



INSIGHT PAPER / AFRICA, THE SAHEL & STATE RESILIENCE

The Sahel at the Edge

State Capacity, Competitive Authority and Africa's Next Thirty Years

Why three decades of security intervention have not produced durable stability - and what a different strategy should seek to achieve

FOCUS

Sahel security | State legitimacy | Demography | Foreign involvement

Stable governance, strong institutions and the global consequences of state fragility

EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT

Executive Summary

The security crisis across the Sahel is often described as a terrorism problem. That description is now too narrow. The decisive contest is increasingly between recognised states and alternative systems of authority that can protect, coerce, tax, adjudicate, regulate movement and influence local political life. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State-linked movements, communal militias, criminal networks and other armed actors succeed where the state is not simply weak, but absent, distrusted, predatory or unable to convert military presence into durable civilian authority.

The central Sahel - above all Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger - demonstrates the limits of the security model pursued over much of the past three decades. French operations, United Nations missions, European training, United States intelligence support, expanding African military forces and, more recently, Russian security assistance have all produced tactical effects. None has yet solved the political problem beneath the insurgency. In August 2026, a United Nations monitoring assessment estimated JNIM at roughly 7,000 to 8,000 fighters operating across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin and Togo. The same assessment concluded that an approximately USD 50 million ransom received in 2025 materially financed JNIM's offensive and parts of the wider al-Qaeda network. This is not a marginal terrorist residue. It is an adaptive regional insurgent system.

The problem cannot credibly be explained by Islam, poverty, climate or population growth in isolation. Mauritania and Senegal are Muslim-majority states exposed to many Sahelian pressures without experiencing the same sustained territorial insurgency. Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire face southward militant pressure yet have so far prevented it from becoming a mature domestic war. Botswana and Mauritius demonstrate that African states can institutionalise succession, manage resources and absorb political shocks. Rwanda demonstrates something equally important for this paper: high administrative capacity and public order can produce substantial stability without making liberal democratic competition the organising objective of the state. The comparative evidence therefore argues against ideological prescriptions and toward a more practical endstate.

The desired endstate is stable, peaceful governance supported by strong institutions: security forces that belong to the state rather than a ruler; predictable mechanisms for succession; courts and administrative systems that resolve disputes; public authority that reaches peripheral communities; economic systems capable of absorbing a rapidly expanding workforce; and institutions able to correct failure without recurring coups, rebellion or collapse. Competitive democracy can be one mechanism for achieving accountability and peaceful transfer of power. It is not treated here as the strategic objective in itself.

Africa's demographic transformation makes the problem global. The United Nations projects the population of sub-Saharan Africa to rise by roughly 79 per cent to about 2.2 billion by 2054. The UN Economic Commission for Africa projects Africa's working-age population aged 20 to 64 to grow from about 883 million in 2024 to 1.6 billion by 2050. The World Bank estimates that up to 12 million young Africans may enter the labour market each year while only around 3 million new formal wage jobs are currently created annually. Those figures describe neither inevitable catastrophe nor automatic demographic dividend. They describe a race between population pressure and institutional and economic absorption capacity.

The policy implication is demanding but clear. Security is necessary, but its purpose is to create time and space. Institutions must convert that time into legitimate authority. Economic and social transformation must then make that authority durable. Foreign partners should be judged by whether they leave behind stronger African capability when they withdraw. The strategic objective for the next thirty years is not to select a better external patron, impose a single political model or fight an endless war on terrorism. It is to build states and societies that armed alternatives can no longer so easily exploit.

ENDSTATE, NOT IDEOLOGY

This paper does not assume liberal democracy is the desired endstate. The objective is stable, peaceful and rule-bound governance with strong institutions, predictable succession, effective territorial administration, credible dispute resolution and the capacity to correct political failure without recurring violence. Democracy may support those functions; where it does not, the functions remain the test.

The working model

The evolving hypothesis is that African fragility is best understood as a competition between state systems and alternative systems of authority. Demography, climate, religion, corruption and foreign involvement alter the intensity of that competition, but none independently determines the outcome.

The model combines several linked propositions. State capacity matters because government must be physically present. Legitimacy matters because coercion cannot substitute indefinitely for consent or predictable rule. The security paradox matters because abusive counterterrorism can win engagements while enlarging the recruitment pool. Competitive statehood matters because insurgents become strategically dangerous when they perform everyday government functions. Peripheral citizenship matters because the state is usually weakest where the insurgency is strongest. Institutional redundancy matters because resilient systems survive the failure of individual leaders or agencies. The civil-military boundary matters because a military that becomes the final political arbiter weakens succession and institutional correction. External patronage matters because foreign support can either transfer capability or preserve dependency.

The comparative cases suggest that these are not competing explanations so much as interacting mechanisms. Where several fail at once, a fragility cascade develops: insecurity reduces economic activity and revenue; weaker services erode legitimacy; poor legitimacy reduces local intelligence; security forces compensate with greater coercion; abuses increase grievances and recruitment; political failure encourages coups; coups rupture regional and external relationships; and the resulting gaps provide armed organisations with still more operating space.



The Sahel is a transnational security system rather than a single-country conflict. The political geography is fragmented; the threat geography is not. (Source: Instagram)

THE STRATEGIC PROBLEM

The Sahel as a System Under Pressure

The modern Sahel crisis did not begin with Islamic State and it did not begin in 2012. It developed from the interaction of weak peripheral administration, historic rebellions, trans-Saharan criminal economies, communal disputes, environmental stress and jihadist networks whose roots included the Algerian conflict of the 1990s. The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 then acted as an accelerator. Fighters, weapons and military experience moved south into an already fragile environment. In Mali, a renewed Tuareg rebellion, a military coup and jihadist opportunism converged in 2012, producing the contemporary conflict system.

