

Rethinking Crisis Responses in the Sahel

By Judd Devermont and Marielle Harris

DECEMBER 2020

THE ISSUE

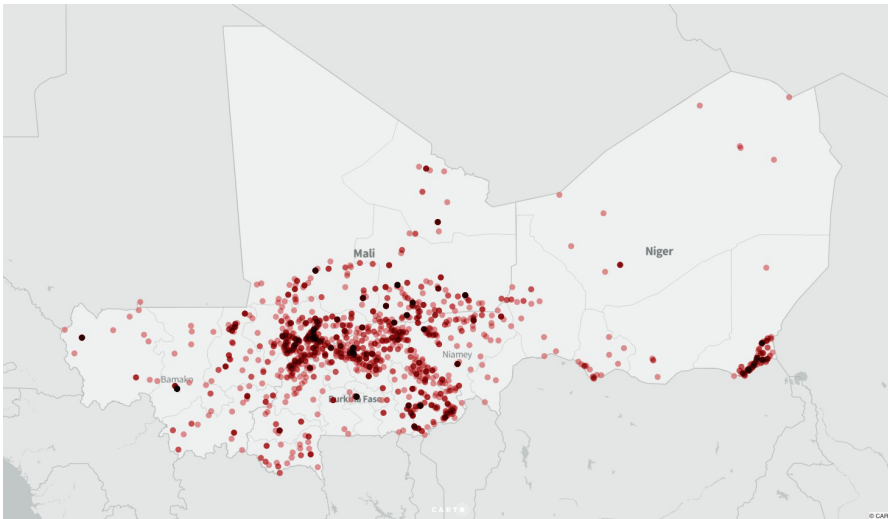
- **The situation in the Sahel has never been more dire.** As the crisis enters its tenth year, extremist violence is spreading, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is growing, and food insecurity is affecting more people than ever before.
- **There are growing doubts about how the current diplomatic, development, and security approaches will facilitate a new peace.** Indeed, there are several—not entirely congruent—working hypotheses underpinning foreign and regional government strategies.
- **It is imperative to reassess and reset the strategy toward the Sahel, casting aside faulty assumptions.** Specifically, the international community and its Sahelian partners should prioritize governance, press for an expanded peace process, cautiously dialogue with militants, and rework the division of labor between foreign and regional actors.

Since January 2012, there has been persistent violence and instability in Mali and in the neighboring countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger. The conflict has evolved from a separatist rebellion in northern Mali to communal and extremist violence in wide swaths across the Sahel. The region has seen two coups in Mali, a popular uprising in Burkina Faso, and the first-ever civilian transition of power in Mauritania—with one pending in Niger.

International and regional responses to the conflict have failed to blunt the escalating insecurity and accompanying humanitarian crises. To be sure, there has been a significant increase in funding; a proliferation of envoys, forums, and ad-hoc coalitions; and more muscular military operations. The situation, however, has demonstrably worsened over the past nine years.

- **Violence has continued unabated in the Sahel.** Halfway through 2020, the number of reported fatalities due to violent attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger had either neared or surpassed the full total for each country in 2019, according to the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database (ACLED).
- **There has been a surge in refugees and IDPs.** In Burkina Faso alone, as of June 2020, nearly one million people were internally displaced, almost twice the number from 2019. In Mali, internal displacements have continued to snowball.
- **The region has become more food insecure** despite relatively favorable weather trends for agriculture and livestock. There were almost five million more people suffering from food insecurity in 2020 than in 2019, with a threefold increase in 2020 alone.

Security Incidents in the Central Sahel (2020)



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Data Export Tool, (2017-2020), distributed by The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.

If international and regional partners want a chance to effect peace in the region, it is necessary to reexamine the key assumptions underlying the current response. There is a fairly broad consensus on the challenges; EU Special Representative Angel Losada has described it as a “polygon of crises,” which includes governance, security, economic, demographic, humanitarian, migration, and radicalization crises. The problem, therefore, is not the diagnosis—it is the policy prescription.

CHECKING KEY ASSUMPTIONS

It is imperative to stress-test and revalidate the multiple theories of change underpinning the international and regional approaches to the conflict in the Sahel. There is some disagreement about how diplomatic, development, and security engagement will facilitate a new peace. Indeed, there are several—not entirely congruent—working hypotheses at the root of foreign and regional government strategies. Proponents of a military-first approach argue that removing extremists from the battlefield is a necessary step before addressing political, social, and economic grievances. Others are pressing for a focus on development and decentralization, contending that the international community must underwrite what some Sahelian governments can’t or won’t. Some champion a more circumscribed intervention, claiming that prioritizing humanitarian responses and engaging armed non-state actors in negotiations are more pragmatic courses of action. Each of the aforementioned approaches includes a kernel of truth, but alone they are

unsatisfying and unequal to the task. If a new policy toward the Sahel is possible, the current assumptions must be rigorously challenged.

