

## Terrorist challenges in the Sahel and NATO's southern flank

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### Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse the growing security threats in the Sahel region and their impact on the stability of the North Atlantic Alliance's (NATO) southern flank. The authors adopt the thesis that the increasing presence of armed groups and the activity of terrorist organisations, primarily the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, are leading to escalation of violence, political and social crisis, which consequently threatens international security, particularly in Europe and NATO countries. The article is based on the author's analysis of the report, a review of the available literature and complementary sources, including reports from journalists and experts specialising in the Sahel region. A research query was conducted, which formulated four key questions concerning the causes of conflict escalation, the impact of interventions and withdrawals of international forces, the role of external actors (Russia and China among others) and the effectiveness of NATO and European Union actions. The analysis showed that these challenges require a comprehensive, long-term international strategy, combining military actions with political reforms and the region development support, while at the same time taking

into account threats not only in the southern, but also in the eastern NATO's flank.

### Keywords

Sahel, terrorism, NATO, Africa, Wagner Group, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, migration

## Introduction

The Sahel is a region of strategic importance and an area of international competition<sup>1</sup>. Due to the intensification of jihadist insurgencies<sup>2</sup>, political instability exacerbated by coups d'état<sup>3</sup>, illegal migration<sup>4</sup>, as well as increasing environmental degradation<sup>5</sup> the need for comprehensive international engagement in the region has never been more urgent. The sources of the crisis include military juntas incapable of governing and maintaining peace and security, whose power greatly hinders the development of states. The difficult situation is confirmed by the presence in the Sahel of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping forces, foreign troops, private military companies (PMC) and mercenaries. It seems that leading organisations, primarily the European Union<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> S. As-Sazid, *Emerging Security Challenges in the Sahel and the Need for an Adaptative Approach towards Peacebuilding*, "International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers Journal" 2023, vol. 9, no. 9, pp. 17–34.

<sup>2</sup> D. Lounnas, *Le djihadisme au Sahel apres la chute de Daech*, "Politique étrangère" 2019, no. 2, pp. 105–114.

<sup>3</sup> *Military juntas in Africa's 'coup belt' fail to contain extremist violence*, Financial Times, 24 XI 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/d0af5533-ecdd-4be0-bbb8-e5b3e4bb11b4> [accessed: 30 XII 2024].

<sup>4</sup> A. Fakhry, *More than borders: effects of EU interventions on migration in the Sahel*, Institute for Security Studies, 16 VIII 2023, <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/morethan-borders-effects-of-eu-interventions-on-migration-in-the-sahel> [accessed: 30 XII 2024].

<sup>5</sup> *Ecological Threat Report 2024. Analysing ecological threats, resilience & peace*, The Institute for Economics & Peace, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/ETR-2024-web.pdf> [accessed: 15 XII 2024].

<sup>6</sup> R. Marangio, *Sahel reset: time to reshape the EU's engagement*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 5 II 2024, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/sahel-resettime-reshape-eus-engagement> [accessed: 15 XII 2024].

the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO)<sup>7</sup>, should re-evaluate their strategies in order to stabilise the region and prevent its further disintegration.

The Sahel countries, which have a complex history of colonialism embedded in their creation, are struggling with the long-term consequences of lack of development, social fragmentation and political exclusion. The challenges of regional development and stability are combined there with threats such as: terrorism, extremism, ethnic tensions and systemic corruption. This state of affairs has a negative impact on both national and international efforts aimed at improving the situation in the Sahel. The instability of the region is compounded by the changing dynamics of external influences. The Russian Federation<sup>8</sup> and the People's Republic of China<sup>9</sup> are increasingly positioning themselves as partners for the Sahel states. They offer financial and military support, but they do not expect changes in human rights or the introduction of democratic principles, which is often one of the conditions imposed by Western countries. This allows the Sahel regimes to maintain a semblance of autonomy without sacrificing their own political independence. African states opt for short-term gains at the expense of long-term stability<sup>10</sup>. The geopolitics of the Sahel is thus shaped by both local problems and the interests of global powers. Foreign competition for political, economic and military influence weakens state structures, deepens social divisions and threatens security not only in Africa, but also outside the continent<sup>11</sup>. It should be emphasised that in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the situation is dynamic

<sup>7</sup> *Independent expert group supporting NATO's comprehensive and deep reflection process on the southern neighbourhood. Final Report. May 2024*, NATO, [https://nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf](https://nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf) [accessed: 16 XII 2024].

<sup>8</sup> *Moscow's winning return to Africa*, Le Monde, 21 VIII 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/08/21/moscow-s-winning-return-to-africa\\_6719241\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/08/21/moscow-s-winning-return-to-africa_6719241_4.html) [accessed: 7 XII 2024].

<sup>9</sup> S. Bhattacharya, *China's Great Game in the Sahel*, Vivekananda International Foundation, 12 X 2022, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2022/china-s-great-game-in-the-sahel> [accessed: 7 XII 2024].

<sup>10</sup> F. Mintoiba, *Footsteps of change: Rising influence of China and Russia in Africa*, Daily Sabah, 3 X 2024, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/footsteps-of-change-rising-influence-of-china-and-russia-in-africa> [accessed: 7 XII 2024].

<sup>11</sup> A. Olech, B. Wójtowicz, *Rywalizacja o surowce w Sahelu – region konfliktu mocarstw* (Eng. Competition for resources in the Sahel – a region of conflict between powers), Trimarium.pl, 18 XI 2022, <https://trimarium.pl/projekt/rywalizacja-o-surowce-w-sahelu-region-konfliktu-mocarstw/> [accessed: 7 XII 2024].

in terms of security level and terrorist activity. The phenomena taking place in the north of the African continent directly threaten the EU and undermine NATO's security not only on its southern flank, but also on its eastern flank<sup>12</sup>. The time has come for a coordinated, action-oriented strategy that addresses not only the problems that have been present for years, but also the new problems of the Sahel.

The article discusses the key factors that fuel the crises in the Sahel. The authors make the case for the development of a new international strategy in which NATO and EU Member States would play the most important role. This strategy should be based on a sustained and coordinated engagement, including support for the local security structures, investment in socio-economic development of the region, efforts to stabilise state institutions and countering radicalisation as well as forced migration. This approach should be prioritised over ad hoc, reactive military interventions. The authors adopted a research thesis: the significant presence of armed groups and the increase in terrorist activity in the Sahel region lead to escalation of violence and political destabilisation, which increases the threat to international security, especially in Europe and NATO countries, as well as intensifies uncontrolled migration. The research query detailed the following research questions:

1. Which factors exacerbate the rise of armed groups and the escalation of conflicts in the Sahel region?
2. How international military interventions and withdrawals of troops have affected security and stability of the Sahel?
3. How the growing influence of external actors, i.e. Russia and China, are changing the political dynamic and security in the Sahel region?
4. Can NATO and EU actions effectively stop the spread of terrorism in the Sahel and illegal migration?

The article is based on the report prepared by the authors<sup>13</sup>, an analysis of the available literature and a small amount of material including information provided by journalists and experts dealing with the Sahel.

<sup>12</sup> A. Olech, P. Wójcik, *Wojna o Sahel [Raport]* (Eng. The war for the Sahel [Report]), Defence24, 17 XI 2024, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/wojna-o-sahel-raport> [accessed: 15 XII 2024].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## Sahel – characteristics of the region

The Sahel is a semi-arid region of Africa stretching from the Atlantic in the west to the Red Sea in the east, forming a transition zone between the desert Sahara and the fertile savannahs of Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>14</sup>. It includes parts of the following countries: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria and Cameroon. The region is characterised by a harsh climate – with high temperatures and erratic and unpredictable rainfall – which makes farming much more difficult and livelihood of local communities dependent on crops and livestock<sup>15</sup>. The unfavourable environmental conditions have a major impact on the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Sahel, but political factors, including weak state institutions, armed conflicts and competition for influence between global powers, are playing an increasingly important role in destabilising the region.

The countries most commonly recognised as central to the Sahel are Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania, which form the G5 Sahel grouping. In other depictions, the region also includes parts of Senegal, Sudan and Eritrea, demonstrating the complexity of the geographical and political boundaries of the Sahel (Figure 1). Although the basic understanding of this region as a semi-arid zone between the Sahara and the savannahs remains the same, the perception of its extent may vary depending on the adopted perspective – ecological, climatic, geopolitical, military, religious or cultural. Views of the Sahel from an ecological perspective focus on the characteristics of the natural environment and vegetation typical for the region. These, which main determinants are climatic conditions, primarily take into account factors such as temperature and rainfall distribution. In geopolitical terms, the boundaries of the Sahel are determined according to national divisions and the dynamics of political changes, while sociocultural definitions are based on the community of traditions, language and lifestyle of local communities. The military perspective takes into account the presence of military bases, the level of training of armed forces and the flow of armaments, while the agricultural

<sup>14</sup> *Sahel*, Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahel> [accessed: 14 XII 2024]; H.O. Ibrahim, *The Sahel – a Land of Opportunity*, United Nations, 10 VI 2019, <https://unpartnerships.un.org/news/2019/sahel-land-opportunity> [accessed: 14 XII 2024].

