JANUARY 2024

Senior Study Group for the Sahel

Final Report and Recommendations

United States Institute of Peace
Making Peace Possible

The United States Institute of Peace convened a bipartisan Senior Study Group in 2022, with consultations continuing through 2023, to critically assess the opportunities for peace, security, and economic development in the Sahel region of Africa. The group included and consulted with former high-level US, African, and European officials; prominent academics and researchers; and leading foreign policy analysts and experts. The study group's deliberations point toward a host of tangible actions that the United States can undertake in the region, including thwarting the expansion of terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, deterring military coups, countering the malign influence of external actors such as Russia, and fostering economic growth through investment in youth. This report presents the consensus findings of these discussions and is designed to inform the strategy and approaches of US and international partners in the Sahel.

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Senior Study Group for the Sahel

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Members of the Senior Study Group for the Sahel express their support for the general findings and recommendations the group reached but do not necessarily endorse every statement or judgment in the report. They participated in the study group in their personal capacities; the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers or of the United States Institute of Peace.

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Letter from the Chair

The work of the Senior Study Group for the Sahel convened by the United States Institute of Peace has involved weaving together the insights and experiences of 10 individuals who come from diverse backgrounds but who all share an abiding commitment to the region's well-being. My experience of having lived through a military coup while serving as the chief of staff to a democratically elected president in a key country of the Sahel—Mali—is but one piece of this multifaceted tapestry. Together, we have collaborated to devise innovative solutions aimed at refining and enhancing the effectiveness of US foreign policy in the Sahel, tailoring them to address the unique challenges faced by governments in the region.

This report presents the study group's findings and recommendations. The latter are designed to be actionable, grounded in real-life experiences, and framed with an understanding of the constraints within which the US government works. At the same time, our recommendations are intended to encourage a change in US policy toward the region, a change that involves refocusing US attention and ambitions and working in partnership with local, regional, and international actors while not losing sight of core US interests.

Many members of the study group have emphasized the importance of genuine partnerships in the region, stressing that they can bring added value only when the partners address issues as they really are, not as they may look from outside the Sahel, a vantage point that often yields misunderstandings of unique contexts. Collaboration should be built on mutual respect, understanding, and a clear recognition of the realities faced by the countries of the Sahel.

This report argues that the Sahel is more important to the United States than is generally recognized within the United States and that the United States has the opportunity to play a more positive role there than is generally believed within the Sahel. While some skeptics, pointing to the

region's tumultuous political landscape, security concerns, and geographical remoteness from the United States, question the wisdom of US engagement, the members of the study group are steadfast in our conviction that a deeper and broader engagement will benefit both the United States and the Sahel. We see the United States as a pivotal force capable of driving transformative change in the region. A vigorous US commitment to the Sahel will not only safeguard American interests and bolster its geopolitical position but also enhance its global stature and influence.

Our deliberations point toward a host of tangible actions that the United States can undertake. These range from thwarting the expansion of terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, to deterring military coups and countering the malign influence of external actors such as Russia, to fostering economic growth through investment in youth. These endeavors, collectively, also have the potential to reduce the pressures that drive illegal migration. Achieving these objectives, however, calls for firm commitment, strategic clarity and consistency, and unwavering political will at the highest levels. Without a concerted effort within the US government to articulate the objectives just described, engagement in the Sahel will remain suboptimal.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the members of the Senior Study Group for the Sahel for their expertise and commitment, to the study group's research team and secretariat for their diligence and dedication, and to the leadership of the United States Institute of Peace for its invaluable and unswerving support. I would also like to express my thanks to all those individuals the study group consulted. Their diverse perspectives and backgrounds—from current and former US and foreign officials to members of nongovernmental organizations, business representatives, and scholars—enriched our understanding and helped shape our recommendations.

I urge both Congress and the administration to study this report with the seriousness it warrants and to translate its recommendations into decisive action. This report is a testament to the power of bipartisan collaboration. While it does not capture the full breadth of views expressed during the study group's discussions, and although no member may endorse every argument in isolation, the report is a consensus-driven blueprint that, we believe, can garner widespread support among policymakers and practitioners within both the United States and the Sahel.

Ambassador Kamissa Camara
Chair, Senior Study Group for the Sahel

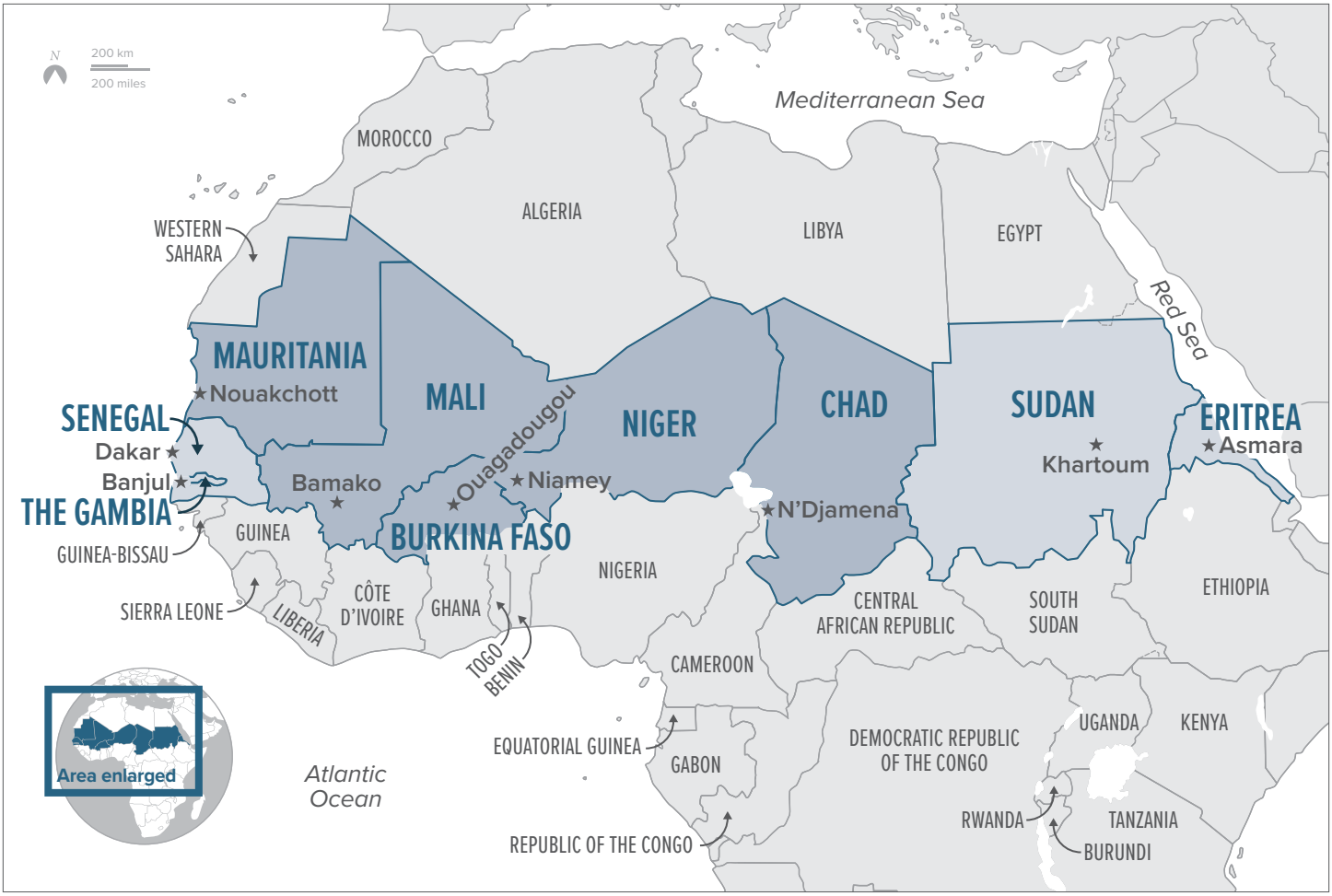
Executive Summary

The United States has not traditionally viewed the Sahel as a region of vital interest, whether in terms of security or from an economic or business perspective. This has led to a pattern of reactive involvement shaped by the circumstances of specific events rather than proactive commitments. This pattern reveals the lack of a comprehensive strategy for the volatile Western Sahel region, which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. In April 2022, President Joe Biden announced that the US government would advance the "U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability" in coastal West Africa by prioritizing a partnership with Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. This policy was formulated to prevent Sahelian terrorism from expanding its reach rather than as a reflection of deep-seated interests in the Sahel itself.