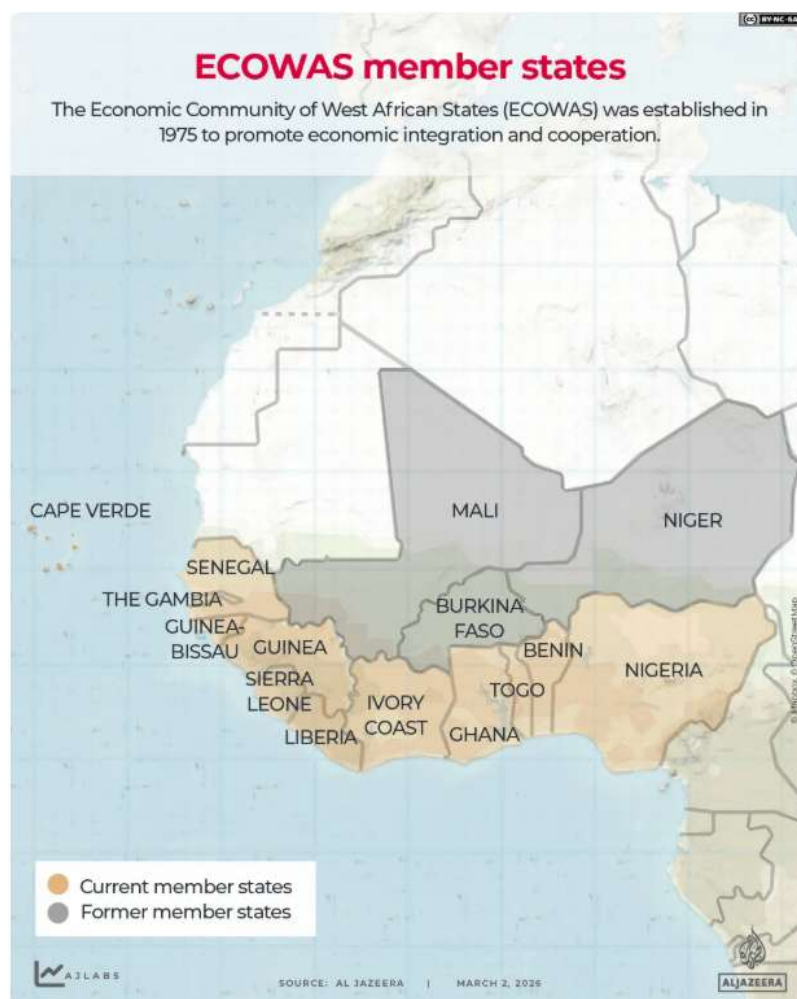
France's Operation Serval intervened in January 2013 and achieved an important immediate military success: major northern population centres were recovered and a southward jihadist advance was stopped. The strategic difficulty emerged afterwards. Retaking territory did not restore the state. Militants dispersed

into rural areas, local grievances remained unresolved, criminal networks endured and government presence often remained intermittent. Operation Barkhane, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, European Union training and wider Western counterterrorism assistance could disrupt armed groups and buy time, but the civilian state did not consistently convert that time into durable authority.

That distinction explains much of what followed. The insurgency spread into central Mali and across borders into Burkina Faso and western Niger. Governments appeared increasingly incapable of reversing the trend. Public frustration and military dissatisfaction contributed to coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, two coups in Burkina Faso in 2022 and the July 2023 coup in Niger. Each takeover was justified in substantial part by security failure. Yet changing the political leadership did not create the local intelligence, logistics, policing, courts, roads, employment or public legitimacy required to defeat a mature insurgency.

The three military-led states subsequently deepened cooperation through the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), comprising Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) became effective on 29 January 2025. The AES reflects genuine demands for sovereignty and regional autonomy, but the institutional split occurred while JNIM and Islamic State-linked organisations were expanding across precisely the borders that now carry greater political friction. This is the regional fragmentation problem in its clearest form: armed networks integrate their operating space while governments fragment theirs.

The response need not be political reconciliation before security cooperation. ECOWAS and AES states can disagree over constitutional government, sanctions and diplomacy while maintaining a protected technical floor for counterterrorism and organised-crime cooperation. Shared watchlists, financial intelligence, weapons tracing, border liaison, kidnapped-person data, airspace deconfliction and rapid notification of cross-border militant movement do not require ideological agreement. They require recognition that national sovereignty is weakened, not strengthened, when political disputes create safe operating seams for non-state armed groups.



The ECOWAS-AES split overlays a threat environment in which militant, smuggling and financial networks operate across the same borders. (Source: Al Jazeera)

Why the last three decades were strategically insufficient

It is tempting to call the last three decades a failure. The more useful judgement is that intervention was repeatedly delivered in the wrong proportions. External actors and African governments became better at generating military activity than at measuring political consolidation. Troops trained, militants killed, equipment supplied, elections held and development money disbursed became convenient indicators of progress. None necessarily answered the harder question: is the citizen's relationship with the state becoming stronger than the relationship offered by an armed alternative?

Counterterrorism became detached from political purpose. A commander can be killed and a base destroyed, but if a district remains without reliable justice, local policing, land dispute mechanisms or economic opportunity, the organisation can regenerate. United Nations Development Programme research among nearly 2,200 interviewees in eight African countries reinforces this point. Employment was the most cited primary driver among voluntary recruits, but the study did not find unemployment alone to be a sufficient predictor. It instead identified broader economic frustration, shortcomings of the state and personal grievances, while earlier UNDP research found state action and abuses frequently acted as tipping points. Religion provided language and identity, but was not a reliable stand-alone explanation.

The institutional error was equally important. Foreign powers often strengthened governments more readily than states. Presidents, ministers and military commanders are efficient partners for bilateral programmes; courts, local administrations, prosecutors, audit bodies and professional civil services are slower. Yet governments are temporary. Institutions are the machinery that must survive them. Where assistance is too heavily personalised, a coup or political rupture can erase years of relationships without leaving an equivalent domestic capability behind.

The geographic error was capital-centric state building. Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey can contain ministries, embassies, headquarters and functioning commercial districts while a citizen hundreds of kilometres away experiences the state mainly through a military checkpoint. This is the foundation of peripheral citizenship: equal legal nationality but unequal practical access to government. The insurgency repeatedly grows inside that gap.

