



Dissecting the Alliance of Sahel States' Withdrawal from ECOWAS

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Abstract: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional body made up of 15 nations, founded in 1975, with eight of its members being French-speaking. It functions as a key forum for advancing economic cooperation, free movement, and peacekeeping across West Africa, similar to the European Union. ECOWAS has been instrumental in promoting regional integration and economic stability, while also playing a vital role in peace and security initiatives in the region. In recent years, however, political tensions have escalated. On September 16, 2023, the military-led governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger created the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in response to growing dissatisfaction with ECOWAS, particularly its perceived failure to effectively address security threats from jihadist groups. This led to their formal exit from ECOWAS on January 28, 2024, signaling a realignment of regional alliances and raising concerns about ECOWAS's future role in maintaining security and governance in West Africa. The move also highlights a push for closer cooperation among Sahelian countries as they confront shared security and economic issues. This briefing paper aims to examine the factors that led to their withdrawal and the impact of the Alliance of Sahel States' departure from ECOWAS.

KEYWORDS: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)



Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional bloc consisting of 15 countries, established in 1975, with eight of its members being French-speaking nations. It operates similarly to the European Union, serving as a significant regional organization in West Africa. The presidency of ECOWAS rotates among its member states, and currently, Nigeria, the region's primary economic force, is in leadership. The organization aims to promote regional collaboration and trade, allow for visa-free movement within the bloc, and improve living conditions while ensuring economic stability. Additionally, ECOWAS plays an essential role in peacekeeping in a region characterized by volatility and acts as a vital security ally for Western nations, including the United States (Akinwotu, 2024). In 2001, ECOWAS established a protocol promoting democracy and good governance, which sets out governance standards and enforces sanctions for non-compliance. This was notably applied in 2017 when ECOWAS intervened militarily to remove Gambian President Yahya Jammeh after he refused to accept electoral defeat (Liedholm Ndounou, 2024). On September 16, 2023, the military regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (L'Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) (Aljazeera 2023). This move followed a series of military coups in these nations and highlights their growing discontent with ECOWAS and its perceived failure to effectively combat security threats from jihadist groups in the region. Subsequently, on January 28, 2024, these three countries declared their immediate exit from ECOWAS (Bhattacharya, 2024). These Sahelian nations have several commonalities: they are former French colonies, landlocked, rank among the poorest globally, and face considerable pressures from cross-border armed factions, all while being governed by military rule (since 2020, 2022, and 2023, respectively) (Liedholm Ndounou, 2024). This briefing paper seeks to analyze the reasons behind their withdrawal and the consequences of the Alliance of Sahel States leaving ECOWAS. It also investigates the factors that influenced the decision of the three countries to withdraw from ECOWAS.



The Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

On September 16, 2023, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, forming the Alliance des États du Sahel. This new alliance aims to serve as a strategic partnership for collaboration among the member states. Although the charter emphasizes the collective defense of the populations within these three nations, it also proposes measures that go beyond basic cooperation, envisioning a confederal integration of the countries. This marks a notable departure from previous collaborations among these nations. The concepts of cooperation, mutual support, and coordination have historical roots, dating back to 1970, highlighted by the establishment of the Liptako-Gourma Region Integrated Development Authority formalized in a memorandum of understanding on December 3, 1970. A subsequent memorandum was signed on December 16, 2000, which replaced the earlier agreement (Bassou, 2024). The revised treaty for the Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma States, signed on January 24, 2017, further updated the 2000 accord. However, the recent text establishing the new alliance in September 2023 does not mention these prior treaties, suggesting a new beginning. What distinguishes the new charter from earlier initiatives is its heightened ambition. It seeks to move beyond the conventional focus on integrated development, pursuing deeper connections and even contemplating the potential for confederation (Bassou, 2024).

What influenced the decision of the three countries to withdraw?