KEY ASSUMPTION #1: TERRORIST GROUPS ARE THE ROOT OF INSTABILITY IN THE SAHEL

In mid-2012, when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies seized control of the major cities in northern Mali and enforced their version of *Sharia* (Islamic law), there was overwhelming international consensus to halt the jihadists’ advance and reverse their control of key strongholds. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and several non-West African governments established the African-led International Support Mission to Mali

(AFISMA) in 2012. France—Mali’s former colonial ruler—intervened in 2013, deploying ground troops and launching air campaigns against the jihadists under Operation Serval.¹

After French and Chadian troops “liberated” most northern Malian towns from jihadist control, the UN Security Council agreed to establish a UN peacekeeping operation to absorb AFISMA’s mandate (and much of its personnel) in July 2013—officially rebranding it as the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In August 2014, France transitioned Serval into Operation Barkhane, which has become the most prominent external counterterrorism (CT) operation in the Sahel, stretching across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Paris currently has some 5,100 troops deployed as part of the mission, making it France’s largest overseas deployment.²

Since mid-2013, when Malians elected a new civilian government, the number of CT-focused combat forces in the Sahel has grown to include the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the French-led Takuba Task Force, which supports Malian forces and is expected to complement the efforts of the G5 Sahel and Operation Barkhane. A future contingent has also been pledged by the African Union.³ In addition to these units, a host of international training missions—such as the European Union Training Mission (EUTM)—have emerged in Mali and are slated for expansion across the Sahel.⁴ This year, the Council of the EU authorized the extension of EUTM Mali’s area of

operations to provide military assistance to the G5 Sahel countries.⁵ Meanwhile, the U.S. Air Force has built a new facility to host unmanned aerial surveillance flights in Agadez, Niger. U.S. Special Forces have also accompanied partner forces in the country on CT missions, including one that culminated in the October 2017 attack in Tongo Tongo⁶ that resulted in the death of four U.S. soldiers and four Nigerien troops.ⁱ

“Violent extremist organizations are our first concern.”

— French defense minister Florence Parly

Pushing back terrorists is undoubtedly critical. France recently removed key leaders of AQIM, killing Emir Abdelmalek Droukdel in June 2020 and senior operative Bah ag Moussa in November.⁷ But on balance, jihadist groups have grown in the Sahel, bringing into question whether a CT-first approach is truly optimal. In the past seven years, AQIM’s Sahel branch has morphed into Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of al Qaeda-linked extremist factions that is deeply rooted in northern and central Mali. The Islamic State has also made inroads into the Sahel through its Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) groups. Indeed, Sahel-based jihadist groups have become adept at recruiting locally, exploiting government weaknesses, and stoking communal tensions to execute coordinated attacks. It has become clear that the insurgents know the terrain better than the security forces trying to counter them. France, in particular, has found itself in an intractable conflict with no end in sight—not unlike the U.S. legacy in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸

Is a CT-first approach enabling Sahelian governments to advance governance and the rule of law? The theory that removing or beating back a terrorist threat will provide governments the time and space to root out corruption, reengage their audiences, and strengthen their democracies is often cited as a critical path to stability, but it is rarely proven. Countering terrorism does not automatically translate into stronger governance; between those two points, there must be the political will to solve the country’s deep-seated structural issues. While a multitude of security stakeholders

wage CT campaigns across the Sahel, good governance by the state, for the most part, remains elusive. The international community has pledged billions of dollars in military aid to counter the crisis—including \$300 million to the G5 Sahel Joint Force from the European Union⁹—supported by a notional billion-dollar CT plan by ECOWAS.¹⁰ The United States has provided direct military logistical support to Barkhane, while also pledging \$111 million in military equipment and training for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and more than \$30 million in aid to the region’s internal security forces. But it is far from clear that these CT efforts have benefited governance in the region. In fact, the Malian coup in August 2020—perhaps the starkest example of failed governance—came after months of protests driven by public disaffection with corruption, political nepotism, and insecurity.

Key Assumption Check: While the international community’s CT efforts have removed high value jihadist targets in the Sahel, they have failed to bring about regional stability. This casts doubt on the assumption that terrorists are the root of instability in the region. While Sahelian governments and their Western partners assert that CT is only part of a comprehensive strategy, the prominence of CT operations—measured in both financial and logistical support, as well as rhetoric—overshadows efforts to support democratization and robust governance in the region. International partners should recalibrate the pace of CT operations, ensuring that CT efforts are effective and that they are being advanced in tandem with governance reforms and efforts to strengthen public trust.

KEY ASSUMPTION #2: INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IS CENTRAL TO SOLVING THE CRISIS

From the start of the violence in the Sahel, most stakeholders have promoted inclusive governance as key to addressing the conflict. In 2013, the UN’s first envoy for the Sahel Region, former Italian prime minister Romano Prodi, identified governance as one of his three strategic objectives.¹¹ His successors and multiple other government envoys have reaffirmed this point, as U.S. Special Envoy Peter Pham did at CSIS’s 2nd Annual Sahel Summit in 2020, opining that “the underlying malady is that of state legitimacy of the contract between the governing and the governed, of the goods, services, the inclusion that states provide for ordinary citizens and populations, especially those

i. The Department of Defense has placed new limits on such missions since the Tongo Tongo incident, and since 2018, it has pledged to scale back counterterrorism activities in West Africa more broadly in the interest of refocusing efforts on global power competition.

at the peripheries of these countries.”¹²

This policy prescription, however, has too often been expressed in the abstract. It rarely has been unpacked to identify specific actors and practices in need of reform, and external actors have struggled to confront their poorly-performing counterparts. There was a reluctance to criticize new leaders, including Ibrahim Boubacar Keita of Mali (IBK, in office 2013–2020) and Burkina Faso president Roch Kaboré (2015), who represented a welcome change from military rule and a long-serving autocrat, respectively. The international community was relatively meek about IBK’s corruption and about President Issoufou’s intimidation of the opposition during Niger’s 2016 election.¹³ The international community also only belatedly condemned human rights abuses in Burkina Faso and Niger.¹⁴ When Malians initiated protests in June 2020, some external partners chose to treat these demonstrations with contempt rather than solidarity.

“The key word . . . it’s inclusion.”

