



Quarterly Report

The Sahel: Insecurity Between the African Desert and Savannas



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Foreword

Welcome to Samphire Risk's latest Quarterly Report. In this edition, we look at one of the most volatile regions on the planet, the Sahel. For any organisation involved in mitigating, insuring, or responding to malicious and hostile risk, it poses many questions.

The risks and threats to human and financial assets are numerous and complex. That said, it is also a region of enormous economic potential with natural resource, populous and developing markets and a hunger to throw off the shackles of the past. For all these reasons it is therefore increasingly seen as a region of strategic importance for global powers and those with ambitions to just that.

Our report looks at some of the historical reasons for tension and what the future may hold for a region that is vast in size, complexity and potential.

I hope that you enjoy the report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CH', located below the text 'I hope that you enjoy the report.'

Charlie Hanbury
Chief Executive Officer
Samphire Risk



Africa's Sahel Region





Influence of Individual States: The Ebb and Flow of Strategic Influence

France

The Sahel stretches from the Atlantic in the west to the Red Sea in the east; it is truly a vast land mass. For centuries the region has been heavily influenced by France; whether directly as a colonial power or, more recently, as a post-colonial influencer using mechanisms like the OIF¹.

Throughout this time, France has sought to guide, stimulate and exploit the region, initially for the exclusive benefit of France. More recent overtures have been part of a broader French strategy, one that sought to modernise ties with the region's French speaking nations; check American influence after the collapse of the Soviet Union; and reinforce the role of Francophone culture in the modern Maghreb² and Sahel³. France also views the region as being well within its security sphere, so any insecurity or volatility emanating from the Sahel with the potential to impact France or French strategic interests, will attract a French response.

One of the most significant effects of the Arab Spring of 2011 was the collapse of the Libyan State and the consequential influx of heavily armed Tuareg fighters into northern Mali in 2012. This influx and its impact on northern Mali coincided with the emergence of Islamist extremists in the same region at the same time.

The violence that ensued triggered a response from France which in 2014 led to the launch of French military operations⁴ across the central Sahel. France did not undertake these operations alone, however, and with an expanded mandate also included the militaries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger⁵. Given France's history in the

Sahel and the on-going efforts to strengthen strategic links with the region, it is fair to say that at the outset the nations involved in these joint operations were broadly aligned. From a French (and to a large extent Western European, US and UN) perspective, these operations were conceived and launched to defeat a potential global threat. Seeking to degrade its ability to spread and to grow; to support democratically elected Francophile governments; and to re-new and deepen France's ties with the nations involved. The end state for the governments of Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) were likely to have been more straightforward; to remove the issue from their doorstep and, in 2013/14, this measure of alignment was viewed to be 'good enough'.

It is striking that with the passage of time and military juntas now in control, Mali and the CAR view the military operations more as acts of self-serving French neo-colonialism than strategic philanthropy. After nearly a decade without a decisive military victory or demonstrable improvement in security, Mali and the CAR no longer feel obligated to turn to France, a failing strategic ally for support, preferring instead to explore the alternatives.

It would therefore appear that, despite significant expenditure and material human cost to France in the pursuit of better or new strategic relationships with the Sahel, these initiatives have failed and even been detrimental to the broader Western world. If this is the case, it leaves the resource-rich and geo-strategically important region of the Sahel in a dangerous state of flux. ►

United States of America

The emergence of the Sahel as the new centre of gravity for Islamic State (IS) triggered the US to invest over \$3.3 billion in security assistance in the area over the past two decades⁶. Of this significant figure, analysis shows that a large share was invested tactically rather than on strategic initiatives designed to deliver long-term, sustainable solutions to the IS threat.

There is nothing to suggest that the US intends to change its current 'light touch' approach. Indeed, the recent decision by the US to pivot south, away from the Sahel and towards partnerships with Coastal West African (CWA) states⁷ suggests that the US views its current policy of tactical military engagement in the Sahel as sufficient. Either that, or that France's failure to deliver strategic results signals an end to a broader Western influence in the region and, as such, a new line of strategic intent is required.

Other Influences

Russia was quick to identify the opportunities afforded by Western Europe's waning influence and US hesitancy to engage comprehensively in the Sahel. Through a combination of anti-imperial rhetoric and advocacy of its own colonial indifference to Africa, Russia now appears to be a rising and influential force in the region.

Further east, having gained a strategic foothold in Djibouti (also at the expense of France) China is expanding west using its Belt and Road Initiative to exert influence and increase the reach of Beijing.

