

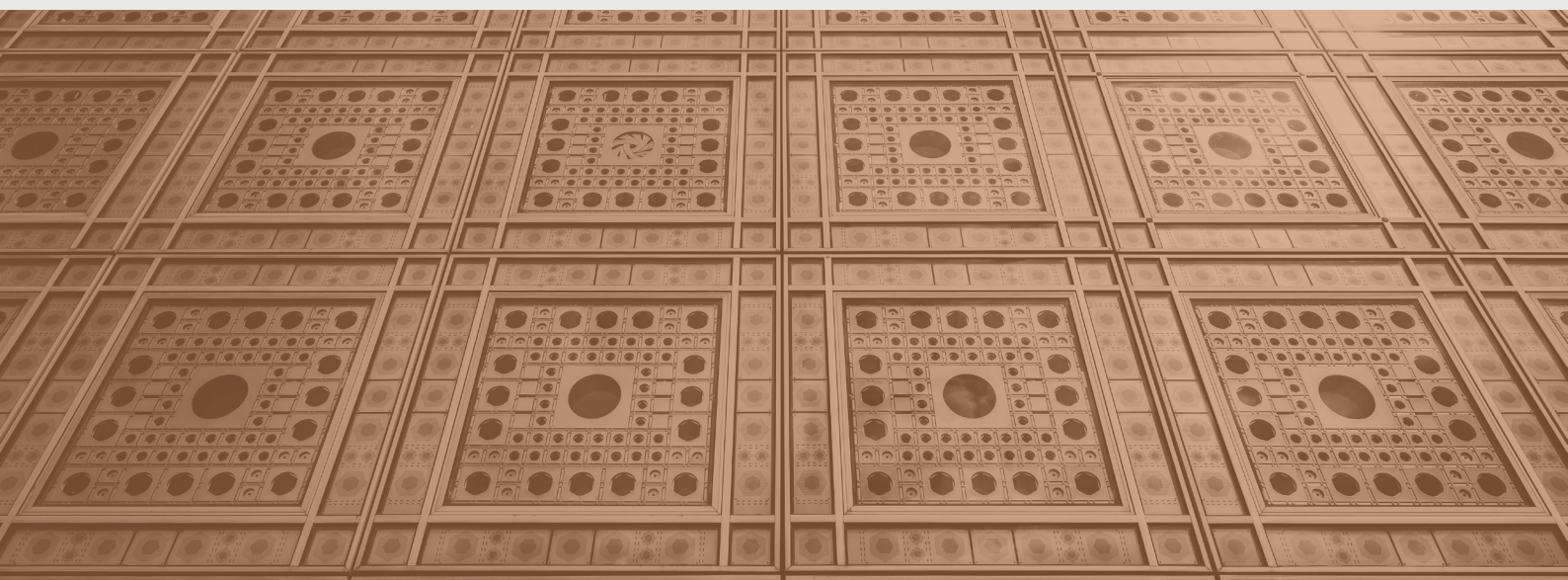


OBSERVATORY of the Maghreb

MALI'S INSTABILITY AND THE LIMITS OF EXTERNAL SECURITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MAGHREB

Dr. Yahia H. Zoubir / Professor of International
Relations and International Management
Abdelkader Abderrahmane / Researcher and
Consultant in Geopolitics of North-West Africa
and the Sahel region

June 2026



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Yahia H. Zoubir / Professor of International Relations and International Management

Dr. Yahia H. Zoubir is a retired Professor of International Relations and International Management. He served as a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs in Doha, Qatar (2020–2026), and is a Fudan University Scholar in Shanghai, China.



Abdelkader Abderrahmane / Researcher and Consultant in Geopolitics of North-West Africa and the Sahel region

Abdelkader Abderrahmane is an independent Researcher and Consultant in Geopolitics of North-West Africa and the Sahel region. He has published numerous peer-reviewed publications on the region.

