The Sahel's Transformation and the Architecture of Perpetual Crisis: A Comprehensive Security Analysis

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Abstract

The Sahel occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary global affairs. Once the cradle of Africa's most sophisticated pre-colonial empires Ghana, Mali, and Songhai whose governance systems thrived on mobility, negotiated coexistence, and transcontinental trade, the region is now synonymous with jihadist insurgency, serial military coups, and humanitarian catastrophe. This region longs for the transformation from an adaptive civilizational corridor into a fragmented landscape of permanent conflict. It argues that the current crisis cannot be understood through the narrow lens of terrorism or state failure alone, but rather as the cumulative product of colonial territorial rigidity, post-colonial extractive governance, ecological stress, and the weaponization of circulation economies by non-state armed groups. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary insurgencies have not only exploited state weakness but have constructed an alternative political order rooted in the control of mobility, gold, and cross-border smuggling networks, a system that conventional counterterrorism frameworks are structurally incapable of dismantling.

The regionalization of instability through the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), the emergence of a transcontinental coup culture, and the progressive dissolution of the security boundary separating the Sahel from the Horn of Africa. It assesses the role of external powers not as primary drivers but as accelerants of fragmentation, often operating through shadow proxy networks that bypass formal state structures. Particular attention is devoted to Sudan's ongoing war, which is rapidly transforming the country from a historic buffer into a connective corridor linking the Sahelian and Horn conflict systems into a single, contiguous arc of state collapse. For Sahel continuous peace only a fundamental reconceptualization of governance, one that restores legitimacy through inclusive resource management, regional infrastructure integration, and the professionalization of security forces can reverse the current trajectory. Without such a shift, the Sahel will continue its descent from a land of emperors and scholars into a permanent laboratory for insurgent governance and geopolitical proxy competition.

Key Words

Sahel, Insurgency, Counterterrorism, Proxy Competition, Red Sea Security, Sahel-Horn Axis, Coup Contagion, Alliance of Sahel States

1. Understanding the Historical Reversal in the Sahel

The Sahel extends across the African continent as a vast semi-arid belt stretching approximately 5,000 kilometers from the Atlantic coast of Senegal to the Red Sea corridor near Eritrea. Historically, this region occupied a central position in transcontinental networks linking North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. Far from being a peripheral space, the Sahel served as a strategic crossroads of commerce, knowledge exchange, and political interaction. The great empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai thrived in this environment not despite its ecological constraints, but because they developed governance systems capable of adapting to them. Political authority was often built upon negotiation, mobility, and shared access to resources rather than rigid territorial control or fixed borders.

Urban centers such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné emerged as influential hubs of trade, scholarship, and diplomacy. Their markets connected West African gold, livestock, and agricultural products to Mediterranean and Saharan trade routes, while their intellectual institutions contributed significantly to fields including astronomy, medicine, theology, and jurisprudence. These historical experiences demonstrate that the Sahel was once characterized by resilience, adaptability, and regional integration.

Contemporary narratives, however, portray the Sahel in markedly different terms. The region is increasingly associated with violent extremism, military coups, humanitarian crises, forced displacement, and intensified geopolitical competition. Over the past decade, the Sahel has become one of the world's most unstable security environments, hosting some of the most resilient and adaptive insurgent movements globally. Since 2020, military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sudan have reshaped regional politics, contributing to concerns about the normalization of military intervention as a mechanism of political transition. The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has further institutionalized this shift, creating a framework through which military-led governments coordinate security policies while distancing themselves from traditional regional and international partnerships.

These developments raise important questions. How did a region with a long history of political adaptation and economic connectivity become associated with chronic insecurity and institutional fragility? What historical processes help explain this transformation? Why have extensive international security interventions over the past two decades produced limited and often temporary improvements in stability?

The contemporary crisis in the Sahel cannot be adequately explained through a single factor, whether terrorism, weak governance, or economic underdevelopment. Rather, current instability reflects the cumulative effects of multiple historical and structural disruptions. These include the erosion of adaptive pre-colonial governance systems, the imposition of colonial state structures designed primarily for extraction and control, the consolidation of post-colonial political systems that concentrated power and resources in urban centers while marginalizing peripheral regions, and the transformation of natural resource wealth into a source of competition and conflict rather than inclusive development.

Furthermore, contemporary armed groups have evolved beyond conventional insurgencies. In many areas, they have established alternative systems of authority, taxation, dispute resolution, and economic regulation. Their influence is often sustained not through the permanent occupation of territory but through the control of movement, trade routes, and local economic networks. As a result, distinctions between insurgency, organized crime, informal governance, and political authority have become increasingly blurred.

2. The Historical Foundations: Empires of Circulation and Coexistence

To understand the Sahel's present, one must first understand what was lost. The pre-colonial empires that dominated the region between the 8th and 16th centuries were not anomalies of African achievement; they were sophisticated political systems that solved fundamental problems of governance in an ecologically challenging environment. Three features of these empires are particularly relevant to understanding the contemporary crisis: their relationship to mobility, their models of authority, and their integration into global systems.

2.1 Mobility as a Principle of Governance

The Sahel's semi-arid geography, characterized by fragile ecosystems, and vast distances, shaped political systems that differed significantly from the territorial state model later introduced by colonial powers. Major empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai exercised authority not through fixed borders but by regulating movement, trade, and connectivity across extensive regions. Political power depended on controlling commercial networks, securing trade routes, and maintaining relationships with diverse communities. The trans-Saharan trade system was central to this order, linking West Africa to North Africa and the Mediterranean and generating wealth through the exchange of gold, salt, and other commodities. The Mali Empire, particularly under Mansa Musa, exemplified how prosperity and influence were rooted in the management of these commercial and cultural connections.

Mobility also shaped social, economic, and cultural life across the Sahel. Pastoral groups such as the Fulani and Tuareg relied on seasonal migration and negotiated arrangements with farming communities to manage access to land and water. At the same time, merchants, scholars, and religious leaders facilitated the spread of ideas, knowledge, and Islamic traditions through centers such as Timbuktu, connecting the Sahel to wider intellectual networks across Africa and the Middle East. As a result, pre-colonial Sahelian societies were organized around mobility, connectivity, and adaptation rather than rigid territorial control. Many contemporary challenges in the region, including cross-border mobility, competition over trade routes, and struggles for authority in peripheral areas, continue to reflect these deep historical foundations.

2.2 Negotiated Authority and Layered Sovereignty

Pre-colonial governance structures reflected this mobile reality. Authority was rarely absolute or exclusive; it was layered, shared, and constantly renegotiated. Empires exercised suzerainty over vassal kingdoms, which in turn governed through local chiefs, clan elders, and religious leaders. The Askia dynasty of Songhai, for instance, combined military force with Islamic legitimacy and commercial patronage, but it also recognized the autonomy of pastoralist groups whose mobility made them difficult to subdue entirely.

Conflict existed, but it was managed through mechanisms suited to a fluid environment. Disputes over grazing rights, water access, or trade routes were mediated through customary institutions that emphasized reconciliation over punishment. When imperial power waned, as it periodically did, the system did not collapse into anarchy; rather, authority devolved to more local levels that continued to function. This resilience was a product of the same mobility that made rigid control impossible if central power became predatory, communities could move, renegotiate allegiances, or shift trade routes.

