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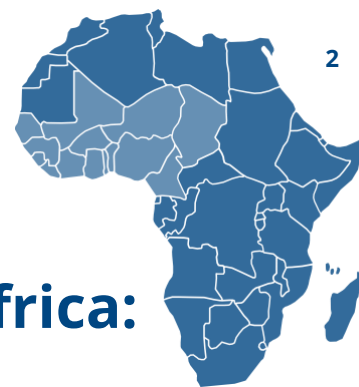WEST AFRICA'S TERRORIST CHALLENGE | WEST

Countering Extremism in West Africa: What Options Are Left? March 2025

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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, Western and multilateral security interventions in the Sahel have failed to stabilize the region, while national and local efforts, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, have remained largely militarized. These approaches have proven ineffective in addressing the underlying causes of instability, such as food insecurity, lack of basic services, and limited economic opportunities. The key lesson learned is that military action alone cannot resolve the Sahel's security crisis—political engagement from local, national, and regional actors is crucial.

Key Lessons Learned

1. Local Ownership is Essential – Sustainable security strategies must be designed primarily by national and regional actors. External support should enhance, rather than dictate, local approaches.

2. Partners Can Become Unreliable – Political shifts, particularly military coups, have led to abrupt changes in alliances, as seen in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where governments expelled French and Western security forces in favor of Russian partnerships. Rapid changes need to be taken into account by external actors when engaging.

3. Risk of Equipment Falling into Wrong Hands – The withdrawal of international forces has often resulted in the unintended transfer of military equipment and infrastructure to juntas or non-state actors. Before providing new equipment to partners in the region, reflection

is needed about what type of material, should be provided, when, and to whom.

Challenges of Local Ownership and Security Initiatives

Despite the frequent emphasis on "local ownership" in international policies, many external interventions have had little lasting impact. Local security actors often formally accept training and assistance but implement few actual changes. The G5 Sahel Joint Force (JFG5S) exemplifies this challenge: while it received substantial foreign funding, cross-border cooperation was limited due to sovereignty concerns, and financial transparency was poor. This highlights the need for externally funded initiatives to be locally driven to ensure sustainability and effectiveness.

Shifting Security Alliances and Equipment Losses

In the wake of military coups, new regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have rapidly severed ties with Western forces, forcing the withdrawal of thousands of troops and leading to losses of strategic assets. The Malian junta, for instance, inherited infrastructure, weapons, and materials left behind by the UN mission MINUSMA, while Niger's junta seized arms and equipment from EU security missions. These developments illustrate the risks of engaging with unreliable partners and the need for cautious assessments when providing military assistance.

Options Going Forward

Given the limited options for external actors, future engagement should be guided by the following principles:

1. Invest in Willing Partners – Countries like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana have shown openness to security cooperation. Strengthening their counterterrorism capabilities and resilience can help contain Sahelian threats.

2. Avoid Overwhelming Partner States – Excessive Western presence risks fueling anti-Western sentiment. Assistance should be co-designed with local actors to ensure sovereignty and legitimacy.

3. Align Support with Local Capacity – Overloading security forces with advanced technology or excessive aid can be counterproductive. A phased, adaptive approach is necessary.

4. Balance Military with Political and Developmental Approaches – Addressing root causes such as youth unemployment and governance deficits is crucial to long-term stability.

5. Counter Disinformation and Strengthen Local Media – Russian, Turkish, and Chinese narratives are shaping public opinion in West Africa. European actors should improve strategic communication to counter misinformation.

6. Expand Health and Vaccination Support – As USAID cuts reduce funding for health programs, the EU should step up efforts to prevent setbacks in public health progress.

Conclusion

The security landscape in the Sahel remains highly volatile, with international actors facing significant limitations in their engagement. Future strategies should prioritize local ownership, targeted partnerships, and a holistic approach that integrates security, governance, and development. Without such recalibration, external interventions risk repeating past mistakes, failing to address root causes, and further alienating local populations.

