

FBA Research report **Prospects for Dialogue in the Central Sahel**

Yvan Guichaoua, Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC)

Jenny Lorentzen, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

Sidy Mariko, Kurukanfuga University in Bamako



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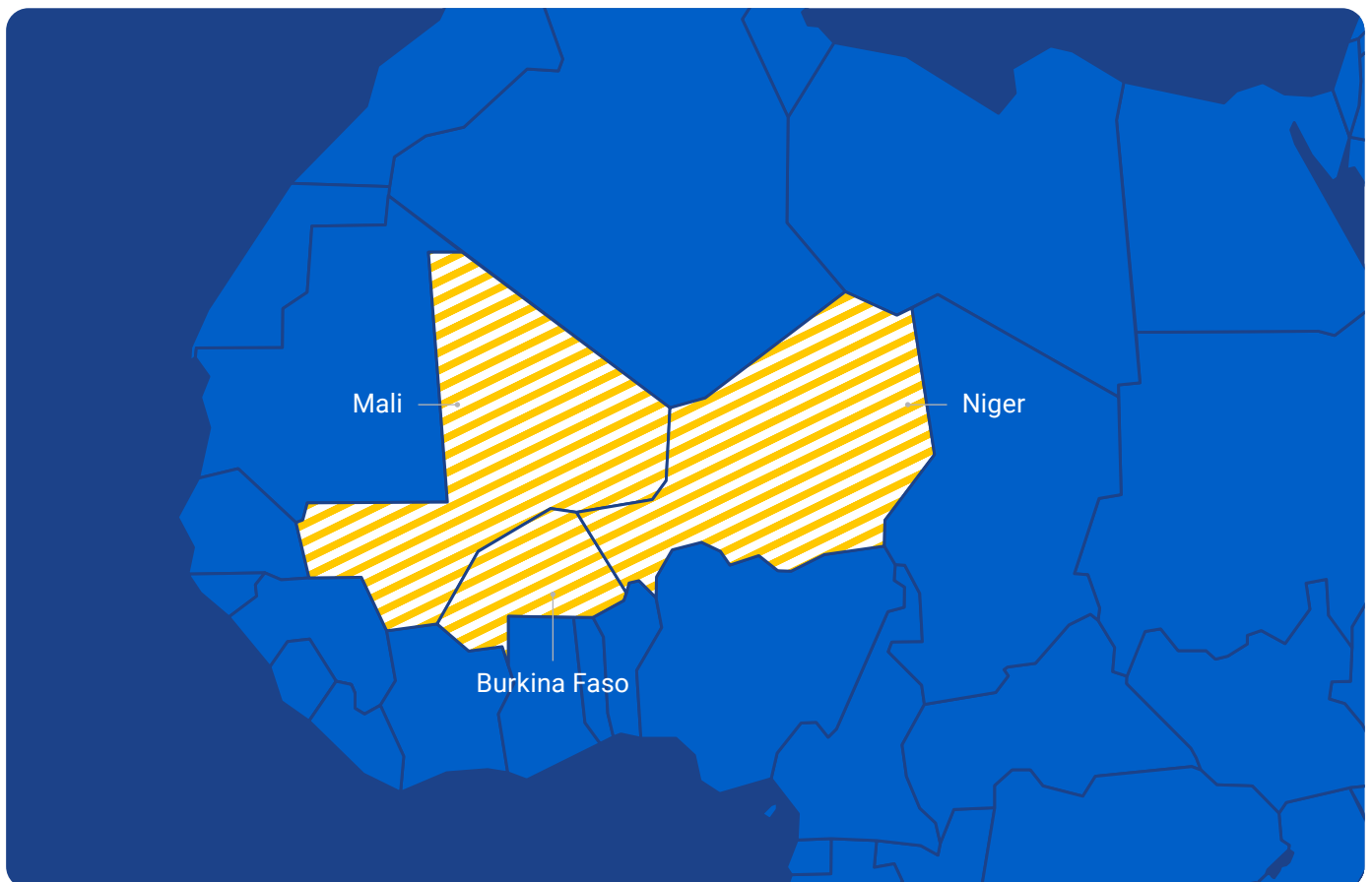
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01 *Executive summary*

Over the past decade, dialogue processes among various categories of actors have been a cornerstone of national and international efforts to address the multifaceted crisis affecting the countries of the Central Sahel. Since 2020, the military has seized power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and radically changed the approach to solving the crisis and the role of dialogue. Is there still room for dialogue as an instrument of peace in the Central Sahel and, if so, in what form, are the key questions this report addresses. Three topical arenas of dialogue are reviewed: regional diplomatic dialogue, dialogue with jihadist insurgents, and women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue processes. The report takes stock of progress made in these arenas over the years, discusses the remaining challenges under the Sahelian military regimes, and makes concrete recommendations to keep them alive.



02 *Introduction*

This report presents findings from a study of the prospects for conflict resolution and dialogue in the Central Sahel.¹ The findings are based on a series of roundtables and interviews with key actors involved in dialogue and conflict resolution efforts in the Central Sahel region that took place between September 2024 and mid-2025. The objectives of the study are to take stock of dialogue initiatives that have worked or not; to explore current challenges and prospects for dialogue; and to identify relevant insights on and concrete recommendations for conflict resolution and dialogue in the Central Sahel. By ‘conflict resolution and dialogue’, we refer to various efforts to resolve conflicts through nonviolent means that operate on different societal levels, involving different actors at those different levels. Such efforts include high-level negotiations between official representatives, as well as initiatives involving middle-range leaders, community-based initiatives and grassroots leadership.² Conflict resolution and dialogue can thus consist of ceasefire negotiations, peace negotiations and mediation efforts at various levels (international, national, local), and can emerge from belligerents themselves or be facilitated and mediated by third parties.

It has long been recognised that the crisis currently unfolding in the Central Sahel is multifaceted and protracted and has highly damaging social, political and economic consequences at different levels of Sahelian societies. Conflict resolution and dialogue initiatives feature among the various mechanisms that seek to mitigate such damaging forces. A myriad of such initiatives have been implemented in a more or less formal way over the last decade in the Sahel. This study chooses to explore such processes in relation to **three dynamics of conflict** that are salient, challenging and unresolved and that unfold on multiple levels of interactions in the Central Sahel. **The regional conflictual dynamics between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and their neighbours** – particularly those forming the regional bloc ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) – constitutes the first thematic axis of our study. The second concerns the tricky and highly contentious issue of **negotiations with jihadist groups** that now control large swathes of territory across the Central Sahel. Finally, the third thematic axis of the study focuses on **women’s participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue processes**.

These three axes do not exhaust the many conflictual dynamics prevailing across the Sahel, but they are worthy of attention for several reasons. First, on the regional level, the crisis in the Sahel has taken a dramatic turn over the years. Insurgency started in Mali in 2012 in a geographic space – the Sahara – in which connectedness³ is an absolute condition of survival. This need for connectedness applies to people, state and non-state actors alike. In the Sahel, insurgencies can hardly be contained within national borders. One country’s problem quickly becomes a problem for its neighbours. This is evidently truer when insurgents have an explicit transnational agenda, which is the case with the Al Qaeda and Islamic State franchises

1 In this report, the term ‘Central Sahel’ refers to the three countries Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

2 J. P. Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997).

3 J. Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

operating in the Sahel.⁴ Regional cooperation is needed and advocated to address security threats of varying intensity, yet it may entail strategic frictions and tensions among the countries exposed to such threats. In the Sahel, such tensions have typically pitched Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger against the regional bloc ECOWAS. The three countries eventually formed their own regional organisation, the *Alliance des états du Sahel* (AES), in 2023⁵ and collectively broke away from ECOWAS in January 2024.

Second, the jihadist insurgency that was launched in a very overt fashion in Mali in 2012 after more than a decade in the making is now an ever-expanding, fully regional phenomenon affecting the lives of millions across the Sahel and coastal West African countries. No solution has been found to combat it efficiently through military means, but nor has there been any vigorous decision to negotiate with its leaders. The result has been protracted non-conventional warfare that hurts civilian populations dramatically through direct violence, forced displacement or destruction of their sources of revenue.⁶

The third axis explores a neglected aspect of conflict dynamics and conflict resolution. In line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), and the WPS agenda more generally, this study considers women's meaningful participation as essential for creating conditions for durable peace. Women's participation is understood to be meaningful when women's 'concerns are heard and taken on board, they have the opportunity to articulate their contributions and expertise, to ensure that gender perspective and analyses inform and shape peace processes, and that outcomes benefit the whole of society'.⁷ Despite normative advances such as the WPS agenda, women remain under-represented in peace processes throughout the world.⁸ In the Central Sahel, women, girls and other marginalised groups are directly affected by conflict yet face significant challenges in influencing conflict resolution and dialogue processes. Women's meaningful participation in future conflict resolution and dialogue efforts in the Sahel is therefore key to ensuring a broader involvement of the affected populations and more sustainable peaceful solutions.

4 These franchises are Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and the Muslims – JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-S). Although there is dispute among Islamic scholars regarding the appropriate terminology, we call them 'jihadists' to reflect the relative consensus among academics regarding the need to privilege labels that actors apply to themselves. Also, while imperfect, the term 'jihadist' makes clear that a religious political agenda is attached to the armed struggle carried out by the insurgents.

5 In July 2024, the Alliance changes its name to Confédération des états du Sahel, but the acronym 'AES' is still in use.

6 ACLED, 'The Sahel: Mid-Year Metrics 2024' <<https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Mid-year-metrics-2024-Sahel.pdf>> accessed 9 March 2025.

7 UN Women, 'Women's Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace and the Implementation of Peace Agreements: Report from the Expert Group Meeting' (New York: United Nations, 2018), 11.

8 A. M Goetz, 'Foreword: Toward Strategic Instrumentalism' in S. Basu, P. Kirby and L. J. Shepherd (eds) *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), xxii.

As well as being thematically relevant, this report is timely owing to a fundamental change in the political circumstances in which war and peace have been unfolding in the Sahel and elsewhere.⁹ Between 2020 and 2023, the militaries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger seized power by force and imposed martial rule in their respective countries. Before that, various armed and political actors had conducted a range of experiments with dialogue with in multiple, often uncoordinated, official and informal ways, with varying degrees of success. The paradigm of liberal peacebuilding supported by Western powers had prevailed as the main strategy for stabilisation in the Sahel region. Peacebuilding efforts carried out under that paradigm involved several military and non-military policy instruments and interventions, among which peace dialogues, although at times constrained, occupied a prominent role. In Mali in particular, the architecture of Western interventionism was Janus-faced. It was essentially articulated around the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the French counter-terrorist Operation Barkhane. This stabilisation complex encouraged and institutionalised dialogue between the state, northern secessionists and pro-government armed groups while leaving aside jihadist militant coalitions. All three types of entities were supposed to implement a peace agreement signed in 2015 to resolve the crisis in a process supported by MINUSMA, whose role was also to foster social cohesion, promote the rule of law, strengthen state capacity and help organise elections.¹⁰ The implementation of the agreement (which was more of a roadmap than a proper settlement with immediate tangible benefits for the signatories) progressed chaotically and very slowly over the years. In the meantime, jihadist militants regrouped into two large coalitions – affiliated, respectively, with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State – and continued to expand their military activity and geographic outreach. They also developed systems of governance in areas where they continue to be unchallenged dominant military and political actors. The package of measures that formed the stabilisation complex structured by the Western partners of Sahelian countries eventually failed to achieve peace and, as a corollary, to persuade large sections of the Sahelian populations of its efficacy. Discontent with the situation grew within the general public (notably in capital cities) and among the ranks of the armed forces. This climate paved the way for coups d'état. As a result, the existing stabilisation complex ended up being dismembered and replaced by new national and international political and security arrangements.

9 See also O. Richmond, 'Peace in an Authoritarian International Order Versus Peace in the Liberal International Order' (BISA, 31 October 2024)

10 Y. Guichaoua and L. Riachi, 'Assessing MINUSMA's Action (2013–2021): A Literature Review' (International Research and Policy Evaluation Department [IOB], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Netherlands, 2022)

Once in power, the Sahelian militaries began to wage war, govern, and conduct regional and international relations in new ways. The organising principles of the changes introduced in these areas have not been formalised, nor do they necessarily form a consistent ideological framework. But ‘sovereignty’ stands out as a motto of the military rulers¹¹ and translates into the rejection of Western liberal interference (including normative references to human rights or international humanitarian law – seen as instruments of neocolonial hegemony), new geopolitical alliances (with a security and diplomatic rapprochement with Russia or Turkey and the breakaway from the regional bloc ECOWAS), and a firmer grip on domestic political life.

On the domestic level, the rising authoritarianism of Sahelian countries has led not just to the drastic closure of the civic space and some heavy repression of political parties and civil society organisations, but also to a revision of who is a legitimate target in the war against ‘terrorist’ groups. In Burkina Faso, multiple statements by officials have made clear that civilians living in parts of the country controlled by jihadists should face consequences.¹² While no equally explicit statements have been made by the authorities in Mali, the government’s military actions in jihadist-controlled areas follow a logic that does not spare civilian lives.¹³ Also, very importantly, the Malian military authorities have stopped making a distinction between the former secessionist groups that signed the 2015 peace agreements and the jihadist entities: all of them are now bundled together under the label ‘terrorists’ and are targeted in military operations.¹⁴

As a result of these profound transformations, the premises of and prospects for dialogue and peace among communities, state actors and other belligerents have changed dramatically and must be reassessed. The new political circumstances represent an opportunity to reflect upon what has been done (with or without success) and what can be done in terms of dialogue.

The report is structured as follows. We first outline the methodology used for the study, including the organisation of roundtables and interviews. The findings are then presented according to the three axes selected, namely: (1) **regional diplomatic dialogue**, (2) **dialogue with jihadists**, and (3) **women’s participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts**. We then conclude by drawing some overall observations and outlining recommendations.