This inattention is unwise, given the Sahel's strategic location between the Maghreb and the Southern Sahara, the presence of terrorist factions linked to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, the region's economic potential, and the major immigration transit routes to Europe and South America that originate there. The Sahel is also inextricably linked to numerous pressing global challenges, including climate change, great power rivalry, and the tug-of-war between democratic governance and authoritarianism. Moreover, there is more at stake here than the immediate challenges: the Sahel's future is certain to be dynamic and has the potential to be prosperous. The region is undergoing one of the world's most rapid population surges; its expansive fertile lands are ripe for innovative, sustainable agriculture; the sun-soaked terrain beckons for lucrative solar energy ventures that can usher in energy autonomy; and the region stands on the brink of a technological revolution powered by increasing mobile connectivity and digital access.

The United States has an opportunity: by engaging now, it can guide this explosive growth in a positive direction that benefits both the people of the Sahel and the United States and its African allies. Ignoring this potential and focusing solely on political volatility and security challenges risks,

The Sahel



Source: Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

Note: Although the geographic Sahel stretches from the western shore of Senegal to the eastern coast of Eritrea, the study group focused chiefly on the countries in the west and center of this area: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

paradoxically, exacerbating instability in the Sahel and increasing the danger that it will destabilize coastal West Africa.

In order to critically assess opportunities for peace, security, and economic development in the Sahel, the United States Institute of Peace convened a bipartisan Senior Study Group made up of former high-level US, African, and European officials; prominent academics and researchers; and leading foreign policy analysts and experts. Between May and December 2022, the 10-member study group held discussions and formulated recommendations that offer strategic avenues for meaningful US engagement. Consultations continued through 2023. Although the geographic Sahel stretches from the western shore of Senegal to the eastern coast of Eritrea, the study group focused chiefly on the countries in the west and center of this area: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (see map). This report presents the consensus findings of these discussions and is designed to inform the strategy and approaches of US and international partners in the Sahel.

The study group identified four emerging trends that should help guide long-term US and multilateral policy in the Sahel:

- The increasing influence and presence of external powers in the Sahel, particularly China and Russia, and the diminishing role played by France
- The growing presence of regional middle powers, most notably, Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey
- An astonishingly rapid and substantial growth in population that has created a potentially destabilizing "youth bulge"
- Intensifying threats to agricultural production and food security created by armed conflict, terrorism, and the effects of climate change

The current US approach—which is focused on containing the Sahel's security crises and preventing them from spilling over into coastal West Africa—will be largely inadequate for addressing the challenges presented by these trends. As the root causes of conflict and instability go unaddressed, cycles of violence are bound to continue, risking a dramatic international expansion and strengthening of jihadist groups in the Sahel. Containment and disengagement by the United States and its Western allies can lead to unforeseen consequences, such as vast stretches of territory falling under the control of violent extremist organizations in a region highly interconnected socially, economically, and culturally. This would threaten Sahelian partners, citizens, and US interests alike and would reinforce the devastating cycles of violence and impunity.

The recent spate of military coups and the increasingly conspicuous Russian presence in the region must not be ignored, but these dangers can best be tackled over the long term by devising a comprehensive approach that addresses underlying causes of current and future regional insecurity while recognizing Sahelian agency and empowering the people of the Sahel, not least the youth.

The study group developed two sets of recommendations for US policymakers. The first set consists of steps that the US government should take to create a policymaking and implementation apparatus with which the United States can engage the Sahel strategically and effectively. Toward this end, the United States should position itself to display robust diplomatic leadership in the region and resolve the structural challenges to implementing a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach.

The second set of recommendations calls for the US government to develop a strategy to work in partnership with local, national, and regional actors. Across much of the region—and in contrast to European countries dealing with colonial legacies—the United States continues to be regarded as a trustworthy actor that can positively influence political processes, support state and regional institutions, advance reform, and spur investment and economic growth. The United States should harness its comparative advantages to develop and leverage partnerships in specific areas. More specifically, the United States should take full advantage of its credibility and pursue an innovative, five-pronged agenda:

- Provide security support while recognizing Sahelian agency and crafting an independent US strategic approach.

- Promote peace, stability, and democracy by deterring coups, facilitating peace talks, and supporting democratic governance.

- Work multilaterally by partnering with regional organizations and enhancing cooperation between the Sahel and the Maghreb.

- Promote human security by prioritizing human rights, civilian protection, and food security.

- Foster economic growth by investing in youth.

These initiatives, when combined, create a comprehensive strategy that will be more effective than any single approach. Emphasizing democratic governance and promoting technical skills among the region's youth directly addresses the future of the Sahel. Ensuring food security is vital for both stability and prosperity. Strengthening economic ties between the Sahel and the Maghreb will open up new avenues for growth and development. Meanwhile, countering military coups and supporting regional security directly contribute to a more stable political landscape. The United States' involvement in peace talks, together with its readiness to address humanitarian needs, would help to signal a pragmatic and sincere commitment to the Sahel.

Implementing this strategy will require patience. While some results may be seen in the short term, especially through the deterrence of military coups, more profound changes in the region will evolve more gradually. Success should be gauged in a variety of ways, but above all in tangible improvements in the lives of the Sahel's people. With this strategy, the United States can help the Sahel to unlock its potential while furthering US strategic interests in the region.

A Region Wracked by Instability

The geographic Sahel forms a 3,730-mile (6,000-kilometer) corridor across Africa, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea and the Maghreb to sub-Saharan Africa.[1] Since the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 and the ensuing proliferation of weapons and armed fighters throughout the region, the countries that make up the Western Sahel—Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—together with their neighbor to the east, Chad, have been wracked by instability. Cross-border terrorism, a series of military coups, and communal violence have been the most visible signs of this volatility, but in the background are longer-term threats posed by stark environmental challenges and a demographic explosion.

The impact of this volatile combination of destabilizing factors will be felt not only within the Sahel. Indeed, the region is inextricably linked to global issues that are of pressing concern to the United States—issues such as the expanding influence and presence of Russia and China in the Global South, climate change, transnational terrorism, mass migration, and the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.

For over two decades, the United States has made substantial investments in the Sahel in the form of humanitarian aid, food assistance, and other nonmilitary support. Yet, since 2011, following the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and the influx of terrorist groups in the Sahel, existing US policy instruments have struggled to keep pace with the rapidly evolving political and security dynamics of the region. As a result, actions have often been reactive, spurred by specific incidents, rather than being founded on proactive strategies explicitly focusing on the region. Illustrating this reactive approach is President Joe Biden's partnership with five coastal West African nations—Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo—under the Global Fragility Act's Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, which was announced in April 2022. This policy seems more tailored to curbing the expansion of Sahelian terrorism than addressing the core challenges of the Sahel.