A HARDER MEASURE OF SUCCESS

A district is not recovered when militants leave. It is recovered when police can remain, courts can function, schools reopen, markets trade, administrators are present, roads are usable and residents voluntarily provide information to the state. Territorial control is a civilian condition supported by security forces, not a military map colour.

COMPETITIVE AUTHORITY

From Terrorism to Competitive Statehood

The language used to describe the threat matters. Terrorism focuses attention on attacks. Insurgency focuses attention on political authority. The most capable armed movements in Africa are moving further along that spectrum. JNIM, al-Shabaab and other groups do not merely seek to frighten states; they tax economic activity, settle disputes, control movement and construct relationships with communities. In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the M23/AFC rebellion provides an important non-jihadist comparison: parallel administration can emerge from the same governance vacuum without an Islamist ideology. The deeper mechanism is therefore competitive statehood.

JNIM is the clearest contemporary Sahel example. Reuters reporting in June 2026 described communities in central Mali in which JNIM collected agricultural and livestock taxes, distributed assistance, mediated land disputes and moderated some of its public behaviour as its territorial confidence increased. Fear and coercion remained fundamental to that system, and the group continues to conduct severe violence. The analytical significance is that coercion is now being combined with administration and political adaptation.

The August 2026 United Nations monitoring assessment is important because it quantifies the scale of this system. JNIM was assessed at roughly 7,000 to 8,000 fighters across the Sahel, with operations extending into Benin and Togo. An approximately USD 50 million ransom received in 2025 was assessed to have materially financed the group's offensive and supported the wider al-Qaeda network. Kidnapping is therefore not simply a crime problem or humanitarian issue; a single payment can reshape the resources available to an insurgent system.

Islamic State presents a parallel but distinct African problem. Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), focused on the Lake Chad Basin, was described by the United Nations in August 2026 as the most active Daesh affiliate globally and as increasingly capable of acquiring and using commercial drone technology. Islamic State-linked affiliates in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique remain resilient despite sustained pressure. Islamic State Sahel Province competes with JNIM in parts of the central Sahel. These organisations are not one African war, but they share an ability to embed transnational ideology inside local political economies.



The armed-group problem is evolving from episodic terrorism toward persistent competition for local authority. (Source: X)

Religion is real, but it is not enough

The jihadist organisations are explicitly religious. Their leaders use theology to justify violence, recruitment and political rule, and any analysis that removes ideology entirely would be false. What the comparison does not support is placing religion at the beginning of the causal chain. Mauritania and Senegal demonstrate that deeply Muslim societies can withstand many of the same regional pressures without producing the same insurgent outcome. Muslim civilians are also among the principal victims of JNIM, ISWAP and related groups.

Religion is better understood as a mobilising and legitimating framework. It can translate humiliation, injustice, economic frustration, communal insecurity or political exclusion into a coherent narrative and organisational identity. But religious institutions can also work in the opposite direction. Mauritania's experience of combining security reform with engagement by recognised Islamic scholars is significant precisely because it uses religious legitimacy to contest extremist claims rather than treating religion itself as the threat.

This distinction has practical consequences. States that indiscriminately repress religious networks can validate the claim that government is hostile to faith. States that support credible domestic religious scholarship, transparent religious education and community mediation can reduce the ideological space available to extremist organisations. The objective is not state control of belief. It is to prevent armed groups from becoming the only actors able to translate religious identity into political authority.

Corruption, nepotism and the security of institutions

Corruption should be treated less as a moral category and more as an institutional-security problem. A police officer who paid for a post needs to recover the cost. A commander promoted for political loyalty weakens military effectiveness. A judge dependent on patronage reduces confidence in peaceful dispute resolution. A customs officer embedded in a smuggling network turns a border post into an enabling asset for illicit trade. When public jobs, contracts, justice and security are distributed through family, ethnic or political networks, citizens stop experiencing the state as impartial.

That matters because insurgents do not need to offer good government by international standards. They often need only to offer rules that appear more predictable than arbitrary government. A state that taxes

without protecting, arrests without due process and spends without visible local benefit creates the political market in which alternative authority can compete. The security objective is therefore not zero corruption - an unrealistic standard anywhere - but institutions sufficiently rule-bound that citizens can predict how they will be treated regardless of personal connections.

COMPARATIVE TEST

Why Similar Pressures Produce Different Outcomes

A theory that explains Mali but cannot explain Mauritania is incomplete. A theory that attributes Sahel instability to Islam cannot explain Senegal. A theory that says African governance is inherently weak cannot explain Botswana or Mauritius. A theory that makes competitive democracy a necessary condition for stability cannot explain Rwanda. Comparative cases are therefore not decorative examples; they force the hypotheses to survive contact with difference.

CASE	WHAT IT DEMONSTRATES	STRATEGIC CAUTION
Mauritania	A Muslim, desert, climate-exposed Sahelian state can prevent durable jihadist entrenchment when security, intelligence, community engagement and religious legitimacy reinforce one another.	Resilience remains dependent on continuing state reach, social protection and adaptation; geography has not disappeared.
Senegal	Political institutions can absorb severe disputes without transferring ultimate authority to the military. Peaceful correction is itself a security capability.	Fiscal opacity, elite conflict and declining trust can still erode a resilient system.
Cote d'Ivoire / Ghana	Jihadist expansion can be contained before it matures through northern security, local development, political continuity and community intelligence.	Low attack numbers can conceal logistics, recruitment and social penetration; peripheral inequality remains exploitable.
Rwanda	Administrative penetration, security capacity and disciplined implementation can generate substantial stability without highly open political competition.	Performance legitimacy can become brittle if succession, information flow and institutional correction depend too heavily on a concentrated political system.
Botswana / Mauritius	African institutions can manage resources, political turnover and economic shocks without state breakdown.	Past success does not remove the need for diversification, accountability and institutional maintenance.
Mali / Burkina Faso / Niger	Military mobilisation and a change of foreign security partner do not substitute for civilian state capacity and legitimacy.	The fragility cascade becomes self-reinforcing when insecurity, coups, coercion, weak administration and regional fragmentation interact.
Nigeria	A strong national state can contain severe subnational governance voids; federal and social redundancy create resilience but also uneven authority.	Convergence between the Sahel, north-western violence and the Lake Chad system would transform the scale of the crisis.
Somalia / Mozambique / DRC	The core mechanisms travel beyond West Africa: alternative governance, foreign security substitution and resource or territorial exclusion recur in very different contexts.	External military success can buy time, but without domestic political consolidation the underlying system regenerates.