11 International Crisis Group, ‘A Course Correction for Mali’s Sovereign Turn’ (Africa Report no. 315, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2024).

12 A recent case of clear conflation of civilians with insurgents by Burkinabé forces and their auxiliaries has been documented by Human Rights Watch; see Human Rights Watch, ‘Burkina Faso: Government-Allied Militias Linked to Massacre’ (Human Rights Watch, 14 March 2025) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/14/burkina-faso-government-allied-militias-linked-massacre>> accessed 5 April 2025

13 See Nations unies, Rapport sur les Événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022 (Geneva: Nations unies, 2023)

14 For some background on the differentiation between ‘jihadists’ and ‘separatists’ in popular and elite beliefs in Bamako, see B. Whitehouse, ‘Public Perceptions of Violent Extremism in Mali’ in O. J. Walther and W. F. S. Miles (eds) African Border Disorders: Addressing Transnational Extremist Organizations (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

03 *Methodology*

The methodology used for this study consisted of a desk study to take stock of existing literature and initiatives, along with data gathering in the form of three closed roundtables, complemented with online interviews, with key actors involved in dialogue processes in recent years in the Central Sahel. The data gathering and analysis were organised according to the three thematic axes outlined above.

Roundtables and interviews with experts and practitioners

Owing to the sensitive nature of the subject, the roundtables were by invitation only and followed Chatham House rules. To allow participants to speak freely, we opted not to record the sessions and instead allocated resources for note-taking during the event.¹⁵ During the roundtables that were conducted online, it was also possible for individuals to take part without having their cameras switched on. In addition, we took extra care to communicate the format and expected outputs clearly to the participants in advance, to ensure that they understood the conditions for participation. The roundtables and interviews were conducted in French, English and Nordic languages. Where relevant, quotes have been translated into English by the authors. To protect the confidentiality of informants and anonymisation of data, we do not use names of participants in the report.¹⁶

The roundtable under the theme **regional diplomatic dialogue** was carried out online on 19 December 2024. This event brought together a total of 14 people, including three panellists, researchers, and representatives of several national and international organisations. It began with a brief introduction of the participants. The moderator then recalled the aims of the session and opened the floor to select speakers. As required under Chatham House rules, the moderator did not fail to emphasise the confidentiality of the data resulting from the roundtable, which will be used exclusively within the framework of the study presented here. The discussions generated by the roundtable were supplemented by individual interviews with other experts and key practitioners involved in dialogue and conflict resolution in the Central Sahel.

The roundtable under the theme **dialogue with jihadists** was carried out online via Signal on 13 December 2024. It involved 15 participants with professional backgrounds in academia, mediation, journalism and humanitarian organisations. The session lasted for almost three hours. It started with three talks by researchers from Mali on local peace agreements in the Bandiagara district of Central Mali, on local peace talks in the Konna district of Central Mali and on the dispositions of Mali's government towards high-level dialogue with jihadists. These three presentations were followed by a discussion by a negotiator from Niger comparing different countries' strategies for dialogue with jihadists and by a female community leader from Central Mali sharing observations about her advocacy efforts in favour of dialogue

15 An exception was made for the roundtable on dialogue with jihadists after the participants agreed collectively to allow the note-taker to record the session.

16 The research has been assessed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT), ref. no. 298538.

between the government and the jihadist groups. In addition to this roundtable, substantial oral and written exchanges were carried out bilaterally with participants, including two long interviews with negotiators from Niger involved in high-level talks with jihadists on behalf of their government (before and after the coup of July 2023).

The roundtable under the theme **women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue processes** was organised on 20 November 2024 by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), in collaboration with the PRIO Centre for Gender, Peace and Security and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF). The specific topic of the roundtable was 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', and the goal was to learn more about efforts to promote women's leadership in peace and reconciliation processes in Mali and to discuss lessons learned and future possibilities for promoting women's inclusion and leadership in peace and reconciliation processes. A total of 21 people attended the event, of which 11 (7 women and 4 men) were from Mali, including representatives of the defence and security forces, representatives of the École de maintien de la paix Alioune Blondin Beye (EMP), local government representatives, representatives of the former signatories to the Algiers Agreement, and researchers. Participants also included representatives of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (including a former ambassador to Mali), representatives from the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), representatives of Norwegian NGOs and research institutions and representatives of the three institutions organising the event.¹⁷ In addition to the roundtable, the discussion and findings in this report draw on interviews with NGOs and civil society representatives (all based in Mali) conducted by the authors.

The findings from the roundtables and interviews with key actors involved in dialogue processes in recent years in the Central Sahel are presented in three separate sections of this report. We begin with the theme **regional diplomatic dialogue**, followed by **dialogue with jihadists**, and then **women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts**. In the conclusion, we bring together the three themes to draw more general lessons and reflect upon the prospects for dialogue in the Sahel.

¹⁷ The roundtable on women's participation took advantage of the visit of a Malian delegation and was organised as an in-person event in Oslo.

Scope and limitations

Through the choice of the three themes introduced above, this work adopts an exploratory approach. It does not claim to cover all geographic areas or themes of interest. The theme of women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts has a focus on Mali; the theme of dialogue with jihadists concentrates on Mali and Niger; and the regional diplomatic dialogue theme discusses the foreign policies of Mali and Burkina Faso. Thematically, some important topics are not discussed comprehensively, such as the relationships between Malian authorities and the secessionist movements that have regrouped in a war-oriented entity¹⁸ or the direction that 'transitions' are taking and the possibility for elections in a not-too-distant future.

Mali is also over-represented in this report, compared with its two neighbours Burkina Faso and Niger. Each country of the Central Sahel has its own political history, configuration of state-society relationships, military and political culture, foreign policy, etc. However, within this regional landscape, Mali currently represents a testing ground for methods of government that eventually inspire its neighbours. Mali remains the epicentre of the regional crisis and the main architect of the Alliance des états du Sahel (AES). For these reasons, the Malian trajectory is a useful preliminary focus of study.

18 In this regard, some fascinating dynamics are in motion in Mali that involve dialogue processes within camps on both sides of the anti-state/pro-state cleavage. In Bamako, national authorities whose rule is contested in the north of the country make big efforts to consolidate support among pro-government elites in Tamashek or Arab tribes, as demonstrated by the recent creation of the umbrella organisation Tamouzok. Conversely, Azawadi secessionists are in discussions with JNIM to step up their military operations and consolidate their governance system in the north.

04 Context

Key events and dynamics

The Central Sahel has a long and complicated conflict history, but the most recent conflict dynamics largely radiate from the events that took place in Mali in 2012 and the subsequent international engagement. Since 2012, Mali has been caught up in a conflict with Azawadi separatist groups and jihadist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.¹⁹ A coup d'état and the occupation of the north of the country by Azawadi separatists and jihadist groups were followed by a French military intervention (first through Operation Serval and then through Operation Barkhane)²⁰ and the establishment of the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013. Peace negotiations were then conducted, which resulted in the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (colloquially called the Algiers Agreement).

While the Malian state and the international community were preoccupied with solving the conflict in the north, violence and insecurity spread to Central Mali and then to Burkina Faso and Niger, where jihadist groups instrumentalised local conflicts and intercommunal and inter-ethnic cleavages.²¹

The international community engaged extensively in efforts to resolve the conflicts and stabilise Mali and its Sahelian neighbours, including through the deployment of peacekeeping forces, military force assistance, good offices, support to the rule of law and quick-impact projects. Yet the dividends of these efforts were not seen by the local populations, who remained exposed to corrupt elites and growing insecurity. The situation gradually deteriorated, and violence and insecurity continued to increase, culminating in humiliating military debacles in Mali and Niger in late 2019 and early 2020. Over time, popular discontent grew in Mali, and in August 2020 a military coup led by Colonel Assimi Goïta ousted the incumbent president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. A transitional government consisting of military and civilian elements was set up. International partners initially suspended aid to Mali but soon resumed most of their cooperation with the Malian authorities. However, Goïta carried out another coup d'état in May 2021, through which he removed the civilian elements of the transitional government.²²

19 'Azawad' designates the northern part of Mali on both banks of the Niger river. It is a contentious term whose exact meaning has not been clarified by the separatists themselves. Still, 'Azawad' is the name that has been given to the territory they claim, which includes multiple communities and not just Tamashek, even though Tamashek groups are over-represented among separatist militants.

20 Serval was the kinetic operation aimed at dislodging jihadists from their bastions. Barkhane was introduced later, after the jihadists had been expelled from Northern Mali's urban centres, and was a counter-terrorism operation aimed at dismantling and neutralising insurgent cells.

21 N. Rupasinghe and M. Bøås, 'Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali' (UNDP Policy Brief, Addis Ababa: UNDP, 2019).

22 N. Wilén, 'Have African Coups Provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?' (Africa Policy Briefs, Brussels: Egmont Institute, 2023).

In the period before and after the 2021 coup, relations between Mali and its international partners worsened significantly. The relationship with France suffered increasing tensions, which led to the expulsion of the French ambassador before French forces eventually left Mali in 2022. The relationship between Mali and the UN also grew increasingly tense, and in May 2023 the Malian prime minister asked that MINUSMA leave the country, which led to the withdrawal of MINUSMA on 31 December 2023.²³ Today, the situation in Mali is characterised by high levels of insecurity due not only to continuing jihadist activities but also to the renewed belligerence between the pro-Azawad secessionists and the transitional authorities.²⁴

Niger and Burkina Faso experienced coups d'état and put in place military regimes in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Like Mali, Niger expelled French forces, which left in late 2023. In 2023, Mali also withdrew from the ad hoc regional security cooperation body G5 Sahel,²⁵ soon to be followed by Niger and Burkina Faso. The withdrawals resulted in the effective breakdown of the G5 Sahel as a regional force.²⁶ As the countries of the Central Sahel have turned away from Western partners, they have sought new partners in countries such as Russia and Turkey.²⁷

Conflict resolution in the Central Sahel: From liberal to sovereign solutions

As stated above, our study focuses on three thematic axes, which have all been heavily transformed by the shift in the Sahelian political climate. A schematic way of relating these thematic axes to recent seismic political changes in the region is proposed in the table below, which differentiates between the pre-coup and post-coup logics of conflict resolution, the former being inspired by a liberal paradigm and the latter by a 'sovereignist' paradigm in which countries claim back control over processes that they say remain dominated by their former colonial ruler France or Western powers more broadly. However, a difficulty encountered by this study – yet also what arguably makes it valuable – is that while we know what has been lost in the policy landscape, we do not know fully yet which still embryonic and experimental new policies will consolidate and last. The 'old' policy offer claimed to be wide-ranging if not all-inclusive ('multidimensional' in the language of stabilisation), but the new one is still patchy and in-the-making. Figure 1 details the most salient aspects of the observed policy changes.

23 H. R. Armstrong, 'Exit France: The Influence of External Actors in the Sahel Region' (2022) Middle East Report <<https://merip.org/2023/01/exit-france/>> accessed 25 June 2025.

24 After the 2015 peace deal, the secessionists had regrouped as the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA). Following the definitive collapse of the Algiers Agreement in 2023 (which followed multiple clashes between the Malian army and the entities originally constituting the CMA), various realignments among the secessionists led to the formation of the war-oriented Front de libération de l'Azawad (FLA).

25 The now unofficially defunct G5 Sahel was an ambiguous regional organisation that reflected the aspiration of Sahelian countries to address transnational security threats but was also very much anchored to the former colonial power France and Western donors. Although its most publicly known objective was to promote security, Sahelian heads of state insisted that it should become a conveyor belt for ambitious investments in infrastructure, in line with its motto of making development and security two sides of the same coin. See N. Desgrais, *Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel: Des réformes nécessaires de l'architecture et du processus décisionnel* (Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique 2019).

26 Wilén, 'Have African Coups Provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU' (n 22).

27 Armstrong, 'Exit France' (n 23).

Figure 1 Manifestations of conflict resolution paradigms on areas covered by the report

	Liberal paradigm	Sovereignist paradigm
Regional conflict resolution and dialogue efforts	ECOWAS, G5 Sahel, support of Western multilateral and bilateral donors	Creation of Alliance des États du Sahel (AES), rapprochement with Russia, exit from ECOWAS
Dialogue or negotiations with jihadists	Unofficial, occasional, essentially local, facilitated by third parties, tolerated by authorities	Quasi-exclusive choice of military solution, criminalisation of civilian engagement with insurgents, broadening of the definition of 'terrorism'
Women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts	Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali and subsequent arrangements: Algiers process and Agreement Monitoring Committee (<i>Comité de suivi de l'accord</i> – CSA), supported by United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)	Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation (DIMPR)

Regional diplomatic dialogue and the changing international alliances of the Central Sahel

When Mali and later the Central Sahel plunged into crisis in 2012 and over the following years, the heterogeneous entity commonly termed the 'international community' was relatively quick to set up a web of measures and instruments to stabilise the region.²⁸ These measures would typically involve military and non-military components. After roughly a decade of

28 The reasons for this international mobilisation have been heavily studied, discussed and theorised; see S. M. Cold-Ravnkilde and K. L. Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism' (2020) 96(4) *International Affairs* 855. From the perspective of the Sahelian heads of state at the time, this international effort was a natural form of reparations for the regional damages caused by the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, which they saw as the cause of the Sahel's destabilisation; see RFI, 'Lutte contre le terrorisme: La Cédéao annonce un plan d'un milliard de dollars' (RFI, 14 September 2019) <<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190914-cedeao-annonce-plan-milliard-antiterrorisme>> accessed 5 April 2025.

implementation, most of these measures and instruments gradually and chaotically unravelled, leaving unanswered the question of the effective regime of relationships between Sahelian countries and their international partners. Below, the section entitled ‘Regional Diplomatic Dialogue’ assesses these relationships and their bitter fate. In line with Figure 1, this subsection provides a synthesis of information regarding the dialogue that took place between the Sahelian states and the regional bodies whose role was to help stabilise the Sahel: the regional bloc ECOWAS and the ad hoc security-oriented G5 Sahel. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were all members of both bodies, which they eventually left while consolidating their own ties through the creation of the *Alliance des états du Sahel* (AES), whose primary purpose is to better coordinate mutual defence but also seeks to promote economic cooperation. The three countries remained members of the African Union and the West African Economic and Monetary Union, although their memberships have been suspended by the former.

Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso jointly left ECOWAS after a long descent toward mutual discontent since 2012.²⁹ At the diplomatic level, ECOWAS took the lead role in dialogue with Sahelian countries in times of coups or tensions. When Captain Amadou Sanogo took power almost inadvertently in March 2012,³⁰ ECOWAS networks mobilised to get Mali back on constitutional tracks – which eventually happened with the appointment of an interim government. Following the French intervention to dislodge jihadists from Northern Mali in 2013, ECOWAS and President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso led the peace negotiations between the warring parties, until Compaoré was deposed in 2014. Later, when the power of Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita vacillated owing to massive popular protests, ECOWAS envoy Goodluck Jonathan shuttled frantically to help resolve the tensions. ECOWAS solidarity proved more timid on the military front. It was the regional body’s weak response to Mali’s takeover by jihadists in 2012 that accelerated France’s intervention and the later deployment of MINUSMA. Eventually, ECOWAS found no way of engaging with Sahelian putschist leaders after 2020. The latter had no intention of returning power to civilians quickly and no intention of letting other ECOWAS presidents – whom they saw as an old guard of servants of Western interests – dictate their conduct. The tactic of mixing gentle nudges and intimidation that had been adopted to get Captain Sanogo to hand power back to civilians in 2012 had no effect on the latest generation of coup-makers.

The G5 Sahel had an even quicker demise. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left it between 2022 and 2023. Only Mauritania and Chad remain in what is now an empty shell. The body was considered an ad hoc construction in the sense that it was originally tailored to overcome one issue, namely, the security challenge posed by transnational jihadist insurgents. It is generally presented as heavily inspired – if not designed – by France. However, while France’s

29 For a short synthesis, see N. Bagayoko, ‘AES versus CEDEAO: Vers la fragmentation de l’Afrique de l’Ouest?’ (FMES, 26 March 2025)

<<https://fmes-france.org/aes-versus-cedeao-vers-la-fragmentation-de-lafrique-de-louest/>> accessed 26 June 2025.

30 M.-A. Boisvert, ‘The Malian Armed Forces and Its Discontents: Civil–Military Relations, Cohesion and the Resilience of a Postcolonial Military Institution in the Aftermath of the 2012 Crisis’ (PhD dissertation, Department of International Development, University of East Anglia, 2020).

role in the construction of the G5 Sahel was significant, Desgrais insists that the demand for regional security cooperation emanated from the Sahelian countries themselves.³¹ The G5 Sahel enjoyed a degree of momentum during a period in which the Sahelian countries manifested their considerable interest in a massive investment programme called the 'Priority Investments Programme' that was attached to the regional body. However, on the ground, suggests Desgrais, the coordination of military operations between French and Sahelian forces was bumpy, for both tactical and possibly normative reasons. In this regard, it is relatively clear that the rules of engagement of Sahelian armies (e.g. concerning the use of drone strikes)³² have become less restrictive following the withdrawal from the G5 Sahel. This normative shift in the conduct of the war is not just relevant for military strategists or belligerents. By abandoning the G5 Sahel and its normative 'Compliance Framework', which included obligations related to the protection of civilians,³³ the AES states reconfigured the parameters of crucial aspects of stabilisation and started speaking a more aggressive military language that was not considered acceptable by their former Western partners.

In addition to these multilateral organisations, the role of Algeria, which shares thousands of kilometres of borders with Mali and Niger, must be mentioned here. Algeria was the crucial (yet also arguably elusive) guarantor of the 2015 peace agreement in Mali. It had been an active promoter of regional security cooperation long before, through the rather inactive mechanism called CEMOC.³⁴ But Algeria's Saharan security governance and border politics (which involves diplomacy with non-state local elites) is difficult for its neighbours to decipher, provoking constant difficulties in diplomatic relations.

Dialogue with jihadists

In the decade of Western intervention following the French Operation Serval in 2013, jihadist armed groups were excluded from official dialogue processes in Mali, which would only involve the government, the secessionist movements and the pro-government paramilitary groups. However, two rounds of national consultation processes were conducted during the presidency of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.³⁵ Their goal was to establish a roadmap for the future of Mali in multiple dimensions. During both rounds of talks, clear demands were made for the opening

31 Desgrais, 'Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel' (n 25).

32 G. Kurtz, W. Lacher and D. M. Tull, 'The Myth of the Gamechanger: Drones and Military Power in Africa' (Megatrends Policy Brief 33, March 2025)
<<https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PolicyBrief33-Kurtz-Lacher-Tull.pdf>> accessed 23 June 2025.

33 Nations unies, 'Projet d'Appui à la Force conjointe du G5 Sahel dans la mise en œuvre du Cadre de conformité aux droits de l'homme et au droit international humanitaire' (New York: Nations unies, 2020)

34 L. Aida Ammour, 'La coopération de sécurité au Maghreb et au Sahel: L'ambivalence de l'Algérie', (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2012).

35 These were the Conférence d'entente nationale in March 2017 and the Dialogue national inclusif in December 2019. Both rounds made extremely light recommendations regarding the method or content of the dialogue advocated with the jihadist leaders. They also insisted that the secular character of the Malian state should be preserved. At the very least, however, they recognised Ag Ghaly and Kouffa as legitimate political interlocutors whose participation in talks was required if lasting peace in Mali were to be established. See O. Sy, A. Dakouo and K. Traoré, 'La Conférence d'Entente Nationale: Mise en œuvre et leçons apprises pour le dialogue national au Mali' (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2018); Dialogue national inclusif, 'Rapport final' (Bamako, 2019).



Photo:
UN Photo/
Harandane Dicko

of negotiations with the jihadist leaders that originated from Mali, namely, Iyad Ag Ghaly (operating in the Kidal region as the commander of the Al Qaeda branch for the Sahel) and Hamadoun Kouffa (Iyad Ag Ghaly's lieutenant, commanding operations in Central Mali). This did not happen, however, arguably because of French opposition at the time.³⁶

Following the coup of August 2020 and the 'coup within the coup' of May 2021, high-level dialogue has been largely ruled out. Similarly, Burkina Faso and Niger do not have an official mechanism of dialogue with jihadists. Before Ibrahim Traoré's coup in September 2022 in Burkina Faso, the government had encouraged local dialogue with jihadist insurgents, notably to make sure populations could continue their economic activities.³⁷ In Niger, President Mohamed Bazoum opted for targeted dialogue with militants originating from Niger, who could be approached through intermediaries appointed by the government. The objective was to bring mid-level commanders and rank-and-file members back on the government's side. Pathways for social reintegration were arranged for defectors. The initiative had mixed results³⁸ and only lasted until Bazoum was ousted in July 2023, but was partially revived six months later by the military authorities. Defectors are still eligible for government programmes, but these schemes cannot be called dialogue per se: they mostly operate as an incentive and a receptacle for militants willing to exit their organisations. Significantly, the conclusions of the *Assises nationales* held in Niger in February 2025 – an exercise similar to the Malian DIMPR – make no mention of dialogue with jihadist insurgents under the chapter 'Peace, Security, and Stability'.³⁹

In all three AES countries, the actual situation on the ground differs from what central authorities do officially on the dialogue front. In practice, multiple channels of communication between various state- and non-state actors and jihadists are open for the settling of a wide

36 Y. Guichaoua, 'The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel' (2020) 96(4) *International Affairs* 895.

37 S. Mednick, 'Burkina Faso to Support Local Talks with Jihadists: A Q&A with the Minister of Reconciliation' (*The New Humanitarian*, 27 April 2022)

38 L. Tschörner, 'Dialogue with Jihadists in Niger: Potentials, Limits, Failure' (*Megatrends Policy Brief* 31, 11 December 2024)

<<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-policy-brief31-dialogue-with-jihadists-in-niger>> accessed 26 June 2025.

39 Government of Niger, 'Synthèse des contributions aux Assises Nationales' (Niamey, 2025).

range of concrete issues in places controlled or partially controlled by jihadists. These channels involve military and non-military officials but also notables, civil society representatives, humanitarian workers, traders, etc. They sometimes benefit from the support of third parties such as the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (before it withdrew from Mali) or professional mediation organisations such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

Women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts

After the outbreak of conflict in Mali in 2012, a ceasefire agreement was negotiated in Ouagadougou in 2013, followed by peace negotiations that resulted in the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (commonly called the Algiers Agreement), which was signed in 2015 between the Malian government and two armed coalitions from the north: the originally secessionist *Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA)⁴⁰ and the pro-government *Plateforme*. From 2015 to 2023, the Algiers peace process worked to implement the 2015 agreement.

Initially, women's participation in the Algiers process was low. In 2013, four women from civil society travelled to Ouagadougou when ceasefire negotiations were taking place. They identified the location of the negotiations and showed up uninvited, demanding a seat at the table. In the following peace negotiations, women constituted less than 5% of the delegations or technical teams of the parties. After considerable pressure from Malian women's activists and the international community, civil society hearings were organised during the second round of negotiations. The civil society hearings were organised as a consultative mechanism running parallel to the negotiation table, with the participation of representatives of Malian civil society, including women's organisations.⁴¹

Women were also under-represented in the mechanisms established to implement the 2015 Algiers Agreement. In 2017, the level of women's participation in the mechanisms for the implementation of the Algiers Agreement was at approximately 3%, except for in the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR), where 4 out of 25 commissioners were women (16%).⁴² Increased representation of women in these mechanisms was called for repeatedly by women's activists and the international community, including in MINUSMA's mandates from 2016 to 2022. However, there were no significant changes until the introduction of a gender quota in the Agreement Monitoring Committee (*Comité de suivi de l'accord* – CSA) in 2020.⁴³

40 Azawad is the part of Mali that secessionists claim as their homeland, although its actual frontiers have never been communicated officially by the insurgents; see also note 19 above.

41 J. Lorentzen, 'Women's Inclusion in the Malian Peace Negotiations: Norms and Practices', (2020) 26(4) Swiss Political Science Review 26 406 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12420>>.

42 J. Lorentzen, 'Women and the Peace Process in Mali' (GPS Policy Brief, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo [PRIO], 2017).

43 J. Lorentzen, 'Explaining Changes in Women's Representation in Peace Processes: The Adoption of a Gender Quota in the Agreement Monitoring Committee in Mali', (2025) International Political Science Review (forthcoming). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121251323483>.

In the context of increasing tensions between Mali and the UN, along with a military offensive in the north of Mali, Malian authorities announced the end of the 2015 Algiers Agreement and the peace process with the Tuareg parties in early 2024.⁴⁴ The announcement was made just after Colonel Assimi Goïta, president of the transition, launched a new initiative in December 2023: the Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation (*Dialogue inter-Maliens pour la paix et la reconciliation nationale* – DIMPR).⁴⁵ A Steering Committee led by Issoufi Maiga was appointed in February 2024 and consisted of 140 members, of which 28 (20%) were women.⁴⁶

The communal and regional phases of the Inter-Malian Dialogue took place in April 2024, and the national phase took place on 6–10 May 2024. More than 3,000 people participated in the national phase, which resulted in a list of almost 300 recommendations. Recommendations included engaging in dialogue with all armed groups, installing a National Day of Pardon, organising for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, dissolution of militias and self-defence groups and ensuring the socio-economic reintegration of their members, and establishing a permanent mechanism for inter- and intra-communitarian dialogue.⁴⁷ ‘Among these recommendations, there are some that are directly addressed to women.’⁴⁸ At the time of writing, a Charter based on the discussions and recommendations was being developed, which will be made public upon validation by the president of the transition.⁴⁹

The Inter-Malian Dialogue faced several challenges, including issues related to representation and lack of participation of key actors.⁵⁰ Armed groups based in the north, now mostly united under the CSP-DPA banner,⁵¹ refused to participate. Many political parties also refused to participate owing to a ban on political organising that was initiated just before the start of the dialogue.⁵²

44 I. Allegrozzi, ‘Mali’s Peace Deal Ends: Warring Parties Should Abide by International Humanitarian Law’ (Human Rights Watch, 26 January 2024)

<<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/26/malis-peace-deal-ends>> accessed 26 June 2025.

45 The Malian authorities’ official website about the DIMPR contains resources and news items about the process;

46 See Décret no. 2024-0062/PT-RM of 2 February 2024.

47 A. Maiga, ‘Mali: Le dialogue inter-Maliens débouche sur près de 300 recommandations’ (Anadolu Ajansı, 13 May 2024) <<https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/mali-le-dialogue-inter-maliens-d%C3%A9bouche-sur-pr%C3%A8s-de-300-recommandations/3218261#>> accessed 26 June 2025.

48 Participant at roundtable on ‘Women’s Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali’, 20 November 2024.

49 Interview with NGO staff, 29 January 2025.

50 F. R. Koné and F. M. Dramé, ‘La stabilité au Mali passe par un dialogue national plus inclusif’ (Institute of Security Studies, 15 July 2025)

<<https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/la-stabilite-au-mali-passe-par-un-dialogue-national-plus-inclusif>> accessed 26 June 2025.

51 The Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad (*Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l’Azawad*; CSP-DPA) was formed on 6 May 2021 as an alliance of the CMA and the *Plateforme*.