The intellectual dimension of these empires is equally significant. Timbuktu's Sankore University, established in the 14th century, housed tens of thousands of manuscripts on subjects ranging from Islamic law to medicine, astronomy, and philosophy. Scholars like Ahmed Baba (1556–1627) corresponded with counterparts across the Islamic world. This was not an isolated, inward-looking civilization but one deeply integrated into global knowledge networks. The irony of contemporary depictions of the Sahel as a zone of ignorance and extremism is sharpened by the fact that the region was once a center of learning that helped shape the intellectual history of multiple continents.

2.3 The Logic of Pre-Colonial Stability

What made these systems stable was not the absence of conflict but the alignment between governance structures and ecological and social realities. Authority was legitimate because it was negotiated, not imposed. Resources were managed through shared access rather than exclusive ownership. Mobility was recognized as a survival strategy and accommodated rather than suppressed. The state, such as it was, did not attempt to control everything; it focused on regulating the flows that mattered most.

This historical pattern is not merely of antiquarian interest. It provides a crucial counterpoint to the contemporary crisis. The colonial and post-colonial states that would later be imposed on the Sahel were built on precisely opposite principles: fixed borders, centralized administration, exclusive sovereignty, and the suppression of mobility. The mismatch between these imported models and the region's underlying realities is one of the deepest structural causes of the current instability.

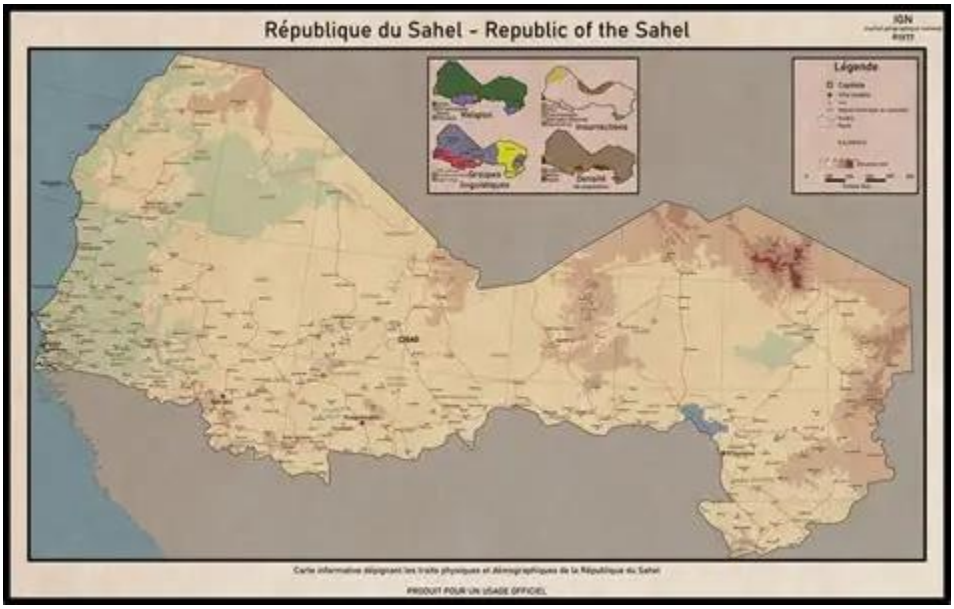
3. Colonial Disruption and the Post-Colonial State: Imposed Rigidity

3.1 The Colonial Remapping of the Sahel

The European conquest of the Sahel in the late 19th century was not merely a military event; it was a systematic dismantling of the region's adaptive governance systems. French, British, and to a lesser extent Italian and Spanish colonial powers imposed rigid territorial boundaries that cut across ethnic, linguistic, economic, and ecological systems. The border between Mali and Niger, for instance, divided Tuareg communities whose seasonal migration routes had traversed that space for centuries. The boundary between Chad and Sudan severed trade networks linking the Lake Chad Basin to Darfur and the Nile Valley.

These borders were not designed to reflect local realities; they were drawn in European conference rooms to balance competing imperial claims. The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 established the principle that effective occupation, not historical or social legitimacy, determined sovereignty. The result was a map of the Sahel that was administratively convenient for colonial powers but ecologically and socially absurd.

Colonial administration compounded the damage. The French, who controlled most of the Sahel through the federation of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française), imposed centralized bureaucratic systems modeled on the French state. Power was concentrated in coastal capitals or colonial administrative centers like Dakar and Bamako, while the vast interior was governed through a thin layer of commandants de cercle who relied on coercion rather than consent. Traditional authorities, kings, chiefs, clan elders, religious leaders were either co-opted into the colonial apparatus or marginalized entirely.



3.2 Extraction as the Organizing Principle

The colonial economy reorganized the Sahel around extraction. Gold, cotton, groundnuts, and later uranium were prioritized for export. Infrastructure railways, roads, ports were designed to move resources outward to the coast rather than to connect Sahelian societies internally. The Dakar-Niger railway, completed in 1924, was not built to facilitate trade between Mali and Senegal; it was built to transport Malian cotton and Senegalese groundnuts to the port of Dakar for shipment to France.

This extractive logic had profound social consequences. Pastoralism, which had sustained Sahelian societies for millennia, was systematically undermined. Colonial authorities viewed nomadic populations with suspicion they were harder to tax, harder to conscript, and harder to control. Land policies favored sedentary agriculture, often at the expense of grazing lands. Seasonal migration routes were restricted by newly enforced borders. The ecological balance between farmers and herders that had been managed through centuries of negotiation began to erode.