Introduction

West Africa is currently witnessing two mutually reinforcing political and security trends: an increasingly rapid expansion of Islamist-terrorist groups across the Sahel region, and a coup wave, resulting in seven coups during the past four years in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea and Gabon. Accompanying the coups have been a strategic alignment by three of the Sahelian states, progressively ousting traditional security allies—starting with France in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, followed by the United Nations (UN) in Mali, and the European Union (EU) and the United States in Niger - and intensifying security collaboration with Russia.[1] Late November 2024, Chad and Senegal became the latest countries to declare an end to the presence of French troops in their states.[2] Yet, it is not only Western and multilateral actors that have been rejected; so too have former regional partners. Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso created a new defense alliance, Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) in September 2023[3] and announced that they would leave the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) only four months later in January 2024.[4] In seeking to resolve this split, ECOWAS has given the AES states six months to reconsider their withdrawal.[5] However, despite Russian support,[6] this emerging new subregional security architecture has not led to a decrease in the spread of Islamist-terrorist networks operating in the region. On the contrary, violence continues to increase, prompting the question: what options are left to address the deteriorating security situation?

Security challenges are not equally distributed across the region, the Sahel countries are by far experiencing the worst expansion of Islamist terrorist attacks. However, it is clear that the number of Islamist-terrorist attacks is increasing in the countries on the Gulf of Guinea. For example, Benin, bordering both Burkina Faso and Niger, witnessed Islamist-terrorist incursions as early as 2019. However, the past two years have seen a significant increase, with recorded fatalities doubling from 2023 to 173 in 2024.[7] The security situation in large parts of West Africa is thus deteriorating

rapidly, accompanied by an authoritarian turn in the states following recent coups. This policy paper addresses the question of what options are left to respond to the deteriorating security situation by examining the current security and political context, exploring previous and contemporary regional responses, and identifying lessons learned for future initiatives.

Security Challenges in the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea

The political and security situation on the African continent has continuously deteriorated over the past decade, with Sub-Saharan Africa recording the greatest annual number of terrorist attacks globally in 2023.[8] The continent has seen more than a 300% increase of violent extremism between 2012 and 2022, yet the Sahel is particularly targeted.[9] Ten years ago, Sahel was the region in Africa which recorded the least victims related to violent extremism. Today it is the region which has the most deaths.[10] The 11,200 figure of fatalities recorded in 2024 in the Sahel represents a staggering threefold increase since 2021. In addition, Islamist terrorist violence has further increased exponentially since the recent military coups. Most importantly, this number of fatalities does not include the 2,430 civilian deaths attributed to the operations of national security forces in the Sahel and their Russian partners during 2024. Given these numbers, it is likely that state security actors have killed more civilians during the past year than the militant Islamist groups, putting the overall figure of civilian victims to violence by armed actors at a record level.[11]

The two main Islamist terrorist groups active in the Sahel region are the Al-Qaida affiliated coalition of jihadist groups: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Sahel province of the Islamic State (ISIS). Sahelian leaders and security forces have been unable to address their growth for over a decade, demanding external assistance to boost their own security capacities and help stop the terrorist expansion. Yet Western and multilateral missions—such as the French counter terrorism operation Barkhane, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization

Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) peacekeeping operation, and the three EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations in Mali and Niger—all failed to stop the growth of terrorist groups while focusing on increasing the capacities of the national security forces. However, given the current situation after the withdrawal of these Western and multilateral forces, it seems as if their presence did at least slow down the expansion of Islamist-terrorist networks in the region and largely prevented a civil war from resuming in Mali.

ISIS doubled its territorial presence in Mali in the year after Barkhane left the country in 2022,[12] while the armed conflict between the Malian regime and the Tuareg separatist movements in the North resumed following MINUSMA's expulsion in June 2023.[13] Currently, Malian transitional authorities are fighting on two fronts: against separatist movements in the North and against ISIS and JNIM more broadly. JNIM conducted symbolically important attacks against a gendarmerie school and the military airport in Bamako in September 2024, killing over 70 Malian security forces and putting the Malian security forces' flaws on full display.[14]

JNIM has also expanded its presence in the three border areas, between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger after consolidating its positions in Mali.[15] In Burkina Faso, the military has lost control of 60% of the territory, with JNIM activity in 11 out of 13 regions.[16] Its establishment in Burkina is also reflected in the record high numbers of fatalities, with deaths increasing by 68% in 2023, a morbid record which 2024 nevertheless appears to surpass.[17]