Mauritania and Mali: the cleanest comparison

Mauritania is particularly important because it shares many conditions often used to explain Mali's deterioration: a largely Muslim population, vast desert spaces, a long Mali border, limited resources, climate exposure and a history of militant threats. Yet it has avoided the sustained territorial jihadist insurgency seen to its east. Its response after the attacks of the 2000s combined better military mobility, intelligence and border management with engagement of communities and religious authorities. The lesson is not that Mauritania is a perfect template. It is that geography and religion create exposure, not destiny.

Mali demonstrates the reverse condition. Military interventions repeatedly altered the tactical balance, but the state failed to establish durable local authority across contested areas. The replacement of French, European and United Nations security structures by Russian support changed the external patron but did not

resolve the domestic political economy of the conflict. By 2026, JNIM was not simply surviving; it was displaying increasingly sophisticated military coordination and local governance behaviour. This is powerful evidence for the external patronage hypothesis: the nationality of the foreign security partner matters less than whether the partnership changes underlying state capacity.

Senegal, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire: institutions as preventive security

Senegal's value lies in its ability to process political conflict. The 2024 attempt to postpone the presidential election produced a constitutional crisis, but institutional pressure eventually returned the dispute to an electoral process and a peaceful transfer of power. The lesson is not that an election is intrinsically stabilising. It is that the political system possessed a mechanism capable of resolving a dangerous dispute without making the armed forces the final arbiter.

Ghana provides a similar institutional advantage while sitting directly below the Sahelian threat. Peaceful transfers of power and a military that remains outside routine political succession create political redundancy. Yet northern poverty, communal violence such as the Bawku conflict, and reporting that Sahelian militants have used parts of northern Ghana for logistics show why resilience cannot be equated with immunity. A state can be penetrated before it is attacked.

Cote d'Ivoire offers a prevention model. After jihadist attacks in its north, the government combined stronger security with infrastructure, youth programmes and efforts to integrate vulnerable northern communities. That approach does not eliminate political risks elsewhere in the Ivorian system, but it supports the proposition that strategic investment before insurgent governance becomes entrenched is cheaper and more effective than reconquest after the fact.

Rwanda, Botswana and Mauritius: why the endstate cannot be reduced to democracy

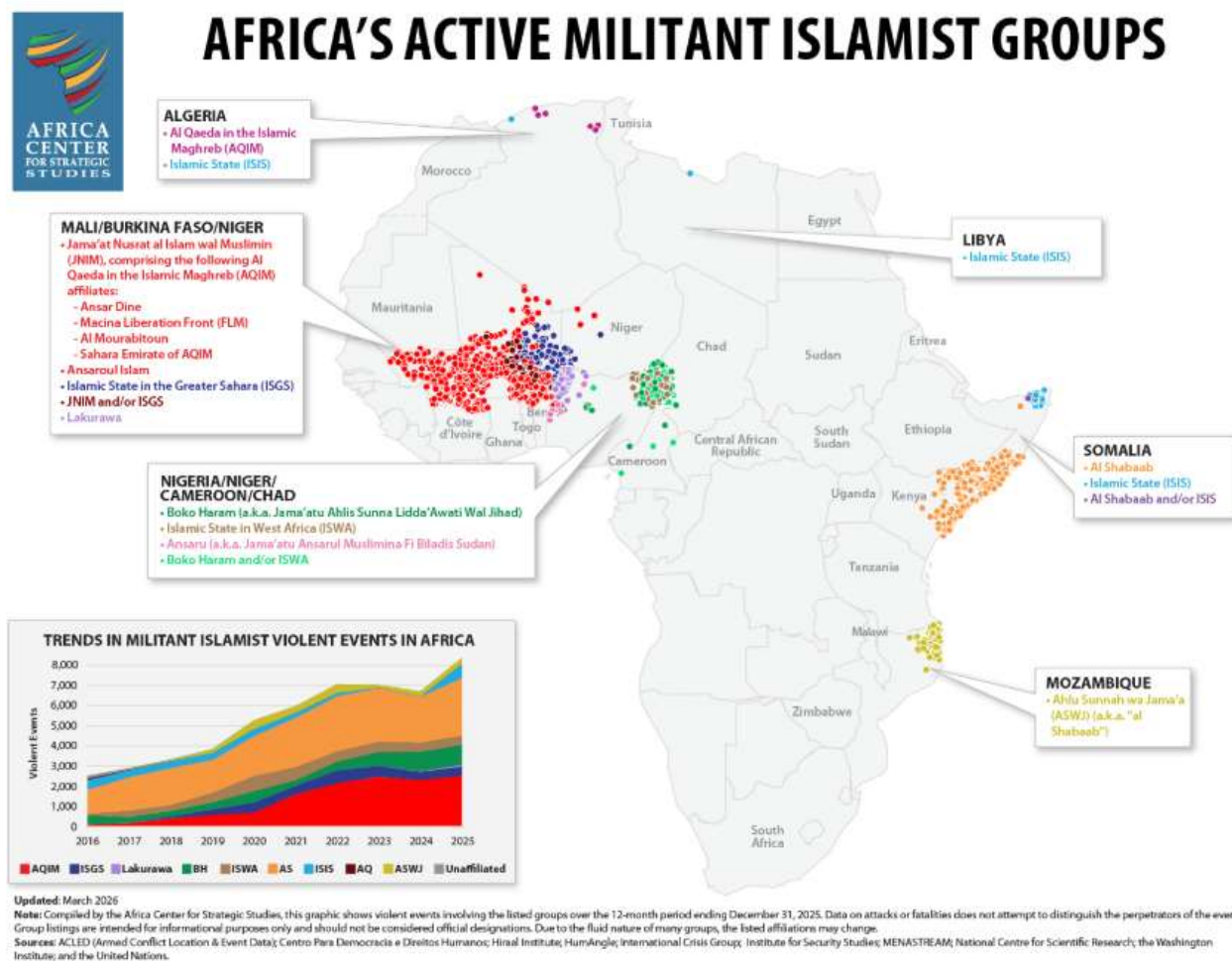
Rwanda is the necessary challenge to any argument that stability is produced only by competitive democracy. It has achieved strong administrative reach, public order, infrastructure delivery and policy implementation inside a tightly controlled political system. For this paper, that demonstrates the independent stabilising value of state capacity. It does not make Rwanda a universal model. Concentrated systems can suppress bad information, narrow mechanisms for political correction and create uncertainty around long-term succession. But the case is sufficient to show why democracy should be treated as an institutional mechanism rather than an ideological endstate.