*— G5 Sahel Executive Secretary
Maman Sidikou*

The Sahel’s Western partners have fundamentally failed to reckon with the principal reason behind the perceived lack of inclusivity: inclusion does not correspond to the region’s political realities. As discussed in CSIS’s 2019 brief, *Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel*, Mali’s ruling class has been under pressure from its constituents to refrain from redistributing resources to the restive north and central regions.¹⁵ A zero-sum mentality and a persistent view that the minority is rewarded for its rebelliousness—as well as disillusion about governance and weak infrastructure in the south—has functioned as a brake within Malian politics. While this dynamic is less pronounced in Burkina Faso, which has not experienced past cycles of ethnic separatist conflict, it is true that Ouagadougou has consistently neglected the country’s northern and eastern regions.¹⁶ The ruling party has performed poorly in these areas relative to its strongholds in other parts of the country, according to an analysis of the 2016 municipal election results.¹⁷

Moreover, as Anna Schmauder, Guillaume Soto-Mayor, and Delina Goxho persuasively explain, many Sahelian citizens disagree with the return of the state as a goal in its own right.¹⁸ They view state authorities as “predatory

and corrupt” and have little appetite for more frequent interactions with abusive governments and security forces. This runs counter to simplistic recommendations to “restore” or “re-establish” state authority.¹⁹ Restored governance is not sufficient, or even desirable, if it is not preceded by significant political reform and a realignment of political prerogatives.

Is inclusivity key to resolving the Sahelian conflict? At the 2nd Annual Sahel Summit, G5 Sahel Executive Secretary Maman Sidikou said it was imperative to pay “more attention to public opinion and to expectations and what our people say.”²⁰ This constitutes a first step toward identifying what Sahelians want from their leaders. It also begins to break down catch-all phrases, such as “good governance”—which are vague and can sometimes be code for “if only everyone tried a little harder and cleaned up their act,” in the view of Alex Thurston.²¹ If inclusivity is the objective, it is essential to understand how political incentives and disincentives are hindering this goal across the Sahel. It will require more than platitudes and exhortations to address historical grievances and alter the political calculus of leaders and populations.

Key Assumption Check: The current approach is sensible and validates the assumption that inclusion is central to solving the crisis. However, it lacks precision and concrete actions. Achieving inclusive social change will require restoring trust between major stakeholders and inviting a broader segment of Sahelian society into the peace and governance processes. Mending broken social contracts between the governing and the governed could also entail more substantial institutional reform than is envisioned in current peace processes.

KEY ASSUMPTION #3: THE ALGIERS ACCORD IS THE FOUNDATION OF FUTURE PEACE IN THE SAHEL

The 2015 Algiers Accord—officially the “Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process”—is the go-to peace framework in Mali despite its limited scope and lack of stakeholder buy-in.²² The Accord, signed by the Malian government and armed rebel groups, was designed to prevent a return to open civil war between the Bamako-based government and secular separatist groups in the country’s north. The peace deal calls for decentralization of state institutions, the integration of rebel combatants into the national army, increased representation of northern areas in national institutions, and the creation of a Northern Region Development Zone to foster economic growth in Mali’s north. These pillars are valuable, but

insufficient, and they remain largely unheeded by the Malian government and signatory groups. There are two key limitations that underline the failure of the Algiers Accord:

- **The Algiers Accord is incomplete in scope.** The Accord was inadequate from the get-go, tackling only one facet of insecurity: the separatist rebellion in Mali's north. It did not have the foresight to outline security and development implications for Mali's other regions, and it has not adjusted to the evolving conflict. Subsequent roadmaps have failed to prioritize or even address escalating interethnic conflict and jihadist violence in the central regions, which increasingly threatens to creep into the south. This has had dangerous consequences. One-time northern jihadist groups have expanded into new areas and grown in strength and lethality, waging deadly attacks and exploiting ethnic grievances to drive recruitment. Jihadist violence has also led to the formation of ethnic self-defense groups and contributed to a cycle of retaliatory violence. Fighting between jihadist groups has increased; the first half of 2020 saw an all-out turf war between ISGS and JNIM. ACLED recorded 34 armed engagements between the two militant groups during the first six months of the year, resulting in the death of more than 300 fighters and contributing to an intractable humanitarian crisis.²³
- **The Accord's key pillars have not been implemented.** The Accord is limited in scope, but its key focus areas—political decentralization and the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants—remain worthwhile. However, only 23 percent of the Accord's provisions have been achieved as of 2020, according to the Carter Center's Independent Observer.²⁴ Indeed, UN sanctions investigators warned in early August 2020 (just prior to the coup) that top Malian officials in IBK's administration had "threatened and delayed" the Accord's implementation, while signatory groups continued to engage in trafficking, corruption, terrorist activity, and the diversion of humanitarian aid.²⁵ In June 2020, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft told the Security Council that most of Accord's benchmarks had "not been achieved" due to a "pattern of failure by the [Accord's] signatory parties." Belgian foreign minister and defense minister Philippe Goffin echoed Ambassador Craft, warning that the underwhelming progress in implementing the Accord had been "too weak to guarantee a return to lasting peace."²⁶ The international community is also to blame:

it has done little to address foot-dragging and sabotage of the Accord by both the Malian government and armed group signatories, and it has failed to sufficiently incentivize progress or penalize missed benchmarks.

"I'm sorry to say . . . but there is no plan B at [this] stage."