This very high number of fatalities is also partly explained by the Burkina regime's decision to arm civilians to counter extremists and terrorists. This strategy dates back to 2020 but has expanded since 2022 when Burkina's military leader, Traoré, announced the decision to recruit 50,000 self-defense militias, the so-called Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) to help fight terrorists.[18] As part of this strategy, civilians are armed after only two weeks of basic military training. The presence of poorly trained but

armed civilians resulted in an increase in clashes between different ethnicities and clans, mass violence, and high numbers of human rights violations[19] and also contributed to the record high number of over 2 million internally displaced persons in the country.[20] In addition, due to its geographical location bordering Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Niger and Mali, Burkina also serves as the link to the neighboring Gulf of Guinea countries for both Islamist terrorist groups as well as refugees.

The spill-over of terrorism and organized crime from the Sahel region towards the Gulf of Guinea was highlighted as a risk long before it became a reality. The annual number of violent events linked to Islamist terrorist groups in and within 50 km of the borders of the coastal West African states neighboring Sahel, increased by more than 250% over the past two years.[21] Yet, already in 2014-2015, Malian fighters reportedly conducted a reconnaissance operation in the W-Arly-Pendjari park complex, three natural parks bordering Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger.[22] Since 2018, the forests of the park complex have increasingly served as logistic fallback bases for Islamist terrorist groups from neighboring countries.[23] However, it was not until the end of 2021 that Benin was officially attacked by JNIM from across the borders of Burkina Faso.[24]

While the increase of attacks in the Gulf of Guinea is often portrayed exclusively as spill-over effects from the Sahel countries, these coastal states also have their own domestic security challenges. As in many Sahelian states, a North-South divide exists with population segments in the North feeling marginalized by the country's establishment in the South. This perceived marginalization and injustice from the South[25] also enables the establishment of domestically based Islamist-terrorist structures. Existing land conflicts in Benin, Ghana, and Togo as well as high levels of unemployment and livelihood concerns are factors that weaken social cohesion and increase vulnerability to Islamist-terrorist groups.[26]

The authorities of the different countries have taken a variety of measures to counter the spread of terrorism. On a national level, Benin launched Operation Mirador, a 5,000 troops-strong military operation with the aim of combatting non-state armed actors and bringing stability to the North of the country, in 2022.[27] In Togo, authorities launched a multisectoral program in 2022 for the northern region, with the help of the West Africa Development program, while the Ivorian government created a Special Program for the North[28] the same year, which combines security presence with investments in infrastructure and social programs. Ghana has also invested more in border security and intelligence gathering, in addition to a comprehensive decentralization program.[29] On a regional level, a variety of initiatives have been launched for both Sahelian and Gulf of Guinea states, with different degrees of success. The next section will explore these further.

Regional Responses So Far

G-5 Sahel

In response to the worsening threat of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel region of West Africa, five Sahelian states Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania and Chad founded the G5 Sahel in February 16, 2014, and in 2017 established the Joint Force G5 Sahel (JFG5S) with heavy support from France. The Force was authorized by the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) on 13 April 2017 for a 12-month period and was subsequently welcomed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).[30] With the support of Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel Joint Force undertook at number of operations along their borders, including in the Liptako-Gourma area, commonly called the three-borders region.

Yet, despite significant external financial and material support,[31] the G5 Sahel experienced considerable internal challenges such as concerns regarding territorial sovereignty relating to cross-border operations, interoperability, and the (un)willingness of the participating governments to

provide contingents on a regular basis. Limited advanced equipment also made operations less efficient.[32] Indeed, when Operation Bakhane left, JFG5S's aerial capability drastically reduced, decreasing its effectiveness. Furthermore, the capacity to patrol the various borders was reduced, contributing to the spread of attacks towards the coastal states of West Africa.[33] By 2022 with the initial withdrawal of Mali from the G-5 Sahel, the force had only conducted about ten operations per year with mixed results. The departure of Niger and Burkina Faso in 2023 de facto dissolved the structure.