The three nations that have exited ECOWAS---Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger---have been contending with significant political and security difficulties in recent years due to the emergence of Islamist militant groups in the Sahel, a semi-arid region across Africa. Groups such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISWAP, JNIM, and ISGS have attacked civilians, local security forces, and foreign troops, leading to thousands of fatalities and millions of displaced individuals. Additionally, these countries have undergone military coups that ousted elected leaders and suspended constitutional governance. Mali experienced two coups in 2020 and 2023, while Burkina Faso had one in 2022, and Niger faced a coup in 2023. These coups were fueled by public unrest, corruption, ethnic



conflict, and foreign interference. ECOWAS has been criticized for its ineffectiveness, being likened to "a toothless bulldog" in managing these crises. In response to these military takeovers, ECOWAS, under the leadership of Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu, has attempted to compel these regimes to transition back to civilian rule, conduct elections, and work together internationally to combat terrorism. Measures such as travel bans, asset freezes, and military intervention threats have been implemented. Furthermore, ECOWAS has supported the G5 Sahel force, a multinational effort comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, to confront extremist groups (Michael, 2024).

However, the military governments have rejected ECOWAS's demands, alleging that the bloc is swayed by external influences, notably France, the former colonial power in much of West Africa, and that it has betrayed its founding values. They perceive ECOWAS as a threat to both member states and their populations. France maintains around 5,000 troops in the Sahel through Operation Barkhane, aiding local forces against militants. The military regimes have also denounced ECOWAS for neglecting the root causes of their crises, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. They claim that ECOWAS has failed to support their fight against "terrorism and insecurity" and has enforced "illegal, illegitimate, inhumane, and irresponsible sanctions" that have worsened their conditions and uncertainty. They argue that the bloc has deviated from its original ideals and the essence of Pan-Africanism, reflecting a broader discontent with its conflict resolution strategies (Usman Adesoji, 2024). In September 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed their own coalition called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), further distancing themselves from France and other Western allies. They have also enhanced their ties with Russia, which has been providing military, economic, and diplomatic assistance. The three nations have indicated their aim to pursue their own development and security objectives based on principles of sovereignty, solidarity, and self-reliance. Despite Article 91 of ECOWAS's revised treaty, which stipulates that member states must provide one year's written notice before withdrawing from the bloc and that their membership only ceases if the notice period expires without withdrawal, the leaders of these three countries appear to have already disengaged from ECOWAS (Michael, 2024).



The ramifications of the Alliance of Sahel States' withdrawal from ECOWAS

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS is a significant setback for this regional bloc, which has long been viewed as a model of integration and collaboration in Africa. This exit diminishes ECOWAS in terms of its size, population, and economic impact, thereby weakening its credibility and effectiveness as a regional authority. It also creates divisions among the remaining 12 ECOWAS members, who may hold differing views and interests concerning how to address the situation of the departing nations (Michael, 2024). This departure further intensifies regional instability and security challenges, especially with the persistent threats of terrorism and violence. It risks undermining coordination and collaboration in fighting militancy, potentially allowing extremists to exploit the resulting fractures and gaps. Moreover, the situation affects the humanitarian landscape, as these three countries host millions of refugees and internally displaced individuals reliant on international assistance and protection. Additionally, this move may alter relationships with global partners, particularly France and other Western nations engaged in the Sahel, indicating a shift in the region's geopolitical landscape as these countries look to forge new alliances with powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey. This scenario raises crucial questions about the effectiveness of the African Union in managing regional blocs and addressing conflicts and crises across the continent (Michael, 2024).

On the other hand, it is clear from an economic perspective that Sahelian nations such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger depend more on regional trade than do coastal states like Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, or Nigeria. This is mainly because, in comparison to their coastal counterparts, Sahelian countries have undergone significantly less urbanization and industrialization. They often produce comparable agricultural goods, which are traded with other nations around the Gulf of Guinea rather than within them (Walther 2024). The free movement of people within West Africa is crucial to the livestock trade between the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea. According to Valerie C. Valerio et al. (2020), around two-thirds of cattle movements in the region that were recorded as of 2017