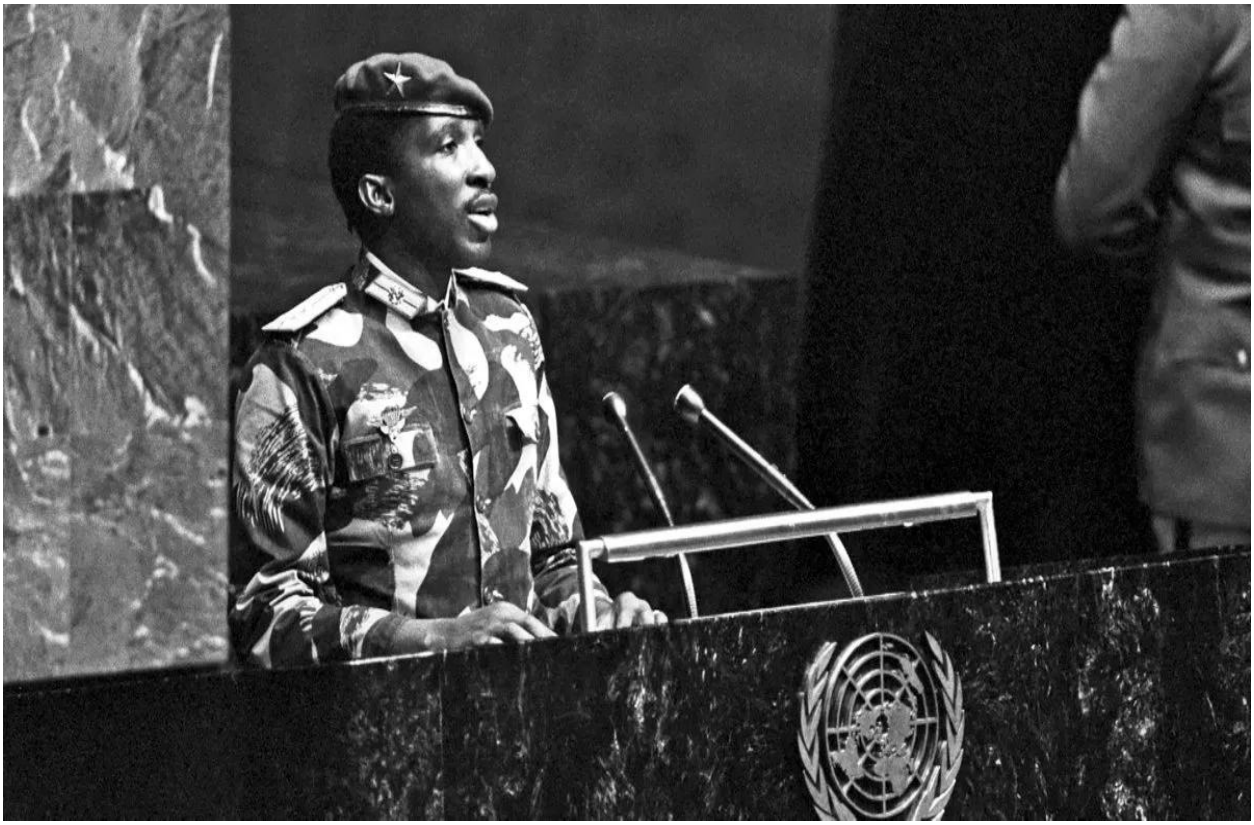
Forced labor completed the transformation. The French colonial administration conscripted hundreds of thousands of Sahelians to build infrastructure, work on plantations, and serve in colonial armies. The Office du Niger, a massive irrigation scheme in present-day Mali, was constructed through forced labor on a scale

that rivaled some of the worst colonial excesses elsewhere in Africa. The human cost in lives lost, communities disrupted, and trust destroyed was enormous.

3.3 Independence Without Transformation

Independence in the 1960s did not fundamentally alter the structures established during the colonial period. The newly independent states of the Sahel inherited weak institutions, economies oriented toward external markets, and centralized political systems that often remained disconnected from local governance traditions. Rather than building inclusive and representative forms of authority, many post-colonial leaders concentrated power within the state apparatus, relying on patronage networks and security institutions to maintain control. Leaders such as Modibo Keïta in Mali, Hamani Diori in Niger, and Maurice Yaméogo in Upper Volta pursued variants of one-party rule that strengthened central authority while limiting political participation in peripheral regions.

As a result, political legitimacy became increasingly tied to control of state resources rather than broad societal inclusion. Public resources were frequently distributed through patronage systems, while rural and nomadic communities remained politically and economically marginalized. Development strategies often prioritized centralized, large-scale projects that paid insufficient attention to local livelihoods and environmental realities. Over time, corruption, weak governance, and exclusion eroded public trust in state institutions. Grievances among Tuareg, Fulani, and other marginalized groups were frequently treated as security concerns rather than political issues, contributing to cycles of rebellion and state response. In Mali, successive Tuareg uprisings in 1962–1964, 1990–1995, and 2006–2009 reflected long-standing frustrations that were only partially addressed through peace agreements, leaving many underlying drivers of instability unresolved.



3.4 The Ecological Dimension

Environmental pressures compounded these governance failures. The Sahel has always been an ecologically challenging region, but the combination of climate change, population growth, and inappropriate development policies has dramatically intensified stress on livelihoods. Lake Chad, once one of Africa's largest freshwater bodies, has shrunk by approximately 90% since the 1960s, devastating fishing communities and altering grazing patterns. Desertification has expanded southward, reducing the carrying capacity of already marginal lands.

Crucially, the state's response to these pressures was often part of the problem. Rather than mediating between competing resource users, governments frequently sided with politically connected elites or simply withdrew, leaving communities to fend for themselves. In northern Mali, the state's failure to address Tuareg grievances over land rights, political representation, and economic marginalization created the conditions for recurrent rebellion. In the Lake Chad Basin, the collapse of fishing and farming livelihoods created a pool of disaffected young men vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.

The deeper point is that the Sahel's post-colonial states were structurally incapable of managing the region's complexities. Built on a model of centralized, territorial sovereignty that had never reflected Sahelian realities, they lacked the flexibility, legitimacy, and reach to govern effectively. The stage was set for a new kind of conflict, one in which non-state actors would exploit the vacuum left by state failure, using mobility as both a weapon and a strategy.

4. The Rise of Militant Insurgency: From Local Grievance to Transnational Network

4.1 The Libyan Catalyst and the Mali Collapse

The contemporary insurgency crisis in the Sahel is closely linked to the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan Civil War. The collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime triggered significant regional instability, as large quantities of weapons from Libyan stockpiles flowed across the Sahel through established trafficking networks. At the same time, Tuareg fighters who had served in Libya returned to Mali and Niger with military experience, weaponry, and renewed political ambitions, contributing to rising tensions in northern Mali.

These developments helped fuel the 2012 Tuareg rebellion led by the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA). However, the conflict soon evolved beyond a separatist uprising as jihadist organizations, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine, expanded their influence and became key actors in the conflict. By mid-2012, these groups had gained control of major northern Malian cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, imposing their authority and damaging important cultural and historical sites. The crisis exposed the weaknesses of the Malian state, which had been undermined by years of limited governance capacity, corruption, and underinvestment in peripheral regions. The March 2012 military coup in Bamako further weakened state institutions and created opportunities for armed groups to consolidate their position.

France's intervention through Operation Serval in January 2013 succeeded in retaking key urban centers and disrupting jihadist advances. However, it did not eliminate the insurgency. Instead, many armed groups adapted by dispersing into rural areas, desert regions, and neighboring countries, where they reorganized and continued their operations. This highlighted a broader challenge that has persisted across the Sahel:

while military interventions can weaken insurgent groups and recover territory, long-term stability remains difficult to achieve without addressing the political, governance, and socio-economic conditions that enable armed movements to endure and regenerate.

4.2 The Structure of Sahelian Insurgency

What distinguishes contemporary insurgency in the Sahel from earlier rebellions is not simply its scale but its structure. The groups that dominate the current landscape Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM, affiliated with Al-Qaeda) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS, affiliated with Islamic State) function as decentralized networks rather than hierarchical organizations. Leadership provides strategic direction and ideological framing, but local commanders exercise significant autonomy. Alliances are fluid, factions split and merge, and groups adapt rapidly to changing conditions.

This network structure confers enormous operational advantages. When pressure is applied in one area through French airstrikes, American drone operations, or regional military offensives fighters disperse and reconstitute elsewhere. When leadership is disrupted, new figures emerge from within the network, often with deeper local roots than their predecessors. The elimination of AQIM commander Abdelmalek Droukdel by French forces in 2020, for instance, did not cripple the organization; it adapted and continued.