52 Koné and Dramé, ‘La stabilité au Mali passe par un dialogue national plus inclusif’ (n 50).

05 *Regional diplomatic dialogue*

In the wake of the coups, the military authorities of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger took retrieval of their countries' supposedly lost sovereignty as their motto and the organising principle of their foreign policies. As a result, their foreign policy efforts soon consisted of undoing the decades-old regional and international arrangements that were seen as detrimental to their sovereignty. Leaving ECOWAS has certainly been the boldest and most dramatic move taken by the three countries as part of their revisionist policies. Conversely, forming the *Alliance des états du Sahel* (which later took the name *Confédération des états du Sahel*) has been the most spectacular decision that the three countries have taken to partially replace the lost formal regional connections. But the AES is not a perfect substitute for ECOWAS, and the transfer of diplomatic prerogatives from one organisation to the other is not clearcut. The renewal of a regime of international relationships cannot take place overnight. In fact, dialogue with the ECOWAS countries has not been irreversibly buried and may even resurface. Conversely, the nascent AES integration and cooperation are far from fully operational. On the bilateral front, connections have proactively been reconfigured with partners beyond the immediate Sahelian neighbourhood, but, here again, the directions taken are not totally clear. The present situation of AES diplomacy looks like a grey zone that is not easy to decipher. This section reviews this still-in-the-making diplomatic landscape, with a focus on the most immediate regional dimension. It leaves aside the G5 Sahel, whose existence, as previously noted, is now largely irrelevant.

Previous conflict resolution and dialogue efforts

ECOWAS's ambivalent relationship with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger

When Sahelian militaries started perpetrating coups in their respective countries, the regional bloc ECOWAS – whose mandate is to promote democracy and good governance among its members – had no option but to condemn the coups and to search for pathways toward the reinstatement of constitutional legitimacy. Its limited effectiveness in establishing a viable settlement with the juntas was very much a function of ECOWAS's past forms of interventionism (or absence thereof) in the region and its degraded image in the eyes of the coup-makers.

Arguably, two elements combined to make the regional bloc unpopular among the new Sahelian military rulers: ECOWAS's failure to offer decisive and timely security assistance when Sahelian countries needed it (which predates the coups by a decade but persisted in the institutional memory of the Sahelian militaries) and the bloc's unwelcome response to coups, which was judged by the putschists and their supporters as being simultaneously both heavy-handed and hypocritical.

Even though the ECOWAS member-states recognise the danger represented by jihadist expansion on their own territory and the necessity to foster cross-border cooperation on the security front, little has been done historically by the regional bloc to support the Sahelian states militarily. Indeed, it was ECOWAS's inability to design and enforce a viable and credible military mission to dislodge the jihadist groups that had taken control of the northern half of Mali in 2012 that played a foundational role for the decade-long international efforts to stabilise the Sahel –

from Operation Serval to the G5 Sahel and MINUSMA. African countries did eventually deploy troops as part of an entity called the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), but they soon passed the baton to MINUSMA, whose operations were notoriously static and harmless for the insurgents. The only African nation whose impact on the battlefield proved decisive in the 2013 ‘kinetic’ campaign, Chad, was not a member of ECOWAS.⁵³

ECOWAS’s objective limitations on the military front have contrasted with its hyperactivity on the governance front on multiple occasions. In 2012, the ECOWAS diplomacy led by Blaise Compaoré’s minister of foreign affairs, Djibril Bassole, was instrumental in bringing Mali back onto constitutional tracks after Captain Sanogo’s largely improvised coup. Using a mixture of carrots and sticks, ECOWAS managed to get Sanogo to cede power to an interim government that was eventually replaced by a new one following a general election in 2013. Similarly, ECOWAS helped reinstate the former transitional president of Burkina Faso, Michel Kafando, who had been removed from power by the deposed ruler Blaise Compaoré’s loyalists led by General Gilbert Diendéré on 16 September 2015. Less than ten years later, the ability of ECOWAS and the international community more broadly to twist the arm of coup-prone militaries and get them to return to their barracks had vanished. The new generation of coup-makers was not impressed by diplomatic pressures and benefitted from a widespread pro-military sentiment among the general public, proportionate to the disillusion toward electoral democracy and the strategic stalemate in the war against jihadist insurgents. The young Sahelian putschists were not ready to swallow patronising lectures about democracy dispensed by ECOWAS heads of state who too closely resembled those they had just deposed and who were judged responsible for the poor state of affairs in their respective countries.⁵⁴ Lectures about democracy sounded even more hollow given that some of these ECOWAS leaders – such as Alassane Dramane Ouattara from Côte d’Ivoire – had themselves manipulated their countries’ constitutions to get re-elected, in events that Sahelian supporters of the putschists publicly called ‘constitutional coups’. In the new climate of widespread democratic fatigue⁵⁵ and defiance toward patronising discourses coming from the West inflamed by ad hoc populist campaigns on social media, the international community’s leverage to stop the coups crumbled. In Mali, following the 2020 coup, the best concession that ECOWAS eventually obtained was a timeline for a return to civilian rule that the military consistently ignored.⁵⁶

53 Many ECOWAS member-states (including Togo, Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire) have eventually become significant contributors of troops to MINUSMA and have paid a heavy tribute to the mission in terms of fatalities. But the deployment of MINUSMA itself and the fact that West African states could only operate through a UN body rather than a regional one signals ECOWAS’s failure to play the role expected of it according to the implicit logic of international conflict management: neighbours first, then more distant bilateral or multilateral security assistance.

54 A Ghanaian diplomat interviewed as part of a previous study stressed that the informal rule of deference toward senior peers was ineffective in interactions between seasoned ECOWAS officials and Sahelian putschists (March 2023).

55 K. Opalo, ‘Putting the Recent Coups in the Sahel in Broader Perspective’ (An Africanist Perspective, 3 August 2023) <<https://www.africanistperspective.com/p/putting-the-recent-coups-in-the-sahel>> accessed 23 June 2025.

56 B. Odigie and P. da Rocha, ‘Norms Diffusion and Mediation in Fragile States: Examining the ECOWAS Intervention in 2020–2022 Mali Political Crisis’, (2024) 2(1) Journal of African Peace and Security 46.

The nail in the coffin for ECOWAS's ability to salvage civilian rule was the backlash against the harsh measures it imposed on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in the wake of coups. In all three countries, post-coup sanctions were repeatedly denounced as 'illegal, illegitimate and inhumane'.⁵⁷ Protests followed. A climax of tensions was reached when ECOWAS threatened Niger with a military intervention after its coup in July 2023. What retrospectively looks like a bluff⁵⁸ caused an outcry among Nigeriens and shut the door on discussions. In the minds of the new Malian rulers, coups are a natural consequence of ECOWAS failure. To them, not only did ECOWAS not help Sahelian countries fight against insurgents, but it turned hostile when the Sahelian countries chose their own way of handling the crisis – through military rule, which was seen as the ultimate solution to the deterioration of the security situation.⁵⁹

The collateral damages of domestic policies

The bitter (yet possibly temporary, as discussed below) ending of relationships with ECOWAS and the ensuing recalibration of the AES countries' international alliances have left a mark on bilateral diplomacy in the region. AES states now have difficult relations with many of their immediate neighbours. Interestingly enough, the difficulties in these relations also mobilise counterforces whose effectiveness at mitigating tensions will be examined below.

In long incendiary speeches or through pseudo-investigations presented on national television,⁶⁰ authorities in Niger regularly accuse Benin or Nigeria of fomenting destabilisation plans against Niger with the help of French special forces or through arming proxy militants.⁶¹ This has led in practice to the closure by Niger of the border with Benin and, until the end of 2024, the suspension of activities of the highly strategic pipeline that allows Niger to export its oil. The rationale behind this unilateral move on the part of Niger is fundamentally anti-economic and reveals the defiant mindset of the Niger junta. Similar accusatory discourse is used by Burkina Faso against Côte d'Ivoire, a country that hosts many Burkinabé nationals fleeing

57 *Malivox*, 'Le Niger n'oubliera jamais l'engagement du Mali et du Burkina Faso à ses côtés suite aux sanctions illégales et illégitimes de la CEDEAO' (*Malivox*, 6 October 2023)

<<https://malivox.net/le-niger-noubliera-jamais-lengagement-du-mali-et-du-burkina-faso-a-ses-cotes-suite-aux-sanctions-illegales-et-illegitimes-de-la-cedeao/>> accessed 23 June 2025.

58 No sign of active preparation was ever visible.

59 Interview with a Malian diplomat, February 2025.

60 See Africa 24, 'Niger: Le Bénin et le Nigeria accusés de vouloir déstabiliser le pays' (video, YouTube, 4 June 2025) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDkJnlzwrxo>> accessed 23 June 2025; France 24, 'Le Niger accuse son voisin nigérian de déstabilisation politique' (France 24, 23 December 2024) <<https://www.france24.com/fr/vid%C3%A9o/20241223-le-niger-accuse-son-voisin-nig%C3%A9rian-de-d%C3%A9stabilisation-politique>> accessed 23 June 2025.

61 The group known as Lakurawa in particular, which operates on both sides of the Niger–Nigeria border, is considered by General Abdourahamane Tiani of Niger to be a creation of the French government; see ONEP, 'Interview accordée par le Président du Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP), Chef de l'Etat, le Général de Brigade Abdourahamane Tiani à la RTN' (Office National d'Édition et de Presse, 26 December 2024) <<https://www.lesahel.org/interview-accordee-par-le-president-du-conseil-national-pour-la-sauvegarde-de-la-patrie-cnsp-chef-de-letat-le-general-de-brigade-abdourahamane-tiani-a-la-rtn/>> accessed 23 June 2025.

Ouagadougou's authoritarian regime.⁶² Côte d'Ivoire is also Bamako's political target. In July 2022, the Malian authorities arrested 49 Ivorian soldiers at Bamako's airport and detained them for eight months. In an obscure sequence that resembled hostage diplomacy more than judicial due process, the soldiers were charged with plotting a coup and condemned to heavy sentences before being eventually pardoned.⁶³

Even more heated episodes occurred between Mali and Mauritania, and between Mali and Algeria. The recent diplomatic tension between Mali and Algeria directly follows the denunciation by the Malian authorities of the 2015 peace agreement between the Malian government and the secessionist movements, which had been guaranteed by Algiers. Algerian authorities found Mali's decision unfortunate as the secessionists' stronghold, Kidal, is highly connected to Algeria's southern region. Any military activity happening in Kidal has immediate consequences for Algeria's south. As a result, Algiers has historically developed policies to manage its 'backyard', not always with Bamako's full approval.⁶⁴ Algiers's grudges escalated further when Malian authorities initiated a military campaign to recapture Kidal – which was functioning as a de facto government in the hands of the former secessionist groups that had signed the peace agreement. The campaign was spearheaded by Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group, whose recruitment by Mali and atrocities against civilians were vividly condemned by Algiers.⁶⁵ Simultaneously, the AES countries developed ambitious business plans with Morocco,⁶⁶ which could only exacerbate Algiers's ire. A serious border incident happened in April 2025 when the Algerian Air Force shot down a Malian drone.⁶⁷ The situation did not escalate further but signals the deep reciprocal resentment between Mali and Algeria, whose end is not in sight.

Tensions between Mali and Mauritania are also multifaceted and tragic yet involve modes of mitigation that are worth mentioning. Before examining that subject in the next subsection, let us stress here that Mauritania is facing the direct humanitarian consequences of the war in Mali through its hosting of 300,000 refugees from Mali in the Hodh Chargui region – the

62 Jeune Afrique, 'Le Burkina Faso assure avoir déjoué un "grand complot" orchestré depuis la Côte d'Ivoire' (Jeune Afrique, 22 April 2025)

<<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1681323/politique/le-burkina-faso-assure-avoir-dejoue-un-grand-complot-orchestre-depuis-la-cote-divoire/>> accessed 23 June 2025.

63 TV5 Monde, 'Pourquoi 46 soldats ivoiriens étaient détenus au Mali?' (TV5 Monde, 30 December 2022)

<<https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/pourquoi-46-soldats-ivoiriens-etaient-detenus-au-mali-1572795>> accessed 23 June 2025.

64 AfriqueXXI, 'Mali–Algérie, une longue histoire d'ambiguïté et de méfiance' (AfriqueXXI, 24 March 2025)

<<https://afriquexxi.info/Mali-Algerie-une-longue-histoire-d-ambiguite-et-de-mefiance>> accessed 23 June 2025.

65 F. Bobin and B. Roger, 'Au Sahel, l'étoile pâlie de l'Algérie' (Le Monde Afrique, 12 January 2025)

<https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/01/12/au-sahel-l-etoile-palie-de-l-algerie_6493848_3212.html> accessed 23 June 2025.

66 D. Rich, 'Désenclaver le Sahel, le mégaprojet du Maroc pour étendre son influence régionale' (France24, 1 May 2025)

<<https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20250501-desenclaver-sahel-megaprojet-maroc-influence-r%C3%A9gionale-atlantique>> accessed 23 June 2025; R. Lyammouri and A. Ghoulidi, 'Morocco's Atlantic Initiative: A Catalyst for Sahel–Saharan Integration' (Policy Brief PB-68/24, Policy Center for the New South, 2024)

<<https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/moroccos-atlantic-initiative-catalyst-sahel-saharan-integration>> accessed 23 June 2025.

67 C. Ewokor, 'Algerian and Mali Block Flights from Each Other After Drone Shot Down' (BBC News, 8 April 2025)

<<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c045zp1l3nko>> accessed 23 June 2025.

second-largest concentration of population in the country after the capital city Nouakchott.⁶⁸ Mauritania and Mali share thousands of kilometres of frontier with only a few official crossing points. As a result, Mauritanian and Malian nationals live on both sides of the border without much awareness of where the frontier is. Malian military operations end up targeting Mauritians and also often cross the frontier.⁶⁹ It takes serious efforts, reviewed below, to prevent escalation from occurring between the two countries.