Botswana and Mauritius demonstrate a different route. Their resilience has rested more heavily on institutionalised political competition, rule-bound succession, resource management, human capital and diversification. The important feature is not the precise political model. It is that governments can change without the state breaking, and economic difficulty can be processed through institutions rather than armed competition.

Nigeria and the external validity test

Nigeria is the hinge state because it connects the central Sahel, the Benin-Niger borderlands and the Lake Chad Basin while containing the largest population and economy in Africa. Its national strength coexists with severe subnational weakness. Federalism, state governments, traditional institutions, business networks and religious structures create redundancy, but some rural areas face policing gaps, kidnapping economies, communal conflict and jihadist penetration. If those systems converge across north-western Nigeria, the scale of the regional problem changes dramatically.

Somalia, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrate that the core hypotheses travel beyond West Africa. Al-Shabaab operates a sophisticated taxation and judicial system in Somalia. Rwanda's intervention in Cabo Delgado shows that a capable foreign force can create genuine tactical improvement, yet the insurgency and local political economy can persist. In eastern DRC, M23/AFC has developed parallel administration while Islamic State-linked ADF fighters exploit weak local authority. Different ideologies lead back to the same central issue: when the recognised state cannot provide effective political order, another actor will.



(Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies)

DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

The Race to 2050

Demography turns a regional security problem into a global strategic question. The United Nations projects sub-Saharan Africa's population to rise by approximately 79 per cent to around 2.2 billion by 2054. The UN Economic Commission for Africa projects the continent's working-age population aged 20 to 64 to rise from approximately 883 million in 2024 to 1.6 billion in 2050, approaching a quarter of the global working-age population. By then, roughly one in three young people globally is expected to be African.

Those figures should not be used as demographic alarmism. A large young population can be a source of labour, consumption, entrepreneurship, military manpower, technological adoption and global economic growth. The decisive question is absorption. The World Bank estimates that up to 12 million young people may enter African labour markets each year while only about 3 million new formal wage jobs are currently created annually. The gap does not mean that everyone without a formal wage job is unemployed or vulnerable to extremism; Africa's informal economies absorb enormous numbers of people. It does mean that the quality and productivity of work must improve at a scale that present systems do not yet achieve.

This is the demographic-institutional race. Education systems must expand without simply producing graduates for whom there is no productive work. Cities must absorb migration without creating enormous peripheral settlements with weak policing, infrastructure and opportunity. Electricity supply must expand quickly enough to support industry and services. Agriculture must become more productive while managing land and water pressure. Public revenue and administration must expand with the population requiring services.

The security significance is indirect but powerful. A young person with skills, reliable power, a viable business, access to markets and confidence that disputes can be resolved has a material stake in stability. A young person who experiences the state as corruption, arbitrary security action and blocked opportunity is

operating in a different political market. Employment does not inoculate societies against extremism, but a productive economy raises the opportunity cost of joining armed systems and increases the number of people with something to lose from disorder.



Climate pressure is best understood as a multiplier of governance weakness. Water, land and pastoral access become security questions when institutions cannot manage competition peacefully. (Source: Facebook).

Climate is a multiplier, not a cause

Climate change is often presented as a direct cause of Sahel conflict. That is too deterministic. Drought does not produce jihadism by itself, and rainfall variation does not automatically produce civil war. Climate pressure changes the value and location of land, water, grazing routes and livelihoods. Where institutions can adjudicate those changes, conflict can remain political and economic. Where they cannot, armed actors become mediators, protectors or predators.

Climate adaptation should therefore be designed as state resilience: water systems, irrigation, drought-resistant agriculture, pastoral corridors, land registration, market access, food storage, early warning and local mechanisms for farmer-herder dispute resolution. A functioning land court or water authority may have as much long-term security value as an additional armed unit because it prevents ordinary economic disputes from being militarised.

FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT

Foreign Power Without Permanent Dependency

Foreign involvement is part of the solution and part of the historical problem. France, the United States, European Union, Russia and China enter Africa with different strategic interests: counterterrorism, migration, trade, minerals, energy, diplomatic influence, military access and geopolitical competition. Those interests are legitimate from their own perspectives. They become destabilising when they encourage governments to become more accountable to external patrons than to domestic institutions, or when foreign capability substitutes for state capability so completely that withdrawal recreates the original weakness.

THE COMMON TEST

Every major foreign programme should answer one question: what African capability remains when the foreign personnel, money or political protection leave? If the answer is little, the programme may be useful in the present but it is not creating strategic independence.

United States / High-end enabler, not permanent combat substitute

The United States has a comparative advantage in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, satellite and signals support, aviation, logistics, counter-IED systems, cyber capability, financial intelligence and specialist training. That is where its value should remain concentrated. African forces should provide the majority of territorial manpower and local security presence; U.S. support should make those forces better informed, more mobile, more interoperable and more capable of disrupting financial and logistical networks.