Equally important is the way these groups embed themselves within local communities. In large parts of rural Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the state is either absent or viewed with suspicion as a distant, often predatory entity that extracts resources, abuses civilians, and provides little in return. Armed groups fill this vacuum not only through coercion but also by providing forms of governance. They mediate disputes over land and water, enforce rules against theft and banditry, regulate markets, and sometimes offer protection against rival groups or state security forces that are themselves perpetrators of violence.

This governance dimension is critical to understanding insurgent resilience. For communities facing chronic insecurity and marginalization, cooperation with armed groups is frequently a matter of survival rather than ideological alignment. When the choice is between a jihadist group that guarantees safe passage for cattle and a state army that extorts bribes and commits abuses, the decision is often pragmatic. This dynamic blurs the line between insurgency and governance, making it extremely difficult to isolate and eliminate militant influence through military means alone.

4.3 The Adaptation of Tactics

Sahelian insurgents have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for tactical innovation. Early jihadist operations focused on hit-and-run attacks against military outposts, ambushes of supply convoys, and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Over time, tactics have become more sophisticated. Groups now employ motorcycle-mounted assault teams that can strike rapidly and disappear into the terrain. They use drones for reconnaissance, coordinate attacks across multiple locations simultaneously, and conduct complex assaults on fortified military bases that once seemed secure.

The killing of Mali's defense minister in a coordinated wave of attacks in 2024 (if reported) represents a qualitative escalation. It demonstrates that insurgents are capable not only of targeting frontline positions but of reaching into the upper levels of the state's security structure. This has both operational and psychological effects; it disrupts command continuity and signals vulnerability at the highest level, undermining confidence within the system and among the population.

Perhaps most significantly, the insurgents have learned to exploit the fragmentation of their adversaries. The withdrawal of French forces from Mali in 2022, followed by the departure of the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA in 2023, removed significant external military capabilities from the theater. The Malian state's turn toward Russian military support, primarily through the Wagner Group (now Africa Corps), has not reversed the trajectory of the conflict. Instead, it has introduced new actors whose tactics often involving extreme violence against civilians have further alienated local populations and created additional grievances that insurgents can exploit.

5. The Political Economy of Insecurity: Gold, Guns, and Circulation

5.1 From Territorial Control to Circulation Control

One of the most significant and least understood aspects of the Sahel's transformation is the shift in how power operates on the ground. Conventional military analysis focuses on territorial control who holds which towns, which roads, which administrative centers. But in the Sahel, this framework misses the essential dynamic. Armed groups have discovered that in fragile states, controlling movement matters more than controlling territory.

Across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and increasingly Chad and Sudan, insurgent groups function as managers of mobility. They do not necessarily seek to govern fixed territories in the manner of a conventional state. Instead, they regulate the circulation of people, goods, and resources. They control access roads, tax transporters, charge protection fees, and decide who moves and who pays. In many areas, a truck driver moving goods from one town to another must negotiate passage with multiple armed actors, some jihadist, some criminal, some militia-aligned, each extracting a share of the value.

This represents a fundamental adaptation. The modern Sahelian insurgent no longer fights like a conventional rebel seeking to capture and hold the capital. They operate like a mobile political actor moving through interconnected systems of trade, conflict, trafficking, ethnicity, and geography. Their battlefield is not a frontline; it is a network. And that network is continuously expanding.

5.2 Gold as the Engine of Insurgency

Gold plays a central role in this evolving political economy. Across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, artisanal gold mining has expanded dramatically over the past decade. Tens of thousands of miners work at informal sites scattered across insecure territories largely beyond effective state control. The Sahel is estimated to be one of Africa's largest gold-producing regions, with Mali alone accounting for significant global output. Much of this production occurs through artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) that operates outside formal regulatory frameworks.

Armed groups quickly recognized the strategic opportunity these mining zones presented. In many cases, insurgents do not directly operate the mines themselves. Instead, they dominate the circulation systems surrounding them. They control access roads to mining areas, tax the transport of ore and equipment, charge protection fees from miners and traders, and profit from the general insecurity that depresses formal investment while inflating the value of informal control.

Gold thus becomes more than a resource; it becomes a mobility economy. Whoever controls circulation increasingly controls the gold trade. And whoever controls the gold trade gains the financial autonomy to sustain long-term insurgency without depending on external sponsors. This represents a profound shift from earlier militant movements that relied heavily on foreign funding or ideological networks. Modern Sahelian insurgencies increasingly finance themselves internally through territorial economic systems tied to gold, trafficking, fuel smuggling, livestock taxation, and cross-border commerce.

The implications are severe. Conflict now reproduces itself economically. Insecurity weakens governance. Weak governance expands informal economies. Informal economies finance insurgencies. Insurgencies deepen insecurity further. The cycle continuously reinforces itself across borders, making it extraordinarily difficult to interrupt through military means alone.

5.3 The Sahara as Infrastructure

The Sahara Desert, once seen as a barrier separating North Africa from Sub-Saharan Africa, has been transformed into a strategic infrastructure for insurgent networks. Smuggling routes that existed for centuries carrying salt, gold, slaves, and later cigarettes, drugs, and weapons have been adapted for contemporary conflict. The Fezzan region of southern Libya, in particular, has become a crucial hub where weapons, fighters, and narcotics from the Mediterranean coast are transferred southward into the Sahel, while gold, migrants, and other commodities move northward.

This is not a chaotic, unregulated space. It is a highly organized system with its own rules, enforcers, and economic logic. The armed groups that dominate these routes function simultaneously as insurgents, smugglers, and protectors. They provide the security that enables trade, and they extract the rents that finance their operations. The boundary between political violence and organized crime has effectively dissolved.

The geography reinforces this transformation. The Sahel is a vast, land-connected region with minimal natural barriers and even less effective border control. Fighters, weapons, and commodities move across frontiers with relative ease. The distinction between Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad becomes largely irrelevant in operational terms. What matters is the network of routes, safe havens, and economic nodes that connect these territories into a single, integrated system.

6. Coup Culture and the Alliance of Sahel States: A New Political Order

6.1 The Mechanics of Coup Contagion

Since 2020, the Sahel has experienced an unprecedented wave of military takeovers that has fundamentally reshaped the region's political landscape. In Mali, Colonel Assimi Goïta first removed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020 before consolidating power through a second coup in May 2021. Burkina Faso witnessed two coups in 2022, with Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba ousting President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in January, only to be replaced by Captain Ibrahim Traoré later that year. In Niger, President Mohamed Bazoum was overthrown in July 2023 by members of the presidential guard led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani. Meanwhile, Sudan's fragile transition collapsed in October 2021 when General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan dissolved the civilian-led government, paving the way for the devastating conflict that erupted in 2023.

These developments reflect more than a series of isolated military interventions. They signal a broader crisis of legitimacy affecting the post-colonial political order across parts of the Sahel. Despite differences in national contexts, the coups share several common characteristics: they were justified through narratives of sovereignty, security restoration, and resistance to external influence; they initially attracted varying degrees of public support; and they were frequently accompanied by tensions with Western partners and regional organizations. The spread of military rule has also been influenced by a demonstration effect, whereby successful coups in neighboring states created political precedents that encouraged similar actions elsewhere. Against a backdrop of persistent insecurity, economic hardship, youth unemployment, and declining public confidence in civilian governments, military leaders have increasingly presented themselves as alternative agents of stability and national renewal, even as questions remain regarding their ability to address the structural challenges facing the region.