Nigerien police officers sit outside the customs offices in Niamey, Niger, on August 21, 2023. (Photo by Sam Mednick/AP)

Inconsistencies have marked US policy in the region, as demonstrated by Washington's strong condemnation of the July 2023 military coup in Niger, which stands in stark contrast to its muted response to previous coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali. Ambassador Victoria Nuland, the acting deputy secretary of state, visited the capital city of Niamey in August 2023, signaling a robust US military and strategic interest in preserving its presence there, including the 1,100 US troops and the two drone bases located close to the capital and in Agadez in northern Niger.[2] This interest has not been dented by the country's unconstitutional change of government. Shortly after Nuland's visit, the United States appointed a new ambassador to Niger and opted to keep its embassy operational.[3]

The United States has had significant strategic and military interests in Niger since 2002, aligning with the post-9/11 war on terror. The drone base in Agadez has served as an indispensable launchpad for the majority of US intelligence and surveillance operations across West Africa. Within days of the July 2023 military takeover, however, the United States had suspended both security cooperation and counterterrorism operations in Niger, a situation that remains unchanged as of December 2023.[4] Characteristically cautious in its response, the United States refrained from officially designating the

July 2023 military takeover as a "coup" until October. US troops have been consolidated in Agadez, and drone flights (for force protection purposes) resumed in mid-September, highlighting the United States' strategic approach to the situation in Niger.[5] Were the United States forced to abandon its base in Agadez, the results could be a surge in jihadist groups and a rise in influence for the Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenary group—outcomes Washington aims to avoid.

These developments have prompted questions about the consistency of US policy in the region and the nature of its long-term goals in the Sahel. This situation has also sparked a debate about whether US policy should be driven solely by immediate security and geopolitical interests or if a more comprehensive and cohesive strategy should be pursued.

A reactive, inconsistent, and inattentive approach to the fragility and instability of the Western Sahel makes it more likely that a massive, ungoverned regional vacuum will form and will be filled by violent extremist groups and other predatory nonstate actors. Signs of this phenomenon are already emerging in a number of countries, with communities being internally displaced, terrorist incidents increasing in number, and governments tottering or being overthrown.

Between 2020 and 2023, Burkina Faso and Mali each experienced two military coups, while Niger experienced one failed coup attempt and one successful coup by members of its military. In Chad, the death in battle of President Idriss Déby led to an unconstitutional change of government in May 2021—an event that many observers consider a coup. Mauritania's president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, was elected to office in 2019, only months after retiring as an army general and after having co-led two coups in 2005 and 2008. By November 2023, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger were all led by former and current military officers. The Sahel's southwestern neighbor, Guinea, also experienced a military coup in 2021, with Conakry's transitional government establishing a solid collaborative alliance with its counterparts in Bamako and Ouagadougou.

A new generation of military leaders has emerged in Burkina Faso and Mali, transforming the region's geopolitical landscape with polarizing diplomatic moves and far-reaching policy implications. A decade ago, Western partners' commitment to the Sahel was at an all-time high, with France launching Operation Serval in 2013 to assist the Malian government in defending and retaking Mali's northern regions from terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda. But the military leaders who have come to power in recent years have shifted the region's geopolitical trajectory. They first broke decade-long military agreements with France, which had allowed the presence of French troops in Burkina Faso and Mali, forcing the strategic repositioning of the former colonial power and traditional strategic partner. Subsequently, with Mali's decision in late 2021 to request help from the private but state-funded Wagner Group in the fight against terrorism, the country forfeited the security assistance of most of its Western allies—including Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom—engaged under the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In June 2023, the military leaders of Mali asked for the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping forces, a request that the UN Security Council swiftly approved.[6]

For an extended period . . . deferring to France hindered the United States from effectively positioning itself in a constructive manner concerning the countries of the Sahel.

Until recently, the United States closely collaborated with France (and other European partners) in numerous counterterrorism actions in the Sahel. Operation Barkhane, established in 2014, was a French-led cross-border counterterrorism operation based in Chad, and the United States provided critical support in logistics, reconnaissance, and intelligence sharing.[7] This partnership effectively aligned the US government's policy and strategic interests with those of its long-standing European ally. For an extended period, however, deferring to France hindered the United States from effectively positioning itself in a constructive manner concerning the countries of the Sahel. France formally terminated Operation Barkhane in November 2022, following explicit requests to do so from the juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. As of this writing, the junta in Niger has severed military agreements with France, but France still has 1,500 troops in Niger. The United States, as noted, has 1,100 military personnel there. Clearly, the United States is at a pivotal moment regarding the nature of its future involvement in the Sahel.

Western intervention and support for counterterrorist operations, it is important to recognize, have been largely ineffective. Indeed, principally because of the failure of France's counterterrorism strategy and the human rights violations associated with those efforts, anti-Western sentiments and narratives have gained significant traction in the Sahel in recent years. The Western approach to security provision in the Sahel has been shortsighted and unproductive, focused on hard power stabilization with limited attention to the local drivers of conflict and limited enduring impact on jihadist terrorist activity.

According to the 2023 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel is home to the world's fastest-growing and most deadly multidimensional insurgencies, and Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are among the top 10 countries most impacted by terrorism.[8] In 2019, UN secretary-general António Guterres warned, "We are losing ground in the face of violence in the Western Sahel."[9] Despite the French-led military interventions, terrorist groups have expanded in Mali and have spread rapidly to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger; violence related to this expansion has driven a staggering increase in the region's number of displaced persons—from 217,000 in 2013 to 4.2 million in 2023.[10] Compounding this dire humanitarian crisis, climate change, conflict, and insecurity have created a food crisis that has left 10 million people in the region at risk of hunger.[11]

In 2014, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger formed the G5 Sahel coalition—which the United States, alongside European and other international partners, supported financially and politically, including through its embassy in Nouakchott—to collectively curtail the terrorist threat in border zones while improving the capacity of their weaker national armies.[12] G5 Sahel countries contributed 5,000 military personnel, border patrol officers, police officers, and gendarmerie, but these were spread over 5 million square kilometers. Efforts to compensate for operational difficulties with the use of US special operations forces and drones have had limited impact. The militants

have successfully embedded themselves within the region's social fabric and capitalized on the tactical mistakes made by national and international armies alike. The G5 Sahel also has been severely undermined since Mali's withdrawal from the coalition in 2022.

Human rights abuses have become an alarming byproduct of counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. Since 2012, there has been a significant surge in unlawful killings by the security forces of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger committed during counterterrorism operations.[13] Between 2021 and 2023, civilian massacres have occurred in all three countries. The most deadly occurred in Moura, a town in central Mali, in March 2022. According to a UN report, 500 civilians were killed in Moura in an operation that involved forces from the Wagner Group.[14] Since its formation in 2014, the Wagner Group has aided controversial regimes globally, including three in and around the Sahel: Libya, the Central African Republic, and, more recently, Mali. In August 2023, the military junta in Niger also asked for the Wagner Group's help in anticipation of military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), prompting Secretary of State Antony Blinken to say that the Wagner Group was "taking advantage" of instability in Niger.[15]

It is often assumed that Niger faces fewer insurgency challenges than its neighbors Burkina Faso and Mali. In fact, Niger's challenges are equal to if not greater than those of its fellow Western Sahelian states. Human rights abuses perpetrated by the Niger army have contributed to the rise of extremism on Nigerien soil, a trend that has continued since the July 2023 military coup. In addition, the country's geographic position, with Nigeria to its south, has made it vulnerable to the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin. Niger has also been the target of the Sahelian insurgency led by two jihadist groups—the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims—in the Liptako-Gourma area that encompasses parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

International strategies to address political instability, poor governance, socioeconomic crises, and violence in the Sahel have often been ill-defined and ineffective. Although developed by the world's preeminent multilateral organizations (among them the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Bank), they have been uncoordinated and unable to cope with the stark realities of the region. Critics have pointed out that they were formulated with little or no input from local actors.[16] Such failings, together with the mixed record of international military support to combat the terrorist threat, have led governments in the Western Sahel, especially those that came to power through military coups, to reassess which of the leading external actors in the region—China, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, among others—can best provide the support the region needs. This process of reevaluating security partners has been justified by the new military leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger as an effort to reclaim agency and restore sovereignty after years of French intervention that extended into the countries' political affairs.