ECOWAS

ECOWAS's inability to respond effectively to the various political and security challenges in the sub-region has resulted in a loss of legitimacy. Democratic processes have stalled or are fragmented in several ECOWAS member states, especially following the large number of military coups in the region. Pervasive and persistently low levels of economic growth and democratic backsliding without intervention by ECOWAS has meant that as an organization, it has "willingly ceded its moral authority"[34] and unintentionally contributed to an enabling environment for the reappearance of military coups. Coups are challenging both the political order and democratic processes as well as the principles inherent in the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol from 2000.[35]

Democracy in West Africa is in crisis. As of January 2024, more than a quarter of ECOWAS member states had experienced democratic reversals through military coups. Since 2020, there have been successful coups in Mali, Niger, Guinea and Burkina Faso and failed ones in Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. Togo and Ivory Coast leaders have manipulated constitutions for extended stays in power, while Liberia and Senegal have witnessed successful elections, yet the latter after attempts by the outgoing president to manipulate the constitution.[36]

ECOWAS has responded in different ways to the coups in the region and thereby reduced its own credibility. In Mali, it imposed sanctions after the second coup;[37] in Burkina it did not impose sanctions; whereas in Niger it threatened with a military intervention[38] which never took place and backfired by increasing the Niger junta's popularity and power. In Guinea, an initial imposition of sanctions was eventually abandoned,[39] while no measures were applied when previous President Macky Sall tried to extend his stay in power in Senegal, nor when Togo's President managed the same trick earlier in 2024. Yet while Macky Sall eventually had to leave his position, Togo's President remains in power.[40]

Furthermore, ECOWAS lifted the sanctions against Niger in February 2024[41] and asked the three departed member states—Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger—to return to the organization without any election in sight, nor, in the case of Niger, a transition timeline. Due to the last years (in) action, the regional bloc's authority and normative frameworks seems to have suffered irreversible damage.

Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The States of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 with the signing of the Liptako-Gourma Charter.[42] Its formation was born out of ECOWAS' expressed intent to intervene in Niger following the July 2023 coup that overthrew President Bazoum. Marking a major geopolitical turning point, the alliance constitutes a response to ECOWAS threat of intervention in Niger and a way for the military juntas to support each other to stay in power. However, officially the objective of the new alliance is to address the growing threat of terrorism and general insecurity in the region.[43]

Several meetings have been held to lay the foundational structures of the alliance and in February 15, 2024, a meeting was held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso to discuss the creation of the confederation.[44] Only a month

later, in March 2024, the Alliance announced the formation of a joint anti-terrorist force and in May it finalized the draft treaty creating the Confederation of the Alliance.[45] In November 2024, the President of the AES, Army General Assimi Goïta, issued instructions to the Chiefs of Staff of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to operationalize their joint action plan, which focuses on coordinating counter-terrorism efforts, strengthening cross-border cooperation and protecting civilian populations.[46] The responsibility of operationalizing the Action Plan lies with Brigadier General Celestin Simporé from Burkina Faso, Major General Oumar Diarra from Mali, and Brigadier General Moussa Salaoua Barmou from Niger.

The AES is still in its formative stage, and it will take some time to assess its operational effectiveness. Somewhat ironically, given the failure of the JFG5S to induce collaboration across borders, interviews conducted in Bamako in October 2024 confirm a political commitment of the AES countries to work together and across borders, which could help address the threat of terrorist networks.[47] Yet so far each of the AES countries are experiencing a rise in Islamist terrorist and rebel attacks and no joint operations have been conducted, raising questions concerning the effectiveness of AES.

Accra Initiative

The Accra Initiative (AI), established in 2017 is a collective intelligence and security mechanism established by Ghana, Burkina Faso, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo, with Niger as well as Mali later joining as observers. The principal aim is to combat the rapid expansion of the Islamist terrorist insurgency, prevalent in the Sahel, towards coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea. This is supposed to be achieved through intelligence sharing, conducting joint military operations, and enhancing border security to counter insurgent movements and criminal networks.[48] The Initiative was established as a homegrown countermeasure with each member country having representatives located in Accra, with a functional responsibility and a central coordinator within Ghana's National Security Secretariat.

