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SOUTHERN VOICES NETWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING
REGIONAL CONFERENCE

**West and North Africa at the Crossroads of Change:
Examining the Evolving Security
and Governance Landscape**

CONFERENCE
REPORT

19 - 20 September 2023
WANEP Regional Office
Accra, Ghana

SVNP

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) regional conference was jointly organized by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), Sadeq Institute in Libya, and the Wilson Center Africa Program from September 19- 20, 2023 in Accra, Ghana. The hybrid event was conducted under the Chatham House rule and brought together regional experts and thought leaders for interactive discussions to explore the changing security and socio-political dynamics in the Sahel-Maghreb[1]; discuss the impacts of the reemergence of military coups in West Africa; and to develop actionable policy recommendations. This report summarizes the key highlights and recommendations from the regional conference.

Welcome Remarks

The welcome remarks highlighted the rising insecurity in the Sahel-Maghreb. The political and humanitarian situation in Libya; military coups in the Sahel; surge in violent extremism; and the new military junta alliance[2] between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso were all referenced as critical issues that required closer examination. The remarks provided an overview of the conference objectives which were to provoke critical thoughts about the evolving security and governance landscape in the region, and to advance recommendations to strengthen stabilization and peacebuilding efforts.

Overview of the Current Political, Security, and Socio-Economic Landscape

North Africa

Security and governance in North Africa are evolving alongside a wide array of contextual issues. First, climate insecurities have impacted agriculture and livelihoods in many local communities. At the time of this conference, floods were affecting Libya and Tunisia, with an estimated 25,000 persons displaced, the majority of whom are farmers. This development has exacerbated food insecurity and facilitated the spread of communicable diseases among local populations.

The second contextual factor is the ongoing leadership crisis in Libya. During the discussions, it came to the fore that Libya's economic leadership was once a stabilizing pillar in the region. The death of President Gaddafi and its consequences have reduced Libya to a failed state with no national structure for governance.

Third, weak governance and rising authoritarianism in the region, compounded with debts from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other external institutions, have contributed to worsening socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and drug trafficking. There are also growing public

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[1] The Sahel-Maghreb consists of the countries located in North Africa and the Sahel.

[2] On September 16, the military juntas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed a collective defense and mutual assistance pact known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to support each other against threats of armed rebellion or external aggression.

perceptions that foreign governments [including but not limited to Russia, China, and the United States] are exploiting the situation in the region and building unhealthy partnerships with authoritarian regimes.

The overview concluded with some critical questions for reflection: Which external actors should countries engage with, and what should countries accept and not accept from them? What early warning and response systems exist, and how can we improve them? What recommendations are necessary for policymakers, considering the multitude of threats confronting the region?

West Africa

Rising human insecurity and poor governance are driving the resurgence of coups in the Sahel. These factors give legitimacy to the narrative of the military juntas who present themselves as a viable option to underperforming civilian elected governments. Across several countries in West Africa, citizen trust in elections and the conduct of elections is on the decline, further diminishing the public's faith in democratic processes. The Liberian elections scheduled for October 2023 were discussed extensively, together with the potential challenges that could impact the process.

Findings from WANEP's fieldwork conducted in all Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member states, showed that some of the key issues undermining security and governance in the region include weak infrastructure (roads, housing, etc.); terrorism; proliferation of self-defense community-led groups; arms proliferation; drug trafficking and abuse; and piracy. The worsening climatic variability and the associated adverse impact on food security and local conflicts were discussed as new security dimensions that required in-depth thinking. A worrisome, estimated figure of 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were recorded[3] in the Sahel due to the impacts of climatic change.

It was concluded that the existing national and international strategies to address climate challenges and other human security issues in the region are either insufficient or not effectively implemented.

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[3] In January 2022, the UNCHR reported that in the last ten years, 2.5 million people from the Sahel were displaced.

Open Discussion: Shared Borders, Shared Issues, Shared Solutions

The overview of the current landscape in West and North Africa highlighted some of the interconnected security and governance challenges in both regions. Key among them are the climate crisis, common external actors, rising debts, poverty, inequality, and high unemployment. While these threats are recognized by the citizens in both regions, they are often overlooked by the governments, signifying a gap between the two on the realities and enormity of the problems faced by the average citizen.