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The crisis unfolding in Mali since April 2026 constitutes one of the most revealing test cases for external security engagement in the Sahel. Over the past decade, the country has undergone a sequence of transformations — from state collapse to international intervention, and more recently to a strategy of post-alignment centred on sovereignty and diversified partnerships.¹ Yet instability has persisted, expanded geographically, and become more structurally embedded.

This trajectory reveals a central paradox: the Sahel has been among the most heavily intervened regions globally, yet it remains one of the least stable. Mali illustrates why. The problem has not been a lack of engagement, but a persistent mismatch between the nature of the crisis and the instruments deployed to address it. External actors have consistently privileged military responses to what are fundamentally political, institutional, and socioeconomic challenges.

More broadly, Mali highlights the structural limits of externally driven security models in environments characterised by weak state capacity, fragmented authority, and resilient local conflict systems. It is therefore not simply a national crisis but a lens through which to understand the transformation of insecurity across the Sahel and its regional and international implications.

Furthermore, Mali’s instability is a major concern for the Maghreb countries and their security, particularly for neighbouring states such as Algeria, due to the risk of instability and insecurity spilling over into their own territories.

MALI AS THE CORE OF THE SAHELIAN CRISIS

Mali’s centrality to the Sahelian crisis derives from both its geographic position and its structural characteristics. Situated at the intersection of North Africa, the Sahara, and West Africa, the country occupies a strategic space through which transnational flows—of people, goods, weapons, and armed actors — circulate. However, geography alone does not account for its importance. Mali functions as a microcosm of the Sahelian condition, where governance deficits, socioeconomic marginalisation, and security fragmentation converge in particularly acute form.

¹ Zoubir Yahia H., Abderrahmane Abdelkader, “Mali’s Post-Alignment Strategy: Sovereignty, Partnerships, and the Limits of Stabilization”, *Stimson Center*, April 13, 2026.

As emphasised in a 2022 report, “*Crisis in the Sahel: Causes and Consequences of the Conflict,*” the drivers of instability are deeply rooted in structural factors: weak institutions, uneven development, intercommunal tensions, and the proliferation of armed groups.²

The collapse of state authority in northern Mali in 2012 triggered a chain reaction that continues to shape the region. The convergence of Tuareg insurgency, jihadist mobilisation, and institutional fragility produced a complex conflict environment that defies simple categorisation. Over time, this environment evolved into a multi-layered system involving local militias, transnational jihadist networks, and external actors pursuing divergent objectives.

Crucially, Mali illustrates how local crises become regional systems. Armed groups operate across porous borders, while socioeconomic networks extend beyond national boundaries. The result is an interconnected conflict system in which instability is not contained but circulates, adapts, and reproduces itself across the Sahel.³ This dynamic has transformed the region from a collection of national crises into a single, evolving security complex.

FROM INTERVENTION TO STRATEGIC STAGNATION

The international response to the Malian crisis initially appeared to validate the effectiveness of external intervention. The 2013 Serval military operation led by France halted the advance of jihadist forces and restored a degree of territorial control to the Malian state. Serval was followed by Barkhane, MINUSMA,⁴ European training missions, and regional initiatives.⁵

However, this architecture generated diminishing returns over time. Rather than consolidating stability, it contributed to what can be described as *strategic stagnation*. Military operations disrupted insurgent activity but failed to eliminate it.⁶ In response, armed groups adapted by decentralising their structures, shifting to asymmetric tactics, and embedding themselves more deeply within local communities.

² Zoubir Yahia H., “Crisis in the Sahel: Causes, Consequences, and the Path Forward”, *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, June 2022.

³ Bodian Mamadou, Tobie Aurélien, Marending Myriam “The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali”, *SIPRI Background Paper*, March 2020.

⁴ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), June 2024.

⁵ “Common Security and Defence Policy. EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali)”, *European Union External Action*, April 2014.

⁶ DeAngelo Michael, “Counterterrorism Shortcomings in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2025.

