism cooperations in order to be seen as a stabilizing partner. While Algeria, with its historical ties, relies on military presence and mediation effort to maintain an hegemony (Smith, 2023).

When talking about Morocco's strategies, it is keen to see how they have been making increasing efforts to establish themselves as a strategic partner for Sahelian states, emphasizing security cooperation, economic integration and religious diplomacy. Moreover, by offering training, intelligence-sharing and deradicalization

programs rounded in its state-sponsored model of "moderate Islam" have established them as a main counterterrorism actor (RUSI, 2024).

In addition to security concerns, Morocco has engaged in economic diplomacy to expand its influence, promoting trade linkages, infrastructure projects (particularly in phosphates and renewable energy), and enhanced connectivity through its Atlantic ports (UNAV, 2024). Its re-admission to the African Union in 2017 was a strategic victory, enabling Rabat to advocate for greater Sahelian integration into continental frameworks while countering Algeria's historical dominance. Morocco's foreign policy is also influenced by its rivalry with Algeria. In an effort to present itself as a more pragmatic and development-oriented alternative for Sahelian partners, Morocco has engaged in a range of diplomatic initiatives (UNAV, 2024).

In contrast, Algeria has adopted a more conventional and security-oriented stance regarding the Sahel, underpinned by its perception of itself as a regional leader and its historical involvement in African liberation movements. Algiers has historically regarded the Sahel as within its sphere of influence, utilizing military agreements, mediation endeavors, and energy diplomacy to maintain its presence in the region. It is noteworthy that Algeria played a pivotal role in the 2015 Algiers Accord for Mali, serving as the venue for the negotiations that led to this significant agreement. Furthermore, Algeria's strategic position as the headquarters for the G5 Sahel's Joint Force underscores its centrality and influence within the regional security architecture (EMUNI, 2024).

Algeria's strategic approach is also indicative of a pervasive mistrust of external interference, particularly from former colonial powers. It has criticized French military interventions in the Sahel while cultivating ties with Russia and China, positioning itself as a counterweight to Western influence (EMUNI, 2024). Furthermore, Algeria's economic dependence on energy exports and its extensive geographical expanse, which intersects with numerous Sahelian nations, necessitates a strategic prioritization of regional stability. This prioritization is predominantly characterized by a security-centric approach, a stance that frequently stands in contrast to Morocco's approach, which emphasizes economic and religious soft power.

c. The Role of International Organizations

The United Nations has played a pivotal role in efforts to stabilize the Sahel. The United Nations, an intergovernmental organization, has had different peaking initiatives in the region. Between the years 2013 and 2023, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was deployed following the French-led military intervention (Operation Serval) and the subsequent collapse of state authority in Northern Mali. The mission's main purpose was to support political transitions, protect civilians and facilitate the implementation of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement (UN, 2013). While success was achieved in aiding electoral processes and mediating between opposing parties, its withdrawal in December 2023 marked a critical juncture in international efforts to stabilize the region. This event showed the limitations of UN peacekeeping and the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Sahel (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The operational challenges encountered by MINUSMA have served to highlight the difficulties inherent in peacekeeping operations in environments characterized by asymmetric warfare. Major casualties occurred while the mission was ongoing, like over 300 personnel killed due to attacks by jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (UN, 2023). Moreover, MINUSMA's reliance on host-state consent made the effectiveness of the mission to be obstructed, especially when Mali's military junta adopted a hostile position towards international intervention. All these impediments led to the Malian government formally demanding the mission's withdrawal, in June 2023, accusing it of failing to deliver lasting stability and exacerbating tensions with Western powers (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The withdrawal of MINUSMA carries profound ramifications for the security of the region. Analysts have expressed concerns that the group's departure could potentially lead to a power vacuum, which might embolden jihadist groups and exacerbate instability beyond Mali's borders, particularly in Burkina Faso and Niger (ICG, 2023). Furthermore, the mission's exit underscores a prevailing trend in the Sahel: the waning influence of established multilateral institutions and the escalating prominence of alternative security frameworks, including regional coalitions (such as ECOWAS or the Alliance of Sahel States) and bilateral military accords.