6.2 The Alliance of Sahel States

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 initially between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger represented the institutionalization of this trend. What began as a security coordination mechanism in response to jihadist violence has evolved into something fundamentally political. The AES increasingly behaves not like a military coordination body but like a political actor that defines legitimacy, resists institutional discipline, and reshapes regional order.

The alliance draws explicitly on the language of sovereignty and resistance. Its members have collectively rejected ECOWAS sanctions, expelled French military forces, and turned toward alternative partners most notably Russia. They have suspended their participation in the African Union and withdrawn from the G5 Sahel framework that once coordinated international counterterrorism efforts. In February 2024, they announced their intention to create a common currency and deepen economic integration, signaling ambitions beyond security cooperation.

This trajectory mirrors historical patterns of alliance formation. Like the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War, the AES offers its members a shared language of sovereignty, resistance, and self-definition. It does not promise victory over insurgents indeed, the security situation has continued to deteriorate in all three member states. But it fulfills a political need: it transforms vulnerability into posture, isolation into solidarity, and criticism into confirmation of resistance.

The key analytical mistake would be to evaluate the AES by security metrics alone. The correct lens is political. The alliance has redefined who belongs, who decides, and who has the authority to judge. ECOWAS, Western partners, and liberal governance norms now sit clearly outside its boundary. Military juntas that were once isolated have created a "military rule club" that trades democratic norms for shared intelligence and defiant autonomy. Whether this proves sustainable or collapses under the weight of its own contradictions remains uncertain, but for now, it represents a fundamental challenge to the post-colonial order in West Africa.

6.3 The Limits of Military Rule

Despite the populist rhetoric and initial popular enthusiasm, military rule has not addressed the structural drivers of the Sahel's crises. Security has not improved; in many areas, it has worsened. The Malian state's partnership with Russian forces has been accompanied by a sharp increase in civilian casualties and human rights abuses, further alienating the very populations whose support is essential for counterinsurgency

success. Burkina Faso's security situation has deteriorated so severely that the government controls only a fraction of national territory. Niger, which had been relatively more stable, faces growing insurgent pressure in its western regions.

Moreover, military governments have narrowed political space, delayed transitions to civilian rule, and deepened isolation from regional and continental institutions. The suspension of these states from the African Union and their boycott of continental mechanisms have reduced opportunities for mediation and collective problem-solving, reinforcing a siege mentality among ruling juntas. The risk is that the AES becomes a militarized bloc focused on regime survival rather than social stability, a trajectory that has historically ended in further fragmentation rather than recovery.

7. External Proxy Competition: Russia, Iran, and the Shadow Proxy Environment

7.1 Russia's Emerging Role in Sahelian Security and Development

One of the most significant geopolitical shifts in the Sahel has been the growing partnership between several regional governments and Russia. Following the withdrawal of French forces and the weakening of Western-led counterterrorism frameworks, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have expanded security cooperation with Moscow. Russian military personnel, initially associated with the Wagner Group and later reorganized under the Africa Corps structure, have provided training, military assistance, and operational support to governments facing persistent security threats.

This partnership reflects a broader convergence of interests. Sahelian governments have sought alternative security partners capable of providing rapid military assistance without extensive political conditions, while Russia has expanded its diplomatic, economic, and security presence across the region. In some cases, security cooperation has been accompanied by agreements involving natural resources and economic concessions. Supporters of this model argue that it strengthens state sovereignty and provides governments with greater flexibility in addressing security challenges. However, despite tactical military gains in some areas, the broader security situation remains fragile, with insurgent groups continuing to operate across large parts of the region. This suggests that while military assistance remains an important component of stabilization efforts, long-term security is also likely to depend on governance reforms, economic development, and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict.

7.2 Iran's Shadow Proxy Strategy

Less visible but potentially more significant in the long term is Iran's expanding footprint in the Sahel. Iran has consistently demonstrated a distinct model of influence-building: rather than relying on conventional military force, it builds power through non-state actors, creating layered systems of indirect control that allow it to shape conflict environments without appearing as the primary actor. This approach has been honed in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The Sahel presents a different environment predominantly Sunni, where Iran's traditional Shia proxy networks have limited natural appeal. But Iran's strategy does not depend strictly on ideological alignment. It depends on access to fragmented environments, the ability to work through intermediaries, and the gradual insertion of influence into existing networks. Operational priorities can outweigh ideological divides, and cooperation can emerge based on immediate interests.

Allegations of Iranian-linked networks in North Africa connecting to Sahelian militant groups, while requiring careful verification, point to a concerning dynamic. Iran does not need to directly support Sunni extremist groups in the Sahel. If actors in North Africa receive training, weapons, or logistical support through Iranian-linked networks for instance, through Hezbollah's alleged engagement with the Polisario Front, which led Morocco to sever diplomatic ties with Iran in 2018 and these actors are connected to Sahelian militant systems, then influence can spread gradually through overlapping mobility networks.

This creates what can be understood as a "shadow proxy" environment. Iran injects influence into the wider network, and it diffuses across the system without formal ideological alignment or direct command structures. The Sahel's geography vast, land-connected, with minimal border control facilitates this. Once influence enters the system, it can move across large distances with little resistance.

At the same time, Iran is pursuing a diplomacy-first approach to expand its presence across Africa. Burkina Faso's leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, has publicly expressed support for Iran in the current Middle East situation. Economic partnerships in energy and industrial sectors provide entry points for broader strategic influence. While these engagements are not inherently linked to security dynamics, they contribute to a wider presence that can be leveraged over time.

7.3 The Multipolar Contest

The Sahel has thus become an arena of intensifying geopolitical competition. The United States, despite its fluctuating level of engagement, continues to view the region as strategically important for counterterrorism, resource access, and regional stability. China deepens its economic presence through infrastructure and mineral investments, maintaining a low political profile. Gulf states particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia pursue economic and security interests, sometimes aligning with Western powers, sometimes with Russian or independent initiatives. Turkey expands its defense industry partnerships and diplomatic footprint.

This multipolar competition does not strengthen Sahelian states. Instead, it fragments strategies, creates competing chains of command, and allows local actors to play external patrons against one another. Resources flow in, but coordination remains weak, and the structural drivers of instability remain unaddressed. The Sahel risks becoming a space where external powers compete for influence while the foundations of governance continue to erode.

8. The Sahel and Horn Nexus: Sudan as the Connective Tissue of Instability

8.1 The Collapse of the Buffer

The most dangerous strategic development in the broader Sahelian crisis is the progressive dissolution of the boundary separating the Sahel from the Horn of Africa. For decades, Sudan functioned imperfectly but meaningfully as a buffer between these two conflict systems. The Sahel's jihadist insurgencies operated in West Africa; the Horn's conflicts, Somalia's al-Shabaab, Ethiopia's internal wars, South Sudan's fragility remained distinct, with limited operational overlap.

That buffer is now failing. Sudan's catastrophic civil war, which erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti"), has shattered the country's territorial integrity and created a power vacuum that is being filled by a complex array of armed actors, external patrons, and transnational networks.