Box 1. Previous conflict resolution and dialogue efforts

- ECOWAS gradually lost its credibility and its leverage as a democracy promoter owing to its failure to help Sahelian states when they needed assistance and its heavy-handed response to coups instrumentalised as an external threat by the military to rally support.
- The decision of AES countries to recalibrate their international alliances caused severe bilateral tensions between Mali and Algeria, Mali and Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Benin, and Niger and Nigeria.

Challenges and prospects for sustainable regional diplomatic dialogue

The AES: A preliminary assessment

The AES presents itself as an endogenous move by the Liptako-Gourma states to take their destiny into their own hands. Its legal basis consists of two main documents: the *Charte de Liptako-Gourma instituant l'Alliance des états du Sahel* (September 2023) and the *Traité portant création de la Confédération AES* (July 2024).⁷⁰ While the first document emphasises the mutual defence that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger owe to each other, the second extends cooperation to the diplomatic and economic domains – in a way, ironically, that recalls the ‘3D doctrine’ (standing for ‘defence–diplomacy–development’) at the heart of the earlier Western-led stabilisation agenda, including the demised G5 Sahel.⁷¹ This is no surprise, as the rationale behind the AES follows a similar postulate: Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger present similarities that can be viewed as advantages in efforts to address conflict resolution and dialogue challenges.

68 UNHCR, ‘UNHCR Mauritania: Overview of Activities in Mbera Camp, April 2025’ (20 May 2025) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/mauritania/unhcr-mauritania-overview-activities-mbera-camp-april-2025>> accessed 23 June 2025.

69 M. Le Cam, ‘Entre le Mali et la Mauritanie, un nouvel épisode de turbulences diplomatiques’ (Le Monde Afrique, 24 April 2024) <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/04/24/entre-le-mali-et-la-mauritanie-un-nouvel-episode-de-turbulences-diplomatiques_6229619_3212.html> accessed 23 June 2025.

70 Both documents are available online at: <https://aes.ml/download-category/documents/>.

71 B. Charbonneau, ‘Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel’ (2021) 97(6) *International Affairs* 1805 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab182>>.

The three countries have a number of geographical, economic and cultural features in common. They are situated in the same region and share several hundred kilometres of borders. The three nations also have populations made up of cultural groups that span the three countries, which creates a demographic continuity that strengthens territorial and geographical links.

What has the AES achieved so far? It is in fact premature to attempt a full assessment of the AES's concrete actions. On the military front, speculations abound about some level of mutual support. Interviews with security analysts suggest, for instance, that Niger provided logistic assistance to the Malian army during the latter's campaign to recapture Kidal. Similarly, Burkina Faso has occasionally mobilised its drones in operations on Malian soil. Also, Nigerien troops secure convoys of commercial trucks circulating between Tera in Niger and Kaya in Burkina Faso. On the diplomatic front, AES countries try to speak with one voice. Their most spectacular coordinated move to date was to jointly recall their ambassadors from Algeria after a Malian drone was shot down by the Algerian Air Force.⁷² Finally, in the economic domain, the AES countries have launched a new passport (surprisingly manufactured by a French firm).⁷³ However, the most promising diplomatic efforts still seem to happen via closed or more discrete channels, as detailed below.

Not all is lost with ECOWAS or AES neighbours

Despite their seriousness, it is remarkable that none of the diplomatic incidents noted above have led to even worse escalations. A likely reason is that all protagonists eventually used restraint, in practice if not in words. There are a number of reasons why ECOWAS countries would typically be reluctant to further inflame relationships with their AES neighbours. First, their leaders know that the Sahelian militaries have an aura and propose a discourse that may resonate in some sections of their own youth populations. It is notable that Captain Ibrahim Traoré from Burkina Faso almost stole the show at Ghanaian President John Mahama's inauguration in Accra in January 2025.⁷⁴ Second, ECOWAS leaders know that some big issues are at stake in their relationships with the AES countries: their own security to start with, along with the future of ECOWAS itself. In the face of a risk of disintegration, cooling down attitudes and adopting a pragmatic diplomatic stance represent a safer option.⁷⁵ The adoption of such an approach is even more necessary given that ECOWAS member-states do not share the same views on the AES, either

- 72 France 24, 'Drone malien abattu: Le Mali, le Niger et le Burkina rappellent leurs ambassadeurs en Algérie' (France 24, 7 April 2025) <<https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20250406-mali-accuse-alg%C3%A9rie-avoir-abattu-un-drone-arm%C3%A9-rappelle-ambassadeur-alger-diplomatie-burkina-niger-enquete>> accessed 23 June 2025.
- 73 TV5 Monde, 'Alliance des états du Sahel: Questions autour du nouveau passeport de l'AES' (TV5 Monde, 31 March 2025) <<https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/alliance-des-etats-du-sahel-questions-autour-du-nouveau-passeport-de-laes-2768417>> accessed 23 June 2025.
- 74 GhanaWeb, 'Watch the Moment Burkina Faso's Head of State Ibrahim Traoré "Stole" the Spotlight at Mahama's Inauguration' (GhanaWeb, 7 January 2025) <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Watch-the-moment-Burkina-Faso-s-head-of-state-Ibrahim-Traor-stole-the-spotlight-at-Mahama-s-inauguration-1966488>> accessed 23 June 2025.
- 75 K. Anings and J. Bjarnesen, 'Ecawas' Dilemma: Balancing Principles and Pragmatism' (Nordic Africa Institute, 10 April 2024) <<https://nai.uu.se/stories-and-events/news/2024-04-10-ecowas-dilemma-balancing-principles-and-pragmatism.html>> accessed 23 June 2025.

for ideological or for more opportunistic business reasons. Typically, Togo,⁷⁶ Ghana and Senegal endorse, to some extent, the sovereignist discourse of the AES. Togo has gone even further and has developed an entity, the African Political Alliance,⁷⁷ whose aim is to facilitate talks around a pan-African revival, a cornerstone of AES propaganda. This entity may host talks toward a rapprochement between ECOWAS and the AES. On the security front, it seems that some willingness to revive cooperation exists,⁷⁸ although so far no concrete measures have been introduced. Certainly, the possibility for continued dialogue exists, but it is clear that its parameters have now taken on a realist, transactional flavour as opposed to a liberal, value-driven one.

Responsible borderland politics from below

We choose to end this section by addressing an underexplored dimension of regional dialogue that surfaced in conversations conducted either as part of the research conducted for this study or separately and concerns the sense of responsibility that subnational leaders in charge of borderlands demonstrate – as opposed to, more often than not, their peers based in capital cities. Such leaders are not only more aware of the predicament of local populations than officials based in capitals, but may also enjoy the specific social connectedness that allows the de-escalation of tensions that sporadically erupt in the borderlands. As a Mauritanian senior civil servant involved in the administration of the border between Mauritania and Mali put it, ‘when misunderstandings arise with Mali, I call officials or traditional leaders in Timbuktu, Taoudenni or Nara and handle the situation with them as much as possible’.⁷⁹ Such informal, personalised contacts may explain why incursions of Wagner Group mercenaries in Mauritania or massacres of Mauritanian civilians did not lead to graver consequences. In a relatively gloomy climate of mutual defiance and grossly offensive public statements by top leaders, such low-key initiatives – whose conditions of replicability need to be studied further – represent a welcome dialogue mechanism that may eventually take on board the interests of local populations.

76 K. A. Adaba, ‘Une récente enquête d’Afrobarometer a notamment permis d’examiner la perception des Togolais du retrait des pays de l’Alliance des états du Sahel (AES) de la Communauté économique des états de l’Afrique de l’Ouest (Cedeao) et de la gestion par leur gouvernement de la menace terroriste au nord du pays’ (*Tama Media*, 30 May 2025) <<https://tamamedia.com/pourquoi-le-togo-a-choisi-une-position-equilibriste-en-afrique-de-louest/>> accessed 23 June 2025.

77 For the website of the African Political Alliance, see: <https://apa.africa/>.

78 *TV5 Monde*, ‘La Cédéao et le Mali, le Burkina Faso et le Niger conviennent de coopérer “contre le terrorisme”’ (*TV5 Monde*, 23 May 2025) <<https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/la-cedeao-et-le-mali-le-burkina-faso-et-le-niger-conviennent-de-cooperer-contre-le->>. See also *New World TV*, ‘Abdoulaye Diop: “Nous entrons dans une phase d’apaisement de réalisme avec la CEDEAO”’ (video, YouTube, 7 June 2025) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp0Tq3521rg>> accessed 23 June 2025>.

79 Personal conversation, March 2025.

Box 2. Challenges and prospects for regional dialogue

- While dialogue is still largely stalled at the multilateral level, a variety of forms of bilateral dialogue persist between the AES and some ECOWAS memberstates, some of which operate as brokers.
- The AES itself has not yielded much for local populations and remains to a large extent a club of khaki-clad rulers promising solidarity to each other.
- At the subnational level, local officials, traditional leaders and populations in borderlands are active forces against isolationism.

Summary

The AES is the product of disappointing relations for all sides in West Africa. Paradoxically, while everyone agrees that the threat that jihadist insurgents pose to security is transnational and requires coordinated regional efforts, a wide gap of distrust and mutual accusations separates the AES bloc from ECOWAS, built up over many years of disagreement on the security and the governance fronts. No evident solution to this mutually harmful situation is in sight, but at least three factors – which need to be both explored and cultivated further – have been identified in this study as contributors to reciprocal restraint and de-escalation. First, not all ECOWAS member-states have responded in the same way to the decision of the AES states to break away from ECOWAS. Some of them may entertain no or cold connections with the AES, while others have strategically repositioned themselves as brokers, which ensures that some diplomatic dialogue continues to flow across borders. As a result, it is probably misleading to portray the current regional state of affairs as a clash between incompatible blocs. Second, as shown by the case of Mauritania–Mali relations, officials or traditional leaders in charge of administrating borderlands continue to talk to each other as they and the populations they represent are directly impacted by the consequences of bilateral tensions. Finally, populations themselves, the family or cultural bonds they entertain, and the economic activities they carry out are the true connectors of borderlands. While long-term, sustainable solutions – consisting, for instance, of reopening the border between Niger and Benin – can only be suggested and enforced through high-level agreements, communities are active forces against detrimental isolationism.

06 *Dialogue with jihadists*

Previous conflict resolution and dialogue efforts

The ambiguous landscape of dialogue with jihadists

As stated above, high-level dialogue between jihadist leaders and central authorities has never been consistently conducted in the Sahel, even though it was advocated by analysts⁸⁰ or demanded by the populations through national processes of consultation. Local dialogues – typically at the district or village level – are more frequent and accepted. They have been presented in the existing literature⁸¹ through two main angles. First, the literature sees such forms of decentralised negotiation as an illustration of the agency of civilians confronted with armed actors and the capacity of communities to effectively navigate armed groups' coercive practices. Second, the literature shows how the impact of local peacebuilding is limited and fragile owing to unescapable asymmetries of power. According to this literature, communities are caught in an intractable dilemma: they can ultimately only negotiate 'survival pacts' with jihadists who would otherwise harass or expel them while trying to avoid becoming 'suspect communities' in the eyes of the state simply because they engage with the militants.

Against this backdrop, the present section combines the findings of the roundtable and the existing literature to clarify the practical modalities of dialogue with jihadists; to assess the outcomes of such modalities; and to discuss the current willingness of the warring parties to engage in discussions with each other.

The modalities and outcomes of dialogue: Levels of command and their implications

Modalities and outcomes of dialogue vary. As expected, the ambivalent nature of local dialogue identified in the literature briefly summarised above is echoed in observations made by the panellists of our roundtable. The panellists also offered valuable details about the substance of the various alternative forms of dialogue that exist. They stressed the crucial importance of the decision-making levels at which dialogues happen. Most of what they shared in these regards is synthesised in Figure 2.

80 International Crisis Group, 'Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists' (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019); F. Bouhlel, '(Ne pas) dialoguer avec les groupes "jihadistes" au Mali?' (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2020).

81 I. Poudiougou, 'Défendre le village et combattre pour le terroir: La mobilisation armée des groupes d'autodéfense à l'épreuve du travail agricole en Pays Dogon, au centre du Mali' (2024) 255 *Revue internationale des études du développement* 97; N. Rupesinghe, 'Resist, Negotiate, Submit? Civilian Agency and Jihadism in Central Mali' (London: ODI, 2023); F. Bouhlel and Y. Guichaoua, 'Interactions Between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger' (project report, University of Kent, 2023); P. Kleinfeld, 'Conflict and Dialogue in West Africa's Sahel' (*The New Humanitarian*, 22 December 2022) <<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2022/12/22/conflict-in-review-sahel>> accessed 5 April 2025

Figure 2 Synthesis of findings on dialogue with jihadists

Level of decision-making	Attitudes	Items open for discussion	Variables affecting the outcomes	Outcomes
Central	Dogmatic	Imposition of Sharia law, secular character of the state, presence of foreign troops, release of hostages/ prisoners	International environment (e.g. deployment and activity of foreign troops, Algerian border diplomacy)	Hostage deals, prisoner swaps, durable settlement (?)
Local commanders	Pragmatic	Planning and conduct of local military operations, collection of zakat, local resource management, humanitarian access	Prewar social proximity between actors, local history of social stratification and violence, presence of self-defence groups	Alternatively: punitive measures for non-compliant communities, negotiated local agreement, submission to jihadist demands

The rationale underlying the construction of Figure 2 is based on a series of considerations made by the participants at the roundtable. First, as reflected in the first column of the figure, two levels of decision-making among jihadist groups are considered analytically and practically highly relevant owing to the nature of the internal organisation of the militant groups. Jihadist groups have a well-defined chain of command across the countries in which they operate, yet combatant units at the local level enjoy some level of autonomy and hold some important prerogatives, hence the necessity to envisage dialogue as a two-pronged process involving the central command and the local commanders, respectively, and requiring different approaches and language in the different contexts. This view is also sustained by the view that, even though militants belong to the same transnational movements, they navigate different physical and social terrains and face different enemies – civil defence groups and, of course, national armies – whom they need to know and strategically adapt to. It seems that not all Sahelian countries and not all places within these countries have the same strategic value for the jihadists. One participant from Niger coined the expression ‘JNIM country’ to characterise the national idiosyncrasies of JNIM. He argued that, as a mediator from Niger, he would essentially engage with Nigerien nationals from JNIM and

added that Niger holds a specific status in JNIM's construction of space, as a place for business (including gold exploitation) and combatants' rest, as opposed to Burkina Faso and Mali, which are seen as places for combat.⁸²

In the second column of the figure, we characterise the attitudes toward dialogue that can be attributed to each level of command. By 'attitudes', we mean the dispositions and normative views mobilised by actors to establish and justify the course of their actions. We distinguish between the central command operating according to a dogmatic approach and local commanders being guided by more pragmatic concerns. Here, the point is not to argue that the central level is more 'religious' than local commanders – all levels have to justify their actions in the Islamic idiom – but to stress that local commanders have immediate, mundane decisions to take that require practical knowledge of the local environment, whereas decisions that concern big strategic choices require the mobilisation of explicit normative references.⁸³ Such references may refer to the typical bodies of instructions of Al Qaeda or the Islamic State, but also possibly to local Islamic jurisprudence.⁸⁴ The fact that different levels of norms can be mobilised to justify actions has a direct impact on modalities of dialogue by delineating the sets of issues that each level of command can govern. We detail these sets of issues in the third column.