<sup>15</sup> T.A. Benjaminsen, H. Svarstad, *Climate Change, Scarcity and Conflicts in the Sahel*, in: T.A. Benjaminsen, H. Svarstad, *Political Ecology. A Critical Engagement with Global Environmental Issues*, n.p. 2021, pp. 183–205. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56036-2\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56036-2_8).

perspective takes into account the specificity of cropping systems and the dependence on climatic conditions<sup>16</sup>. The diversity of these approaches underlines how multidimensional the nature of the region is<sup>17</sup>.



**Figure 1.** The Maghreb and the Sahel.

Source: A. Olech, *Grupa Wagnera w Afryce* (Eng. The Wagner Group in Africa), Defence24, p. 27. The report is available on the website: <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/rosyjscy-najemnicy-raport-z-dzialalnosci-w-afryce>.

<sup>16</sup> B. Tesfaye, *Climate Change and Conflict in the Sahel*, Council on Foreign Relations, November 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/report/climate-change-and-conflict-sahel> [accessed: 27 V 2025].

<sup>17</sup> *G5 Sahel Region: Country Climate and Development Report – Annex*, World Bank Group, <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/document-detail/099150106302237600/p1773430dc79a10c09f600cf2ac1e0e9f3> [accessed: 27 V 2025].

Approx. 64,5% of the Sahel's population is under the age of 25, making it one of the youngest regions in the world demographically. This age structure creates potential for economic development, provided there is adequate investment in education, vocational training and job creation<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the Sahel has significant potential for renewable energy, especially solar, which can contribute to its energy transition. Initiatives such as Desert to Power aim to harness this potential by developing renewable energy infrastructure<sup>19</sup>. However, realisation of these opportunities requires overcoming major challenges which are political instability, climate change and food insecurity<sup>20</sup>.

Internal conflicts in the Sahel have forced tens of millions of inhabitants to flee their homes. Violence, massive corruption, political instability and extreme climatic events, especially droughts and sudden floods, have led to the numerous humanitarian crises. The lack of adequate food is affecting nearly 40 million people<sup>21</sup>. The situation is exacerbated by limited humanitarian access in important countries in the region – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad, as the situation there is unstable and violence persists. In 2025, the US government withdrew humanitarian aid, implemented mainly under the aegis of the United States Agency for International Development, which organised the necessary aid in entire Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>22</sup>. The United Nations alerts that during the summer season (between June and August 2025), as many as 52 million people will be at risk of starvation. The largest food crisis in all of West and Central Africa is in Mali. The United Nations needs more than USD 700 million by

<sup>18</sup> A. Dieng, *The Sahel: Challenges and opportunities*, "International Review of the Red Cross" 2021, vol. 103, no. 918, p. 775, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/editorial-the-sahel-challenges-opportunities-adama-dieng-918> [accessed: 15 XII 2024]. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383122000339>.

<sup>19</sup> *Desert to Power initiative*, African Development Bank Group, <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/desert-power-initiative> [accessed: 15 XII 2024].

<sup>20</sup> W. McMakin, *UN food agency says 40 million people are struggling to feed themselves in West and Central Africa*, AP, 20 XII 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-food-insecurity-hunger-304b66ef7b9b56262fe1114a4b28c7e6> [accessed: 26 XII 2024].

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> R. Maclean, S. Jammeh, *Africa Received Billions in U.S. Aid. Here's What It Will Lose*, The New York Times, 8 III 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/world/africa/africa-usaid-funds.html/> [accessed: 20 IV 2025].

October 2025 to carry out essential humanitarian operations in West Africa and the Sahel<sup>23</sup>.

The Sahel has become one of the main centres of activity for armed groups, rebels and jihadist organisations<sup>24</sup> that operate with impunity in vast, poorly supervised areas<sup>25</sup>. The lack of efficient border control – particularly on long and difficult-to-access stretches between countries – facilitates the movement of terrorists and transfer of people and weapons. The presence of extremist factions deepens political destabilisation, threatens to local economies and hinders humanitarian operations. A coordinated response from both regional governments as well as international organisations is essential in order to effectively address these threats. From a security point of view, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Sudan and Chad – countries that are particularly vulnerable to violence from terrorist groups and mercenaries and the influence of military regimes – are the most important for the stability of the Sahel. Although other countries of the region also face serious challenges, their internal situation is not deteriorating as much as in the mentioned countries<sup>26</sup>. The effective response to the security challenges is a prerequisite for a stable and more predictable future of the Sahel<sup>27</sup>. This future is not without significance also for Europe, which is already suffering the consequences of the destabilisation of the region – both in terms of migration and geopolitics<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> *More than 50 million in West and Central Africa at risk of hunger*, United Nations, 9 V 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163086> [accessed: 30 V 2025].

<sup>24</sup> L. Raineri, F. Strazzari, *Jihadism in Mali and the Sahel: evolving dynamics and patterns*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 29 VI 2017, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/jihadism-mali-and-sahel-evolving-dynamics-and-patterns> [accessed: 16 XII 2024].

<sup>25</sup> Center for Preventive Action, *Violent Extremism in the Sahel*, Council on Foreign Relations, 23 X 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel> [accessed: 16 XII 2024].

<sup>26</sup> *Defining a New Approach to the Sahel's Military-led States*, International Crisis Group, 22 V 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-mali-niger/defining-new-approach-sahels-military-led-states> [accessed: 27 V 2025].

<sup>27</sup> L.V. del Portillo, *Challenges in the Sahel: Opportunities for Europe*, Eurodefense Network, 21 II 2021, <https://eurodefense.eu/2021/02/21/challenges-in-the-sahel-opportunities-for-europe/> [accessed: 18 XII 2024].

<sup>28</sup> J. Borrell, *Together for the security, stability and development of the Sahel*, European Union External Action, 8 V 2020, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/together-security-stability-and-development-sahel\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/together-security-stability-and-development-sahel_en) [accessed: 27 V 2025].



## Great rivalry in the region

The Sahel constitutes a complex geopolitical area, in which groups with diverse ideologies, aims and structures coexist – from tribal communities, to religious organisations and local institutions. Many of them have been there for years, such as Tuaregs, who have lived in Azawad for centuries and claim these lands. Over the past decade, the structure of this community has undergone radical changes. There has been an increase in the importance of jihadist-terrorist groups that have not only dominated the pre-existing armed organisations, but have also taken control of parts of the territory and significantly destabilised the situation in the region. Following the coup in Niger in 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) as a mutual defence pact and an alternative to the pro-Western trend in the region<sup>29</sup>.

### Mali

There are three main parties of the conflict in Mali. They are currently represented by dozens of factions and rebellions (their number changes every month). The first camp is the pro-state stream, whose narrative is shaped and implemented by the Malian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Maliennes, FAMA). This formation uses the support of three main allied structures, that vary in scope and character of operation:

- 1) ethnic militia – above all, representatives of the Dogon ethnic group, actively supported by the authorities in Bamako and the military junta of General Assimi Goïta. These militias are involved in ongoing ethnic conflict with the Fulani, some of whom – deprived of state protection – are seeking security within the structures of organisations such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS); the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)<sup>30</sup>;

<sup>29</sup> J. Czerep, *Konsekwencje powołania Konfederacji Państw Sahelu* (Eng. The consequences of establishment of the Confederation of Sahel States), Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 14 VIII 2024, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/konsekwencje-powolania-konfederacji-panstw-sahelu> [accessed: 15 I 2025].

<sup>30</sup> A. Hauchard, *In Violence-shattered Central Mali, Victims Recount Their Lives*, Barron's, 9 II 2022, <https://www.barrons.com/news/in-violence-shattered-central-mali-victims-recount-their-lives-01644458408> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

- 2) the Africa Corps – Russian paramilitary formation previously known as the Wagner Group, currently functioning as an official mission of support to Mali's authorities<sup>31</sup>;
- 3) pro-government Tuareg groups – including former members of the organisation Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA), who currently operate, among others, in the tri-state border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where they carry out patrol and security tasks<sup>32</sup>.

The second camp is made up of anti-government groups, the most important of which is associated to Al-Qaeda Islam and Muslims' Support Group (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, JNIM), coalition Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad (CSP-DPA) and newly established Azawad Liberation Front, gathering Tuaregs and other ethnic minorities. Although formally separate structures, they share a hostile attitude towards the authorities in Bamako, as well as family ties and personal relationships between leaders, which enable them to maintain a fragile agreement<sup>33</sup>. The leaders of JNIM and CSP-DPA were active participants in the conflict of 2012–2013, that ended with the French military intervention. Memories of the betrayal committed by Al-Qaeda against the Tuaregs during this period remain vivid and affect current relationships within this camp<sup>34</sup>.