Sudan sits at the precise intersection of Africa's major instability belts. To the west lies the Sahel, already consumed by insurgencies, coups, and jihadist expansion. To the east lies the Horn of Africa, burdened by civil wars, ethnic tensions, fragile peace processes, and growing geopolitical competition involving Gulf powers and global actors. To the south lies Central Africa, with its own legacy of weak states, armed groups, and resource conflicts. To the north sits Libya, whose own collapse permanently altered the security architecture of the continent.

8.2 The Corridor in the Making

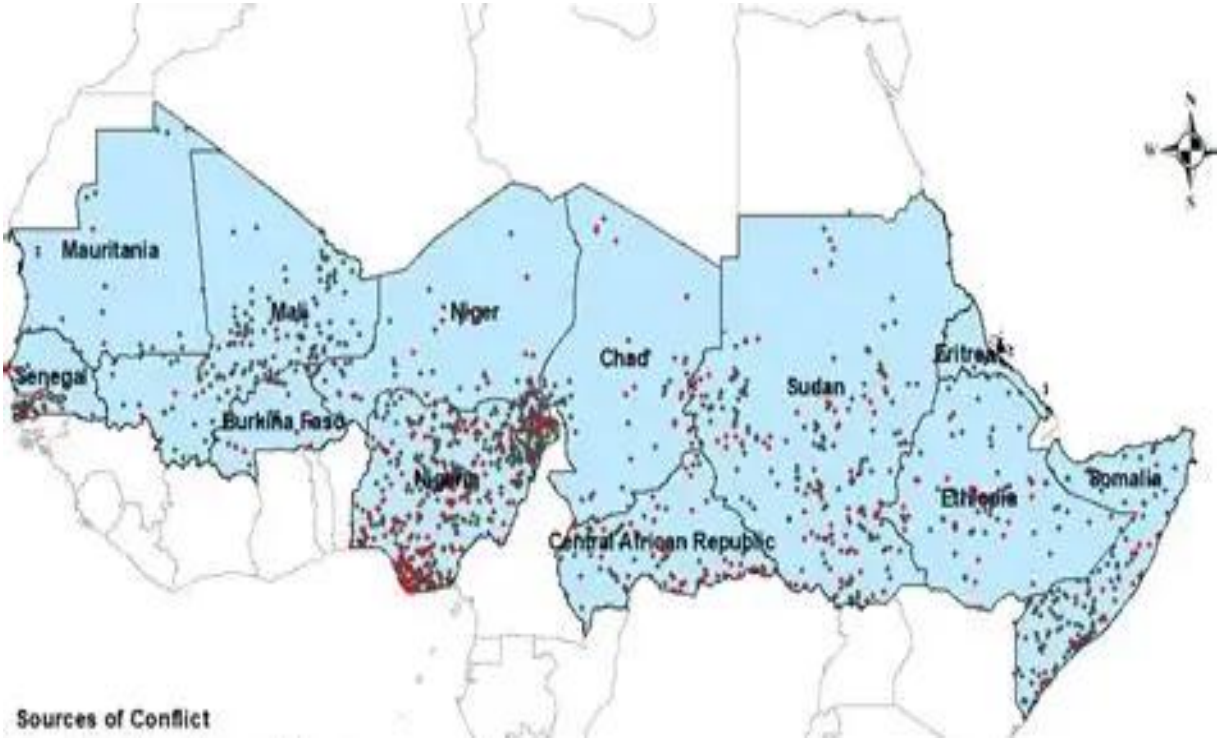
Sudan is no longer simply a war zone; it is becoming a corridor in the making. If the conflict continues without resolution, that corridor may link some of the most volatile insurgent landscapes in Africa into a single, continuous arc stretching from the Atlantic coast of the Sahel to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

In western Sudan Darfur and parts of Kordofan the patterns are already visible. Cross-border militia movements, the proliferation of arms from Libyan and Sahelian sources, and the erosion of central authority in favor of localized power structures are intensifying. Darfur's connections with Chad, southern Libya, and the Central African Republic are not new, but they are being weaponized under conditions of war. Supply lines run across borders; fighters move with relative ease; the distinction between domestic and regional conflict is steadily fading.

This is precisely how the Sahelian system expanded over the past decade not through formal alliances, but through the gradual integration of conflict zones into a shared ecosystem of insecurity. Countries like Mali and Burkina Faso experienced the collapse of state authority in peripheral regions, followed by the rise of highly mobile insurgent groups that operate across borders. If western Sudan becomes fully absorbed into this dynamic, the Sahel will effectively extend eastward, bringing its insurgent networks closer to the Red Sea corridor.

At the same time, eastern Sudan is being pulled into the Horn of Africa's security environment. The RSF's supply chains rely heavily on cross-border networks running through eastern Chad and potentially reaching into the Horn. Air corridors, remote airstrips, and land routes have all been cited in investigations as part of the broader logistical environment sustaining the war. As Sudan's eastern frontier weakens, it risks

becoming a transit zone for arms, fighters, and political influence flowing between the Red Sea and the interior.



8.3 Chad as the Junction

Chad has quietly become the most critical connector of instability across this emerging geography. Its geographic position bordering the Sahelian insurgencies to the west, fractured Libya to the north, the unstable Central African Republic to the south, and war-torn Sudan to the east makes it a natural junction for conflict circulation.

Chad does not create the ideological foundations of terrorism, nor does it initiate wars like the one in Sudan. But it plays a crucial role in how these crises evolve and spread. It is a transmission point, a place where different forms of instability meet and move forward. Weapons from Libyan stockpiles pass through Chadian territory southward into the Sahel and eastward into Sudan. Fighters, smugglers, and intermediaries move across borders with relative ease. The same networks that sustain jihadist operations in Mali and Burkina Faso increasingly intersect with those feeding Sudan's civil war.

The governance situation in Chad amplifies these dynamics. Since the death of longtime ruler Idriss Déby in 2021, central authority has been uneven, particularly in the peripheral borderlands where state reach is nominal at best. These governance voids function as unmonitored zones, strategic blind spots exploited by non-state armed actors and covert external logistics networks. Chad is used not as a willing participant but as a geographic inevitability. Its vast and difficult-to-govern terrain makes it a natural passageway.

8.4 The Implications for the Horn and Red Sea

The significance of these developments extends far beyond Chad and Sudan. The Horn of Africa, often treated as a separate strategic space, is increasingly exposed to this broader system. Sudan acts as the immediate bridge. As instability spreads within Sudan, it moves closer to the Red Sea corridor, one of the world's most strategically significant maritime chokepoints.

The Houthi campaign against commercial shipping in the Red Sea, which escalated dramatically following the Gaza war, has already demonstrated how localized conflicts can produce transregional effects. Shipping disruptions increased costs, created economic pressure, and directly affected countries like Djibouti, Somalia, and landlocked Ethiopia. If Sudan's fragmentation adds another layer of instability to this already volatile maritime space, the consequences would be severe.

Moreover, the fusion of Sahelian and Horn conflict systems would create unprecedented opportunities for militant networking. Groups like al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has historically focused on its immediate region, could potentially benefit from connections to Sahelian networks with experience in IED manufacturing, drone operations, and sophisticated propaganda. The same smuggling routes that move gold from Mali and weapons from Libya could carry expertise, tactics, and personnel in multiple directions.