AI is funded by member countries[49] who view its ownership and non-dependence on external funding as important. However, this is more rhetoric than reality, as funding and support for the AI come from a mix of internal resources and external sponsors. The EU has been a key financial backer, particularly through its "Team Europe" framework, which aligns with the EU's broader Sahel strategy. The United Kingdom has also provided financial and logistical support[50]. Other international partners, such as the United States, Japan and multilateral organizations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), contribute through capacity-building programs and technical assistance.[51] So far, the AI has had a slow start with limited results. Yet, a few accomplishments have been achieved, including three joint operations between Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire between 2018 and 2019 resulting in the arrest of approximately 700 individuals suspected of criminal or terrorist activities and the seizure of weapons.[52] The formation of a Joint Task Force in 2022 was another milestone, yet so far it has not been deployed. Intelligence sharing, joint training and resource pooling may be the most important achievements of the Initiative so far, while the political buy-in from the member states constitutes a promising although still fragile beginning for its further development. It is also unclear how much the military government of Burkina Faso, which has downgraded ties with Western countries and some ECOWAS members such as Cote D'Ivoire, cooperates with the Accra Initiative. Burkina Faso is key to better cross-border security mechanisms as Islamist terrorists use forests at its southern border to launch attacks in coastal countries.[53]

Lessons Learnt

The past decade of security interventions from Western and multilateral actors have not managed to stabilize the security situation in the Sahel. Nor have the efforts undertaken by the national and local actors, which, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, have remained focused on heavily militarized approaches. If anything has come out of the last eleven years of

interventions, it is that the security crises in the Sahel will not be solved through military action alone; political efforts from local, national and regional actors are needed to deal with the situation and to address the challenges the various populations face concerning food security, physical security, employment opportunities, and education and health issues by providing the basic services.

A few more specific lessons learned during the past decade of external security engagement in the Sahel region and beyond can also be drawn:

1) security strategies and structures for the region need to be elaborated primarily by local and national actors to be sustainable and effective;

2) reliable partners may quickly shift and become unreliable;

3) the infrastructure and the equipment that external actors provide to their local partners may fall into the hands of competitors.

Local Ownership and Ceremonial Structures

The regularity with which policy makers and strategy writers insert "local ownership" into the policies and strategies elaborated in order to deal with crises in third countries is by no means a reflection of its success on the ground. In the Sahel this has been particularly clear, as external security interventions have had a limited impact on the actual workings of the national and local security actors. This is partly because external actors have not considered the local context and power dynamics, nor assessed how their own contributions will influence the situation on the ground. In part, this is because local security actors have formally accepted assistance, training, and advice from external actors regarding their security sectors, yet in practice have made few changes to implement these, reflecting what scholars Ursula C. Schroeder, Fairlie Chappuiss, Deniz Kocak have called "normative shells" and "ceremonial structures".[54]

The JFG5S is an example of this. Formally, it was a joint initiative between five of the Sahelian states, yet which essentially reflected a project heavily supported by France. Whereas the five member states received considerable funding from external actors for the creation and functioning of the JFG5S, in practice, only a limited number of joint operations actually took place. Concerns about territorial sovereignty among the five members created significant challenges for cross-border operations, which as a result remained limited in number. This reduced significantly the ability of the JFG5S troops to pursue non-state armed actors across borders. Similarly, the cohesion of the Joint Force was questionable at best, with one interviewee stating that the force had never been a G*5* Sahel, yet often a G*2*, G*3* and rarely a G*4*. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the different states from bilaterally receiving external funding for the JFG5S, which also posed a problem for its cohesion and functionality. Given that no funding was given to the Joint Force directly, but rather to the different member states bilaterally, it became difficult to estimate how much of the financing was actually spent for its activities.[55] Therefore, while external funding may be necessary to kick-start regional and national initiatives, these initiatives should primarily be designed by the national and regional actors to ensure political buy-in and sustainability.

(Un) Reliable Partners and Procurement Proxies

Western and multilateral actors have supported different types of authorities in the Sahel countries over more than a decade through their security missions, both democratically elected authorities and coup leaders. Western and multilateral actors have thus maintained support, albeit with conditions about transition timelines, in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad after their respective coups. The Niger coup, however, divided regional and international partners.