This outcome reflects the deeper political economy of insurgency. Armed groups in Mali are not merely ideological actors; they are embedded in networks that link local grievances, economic survival strategies, and transnational illicit economies.⁷ In regions where the state is absent or perceived as predatory, these groups can provide alternative forms of governance, including dispute resolution and protection.⁸

External intervention strengthened coercive capacity but not legitimacy, addressing immediate threats while leaving underlying causes intact.

POST-ALIGNMENT AND THE LIMITS OF SOVEREIGNTY

The coups of 2020 and 2021 marked a decisive turning point in Mali's political trajectory.⁹ The military authorities that assumed power framed their legitimacy around sovereignty and resistance to external influence.

In practical terms, this shift led to a reconfiguration of external partnerships. Cooperation with Western actors was reduced or terminated, while new relationships were established with alternative partners, particularly Russian-linked security actors.¹⁰ This strategy — often described as post-alignment — was intended to enhance autonomy and reduce dependence on any single external actor.

However, as analyses, including our own previous work, have argued, post-alignment does not eliminate dependency but rather redistributes it.¹¹ External actors, regardless of their origin, face similar structural constraints in fragile environments characterised by weak institutions and complex local dynamics.

Moreover, domestic political decisions have compounded these challenges. The rather limited and partial implementation of the 2015 Algiers Accords and renewed confrontation with northern armed groups have deepened divisions within the country.¹² In this context, pressures on different armed actors may have facilitated tactical convergence among groups that had previously operated separately.

⁷ Kapetanovic Tin, "Applying the Transplantation Framework to JNIM's Expansion in the Sahara-Sahel", *A Criminological Lens. Journal of Illicit economies and Development*, 2025.

⁸ Mokeddem Mohamed, "Al Qaida au Maghreb islamique. Contrebande au nom de l'Islam" (Algiers: Casbah, 2011). [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb- Smuggling in the Name of Islam].

⁹ Zoubir Yahia H., Abderrahmane Abdelkader, "Mali's Post-Alignment Strategy: Sovereignty, Partnerships, and the Limits of Stabilization", *Stimson Center*, April 13, 2026.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali. Issue du processus d'Alger", *Centre citoyen*, 2015.

THE APRIL 2026 RUPTURE

The coordinated attacks of April 25–26, 2026, marked a major inflection point in Mali’s crisis.¹³ Armed groups conducted synchronised operations across multiple regions, targeting key military and political centres.

The events exposed several structural vulnerabilities. Centralised command structures proved susceptible to disruption, particularly when targeted simultaneously. The response capacity of the Malian armed forces was constrained by logistical limitations, deficient intelligence, and issues of coordination. In several locations, the rapid withdrawal of government forces suggested deeper problems related to lack of morale and cohesion.¹⁴ The killing of senior officials in Bamako, including the minister of defence, further underscored the depth of institutional vulnerability. It seems that serious internal divisions exist among the Malian army; this has complicated any coordinated response to these attacks.¹⁵

Taken together, the April offensive illustrates a broader pattern of systemic fragility, in which multiple elements of the security architecture—state institutions, external support, and regional coordination—fail simultaneously under pressure.

REGIONAL DIFFUSION AND THE LIMITS OF THE AES

The repercussions of Mali’s crisis extend far beyond its borders. Over the past decade, instability has spread across the Sahel, transforming the region into an interconnected conflict system. Violence has intensified in Burkina Faso and Niger, while concerns have grown about spillover into coastal West African states. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project confirm a sustained increase in violent events, reflecting both the expansion and adaptation of insurgent activity.¹⁶

The creation of the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES), now Confédération “Alliance des États du Sahel,” by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, was intended to provide a framework for collective security and political coordination.¹⁷ However, its effectiveness has been limited.¹⁸

¹³ “Gunmen stage simultaneous attacks across Mali, army says”, *Al Jazeera*, April 2026.

¹⁴ “JNIM + FLA frappent simultanément Bamako, Kidal, Gao, Sévaré et Mopti”, *Centre d’études pour le développement et la prévention de l’extrémisme (CEDPE)*, April 2026.