There are also new influences emerging, arguably with less strategic clout than China and Russia, but with stronger Islamic credentials and greater cultural links. In conjunction with the effective use of soft power, this has positioned Turkey, Qatar and the UAE strongly with the Sahel's incumbent regimes, at least for now.

‘Through a combination of anti-imperial rhetoric and advocacy of its own colonial indifference to Africa, Russia now appears to be a rising and influential force in the region.’



Changes to International Governance Frameworks

Governance is defined by the Rand Corporation⁸ as ‘the rules that dictate how actors interact with one another within an interdependent system’⁹. Since the end of World War Two, the pre-eminent system for dictating these rules internationally has one been based predominantly on the evolved requirements of the most influential western governments and institutions of 1945; it has become known as the Rules Based Order (RBO)¹⁰. The RBO served the majority of the world well through the remainder of the 20th century and in to the 21st; the challenge now is that it is no longer the only viable global management model. The rules it mandates are not universally followed in a decreasingly bipolar world; proponents of other systems do not necessarily share the view that places like the Sahel lack governance or require that governance be imposed upon it.

Historical Governance Framework

Historically, governance in the Sahel was implemented and enforced by the colonial powers who annexed the region in the 19th century. The end of colonial rule triggered the requirement for a new governance framework, resulting in a system of agreements founded on the doctrine of the RBO. Amongst other things, this enabled western-backed industrial commerce¹¹ in the Sahel in the post-war

period. Contemporary events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, added some impetus for further change; however, because the terms mandated by the historic RBO based framework were so advantageous for incumbents, it remained the basis for evolutionary change.

Then the Arab Spring happened. ►

Proponents of other systems do not necessarily share the view that places like the Sahel lack governance or require that governance be imposed upon it. ◀

Strategic Governance in the 21st Century

The Arab Spring of the early 2010s was an event so profound it triggered fundamental changes to regional dynamics across the Maghreb and the Sahel. From it emerged new actors who quickly evolved to present a strategic threat to the region at large. Reactive operations by the international community to deal adequately with this threat and to secure the status quo failed; this led to both a significant erosion of western influence in and, latterly, a fundamental change to the geo-political landscape of the Sahel.

It is now most unlikely that incumbent governments will agree to use historic commercial methodology as a guide for future governance structures, or will be governed solely by the RBO system; the goal posts have changed.

In their place, the governments of the Sahel appear to expect governing rules and systems better aligned to their own requirements (rather than those defined by the international community) and if new definitions based on expediency rather than the old norms are required, then so be it.

Russia was again quick to recognise this new strategic reality and the opportunity it offered. The response in Mali and the Central African Republic has been an offer of security assistance in return for commercial contracts on terms agreed between the contractor and the host nation. These contracts are still relatively new in strategic terms but, so far, the commercial model on which they are based appears to be gaining traction. In part this is because the security they deliver produces results that the French and the UN could not.

The longer-term impact of Islamist (and other militant) activity on the Sahel has yet to emerge but early indications appear to suggest that the structures which governed the region's political, diplomatic, commercial and security landscape during the first two decades of the 21st century have gone and are unlikely to return.

In their place, new systems are beginning to emerge and are being enforced by governments confident in their right to do so, supported by new actors who are willing to play by new rules in order to secure commercial opportunity. On this basis, the West has a decision to make.



The Impact of Proxies

There are 14 countries in the Sahel. Each has its own government. Most are assessed to be fragile¹²:

Country	Government Type	Relative Stability
Mauritania	Unitary Semi-Presidential Islamic Republic	Fragile (142/179)
Senegal	Democratic Republic	Stable (80/179) ¹³
Gambia	Democratic Republic	Stable (67/179)
Guinea Bissau	Semi-Presidential Democratic Republic	Fragile (148/179)
Guinea	Transitional Government (Military Rule)	Fragile (164/179)
Mali	Military Rule	Fragile (166/179)
Burkina Faso	Military Rule	Fragile (158/179)
Niger	Military Rule ¹⁴	Fragile (155/179)
Nigeria	Federal Republic	Fragile (164/179)
Chad	National Transitional Council	Fragile (170/179)
Cameroon	Unitary Presidential Republic	Fragile (158/179)
Central African Republic	Presidential Republic	Fragile (171/179)
Sudan	Military Rule	Fragile (174/179)
Eritrea	Unitary One-Party Presidential Republic	Fragile (160/179)

The fragility of most of these states is not a recent phenomenon; newly emergent influences have added significantly to their fragility and, in some cases, have led to direct and fundamental change. These new influences fall into two broad categories:

Ethno Nationalists

These comprise:

- **Tuareg nationalists** represented by:
 - Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA).
 - Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA).
 - Part of the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA-CMA).