d. The Shift in International Presence ⁸

France has been for decades the main international actor with influence in the Sahel region by different military intervention like the Operation Barkhane, as well as has prevailed a dominant role with economic mechanisms, like the establishment of the CFA franc, tiering regional currencies to the French Treasury. But, this long-standing influence has suffered a decline in recent years, driven by different factors: geopolitical, military and socio-political (Doucouré, 2024). However, Sahelian countries felt like the policies established by France were neocolonial impositions, which fed a generalized anti-french sentiment throughout the region (Bradshaw, 2025). Public discontent reached a breaking point that eventually led to different military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, ending in the establishment of new regimes who rejected Western interference (UNSC Report, 2025). This paradigm shift was further highlighted by mass protests, such as those observed in Niger, where demonstrators replaced French flags with Russian and national symbols (Samantha Bradshaw, 2025). Moreover, these tensions increased with the failure of France to encounter terrorism, despite deploying nearly 4,500 troops, which did not stop the expansion of jihadist groups such as JNIM and ISG. (ECFR, n.d.; IEEE, 2024). This perceived ineffectiveness, in conjunction with Russia's disinformation campaigns that portray France as a destabilizing force, accelerated the withdrawal of French forces and the erosion of its political leverage (ACSS, 2024).

With France's departure, there was a power vacuum, which led to the entry of alternative actors who swiftly filled it. These actors are most notably Russia, China and Turkey, each with different strategies but with the same goal, to expand their influence. Recent developments in the region have made Russia the main security partner for the new governments established after the coups, the Sahelian juntas. This is evidenced by the deployment of the Wagner Group, rebranded as the Africa Corps, to provide counterinsurgency support in exchange for access to strategic resources such as gold and uranium (ISW, 2024). However, major criticisms have emerged from this new partnership, with claims of human rights abuses and deepened governance crises. (HRW, 2023).

⁸ SDG 17

Moreover, China has adopted an economically focused approach, by securing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to fund infrastructure projects and secure natural resources while avoiding direct military links (Egmont Institute, 2024). With a non-interference policy, China has resulted in a source of appeal for those regimes who face Western condemnation while at the same time, building a strategic alliance without the obstacle of conditional aid (ACCORD, 2023).

Turkey, in contrast, has employed a combination of soft power, as evidenced by the activities of religious and cultural institutions such as TIKA and Diyanet, with military exports, including drone sales to Niger and Mali (Clingendael, 2023; Geopolitical Futures, 2023). Eventually establishing it as both an economic and security partner.

As can be evidenced by all the recent events, it is possible to deduce that there has been a political reconfiguration in this region which is indicative of a wider tendency of multipolar competition, a phenomenon characterized by the emergence of new powers and the decline of Western influence. In the Sahel region it can be interpolated by the decline of Western powers' influence which created an opportunity for new emerging powers to exert their influence. Although Russia's militarized approach and China's economic investments offer short-term alternatives to French hegemony, their long-term impact on regional stability remains uncertain.

6. Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape of the Sahel is much more complex than it appears at first glance. It is of immense geopolitical importance due to its geographical location, its abundance of natural resources and its role as a migratory and transnational threat corridor. Due to its strategic location between North and sub-Saharan Africa, the region serves as a pivotal nexus for security, trade and human mobility. These features have made it the focus of numerous world powers that are eager to pursue strategic interests, economic and security interests against each other.

Despite its great importance, the Sahel does not yet operate as a coherent or autonomous geopolitical actor. However, the region remains divided and susceptible to external influence. The absence of regional cohesion, intensified by ongoing instability and underdeveloped state institutions, transforms the Sahel into a geopolitical arena, where major powers compete for influence, rather than an autonomous entity charting its own course. The formation of new alliances, such as the CES, demonstrates an effort to assert national sovereignty and distance itself from Western-dominated institutions like ECOWAS. However, these initiatives face obstacles due to the ongoing reliance on security concerns and financial assistance primarily provided by foreign entities.

There has been a clear decline in Western influence due to several failures in their main missions, combined with rising anti-colonial sentiment and effective Russian disinformation campaigns. In the resulting vacuum, Russia, China, and Turkey have emerged as alternative partners, each with distinct strategies. These developments indicate a shift towards multipolar competition in global politics, with the Sahel emerging as a significant battleground.

Security still remains the region's most pressing and complex challenge, with still ongoing jihadist insurgencies, interethnic violence, and political coups which have destabilized the region, creating fertile ground for extremist recruitment and undermining state legitimacy. As military juntas assume control in several countries, governance has placed a higher priority on regime survival than on democratic reform, which has led to a weakening of prospects for inclusive development.