¹⁵ “Mali : une armée minée par les divisions internes”, *Mondafrique*, April 2026.

¹⁶ Nsaibia Héni, “The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-long Conflict”, *ACLEED*, January 2024.

¹⁷ *Confédération des États du Sahel*.

¹⁸ “Mali : l’Alliance des États du Sahel réagit à minima aux attaques des jihadistes et rebelles Touaregs”, *RFI*, April 2026.

Coordination among member states has been uneven, and responses to crises have reflected divergent national priorities rather than a unified strategy.

This suggests that regional alignments, while politically significant, remain operationally fragile. They are unable to compensate for structural weaknesses at the national level or to provide a coherent response to transnational threats.

Beyond these regional dynamics, the Malian crisis also reflects deeper transformations in authority and governance across the Sahel.¹⁹

INSURGENT GOVERNANCE AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF AUTHORITY

A central dimension of the Malian crisis that remains insufficiently addressed in external policy frameworks is the emergence of insurgent governance systems. Armed groups operating in northern and central Mali have increasingly moved beyond purely military objectives to establish forms of territorial administration that, while often coercive, nonetheless perform functions traditionally associated with the state.²⁰ In areas where the state is absent, predatory, or incapable of delivering basic services, such arrangements can generate a degree of local acceptance or at least acquiescence. This dynamic complicates the assumption that insurgent groups can be effectively dislodged through military pressure alone.

Rather than a simple dichotomy between state and nonstate actors, the region is increasingly characterised by layered and competing forms of governance, in which authority is fragmented and negotiated at the local level. This fragmentation reduces the effectiveness of externally supported state-building efforts, as formal institutions often lack both reach and legitimacy. In Mali, this reconfiguration has been particularly pronounced in the aftermath of successive military operations. As state forces withdrew or failed to consolidate control, armed groups filled the vacuum, embedding themselves within local socioeconomic structures. This process has contributed to the resilience of insurgency and underscores the limits of approaches that focus narrowly on military objectives without addressing governance deficits.

¹⁹ Mulugeta Rebecca, “How Sahel’s Past Explain it’s Violent Present & Uncertain Future”, *Horn Review*, no date.

²⁰ “The Shifting Front of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel”, *Africa Center for Security Studies*, April 2025.

STATE EROSION, LEGITIMACY, AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

Mali's crisis reflects a deeper erosion of state legitimacy rather than a purely military imbalance. In much of the north and centre, the state is absent or perceived as coercive, undermining efforts to restore authority through force alone. External support has improved operational capacity but not the credibility of state institutions, leaving military gains fragile. Persistent governance vacuums enable insurgent resilience, as groups reemerge where authority lacks legitimacy. The core challenge is therefore not merely weak state presence, but also the absence of credible and accepted authority.

FUTURE TRAJECTORIES: FRAGMENTATION, STABILISATION, OR MANAGED INSTABILITY

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Mali's crisis is likely to be shaped by a combination of domestic political developments and regional dynamics.

The first is a scenario of continued fragmentation, in which state authority remains weak and armed groups consolidate their presence in peripheral regions. Under this scenario, Mali would continue to function as a fragmented political space, with limited central control and persistent insecurity. This outcome appears plausible given current trends and would reinforce the regionalisation of instability.

The second scenario involves a form of partial stabilisation, potentially linked to renewed political engagement and the reactivation of frameworks such as the 2015 Algiers Accords. This would require a shift in both domestic and regional dynamics, including greater willingness among key actors to pursue negotiated solutions. While not impossible, this scenario faces significant obstacles, including the fragmentation of armed groups and the lack of trust among stakeholders.²¹

The third and perhaps most realistic scenario is one of managed instability, in which violence persists but remains contained within certain limits. Under this scenario, external actors and regional powers would focus on preventing further deterioration rather than achieving comprehensive stabilisation. This approach aligns with the broader trend toward pragmatic, risk-management strategies in complex conflict environments.

²¹ "Violent Extremism in the Sahel", *Center for Preventive Action*, May 2026.