Whatever the amount and source of external support they receive, political leaders in the Sahel must use it to tackle three critical problems that are deeply interconnected with instability and violence in the Sahel: the inability of governments to provide their citizens with essential resources and services, prevailing conditions of insecurity, and persistently low levels of human development.

Some of the dangers facing the Sahel are also opportunities . . . to nurture a more peaceful and prosperous region [and] a valuable economic partner.

The interplay of this trio has the potential not only to exacerbate instability within the Sahel but also to export it. For instance, poorly performing economies and limited employment opportunities, coupled with a rapidly expanding and predominantly youthful population, could continue to drive high recruitment into extremist organizations, strengthen illicit trade networks, and escalate intra-Africa and illegal migration toward Europe.[17]

Yet, seen in a different light, some of the dangers facing the Sahel are also opportunities—opportunities to nurture a more peaceful and prosperous region that could contribute to, rather than undermine, the stability of its neighbors and could prove a valuable economic partner for the United States. For instance, the population surge might produce a generation of unemployed and disaffected youth, but it might instead create an energetic and ambitious workforce that can drive economic growth. The United States, the study group believes, has an opportunity: by engaging now, it can guide this explosive growth in a positive direction. The Sahel stands on the brink of a tech revolution powered by increasing mobile connectivity and digital access. As a world leader in technology, the United States can sculpt this emerging digital landscape. The vast, sun-soaked terrains of the Sahel beckon solar energy ventures, promising a path to regional energy autonomy and lucrative investment avenues for US enterprises. Furthermore, the expansive fertile lands of the Sahel are ripe for innovative, sustainable agriculture that can thrive despite the impending challenges of climate change. By championing agrotech collaborations, the United States can fortify global food security and unlock new economic potential that could also benefit US investors and businesses. Moreover, deepening US engagement in the Sahel can act as a conduit for broader African alliances, including with the countries of the Maghreb.

Seizing these opportunities necessitates a proactive and enduring commitment from the United States and a comprehensive strategy for the region that is attuned to the major trends shaping the Sahel now and into the future. It is to the task of identifying these trends that this report now turns.

Four Emerging Trends

The study group identified four trends in the Western Sahel that are likely to define its near and mid-term future. These trends affect different facets of life in the region—security, politics, the economy, demography, and the environment—but all are interconnected in various ways. Within the US government, the focus on the Sahel since the early 2000s has primarily been driven by security concerns, influenced by the policies stemming from the war on terror.[18] But if US policymakers are now to develop an effective, forward-looking strategy for the region, they will need to take into account all four of the trends discussed below.

An Arena for Great Power Competition

The Sahel has become an increasingly active arena for competition among global powers for direct and indirect influence over the region's counterterrorism efforts, government institutions, governance norms, and technological infrastructures, as well as for access to natural resources, markets, and policymakers. In this competition, the United States is losing ground to its rivals.

As noted in the preceding section, whereas the United States and its Western allies—particularly France—once led the international community in terms of providing external military support for counterterrorism efforts, in recent years, the United States' great power rivals have entered the Sahelian security space. This move should be seen not so much as displacing US and French leadership but more as entering a partial vacuum created by the failure of Western efforts. In 2021, many observers assumed that the deployment of the Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenary group into Mali was intended to disrupt French leadership and European strategies in the Sahel. Yet the Wagner Group entered an environment where those strategies had failed after a decade-long investment in the security sector. The series of military coups that took place in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2020 and 2023 undermined the credibility and track record of international



People carry a Russian flag in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on October 2, 2022, two days after a military coup. Russia has provided diplomatic legitimacy to coup regimes in Burkina Faso and Mali, giving them an international platform at the 2023 Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum. (Photo by Sophie Garcia/AP)

support to Sahelian militaries, given that Western assistance had neither improved security in the region nor produced effective and accountable militaries.

Russia, particularly during the era of the Soviet Union, has maintained long-standing diplomatic relationships with various African states. Following their independence from France in the early 1960s, many Sahelian countries, such as Burkina Faso and Mali, embraced communist policies that reflected their diplomatic and ideological alignments with the Soviet Union. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, Sahel countries more clearly aligned themselves with Western nations, coinciding with opening up their political landscape to multiparty systems. Since 2020, as military coups have created governments prepared to look elsewhere than to the West for security partners, Russia's relationship with Sahelian states has been dominated by arms sales, training of security forces, disinformation campaigns to undermine support for democracy, and political interventions that deepen violence and corruption while bolstering authoritarian governance. The Wagner Group, often regarded as Russia's clandestine military force, has exploited client states that trade access to their natural resources in return for security services—rendered in the form of arms, military equipment, and support for military operations. Russia has also provided diplomatic

legitimacy to regimes in Burkina Faso and Mali by giving them an international platform alongside democratically elected governments at the 2023 Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum.

The Kremlin has provided this multifaceted assistance as part of its efforts to bolster its international standing. Following Russia's widely criticized annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which led to its estrangement from the West, Russia has been looking for new international partners. Russia's assertive foreign policy engagements in Sahelian countries coincide with a period in which France is facing calls to terminate its remaining military cooperation in the region, and coup-installed military governments are solidifying their positions. In the Sahel, as in other parts of the world, President Vladimir Putin is maneuvering to put Russia in a position to be a leader of a potential post-liberal world order.

China's influence in the Sahel has grown significantly over the past decade, surpassing even the expanding presence of Russia. China's initial foray into the region's security landscape was marked by its deployment of peacekeepers to the MINUSMA (as noted earlier), which has since concluded. Subsequently, Beijing bolstered its security ties by providing various forms of military assistance, including a notable contribution of $45.6 million to the G5 Sahel Joint Force for security and counterterrorism operations.[19] While security engagement in the Sahel is a growing focus for China, it remains subordinate to the country's economic and diplomatic pursuits. The primary catalyst for China's involvement in the region is its economic interests, particularly access to the Sahel's abundant natural resources, which include gold, iron ore, crude oil, phosphates, uranium, manganese, and bauxite. Beijing's strategy in the security sector is intrinsically tied to its economic objectives. It aims to fortify and protect China's economic investments, mainly through military exchange programs, training, contributions to UN missions, and donations to the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Additionally, bilateral discussions encompassing trade, peace, and security are conducted through platforms such as the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation.

China's presence has been widely praised by Sahelian governments, which welcome Chinese investment and other forms of support and which see China as a respectful partner that does not interfere in their affairs. Russia's growing presence, however, has not escaped criticism. Russian actors, and the Wagner Group in particular, continue to be implicated in grave human rights abuses under the guise of counterterrorism operations. The March 2022 Moura massacre in central Mali is, to date, the most significant violation attributed to the Wagner Group in the Sahel, but it has been followed by other atrocities. For instance, Malian witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch have described Wagner operatives participating in beatings and summary executions of several dozen civilians in Mali's central region since December 2022.[20] Similar incidents seem certain to unfold elsewhere in the region, likely drawing further condemnation from local communities. Indeed, there is a growing distrust of foreign entities among the Sahel's populace. Many Sahelians feel that geopolitical ambitions are overshadowing and sidelining the genuine needs and aspirations of the local populations.

This growing wariness presents the United States with an opportunity to separate itself from other major powers active in the Sahel—and from the failure of France's counterterrorism strategy—by

focusing less on short-term gains in security-related areas and more on the underlying governance and policy challenges that drive regional insecurity. As suggested later in this report, Washington should adopt a selective, tailored approach that includes increased support for human rights and political dialogue while emphasizing Sahel-led cooperation in security sector reform, community engagement, and counter-radicalization efforts. Such an approach, if supported by adequate and sustainable human and financial resources, is likely to yield sustainable results and minimize the risks of unintended consequences.

The Growing Presence of Neighboring Middle Powers

The competition for influence in the Sahel among foreign powers is not limited to the global heavyweights. Neighboring powers are also vying for influence in economic, security, and other areas.