All of whom wish to establish a secular independent state (Azawad) in Northern Mali.

- **The Fulani** are nomads who inhabit large tracts of the Sahel which they access to breed and graze cattle. They are also heavily represented in the Islamist extremist groups identified above and have been driven to armed conflict, both as an ethno nationalist group, and as part of the Islamist insurgency. They seek to counter the activities of incumbent governments who they believe constrain their freedom in order to reduce their impact on scarce natural resources within nation states, or for economic gain after ecological impacts '...decimated their herds and impoverished their families'¹⁵. ►

Composition of Fulani within Total Population by Country			
Country	Fulani Population (000's)	Total Population (000's)	Fulani Share of Total Population (%)
Nigeria	16,800	190,000	8.8
Guinea	4,900	13,000	37.7
Senegal	3,500	16,000	21.9
Mali	3,000	18,500	16.2
Cameroon	2,900	24,000	12.1
Niger	1,600	21,000	7.6
Mauritania	1,260	4,200	30.0
Burkina Faso	1,200	19,000	6.3
Chad	580	15,000	3.9
The Gambia	320	2,000	16.0
Guinea-Bissau	320	1,900	16.8
Sierra Leone	310	6,200	5.0
Central African Republic	250	5,400	4.6
Ghana	5	28,000	0.02

Source: Boukary Sangare

Islamist Extremists

These include:

- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).
- The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).
- Ansar al-Dine.
- Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).
- Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM).
- Boko Haram.
- Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) / Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyah.
- Ansarul Islam.

These groups follow different Islamist methodologies; their loyalties are to different leadership groups; and they can actively compete against each other for dominance and overall control of contested spaces. That said, they can and do form alliances to cooperate and, broadly speaking, they all have the same regional end-state: 'To replace established state authority with a conservative interpretation of Islamic law'.¹⁶

All of the nations directly impacted by Islamist extremists have taken steps to tackle the threat themselves; however, they broadly lack the capital resources, knowledge and experience necessary to fight and win a counter-insurgency campaign. It is for this reason that proxies, either in combination with national forces or on their own, have taken the military lead in the Sahel since 2013.

Regional attempts¹⁷ have had little strategic effect, and UN missions¹⁸ have had neither the mandate nor the teeth to impose order or control. International forces (primarily the French) did have some tactical success early on in the military campaign against the Tuareg and Islamist insurgents. However, a failure both at the outset and subsequently to understand adequately the region and its key dynamics led to serious errors of judgement being made by military and political leaders¹⁹. This resulted in an approach which advocated and delivered military effect at the expense of a political solution. These strategic errors ceded the tactical initiative to the insurgents and allowed them to expand their influence; perhaps most importantly, they also fatally undermined a number of governments in the region who were reliant at that time on the French for financial support, security and international legitimacy. Emboldened by this weakness, opposition elements successfully challenged incumbent regimes and in Mali and the Central African Republic demanded the French withdraw their troops.

The rejection of France as the Sahel's preferred security partner delivered opportunities both to the insurgents (who no longer had to fight one of the world's most capable militaries) and to the governments of the region (who were now free to look for alternatives to help them deliver security) and this is how the Wagner Group emerged as major player in the region.



Implications for Organisations Operating in the Region

When the nations, structures and systems which influenced, governed and secured the Sahel since 1945 proved fallible, new actors governed by different rules using different methods emerged. The relative effectiveness of these actors and the newfound weakness of the West had a significant effect on the Sahel²⁰. Planning assumptions used historically to inform strategic decisions may no longer be valid as a result and, even if they are, how these assumptions will be interpreted and applied by the region's new governments remains unclear.

Operationally, it is difficult to predict with any certainty what the next phase of the Sahel's multi-faceted insurgency will look like. Typically, security force success drives insurgents elsewhere, whilst conversely security force failure emboldens the insurgents which often results in an expansion of their footprint to fill the vacuum left when government forces withdraw. The current status quo is seen by many within and outside the Sahel as either a strategic threat (does Europe want nations throughout its southern flank influenced by Russia and / or China or ruled by extremists as an Islamic Caliphate?) or a strategic opportunity (Russia and China aside - Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf States all see opportunity in the region). Whoever does take the lead is likely to use a mixture of direct action and soft power to shape the landscape to their own ends.

