

A New UN Approach to the Sahel

On the topic of The Situation in the Sahel Region for the Security Council of

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Introduction

The situation in the Sahel is one of the fastest-developing crises on the planet. Since August 2020, the region has experienced six successful coup d'états and multiple more attempts.¹ The wave of political instability has been paired with a wave of violence tied to multiple Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), including Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, a part of Al-Qaeda and the world's fastest-growing terrorist organization.² As a result, a quickly developing humanitarian crisis has ravaged the region, causing a mass movement of people.³ According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 4 million people have been displaced in the region, with 3.8 being internally displaced persons.⁴ The Sahel now corresponds to the world's most unstable areas, suffering from stark political instability, rising violence, and democratic backsliding.⁵ As a result, the Sahel encompasses an epicenter for the biggest threats to global peace and security. The termination of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as of 30 June 2023 has only exacerbated the situation and diminished the reputation of the United Nations in the region.⁶

The United Nations Security Council has not passed a resolution on the topic since S/RES/2531 (29 June 2020).⁷ The Security Council, and by extension, the entire UN, has a responsibility to the people

¹ Guillermo. "Prospects Dimming for Democracy in the Sahel." Foreign Policy Research Institute. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/07/prospects-dimming-for-democracy-in-the-sahel/>.

² Institute for Economic and Peace. "2024 Global Terrorism Index." Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>.

³ Institute for Economic and Peace. "2024 Global Terrorism Index."

⁴ "Refugee Data Finder." UNHCR. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.

⁵ UNHCR. "Situation Sahel Crisis." Sahel Crisis. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis/location/8776>.

⁶ United Nations. "Security Council Terminates Mandate of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2690 (2023) | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15341.doc.htm>.

⁷ United Nations. "Resolution 2531 (2020) /." United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3870256?v=pdf>.

of the Sahel to guarantee the upholding of international law and the protection of civilians.

Background

The Sahel is a biogeographical region in northern Africa that encompasses all transitional territories between the Sahara Desert and the Central African Sahara. The region comprises the countries of Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria.⁸ All member states are UN member states and all of them achieved independence and self-determination in the second half of the XXth Century.⁹ The region suffers from a plethora of issues stemming from historical grievances and exacerbated by modern developments. The harsh colonial past that most of these countries underwent during the majority of the 20th century led to fractured states and severe tribal and religious frictions that came as a result of the new international borders drawn during the independence processes.¹⁰ As a result, armed conflict, political instability, and particularly terrorism have seen fertile ground to grow in the Sahel. According to The Economist, around 35% of all deaths caused by terrorism occurred in the Sahel.¹¹ A recent wave of violent regime changes and Coups has led to an escalation of violence and skepticism towards Western and international forces.¹²

Analysis

Following the closing of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the United Nations' presence in the region should be re-considered and re-drafted into a humanitarian approach.¹³ Instability and violence in the Sahel have reached levels previously not

⁸ "Sahel." Encyclopædia Britannica. Last Modified on February 7, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahel>.

⁹ "Member States." United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/member-states>.

¹⁰ Indrek Elling, "The Sahel: A Hopeless Corner of the World?" International Centre for Defence and Security, August 6, 2020. <https://icds.ee/en/the-sahel-a-hopeless-corner-of-the-world/>.

¹¹ "The World's Centre of Terrorism Has Shifted to the Sahel." The Economist. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/03/05/the-worlds-centre-of-terrorism-has-shifted-to-the-sahel>.

¹² The Economist, "The World's Centre of Terrorism."

¹³ "MINUSMA Peacekeeping." United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>.

thought possible, the United Nations cannot let down the people in the region, nor the larger international community.

The United Nations is not the only organization whose reputation has been tarnished in the region. The African Union, ECOWAS, and its standby force have also seen a drop in their presence. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have all been suspended from ECOWAS and the African Union. ECOWAS and its Standby Force have a limited capacity to act within these states. ECOWAS even economically sanctioned Mali following the 2022 Coup.¹⁴

Policy Solutions

Following the large number of regime changes, attempted Coup d'Etats in the central and eastern Sahel, and the large migration rate, a UN-backed solution is necessary. First, considering that the Security Council has not addressed the Sahel since the 2020 resolution S/RES/2531,¹⁵ the Council must recognize a new and distinct threat to international peace in the region due to widespread political instability and active armed conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad. Keeping in mind that most of these states have been suspended from the African Union (AU), this has hampered international efforts to stabilize the region.¹⁶

The Security Council should immediately draft Provisional Measures for all countries that underwent a regime change in the region as per Article 40, Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.¹⁷ The Security Council has not addressed the Sahel since the 2020 resolution S/RES/2531, hence the

¹⁴ Ewokor, Chris. "ECOWAS: What Changes as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Leave the West African Bloc?" BBC News, January 29, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yvd91j72eo>.

¹⁵ Resolution 2531 (2020) /." United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3870256?v=pdf>.

¹⁶ Ewokor, "ECOWAS."

¹⁷ "Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression (Articles 39-51)." United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-7#:~:text=Article%2040,it%20deems%20necessary%20or%20desirable>.

implementation of Provisional Measures is not only necessary but long due.¹⁸ In the same spirit, it must not reject a possible implementation of Article 45 if the Council considers it necessary.¹⁹ Despite the catastrophic failure of MINUSMA, the United Nations still can reinstate that a new threat to peace exists in the Sahel following Article 39, and implement new Measures under 40.²⁰ These measures could instate the governments of the Region to:

1. Reinstate their Commitments to International Law and the Protection of Civilians.
2. Establish Humanitarian Corridors to allow for the free movement of internal refugees and humanitarian aid.
3. Recognize the importance of regional cooperation to strengthen the participation of regional players such as ECOWAS and the African Union. 4. The Dispatch of a UN Special Envoy to the Sahel to mediate amongst States, regional and international organizations, and NSAGs.
4. Amongst other possible measures to be debated by the Council.

We must understand the urgency to address the topic, yet also bear the past missteps of the organization in mind. Suppose the Provisional Measures are to be drafted by the Council. In that case, these main aspects should revolve around humanitarian aid, consolidating the region's armed forces, and establishing relief corridors. This should be paired with calls for strong regional cooperation and collaboration with humanitarian and relief organizations operating in the regions. Was Article 45 to be activated, the Council should immediately enter talks with the governments of the Republic of Chad and the Republic of Niger to coordinate efforts for possible deployments. Considering the current developments and sudden changes in the administration of both nations.

Conclusions

¹⁸ "Resolution 2531 (2020)" United Nations. Accessed February 7, 2025. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3870256?v=pdf>.

¹⁹ "Chapter VII," United Nations.

²⁰ "Chapter VII," United Nations.

The current crisis in the Sahel is and will continue to be one of the main threats to international peace, as long as the international community does not intervene. Not with the intent to reinstate military stability, but to guarantee the well-being of noncombatants, civilians, and refugees. A conflict so rooted in historical grievances and exacerbated by modern complexities must be addressed with all of the complications it entails. The United Nations Security can implement quick decisions that can serve as temporary measures to keep stability, prevent spill-outs, and protect civilians. These measures must be implemented, not only in the name of regional security but of global peace.

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