The emphasis should shift from bilateral dependency toward African interoperability. A system that only functions when U.S. personnel are present is less valuable than one that allows Niger, Nigeria, Benin, Ghana or Cote d'Ivoire to exchange actionable intelligence directly. Training should also treat civilian protection, detainee handling, evidence preservation and command accountability as operational capabilities. In an insurgency, a unit that kills the wrong people can destroy the intelligence relationships on which future operations depend.

European Union / Build the state behind the soldier

Europe's comparative advantage is strongest in the less dramatic institutions that make security durable: police, prosecutors, courts, customs, border administration, public finance, audit, municipal government, education, vocational systems and infrastructure. The European Union Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea already reflects a shift toward preventing Sahel instability from moving deeper into Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo while combining military and civilian support. That prevention logic should become central.

European migration policy should also be judged against long-term state resilience. If assistance primarily turns African states into external border guards, it can distort local political priorities without addressing why movement becomes desperate. The stronger objective is to make migration increasingly a choice within a functioning economic relationship rather than an escape from insecurity and blocked opportunity.

France / From indispensable power to requested partner

France remains a special case because its colonial history and post-colonial military role shape political perceptions in ways that Brussels or Washington do not fully share. Operation Serval was militarily consequential, but the longer French presence became inseparable from debates over sovereignty and *Françafrique*. By 2025 France had ended its permanent troop presence in Senegal and substantially reduced its wider West African footprint, while signalling a greater emphasis on training, intelligence sharing and assistance requested by partners.

The lesson is not that France should disengage from Africa. It is that a foreign presence can lose strategic value when the political cost of being perceived as indispensable exceeds its military benefit. A lower-visibility partnership built around requested capability, education, business, intelligence and training is more likely to strengthen sovereignty than a permanent security architecture that allows domestic leaders to outsource responsibility.



French foreign legionnaires deployed in the Sahel as part of Operation Barkhane. (Source: Armée Française)



Sovereignty politics became a strategic factor in the collapse of parts of the previous Western security architecture. Foreign support that is perceived as domination eventually weakens its own political utility. (Source: Reuters credit retained in source image).

Russia / Capability transfer, not regime insurance

Russia offers something military-led governments often value: rapid security cooperation with fewer political conditions. In July 2026 Russia and the AES states agreed to deepen military and military-technical cooperation as insurgent attacks continued. Russia can provide equipment, trainers and specialised military knowledge. Those contributions should be judged by the same standard applied to the West.

The key distinction is between state security and regime security. Protecting a capital, leadership compound or strategic asset can preserve a government while the state continues to contract elsewhere. A Russian-trained African pilot, engineer, intelligence officer or instructor represents domestic capability. A system that cannot operate without Russian personnel represents dependency. Opaque security-for-resource arrangements and coercive operations that alienate local populations can strengthen a regime tactically while weakening the political contest against insurgency.



Russian security engagement has expanded as the central Sahel states have sought alternatives to former Western partners. The strategic test is whether assistance creates transferable national capability. User-supplied reference image.

China / The structural economic partner

China may have greater capacity to influence the structural causes of instability than any external military actor because its principal comparative advantages are infrastructure, energy, industrialisation, construction, telecommunications, agriculture and vocational training. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Beijing Action Plan for 2025-2027 emphasises local value chains, industrial parks, digital infrastructure, agriculture, green development and skills. China also committed substantial security cooperation, including an RMB 1 billion military grant, training for 6,000 African military personnel and 1,000 police officers.

The security value of Chinese engagement will be highest when infrastructure becomes an economic ecosystem rather than an isolated extractive corridor. The preferred model is not mine, road, port and export. It is extraction followed by local processing, supplier development, technical training, manufacturing, regional markets and export. Africa cannot absorb its future labour force by exporting unprocessed resources alone.

Electricity is a security capability when it allows industry and small businesses to operate. Roads are a security capability when they connect peripheral communities to markets and government. Telecommunications are a security capability when they connect citizens to services and authorities. Technical education is a security capability when it produces careers outside patronage and armed economies. China does not need to become another expeditionary counterterrorism power to make a major contribution to African security; it may be more useful if it does not.



Industrialisation, local processing and productive employment are not separate from security policy. They determine whether demographic growth becomes economic power or political pressure. User-supplied reference image.

The external patronage market

The strategic risk is that African governments can shop between patrons without changing domestic behaviour. One partner offers weapons, another infrastructure, another development finance, another political support. Competition gives African states useful bargaining power, but it can also allow governments to replace one source of conditionality with another whenever accountability becomes inconvenient. That is the external patronage market.

The response should not be a Western attempt to exclude Russia or China. That would return the argument to geopolitical competition rather than African state capability. African governments, the African Union and regional institutions should define common capability standards that apply to every partner: transparent contracting, local skills transfer, maintainable equipment, domestic training pipelines, civilian protection, auditable finance and an explicit path toward reduced foreign dependence.

Foreign partners do not need to coordinate every policy or share strategic objectives. Their activities do need to become compatible with an African endstate in which external assistance eventually declines because it is no longer structurally necessary.

SECURITY AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

What a Different Strategy Should Do

THE SEQUENCE

Security creates time. Institutions convert time into authority. Economic and social transformation make that authority durable. Regional cooperation gives it depth. Foreign partnerships should accelerate every stage while making themselves progressively less necessary.

Security should protect the political system, not replace it

The immediate phase remains security intensive. Governments cannot administer territory they cannot safely access. But the operational objective should move away from hunting militants across enormous spaces toward protecting the systems on which civilian life depends: population centres, roads, markets, power and telecommunications, border crossings, water infrastructure and administrative nodes. Mobile forces, intelligence, drones, counter-IED capability, aviation, night operations, medical evacuation and logistics remain essential.

Every clearance operation should, however, have a civilian continuation plan. Police should replace soldiers in routine law enforcement. Courts and prosecutors should follow. Administrators should remain. Schools and clinics should reopen. Roads should become commercially usable. The strategic test is whether normal government can persist after the tactical operation ends.