In recent years, both Algeria and Morocco have intensified their focus on the Sahel, acutely aware of the transboundary problems—including drug trafficking, migration, and a surge in extremism—that span and impact both the Sahel and the Maghreb. Algeria, with its significant diplomatic influence, robust military capabilities, and extensive experience in counterterrorism, plays a pivotal role in the Sahel's strategic landscape. The Sahel has emerged as one of Algeria's main foreign policy imperatives. Drawing from its battles against extremist elements domestically, especially during the Algerian civil war (1991–2002), Algeria offers invaluable insights and strategies that can be applied to the broader Sahelian challenges. This experience and expertise, combined with Algeria's deep-rooted relationships with Sahelian nations and its proactive participation in regional initiatives, position it as a pivotal mediator and adviser, capable of helping to guide the region through political and security quandaries and toward stability and peace.[21]

Concurrently, Morocco has carved out its own niche in the Sahel. The country has invested in key sectors, including farming, fertilizers, telecommunications, and banking. Beyond commerce, Morocco's engagement in the Sahel has diversified to foster military training collaborations with Sahelian forces, spearhead religious diplomacy, and promote cultural and educational interchanges.

However, it is important to underscore that the human rights records of both Morocco and Algeria, especially in dealing with African migrants—including those from the Sahel—have been subject to criticism. Reports of mistreatment, forced deportations, and discriminatory practices have raised concerns among human rights advocates and could undermine the trust and collaboration needed for partnerships with their Sahelian neighbors.[22]

Turkey, in a move to augment its geopolitical influence in Africa, has adeptly harnessed soft power to cultivate deeper connections with Sahel states.[23] Ankara's strategic engagement in the region is evident in its assertive diplomatic expansion. The opening of new embassies in Mali (2010), Burkina Faso (2012), and Niger (2012) shows its intent to nurture close bilateral ties. Alongside these diplomatic endeavors, Turkey has prioritized enhancing air connectivity. By introducing direct flights via its flagship carrier, Turkish Airlines, connecting major Turkish cities with capitals in the Sahel, it is not only boosting tourism and trade but also demonstrating burgeoning ties between the regions. Moreover,

The Sahel's strategic importance continues to be a magnet for various neighboring and nearby actors, each employing a blend of diplomacy, economic muscle, and soft power.

Turkey's commitment to the Sahel's development is underscored by significant investments in health projects, such as the construction of hospitals in the capital cities of Mali (2018) and Niger (2019).

The region has also emerged as an arena where existing tensions between rising powers—notably, Turkey and Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have fueled competition for influence. For instance, Turkey has been actively involved in providing humanitarian aid, weapons, and military training to countries of the Sahel, while the UAE has focused on investing in infrastructure and economic development projects, while also providing military training and materiel to countries across the Sahel. These divergent strategies and the competing support for actors in the region contribute to the complex dynamics of Sahel geopolitics.[24]

At the same time, other Gulf countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have been proactive in the Sahel, employing their own brands of soft power. Their influence is palpable in the realm of education, with initiatives such as the Qatar Foundation working to enhance literacy and provide better-quality education. The religious fabric of the Sahel has also been enriched by these Gulf states, which have funded mosques and other religious centers that strengthen cultural and religious ties. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has played a leading part in offering Islamic education and scholarship programs for Sahelian students. Economically, the Sahel has benefited from the robust engagements of both Qatar and the UAE. Their investments span various sectors and include endeavors such as the UAE's $4.5 billion commitment to clean energy projects in Africa, with a focus on the Sahel demonstrating a readiness to help fund the Sahel's sustainable development.[25]

In essence, the Sahel's strategic importance continues to be a magnet for various neighboring and nearby actors, each employing a blend of diplomacy, economic muscle, and soft power to carve out its niche and further its geopolitical aims.

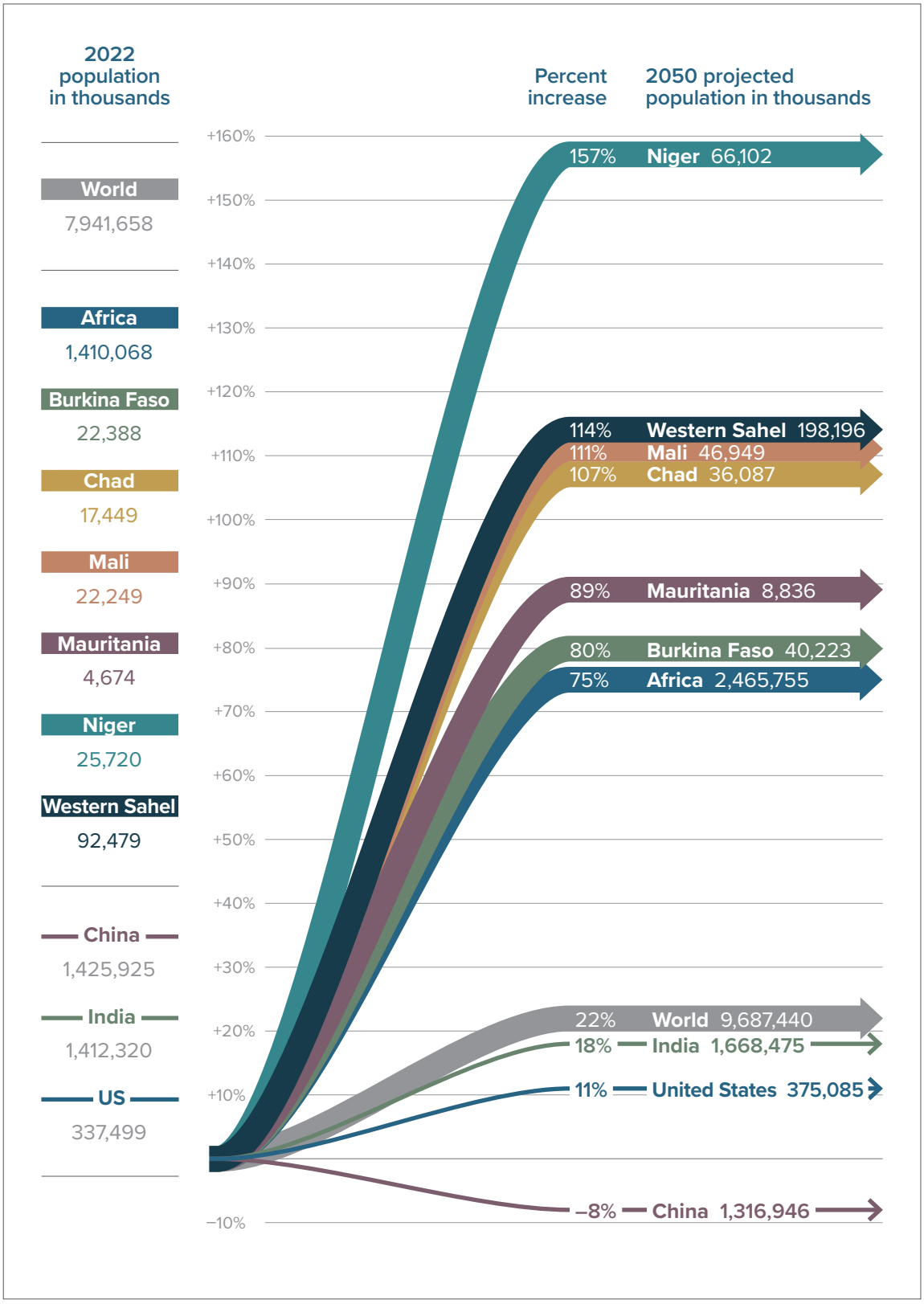
A Ticking Demographic Time Bomb

The Sahel is currently facing a rapid and exponential increase in its population that will leave it with a pronounced "youth bulge." This dramatic shift in the size and makeup of the region's population demands careful attention and long-term strategic planning.