In spite of this support, during the past four years incoming coup leaders in the various regional countries decided to change security partners. In Mali,

less than nine months after the second coup in 2021, the Malian junta ended all military collaboration with France, forcing several thousands of French troops to withdraw from the country in a matter of months.[56] Following Mali's example, Burkina Faso's new junta after its second coup expelled the French Ambassador and ended the country's military defense accord with France at the beginning of 2023, forcing the latter to withdraw its troops a year after the country started its withdrawal from Mali.[57] Faster than its neighbors, within ten days of its coup in July 2023, Niger suspended military collaboration with France and less than a month later expelled the French ambassador.[58] All three states later expanded security collaboration with Russia.

In contrast to the previous states, Chad, a long-term security partner to France, took more than three years following its constitutional coup before it broke off its military collaboration with France at the end of November 2024.[59]

The change of security partners by the Sahelian states has not only resulted in a loss of influence in the area for Western and multilateral actors, but also in the loss of equipment and infrastructure.

The decisions by the Sahelian regimes in Mali and Niger to kick out international partners were announced abruptly, and the departures rushed, as juntas have increased pressure for the missions to leave. Furthermore, after making the decision to oust the missions, the juntas also mounted new obstacles for the missions' departures themselves. This resulted in the juntas either taking over equipment directly or forcing the missions to leave a large amount of equipment and material behind.

In Mali, MINUSMA was forced to destroy millions of dollars-worth of equipment to avoid it falling into the hands of the rebels, while some was taken over directly by Malian troops as they moved into UN bases. In addition to inheriting the infrastructure, such as airfield installations and equipment, buildings and bridges constructed by the UN, the Malian junta also inherited

more than 100 containers of material linked to the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program which could not be transported out of the country.[60] In Niger, the junta ordered Nigerien security forces to conduct unannounced searches at the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP)'s headquarters, seizing a large amount of arms, ammunition, and other equipment from the mission, including rifles, clock pistols, drones, military helmets and body amours, thereby acquiring new security material from ousted security partners.[61]

From a Western perspective, there was thus a transition from reliable to unreliable partners following the coups in the respective states. Such change of partners from newly minted junta leaders should not be surprising. Western and multilateral actors should therefore draw the lesson that if they engage with people who have come to power by not playing by the rules, the same persons are also unlikely to follow established accords with their external partners.[62] This includes persons who have gone from being elected officials to siding with military juntas. As seen above, there is a real risk that such partners also attempt to obtain equipment and material from ousted security partners.

In the future, Western states and multilateral organizations should therefore reflect carefully about which actors they engage with and assess the probability of reliable partners becoming unreliable. Building trust often involves providing equipment and taking risks, yet more consideration and thought are needed concerning what type of equipment can be provided given the risk that it may get lost during a rapid withdrawal or change of partners.

What Options are Left Going Forward?

This analysis has painted a dark picture of the security situation in the Sahel both with regards to the expansion of Islamist terrorist groups as well as other non-state armed actors. It has also underlined the limits of international, regional, and national approaches aimed to address these

threats. Going forward, the options for external actors to actively engage in the region are limited, yet based on lessons learnt, four aspects could be considered for future engagement.

1. **Invest in States Seeking Support**

   Effective support begins with focusing on states that actively seek assistance and demonstrate political will to collaborate. Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana have shown readiness to engage with external partners, making them ideal recipients for targeted investments. Enhancing these states' capacities in intelligence gathering, border control, and counter-terrorism efforts could curb the spread of terrorist threats from the Sahel. Investments should prioritize enhancing institutional resilience, including training security forces, equipping them with modern tools, and improving their infrastructure, in line with the recent EU Gulf of Guinea Initiative[63] which has maintained a minimal presence and visibility in the three countries, but which has worked on improving security forces' capacities and capabilities. Building partnerships with regional organizations and civil society groups within these countries can also strengthen grassroots resilience, ensuring a broader societal commitment to security.

2. **Avoid Overwhelming Partner States to Prevent Anti-Western Sentiments**

   While support is essential, an overbearing presence or over-reliance on Western frameworks can trigger local backlash.[64] Anti-Western sentiments in West Africa have grown in recent years, fueled by perceptions of neocolonialism or overreach. Assistance should prioritize co-designing programs with local actors, respecting sovereignty, and ensuring cultural sensitivity. It is equally crucial to ensure transparency in resource allocation to counter fears of external agendas. Avoiding overt militarization and emphasizing non-combative roles, such as community-based approaches, can mitigate the risk of alienation. External actors should also support initiatives that build trust among local populations,

such as community policing programs, which can bridge the gap between citizens and the state while fostering goodwill toward external partnerships.