Moreover, the region's demographic trends and migration pressures are likely to contribute to an escalation in instability. The nation's youthful population is faced with little economic opportunities causing unemployment and undereducation leading to major discontent and radicalizations. To this situation it adds environmental degradation and resource scarcity, ending in internal displacement and cross-border migration. Efforts made by Europe to control this migratory crisis by external border control have ended up being ineffective, and counterproductive, failing to address the primary causes of displacement.

It is evident that the future of the Sahel depends on a transition from externally imposed and militarized solutions to inclusive governance, economic development, and regional cooperation. To achieve sustainable peace, investment in key areas is essential, including education, youth employment, climate resilience, and institutional reform. It is imperative that the region implement global and locally-driven strategies to transform itself from a place of geopolitical competition into a stable and self-determined player on the world stage.

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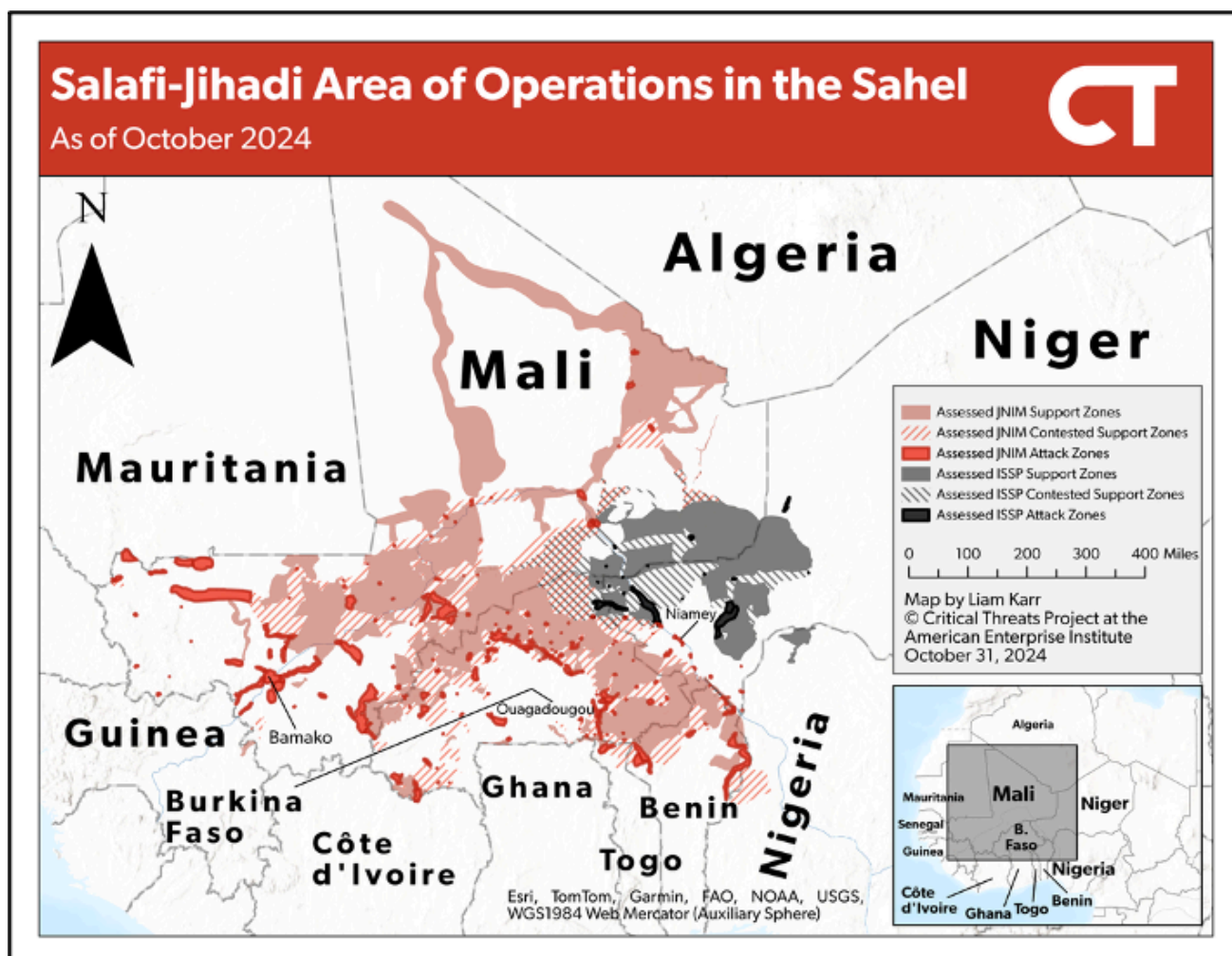
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<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bf0a5ff1-8ad7-56dd-af9f-df66ebe011fd/content>