According to data from the United Nations Population Division, the collective population of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, is projected to grow by a remarkable 114 percent between 2022 and 2050 (see figure 1 on page 22).[26] The current population of 92.5 million will rocket to 198.2 million. Among these five countries, Niger is expected to exhibit the fastest rate of population growth, while Burkina Faso's growth is projected to be comparatively slower, with an increase of 80 percent by 2050.

FIGURE 1.

Projected population growth in the Western Sahel, 2022–2050



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022*, https://population.un.org/wpp/.

This rapid growth in the Sahel is part of a broader trend observed across the African continent. Africa's population is projected to surge by just over 1 billion people by 2050, a rise of 75 percent, surpassing proportional changes in other regions of the world and accounting for more than half of the global increase.[27] By 2050, the continent's working-age population will exceed 1.5 billion—larger than India's 1.1 billion and China's 855 million.[28]

Africa currently has the world's youngest population: roughly two of every three of the continent's inhabitants are below the age of 30. The youth bulge of the five countries in the Western Sahel is even more pronounced—74 percent of the population is under the age of 30 (see figure 2 on page 35). Although this percentage is expected to fall slightly by 2050, to 66 percent, the preponderance of young people will remain a potentially destabilizing factor in the Sahel.[29]

This rapid population growth presents both opportunities—creating an enormous workforce that could drive substantial economic growth and a significant consumer base that will create massive demand for goods and services—and challenges. Foremost among the latter are the following:

- *Economic challenges.* The Sahel already faces strong economic difficulties, including high poverty rates and limited job opportunities. Rapid population growth will further strain the region's economies, making it more difficult to provide adequate employment, education, health care, and basic services. The dearth of these is likely to exacerbate economic inequality and other disparities and fuel social unrest.

- *Threats to food security and agriculture.* The Sahel is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and suffers from recurrent droughts. The region's population surge will increase already strained agricultural resources and food production. Increased demand for food and climate-related challenges pose significant risks to food security in the region. Efforts to improve agricultural productivity and adapt to climate change should be a primary objective of any strategy to address these problems.

- *Migration and displacement.* A swift increase in the size of the population will contribute to increased migration both within the region and outside it, with large numbers heading toward other parts of Africa or Europe. Factors such as limited economic opportunities, environmental degradation, and conflicts over resources may drive individuals and communities to seek better prospects and a more secure environment elsewhere. Substantial internal displacement and migration flows can be expected to complicate a range of associated socioeconomic and political challenges.

- *Security challenges.* Population growth, resource scarcity, and socioeconomic pressures are likely to intensify insecurity within the Sahel. High youth unemployment rates and a lack of economic opportunities may increase the vulnerability of young people to recruitment by extremist groups. As resource competition intensifies, tensions are likely to rise among ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups and may result in outbreaks of violent conflict.

- *Pressure on resources.* The population growth in the Sahel puts immense pressure on limited resources such as water, land, and food. Increasing demand is likely to generate conflicts over access and distribution, exacerbating existing tensions and creating new threats to stability in the region.

Addressing the implications of rapid population growth in the Sahel requires multiple actors—governments, regional organizations, and international partners—to work together on multiple fronts: promoting sustainable development, creating employment opportunities for youth, improving food security, strengthening governance, promoting social cohesion, and building resilience to the impacts of climate change. Whether such a collective and multifaceted response is achievable, however, is unclear, given the varied interests and differing priorities among the numerous actors and the sheer scale of the challenges.

A Gathering Storm of Environmental Challenges

Projected climate change scenarios depict a bleak future for the Sahel. While the global average temperature is expected to increase by 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2080, the Sahel's temperatures are anticipated to rise by 2.5 degrees Celsius in the same time frame.[30] The region is not only bracing for intensified heat waves but also facing the looming threats of recurring droughts and catastrophic floods.[31] While Sahel communities have historically displayed resilience in the face of environmental challenges, the combination of shifting economic, political, and social dynamics with accelerating environmental changes amplifies the potential risks local populations face.

The Sahel grapples with a precarious dependency on climate-sensitive agricultural livelihoods. A staggering 80 percent of the population relies on agriculture for sustenance, a figure even higher than Africa's overall 75 percent.[32] The use of land and water resources for agriculture, if unchecked, may lead to their rapid depletion. Compounding the problem is the danger that the interplay of conflict and climate variability will disrupt agricultural production, causing food prices to soar and food security to plummet. Such a dire situation not only poses grave threats to individual and community well-being but also elevates the risk of famines. For instance, in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region of Mali, over 80 percent of arable land in more than 100 villages is now impossible to farm due to conflict-driven destruction and displacement. Similarly, in Burkina Faso's Yatenga and Loroum provinces, conflict has resulted in a loss of up to 90 percent of crops, with residents either fleeing the area or facing disruptions in planting, tending, or harvesting due to violence.[33] The region's burgeoning urban areas further strain food supply chains, prompting a surge in import dependency. Such increased reliance on international markets subjects the Sahel to the whims of global food price volatility. Economically disadvantaged households will bear the brunt of these challenges.

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Individually and collectively, these four trends are already reshaping the Sahel, and the political, security, demographic, and environmental changes they are driving are destined to become more pronounced in the coming years and decades. The shifting Sahelian landscape demands a shift in US policy toward the region. How US policy should be rethought and revised is the subject of the rest of this report.

Recommendations

US Policy

The Western Sahel presents a daunting challenge for the United States. Despite providing considerable nonmilitary assistance for over two decades, the United States has not accorded the region the priority it deserves in US foreign policy. If the United States is to correct this comparative neglect, it needs to develop a strategy for engaging the region on a wide variety of issues, partnering with an array of actors not only to bolster the Sahel's security but also to promote peace and democracy, work multilaterally, promote human security, and invest in youth. But to implement this strategy (which is laid out in the next section of this report, "US Engagement Strategy"), Washington first needs to adjust its policy apparatus to enable it to engage with the Sahel effectively in pursuit of ambitious and transformative objectives. This section highlights the kinds of adjustments that need to be made, focusing on two areas: diplomatic leadership and a whole-of-government approach.

DEMONSTRATE ROBUST DIPLOMATIC LEADERSHIP

The Sahel is at a crossroads. To establish itself as a partner of choice and because of the alarming pace at which jihadists are gaining territory in the region, the United States should aim to help reshape this chaotic environment and influence potentially powerful actors.[34] This requires a significant degree of diplomatic capacity and understanding of the pressures, personalities, and agendas seeking to remold the region. In short, the United States should demonstrate robust diplomatic leadership in the Sahel.

To be able to demonstrate such leadership, Washington should take the following steps:

- Develop and release a comprehensive US strategy for the Sahel, articulating a coherent approach to assist Sahelian governments in reestablishing fundamental security, upholding human rights, fostering multilateral cooperation, and catalyzing economic growth. This strategy



Men prepare to dock a fishing boat at the port in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, on November 27, 2021. Strategic support for the Sahel should spur investment and economic growth. (Photo by Felipe Dana/AP)

should delineate a collaborative pathway to facilitate synchronizing efforts between international, regional, subregional, and bilateral stakeholders around shared values, human security, and sustainable development. Central to this strategy must be the explicit inclusion of women and youth, recognizing their critical role in fostering peace and prosperity in the region. The publication of such a strategy will not only differentiate US policy from French interests and liabilities in the region, it will also capitalize on America's robust credibility among the Sahelian people and governments. By leading with a unified and inclusive strategy, the United States can effectively champion a peacebuilding and prosperity-driven agenda in the Sahel.

- Appoint a Sahel regional lead with dual-hatted reporting lines to both the State Department and the National Security Council to promote a cohesive approach to US engagement and ensure clarity on roles and responsibilities throughout the entire executive branch on regional issues.

- Sustain and increase diplomatic, financial, and technical support to ECOWAS, the African Union, and regional initiatives such as the Accra Initiative while encouraging greater coherence across these multilateral players on good offices, dialogue, and stabilization.[35]

- Staff US embassies in the Sahel with individuals who have the training and expertise to implement an effective stabilization program based on peace and economic development. At present, these embassies are understaffed, with vacant positions going unfilled.