9. The Red Sea and Middle Eastern Integration: Blurring Regional Boundaries

9.1 The End of the Old Map

For decades, political analysis treated the Middle East and the Horn of Africa as two distinct security silos. The Red Sea was viewed as a physical gap rather than a political bridge. That old map is now obsolete. The current security climate has forged an emerging, unified strategic space where the Middle East and the Horn of Africa are inextricably linked. The traditional boundaries between these two regions have blurred into a single continuum of risk, alliance, and shared vulnerability.

This transformation is operational, not symbolic. Events in one region now produce immediate consequences in the other. The Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping demonstrated how a non-state actor in Yemen could disrupt global trade, increase costs for Horn of Africa economies, and create diplomatic crises involving multiple continents. The broader confrontation between Iran and Israel has expanded beyond traditional battlefields to include maritime domains, proxy engagements, and indirect economic warfare effectively integrating the Horn into a wider geopolitical contest.

9.2 The Merging of Conflict Systems

Non-state actors have aggressively adapted to this new strategic environment. The Houthis represent a significant evolution: their ability to dominate maritime spaces and dictate the flow of global trade has effectively turned a non-state militia into a gatekeeper of the world economy. Further south, there are concerning indications of networked forms of power emerging jihadist groups in the Sahel potentially interacting with Hezbollah-trained cells arriving from North Africa. This alignment with Iran, if substantiated, would create a unified militant front spanning entire regions, completely dissolving the security boundaries between the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel.

What ties these dynamics together is the Red Sea itself. It has become a shared strategic space where the interests of Gulf states, African nations, global powers, and non-state actors all intersect. Ports, logistics corridors, and infrastructure projects across the Horn are embedded in a wider network connecting the Gulf to Africa and beyond. Their stability is essential not only for local economies but also for external stakeholders. As a result, risks are shared: instability in one region directly threatens interests in the other.

9.3 Institutional Gaps

The trouble is that institutional frameworks remain stuck in the past. The African Union, the Arab League, IGAD, and ECOWAS operate within defined regional boundaries that no longer reflect operational realities. Their mandates are too narrow, their coordination too thin, and they lack the collective strength to manage challenges that now span entire continents. Intelligence sharing is limited, crisis responses are reactive rather than proactive, and maritime security efforts are uncoordinated.

This gap between reality and governance creates vulnerabilities. In a highly interconnected environment, these weaknesses increase the risk of escalation and instability. The Sahel's crises are no longer a West African problem; they are a transcontinental challenge that demands a new security architecture.

10. Ethiopia and the Sahel: The Blind Spot in Strategic Thinking

10.1 The Legacy of Distance

Ethiopia's foreign policy has long been guided by a map that separates the Sahel from the rest of the continent. The Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Nile Basin have consistently defined the core of its strategic thinking, while the Sahel has been treated as distant and secondary. This perception is deeply rooted in history, reinforced across successive governments from the imperial era through the Derg and the EPRDF to the current Prosperity Party administration.

Historically, Ethiopia's engagement with the Sahel was indirect rather than absent. Emperor Yohannes IV's confrontation with the Mahdist state in Sudan in the late 19th century, while often framed narrowly as a Sudanese-Ethiopian encounter, was embedded in wider networks that extended into Darfur and toward the Sahel. Ethiopia's role in hosting the Organization of African Unity and later the African Union in Addis

Ababa provided a platform for multilateral engagement on Sahelian issues. But these interactions remained institutional rather than strategic. Ethiopia did not develop a distinct Sahel policy; it prioritized its immediate neighborhood.

10.2 The Shift in Strategic Geography

This approach is increasingly untenable. The Sahel has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade. Armed groups operate across borders with relative ease. The movement of weapons, fighters, and illicit networks has created a fluid and interconnected security environment that extends beyond the Sahel itself. These dynamics are no longer confined to West Africa; they are spreading eastward through Chad and into Sudan, creating a continuous belt of instability that links the Sahel to the Horn of Africa.

For Ethiopia, this shift has significant implications. The Sahel is now effectively part of its extended neighborhood not because of geographic proximity in a conventional sense, but because of the intensity of the connections that link the two regions. There is no ocean or natural barrier separating Ethiopia from the Sahel. The distance between them is bridged by a chain of weakly governed spaces Chad, Sudan, and the borderlands of Eritrea and South Sudan through which instability can travel.

Refugee flows originating in the Sahel intersect with those from Sudan, creating complex patterns of displacement that place additional strain on Ethiopia and its neighbors. These movements carry security risks, as they can be exploited by transnational extremist groups seeking to expand their reach. The combination of weak border controls, ongoing conflicts, and the presence of illicit networks increases the likelihood that such groups could use these pathways to move closer to Ethiopia.

10.3 Reconceptualizing Proximity

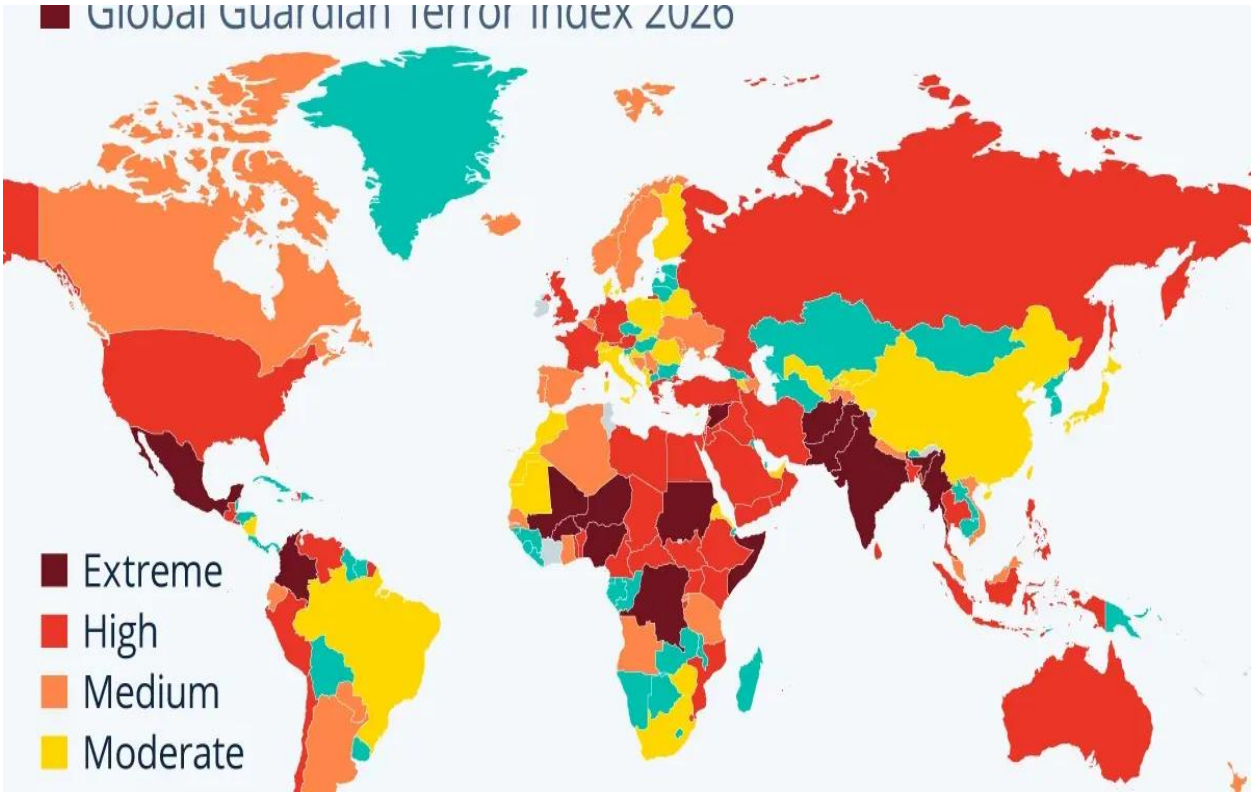
Ethiopia must therefore rethink its approach and begin to view the Sahel as part of its immediate strategic neighborhood. This does not mean equating the Sahel with the Gulf in all respects, but it requires recognizing that both regions have a direct impact on Ethiopia's interests. The Gulf is important because of its economic and maritime significance; the Sahel is becoming important because of its role in shaping security dynamics across the continent. Ignoring one while prioritizing the other creates a strategic imbalance that could leave Ethiopia vulnerable to emerging threats.