— EU Special Representative to the Sahel Angel Losada Fernandez, in reference to the Algiers Accord

Despite these grave limitations, the Accord is repeatedly championed as Mali's premier—even sole—vehicle for peace. In March 2020, U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs David Hale told Congress that the United States' efforts in Mali are focused on the Accord, "which remains the best mechanism for achieving a peaceful and reconciled Mali."²⁷ The UN Security Council's (UNSC) June 2020 resolution extending MINUSMA's mandate reaffirmed support for the Accord's implementation as the mission's "primary strategic priority."²⁸ This habitual adherence to the Accord persists even after the August military coup that ousted IBK and the junta's appointment of a transitional president known for his skepticism of the 2015 framework. In mid-November, Koen Vervaeke, managing director for Africa at the European External Action Service, told the UNSC that the implementation of the Accord is more of a priority than ever before.²⁹

Is the Algiers Accord broad enough to address the many facets of Malian insecurity? There is skepticism that the international community can count on the transitional government to support the development and implementation of a new, comprehensive peace plan. Northern armed group signatories may also threaten to withdraw from the peace process entirely if they feel that their influence is being diluted within a broader national dialogue. Interim President Bah Ndaw has pledged to uphold the Algiers Accord, though it is likely to take a backseat to the transition to civilian rule. Bamako is far weaker today than in 2015, hobbled by five years of inaction, entrenched corruption, denial of escalating insecurity, and the recent coup.

Key Assumption Check: The Algiers Accord is outdated and lacks critical stakeholder buy-in, undercutting the assumption that the Accord is the foundation of future peace in the region. International actors should avoid reflexively urging

its implementation, and instead, take a temperature check and re-examine what is working and what needs fixing. For the first time in five years, there is a fresh opportunity for Mali and its partners to lay the groundwork for a renewed, inclusive framework for peace. The international community should push Bamako, the signatory groups, trade unions, religious leaders, civil society representatives, and others to reimagine what this might look like.

KEY ASSUMPTION #4: IT IS DANGEROUS TO NEGOTIATE WITH TERRORISTS

During the negotiations for, and the implementation of, the Algiers Accord, the Malian state and many of its external partners strictly forbade engagement with internationally-designated Islamist terrorists. They were deemed illegitimate and unworthy of inclusion in peace processes. After all, AQIM and its affiliates were responsible for horrific crimes. The Malian government insisted that Mali remain a secular country, and negotiations with Islamists were therefore unacceptable.³⁰ This red line was not unique to the Sahel at the time. From Afghanistan to Somalia, there was little appetite to negotiate with “bad guys.” The rationale, aside from its moral and ethical considerations, was that engagement conferred legitimacy to these groups, and that it would presumably spur more individuals to join or initiate jihadist movements.

This position, however, was never as clear-cut as it seemed. Several former Sahelian leaders allegedly negotiated with these groups. Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso allowed free passage to terrorist groups and northern Malian separatists with ties to terrorists in exchange for no attacks on Burkinabe soil.³¹ There have been accusations that Amadou Toumani Toure of Mali and Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania had separate non-aggression pacts with violent extremist groups.³² Of course, several external and regional governments, as well as humanitarian organizations, have negotiated with terrorists to ensure the release of hostages or the access to deliver life-saving assistance to vulnerable populations.³³

“It’s an entirely different calculation when you’re talking to criminals or terrorists . . . legitimizing the violence that they’ve carried out.”

— U.S. Special Envoy to the Sahel Region Peter Pham

There have been more overt disagreements over the efficacy of the no-negotiations policy in recent years. In 2017, the delegates at Mali’s Conference of National Understanding expressed support for a dialogue with more radical actors in Mali’s ongoing conflict, including Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa, a preacher who leads a JNIM faction called the Macina Battalion.³⁴ A few years later, Mali’s Inclusive National Dialogue echoed this same recommendation.³⁵ In 2019, the International Crisis Group argued that Mali’s government should “test the possibility of talks with militants,” starting with local ceasefires before broadening the scope.³⁶ IBK—before he was deposed—publicly acknowledged that his government had reached out to Iyad ag Ghali. He added that “talking with jihadists and fighting terrorism is not contradictory,” and pointedly compared his efforts to U.S. negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan.³⁷ The ground had started to shift, and the military government that replaced Keita this summer has signaled its openness to dialogue “to redefine the contours of a new governance.”³⁸ This became reality in October, when Mali’s transitional government released 180 jihadists in exchange for four hostages.³⁹ Even UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and African Union Peace and Security Commissioner Smail Chergui have expressed an openness to dialogue with extremists.⁴⁰

Is a no-negotiation policy still valid? At CSIS’s 2nd Annual Sahel Summit, Pham stressed pragmatism as a guiding principle. He said that talking to combatants at a tactical level to ensure humanitarian access was tolerable, but “it’s an entirely different calculation when you’re talking to criminals or terrorists . . . legitimizing the violence that they’ve carried out.”⁴¹ France’s foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has been less forgiving, bluntly stating that “there are peace accords . . . and then there are terrorist groups that have not signed the peace accords.”⁴² Paris’s stance, and to a lesser extent Washington’s, is largely out of sync with the region’s position on the matter, as well as with broader global thinking about engaging with militants. As Thurston notes, this position also reflects a “lack a vision beyond the theory that eventually, killing enough terrorists and undertaking enough development projects will eliminate the jihadist presence.”⁴³ After almost a decade of fighting, extremist groups continue to have influence over much of central and northern Mali, as well as areas in Burkina Faso and western Niger. Some reports indicate that militants, notably in Central Mali, have started to mediate conflicts in war-torn communities.⁴⁴ They have provided some justice and security, even signing

Negotiating Peace: Proponents, Opponents, and Fence-Sitters

There is a lack of consensus around negotiating with terrorists in the Sahel. This table displays the views of regional governments and external partners, as well as JNIM and the Islamic State.