3. **Assess Capacity Absorption to Avoid Overloading Systems**

   Linked to the previous point, investments in training and equipment must align with the absorptive capacities of recipient states. Rushed or overly ambitious projects risk straining local institutions, leading to inefficiencies and waste. For example, if security forces are equipped with advanced technology without adequate time or resources for training, the benefits may be short-lived or counterproductive. Therefore, external partners should implement phased approaches, allowing recipient states to gradually integrate and operationalize new capabilities and avoid creating dependency on external capacities.[65] Similarly, external partners should coordinate about which equipment to provide, to whom and when, to avoid a duplication and an accumulation of material that local and national security forces are unable to use. Regular assessments of institutional readiness, combined with adaptive programming, can ensure that support remains effective. Building redundancy in training and creating follow-up mechanisms for evaluating the impact of assistance are also critical for long-term sustainability.

4. **Integrate Political and Developmental Approaches Alongside Military Solutions**

   While military efforts are crucial in curbing immediate threats, they cannot address the root causes of instability. Yet, for external actors it is often less sensitive to provide military assistance rather than political and governance suggestions. The responsibility to develop political approaches must remain with the national authorities, just as for security strategies, yet external actors can support local actors and agencies through capacity building in different domains to ensure a more comprehensive analysis towards conflict resolution. They can do so while targeting youth employment, particularly in marginalized regions

through locally co-organized development initiatives to undercut extremist and terrorist recruitment efforts. It is crucial to engage local communities in shaping these initiatives, ensuring that interventions are inclusive and address their specific needs. External actors should carefully encourage governments in the region to pursue political reforms that build trust and enhance accountability, which are critical for long-term peace, yet without risking accusations of being too intrusive. This is a delicate balance heavily impacted by the context, thus external actors need to be attentive and perceptive to changes in the local, national and regional environments.

5. Counter disinformation and strengthen local media

Despite development aid cuts, the EU is still a major donor of development projects in the Sahel and West Africa. Yet, so far it has been reluctant to communicate and engage with the public about its projects, both for fear of accusations of being too intrusive but also simply for lack of an efficient strategic communication policy. As a result, there is limited knowledge in the region of the EU's many projects. This has opened the door to far-reaching disinformation campaigns both by external actors, such as the pro-Russian influencers, but also local actors, all actively undermining European interests. Social media campaigns have especially targeted France and the European Union, framing them as "neo-colonial" powers seeking to exploit natural resources in Africa. Somewhat ironically, given their interest and engagement in precisely natural resources, Russia, Turkey and China have expanded soft power activities to shape the narrative in their favor. Russia has been particularly active recently, opening Russia Houses in the region and providing free information about its political narrative in topics such as the Ukraine war and training to local journalists. To counter disinformation and promote European interests, European actors should therefore communicate more actively about their role as major donors and development

partners and also strengthen capacities of local media to counter "fake news" and disinformation campaigns.

6. Improving access to health facilities and multiply vaccination campaigns

The cuts in USAID funding for the region create a gap in the existing health and vaccination systems. Therefore, the EU should explore options for increased support and investments in these sectors to ensure the continuing functioning of these crucial public services.

Endnotes

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About the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. (KAS) is a German political foundation that started its international cooperation programs in 1962. The Foundation carries out assignments in the field of governance, parliamentary support and cooperation, rule of law, human rights protection and gender, civil society development, media promotion, decentralization and local democracy promotion in more than 110 countries on four continents. In this regard, KAS functions as a political think tank. KAS places a strong emphasis on dialogue and free exchange of views and ideas, the cornerstone of an open, democratic society.

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The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a nonprofit and non-partisan international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. CEP builds a more moderate and secure society by educating the public, policymakers, the private sector, and civil society actors about the threat of extremism. CEP also formulates programs to sever the financial, recruitment, and material support networks of extremist groups and their leaders. For more information about CEP's activities, please visit www.counterextremism.com.