TAKE A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

The United States should actively address the current structural impediments hindering the successful implementation of a comprehensive whole-of-government approach in the Sahel. These obstacles have resulted, for example, in the failure to acknowledge the intricate cross-border connections between the Sahel and the Maghreb. Until the different arms of the US government are working in concert, US policy will continue to struggle to effectively address security and stability challenges in the Sahel.

The following measures would enhance the ability to put a whole-of-government effort into practice:

- Incorporate into strategy and policy clear recognition that the Sahel is as significant as coastal West Africa to US interests and priorities and allocate US government resources and efforts accordingly.

- Address structural and bureaucratic obstacles within the State Department that create a divide between the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, where US foreign policy in North Africa is handled, and the Bureau of African Affairs, where Sahel countries are managed. This division dates back to the early 1970s, when the United States had distinct geopolitical interests in North Africa and West Africa. It needs to be rectified to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the Sahel and Maghreb regions and enhance the coordination of policies toward them.

- Allocate additional staffing and resources to the Bureau of African Affairs, acknowledging the region's significance and complexity. This entails expanding the bureau's capacity in terms of its Sahelian expertise by reassigning experts from other government agencies and recruiting specialists from outside government. This enlarged group should concentrate on a range of critical areas: security and counterterrorism to address complex security challenges, development and humanitarian aid for sustainable socioeconomic development, governance and political stability to mitigate conflicts, cultural and regional understanding to facilitate effective diplomacy, and environmental and climate resilience to address the region's vulnerability to climate change.

- Empower the US Africa Command to maintain and tailor dialogue with relevant Sahelian militaries, especially on best practices in mitigating civilian casualties, civil-military coordination, and constructive engagement with local populations.

- Initiate a multi-donor basket fund for the Sahel, aimed at expediting response, scaling up interventions, extending territorial coverage, and fostering regional cooperation among US government agencies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The United States can leverage its leadership role to galvanize support and secure financial commitments from other stakeholders.

Several critical measures outlined in this report necessitate substantial congressional involvement, encompassing new authorizations, rigorous oversight, and necessary appropriations. In light of the Sahel's persistent instability and its pivotal significance to various US interests across Africa, Congress should assertively champion a peaceful trajectory for the Sahel amid its ongoing challenges. This can be achieved through robust resourcing of US government initiatives that are part of a comprehensive strategy for supporting the region and its citizens.

US Engagement Strategy

The United States does not have a comprehensive strategy for the volatile Western Sahel. This strategic neglect stems from the fact that Washington has not traditionally viewed the Sahel as a region of vital interest and has been content to behave reactively rather than proactively, responding to specific events as they unfold. This approach is outdated and ineffective.

The Sahel today presents both a threat and an opportunity. The threats include Russian and Chinese involvement in the region, the advent of a generation of leaders prepared to ignore democratic norms and align with US adversaries for support, the continuing presence of formidable jihadist groups, and the danger that terrorism and instability might spill over into coastal West Africa. The opportunity lies in the economic potential of the region, its youthful population, the shared interest among states both within and outside the Sahel in seeing the region become more secure, and the United States' credibility with both the governments and the people of the Sahel. By engaging now, the United States can guide the region in a positive direction that benefits not only the Sahel but also the United States and its African allies. Ignoring this potential and focusing solely on political volatility and security challenges risks, paradoxically, exacerbating instability and increasing the danger that it will destabilize coastal West Africa.

The Senior Study Group for the Sahel recommends that the United States seize this pivotal moment by developing a strategy that emphasizes working in partnership with local, national, and international actors. No longer should the United States define its relationship with the region primarily in terms of terrorism and great power competition. Washington must devote more resources and attention to helping the Sahel tackle pressing problems related to governance, displacement, economic development, youth unemployment, food insecurity, climate change, and human rights.

The strategy that the study group proposes has five main components: provide security support while recognizing Sahelian agency; promote peace, stability, and democracy; work multilaterally; promote human security; and foster economic growth by investing in youth.

PROVIDE SECURITY SUPPORT WHILE RECOGNIZING SAHELIAN AGENCY

The United States needs to understand the types of security partnerships that individual Sahelian countries and institutions are asking for and then demonstrate its understanding through its actions. It is encouraging that the Biden administration's sub-Saharan Africa strategy recognizes the importance of forging strong local partnerships and the centrality of African agency in addressing

the continent's challenges.[36] Following this example, Washington should consider working with Sahelian governments and institutions while respecting the partnerships that Sahelian actors decide to pursue. Although the United States can and should compete with other great powers to achieve its national security interests, it will be most effective in doing so by demonstrating it is a partner of choice for the region's governments and citizens, without compromising its values related to human rights and the rule of law. These governments know they have a choice today when it comes to forming security partnerships with external powers, and they are most likely to select actors that are prepared to align themselves with the needs and priorities of the region.

In 2014, the creation of the G5 Sahel initiative was hailed as a significant regional security effort, one that would empower Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to take charge of their own security and reduce their reliance on international assistance. Nearly a decade later, the G5 Sahel teeters on the brink of dissolution. The initiative was hampered by a lack of clear strategic direction, insufficient funding, and domestic challenges. Mali left the alliance in May 2022; and Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew in November 2023, citing bureaucratic complexities and undue foreign influence.[37] However, it is important to note that the security, humanitarian, and political landscapes in the Sahel have evolved considerably since 2014. Most notably, France is scaling back its security assistance in the region, as requested by the military governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. For a decade, the United States has provided France with vital logistical, operational, and intelligence support. The United States now has the opportunity to craft an independent strategic approach using the insights and expertise it has acquired in its partnership with the former colonial power.

Although it requires a nuanced approach, given the restrictions on US foreign assistance to governments that have come to power through a military coup, it is possible for the United States to support regional initiatives that are resilient to political instability while adhering to the law.[38] Doing so will involve a strategic balance between applying pressure on military governments for democratic transitions and maintaining crucial security partnerships, especially in contexts where counterterrorism efforts are paramount. The United States should leverage its accumulated knowledge and align its efforts with the evolving dynamics in the Sahel in order to contribute effectively to regional stability, security, and development. This approach requires ongoing, careful assessment to ensure that support is contingent on clear progress toward democratic governance and stability.

PROMOTE PEACE, STABILITY, AND DEMOCRACY

In the Sahel, the confluence of democracy, good governance, and the struggle against terrorism and insurgencies has given rise to a complex and precarious landscape. As of 2023, the region has endured 15 years of relentless conflict and instability, resulting in the displacement of over 4 million people across the region.[39] The broader Sahel now accounts for a staggering 43 percent of global terrorism-related fatalities, surpassing the combined figures of South Asia and the Middle East.[40] This represents a shocking 2,000 percent increase in the number of victims of terrorist attacks since 2008, pushing certain nations, including Burkina Faso and Mali, to the precipice of collapse. The recent spate of military coups underscores the fragility of democracy in an environment plagued by terrorism and insurgencies.

The United States cannot by itself restore stability or democracy in the Sahel, but it can help generate momentum in that direction.

Addressing this concerning trend requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges the intricate relationship between counterterrorism efforts and the pillars of democratic governance. The absence of effective governance often provides fertile ground for terrorism to thrive, as marginalized and underserved communities turn to extremist groups that promise them protection and crucial public services such as education, employment, and electricity—services that governments have struggled to deliver. Paradoxically, the looming threat of terrorism can cultivate support for undemocratic regimes as they pledge security but frequently stumble in delivering transparent and effective governance. Therefore, achieving lasting peace in the Sahel depends on regional actors concurrently advancing both counterterrorism strategies and the foundational principles of good governance, recognizing the inseparable link between the two in the pursuit of enduring stability.