Most participants noted that electoral processes and management of political transitions also constitute an area of interconnected challenges. Manipulation of the election process and the overpoliticization of electoral and security institutions are common in both regions. Participants stressed the need to deeply examine governance in the region and noted that it would require hard and honest thinking to overcome the governance challenges and strengthen democratic processes.

Several participants criticized the approach of the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, stating that weak electoral processes and disregard for constitutional term limits were fueling violent extremism and coups. They noted the imperative for Africa's continental and regional organizations to hold its members accountable, and to have a proactive response to flawed elections and attempts to manipulate the constitution before it degenerates into civil protest and military takeovers.

Participants explored in-depth the growing public narrative that military juntas are more effective than civilian governments in addressing the insecurity in the region. The discussion provoked new debates about the capacity of the state to defend its citizens and protect them from violent extremism. A comparative study was therefore suggested to help fully understand if and why military juntas are gaining the attention and support of civilian populations in the Sahel.

Participants highlighted that international partners such as the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union (EU) often have clear strategic objectives for their engagement in the Sahel. However, there is a lack of clarity about the strategic objectives that inform the actions or inactions of Sahelian governments towards addressing the rising insecurity.

Participants also raised the key role of young people and gender dimensions in security policy. They questioned whether governments in the Sahel-Maghreb are doing enough to involve young people, women, and other gender-based groups in their peace and security agenda. The Sahel has become a dangerous transit corridor for irregular migration towards Europe, mostly of young people. Increased securitization to curb migration has had the opposite effect, disrupting the livelihoods of those dependent on migration flows and making them more susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist groups. It is important for national governments and international partners to understand the complexity of the overlapping issues that are driving irregular migration in the region.

Participants noted that the recent coups in the Sahel reflect an anti-French sentiment. In this light, it is important to explore what diplomatic steps the AU and ECOWAS are taking to address the grievances against France.

Participants also discussed the role of multinational private corporations. They noted that despite the dominance of these corporations in the trade and extraction of natural resources in the region, their role in peacebuilding remains limited and unclear. They stressed the need to engage the private sector in building peace and finding a sustainable solution to the challenges in the region.

Brainstorming Concrete Recommendations

The session began with an overview of the interconnected areas of challenges and opportunities between North and West Africa. Participants suggested deeper regional cooperation as a formidable approach to address the security and governance challenges. This approach must include thoughtful initiatives to encourage cross-border collaboration among communities in the Sahel-Maghreb states. Participants highlighted the need for dialogue among the relevant states to help inform any organizational framework that would be used to drive collaboration between border communities.

To address the security threats in the region, participants highlighted the need to prioritize long-term proactive response over short-term reactive actions. This includes being deliberate about the different risks and vulnerabilities, especially those that impact young people, women, and other gender categories. Also, social factors such as language and ethnic identity must be factored into analyzing the drivers of insecurity. ECOWAS must institutionalize presidential term limits in its member states. In the wake of current developments in Niger, ECOWAS must re-engage local populations through broad stakeholders' consultation to build goodwill, legitimacy and protect its fast-eroding reputation. Participants called for the need to effectively scrutinize external actors and security partnerships to ensure a win-win situation. They noted that security partnerships must go beyond "train and equip" programs and must include long-term strategies for addressing the threats of terrorists and violent extremist groups.

As part of the discussion, participants suggested that governments in the region should explore the "Rwandan model,"[4] where one African country intervenes to support the stabilization efforts of other countries by deploying special technical security missions for a period. The Rwandan model was not presented as a solution to the security challenges in the Sahel; however, there are lessons that can be drawn from Rwanda's recent security intervention in Benin and Mozambique. Models like these are worth deeper exploration to help inform African-led security initiatives. They also emphasized the need to use more non-kinetic approaches to complement existing kinetic measures as part of the overall regional counter-terrorism strategy. The Accra initiative - a security mechanism between Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Ghana to prevent terrorism from the Sahel region- was discussed as an example of a

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[4] Rwanda has deployed forces in Benin and Mozambique to assist in thwarting extremist violence present in the countries' bordering areas.

homegrown initiative. However, it was also pointed out that there is an urgent need to raise awareness about the Accra initiative in other West African countries. Public campaigns, stakeholder conferences, public dialogue, and engagements with civil society organizations were suggested as mechanisms to increase regional awareness about the initiative.