In all three scenarios, the role of regional actors—including Algeria, which shares a 1,300 kilometre border with Mali—will remain significant, though constrained. The ability of these actors to influence outcomes will depend on their capacity to engage with local dynamics and to navigate an increasingly multipolar environment.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS, STRATEGIC PATIENCE, AND ALGERIA'S POSITION

These broader transformations in governance, regional coordination, and external engagement also frame the role of key regional actors, particularly Algeria. Sharing more than 1,300 kilometres of border with Mali, the instability in that country is a major concern for the Algerian leadership, which fears potential spillover effects onto Algerian territory.

Therefore, while Algeria has not directly shaped events on the ground, the evolving situation in Mali aligns with several of its long-standing objectives,²² including the containment of instability away from its borders and the limitation of sustained external military presence in northern Mali.²³ For Algeria—the Sahel's most capable military power—the protracted crisis poses a significant national security challenge. While building ties with Mali's AES allies (Niger/Burkina), relations with Bamako remain strained due to the junta's hostility.²⁴ Algerian authorities have sought to contain the instability's spillover effects by safeguarding national territory and preventing the infiltration of violent extremist groups, the escalation of migrant transit flows toward Europe, and the expansion of drug and human trafficking networks. Algeria long argued that the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord (which the junta scrapped in 2024) was the only viable path.²⁵

At the official level, this position has been clearly articulated by Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf, who reaffirmed Algeria's "unwavering support for the unity of the Malian territory, its people, and its institutions," alongside its categorical rejection of terrorism and its emphasis on national cohesion as the most effective response to instability.²⁶

²² Zoubir Yahia H., Abderrahmane Abdelkader, "Alger au Sahel : stabilité et sécurité", *Politique étrangère*, 2022.

²³ Meddi Adlène, "Crise au Mali : ce qu'en pense Alger", *Le Point*, April 2026.

²⁴ Laredj Basseem, "L'impact de la crise malienne sur l'Algérie et la Mauritanie : enjeux, dynamiques et répercussions regionaux", *IRIS*, February 2026.

²⁵ Meddi Adlène, "Crise au Mali : ce qu'en pense Alger", *Le Point*, April 2026.

²⁶ "Attaf: Algeria reiterates support for unity of Malian territory, people and institutions", *People's Democratic Republic of Algeria Permanent Mission of Algeria to the UN - New York*, no date.

This reflects a broader strategic doctrine grounded in sovereignty, noninterference, and the primacy of political solutions over military approaches.²⁷ At the same time, Algeria's influence remains constrained by the fragmentation of armed actors and the complexity of the conflict environment.²⁸

More broadly, for North African states such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, the crisis has generated acute security concerns linked to arms trafficking, cross-border militant networks, and the persistence of ungoverned desert spaces. In this context, strengthening regional security coordination has become increasingly imperative.²⁹

The vast and sparsely populated border regions between Algeria and Mali remain difficult to monitor effectively, creating opportunities for trafficking networks and armed groups to operate across jurisdictions. Despite bilateral cooperation, these geographic and logistical constraints continue to undermine the effectiveness of purely security-driven approaches.

Recent developments in Mali may also affect its relations with Morocco. Over the past several months, the two countries have pursued closer political and economic ties, reflecting Morocco's increasingly assertive diplomacy in the Sahel. In recent years, Rabat has succeeded in expanding its political and economic influence across the region through a combination of infrastructure, trade, religious, and security initiatives.

As part of this broader strategy, Morocco proposed in December 2023 to provide Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso with access to the Atlantic port of Dakhla, located in the disputed territory of Western Sahara. The so-called Atlantic Initiative is intended to facilitate trade and improve access to global markets for these landlocked Sahelian states.³⁰

As a further indication of this rapprochement, Bamako announced in April 2026 its support for Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara.³¹

However, the continuing instability in Mali may ultimately jeopardise Morocco's diplomatic gains in the country. The escalation of violence complicates Rabat's strategic calculations, particularly after Morocco moved quickly to capitalise on the wave of coups d'état and foreign policy realignments that affected Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2021 and 2023. Morocco had effectively wagered on the consolidation and eventual international

²⁷ Zoubir Yahia H, "Algeria and the Sahelian Quandary: the Limits of Containment Security Policy", pp.70-95, *Euromesco Joint Policy Study*, April 2018.