The importance of distinguishing between levels of command appears clearly in the third column, which indicates what each level of command is entitled to do. Here, the 'division of labour' between echelons of the jihadist hierarchy is striking. The central command decides on big subjects related to what the jihadist rule should look like on the basis of the jihadist interpretation of Sharia law. The central command also decides on whether the presence of foreign troops within particular territories should be considered acceptable, along with everything related to national or international civilian hostages and military prisoners. Conversely, the local commanders handle a very broad spectrum of local issues, which may include military activity, the collection of the Islamic tax zakat,⁸⁵ the management of agricultural, pastoral or mineral resources, or questions related to humanitarian access in their respective zones of influence.

82 These representations may, of course, be fluid and temporary. Ultimately, the territory that JNIM hopes to conquer is limitless, but this does not preclude the possibility of attributing different characteristics to places, their inhabitants, or the valour and toughness of JNIM's enemies. Such representations eventually inform warring tactics and the willingness to enter into a dialogue.

83 In the book narrating his 711 days of captivity in JNIM's hands, French journalist Olivier Dubois insists on the deep religiosity of all the militants he encounters. But, importantly, the rank and file among his captors systematically defer to their commanders when Dubois's questions become more general and abstract. See O. Dubois, *Prisonnier du désert, 711 jours aux mains d'Al-Qaïda* (Paris: Michel Lafon, 2025).

84 On the integration of jurisprudence in Islamic Law with application to the norms surrounding the use of violence, see Bouhlel, '(Ne pas) dialoguer avec les groupes "jihadistes" au Mali?' (n 80).

85 What jihadists call zakat may be at odds with what non-jihadist clerics and populations consider as zakat, hence the heated disputes about the scope of Islamic fiscal obligations in jihadist-controlled areas.

The above set of prerogatives combine with intervening variables related to changing local historical circumstances and configurations to produce a variety of outcomes associated with dialogue processes. Significant intervening variables identified by the panellists at the roundtable on dialogue with jihadists are featured in the fourth column of Figure 2. The central level of command would typically respond to macro-level circumstances affecting the course of the war (e.g. major military offensives, the presence of foreign troops, the international environment, etc.) and base its willingness to engage in discussions on its perception of the global environment and its evolution.⁸⁶ Intervening variables differ at the local level. Evidence shared by panellists suggests that prewar social bonds between protagonists play a key role in the facilitation or impeding of wartime dialogue.⁸⁷ Similarly, the local history of social stratification or violence provides a good predictor of the feasibility of wartime dialogue. Crucially, the existence of armed self-defence groups, generally coterminous with specific ethnic makeups, constitutes what may unleash the worst consequences for populations, often in the form of devastating techniques of economic warfare ('blocus' – i.e. sieges, cattle theft or destruction of crops).

Finally, varying outcomes emerge from the various levels of decision-making through their interaction with the intervening variables. These are indicated in the fifth column of Figure 2. The central command decides on hostage deals or prisoner swaps when talks bear fruit. It may also decide on a – for now elusive – high-level settlement with the state. For their part, local commanders may obtain the full submission of communities as well as strict compliance with their rule.⁸⁸ However, less strict, negotiated outcomes may also arise, as suggested in the next subsection. In the event of failure of dialogue, collective punishment may continue for non-compliant communities.

The above remarks synthetically portray a series of factors that affect the occurrence, forms and outcomes of dialogue with jihadists, as witnessed and studied by the participants at our roundtable. This analytical effort was complemented by more dynamic considerations as well as judgements about the processes of dialogue, to which we now turn.

86 For instance, one of our panellists mentioned the impact on JNIM internal strategic discussions of the latest success of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria after the insurgent group dropped its allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2016; see J. Drevon and P. Haenni, 'Redefining Global Jihad and Its Termination: The Subjugation of al-Qaeda by Its Former Franchise in Syria' (2022) 48(3) *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 284. Algeria's attitude toward Mali and insurgents operating at its border is another major factor affecting the jihadist dynamic. Another illustration is a JNIM communiqué released in February 2025 denouncing the atrocities perpetrated by the Russian mercenaries against civilians in Mali and, somewhat ironically, alerting the international community about this state of affairs.

87 This is in line with similar findings in Afghanistan; see A. Jackson, *Negotiating Survival: Civilian–Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021).

88 For concrete examples of what is implied when a community submits to jihadi rule, see Bouhlel and Guichaoua, 'Interactions Between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger' (n 81).

Box 3. Dialogue with jihadists: What works and what does not

- The level on which dialogue is conducted is a key predictor of what is feasible and what is not.
- High-level dialogue only happens occasionally, typically around prisoners or hostage swaps.
- Local dialogue is the most accepted form of dialogue. By definition, its terms depend on local situations.
- Local dialogue is a double-edged sword: it stabilizes relationships among local actors and makes those relationships more predictable, yet it also tends to 'lock' populations under jihadist rule and make them complicit with insurgents in the eyes of the government.

Challenges and prospects for dialogue: Four key considerations

Beyond the descriptive and analytical contributions made by the roundtable's participants, more reflexive considerations were also put forward, which we group into four main observations. First, local agreements may bring essential relief to populations. They basically put an end to coercive measures implemented by jihadists against communities that reject their rule and allow economic and commercial activities to resume. However, two limitations must be mentioned in this context. The cost of reaching such local agreements can be huge for communities subjected to economic blocus for months, if not years. And such agreements, once in place, are generally highly detrimental to women, against whom most of the dos and don'ts of jihadi rule are imposed, representing all sorts of obstacles to their participation in the local economy. The other limitation of local agreements relates to their spatial and temporal volatility. Their success depends on highly idiosyncratic factors (e.g. a good relationship between a commander and a local notable) and is vulnerable to changes in contexts. For example, a self-defence group that disarmed under jihadist military pressure may be revived if provided with enough incentives for such a revival by the government, which itself might not offer lasting support to its local proxies.

Second, are such local agreements politically desirable? They are a double-edged sword since they often equate with the hegemonic dominance of the jihadists, a situation unacceptable to the state as it means its *de facto* loss of territorial control.⁸⁹ If no side can defeat the other militarily, discussing core matters such as norms of governance becomes imperative, and this can only happen through high-level dialogue. This is certainly a better option than protracted

⁸⁹ Some exceptions to this view were mentioned during the roundtable. At certain points, in certain places, it may be mutually advantageous for belligerents not to confront each other and to accept the prevailing status quo. Such truces emerge from tacit coordination rather than dialogue *per se*.

cycles of offensives, retreats, hit-and-run operations and temporary territorial control that cost lives and endanger populations as they are permanently accused by each side of being complicit with the other.

Third, for the above reasons, the panellists agreed that agreements with jihadists that are intended to be sustainable should only be negotiated at a high level of command. Exactly which level, however, was a contentious point. Some participants mentioned the top command (e.g. Iyad Ag Ghaly in the case of JNIM), while others argued that discussing with national commanders would suffice, in line with the idea that there is such a thing as JNIM-Burkina, JNIM-Mali or JNIM-Niger. In a nutshell, as a negotiator with jihadists from Niger put it: 'L'Etat doit s'assumer' ('the state should take responsibility'). What he meant was that responsible leadership cannot leave it to local actors to seek solutions and expose them to danger as a result. State actors should have the courage to recognise the protracted nature of the conflict and the military stalemate in which the Sahelian countries have been caught and engage with jihadists through high-level dialogue. The same person stressed that this was highly feasible since jihadists not only can articulate perfectly their political demands but also show some openness to engaging in discussions, at least in Niger – discussions that, he added, could perfectly well take place while military operations were ongoing.

But is such high-level dialogue feasible? This is our fourth point. Some panellists answered this question positively, for several reasons. First, high-level dialogue happens regularly for occasional operations (typically prisoner swaps or releases of hostages). Second, some methods and intermediaries are already in place and are mutually accepted.⁹⁰ Another participant, a negotiator specialised in the liberation of foreign hostages detained by JNIM, showed less optimism. Jihadists, he argued, may impose harsh conditions that could quickly bring an end to dialogue: they might demand that the secular character of the state be abandoned and replaced with the imposition of Shariah law or that foreign troops leave the country. Setting such a high bar might prevent states from going any further with discussions. However, how rigid these conditions are is subject to question, as shown by the evolution of HTS in Syria, which, as indicated above, triggered strategic conversations among Sahelian insurgents.

90 One such 'method' in Niger requires that detained jihadists or jihadist sympathisers be freed as the price for jihadists for entering into discussion. Discussions can start only after liberations have taken place.



Photo:
UN Photo /
Marco Dormin

The openness to dialogue of Sahelian governments is also uncertain. The participants at the roundtable were all familiar with state circles, and it was striking that they were all unable to go beyond speculations concerning the willingness of Sahelian states to engage in discussions with jihadists. Sahelian states are not keen to recognise jihadists as political actors carrying possibly valid political claims.⁹¹ The military approach remains their privileged way of ending the conflicts in the region even though the various actors might engage in occasional talks.⁹² No formalised policy toward dialogue seems to exist despite recurring vague and paternalistic calls directed towards nationals who have followed the ‘wrong path’. In Mali, the DIMPR has timidly discussed a template for dialogue officially proposed by the independent researcher Boubacar Ba, which, according to a participant at the roundtable, did not convince the military.⁹³ Ideas have also emerged during the DIMPR that promote the role that ‘traditional leaders’ could play in facilitating discussions. Panellists concurred that the reflection on this issue was extremely preliminary and failed to formulate clearly what ‘tradition’ means in such a culturally diverse country as Mali.

91 This is even more complicated on the international scene since both JNIM and IS-Sahel are listed as terrorist entities by multiple countries and multilateral organisations. On this subject, see S. Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace: How Listing Armed Groups as Terrorists Hurts Negotiations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

92 This can be seen in events that took place in August 2024, when six detained Nigerien soldiers were released by JNIM following talks considered extremely encouraging by one of the negotiators, who then lamented that they stopped abruptly owing to a decision by the CNSP.

93 This observation may not hold indefinitely, however, as signs of reciprocal engagement approved by authorities in Bamako are perceptible in April 2025.

Box 4. Challenges in dialogue with jihadists

- High-level dialogue is the form of dialogue most likely to lead to a durable settlement, yet it is also the most difficult to conduct.
- Sahelian governments are not keen to see such a process happening in the immediate future.
- Jihadist actors are likely to set a very high bar on their agreement to enter into discussions.
- However, such actors are not monolithic entities and would probably reconsider their demands if they gradually shift toward a national agenda.
- Realistically, the most feasible form of dialogue is local. Local dialogue may alleviate the predicament of the civilian population in the short run.

Summary

The findings of the roundtable, separate interviews and the relevant literature are mixed. They point to the substantial benefits that dialogue could bring to populations along with its absolute necessity for achieving durable peace. However, concrete obstacles remain. States are not keen to engage in high-level dialogue, and jihadists may place the bar too high to even allow such high-level dialogue to take place. It seems as though, for both sides, an exogenous shock would be needed to make them abandon their current stances. Although not specifically discussed in the roundtable, such shocks could include economic deterioration, social unrest or drastic changes in the global political climate.

Local arrangements continue and are more relevant than ever owing to pressing problems that communities need to solve. A notable and interesting case is the role that the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue continues to play in Niger, even after the coup, to help prevent communal violence through a strategy that officially only involves civilian representatives of communities yet in practice relies on jihadists' tacit approval – a way for the state to achieve peace locally while dodging the accusation of openly discussing with 'terrorists' and the risk of losing face.⁹⁴ This model of local conflict resolution may be explored further.

94 The agreement for Banibangou (Tillabéri region) serves as a template. This agreement was signed in 2023 before the coup in Niger and involved communities whose relations had been recurrently violent, to such a point that Fulani people had eventually left the city. Two years later, the reciprocal commitments of the parties seem to be holding despite a regime change. See HD Centre, 'Accord de paix entre communautés du département de Banibangou' (Geneva: HD Centre, 2023) <https://hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Accord-de-paix-de-Banibangou-21_janvier-2023.pdf> accessed 5 April 2025.