Crafting the Way Forward: Moving from Recommendations to Action

This session was comprised of small group work and a plenary discussion. Three groups were created, and each of them had to deliberate on the same questions. Participants were tasked with developing actionable recommendations that could guide the activities of their respective groups.

Group 1: Recommendations for the African Union, ECOWAS, and North African states
Group 2: Recommendations for the United States and other International Partners
Group 3: Recommendations for the Private Sector and Business Community

Question 1: On September 16, the military juntas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed a collective defense and mutual assistance pact known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to support each other against threats of armed rebellion or external aggression. What are the implications of this new alliance on the economy, security, and governance in the region? How should the AU, ECOWAS, and North African states respond to this new alliance? What could this alliance mean for efforts to restore peace and security in the region?

Question 2: The coup in Niger has generated discussions around North Africa –Sahel relations. This was exemplified by the strong stance of some North African states against any external military action in Niger. How should the AU, ECOWAS, North African states, external partners, and private sector engage?

Recommendations for African Union, ECOWAS, and North African States

- Prioritize subtle diplomatic engagement with the new junta alliance to help counter misinformation and promote cohesive engagement.

- Review and harmonize the multiple regional and international Sahel stabilization strategies[5] to identify areas of constructive collaboration to better inform peacebuilding efforts.

- ECOWAS should urgently fast-track the review and implementation of its 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which is designed to prevent unconstitutional changes of presidential term limits.

- ECOWAS should strengthen its public communication efforts to align with the social, political, and economic realities of citizens in the sub-region. These efforts should be in coordination with the AU, relevant North African states, the UN, and other stakeholders.

- The AU and ECOWAS should foster bilateral and multilateral engagement with North African states, particularly Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, and Libya, to renew commitment and collective response towards tackling the expansion of threats posed by violent extremist groups.

- The AU, in coordination with ECOWAS and relevant North African states, should lead efforts to negotiate an effective Sahel-Sahara security strategy that will not only focus on dialogue with the military juntas but also encourage effective intelligence sharing to prevent spillover effects from violent extremist groups.

- The AU, in coordination with ECOWAS and relevant North African states, should lead efforts to develop an inclusive operational plan and timeline to address cross-border security challenges. The project should transcend the immediate impacts of the most recent coup in Niger and look at the wider regional security and humanitarian support implications.

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[5] There are multiple Sahel stabilization strategies. Some are led by the AU and ECOWAS, while others are led by international partners in collaboration with governments in the region. These strategies have not addressed the growing security crisis. Meanwhile, public frustration with governments in the region continues to rise.

Recommendations for the United States and other International Partners

- Prioritize transparency and frank dialogue in any engagements with the military juntas and with other relevant government stakeholders in the Sahel-Maghreb.

- Continue to support development projects that specifically target the well-being of citizens, such as health, education, and infrastructure development.

- Continue to engage in bilateral discussions with AES member states to nurture conversations that could eventually pave the way for an inclusive political transition.

- Support ongoing efforts to strengthen the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF)[6], which can be deployed to protect civilians and counter violent extremist threats in the sub-region.

- Strengthen engagement with North African states, like Algeria, that have a successful record of accomplishment of fighting violent extremism and have the diplomatic leverage to ensure buy-in for security initiatives in the region.

- Prioritize long-term support to local organizations that work with and in border communities to prevent the spread of violent extremism.

- The United States and international partners should avoid strategic competition among each other that could negatively impact the human security of local populations.

Recommendations for the Private Sector and Business Community

- Spearhead resource mobilization efforts to contribute to the existing ECOWAS Peace Fund,[7] which is currently underfunded.

- Collaborate with governments to strengthen social protection initiatives, such as skills acquisitions training and financing for local businesses, particularly those targeting women and youth.

- Alongside existing government efforts, finance climate adaptation projects to strengthen citizen resilience to adverse climate conditions and to create a conducive environment for businesses.

- Increase advocacy to ECOWAS to establish a framework that is in accordance with ongoing efforts of the African Continental Free Trade Area[8] to boost and strengthen long-term investments in trade and economic development.