The third camp is the most cruel participant of the current conflict – the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel, ISSP). The group took control of a large part of the border area between Mali and Niger<sup>35</sup>. Unlike other

<sup>31</sup> D. Ehl, *How the Russian Wagner Group is entrenching itself in Africa*, Deutsche Welle, 27 X 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-kremlin-wagner-group-influence-in-central-african-republic-sudan-mali/a-70599853> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>32</sup> H. Nsaibia, C. Weiss, *The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida Finally Came to West Africa*, "CTC Sentinel" 2020, vol. 13, no. 7, <https://ctc westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTC-SENTINEL-072020.pdf> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>33</sup> C. Weiss, *Tuareg rebels, JNIM each claim victory over Russia's Wagner Group in Mali*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 29 VII 2024, [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op\\_ed/2024/07/29/tuareg-rebels-jnim-each-claim-victory-over-russias-wagner-group-in-mali/](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2024/07/29/tuareg-rebels-jnim-each-claim-victory-over-russias-wagner-group-in-mali/) [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>34</sup> *Tuareg rebels driven out of Timbuktu*, Al Jazeera, 29 VI 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/6/29/tuareg-rebels-driven-out-of-timbuktu> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>35</sup> A.Y. Zelin, S. Cahn, *Exploiting a "Vast jihad Arena": The Islamic State Takes Territory in Mali*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 IX 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>.

actors, ISSP does not maintain alliances with either Bamako authorities or other armed groups in Mali, making it an isolated but threatening force in the region. The rapid expansion of ISSP is of concern in the context of the growing number of terrorist groups active in the Sahel.

### Burkina Faso

In 2014, the situation of security forces in the country was deteriorated by removal of president Blaise Compaoré from office as well as the army's conflict with special services and military police. In 2020, president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré established a militia known as Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (Les Volontaires pour la défense de la Patrie, VDP), whose aim was to involve the civilian population in the fight against the growing jihadist threat and to organise a social line of defence against violent attacks by the terrorist groups<sup>36</sup>. Over time, however, the formation proved operationally inefficient and incapable of effectively countering the violence. The deteriorating security situation and expansion of JNIM structures resulted in the state authorities losing control of much of the territory. Currently, according to available data, the military junta commanded by Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, exercises effective authority over less than 60% of the Burkina Faso territory<sup>37</sup>.

This junta significantly increased the number of VDP and expanded its involvement in actions against jihadist groups. However, the increase in the number of members of this formation has coincided with accusations of serious abuses. Between 2023 and 2024 international organisations and the media revealed cases of indiscriminate crimes committed by VDP against civilians, including killings, kidnappings and looting<sup>38</sup>. Currently, VDP is estimated to have approx. 100 000 volunteers supporting Burkina Faso's regular army, but there are serious concerns about the quality

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org/policy-analysis/exploiting-vast-jihad-arena-islamic-state-takes-territory-mali [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>36</sup> H. Nsaibia, *Actor Profile: Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP)*, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, 26 III 2024, <https://acledata.com/2024/03/26/actor-profile-volunteers-for-the-defense-of-the-homeland-vdp/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>37</sup> *Crisis in Burkina Faso: What you need to know and how you can help*, International Rescue Committee, 14 II 2024, <https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-burkina-faso-what-you-need-know-and-how-you-can-help> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>38</sup> *Burkina Faso: Unlawful Killings, 'Disappearances' by the Army*, Human Rights Watch, 29 VI 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/29/burkina-faso-unlawful-killings-disappearances-army> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

of their training, the lack of effective oversight, as well as the exclusion of some communities from the recruitment process and the failure to include parts of the regions in operational planning. Due to growing concerns about the brutalisation of the conflict, Ouagadougou government should urgently strengthen mechanisms to control and monitor the VDP's activities, to prevent further escalation of violence and a deepening crisis of social confidence.

## Niger

After the 2023 overthrow of president Mohamed Bazoum by the military junta, a number of pro-government organisations supporting the idea of his return to power began to emerge in Niger. Some of these came from backgrounds previously involved in Tuareg rebellions, in both Niger and Mali territory. One of the most recognisable figures associated with this trend is Rhissa Ag Boula, the former leader of Tuareg armed movements, who set up the Council of Resistance for the Republic (Conseil de la Résistance pour la République, CRR). Its aim was to organise political and military support for the ousted president Bazoum<sup>39</sup>. However, in September 2024, CRR was dissolved due to internal divisions and disagreements over strategy and vision for the future. In response to the disintegration of the organisation, Rhissa Ag Boula announced a new formation – the Free Armed Forces (Forces armées libres, FAL)<sup>40</sup>.

One of the main groups supporting ousted president Bazoum is Patriotic Liberation Front (PLF) – gaining in importance armed formation, increasingly active on the Nigerian political scene and in the military sphere. In June 2023, PLF carried out an attack on a Chinese oil pipeline linking Niger and Benin. The justification was an allegation of betraying the interests of the ousted government by the junta's support of foreign, mainly Chinese, influence<sup>41</sup>. In August 2024, the leader of the organisation

<sup>39</sup> P. Kum, *Niger: L'ancien rebelle nigérien, Rhissa Ag Boula, annonce son intention de reprendre les armes pour chasser les putschistes*, Alwihda Info, 21 VIII 2023, [https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Niger-L-ancien-rebelle-nigerien-Rhissa-Ag-Boula-annonce-son-intention-de-reprendre-les-armes-pour-chasser-les\\_a125857.html](https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Niger-L-ancien-rebelle-nigerien-Rhissa-Ag-Boula-annonce-son-intention-de-reprendre-les-armes-pour-chasser-les_a125857.html) [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>40</sup> J. le Bihan, *Former Niger minister launches movement to overthrow junta*, The Africa Report, 27 IX 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/363047/former-niger-minister-launches-movement-to-overthrow-junta/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>41</sup> L. Fleming, T.I. Issoufou, *Niger confirms anti-junta rebels behind oil attack*, BBC, 22 VI 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c511n4edl7lo> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

met in Tinzaouaten, in the north of Mali, with a representative of Tuareg leadership. The meeting took place just a month after the battle between the forces of the Russian-backed Mali government and the Tuareg and Al-Qaeda coalition. This event is indicative of the progressive coordination between PLF and Tuareg rebel groups<sup>42</sup>.

Niger is one of the states in the Sahel region, on whose territory three ISIS-affiliated groups operate at the same time. The presence of these factions, which include both cross-border structures and local cells, makes the country particularly vulnerable to escalating violence and poses a serious challenge to maintain internal stability and security in the region. Currently, these factions are: the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which operates mainly in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger border region, where it carries out attacks on government forces and civilians; the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) – active in North-Eastern Nigeria, but also in south-eastern Niger, in Chad and Cameroon, where it attacks the army and infrastructure, and the Islamic State in Libya (IS Libya), that has its main structures in Libya, but its militants also infiltrated the north of Niger. The ISIS leaders are working to consolidate power, facilitated by the lack of threat from the US and French air force, whose military bases have been closed in May 2024<sup>43</sup>. The armed groups of terrorists systematically used sieges, threats and kidnappings as well as planted explosives and landmines to control supply routes and expand their influence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Islamic groups impose forced taxes, destroy and plunder civilian infrastructure such as places of worship, health centres, food stores, bridges<sup>44</sup> and schools. They also threaten, kidnap and kill teachers.

<sup>42</sup> *Mali and Niger rebels met to 'strengthen' ties amid political turmoil*, Al Arabiya News, 2 IX 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2024/09/02/mali-and-niger-rebels-met-to-strengthen-ties-amid-political-turmoil> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>43</sup> *US military says withdrawal from Niger is complete*, France24, 16 IX 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240916-us-military-says-withdrawal-from-niger-is-complete> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>44</sup> E. Pertier, *After Military Took Power, Terrorist Attacks Only Got Worse*, The New York Times, 22 XII 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/22/world/africa/niger-war-coup.html> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

## Division of terrorist groups in the Sahel

A number of terrorist organisations are active in the Sahel (Figure 2). The most important of them can be divided on the basis of their relationship with global network of Al-Qaeda and ISIS:

