

## AFRICA

# The West Can Work with Sahelian Democracies to Restore Civilian Rule and Regional Security

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After two coups in both Burkina Faso and Mali in the past three years and another coup in Guinea in 2021, Niger became the latest West African country to succumb to a coup in July. Like the other coups, the one in Niger was relatively bloodless and involved military generals pushing aside a civilian leader in the name of national security and combatting corruption. However, now that the Niger coup is in the rear-view mirror, a key outcome of the coup, like the others in Mali and Burkina Faso, has clearly become the growing presence of Russia—and particularly Wagner Group mercenary troops—in the Sahel. This has been accompanied by the waning influence of the French and more broadly the Western and the UN presence in the Sahel. If anyone stands to benefit from the coups, however, it is not merely Wagner, but also fighters of the al-Qaeda-loyal Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) or Islamic State (IS)-loyal Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) (now officially named Islamic State in Sahel Province).

## Whither France in the Sahel and Rise ISGS and JNIM?

France has been the primary international supporter to West African countries, including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, for their counter-insurgencies. The French role in West Africa increased in importance in 2012, when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and allied al-Qaeda-loyal groups took control of northern Mali after the start of the Libyan civil war one year earlier. Although the French-led military intervention in Mali and later in the Sahel more generally dispersed these factions, most fighters eventually joined JNIM or ISGS in the ensuing five years.

JNIM and ISGS have frequently clashed with each other, despite several attempts to reconcile over the years. As recently as September, for example, a new group, Jamaat Wahdat al-Muslimin (Group for the Unity of Muslims), [emerged](#) to call on JNIM and ISGS to put their squabbles aside to focus on their mutual enemy—the Sahelian governments. However, the groups were unable to reconcile and the recent ISGS claims of killing “al-Qaeda spies” in northern Burkina Faso have put to rest any prospects for a Jamaat Wahdat al-Muslimin-inspired merger to take place.

JNIM nevertheless maintains the edge over ISGS and remains the larger of the two groups. In particular, JNIM has benefitted from the Malian army’s spat with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which contributed to MINUSMA’s prematurely abandoning its base in the northern Malian town of Aguelhok in October. Rather than allowing MINUSMA to turn over its weapons, vehicles, and other supplies to the Malian army, JNIM quickly attacked MINUSMA convoys while they were withdrawing from Aguelhok, took control of the base, and pilfered all the weapons it could and destroyed other equipment. Ultimately, the Malian army along with Wagner retook the base and the main town in northern Mali, Kidal, but JNIM is now launching a renewed insurgency against them, including by laying IEDs on roadways, conducting ambushes, and [firing rockets](#) toward their positions.

### **Scapegoating and Coup-Proofing**

The military coup regimes in the Sahel have [scapegoated](#) France as the cause of the growing insecurity in the region. This has occurred at the same time that Russia is portraying itself as the “protector” of Sahelian countries, while the West is still sanctioning Russia over its invasion of Ukraine and Wagner over its illegal export of resources from African countries. The growing alliance between these post-coup Sahelian regimes and Russia is, however, not so much based on genuine counter-terrorism cooperation, but for Russia, or specifically Wagner, to help “coup-proof” the regimes.

The coup regimes main interest is their continued rule and they have even seemingly conceded that they will not provide security, despite that they all carried out the coups with

counter-terrorism as a key justification. In a visit to Mali in November, for example, the new leader of Niger, Abdourahamane Tiani, for example, did not [focus](#) on ending “insecurity”, but rather on creating “prosperity.” How these countries will prosper by replacing close ties with the West with close ties to an internationally sanctioned Russia is hard to reconcile.

Moreover, the second justification for the coups—combatting corruption—is an actually an issue from within the militaries themselves, such as in Niger, where in 2020 millions of dollars of materials were found to be missing during an [audit](#). Beyond these issues are those of nepotism, with the general [appointed](#) to govern Kidal in Mali, El Hadj Ag Gamou, having failed to stem the spread of ISGS and JNIM during his pre-coup decade of experience. This appointment highlights how there is little hope that the coup regimes in Mali, Niger, or Burkina Faso will provide greater security in the region, let alone transition to civilian rule or improve the region’s economic prospects.

### **Policy Options: The Waiting Game**

The rapid [withdrawal](#) of the UN and other Western troops as well as the reduction in the Western diplomatic presence in post-coup Sahelian states alongside the intensified focus on the Middle East as a result of the Israel-Gaza conflict indicates that Western influence, if not also interest, in the Sahel is clearly at a low point. Nonetheless, the trends are clear that democratic backsliding and growing insecurity will continue—and Wagner will do little to stem the tide of either. The [humanitarian crisis](#) that already exists in the region will, therefore, likely also expand and there will be few avenues for the citizens of these countries to petition their post-coup governments for change.

Whether from a transnational migration or international security perspective, the West will eventually no longer be able to turn a blind eye to the Sahel. At present, however, there are few entry points for the West in countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina, if not also other new Russian “allies,” such as the Central African Republic. Other countries in the region that have not experienced recent coups and have [opposed](#) them, such as Nigeria, Senegal, and Côte d’Ivoire, remain more closely aligned with the West, including to see more effective counter-terrorism in the region and more accountable democratic governance and can be conduits for

continued engagement in the region

It may not be possible for the West to cooperate with the post-coup regimes, including even Niger's, which had been considered relatively close to the West but is now [turning to Russia](#) for defense cooperation. However, the West can maintain influence and ties via the region's remaining democracies. Although it would be excessive to push for popular uprisings against the coup regimes, it is likely that at some point in the future, the region's citizens will demand greater accountability and improved governance and security, and a return to civilian rule. It will then be important for the West, and for the region as a whole, to work through the region's democracies to finally facilitate a return to civilian rule and at that point also a reconsideration of the region's counter-terrorism strategies, which are seeing no abatement of the continued expansion of ISGS and JNIM.

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