



FBA Research Brief

Prospects for Dialogue in the Central Sahel

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Introduction

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 (with a focus on Mali). These three axes do not exhaust the many conflictual dynamics prevailing across the Sahel, but they are worthy of attention for several reasons.

How to refer to this brief

Guichaoua, Y.
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Mariko, S. 2025
Prospects for Dialogue in the Central Sahel
Stockholm:
Folke Bernadotte Academy
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61880/VFRD4764>

About the brief

This research brief is a summary of a more comprehensive research report with the same title. The research briefs are available in both English and French. The full report, including references, and the research briefs are available at FBAs website on the following link.

<https://fba.se/en/about-fba/publications/research-brief---prospects-for-dialogue-in-the-central-sahel>

First, on the **regional** level, the crisis in the Sahel has taken a dramatic turn over the years. 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 *Economic Community of West African States* (ECOWAS). The three countries eventually formed their own regional organisation, the *Alliance des états du Sahel* (AES), in 2023 and collectively broke away from ECOWAS in January 2024.

Second, the **jihadi** 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 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**.

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. 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 findings are based on a series of round-tables 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.

What has dialogue become under military rule?

A reflection on dialogue processes in the Central Sahel is necessary owing to a fundamental change in the political circumstances in which war and peace have been unfolding in the region.

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.

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 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.

Once in power, the Sahelian militaries began to wage war, govern, and conduct regional and international relations in new ways. 'Sovereignty' stands out as a motto of the military rulers and translates into the rejection of Western liberal interference, new geopolitical alliances, and a firmer grip on domestic political life.

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.

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.

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 in Mali	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)	Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation (DIMPR)

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.

Regional conflict resolution and dialogue efforts. 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. These measures would typically involve military and non-military components. After roughly a decade of 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, including their immediate neighbours from the ECOWAS regional bloc which condemned the military coups and imposed sanctions on putschist regimes.

Dialogue or negotiations with jihadists. In the decade of Western intervention following the French Operation Serval in 2013, jihadist armed groups were excluded from official dialogue processes. This ‘red line’ was reinforced after the coups. However, in all three AES countries, the actual situation on the ground differs from what central authorities do officially. In practice, multiple channels of communication between various state- and non-state actors and jihadists are open for the settling of a wide 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.

Women’s participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts in Mali. Women’s participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue efforts in Mali. From 2015 to 2023, the Algiers peace process worked to implement the 2015 agreement. Women were marginalised in the Algiers process from the start, and initially, women’s participation in the Algiers process was low. 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. In December 2023, Colonel Assimi Goïta, president of the transition, launched the Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation (*Dialogue inter-Maliens pour la paix et la reconciliation nationale* – DIMPR). The large women’s organisations and civil society representatives have been able to participate in the DIMPR, and women representatives were nominated to sit on important committees (although not at a level of 30% as required by Law 052). 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.

Regional dialogue. 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.

Dialogue with jihadists. 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, including protracted and destructive embargoes carried out by jihadists against certain localities. A notable and interesting case is the role that third-parties specialising in mediation continue 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. This model of local conflict resolution may be explored further.



Photo:
UN Photo/
Harandane Dicko

Women's participation in conflict resolution and national dialogue processes in Mali.

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.

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;
- 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.

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The report is published by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and has been produced in close collaboration with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). It was written by researchers from the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), and the University of Kurukanfuga in Bamako, whose biographies can be found on page 10-11.



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