²⁸ Sour Lotfi, "Algeria's role in the African Sahel : toward a new security paradigm", *IJEMS*, December 2022.

²⁹ Bourehla Mourad, "Mali's Crisis and Its Fallout for the Maghreb", *ISPI*, May 2026.

³⁰ Zaanoun Abderrafie, "Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and Potential Challenges to Regional Leadership", *Sada*, October 2024.

³¹ "Mali backs Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara", *Reuters*, April 2026.

rehabilitation of the newly established military juntas as stable political interlocutors and potential long-term regional partners.³²

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN POLICY

For European policymakers, the Malian case, to which it has paid close attention, offers several critical lessons that extend beyond the Sahel.³³ First, it highlights the limitations of security strategies centred on capacity building and counterterrorism. While such approaches can enhance the operational capabilities of partner states, they are insufficient in contexts where the underlying drivers of instability are political and socioeconomic.

Second, Mali underscores the risks associated with over-reliance on external partners in fragile environments. The shift from Western to alternative security partnerships has not produced improved outcomes, suggesting that the effectiveness of external engagement is constrained less by the identity of the partner than by the structural conditions within which it operates.

Third, the regionalisation of instability has direct implications for Europe in areas such as migration, transnational crime, and energy security. Instability in the Sahel contributes to irregular migration flows across the Mediterranean, while the expansion of illicit networks affects broader patterns of regional trade and governance. As a result, the Sahel cannot be treated as a peripheral security concern but must be integrated into a broader strategic framework.

In practical terms, this requires a recalibration of European policy along several dimensions. Greater emphasis should be placed on political engagement, governance reform, and local conflict resolution, rather than on military assistance alone. At the same time, European actors must recognise the limits of their influence and avoid overambitious objectives that are unlikely to be achieved.

A more sustainable approach would prioritise conflict management over conflict resolution, focusing on reducing violence, supporting local resilience, and maintaining channels of

³² Fernandez-Molina Irene, “Mali’s Crisis and Its Fallout for the Maghreb”, *ISPI*, May 2026.

³³ “Council conclusions on the European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel”, *Council of the European Union*, April 2021.

engagement with a range of actors. This does not imply disengagement but rather a more realistic assessment of what external intervention can achieve.³⁴

CONCLUSION

The Malian crisis illustrates a broader transformation of insecurity across the Sahel, where armed violence increasingly intersects with weak governance, fragmented sovereignty, illicit economies, and shifting geopolitical alignments. In such an environment, military victories alone are unlikely to produce durable stabilisation. Rather, the region risks evolving into a space of chronic managed instability in which state authority remains uneven and external actors focus primarily on containment rather than resolution.

For the Maghreb states, particularly Algeria, the persistence of instability in Mali is not simply a neighbouring crisis but a direct strategic concern. The expansion of trafficking networks, militant mobility, and ungoverned border spaces creates long-term security pressures that no state can address individually. This reinforces the necessity of greater regional coordination linking the Sahel and the Maghreb within a broader security framework.

Ultimately, Mali demonstrates that the future of security in the Sahel will depend less on the scale of external military engagement than on the capacity of regional states to rebuild legitimate political authority, foster inclusive governance, and address the structural conditions that sustain conflict. Absent such a shift, cycles of instability are likely to persist, with consequences extending far beyond Mali itself.

³⁴ For a good discussion on European policy, see: Eric Hall, "Europe's Forthcoming Sahel Strategy: A Limited Role in a Multipolar Region", *International Center for Defense and Security*, 29 October 2025, <https://icds.ee/en/europes-forthcoming-sahel-strategy-a-limited-role-in-a-multipolar-region/>

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