The enduring failure of UN missions in Africa to deliver their remit makes it increasingly unlikely that the UN will take on this role. In all likelihood it will be the nations of the Sahel in combination with each other, alongside international forces and / or private military companies who will lead. Whoever conducts this activity, its effect will almost certainly be to move the insurgents from their current areas of operation elsewhere, and this is likely to have wider regional implications. There are contemporary signs that this is happening already:

- **Nigeria.** The Nigerian-Niger border stretches for more than 1500km from Chad in the east, to Burkina Faso in the west and is the most important border for ISWA²¹ in the region. The recent coup in Niger (July 2023) makes it unlikely that this border will become less porous, and this risks an increase in ISWA operations in northern Nigeria as the group looks to build on recent tactical successes in the area. Given Nigeria's recent history of using private military companies²² to help

Nigerian forces tackle Islamist extremists, plus reports of the Wagner Group expanding operations into new territories in Niger and Chad, the possibility of Nigeria co-opting the Wagner Group as a partner in its on-going campaign to defeat Islamist insurgents in northern Nigeria cannot be ruled out. ►



- **Ghana.** The vulnerability of northern Ghana to Islamist extremists pushing south is well documented. The West Africa Centre for Countering Extremism (WACCE) recently articulated ‘...its fervent concern about the southward advance of terrorism in the Sahel, making border regions of Northern Ghana vulnerable and a possible target for extremist exploitation’²³.
- **Niger.** The coup in Niger on 27th July 2023 had its roots in the unrest that has plagued the Sahel since 2013. The instability that has resulted makes Islamist extremist violence more likely in Niger and with reports surfacing²⁴ of the Wagner Group already operating in the country in support of the new regime. Further movements of insurgent groups is likely should the Wagner Group be granted full freedom to operate.
- **Togo.** The Institute of Economics and Peace placed Togo 27th out of 163 in its Global Terrorism Index; a jump of 49 places from the year before. There were 20 terrorist attacks in 2022; all were linked to Islamist extremists operating southward from their bases in the Sahel.
- **Benin.** The Institute of Economics and Peace placed Benin 28th out of 163 in its Global Terrorism Index; a jump of 23 places from the year before. There were three terrorist attacks in Benin in November 2022 alone; all were also linked to Islamist extremists operating southward from their bases in the Sahel.



Implications for Insureds in the Region

Strategic ownership and operational control do not necessarily translate into site access or freedom to operate, especially in ungoverned spaces where physical presence is quite often perceived as ownership and is often the only real guarantor of access.

With significant tracts of the Sahel now ungoverned, or with its governance in question, the possibility of local solutions arise (as seen with the Wagner Group); this raises the possibility of opportunity occupation and asset seizure resulting in exposure to property, active duty of care and political risks.

Superficially however, the risk to the insured in the Sahel remains the same - this region has always been volatile, so little has changed. However, because new leadership groups are now making strategic decisions in this region, the question of whether existing contracts and agreements will be honoured arises - as does the threat of asset seizure and Force Majeure. Even if incumbents do retain their assets and their rights, when new governments decide it is in the best interests of their country to forge new alliances with new partners, questions of jurisdiction, governance and compliance will arise, with all the challenges that they can pose to insurance contracts.



About Samphire Advisory

This report has been researched and produced by Samphire Advisory, our in-house team of malicious risk consultants. The multi-disciplined team focuses on mitigation, threat intelligence and risk analysis. Our advisors are trusted in some of the world's most demanding sectors, providing the strategic insight, operational resilience and tactical support necessary to develop awareness, mitigate risk and protect the bottom line.

The Samphire Advisory team allows us to provide our partners and clients with greater understanding and the ability to mitigate malicious and hostile risk. Our insurance products allow them to transfer risk if required, positioning us as an expert provider of what is needed to protect people and companies from 'bad people doing bad things'.

This capability also enables us to fuse the deep understanding and significant knowledge of our underwriters with the insight and experience of our consultants. This nexus helps us to develop market leading products at the forefront of malicious risk mitigation, and to operate at the leading edge of insurance innovation.

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18. MISCA and subsequently MINUSCA in the Central African Republic and MINUSMA in Mali
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20. French / western hegemony in the region and the strategic influence that resulted can no longer be taken for granted; 'Acceptable Governance' delivered locally is now good enough to attract investment (albeit from strategic actors new to the region); and traditional security solutions are no longer trusted to deliver results
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About Samphire Risk

Samphire Risk was formed in 2021 and is a world-leading independent Managing General Agent (MGA) focused on insuring people and companies against hostile and malicious risks. Through an expert team and exceptional technology, Samphire aims to create world-class products that insure against extortionate crime, hostage-taking and kidnap; terrorism in all its guises; travel into, and within, insecure countries and locations.

To find out more about Samphire please visit our website www.samphirerisk.com or follow us on LinkedIn.

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