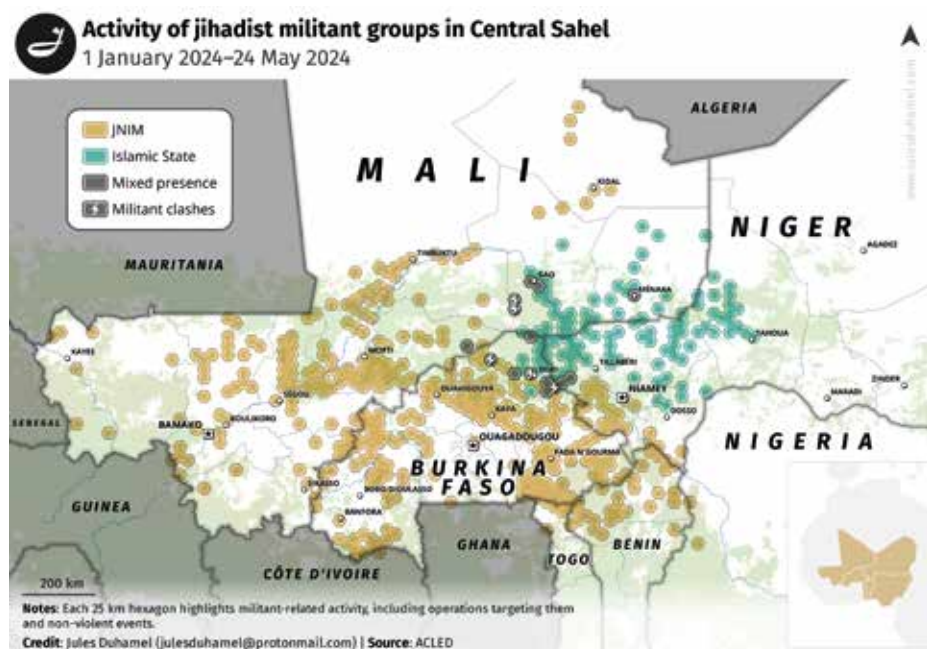
- 1) Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) originates from jihadist groups fighting in the civil war in Algeria, since 2007 under the aegis of Al-Qaeda the organisation has been fighting in the North and West Africa. One of several groups forming Shura Council of terrorists assists local structures in the Sahel in the fight against military rebellions and democratic rule;
- 2) JNIM was established in 2017 as a coalition of loyal groups, well-disposed to Al-Qaeda, that decided to reorganise their operations in the face of pressure from French troops and ISIS. After eight years, it is successfully operating in Mali, Burkina Faso as well as Niger and extends its influence throughout West Africa. In 2025, JNIM also has conducted its operations in North West Nigeria and Benin;
- 3) ISIS divided into three main operational provinces:
  - a) ISSP covering Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger,
  - b) ISWAP in Nigeria and neighbouring countries,
  - c) IS Libya on the Libya and Niger borderland.

Since 2024, all of these units have a single overarching structure that coordinates operations with both the central command in Syria and the structures in Eastern and South Africa, which strengthens the presence of ISIS along major smuggling routes and in strategic regions of the Sahel.

The number of fundamentalist, extremist and terrorist groups in the Sahel region has grown steadily since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since 2019, these organisations have extended their activities to the coastal states of West Africa – Benin, Cote d'Ivoire and Togo<sup>45</sup>. Since 2022, there has been a sharp increase in the number of attacks and they have been extremely violent. In 2024, approx. 11 200 deaths from terrorist activities were recorded in the Sahel – three times more than in 2021. Burkina Faso

<sup>45</sup> M. Jeannin, *Ghana worries about rise of terrorist threat in Gulf of Guinea*, Le Monde, 7 VI 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/06/07/ghana-concerned-about-extension-of-terrorist-threat-to-coastal-states-of-gulf-of-guinea\\_5985936\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/06/07/ghana-concerned-about-extension-of-terrorist-threat-to-coastal-states-of-gulf-of-guinea_5985936_124.html) [accessed: 5 I 2025].

remains the most vulnerable country, accounting for 48% of all attacks and 62% of those killed in the region<sup>46</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Activities of jihadist groups in the Central Sahel.

Source: ACLED. Quoted after: J. Duhamel, *Central Sahel – Map of jihadist militant groups activity (Jan–May 2024)*, Jules Duhamel, 21 VI 2024, <https://www.julesduhamel.com/central-sahel-map-of-jihadist-militant-groups-activity-jan-may-2024/> [accessed: 15 I 2025].

Before the French intervention in the Sahel, there were a number of groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Their weakening and the expansion of ISIS have resulted in further fragmentation of jihadism in the region. In response, in 2017, Tuareg Iyad Ag Ghali, together with representatives of AQIM and other groups, led them to unite in JNIM<sup>47</sup>. The aim was both to counter French and UN counter-terrorist efforts and to limit

<sup>46</sup> *Global Terrorism Index 2025*, Institute for Economics & Peace, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf> [accessed: 27 V 2025].

<sup>47</sup> T. Joscelyn, *Analysis: Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa*, FDD's Long War Journal, 13 III 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php> [accessed: 5 I 2025].



the recruitment of fighters by ISIS, and above all to stop the fragmentation of jihadist groups and to keep the organisation united in the Sahel.

Strategic operational plans of JNIM initially focused on three countries in the region: Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The formation of the coalition was intended to strengthen the effectiveness of recruitment efforts and to build a centre of power alternative to local governments perceived as allies of “western crusaders”<sup>48</sup>. In the longer term, JNIM envisaged expanding to more countries, including the Gulf of Guinea coastal states. In spite of these ambitions, the high command of this group – Majlis al-Shura – struggles with internal problems typical of decentralised terrorist organisations. These include loyalty conflicts between the organisational structure and clan ties, the ambitions of individual leaders and weak governance at all levels of the hierarchy.

One of the most important elements of *AQIM Playbook*<sup>49</sup> was the principle of avoiding the repetition of mistakes previously made by other jihadist groups. Abdelmalek Droukdel, long-serving emir of AQIM, killed in 2020 by French forces, warned against actions that could trigger foreign intervention and thus damage the long-term interests of the movement. He foresaw the potential consequences of expanding too quickly – particularly in the context of the events of 2013, when the spread of jihadist insurgency to the south of Mali prompted France to launch the “Serval” operation<sup>50</sup>. Droukdel warned commanders against a rapid march to Bamako, as he decided that such action could provoke international intervention. This cautious strategy, however, became a source of tension within AQIM and between AQIM and some allied groups that favoured a more aggressive operational approach.

From the perspective of AQIM, one of the main mistakes made by earlier jihadist movements was to impose harsh Shariah-based punishments too quickly and to prematurely implement quasi-state structures based on

<sup>48</sup> C. Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook. Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Expansion into West Africa*, n.p., April 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/AQIMs-Imperial-Playbook.pdf> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>49</sup> *AQIM Playbook* – a term used to describe strategies, tactics and methods of operation used by AQIM. It refers to the group's operational, propaganda and recruitment schemes, developed on the basis of its experience in Northern Africa and the Sahel. Abdelmalek Droukdel played an important role in the creation and implementation of *AQIM Playbook*. As the emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb from 2004 until his death in 2020, he was the organisation's chief strategist and ideologue.

<sup>50</sup> T. Joscelyn, *Analysis: Al Qaeda groups...*



Islamic emirate principles. This approach, according to this organisation, led to the loss of popular support and the collapse of the jihadist state project. After starting the French Operation Barkhane in 2014, AQIM adopted a more cautious strategy and focused on winning the support of local communities. These measures have brought tangible results, particularly in areas lacking effective state management. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali (2022), Burkina Faso and Niger (2023) has reinforced the belief among AQIM supporters that their long-term strategy is bearing fruit and that the idea of creating an Islamic emirate in the region is once again viable<sup>51</sup>.

In recent years, Burkina Faso has become a major area of JNIM activity and expansion. This process began in 2016, when Katiba Macina, a unit of AQIM trained by Al-Qaeda, supported by its recruits, finances and command, quickly gained influence in this country. This was fostered by the lack of a coherent political vision among the state elite, the inability of the military to fight the uprisings effectively and the apparent reluctance of the French forces to engage directly. After a series of coups in Burkina Faso and after the forced withdrawal of France, jihadists greatly expanded their territorial gains at the request of the new junta<sup>52</sup>. Terrorists have surrounded the capital, Ouagadougou, seized the country's main roads and cut off access to cities. The situation in Burkina Faso has implications for other countries in the region who feel threatened by terrorism<sup>53</sup>.