07 *Women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue processes*

Activists, practitioners and policymakers have used the WPS agenda and related norms to push for women's meaningful participation, at all levels, in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts around the world. This has resulted in the inclusion of gender provisions in peace agreements, new forms of participation, and more attention to women's roles in peace and security. This section discusses past experiences and lessons from previous dialogue initiatives as well as current challenges and prospects regarding women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue processes. In doing so, it draws mainly on Mali's experience with the Algiers process and the recent Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation (DIMPR).

Previous conflict resolution and dialogue efforts

Women's participation in internationally supported peace processes: The Algiers process

Since the start of the conflict in 2012 and throughout the Algiers process, women in Mali mobilised for peace but struggled to access decision-making forums.⁹⁵ Whenever the negotiations process entered a new phase, women were often excluded again.⁹⁶ However, the process also led to greater awareness of existing norms and frameworks such as WPS, and participation in one phase may have created expectations for what followed. For example, during the ceasefire negotiations in Ouagadougou in 2013, negotiating parties did not include any women in their delegations, nor were women representatives from civil society invited, yet a small group of women from civil society forced their way into the talks and demanded a seat at the table. In fact, they contributed to the preamble of what became the final ceasefire agreement text. However, in spite of this, women were not invited to participate when it was time for the Algiers negotiations in 2014. This was very disappointing for many women's activists, who strongly felt they should be involved, and resulted in campaigns by women's activists for women's participation.⁹⁷

For quite some time, the Algiers process was considered one of those peace processes where the WPS agenda failed to have much impact. Over time, however, the support for women's participation increased, and in 2020 a gender quota was adopted in the Comité de suivi de l'accord (Agreement Monitoring Committee – CSA), the highest decision-making forum in the Algiers peace process. The Algiers process therefore also shows the potential of efforts to redress women's under-representation during peace processes.⁹⁸

95 Lorentzen, 'Women and the Peace Process in Mali' (n 42). Lorentzen, 'Women's Inclusion in the Malian Peace Negotiations' (n 41).

96 Lorentzen, 'Women's Inclusion in the Malian Peace Negotiations' (n 41).

97 Ibid.

98 Lorentzen, 'Explaining Changes in Women's Representation in Peace Processes' (n 43).

One roundtable participant was a former member of the Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA). She described the contributions of the women of the CSA. As she saw it, in contrast to the men involved in the process, the women formed a united group:

When we [the women] met the partners, they did not know who was who. They did not know who was CMA, who was Plateforme, who was government, or who was part of the Mouvement de l'inclusivité.⁹⁹ Because we simply introduced ourselves as members of the CSA. For example, when MINUSMA had to meet the signatory movements, if it had to meet the CMA at 10 a.m., it would meet the Plateforme at noon, and so on. This was not the case for the women. We went together.¹⁰⁰

When speaking of the added value that women representatives brought to the CSA, she emphasised the capacity-building that these women and some of their male colleagues received from international partners. She also described how when women entered the CSA, new topics entered the discussions:

For five years, when the CSA members were around the table, the men discussed political and security issues. With the arrival of women, they addressed development issues, basic social services, the return of refugees and humanitarian issues.¹⁰¹

The fact that the women representatives of the three conflict parties appeared as a united group may have allowed them to collectively advocate for specific causes. It is not clear whether this limited their influence within their own delegations, as some observers have noted that the women delegates were sometimes seen as a 'fourth party' in the process, implying some scepticism regarding the extent to which women's contributions and expertise could inform and shape the process.¹⁰²

The introduction of a gender quota in the CSA, however, took place in the context of a failing peace process. In the current security and political context of Mali and the Central Sahel, the focus often turns to hard security issues owing to a sense of urgency regarding the need to end the ongoing spiral of violence, and women's participation becomes a secondary concern. However, women can be important conflict actors, and there are examples from the Malian context of women's roles in encouraging armed rebellion.¹⁰³ It is therefore important to ensure that women are involved in future dialogue initiatives.

99 Two of the women nominated by the government were affiliated with the *Coordination des mouvements de l'inclusivité* (CMI), formed in 2017 by dissident groups of the CMA.

100 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

101 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

102 Interviews, Bamako, September 2022.

103 See H. Lackenbauer, M. T. Lindell and G. Ingerstad, "If Our Men Won't Fight, We Will": A Gendered Analysis of the Armed Conflict in Northern Mali' (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency [FOI], 2015); D. Chebli, 'La révolte en héritage: Militantisme en famille et fragmentation au Nord-Mali (MNLA)' (2019) 234 *Cahiers d'études africaines* 453.

Women's participation in conflict resolution and dialogue at the community level

In addition to discussing women's contributions in national dialogue processes, participants at the roundtable underlined the importance of women's contributions to peace and conflict resolution at the community level. One of the participants complained that women's contributions to conflict resolution often go unnoticed because 'there are no mechanisms that exist to value them, to document everything that women do'. She argued that 'this is why, today, prejudices continue about women not being able to manage conflicts or that they are not capable'.¹⁰⁴

The participants also shared their own experiences of leadership and conflict resolution. One of the participants at the roundtable explained how she had contributed to easing tensions between communities since she took up her role as mayor of a commune in the Koulikoro region:

*When I started as mayor, there was a climate of mistrust between the communities and the municipality concerning the collection of the regional and local development tax. Through awareness-raising and trust-building with the various village chiefs, the collection of taxes increased considerably.*¹⁰⁵

One roundtable participant, a mayor of a commune in the Kayes region, gave testimony regarding women's involvement in conflict resolution in his municipality:

*Before, six women served on the municipal council, but they were only deputies. Because we thought municipal management was men's business. After having participated in training in conflict prevention and management, women got involved and contributed to resolution of conflicts related to land, gender, etc. For example, since 2021, there was a conflict between farmers and breeders. Despite several interventions, the men were unable to find a solution. It was towards the end of 2022 that two brave women got involved in dialogue with each party until they found a solution. The two opposing parties ended up reconciling thanks to the intervention of these two women.*¹⁰⁶

According to the roundtable participant, these women succeeded where the men had failed. After the conflict, farmers and herders created a commission for the exploitation of natural resources together, and the case inspired several other villages to involve women in conflict resolution. According to the mayor, 'It also helped promote the participation of women in the commune. This, in turn, facilitated women's access to land and their empowerment. Thus, we understood that women have a role to play in the development of society'.¹⁰⁷

104 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

105 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

106 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (male).

107 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (male).

Civil society representatives further identified the existence of mechanisms set up by local women's organisations, such as peace huts and peace committees (which are mechanisms and spaces that strengthen women's capacity and facilitate their involvement in conflict management processes), as creating opportunities to promote women's participation in conflict resolution.¹⁰⁸

Box 5. Key take-aways from previous conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts

- Women were marginalised in the Algiers process from the start.
- Efforts to redress women's under-representation in the Algiers process resulted in a 30% gender quota in the CSA in 2020.
- When women representatives joined the CSA, they appeared united and brought new topics to the discussions.
- Roundtable discussions revealed that women contribute significantly to conflict resolution at the community level.
- Women's involvement in local conflict resolution often takes place after women attend trainings in conflict resolution and leadership.

Challenges and prospects for dialogue

Women's participation in the Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation (DIMPR)

In the early stages of the Inter-Malian Dialogue, women's activists reported they were involved in the process but not at the level they wanted, and that they were organising to make their voices heard.¹⁰⁹ From the Malian authorities' own communications, one learns that women's organisations participated in the DIMPR through the formation of a women's group that carried out activities under the DIMPR umbrella, including the organisation of meetings and the formulation of women's recommendations.¹¹⁰ According to NGOs based in Bamako, 'at least the organisations of women and young people were invited, they were formally recognised', and many women's organisations and organisations of young people participated in the process. These included CAFO (Coordination des associations et ONG féminines du Mali), APDF (*Association pour le progrès et la défense des droits des femmes*) and FENACOF (*Fédération nationale des collectifs d'organisations féminines du Mali*).¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Interview with NGO staff, 29 January 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Personal communication with woman leader, 22 April 2024.

¹¹⁰ République du Mali, 'Dialogue inter-Maliens: Les faitières féminines en ordre de bataille' (3 May 2024)

¹¹¹ Interview with NGO staff, 29 January 2025.

The end of the Algiers process represents a break with international involvement and with the former non-state parties CMA and Plateforme. However, in the roundtable discussion, participants argued that there is some continuation between the Algiers process and the Inter-Malian Dialogue. The recommendations from the Inter-Malian Dialogue cover five themes, which broadly correspond to the themes in the Algiers process. On women's participation, one of the participants explained that the roadmap for the integration of women in the process that was developed in February 2024 requested a strong involvement of women in the implementation of the recommendations.¹¹² Another of the participants concurred, explaining that the recommendations have been transformed into an action plan for the period from 2024 to 2028. He further stated that 'the government is committed to implementing these recommendations. The gender dimension has not been forgotten.'¹¹³

Women's participation has been very present in the Malian authorities' own communications and coverage of the Inter-Malian Dialogue, as well as in national media coverage. Examples of this include a number of news stories published on the official website of the DIMPR, such as a report on the consultation of two of Mali's former first ladies¹¹⁴ and media coverage placing women 'at the heart of the Inter-Malian Dialogue', noting the involvement of women in several localities and quoting testimonies about 'their remarkable participation and their contribution to the recommendations'.¹¹⁵ At a meeting organised by Malian women's organisations a few days before the start of the national phase, the leader of the Steering Committee, Ousmane Issoufi Maiga, was quoted saying that 'it is a joy to see this strong mobilisation of Malian women for peace. When women get involved in an action, we cannot doubt its success'.¹¹⁶ The meeting, which lasted for two days, resulted in a list of recommendations from women's organisations that they delivered to the Steering Committee.

Formally and rhetorically, we can thus observe that the Malian authorities have maintained a focus on women's participation throughout the DIMPR, whose Steering Committee consisted of 20% women. The vice-president of the Sub-Commission on National Reconciliation – one of the five sub-commissions of the Steering Committee – was also a woman. It also seems that women have had the opportunity to articulate their contributions and expertise and to provide input to the DIMPR. At this point in time, however, it is unclear to what extent women's concerns have been heard and taken on board, or whether women representing different groups and segments of society have had an opportunity to access and contribute to the process, given the challenges related to representation and lack of participation of key actors and parties in the process.

112 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

113 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (male).

114 République du Mali, 'Dialogue inter-Maliens: Les voix de Mariam Traore et de Aminata Keïta' (18 April 2024)

115 K. Goïta, 'Les femmes au cœur du dialogue inter-Maliens' (Studio Tamani, 16 April 2024)

<<https://www.studiotamani.org/161375-les-femmes-au-coeur-du-dialogue-inter-maliens>> accessed 24 June 2025.

116 République du Mali, 'Dialogue inter-Maliens: Les faitières féminines' (n 109).

NGOs in Bamako say that possibilities for engaging in national dialogue processes are limited. If they want to avoid taking sides or being seen as instrumentalised by one side or the other, in practice it is difficult to get involved in or support national dialogue processes.¹¹⁷ However, they can work on local conflict resolution and support dialogue efforts at the local level by creating and supporting fora for dialogue and conflict resolution. This is often done in combination with income-generation and capacity-building projects, which thus also serve to build capacity and competence in meaningful dialogue and conflict resolution among the participants.

Further, while the authorities are resistant to external actors' involvement in dialogue processes on conflict resolution or governance issues, external actors may support dialogues on wider societal challenges such as gender equality/WPS, climate change etc. Such conversations can serve as an entry point for dialogue, and to keep dialogue and communication channels open.

Enabling and disabling factors for women's participation in dialogue and conflict resolution

Roundtable participants and interviewees highlighted the existence of legal and political frameworks that can be used to advocate for women's participation in dialogue efforts. In the roundtable discussion, participants highlighted how, in Mali, it is not the laws or policies that are missing. For example, in 2015, the Malian National Assembly adopted Law 052 (known as the 'Quota Law'), which requires that women be represented on nominal and elective lists at a level of 30%.¹¹⁸ In the Algiers process, activists made reference to the Quota Law, arguing that it should also be applied to the mechanisms for the implementation of the Algiers Agreement.