entailed crossing international borders, typically from the Sahel to important southern markets like Abidjan. Because human and economic activity in West Africa are highly regional, an alliance focused just on Sahel, like the recently established Alliance of Sahel States, cannot take the place of ECOWAS. Sahelian nations, which have few industries, are mostly dependent on imports from West Africa and international markets, particularly China (Walther 2015). A large share of the cement, petroleum, vehicles, textiles, wheat, rice, and plastics sold in Niamey, Ouagadougou, and Bamako comes from distant locations, often thousands of miles away. This dependency requires access to Gulf of Guinea ports. Coastal nations, however, also rely on imports from the Sahel, such as onions, and gain from import-export trade with landlocked Sahelian countries (Mensah 2023). Countries like Benin and Togo have become "entrepôt economies," as John Igué noted, where goods entering ports like Cotonou or Lomé are frequently re-exported illegally to countries with high tariffs or bans (Igué & Soule 2005). Previous border closures between Sahelian and coastal nations severely impacted the regional economy and livelihoods of farmers, herders, and urban populations who are highly dependent on trade (Golub, Ahmadou Mbaye, & Golubski, 2019). This interdependence between the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea is one reason ECOWAS was founded nearly 50 years ago in Abuja. Exiting ECOWAS is expected to have wide-ranging effects on the regional economy, especially on landlocked Sahelian nations, which will face rising import costs without access to ports like Cotonou, Lomé, Abidjan, or Tema (Walther 2024). Their exports will also suffer, making Sahelian goods less competitive both regionally (like onions and fish) and globally (such as gold and uranium). Informal trade, which already dominates the region, is likely to surge, especially along the Niger-Nigeria border.

Furthermore, leaving ECOWAS and its free movement protocol could devastate millions of Sahelians who live or wish to migrate to coastal cities. Migration within West Africa is largely intraregional, with most Sahelians moving to the Gulf of Guinea, while migrants from coastal countries tend to head for Europe or the United States. Sahelian traders have built extensive networks throughout West Africa, capitalizing on trade liberalization since the 1980s. These



networks, supported by Sahelian diasporas in cities like Abidjan and Lagos, would be heavily disrupted by new trade barriers and immigration policies (Walther 2024)

Conclusion

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS and the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represent a major change in West African geopolitics. This move stems from significant frustration with ECOWAS's perceived inability to effectively address urgent security issues, particularly the threats posed by jihadist insurgencies and the political instability resulting from military coups. The departure of these countries diminishes the strength, unity, and credibility of ECOWAS, posing serious economic, political, and security challenges for both the Sahelian nations and the wider West African region. The formation of AES signals a growing desire for sovereignty and self-determination, as these countries increasingly seek military and economic assistance from non-Western powers like Russia. Additionally, this withdrawal raises concerns about the future stability of the region, as the coordination needed to combat terrorism and address humanitarian crises may decline. Economically, the landlocked Sahelian countries, which rely heavily on regional trade and access to coastal ports, face the risk of isolation and higher costs, making them more susceptible to economic downturns.

Recommendations

Re-engagement and Dialogue: ECOWAS should resume diplomatic discussions with the AES nations, concentrating on their security concerns and reevaluating governance structures that may have pushed these countries away. Adopting a more flexible and inclusive strategy could help restore trust.

Strengthening Regional Security Cooperation: AES and ECOWAS should seek ways to collaborate on counterterrorism initiatives, despite their political differences. Joint security efforts could help mitigate the adverse effects of the Sahel split and curb the growth of militant groups.



Economic Integration Efforts: Both AES and ECOWAS must prioritize facilitating trade, particularly in essential sectors like livestock and agricultural products that are crucial for the economies of the Sahel. Addressing tariff barriers and improving access to coastal ports is vital for sustaining regional trade.

Humanitarian Support: International organizations and ECOWAS should continue delivering humanitarian aid and development support to the millions displaced in the Sahel, ensuring that political tensions do not exacerbate the humanitarian situation in the region.

Exploring New Alliances: ECOWAS may need to establish new partnerships and strengthen ties with external powers and other African blocs to offset the loss of these three countries and maintain regional stability. Similarly, AES should work on building relationships with the remaining West African nations to reduce economic and security risks.

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