Reconceptualizing the Sahel as an immediate neighbor involves more than increasing diplomatic engagement. It requires a fundamental shift in how Ethiopia understands proximity and interdependence. Proximity should not be defined solely by shared borders but by the degree to which developments in one region affect another. By this measure, the Sahel is already closer to Ethiopia than traditional maps suggest.

11. Toward a New Security Architecture: Beyond Military Force

11.1 The Failure of the Military-Centric Approach

After two decades of international military intervention from the French, American, UN, African Union, and now Russian, the security situation in the Sahel is worse than at any point in recent history. The Global Terrorism Index consistently ranks the Sahel as the region most affected by terrorism worldwide. Violence against civilians has increased. The number of displaced persons has grown exponentially. State authority continues to contract rather than expand.



This is not because military force is irrelevant. Tactical operations have disrupted networks, eliminated key leaders, and temporarily degraded insurgent capabilities. But these tactical successes have not translated into strategic outcomes because they do not address the underlying conditions that sustain insurgency: governance failures, economic marginalization, and the collapse of state legitimacy in peripheral areas.

The Sahel's crises are fundamentally political, not military. They arise from the accumulated disruptions described in this article the destruction of adaptive pre-colonial governance, the imposition of extractive colonial and post-colonial states, the marginalization of rural and mobile populations, and the conversion of natural wealth into a source of conflict. Until these structural drivers are addressed, military operations will remain a costly exercise in symptom management.

11.2 Performance Legitimacy and Resource Governance

A sustainable path out of the Sahel's cycle of insecurity lies not in deeper militarization but in strengthening what many political scientists describe as "performance legitimacy" the ability of a state to earn public trust by providing security, justice, and economic opportunities. Achieving this requires progress across several interconnected areas.

First, the governance of natural resources must be improved. The Sahel possesses significant reserves of gold, uranium, lithium, hydrocarbons, and other strategic minerals. Yet these resources have often contributed to instability by fueling corruption, financing armed groups, and intensifying competition among domestic and external actors. Greater transparency in resource management, equitable revenue-sharing arrangements, community benefit mechanisms, and the formalization of artisanal mining could help transform natural wealth into a driver of development rather than conflict. When local populations benefit directly from resource extraction, grievances that fuel instability are likely to diminish.

Second, regional integration must move beyond political declarations and translate into practical cooperation. Historically, the Sahel prospered through mobility, trade, and interconnected economic networks, while contemporary fragmentation has constrained growth and development. Investments in transport corridors, energy infrastructure, digital connectivity, and cross-border trade networks could strengthen economic interdependence and create incentives for cooperation. Initiatives such as those proposed by the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) hold potential, but their long-term success will depend on whether they prioritize regional development and economic integration alongside political objectives.

Third, security sector reform remains essential. Effective security institutions require professionalism, accountability, and strong relationships with the communities they serve. Where security forces are perceived as abusive, unaccountable, or disconnected from local populations, public trust erodes and insecurity can deepen. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, improving civilian protection, enhancing accountability, and fostering community engagement can contribute to more effective and sustainable security outcomes. In this sense, security sector reform is not separate from counterterrorism efforts but an important component of long-term stabilization.

11.3 The African Union's Role

The African Union must move beyond statements and sanctions toward active mediation and institutional support. The suspension of member states that experience coups, while principled, has demonstrated limited effectiveness in restoring constitutional order. It has instead deepened the isolation of military regimes and pushed them toward alternative partners

A more effective approach would combine principled pressure with pragmatic engagement. The AU should lead mediation efforts that address the political drivers of coups not simply demanding a return to the pre-coup status quo, but facilitating negotiations that produce more inclusive and legitimate governance arrangements. It should support region-led development and security reforms rather than outsourcing these functions to external actors whose interests may not align with local needs. Most importantly, the AU must treat the Sahel as a political and social crisis first, not just a battlefield, and act early before violence becomes the only language left.

11.4 A Red Sea Security Architecture

Given the fusion of Sahelian, Horn, and Middle Eastern security dynamics, new institutional mechanisms are necessary. A Red Sea Security body, including key states from both the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, could provide a platform for continuous dialogue, coordination, and decision-making. A Red Sea Intelligence Fusion Center could facilitate real-time information sharing, enabling faster and more coordinated responses to emerging threats. A Regional Infrastructure Protection Mechanism could focus on safeguarding ports, logistics corridors, and critical investments.

These proposals face significant political obstacles, competing interests, historical mistrust, and divergent threat perceptions among potential members. But the alternative continued fragmentation, uncoordinated responses, and the progressive entanglement of multiple conflict systems is far worse.

12. Conclusion: Can Persistent Coups and Conflict in a Fragile Region Ever End?

The ongoing crisis in the Sahel marks the definitive collapse of an exhausted, post-colonial state structure that relied too heavily on centralized elites and foreign security guarantees while ignoring its rural margins. International interventions failed because they treated terrorism as the root problem rather than a symptom of deep structural fractures, historical marginalization, and economic exclusion. This mismatch fueled widespread public frustration, translating into anti-foreign sentiment and a wave of military coups seen as a reclamation of national dignity. However, symbolic sovereignty alone cannot save the region; if transitional governments merely swap one foreign dependency for another without fundamentally transforming local governance, the underlying instability will persist.

True, long-term survival demands a dual shift: rebuilding political legitimacy from the ground up and replacing isolated military reactions with deep regional integration. Because borderless insurgent and smuggling networks easily exploit divided nations, Sahelian states must cooperate on unified intelligence, infrastructure, and trade corridors to avoid permanent fragmentation. Ultimately, the region stands between chronic militarization and gradual state reconstruction. Lasting stability cannot be imported or enforced by guns alone; it will only be achieved when governments build inclusive, functional systems that citizens actually trust because they deliver real accountability, economic opportunity for the youth, and a genuine sense of national purpose.

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