Roundtable participants also highlighted enduring structural problems that pose a challenge to women's participation in conflict resolution and dialogue:

We need a lot of political will. In all institutions, we see that there is a need to represent women. We have a low representation of women in the executive, at the level of the CNT.¹¹⁹ What is important for us as an indicator is not only the number of women in these institutions, but having the capacity to advance agendas, in particular issues of justice and exploitation.¹²⁰

Both NGO staff and civil society representatives also identified the existence of political and legal frameworks and state mechanisms such as Law 052 and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related action plans, as well as tools and instruments such as the Malian constitution and the national gender policy, as representing opportunities to promote women's participation in dialogue. However, they also emphasised the need for the state to accompany and support the implementation and promotion of these instruments, along with the importance of

117 Interview with NGO staff in Bamako, 24 January 2025.

118 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

119 The National Transition Council.

120 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

political will. In this regard, several interviewees identified the weak commitment of the state to the various national and international texts and conventions on the involvement of women in dialogue and peace processes, along with the lack of structural progress on women's participation, as challenges.¹²¹ Further, according to civil society representatives, the 'current agendas of Malian authorities are primarily military and financial, rather than focused on women's rights and peace'.¹²² And this focus on security 'results in the lack of support from the state for advocacy actions in the context of the promotion of women and other marginalised groups'.¹²³

The WPS agenda and the various National Action Plans adopted by the Malian government for its implementation have been important tools for activists in their efforts to call on authorities and involved parties to support women's participation in dialogue efforts and peace processes. In these efforts, women's organisations have benefitted from the support of the international community. In the Algiers process, pressure from the international community for the implementation of the WPS agenda with regard to women's representation in the process was one condition that enabled the work of other actors who sought to promote the adoption of a gender quota.¹²⁴

Today, some women activists express despair and fatigue over an international community that they perceive as having left the women of Mali to fend for themselves. Since 2022, the funding for women's organisations and their projects has dried up, which has led to the closing or scaling down of several important initiatives and projects in support of women's empowerment and their protection from violence. One civil society representative stated that, 'frankly, it's difficult for me to talk to you about the WPS agenda, because I don't think it exists today in Mali'.¹²⁵

The roundtable participants also underlined the role of training and capacity-building for exploiting the full potential of women in conflict resolution:

*Because, today, we have created conflict management advisory committees up to the municipal level. It is a good initiative to set them up, but unfortunately the advisory committee members have not been trained in conflict prevention and management.*¹²⁶

The potential for tensions between men and women in cases where men would be expected to give up their seats to accommodate women's increased representation was also discussed at the roundtable. According to one participant, this was not a problem in his municipality. Training and capacity-building had led to awareness-raising about the importance of women's participation among both men and women. 'If it is something that is forced on people it

121 Interviews with NGO staff and civil society representatives.

122 Interview with civil society representatives, 3 February 2025.

123 Interview with NGO staff, 29 January 2025.

124 Lorentzen, 'Explaining Changes in Women's Representation in Peace Processes' (n 43).

125 Interview with civil society representative, 3 February 2025.

126 Participant at roundtable on 'Women's Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali', 20 November 2024 (female).

can cause problems. But if you have a discussion first you avoid these kinds of problems.¹²⁷ Another participant said that ‘this problem often arises when we direct efforts towards women. To avoid this kind of problem, the approach we use is to take 65% women and 35% men at each training session. This way they are all trained on the same topics, and all are beneficiaries.’¹²⁸ In the Algiers process, the mediation team and the parties chose a slightly different approach when they decided to expand the committee upon the introduction of the gender quota, rather than replacing male representatives with female ones.¹²⁹

Box 6. Key take-aways on current challenges and prospects for dialogue

- The WPS agenda has been an important tool for advocating for women’s participation in dialogue efforts.
- Women have participated in the DIMPR, both in the Steering Committee and through consultations with civil society.
- Possibilities for external actors to engage with national dialogue processes appear limited at the present time. Instead, such actors can support local conflict resolution and dialogue efforts.
- External actors may also support dialogues on wider societal challenges (such as gender equality/WPS).
- Training and capacity-building should target both men and women to avoid tensions between men and women in the community.

127 Participant at roundtable on ‘Women’s Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali’, 20 November 2024 (male).

128 Participant at roundtable on ‘Women’s Leadership in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali’, 20 November 2024 (female).

129 Lorentzen, ‘Explaining Changes in Women’s Representation in Peace Processes’ (n 43).

Summary

There is a lot of continuity in the ways in which the Malian authorities approach the issue of women's participation in dialogue processes. The large women's organisations are still able to work with the authorities; civil society representatives are still able to participate; and women representatives are nominated to sit on important committees (although not at a level of 30% as required by Law 052). As developments are still unfolding, it is too early to assess the influence women from different backgrounds may have on these processes. However, *we must assume that the exclusion of a number of actors from the DIMPR, along with the limitations in civic space following the introduction of military rule, also has implications for women's meaningful participation.*

Further, women's contributions to conflict resolution at the community level are significant yet often go unnoticed. Also, *the support provided by international partners through projects, training and capacity-building is important for women who seek to make a difference in their communities.* This suggests that *while international partners may find it difficult to engage directly with national processes or with the national authorities, support to projects and capacity-building at the community level can empower women to take on enhanced roles in leadership and/or conflict resolution.* However, one recommendation that emerges from our research concerns the approach through which this support is provided: *The participants highlighted that training and capacity-building initiatives that target both men and women are more effective in avoiding tensions between men and women and in securing support from potential male allies.*

08 *Conclusion: Prospects for dialogue under a sovereignist paradigm*

As longstanding observers of political and security developments in the Central Sahel, we find that, in recent years, sovereignty has imposed itself as the guiding principle of policies toward conflict resolution and dialogue efforts adopted by Central Sahelian countries since the wave of coups in the region. This shift toward sovereignism has been accompanied by unequivocal statements about what Sahelian authorities do not want anymore, which includes the liberal stabilisation complex formerly pushed by Western donors. The military takeover of governance structures in the Sahel also means that priority is given to military operations to solve the numerous crises these countries are currently facing. However, the appeal of non-military ways of solving these crises has not disappeared. Peaceful conflict resolution and dialogue mechanisms remain very much in existence in Sahelian societies, with or without endorsements from state actors – who, it should be noted, do not form a monolithic bloc.

This report has explored prospects for conflict resolution and dialogue in the Central Sahel along three thematic axes: regional dialogue, dialogue with jihadists, and women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts. By taking stock of dialogue initiatives that have or have not worked and exploring current challenges and prospects for dialogue in the Central Sahel, the report not only demonstrates the enduring social energy devoted to the search for solutions but also stresses the limitations of such efforts.

Across all three themes, the current authorities' preference for military and security options and solutions has been highlighted, as well as a tendency of the large security focus to deflect attention from issues related to rights, social justice, and the protection of local populations from violence and health-related risks. The military choice should not be the primary means of resolving conflict. In Mali, since 2012, the solution put forward has been essentially military, with less focus on socio-economic and cultural factors. Interventions have failed to protect civilians. However, more than half of MINUSMA's resources were used to protect peacekeepers and mission personnel. Abuses of power by local customary chiefs and social stratifications well known and documented in the Sahel, as well as issues of social justice, have been underestimated. Jihadist groups across the region have been able to instrumentalise the grievances of local populations to achieve their ends.

At the national level, despite their anti-Western stance and insistence on managing national dialogue processes without the involvement of international (in particular Western) actors, Malian authorities have remained rhetorically committed to women's participation in the Inter-Malian Dialogue – despite gender equality and women's participation having a long history of being scapegoated as Western ideas in Mali.¹³⁰ The large women's organisations are still able to engage with national processes, and women continue to be nominated to relevant committees.

¹³⁰ See, for example, S. D. Wing. *Constructing Democracy in Africa: Mali in Transition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

However, the inclusivity of this participation can be questioned – not only in relation to women from different backgrounds or representing different groups, but also in terms of the totality of belligerents in the central Sahelian countries. A similar observation was made about the discussions with jihadist groups, where jihadist responses to communities' demands depend heavily on local factors, which results in fragmented landscapes of jihadist control, themselves mirrored by highly partial treatment of communities by state actors in war zones.

Further, our analysis does not suggest the existence of an obvious pathway toward conflict resolution between the Central Sahelian states and the jihadist groups because the models of governance proposed by each side seem incompatible and no side has made explicit positive gestures toward the other. The path toward peace might be narrow, its outcome highly uncertain, but it is still worth a try given the constant deterioration of the conditions of life of the Sahelian populations.

At the time of writing, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have tense relationships with most Western countries, as well as with international and regional organisations and neighbouring countries. In this situation, it seems difficult for Western actors to play a role in the current political affairs of Central Sahelian states. The scope for Western actors to engage with national dialogue is limited, and dialogue about political transitions is still difficult given that the Central Sahelian countries are mainly concerned with military security and not interested in holding elections any time soon.

The question of how war should be conducted or how it should end is evidently of particular importance for states claiming to be in the process of recovering their sovereignty from malignant external interests. It seems that a precondition for engaging directly with any of the Central Sahelian states is that external actors renege on any normative role (meaning, for instance, not attaching human rights conditions to the assistance they offer). Are traditional Western donors ready to this? This is an introspective question that only donors can answer – and need to answer before getting directly involved with countries of the Central Sahel.

This suggests that, for the moment, Western actors may consider rethinking their modes of engagement. Rather than direct engagement with the transitional authorities in the Central Sahelian countries, they may also try to find more indirect ways of engaging in or supporting conflict resolution and dialogue efforts. Even though discussions around dialogue are relatively scarce and constrained in public discourses, a general observation from the roundtables and interviews conducted for this study is that peace initiatives at the grassroots level continue to abound and reflect a thirst for peaceful conflict resolution. Our study also shows that there is immense potential for promoting women's leadership and roles in conflict resolution at the community level. The community level is also where we see the most opportunities for dialogue with jihadists.

While the shift towards sovereignism in many ways makes it more difficult for international partners to engage in dialogue processes and initiatives, the findings presented in this report suggest that while opportunities to engage at the national level may have changed drastically, support to local-level initiatives seeking to build more resilient and peaceful communities can still produce positive results. Conversations with civil society representatives also revealed that the withdrawal of international partners and funding has significant impacts on the services that are available to particularly vulnerable groups, including women survivors of gender-based violence. International partners should therefore consider how they can support the provision of such services even in times of crisis.

09 *Recommendations*

To support regional diplomatic dialogue

National governments/authorities should:

- distance themselves from strictly adversarial military rhetoric and integrate in their mode of action with their neighbours the full range of political and diplomatic conflict resolution mechanisms, notably by recognising the interests of populations directly impacted by tensions in their borderlands and empowering their representatives;
- explore in good faith modalities of cross-border security cooperation.

Regional authorities should:

- address issues related to the democratic credentials of ECOWAS by avoiding double-standards and condemning extra-constitutional access to power among member-states in a consistent manner;
- cultivate channels of communication with the AES countries, either through brokers among the ECOWAS member-states or through subnational leaders with direct stakes in cross-border disputes.

International partners should:

- refrain from adopting counterproductive patronising language with Sahelian countries while at the same time establishing clear objectives for their Sahel diplomacy. Europe, in particular, needs to know why it is interested in the Sahel in the first place.
- anticipate further possible changes in the Sahel region and develop policy options that aptly address the alternative scenarios that may concretise in the region in the short, medium and long term.

To support dialogue with jihadists

National governments/authorities should:

- recognise the political nature of jihadist movements and their claims as a precondition for opening talks;
- abstain from criminalising participants in local agreements who engage in dialogue with jihadists for survival purposes;
- adopt the view that engaging with jihadists does not mean conspiring with them;
- recognise the possible short-term benefits of local dialogues for populations, but also their inability to generate sustainable peace. High-level dialogue presents its challenges, but the eventual collective payoff may be much higher.
- In the case of Mali, deepen the doctrinal work initiated by the DIMPR and develop a framework for dialogue that taps into grammars of conflict resolution adapted to local contexts and reflects cultural diversity in zones where they apply;
- not let any party's hegemonic national culture or practice of Islam monopolise processes of dialogue.

International partners should:

- support high-level dialogue with jihadists, as this is more likely to lead to durable solutions;
- consider back-channel conversations with jihadists as a way of gauging interest in high-level dialogue;
- consider assuming a technical/logistical role in case an opening for dialogue appears.

To support women's participation in conflict resolution and dialogue processes

National governments/authorities should:

- support the promotion and implementation of legal and political frameworks for gender equality to which each country is a signatory (such as CEDAW, the Maputo protocol, the WPS agenda, as well as national policies, action plans and legislation);
- continue to promote the meaningful participation of women and other marginalised groups in dialogue initiatives;
- in doing so, ensure that a diversity of voices are included;
- ensure that official appointments and nominations are in line with national legislation (e.g. on gender quotas).

International partners should:

- support dialogue initiatives when possible, and request the meaningful participation of women;
- identify less contestable topics for dialogue (e.g. WPS, climate change, etc.), as a way to keep dialogue and communication channels open;
- support conflict resolution and dialogue at the community level;
- support women's leadership and empowerment at the community level to build resilient communities;
- in doing so, support projects that benefit the whole community, that focus on topics that are of interest to both men and women, and that target men as well as women;
- continue to support civil society and women's organisations with financial resources and capacity-building in conflict resolution and leadership also in times of political and security challenges;
- identify contextualised needs and responses to ensure that the WPS agenda remains relevant as the political and security situation changes.

10 *About the Authors*



Yvan Guichaoua

is a Senior Researcher at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (bicc). He has formerly occupied academic positions at Kent, East Anglia, Yale, and Oxford universities. Yvan Guichaoua holds a PhD in Development Economics from the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (2004). He has been studying the dynamics of irregular armed groups and state and international responses to security crises in Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger since 2004. His present research focuses on jihadist governance in the Central Sahel. He is an editor at afriquexxi.info and has published in *International Affairs*, *World Development*, *The Journal of International Development*, *International Interactions*, and *Geopolitics* among other places. Yvan is a member of FBA's International Research Working Groups (2023-2027).



Jenny Lorentzen

is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), where she conducts research on women's participation peace processes, different aspects relating to the Women Peace and Security agenda, and gender and women's roles in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Jenny Lorentzen holds a PhD in Political Science from Lund University (2020). Building on extensive field research, she has been doing research on women's participation in peace and security processes in Mali since 2017. She is the Principal Investigator of a Researcher Project for Early Career Scientists titled "From combatants and war supporters to peacemakers? Women's participation in political violence and political transitions (Gendered Transitions)" funded by the Research Council of Norway for 2025-2028. Her research has been published in international peer-reviewed academic journals such as *International Affairs*, *International Political Science Review*, *the Journal of Modern African Studies*, and *International Peacekeeping*. Jenny is a member of FBA's International Research Working Groups (2023-2027).



Sidy Soungalo Mariko

is a Research consultant whose areas of specialisation encompass Security Sector Governance, Human Security, Climate Security, Military Transitions in Africa, and Public Policy. From 2024 to 2025, he served at the Nairobi office of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), working on Security Sector Reform Governance in Africa. He also lectures at the Faculty of Administrative and Political Science at Université Kurukanfuga in Bamako, a role he has held since 2022. Previously, he was an Assistant Professor at the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC) from 2018 to 2021. Dr. Mariko holds a Ph.D. in Governance and Regional Integration, jointly awarded by the Pan African University and the University of Yaoundé II in Cameroon. Yvan is a member of FBA's International Research Working Groups (2023-2027).

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