Actors	Position on Negotiations	Background
Malian Government	Yes	In February 2020, following years of secret dealmaking with elements of JNIM, the Malian government officially announced it was negotiating with the extremist group to curb jihadist violence in northern and central Mali. Negotiations have continued after the ousting of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August, and in October, Mali's transitional government released 180 jihadists in exchange for four hostages. The Malian government has not explicitly rejected nor endorsed the possibility of negotiations with the Islamic State.
African Union	Yes, with caveats	In October, African Union (AU) Peace and Security Commissioner Smaïl Chergui suggested that negotiations between the U.S. government and the Taliban could spur Sahelian states to explore dialogue with extremists. Since the start of the Malian conflict, the AU has left "the door of dialogue open to those Malians willing to negotiate," but only "on the basis of a clear commitment to the respect of Mali's unity, territorial integrity and rejection of links with terrorist and criminal groups."
French Government	No	France is unwilling to negotiate with extremist groups. In Mali, France urges dialogue with signatories of the Algiers Accord, but stops short of engaging with groups that kill soldiers and aspire to impose totalitarian regimes. In November, French president Emmanuel Macron told <i>The Africa Report</i> that "with terrorists, we do not discuss. We fight."
United Nations	Yes, with caveats	In an October 2020 interview with <i>Le Monde</i> about the Sahel crisis, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said "there will be groups with which we can talk, and which will have an interest in engaging in this dialogue to become political actors in the future." Guterres noted that dialogue would be impossible with the Islamic State, but did not mention JNIM by name—presumably leaving the possibility of talks with JNIM on the table.
U.S. Government	No, with caveats	The U.S. government has denied the possibility of negotiating with terrorists in the Sahel, despite Washington's dialogue and subsequent agreement with the Taliban in February 2020. U.S. Special Envoy Peter Pham has suggested that negotiating with combatants to ensure humanitarian access is tolerable, but that "it's an entirely different calculation when you're talking to criminals or terrorists . . . legitimizing the violence that they've carried out."
JNIM	Yes, with caveats	In March 2020, JNIM released a communique in which it conveyed willingness to participate in negotiations with the Malian government, on the basis that the Malian government end "the racist, arrogant, French Crusader occupation." A top JNIM leader Amadou Koufa had previously considered negotiations with the Malian government but only in the absence of international forces including MINUSMA.
Islamic State	No	The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is unwilling to negotiate with regional governments, which they consider "infidels." ISGS clashed with al-Qaeda faction Macina Battalion in April 2020 following JNIM's willingness to negotiate with the Malian government. ISGS's spokesman has referred to JNIM as "guard dogs" for Algeria and accused the group of collaborating with "nationalist and secular groups."

Source: Above data is drawn from multiple online sources including UN and government websites.

a tentative peace agreement with communities in the Mopti Region to allow state schools to continue to function as long as Arabic-language schools are prioritized.⁴⁵

Key Assumption Check: The assumption that negotiating with terrorists is dangerous neither reflects battlefield realities nor does it offer regional governments sufficient flexibility to fashion a durable peace with combatants and the communities that support them. Following recommendations from the International Crisis Group and other scholars, dialogue should start on a modest scale and focus on reducing violence and addressing underlying drivers of unrest, including land disputes. At minimum, even with a healthy dose of skepticism, it is worth exploring the merits of this approach for reversing the current trajectory of violence.

KEY ASSUMPTION #5: INCREASED INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT ADVANCES SECURITY AND GOVERNANCE OBJECTIVES

After nearly a decade, the international community remains caught up in the conflict in the Sahel. The consequences of state collapse—including safe havens for extremist groups and a flood of migrants—have spurred key African and European governments, as well as the United Nations, to enlist as many partners as possible. The rationale for this was straightforward: in theory, more stakeholders translates into more financial, diplomatic, and security resources. In complex conflicts, it has become rather routine to coordinate the responses of foreign governments and to establish a mechanism for achieving shared goals.

In Mali and the Sahel, the international architecture initially evolved in three tracks: security, development, and diplomacy. In 2013, AFISMA morphed into MINUSMA. Meanwhile, the French deployed Operation Serval in Mali, followed by Operation Barkhane with an expanded mission set in the Sahel. EUTM entered the picture in 2013, dispatching trainers from 22 EU countries and six non-EU countries. Another EU mission, the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP), has been extended until January 2021 with a budget of €67 million.⁴⁶ In addition, G5 Sahel and other security coalitions on the periphery joined the fray, including the Accra Initiative.⁴⁷

“We are facing a big problem in coordination. As I said, we have 17 strategies.”

— EU Special Representative to the Sahel Angel Losada Fernandez

These military endeavors have been followed by bilateral and multilateral development responses, chief among them the Sahel Alliance, which was launched by France, Germany, and the European Union along with the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2017. Finally, several organizations, regions, and countries appointed diplomatic envoys to attend to the crisis. The UN named Prodi as its special envoy, and other countries and regions—such as the European Union and France—quickly followed suit.⁴⁸ Paris, seeking to more directly choreograph these varied initiatives, unveiled the Coalition for the Sahel in 2020, pledging to provide a more “collective and inclusive response.”⁴⁹

While the principles behind these partnerships are sound, there have been consistent critiques of their efficacy. Several participants have complained about the duplication of efforts and about an emphasis on symbolism, not substance. At the inaugural CSIS Sahel Summit, Heike Thiele, then-director for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Stabilization at the German Foreign Office, noted that “coordination should not only be the exchange of excel sheets about activities.” A year later, Pham reflected that “a multiplication of structures of meetings is not the same as an increase in results on the ground.” Sidikou added that “partners should cooperate rather than compete . . . because trying to coordinate an intervention has an expensive transaction cost.”⁵⁰

Is greater international coordination useful? International architecture has considerable advantages if there are meaningful distinctions between leadership roles. There is no need for “17 strategies,” as Losada pointed out at the 2nd Annual Sahel Summit. If partners agree on a division of labor, international coordination can be a strategic and cost-effective approach to the Sahel’s challenges. That said, Andrew Lebovich offers an important rejoinder: the crises in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are “much more complicated than simply a lack of international coordination, or insufficient support from external allies.”⁵¹ The international architecture question is therefore secondary

Envoy Proliferation in the Sahel

The Sahel is host to an unprecedented number of regional and international diplomatic envoys.