The centre of gravity shifts when security is translated into routine policing, justice and civilian administration. User-supplied reference image.

The state needs an internal boundary between politics and force

The civil-military boundary is one of the most important conclusions from the comparison. This paper does not assume civilian politicians are always competent or that elections guarantee stability. It does argue that a state becomes structurally more brittle when the armed forces establish themselves as the final mechanism for correcting political failure. Once coups become an accepted form of performance review, every security crisis gives ambitious officers a political constituency and every leader has an incentive to politicise command appointments.

Stable governance therefore requires a rule-bound relationship between political authority and the security sector. The form of government may vary, but the military must serve the state rather than own the succession process. Security institutions require professional promotion, auditable procurement, military

justice and command accountability. These are not democratic decorations. They are measures that reduce factionalism and preserve combat effectiveness.

Local justice may matter more than national constitutional design

The repeated geography of African insurgency is peripheral: northern Mali, eastern Burkina Faso, western Niger, northern Benin, northern Ghana, Cabo Delgado, eastern DRC and rural Somalia. The most important political reform may therefore occur below the level of national constitutions. Citizens need nearby mechanisms for land disputes, grazing access, family and commercial conflicts, documentation and criminal complaints.

This is where stable governance becomes tangible. A national political system can be formally sophisticated while local government remains absent. Conversely, a state with modest national institutions can achieve meaningful resilience if local authority is accessible and predictable. The next generation of stabilisation programmes should therefore measure kilometres to justice, police response times, administrative presence, road accessibility and citizen confidence as seriously as it measures national political milestones.

Corruption control should target institutional failure

Anti-corruption programmes should concentrate on the forms of corruption that most directly destroy state performance. Security-sector payroll fraud, purchased recruitment, politically manipulated promotion, customs collusion, procurement theft, land administration and judicial bribery deserve priority because they weaken the institutions that citizens rely on during insecurity. Digital public finance, transparent contracting, professional recruitment and independent audit are security measures when they make the state more predictable.

Negotiate to fragment the insurgency, not legitimise its ideology

Mature insurgencies rarely end through kinetic pressure alone. Armed networks contain irreconcilable ideologues, local commanders, coerced recruits, economic participants, communities seeking protection, people motivated by revenge and criminal actors. Treating all of them as strategically identical can help an insurgency remain united.

States should create credible pathways for defection, reintegration and local reconciliation while maintaining pressure on actors responsible for mass violence or committed to transnational revolutionary projects. Negotiation should be used selectively to separate local interests from wider jihadist objectives. The aim is not to legitimise terrorism; it is to reduce the number of people for whom continued participation in the armed system appears rational.

The coastal states need a resilience belt, not another future war

Benin, Togo, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire represent the most important preventive front. Investment should concentrate in strategically vulnerable northern districts before armed organisations become local governors. Local intelligence, roads, police, border administration, pastoral agreements, schools, markets and youth employment should be funded as a single resilience package rather than separated into security and development silos.

Traditional donor logic often sends development money where poverty is highest and security money where violence is already severe. A preventive strategy targets where poverty, weak state presence, local grievances and proximity to militant networks intersect. That is where relatively modest investment can prevent the future cost of reconquest and long-term military deployment.

GOVERNANCE WITHOUT IDEOLOGICAL PRESCRIPTION

The Desired Political Endstate

The paper's central political proposition should be explicit: the strategic objective is not to make Africa uniformly democratic, authoritarian, federal, centralised or Western in institutional design. The objective is stable, peaceful governance with strong institutions capable of performing essential state functions. Political forms will differ because African states differ in history, geography, scale and social composition.

Competitive democracy has clear strategic advantages where institutions can support it. It creates a peaceful route for removing failed governments, gives opposition movements incentives to remain inside the system,

provides information through contestation and can strengthen the legitimacy of succession. Ghana, Senegal, Botswana and Mauritius demonstrate those benefits. But elections held inside weak institutions can also deepen zero-sum competition, reward ethnic patronage or legitimise governments without improving state capacity.

Rwanda provides the counterweight. Its stability demonstrates that administrative competence, territorial reach and performance legitimacy have independent value. The long-term caution is that concentrated political systems can be vulnerable to succession uncertainty and weak error correction. The appropriate conclusion is not that one model should replace another. It is that governance should be evaluated against functions.

FUNCTIONAL TEST OF GOVERNANCE

Can authority change without the state breaking? Can the state correct a serious policy failure without a coup or rebellion? Can courts resolve disputes without political permission? Can the security forces operate professionally across political transitions? Can citizens in peripheral regions obtain the same basic protection and administrative treatment as citizens near the capital? If those functions exist, the political system is resilient regardless of the label applied to it.

This also changes the way foreign conditionality should be designed. Outside powers should be cautious about making political form the sole test of partnership while tolerating corruption, abusive security institutions or state absence. Conditions tied to institutional performance - civilian protection, audit, professional security promotion, judicial access, transparent procurement and predictable succession - are more directly connected to the security endstate this paper seeks.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Make Stability Economically Rational

No security architecture will be durable if the legitimate economy cannot absorb the population it is intended to protect. The scale of the challenge means that public-sector employment cannot be the answer. African states need productive private economies that create millions of firms, jobs and supply chains across agriculture, construction, manufacturing, energy, logistics, digital services and resource processing.

Education policy must therefore move beyond enrolment. Technical and vocational systems should be linked to actual sectors. Foreign infrastructure and mining contracts should include apprenticeships, local supervisory pathways and supplier-development requirements. Female education and economic participation deserve particular emphasis because they strengthen household resilience, labour-force participation, health outcomes and the longer-term demographic transition.

Agriculture remains central because large populations will continue to depend on rural livelihoods even as urbanisation accelerates. Irrigation, storage, agricultural processing, finance, road access and predictable land rights can convert subsistence livelihoods into commercial ones. This is more than development policy. It increases the number of households whose prosperity depends on safe roads, functioning markets and legitimate property rules.



Productive rural economies raise the opportunity cost of instability and connect peripheral communities to the legitimate state through markets rather than coercion. (Source: Facebook).