Al-Qaeda is able to carry out attacks to the north and south, such as in Togo and Benin, and infiltrate the W-Arly-Pendjari National Park complex, which includes the Gulf of Guinea and West African countries. The number of terrorist attacks has steadily increased since 2022, especially in the countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea<sup>54</sup>. An increase in the intensity

<sup>51</sup> H. Nsaibia, *Actor Profile: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)*, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, 13 XI 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/11/13/actor-profile-jamaat-nusrat-al-islam-wal-muslimin-jnim/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>52</sup> *Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Continue to Spiral*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 29 I 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2024-deaths-militant-islamist-violence-africa-rise/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>53</sup> S. Douce, *Burkina Faso's Djibo city struggles under jihadist siege*, La Croix International, 7 XI 2024, <https://international.la-croix.com/world/burkina-fasos-djibo-city-struggles-under-jihadist-siege> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>54</sup> J. Zenn, *Brief: JNIM Attacks in Benin Represented Group's Growing Operational Strength in Periphery*, The Jamestown Foundation, 11 XII 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/brief-jnim-attacks-in-benin-represented-groups-growing-operational-strength-in-periphery/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

of attacks and success in securing roads and key communication points in the south-east of Burkina Faso in 2024 meant that in 2025 the Al-Qaeda was confidently entering northern Benin and strengthening its position in the country. According to Critical Threats, more than 157 people were killed in attacks there in the first four months of 2025, this is 50 more than in 2024, and statistics indicate that by the end of 2025 the number of victims could increase up to fivefold<sup>55</sup>. Due to dynamically changing situation and fragility of the state structures in Togo and Benin, further empowerment of jihadists and the establishment of operational bases by them will have direct consequences for states of the Sahel. This region, already struggling to cope with the increasingly dense network of supply routes used by the terrorist group, may not be able to effectively counter their further expansion.

Niger is heavily influenced by groups operating in Mali and Libya borderlands and the Lake Chad basin. The poor, strategically located country has been home to French and US forces for years and has served as a key Western partner in counter-terrorism operations in the region of the Sahel. The US drone base in Agadez was the largest of its kind in the region<sup>56</sup>. It was set up to monitor terrorist groups and support Niger in its fight against them. In recent years, this has mainly been ISIS.

The presence of ISIS in the Sahel has been controversial from the outset among the jihadists. The conflict for dominance between Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Sahel initially took a unique form. Despite their growing importance of ISIS, particularly in Mali, the two organisations, i.e. JNIM (related to Al-Qaeda) and the local ISIS factions, avoided an open clash for a long time. This state of affairs has come to be known as Sahelian exceptionalism<sup>57</sup>. This term, denoting the coexistence of two competing organisations in one

<sup>55</sup> L. Karr, *Africa File, April 24, 2025: JNIM's Growing Pressure on Benin; Turkey to Somalia; Salafi-Jihadi Cells Continue to Grow Across Nigeria*, Critical Threats, 24 IV 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/africa-file-april-24-2025-jnim%E2%80%99s-growing-pressure-benin-turkey-somalia-salafi-jihadi/> [accessed: 20 V 2025].

<sup>56</sup> M. Banchereau, *US hands over its last military base in Niger to the ruling junta*, The Associated Press, 7 VIII 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/niger-united-states-troops-army-military-bases-junta-sahel-coup-1ae5334bc68eb6b45e1e2d612bfb2b6f> [accessed: 5 I 2025]; *US troops pull out of Niger's Air Base 101*, Reuters, 8 VII 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-troops-pull-out-nigers-air-base-101-2024-07-07/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>57</sup> W. Nasr, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, New Lines Institute, 2 VI 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception> [accessed: 10 I 2025].

region, which is unusual for global jihadism, was coined by the French journalist Wassim Nasr.

By the end of 2019 JNIM and Malian ISIS cells (mainly ISGS) avoided direct confrontation, and one could even see the signs of local cooperation in selected areas<sup>58</sup>. However, in 2020 JNIM, which saw the growing strength of ISGS and the exodus of fighters to this faction, decided to clash openly and forged closer ties with the global Al-Qaeda structure. Since then, the conflict between JNIM and ISGS has developed into a regular war, interrupted only by occasional ceasefires and ad hoc agreements of a tactical nature<sup>59</sup>.

Between 2022 and 2023 both the army of Mali with the support of the French, and Al-Qaeda made attempts to defeat ISGS<sup>60</sup>. Although these forces are hostile to each other, they were united by the goal of reducing ISGS's influence in the region. The Islamic State is known for a more brutal and restrictive government than Al-Qaeda, which is due in part to the more rigorous approach to the *takfir* doctrine. The Muslims, who deviate from the true faith, as interpreted by ISIS, are considered infidels by them. This interpretation allows them to justify violence not only against ideological opponents, but also against local populations who do not accept ISIS authority<sup>61</sup>.

A new phase in the activities of ISIS may be evidenced by the armed drone attack carried out in Nigeria in December 2024. This was the first action of its kind on such a large scale<sup>62</sup>. In 2025, ISIS will probably try to extend its influence in the Sahel and directly in Nigeria, where the largest branch of ISWAP organisation at the moment is located, which has made no secret of its ambitions for Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon territory and is trying to restore power over areas lost under Abu Bakar Shekau the leader of organisation Boko Haram.

<sup>58</sup> H. Nsaibia, C. Weiss, *The End of the Sahelian Anomaly...*

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> *Islamic State group nearly doubled its Mali territory in under a year, UN says*, France 24, 26 VIII 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230826-islamic-state-group-doubled-controlled-territory-in-mali-in-under-a-year-un-experts-say> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>61</sup> J. Kadivar, *Exploring Takfir, Its Origins and Contemporary Use: The Case of Takfiri Approach in Daesh's Media*, "Sage Journals" 2020, vol. 7, no. 3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2347798920921706> [accessed: 5 I 2025]. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920921706>.

<sup>62</sup> T. David, *Troops Foil Boko Haram, ISWAP Drone Attack In Buni Gari*, Leadership, <https://leadership.ng/troops-foil-boko-haram-iswap-drone-attack-in-buni-gari/> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

There has been a marked increase in ISGS activity in Morocco, Algeria and Spain over the past two years. ISGS, like other ISIS factions, is developing and testing various operational strategies and aims to become an independently operating structure capable of conducting promotional and recruitment activities, as well as coordinating international fighters. The aim of these activities is to gradually shift the axis of jihad towards Europe.

Cells established in North Africa are to target Mali, where ISGS has its territory<sup>63</sup>. In January 2025, the Moroccan services foiled an attempted ISGS operation on its territory. Terrorists preparing for attacks who were in contact with jihadists of the Islamic State in Mali were arrested<sup>64</sup>. In February 2025, the Moroccans again dismantled the ISGS network, carrying out an operation in nine cities. New ISGS plans came to light, coordinated from Mali by foreign fighters of Arab origin, who formed a special committee to establish contacts abroad and enlist recruits<sup>65</sup>. Through a network of cross-border links, ISGS smuggled weapons hidden in special caches into Morocco. It was supposed to have been picked up – by providing GPS coordinates – by the jihadists planning large-scale attacks<sup>66</sup>. This is an example of one of the many terrorist operations Spaniards and Moroccans broke up together in 2023–2025<sup>67</sup>.

In 2024, the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) attracted the most attention from the international community, mainly due to its growing ability to influence various groups and diasporas, and its effectiveness in infiltrating Europe by sending there agents and supporters<sup>68</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> A.Y. Zelin, *The Islamic State on the March in Africa*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 III 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-march-africa> [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>64</sup> S. Kasroui, *Morocco's BCIJ Foils Terrorist Plot, Arrests 4 ISIS-Affiliated Suspects Near Casablanca*, Morocco World News, 26 I 2025, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/01/367913/morocco-s-bcij-foils-terrorist-plot-arrests-4-isis-affiliated-suspects-near-casablanca> [accessed: 20 V 2025].

<sup>65</sup> *Morocco: ISIS-instigated plot foiled, 12 suspects arrested*, The North Africa Post, 19 II 2025, <https://northafricapost.com/84516-morocco-isis-instigated-terror-plot-foiled-12-suspects-arrested.html> [accessed: 20 V 2025].

<sup>66</sup> I. Toutate, *BCIJ Links 'Highly Dangerous' Foiled Terror Plot to Sahel Terrorist Groups*, Morocco World News, 24 II 2025, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/02/174948/bcij-links-highly-dangerous-foiled-terror-plot-to-sahel-terrorist-groups/> [accessed: 20 V 2025].

<sup>67</sup> A. Zelin, *The Islamic State on the March...*

<sup>68</sup> A. Jadoon et al., *From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan*, "CTC Sentinel" 2024, vol. 17, no. 5, <https://ctc.westpoint>.

A new campaign by jihadists in 2025 poses the threat to tourists in Maghreb and the Sahel, and thus to the lucrative tourism business. The kidnappings of Europeans in Algeria, Chad and Niger are a warning sign<sup>69</sup>. Based on what has happened so far, it can be assumed that in 2026 there is a likelihood that one of the terrorist groups will seize a major city in Mali or Burkina Faso. It appears that in the first half of 2025 Al-Qaeda is preparing the ground for lasting rule. An example of this is the city of Djibo, under siege for three years and exhausted by heavy attacks<sup>70</sup>. The consequence will be an escalation of the conflict, unseen for a decade, and the creation of a new terrorist “state”, markedly different from the rule of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria or Taliban in Afghanistan by its expansive nature.

If Al-Qaeda or ISIS jihadists manage to bring down the authorities in any of the countries that make up AES Alliance, there is a serious risk of a domino effect destabilising the other members of the agreement. The most alarming situation is currently in Burkina Faso, where the spread of terrorist groups poses a direct threat to neighbouring countries in the region as well<sup>71</sup>.