Annexes

Table I

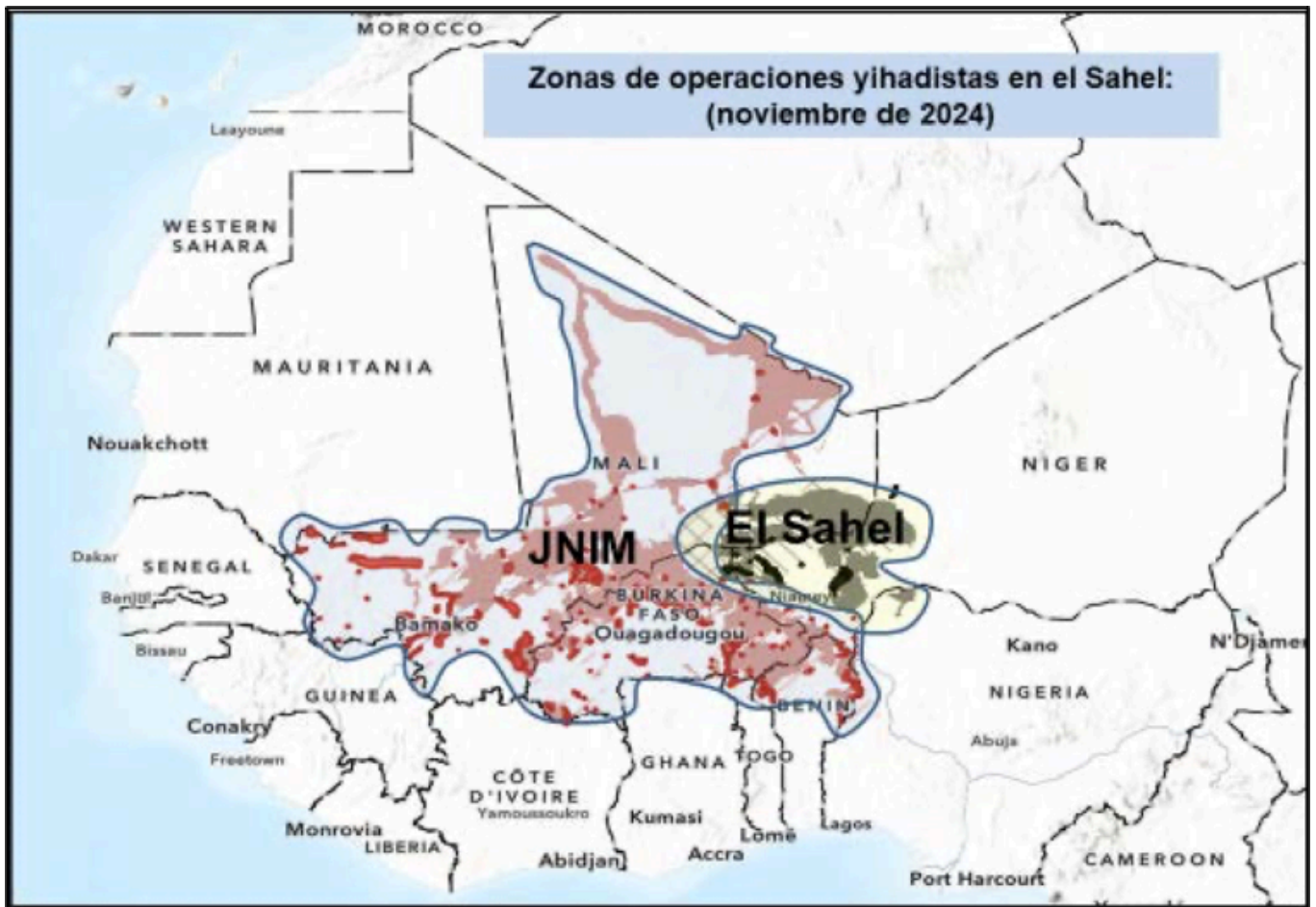
Jihadist Groups established in the Sahel region



Source: *Africa file*, November 2024: *Salafi-jihadi areas of operation in the Sahel*. (s. f.). Institute for the Study of War.

Table II

Geographic expansion of jihadist activities



Source: Cobo, I. F. (2025, may 3). *Anatomy of the Jihadist Threat in the Sahel*. Gob.es.