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[6] ESF is a peace keeping force, which is a part of the larger Africa Standby force, and consists of military, law enforcement and civilian components that can be activated to meet the security challenges of the region.
[7] The ECOWAS Peace Fund was established to achieve ECOWAS' mandates that support activities and initiatives for conflict prevention, management, peace keeping, peace building and recovery.
[8] A free trade area that encompasses most of Africa, established in 2018.

- To prevent hostilities between local communities and extractive industries, the private sector should work with governments to ensure that their businesses adhere to the regulatory frameworks that protect the rights of citizens and the environment.

- Increase engagement with ECOWAS to review economic sanctions and border restrictions on a case-by-case basis in order to manage the impacts on local businesses and citizen wellbeing.

- Support opportunities for learning and exchange of best practices between businesses operating in the Sahel-Maghreb and those in other regions of the world that have experienced or are currently experiencing insecurity, coups, and complex humanitarian emergencies.

Closing Remarks

Regional knowledge sharing between West and North African countries can generate broader interests and political support to address the adverse human security challenges in both regions. The security challenges in the Maghreb are intertwined with the insecurity in the Sahel. Early warning and response systems and climate adaptation initiatives must be coordinated and ramped up in both regions. The new military junta alliance (AES) in the Sahel is presenting itself as a viable option to weak and ineffective civilian governments. There is an urgent need to rethink and reimagine security assistance in the Sahel, and this must include a governance approach that leverages local potential and knowledge. Participants were encouraged to continue the discussion through the Wilson Center's *Africa Up Close* blog platform.

Implementing Partners

The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding

Centering African knowledge and agency is key to building and sustaining peace in Africa. The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) is a network of 22 African policy, research, and academic organizations that works with the Wilson Center's Africa Program to attain the most appropriate, cohesive, and inclusive policy frameworks and approaches for achieving sustainable peace in Africa. Generously sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York since its establishment in 2011, the SVNP works to generate African knowledge to inform US and international peacebuilding policies on Africa; help build the next generation of African peacebuilders through its scholarship program; and create a pan-African network of African peacebuilding organizations, practitioners, and experts to collaborate and share knowledge, best practices, and lessons learned on peacebuilding in Africa.

The Sadeq Institute

Founded in 2011, The Sadeq Institute is the world's first public policy institute established in Tripoli, Libya. The institute is an independent, non-partisan organization, focusing on strategic issues in Libya, with a focus on security, governance, economic and foreign policy. Their mission is to illuminate the news on Libya through in-depth research, publications and thought-provoking discussions and events. The Sadeq Institute is a member of the Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding in Washington, DC.

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

Founded in 1998, WANEP places special focus on collaborative approaches to conflict prevention, and peacebuilding, working with diverse actors from civil society, governments, intergovernmental bodies, women groups, and other partners in a bid to establish a platform for dialogue, experience sharing and learning, thereby complementing efforts at ensuring sustainable peace and development in West Africa and beyond. Underlying its work is a commitment to professionalism and a dedication to a world of mutual respect, tolerance, and peace. WANEP is a member of the Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding in Washington, DC.

The Wilson Center

Chartered by Congress, the Wilson Center provides nonpartisan counsel and insights on global affairs to policymakers through deep research, impartial analysis, and independent scholarship. The Wilson Center brings fresh thinking and deep expertise to the most pressing policy challenges we face today. We convene scholars to create a global dialogue of ideas that Congress, the administration, and the international policy community can act on. In 2019, the Wilson Center was named the #1 regional studies think tank in the world.

The Africa Program

The Africa Program works to address the most critical issues facing Africa and US-Africa relations, build mutually beneficial US-Africa relations, and enhance knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States.

The Program achieves its mission through in-depth research and analyses, including our blog Africa Up Close, public discussion, working groups, and briefings that bring together policymakers, practitioners, and subject matter experts to analyze and offer practical options for tackling key challenges in Africa and in US-Africa relations.

The Africa Program focuses on four core issues:

i.   Good governance and leadership
ii.   Conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and security
iii. Trade, investment, and sustainable development
iv.   Africa's evolving role in the global arena

The Program maintains a cross-cutting focus on the roles of women, youth, and technology, which are critical to Africa's future: to supporting good governance, to securing peace, to mitigating poverty, and to assuring sustainable development.

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