Source: Above data is drawn from multiple online sources including UN and government websites.

to implementing a pragmatic and politics-first approach to tackling the problems in the Sahel.

Key Assumption Check: The current approach to partnerships has failed to yield substantial progress, challenging the assumption that increased international engagement advances security and governance objectives. The mushrooming number of envoys and forums has become a distraction at best and counterproductive at worst. Unless the Sahelian countries and their foreign partners agree on concrete goals and a path toward progress, it is immaterial how many soldiers or diplomats are involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the conflict in the Sahel nears its second decade, the international community must refresh its approach to the region's intertwined political, economic, and security challenges. It is foolhardy to “do more” when the underlying theory of change is flawed. A new strategy for the Sahel should include the following correctives, based on the assumption checks listed in this paper.

A Governance-Focused Approach. International partners should rebalance existing CT campaigns with a reinvigorated approach toward governance, democratization, and public trust. This might include defining and building out “political and . . . development dimension[s]” in the Sahel, as outlined by the European Union and African Union during the 12th Annual Joint

Consultative Meeting in October 2020.⁵² Governance accountability programs, civic education trainings, and provision of support to civil society and faith-based institutions are all options for deeper engagement. But true impact requires far more than development programming; international partners must help shape incentives through deft diplomatic muscle. They must work to create a sense of urgency among the political elite—and even shift public opinion—to prioritize the reduction of violence, curb the proliferation of IDPs, and tackle deepening food insecurity. This includes applying significant carrots and sticks. For instance, the UNSC sanctions committee on Mali and the U.S. Treasury Department should ramp up sanctions on individuals obstructing peace efforts in the region, with equal attention on government officials and on extremist groups and other illicit actors. The international community also should explore options for incentive-based conditioning, such as increasing funding or participating in matching funds when governments take steps to govern responsibly, to protect civilians, and to commit to ceasefires. Similarly, it should work with the region's leaders to ensure that their core political constituents benefit as much as the restive populations do.

A New Peace Deal. It is time to tell the truth: the Algiers Accord is an incomplete, unfulfilled peace deal that has failed to solve Malian insecurity. It does not, however, need to be discarded in full. As a first step, stakeholders

should preserve key tenets outlined in the agreement, including decentralization, justice sector reform, and truth commission work. In fact, the Accord already contains a provision to revise the agreement, providing an opportunity for stakeholders to reopen and expand the deal without scrapping it altogether. Mali and its international partners should identify and incorporate successful side agreements into a new peace plan, including truces between signatory groups, evolving deals between Bamako and jihadist factions, and reconciliation efforts to address ethnic conflict in the central regions. The new peace framework should incorporate on-the-ground stakeholders originally excluded from the 2015 Accord. There is no time to waste: the international community should immediately engage Mali's transitional government in talks on an expanded, more comprehensive peace framework.

A Cautious Dialogue with Militants. The United States and other international partners should support the Malian government and its Sahelian neighbors to reach a peace with armed non-state actors. At the very least, it should ensure that well-meaning laws and policies do not stand in the way of peace. Mali and its partners should empower Islamic scholars to negotiate with jihadist groups on local compromises, ceasefires, and humanitarian access, as suggested by the International Crisis Group.⁵³ In addition, dialogues with jihadist-aligned communities—not necessarily with jihadists themselves—could establish a shared understanding of what is driving violence and a road map for mitigation. As is the case in other conflict zones, such as Afghanistan, this is far from straightforward. The regional government will have to weigh JNIM and ISGS's linkages to global jihadi networks and their culpability for the deaths of many Sahelians. In a recent piece on negotiations with al-Shabaab, Tricia Bacon judged that “there aren't any shortcuts to negotiations or real options for how to resolve the conflict in Somalia without them.”⁵⁴ The same logic applies to the Sahel.

A Smarter International Architecture. The international community—with its army of envoys and abundance of strategies—demonstrates interest but not cohesion.

The international community should return to basics: what is achievable and how do external partners work together effectively to advanced shared objectives? First, there should be a single approach and partners should march in lockstep to carry it out. This means understanding how each actor's core strengths—whether diplomatic, development, defense, or financial—fit into the bigger picture. As Pham concludes, there should be a “diversification of programming, diversification of expertise.”⁵⁵ The recurrent coordination meetings must focus on establishing a division of labor and de-conflicting lines of action. Second, foreign governments, despite the temptation, should refrain from insisting that their envoys engage separately with host governments. It may be more useful to designate a lead interlocutor for specific issues and establish smaller working groups to press forward on overarching challenges, including peace negotiations, security assistance, humanitarian access, and Mali's political transition. When it is advantageous to do so, diplomatic envoys should play “good cop, bad cop” to extract concessions. Finally, the international community should seek to untangle its various security operations which may have overlapping jurisdictions and duplicative goals. Sahelian and European countries—particularly France—as well as organizations such as the UN, AU, G5 Sahel, and ECOWAS need to develop a tighter concept of operations to execute their CT, counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, and border security missions. ■

Judd Devermont is the director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. *Marielle Harris* is a research associate with the CSIS Africa Program.