Resource economies require a similar transformation. Extractive growth that produces fortified mines or energy projects surrounded by poor communities can increase national revenue while leaving the local political economy unchanged. Mozambique's Cabo Delgado illustrates the risk. The correct metric is not only whether a project operates, but whether it creates local skills, suppliers, services, processing and public revenue that citizens can see.

The long-term objective is to make stability economically rational at household level. When citizens have assets, businesses, careers and credible prospects, disorder becomes more expensive. That does not eliminate ideological violence. It changes the environment in which recruiters must operate.

OUTLOOK

What the Next Three Decades Could Produce

The positive trajectory is not a continent without conflict. It is a continent in which institutions prevent local conflict from repeatedly becoming state-threatening violence. In the Sahel, that would mean jihadist organisations pushed away from major population and economic systems, local government restored behind security forces, and ECOWAS-AES political disputes prevented from disabling practical security cooperation. In the coastal states, it would mean militant penetration detected and contained before alternative governance networks form.

Across Africa more broadly, success by 2050 would mean that demographic growth has been matched by power generation, urban infrastructure, productive agriculture, industrialisation, education and local government. The relationship with foreign powers would shift progressively from assistance and security substitution toward investment, technology, trade and selective specialist cooperation. African governments would remain different in political form, but they would share stronger institutional boundaries: militaries that do not own succession, bureaucracies that survive leaders, courts with practical authority and local administrations able to manage peripheral grievances.

A less favourable trajectory is chronic managed instability. Capitals and strategic assets remain secure, but large rural areas are negotiated among governments, armed groups and informal authorities. Foreign security assistance continues indefinitely because indigenous systems never become self-sustaining. This is not state collapse, but it is a persistent ceiling on growth and sovereignty.

The dangerous trajectory is regional contagion. JNIM and Islamic State-linked networks deepen their presence in coastal West Africa and north-western Nigeria; criminal and insurgent economies become more integrated; political crises trigger additional military interventions; and rapidly growing cities inherit rural insecurity faster than governments can build services. The global consequences would extend through

migration, terrorism, critical-mineral and energy supply chains, shipping, foreign investment and geopolitical competition.

The choice among these trajectories will not be made by a single summit or counterterrorism campaign. It will be made by whether institutional capacity compounds faster than fragility over several decades.

STRATEGIC CONCLUSION

Conclusion

The central lesson from the past three decades is not that Africa received too much attention or too little. It is that intervention was too often weighted toward the visible manifestation of failure - the armed man - and insufficiently toward the institutional vacuum that made him politically relevant.

Military force remains necessary. A state that cannot protect its citizens will not remain legitimate. But force is strategically useful only when it creates conditions in which ordinary government can take over. The soldier's success should eventually make the police officer, magistrate, administrator, teacher, engineer and employer more important than the soldier.

The comparative cases matter because they reject fatalism. Mauritania shows that Muslim Sahelian geography does not make jihadist entrenchment inevitable. Senegal and Ghana show the value of institutions that process political conflict without transferring authority to the military. Cote d'Ivoire shows the importance of prevention in vulnerable peripheries. Rwanda shows that administrative capability has stabilising value independent of political liberalism. Botswana and Mauritius show that African institutions can survive leadership change and economic shocks. Nigeria shows that national power means little where local authority is thin. Somalia, Mozambique and DRC show that the underlying mechanism extends far beyond the Sahel.

Democracy should therefore not become another externally imposed shorthand for success. Where democratic institutions generate peaceful succession, accountability and correction, they are valuable security assets. Where other systems provide stable, rule-bound authority, capable administration and credible mechanisms for succession and correction, those functions should be recognised. The desired endstate is not ideological uniformity. It is a state that works, remains peaceful, controls legitimate force, resolves disputes and can change leadership without destroying itself.

Foreign partners should also be evaluated without ideological double standards. The United States is most useful as a high-end enabler. Europe is most useful building the state behind the soldier. France can remain relevant by becoming a requested rather than indispensable partner. Russia can contribute where it transfers genuine capability rather than insuring regimes. China may have the greatest structural leverage through infrastructure, industrialisation, power, agriculture and employment. None should be allowed to become a substitute for African political responsibility.

Africa's demographic transformation is what makes the next thirty years decisive. A much larger, younger and more urban population could become an extraordinary global economic asset. The same population under weak institutions, stagnant productivity and widening peripheral exclusion could amplify insecurity far beyond the continent. The difference is not demography itself. It is whether states and economies can absorb change faster than armed and illicit systems can exploit it.

The strategic objective for 2050 should therefore be simple even if achieving it will be difficult: an African citizen should have more reason to trust the state than fear it, more opportunity inside the legitimate economy than outside it, more confidence in a court than an armed intermediary, and more influence over public authority through legitimate institutions than through violence.

We need to do better in the next three decades because the cost of repeating the last three will be considerably higher. The answer is not another war on terrorism. It is a long campaign to build states, societies and economies that terrorism, organised crime and armed political entrepreneurs can no longer so easily exploit.

The ultimate measure of success will not be how many foreign counterterrorism missions are operating in Africa in 2050. It will be how few are still necessary.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

Security must create time. Strong institutions must convert that time into authority. Economic and social transformation must make that authority durable. The purpose of foreign involvement is to accelerate that process - and eventually to make itself less necessary.

SOURCE NOTE

Selected Source Base

This paper is an analytical synthesis using information available to 17 August 2026. It draws primarily on United Nations and World Bank research, African and regional institutional material, official government and intergovernmental documents, and current reporting used to validate the 2026 security picture. The selected sources below are not intended as an exhaustive bibliography.

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Analytical caveat

Conflict data in the Sahel are incomplete and contested. Casualty totals, territorial-control assessments and claims by armed groups should be treated as estimates rather than precise measures of sovereignty. The paper deliberately places greater weight on converging evidence about institutional reach, governance behaviour, recruitment, regional expansion and the persistence of armed networks than on any single map of territorial control.