Even the newly elected President of Senegal, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who was initially seen as an adversary of the West because of his stance towards international economic and political institutions, called for European support in 2024, which clearly shows the scale of the threat. In order to prevent further escalation, a coordinated and long-term stabilisation initiative is needed, with the participation of the largest countries in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), particularly Nigeria. It should include security measures, institutional support and integration of political and economic activities for development of the region. It is also worth considering the possibility of the EU

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edu/from-tajikistan-to-moscow-and-iran-mapping-the-local-and-transnational-threat-of-islamic-state-khorasan/ [accessed: 5 I 2025].

<sup>69</sup> P. Wójcik, entry on the portal X, 19 I 2025, <https://x.com/SaladinAlDronni/status/188101394443363547> [accessed: 24 I 2025].

<sup>70</sup> *Al Qaeda affiliate says 200 soldiers killed in Burkina Faso attack*, Reuters, 16 V 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-affiliate-says-200-soldiers-killed-attack-burkina-military-site-reports-2025-05-15/> [accessed: 16 V 2025].

<sup>71</sup> J. Wójcik, *Sahel pogrąża się w terrorystycznej rebelii* (Eng. The Sahel plunges in a terrorist rebellion), Defence24, 30 IX 2023, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/sahel-pograzza-sie-w-terrorystycznej-rebelii> [accessed: 12 XII 2024].

organising a training mission, which will prepare African countries to counter terrorism primarily at the political level, but will also include specialised training for counter-terrorism groups.

### The presence in the Sahel of countries outside the region

Since 2013, France has played the most important role in counter-terrorism and stabilisation in the Sahel for more than a decade, mainly through Operation Barkhane and Mission Takuba. This involvement included Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, where the French trained local forces and supported their fight against the jihadists. However, diplomatic tensions, especially after the military coups d'état in Mali in 2020 and 2021, led to the withdrawal of French troops in 2022<sup>72</sup>. France is now re-evaluating its strategy with an emphasis on European partnerships and a limited military presence in Africa.

Germany's efforts to stabilise the situation in the Sahel focus on UN peacekeeping missions and diplomatic initiatives such as the Sahel Plus. Germany is cooperating with neighbouring countries of the region, including Senegal, Ghana and Togo, to reduce migration and promote peace. Berlin is considering further military involvement, although its priority is EU coordination<sup>73</sup>. Germany is betting on dialogue and negotiation, which can help maintain stability in the region.

Spain, through EUTM Mali mission, played a significant role in the training of Mali armed forces. The Spaniards deployed there more than 8300 soldiers and supported counter-terrorist operations<sup>74</sup>. Although Madrid has extensive military and diplomatic experience in the region, and cooperates with Maghreb countries, e.g. on the former colony in Western Sahara, contested today by Morocco and the Polisario Front organisation, is now focused on securing the Mediterranean Sea and maintaining its

<sup>72</sup> A. Olech, *French Operation Barkhane in Africa – success or failure?*, Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations, 18 XII 2023, <https://internationalrelations-publishing.org/articles/3-17> [accessed: 3 XII 2024]. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17737.1>.

<sup>73</sup> *The Federal Government realigns its Sahel policy*, Federal Foreign Office, 3 V 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/2595298-2595298> [accessed: 4 XII 2024].

<sup>74</sup> L.M. Sanjuan, *Los soldados más temidos del mundo: hay una unidad española*, AS, 24 X 2024, <https://as.com/actualidad/politica/los-soldados-mas-temidos-del-mundo-n> [accessed: 4 XII 2024].

economic influence in Africa. The lack of a clear strategy to return to the Sahel suggests that Spanish involvement in the region will decrease.

Italy gradually increased its presence in Africa by opening new embassies and intensifying diplomatic visits. In 2023, in the face of political instability, Italy reduced their forces in Niger, but remains there and represents the EU and tries to maintain influence in the country despite its aggressive attitude towards the West. Italy also remains in Chad and is involved in training local units and working with European partners. Its strategy includes reducing illegal migration and strengthening relations with Maghreb countries<sup>75</sup>. Italy combines humanitarian aid with diplomacy, which is conducive to their positive perception in the region.

Turkey is increasing its influence in the Sahel. It is supplying drones and helping in the fight against terrorism, by which it supports the efforts of NATO<sup>76</sup>. At the same time a private military company Sadat sends mercenaries to regions of conflict and protects critical infrastructure, for instance in Niger. Ankara focuses on economic development, invests in infrastructure projects and expands embassy network<sup>77</sup>. Its strategy, which is less dependent on the resolution of human rights issues by states in the Sahel, makes it an attractive partner for African governments seeking an alternative to the partnership of the West.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) strengthen cooperation with Chad, to which they supply military equipment and where their troops are stationed. The role of the UAE as a new partner in providing security in the region is important, especially for local leaders who need to replace the traditional alliance with France. The Emirates can become a model for other Arab states, for instance Saudi Arabia. They can also fill the gap left by the withdrawal of France.

Estonia sent its troops to Mali, as part of the Operation Barkhane, to support counter-terrorism efforts in cooperation with international

<sup>75</sup> J. Renoult, *L'Italie, dernier partenaire occidental du Niger*, Le Monde, 23 VII 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/07/23/l-italie-ultime-partenaire-occidental-du-niger\\_6256111\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/07/23/l-italie-ultime-partenaire-occidental-du-niger_6256111_3212.html) [accessed: 6 XII 2024].

<sup>76</sup> *Sahel Showdown: How Türkiye Can Help NATO With Russian and Chinese Advances*, TRT World Research Centre, 29 VII 2024, <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/featured/perspectives/sahel-showdown-how-turkiye-can-help-nato-with-russian-and-chinese-advances/> [accessed: 10 XII 2024].

<sup>77</sup> B. Roger, T. Eydoux, *Drones turcs, avions russes... au Sahel, la guerre des airs est déclarée*, Le Monde, 20 XI 2024, [lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/11/20/drones-turcs-avions-russes-au-sahel-la-guerre-des-airs-est-declaree\\_6405083\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/11/20/drones-turcs-avions-russes-au-sahel-la-guerre-des-airs-est-declaree_6405083_3212.html) [accessed: 7 XII 2024].



partners. The country's engagement in Africa also includes digitalisation and e-governance initiatives as part of Estonia's broader foreign policy strategy for 2020–2030<sup>78</sup>. Despite the withdrawal of the military contingent, Tallinn remains open to future military missions and the development of cooperation with the African Union – with a particular focus on innovative partnerships in the areas of digital technology, sustainable development and energy transition.

The US focused on countering terrorism. They built an air base in Agadez and invest millions of dollars in training local forces. The coup in Niger in 2023 led to the withdrawal of the US troops, which has weakened the influence of the US in the region<sup>79</sup>. Russia took advantage of the situation. Through military cooperation and the location of private military companies in former French colonies, usually ruled by authoritarian governments, it seeks to challenge the dominance of the US in Africa.

France and the US, despite their common goal of fighting terrorism, often acted independently, which undermined their effectiveness. The lack of coordination has left the region unstable, despite huge investments in security. The two countries should step up their cooperation to respond more effectively to threats in the Sahel region, especially with the growing influence of Russia and China<sup>80</sup>.

The Chinese have become the main weapon supplier for Burkina Faso<sup>81</sup>. It usually ends up in the hands of Al-Qaeda, which means that this group has more resources to implement its plans. The EU countries should therefore consider various forms of support for the Gulf of Guinea

<sup>78</sup> *Estonia's strategy for Africa*, Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 V 2021, <https://vm.ee/en/estonias-strategy-africa> [accessed: 11 XII 2024].

<sup>79</sup> M.M. Phillips, B. Faucon, *U.S. Forces Try to Regroup as al Qaeda, Islamic State Sow Terror in West Africa*, The Wall Street Journal, 11 IX 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-moves-aircraft-commandos-into-west-africa-in-fight-against-islamist-militants-0b15c41b> [accessed: 11 XII 2024].

<sup>80</sup> A. Olech, *Francja i USA będą ponownie wojskowo współpracować w Afryce* (Eng. France and the US will again cooperate militarily in Africa), Defence24, 20 II 2024, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/francja-i-usa-beda-ponownie-wojskowo-wspolpracowac-w-afryce> [accessed: 11 XII 2024].

<sup>81</sup> G. Martin, *Burkina Faso receives huge batch of Chinese military equipment*, Defence Web, 27 VI 2024, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/land/land-land/burkina-faso-receives-huge-batch-of-chinese-military-equipment> [accessed: 12 XII 2024].



countries, in the worst case scenario re-establishing relations with the juntas in power there.

Russia and Iran have expressed an interest in developing closer relations with Niger, having the world's largest uranium deposits. The potential that the Sahel countries could use for their own development could be seized by foreign states hostile to the West.