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



CSIS BRIEFS are produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Cover Photo: PHILIPPE DESMAZES/AFP via Getty Images

ENDNOTES

- 1 Steven Erlanger and Scott Sayare, “French Airstrikes in Mali Deter Islamist Rebels,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/world/africa/french-airstrikes-push-back-islamist-rebels-in-mali.html>.
- 2 “Opération Barkhane,” Ministère des Armées, October 7, 2020, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane>.
- 3 Smaïl Chergui, “Statement by his Excellency Ambassador Smaïl Chergui, AU Commissioner for Peace and Security” (speech, Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, July 10, 2020), <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/statement-by-his-excellency-ambassador-smail-cherGUI-au-commissioner-for-peace-and-security-virtual-counter-terrorism-week>.
- 4 “European Union Training Mission Mali”, European Union, <https://eutmmali.eu/>.
- 5 EUTM Mali Mandates, <https://eutmmali.eu/mandates/>.
- 6 U.S. Department of Defense, Oct 2017 Niger Ambush, Summary of Investigation (Washington, DC: DOD, May 2018), https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418_niger/img/Oct-2017-Niger-Ambush-Summary-of-Investigation.pdf.
- 7 “US, France Confirm Death of Key al-Qaida Emir in Africa,” *Voice of America*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-france-confirm-death-key-al-qaida-emir-africa>; “France says it has killed senior al Qaeda operative in Mali,” *France24*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201113-france-says-it-has-killed-senior-al-qaeda-operative-in-mali>.
- 8 Ruth Maclean, “Crisis in the Sahel Becoming France’s Forever War,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/world/africa/france-sahel-west-africa-.html>.
- 9 European Union External Action Service, “L’Union Européenne et le G5 Sahel un Partenariat Plus que Jamais d’actualité,” Fact Sheet, April 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_eu_g5_sahel_updated.pdf.
- 10 “West African leaders pledge \$1 billion to tackle terrorism,” *France24*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190915-west-african-leaders-pledge-1-billion-tackle-terrorism>.
- 11 Romani Prodi, “Written Statement by UN Special Envoy for the Sahel Region,” United Nations, September 20, 2013, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2013-09-20_SE_Sahel_Stmt.pdf.
- 12 “Online Event: The 2nd Annual Sahel Summit,” CSIS, October 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-2nd-annual-sahel-summit>.
- 13 Paul Folmsbee, “Op-Ed: The time has come to stop talking and unite against corruption at all levels,” U.S. Embassy in Mali, December 9, 2016, <https://ml.usembassy.gov/ambassador-folmsbee-time-come-stop-talking-unite-corruption-levels/>.
- 14 U.S. Embassy in Burkina Faso, “U.S. Embassy Ouagadougou Statement on Human Rights Watch Report (July 8): Burkina Faso Allegations of Extrajudicial Killings,” Press release, July 8, 2020, <https://bf.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-ouagadougou-statement-on-human-rights-watch-report-july-8-burkina-faso-allegations-of-extrajudicial-killings/>.
- 15 Judd Devermont, “Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel,” CSIS, *CSIS Briefs*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/politics-heart-crisis-sahel>.
- 16 Judd Devermont, “How Fraym Explains Extremist Violence in Burkina Faso,” Fraym, March 9, 2019, <https://fraym.io/violence-in-burkina-faso/>.
- 17 “La CENI échange avec l’APMP sur l’enrôlement des électeurs,” CENI, <http://www.ceni.bf/?q=content/la-ceni-%C3%A9change-avec-lapmp-sur-lenr%C3%B4lement-des-%C3%A9lecteurs>.
- 18 Anna Schmauder, Guillaume Soto-Mayor, and Delina Goxho, “Strategic Missteps: Learning From a Failed EU Sahel Strategy,” ISPI, November 5, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy-28130>.
- 19 UN Security Council, Resolution 2531, S/RES/2531 (June 29, 2020), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2531\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2531(2020)).
- 20 “Online Event: The 2nd Annual Sahel Summit,” CSIS, October 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-2nd-annual-sahel-summit>.
- 21 Alex Thurston, “Could Mali’s Coup Have Been Avoided? Part Two – The International Community’s Mistakes,” *Sahel Blog*, August 21, 2020, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2020/08/21/could-malis-coup-have-been-avoided-part-two-the-international-communitys-mistakes/>.
- 22 Government of the Republic of Mali, “Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process,” https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML_150620_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali_Issu-du-Processus-d’Alger.pdf.
- 23 Héli Nsaïba et al., “Mid-Year Update: 10 Conflicts to Worry about in 2020,” The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, August 18, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/18/mid-year-update-10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2020/#1597759395479-dd34f4e9-c05f>.
- 24 The Carter Center, *Report of the Independent Observer On the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Emanating from the Algiers Process* (Atlanta: The Carter Center, January 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/mali-independent-observer-report-eng-jan-2020.pdf>.
- 25 Albert Barume, et al., *Letter dated 7 August 2020 from the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali addressed to the President of the Security Council* (New York: United Nations Security Council, August 7, 2020), <https://undocs.org/S/2020/785/Rev.1>.
- 26 Edith M. Lederer, “Differences on peace progress in Mali amid terrorist acts,” AP News, June 11, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/696667d27bd1390ac7085ca559df586>.
- 27 “Hearing to Review Fragility in the Sahel before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs,” March 10, 2020 (statement of David Hale, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs), <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/03.10.20%20-%20Hale%20Testimony.pdf>.
- 28 United Nations, “Security Council Renews Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2531 (2020),” Press release, June 29, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14235.doc.htm>.
- 29 “Ignoring Sahel Region Will Have ‘Disastrous Implications’ for West Africa, Peace Operations Chief Warns Security Council,” Relief Web, November 16, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/ignoring-sahel-region-will-have-disastrous-implications-west-africa-peace>.
- 30 François Soudan and François-Xavier Freland, “Mali – Ibrahim Bou-bacar Keïta : « Je ne crois pas avoir échoué »,” *Jeune Afrique*, December