## The role of NATO in the Sahel

The Sahel region remains one of the most undervalued and marginalised areas in EU<sup>82</sup> and NATO<sup>83</sup> security policies. The dynamics of changes that have taken place there since 2021, combined with the geopolitical proximity of the Maghreb, should make Europe rethink its engagement and step up its efforts in the region. Between 2021 and 2023, most EU and international initiatives concerning the Sahel have been suspended, despite security, migration and radicalisation challenges are steadily increasing. This situation calls not only for an in-depth analysis of potential threats, but also for the development of a long-term, coherent security strategy, adapted to the realities of the region.

Both the negative experience of the NATO intervention in Libya and the failure of French military mission in the Sahel have contributed to the current reticence of Western states. The EU and NATO countries are reluctant to engage in another long-running operation that would require a coordinated response to a complex challenges in the region.

Numerous national, regional and international actors, including the armed forces of the countries of the Sahel, the African Union, ECOWAS, the UN, the EU and partners outside the continent are involved in the region, but the problem is the lack of coordination. Inconsistent approaches, competing interests and limited cooperation mechanisms make stabilisation efforts fragmented and often ineffective. Although some of NATO Member States, particularly these maintaining historic ties

<sup>82</sup> European Parliament, *New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel. Addressing regional challenges through better governance*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS\\_BRI%282021%29696161\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI%282021%29696161_EN.pdf) [accessed: 14 XII 2024].

<sup>83</sup> NATO, *Strategic foresight analysis. Regional perspectives report on North Africa and the Sahel*, [https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NU\\_SFA\\_Report\\_North\\_Africa\\_and\\_the\\_Sahel\\_SACT\\_approved\\_final\\_edited\\_version.pdf](https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NU_SFA_Report_North_Africa_and_the_Sahel_SACT_approved_final_edited_version.pdf) [accessed: 14 XII 2024].

to the region, have over the years invested in the security and development of the Sahel, end of Operation Barkhane created a serious gap in the military space that remains unfilled to this day<sup>84</sup>.

In recent years, the NATO's security efforts have mainly focused on threats occurring in the Mediterranean Sea. The Alliance has implemented training campaigns within Member States, as well as strengthening cooperation with partners from North Africa<sup>85</sup>. Meanwhile, the steadily increasing number of terrorist incidents in the Sahel should prompt NATO to reassess its strategy priorities and pay more attention to this volatile region. The growth of the Islamic State in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali is of particular concern. It should be a wake-up call for policymakers and analysts dealing with trans-regional security<sup>86</sup>.

The character of ISIS's operations makes its presence a threat not only to the countries in which it has direct structures, but also to the countries of Southern Europe, mainly those with large Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian diasporas. There have been recent reports suggesting that ISIS is not only actively recruiting among these communities, but is also monitoring the activities of potential perpetrators of terrorist attacks on the territory of Spain<sup>87</sup>.

#### **The Sahel as an extension of NATO's southern flank. Implications for the Alliance**

In its future strategy, NATO should treat the southern and eastern flank as areas that are interlinked. Adopting this perspective requires minimising internal disputes and promoting deeper political integration on the twin

<sup>84</sup> C. Doxsee, J. Thompson, M. Harris, *The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2 III 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/end-operation-barkhane-and-future-counterterrorism-mali> [accessed: 19 XII 2024].

<sup>85</sup> A. Olech, *Cooperation of the Maghreb countries with NATO for security in the region*, Instytut Nowej Europy, 12 X 2021, <https://ine.org.pl/en/cooperation-of-the-maghreb-countries-with-nato-for-security-in-the-region/> [accessed: 19 XII 2024].

<sup>86</sup> R. Grammer, *Top counterterrorism official warns of ISIS' rapid rise in Africa*, Politico, 25 XI 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/25/top-counterterrorism-official-warns-of-isiss-rapid-rise-in-africa-00191571> [accessed: 20 XII 2024].

<sup>87</sup> L. Breton, *Terrorisme: l'État islamique avait des projets d'attentats visant les Jeux olympiques de Paris et l'Euro de football*, La Depeche, 17 VI 2024, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2024/06/17/terrorisme-letat-islamique-avait-des-projets-dattentats-visant-les-jeux-olympiques-de-paris-et-leuro-de-football-12022418.php> [accessed: 21 XI 2024].

tracks. The war in Ukraine has revitalised the structures of NATO, as evidenced by the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance. The reason was that these countries were concerned about potential aggression from Russia<sup>88</sup>.

This situation should prompt discussion on developing NATO strategy towards the south. The effectiveness of the new conception will depend on Alliance's ability to take action on the Sahel before there is a significant proliferation of terrorist organisations there<sup>89</sup>. During the NATO Summit in Vilnius in 2023, where the most important issue was the war in Ukraine, a separate document on Southern Europe was published and two of the most important threats to the Alliance – Russia and terrorist organisations were identified<sup>90</sup>.

In the past, the activity of NATO on the southern flank was dominated by developments on the eastern flank. Member States presented different approaches to defence capacity building from Africa side, and the war in Ukraine has focused even more attention on the east. However, this should not diminish engagement and strategy development in the south. The war in Ukraine has consequences for the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and Africa. Russian's geopolitical inclinations and increasing competition from China have brought to light the security issues common to East and South over the past decade<sup>91</sup>.

<sup>88</sup> Y. Atalan, *The Future of NATO's Southern Flank*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 10 VII 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-natos-southern-flank> [accessed: 23 XII 2024]; J. Davidson, *Four steps that NATO's southern flank strategy needs to succeed*, Atlantic Council, 25 VI 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/four-steps-that-natos-southern-flank-strategy-needs-to-succeed/> [accessed: 23 XII 2024]; A. Polyakova et al., *A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance: The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine*, Center for European Policy Analysis, 30 XI 2023, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-new-vision-for-the-transatlantic-alliance-the-future-of-european-security-the-united-states-and-the-world-order-after-russias-war-in-ukraine/> [accessed: 23 XII 2024].

<sup>89</sup> S. Colombo, I. Fakir, *NATO, North Africa, and the Sahel: Squaring the triangle of insecurity*, Middle East Institute, 5 VII 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/nato-north-africa-and-sahel-squaring-triangle-insecurity> [accessed: 23 XII 2024].

<sup>90</sup> *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, NATO, 11 VII 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm) [accessed: 23 XII 2024].

<sup>91</sup> Y. Atalan, *The Future of NATO's Southern Flank...*

### Current priorities and challenges to NATO

Geopolitical stability of the southern flank of NATO is very important for the security of Member States: France, the US, Italy, Spain, Turkey and Greece. Its maintenance requires increased coordination and interoperability between allies operating in the region, especially in relation to the most volatile areas such as Maghreb – with a clear focus on the situation in Libya – and the Sahel. Increasing influence of Russia and China in the Middle East and Africa, as well as the growth of terrorist organisations and criminal networks point to the urgent need for NATO to adopt long-term, integrated strategy towards these regions. Counter-terrorism efforts and effective migration management should be at the centre of such an approach. This is one of the most significant challenges for the countries of the Alliance's southern flank.

The effectiveness of NATO's operations on this flank may be undermined by tensions in Greek-Turkish relations, as well as by divergences between France, Spain and Italy over involvement in further military missions in Africa. Lack of political cohesion and limited willingness to cooperate may make it difficult to develop a coordinated response to security challenges in the region.

The countries of West Africa, among others, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin, recognise the growing threat from terrorist organisations and are increasingly calling for urgent support from the international community. In this context, the priority for NATO and EU should be to build sustainable political and economic ties with countries on the periphery of the Sahel and to ensure security in the region. Such an approach would not only reduce their dependence on strategic investments made by China, but would also hinder the activities of Russian mercenaries and counter the information war waged by third countries. More broadly, these measures would contribute to the real strengthening of local communities and increase the resilience of the entire region.

Despite efforts over the past ten years, NATO's activities as a security guarantor in the Sahel region remain inconsistent and have limited impact. This is primarily due to the diffuse and difficult-to-define nature of the threats, which encompass not only the activities of multiple terrorist groups, but also deep-seated political, social and economic problems. Additional challenges include the Alliance's unclear ambitions for the region, the lack of internal consensus among its members and the relatively limited use of military resources.

NATO's relations with partners from North Africa and the Sahel, including Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, focused mainly on combating transnational crime and strengthening regional military capabilities. Although this cooperation has contributed to a partial reduction in the activities of terrorist groups in the Mediterranean area, it has also had the unintended consequence of shifting militant activity to the centre of the continent and strengthening terrorist structures in the Central Sahel.

The situation is complicated by the unclear and unspecified policies of West European countries, which complicate NATO's efforts through lack of consultation when taking political action. For instance, France and Spain are pursuing different policies towards Morocco and Algeria, confronting each other over the Western Sahara and hindering contact that could be used to stabilise the situation in the Sahel.

In the coming years, NATO will need to develop a coherent, realistic strategy towards the Sahel region, based on cooperation with legitimate governments, selected private military companies acting on their behalf (this may seem dangerous, but these are viable military structures) and local communities. Only such an approach can lead to the formulation of an effective strategic vision which takes into account the complexity of challenges specific to this region<sup>92</sup>. The Alliance is now at a turning point in terms of shaping overseas missions, following the end of its involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and with a limited presence in Libya, Syria and the Sahel. There is a need to reconsider the role of NATO in fragile areas and to develop new models of action that are not simply a duplication of previous interventions, but a viable response to 21<sup>st</sup> century threats.

The countries of the Sahel, facing a growing threat from terrorist organisations, are now in a situation where they have to make strategic choices: either they confront the West and the NATO structures, or they face alone a rising wave of jihadist violence that neither Russia nor China, despite their growing presence in the region, can effectively stem. This situation provides a real opportunity for Western states to rebuild influence and increase their credibility as a security partner. In the face of a changing threat architecture, NATO should consider reorganising its mission in

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<sup>92</sup> S. D'Amato, E. Baldaro, *Does the Sahel need NATO?*, ICCT, 26 VIII 2024, <https://icct.nl/publication/does-sahel-need-nato-0> [accessed: 24 XII 2024].

the region, expanding the scope of its operations and engaging more forcefully militarily in countries facing long-lasting jihadist insurgencies.

## Migration

Africa is experiencing an unprecedented demographic transition as the region with the fastest population growth in the world. By 2050, the continent's population will grow from the current 1.2 billion to approx. 2.5 billion people<sup>93</sup>. Between 10 million and 12 million young Africans enter the labour market each year. This creates both huge development opportunities and serious challenges for the economic and education systems. More than 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25 and these young societies have to contend with many difficulties, such as terrorism, repressive power and extreme poverty. The continent's unique demographic profile makes Africa very much at the centre of the global debate on the future of employment, education and mobility for young people. Due to the lack of prospects in the region, an increasing number of them are seeking better living conditions outside the continent and they choose mainly Europe.

One of the main factors in the migration crisis has become the threat of jihadism. These are exacerbated by the war waged by the AES Alliance against Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Following the rupture of agreements with the EU by the military governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, migration routes leading to Maghreb and the southern borders of Europe have been reactivated. Although Tunisian and Algerian administrations, supported financially by the EU, are taking steps to turn back migrants, new routes of transit are constantly developing. The fact that those moving towards Europe also include fighters linked to terrorist organisations is of great concern. This poses a serious threat to the internal security of European countries.

As climate change intensifies, the situation in Africa, especially in the Sahel region, is getting worse. Desertification and droughts are forcing millions of people from their homes, further weakening an already fragile socio-political structure. This ecological catastrophe is creating ideal

<sup>93</sup> *Forecast of the total population of Africa from 2020 to 2050*, Statista, 22 III 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1224205/forecast-of-the-total-population-of-africa> [accessed: 27 XII 2024].

conditions for extremist groups to recruit new members among displaced, desperate communities. Terrorist groups are transforming vast areas of the Sahel into their own territories, taking advantage of the ineptitude of the military juntas that have forcibly taken over governance. These areas have become impossible for the authorities to control. Europe, which is already struggling to cope with the challenges of migration, faces a double threat – a humanitarian crisis and a growing terrorism that is increasingly affecting it.

The route via Maghreb and the Mediterranean Sea to Spain, Italy and France is the most heavily trafficked migration road<sup>94</sup>. Due to increasing pressure on this route, migrants are increasingly using alternative corridors. One of them is the route through Russia and Belarus, from where they try to cross the EU borders and reach Lithuania, Latvia and Poland<sup>95</sup>. This direction, used by regimes in Minsk and Moscow as a tool of a political pressure, confronts EU border countries with both a migration crisis and security threats.

The stakes for Europe and NATO have never been higher. The lack of a coordinated international strategy in the face of the Sahel's complex challenges carries the risk of escalating crisis and a lack of control. The current situation will lead to larger migratory movements and more sophisticated terrorist operations targeting European cities. Without adequate border control mechanisms and international cooperation, migratory movements can turn into a crisis that destabilises the security system not only in border states but also in the entire EU. Migration is also a kind of weapon. Thousands of unidentified people, among whom are members of terrorist groups, have a direct influence on the security of EU and NATO countries, and in this case the possibility of military response is limited. The Alliance is therefore obliged to protect the borders<sup>96</sup>.

<sup>94</sup> V. Malingre, P. Jacqu  , *European Union wants to toughen fight against illegal immigration*, Le Monde, 18 X 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/18/european-union-wants-to-toughen-fight-against-illegal-immigration\\_6729757\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/18/european-union-wants-to-toughen-fight-against-illegal-immigration_6729757_4.html) [accessed: 12 XII 2024].

<sup>95</sup> Z.   liwa, A. Olech, *Wyzwania w kontek  cie migracji i kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej*, "Wiedza Obronna" 2022, vol. 278, no. 1, pp. 87–105. <https://doi.org/10.34752/2022-d278>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



## Summary

The deterioration of the situation in the Sahel will continue in the coming years. The rise of the jihadist threat, the brutality of military regimes, climate changes and migration movements are all issues that will continue to challenge both Africa and Europe. The current state of security in the Sahel indicates a degradation of social, economic and political life. Local armies are unable to control more than 60% of their own territory<sup>97</sup>. There is no question of investment or development in societies that are, after all, so different from one another.

Financial aid to the countries of the region is too low. The Sahel needs a new economic development strategy and direct military assistance such as air support, permanent military bases or special operations against terrorists carried out on the territory of Africa. Leaving the terrorists and rebels to fend for themselves may seem an easy and safe solution, but in the decades to come, poorly prepared West African states will be targets for terrorist organisations, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda, which promote mainly Islamic fundamentalism.

The Sahel states are increasingly entering into new partnerships, especially with China, Russia and countries in the Arabian Peninsula. Unlike the financial support offered by Western states, which often impose conditions on transparency, democratisation and respect for human rights, the new partners do not require political change. Moreover, they provide immediate financial benefits, which for the military juntas ruling the region is an important factor in supporting the maintenance of power and control<sup>98</sup>.

In the face of a difficult situation, the strategy for NATO is to cooperate with countries of the region. This means co-operating with countries close to the Sahel, i.e. allied to NATO and the West, in order to train the troops of African countries there and prevent terrorist groups from proliferating. Even if these activities are not directly related to the Sahel, NATO and EU countries, they will soon be forced to interact with states and organisations in Maghreb and the Sahel anyway.

<sup>97</sup> A. Antil, *Un an après sa création, une Alliance des États du Sahel qui se cherche*, IFRI, 16 IX 2024, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/presse-contenus-repris-sur-le-site-presse-lien-externe-avec-citation/un-apres-sa-creation-une> [accessed: 28 XII 2024].

<sup>98</sup> A. Olech, *The Wagner Group in Africa. The sham battle of Russian mercenaries against terrorism*, "Terrorism – Studies, Analyses, Prevention" 2024, no. 5, pp. 273–309. <https://doi.org/10.4467/27204383TER.24.010.19398>.



From a military point of view, it is important to maintain the presence of international forces in Africa, close to the regions where ISIS and Al-Qaeda are active, and consequently where the military authorities cooperate with Russia. This applies in particular Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Military action should be complemented by support from the governments of other African countries, including those of the African Union, which are engaged in the region. Positive relations with the civilian population must be nurtured, which can result in greater respect for the law of armed conflict and the rule of law. The armed forces must exemplify the values promoted by the states of the region and enjoy the trust of the civilian population. This is lacking in Africa. The difficulty is the cultural and ethnic diversity of this continent, but even a small common denominator should be used to build an agreement.

It is worrying that after more than a decade of violence, a new phase of crisis is emerging. Although there are similarities with the situation in 2012 (before the arrival of troops from NATO and EU countries, led by Operation Barkhane) it is now a more complicated security situation in the Central Sahel. The region is increasingly unstable and at the same time the influence of international organisations in the region is diminishing. Underestimating the gravity of the situation and ignoring the build-up of complex problems in the Sahel will mean that, in a few years' time, the decisions that NATO will make in relation to the region will only have a military mission dimension. The contemporary crisis in the Sahel must therefore not go unanswered. The first step should be the development of a political presence in the region, followed by the training of African soldiers and then the implementation of measures to effectively monitor and manage the situation in order to minimise the losses, above all in terms of human lives.

It is necessary to take advantage of the existing opportunity, as the threat of terrorism is increasing in Europe. The Russian Federation and other states hostile to the Alliance are pursuing a very active policy in the Sahel region, which requires a strong response from NATO and partners. The challenge of simultaneous engagement on eastern and southern flanks may prove too much for the Alliance and EU.

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