- 21, 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/286400/politique/mali-ibrahim-boubacar-keita-ne-crois-echoue/>.
- 31 Joe Penney, "Burkina Faso has replaced Mali at the epicenter of the Sahel's security crisis," Quartz Africa, November 27, 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis/>.
- 32 Anouar Boukhars, "Keeping Terrorism at Bay in Mauritania," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, June 16, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/keeping-terrorism-at-bay-in-mauritania/>.
- 33 Serge Daniel, "Mali frees over 100 jihadists seeking hostage swap," Agence France-Presse, October 5, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/mali-frees-over-100-jihadists-140509748.html>; "A conflict without borders continues to play out in the Sahel," ICRC, July 8, 2020, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/conflict-without-borders-continues-play-out-sahel>.
- 34 Delphine Mechoulan, "Mali's National Conference: A Missed Opportunity for Reconciliation," IPI, April 14, 2017, <https://theglobalobserver.org/2017/04/mali-reconciliation-conference-national-understanding-azawad/>.
- 35 "Mali: le dialogue national inclusif s'achève sur quatre résolutions," RFI, December 22, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20191222-mali-dialogue-national-inclusif-acheve-quatre-resolutions>.
- 36 International Crisis Group, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists* (Dakar/Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 28, 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward-dialogue-central-malis-jihadists>.
- 37 "Mali's president admits to holding talks with senior jihadist leaders," France24, February 10, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200210-exclusive-mali-s-president-acknowledges-dialogue-with-jihadist-leaders>.
- 38 "Mali and France at odds over talks with Islamist militants," Reuters, October 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-france/mali-and-france-at-odds-over-talks-with-islamist-militants-idUSKBN27B1NA>.
- 39 Baba Ahmed, "Mali releases 180 jihadists in likely prisoner exchange," AP News, October 4, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-archive-prisoner-exchange-6ef5691bdbe75fa000c01a30a6c9ed8e>.
- 40 Alex Thurston, "Sahel: Smail Chergui and Antonio Guterres Open to Idea of Supporting Dialogue with Jihadists," *Sahel Blog*, October 20, 2020, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2020/10/20/sahel-smail-chergui-and-antonio-guterres-open-to-idea-of-supporting-dialogue-with-jihadists/>.
- 41 "Online Event: The 2nd Annual Sahel Summit," CSIS, October 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-2nd-annual-sahel-summit>.
- 42 "Mali and France at odds over talks with Islamist militants," Reuters, October 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-france/mali-and-france-at-odds-over-talks-with-islamist-militants-idUSKBN27B1NA>.
- 43 Alex Thurston, "France should give Mali space to negotiate with jihadists," War on the Rocks, April 16, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/france-should-give-mali-space-to-negotiate-with-jihadists/>.
- 44 Aaron Ross, "Where state is weak, Mali militants broker talks between rival clans," Reuters, August 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-islamists-mali-insight/where-state-is-weak-mali-militants-broker-talks-between-rival-clans-idUSKBN2500LA>.
- 45 Olivier Dubois, "Mali : dans la région de Mopti, une « paix » précaire avec les jihadistes," *Jeune Afrique*, October 4, 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1052437/societe/mali-dans-la-region-de-mopti-une-paix-precaire-avec-les-jihadistes/>.
- 46 "EUCAP Sahel Mali," EUCAP Sahel Mali, https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eucap-sahel-mali_fr; Council of the European Union, "EUCAP Sahel Mali: mission extended until 14 January 2021, €67 million budget adopted," Press release, February 21, 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/02/21/eucap-sahel-mali-mission-extended-until-14-january-2021-budget-of-67-million-adopted/>.
- 47 Sampson Kwarkye, Ella Jeannine Abatan, and Michaël Matongbada, "Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states?" ISS Africa, September 30, 2019, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>.
- 48 "EU appoints envoy to Sahel," Politico, March 18, 2013, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-appoints-envoy-to-sahel/>; "OIC welcomes peace, nat'l reconciliation deal in Mali," Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), May 17, 2015, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2441924&language=en#>.
- 49 "Providing a More Collective and Inclusive Response to the Sahel Crisis," Sahel Coalition, <https://www.coalition-sahel.org/en/>.
- 50 "The Sahel Summit," CSIS, September 11, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/events/sahel-summit>; "Online Event: The 2nd Annual Sahel Summit," CSIS, October 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-2nd-annual-sahel-summit>.
- 51 Andrew Lebovitch, "'More coordination' won't fix the Sahel," European Council on Foreign Relations, January 10, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_more_coordination_wont_fix_the_sahel/.
- 52 Council of the European Union, "EU-African Union relations: joint communiqué of the AU Peace and Security Council and the EU Political and Security Committee," Press release, October 26, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/26/eu-african-union-relations-joint-communiqué-of-the-au-peace-and-security-council-and-the-eu-political-and-security-committee/>.
- 53 International Crisis Group, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys."*
- 54 Tricia Bacon, "No Shortcuts to Negotiating With al-Shabaab," *Lawfare*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/no-shortcuts-negotiating-al-shabaab>.
- 55 "Online Event: The 2nd Annual Sahel Summit," CSIS, October 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-2nd-annual-sahel-summit>.