The United States cannot by itself restore stability or democracy in the Sahel, but it can help generate momentum in that direction by taking a variety of supportive actions. These include the following:

- *Deter military coups.* Advocate for elevating the economic and political sanctions imposed by ECOWAS to be endorsed and intensified by the United Nations Security Council. Amplifying these sanctions on a global stage would significantly raise the costs associated with military coups, thereby deterring potential coup instigators by rendering such endeavors economically and politically unsustainable. It is imperative that these sanctions be strategically designed and implemented to minimize adverse impacts on ordinary citizens, ensuring that punitive measures target only the coup-makers and their civilian supporters. Clarifying the goals of the sanctions and monitoring and assessing progress toward their goals would also make them more effective.

- *Facilitate peace talks in northern Mali.* The 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement brokered between the Malian government and the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA)—an alliance of rebels who had taken up arms against the government in 2011 and 2012—was rendered obsolete by the resumption of hostilities between the CMA and the Malian army. It is imperative that the United States, which is untainted by participation in previous failed negotiations, prioritize and advocate for the revitalization of peace negotiations between the former northern Mali rebels and the next elected governments.

- *Support democratic governance through support for fair elections and public service delivery.* The United States should leverage its diplomatic channels and collaborate with international partners to exert increased diplomatic pressure on the military governments of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger. The goal should be to encourage these governments to facilitate transparent presidential and legislative elections. If these elections are conducted in a free and fair manner, the United States should actively support the elected governments in delivering efficient public services in health, education, and infrastructure development. This assistance

can take various forms, including financial aid, technical expertise, and capacity-building programs. By providing resources and guidance, the United States can help these governments improve the delivery of essential services to their citizens. When citizens see tangible improvements in health care, education, and infrastructure, they are more likely to engage positively with their elected representatives and institutions. Enhanced public service delivery not only strengthens the legitimacy of elected governments but also reinforces the belief that democratic systems can effectively address societal challenges. Thus, the provision of better public services becomes a key driver in building and sustaining democratic support, stability, and progress in these nations.

WORK MULTILATERALLY

It is in the long-term interest of the United States to prioritize regional cooperation over competition with other great powers in order to break the cycle of instability in the Sahel. Regional cooperation nurtures a unified approach to addressing common security challenges such as terrorism and insurgencies, which often exploit deficiencies in regional intelligence sharing, porous borders, and disjointed approaches to these issues.

Opportunities exist to promote three kinds of multilateral partnerships: within the region, between regions, and internationally.

- *Partner with regional organizations.* Within the region, the United States could foster trust and legitimacy by establishing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with regional organizations such as ECOWAS. These MOUs would include cooperative agreements on security coordination, intelligence sharing, capacity-building initiatives, and economic development efforts. This approach allows for mutual respect, local ownership, and the promotion of shared values, which are critical for sustained regional stability.

- *Enhance cooperation between the Sahel and the Maghreb.* In terms of partnerships between regions, the United States should engage countries such as Algeria and Morocco that share borders with the Sahel in order to encourage concerted action to address the Sahel's political and security crises. Additionally, the United States should advocate for compassionate and constructive approaches to manage irregular migration from the Sahel region into and through Maghreb countries. Promoting economic development in tandem with these initiatives can contribute to the creation of a more stable and prosperous region.

  US trade and investment entities (most notably, the International Development Finance Corporation and the US Export-Import Bank), in collaboration with Algeria and Morocco, should pursue economic partnerships and investments in the region. By investing in projects that promote regional connectivity and economic development, the United States can appeal to both Algeria's and Morocco's interests in the Sahel's stability and prosperity and may foster improved relations and cooperation between the two nations. Additionally, recognizing that



Nigerien migrants expelled from Algeria wait in line at an International Organization for Migration transit center in Agadez, Niger, on August 11, 2016. Algeria and Morocco have intensified their focus on the Sahel, acutely aware of the transboundary problems, including migration, that span and impact both the Sahel and the Maghreb. (Photo by Josh Haner/New York Times)

both countries share concerns about regional security, countering extremism, and managing migration flows, the United States can emphasize joint security efforts and collaboration in addressing these common challenges.

- *Fill the vacuum left by France.* The security vacuum that France has left behind in some parts of the Sahel can be filled by willing and able partners. The European Union already contributes to the Sahel through nonmilitary, civilian support for national security and military capacity-building initiatives such as the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) and the EU Capacity-Building Mission (EUCAP). Individual EU countries, such as Germany, Portugal, and Spain, provide bilateral assistance that supports their own development agendas, which range from support for civil society organizations to digitization projects and education programs. Countries in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East and South America, have also provided the Sahel with medical support, logistics help, and mediation and negotiation assistance. The United States should continue to explore these nontraditional partnerships to discover additional entry points into the Sahel and effective responses to its instability.

PROMOTE HUMAN SECURITY

The United States has the opportunity to tackle diverse sources of instability by promoting different facets of human security. Doing so will enhance and leverage the positive reputation the United States already enjoys among the public in the region because of its military capability, provision of humanitarian aid, and lack of a colonial legacy in the Sahel.

- *Continue to promote food security.* The United States should support the Green Great Wall Initiative (GGW), the African Union's flagship initiative to restore a greenbelt across the width of Africa to combat desertification. The GGW is a comprehensive, integrated ecosystem management and rural development initiative to combat land degradation and desertification.[41] As of 2023, the GGW comprises 22 countries, 11 of which are Saharan-Sahelian: Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sudan. By participating in the GGW, these countries have committed themselves to turning natural assets—a young population and abundant natural resources—into levers for sustainable development. An additional route to greater food security could involve identifying underutilized crops and integrating them into markets to diversify the region's diet. For instance, a study conducted in 2011 by African researchers indicated that using modern tools to process fonio, a grain native to West Africa, could halve the amount of waste produced while doubling processing speed.[42] A massive increase in the production of fonio in the Sahel could reduce food insecurity and create a valuable export crop.

- *Prioritize civilian protection.* The lives of civilians in the Sahel are endangered both by terrorist groups and by counterterrorism operations. The United States could help guard against the former threat by continuing the intelligence operations it conducted when France was leading counterterrorism efforts in the region; US intelligence has played a significant role in preempting and countering attacks by groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda that target major cities in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. However, the United States must carefully evaluate on a case-by-case basis the intelligence it shares and with whom. It is crucial that this intelligence not be shared with any government or entity that might relay the information to state or nonstate actors adversarial to the United States and its allies.

  Reducing the civilian toll taken by counterterrorism could be accomplished by ensuring that civilian protection is central to US training programs and engagement with the region's militaries. In addition, civilian protection should be given a higher place on the agenda in discussions with US allies that are also engaging the Sahel.

  More broadly, the Department of Defense should consider balancing kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to counterterrorism and toward civilian protection, civil-military coordination, and atrocity prevention, which are desperately needed given the pace of jihadist attacks on civilians.

- *Emphasize human rights, governance, and support to civil society.* The US government, under the Biden administration, has underscored the paramount importance of prioritizing human rights

on a global scale. It is imperative to commit to giving the Sahel region the attention it deserves and to invest in human rights through both financial support and technical assistance to local and national civil society organizations. These groups can play a crucial role in instigating policy change and reform from the bottom up. It is also important to recognize the role of women-led and youth organizations, independent media organizations, religious bodies, traditional leaders, and other frontline actors working to help tackle drivers of conflict.

To effectively address the complex challenges in the Sahel, a comprehensive, regionwide initiative centered on governance and bolstering civil society should be considered. Such an approach could complement national strategies aimed at promoting stabilization and development. Key to its success would be fostering constructive dialogues with Sahelian partners and convening a spectrum of stakeholders—including "Leahy-vetted" state actors, representatives from the European Union, civil society leaders and representatives, experts, and members of the private sector—to collectively address the multifaceted issues.[43]

Should the United States decide to adopt a regional strategy led by a designated senior-level official, this individual must possess authority and backing from the president at the National Security Council level. This authority is vital to ensure a cohesive approach across executive branch departments.

Within this broader framework, a US strategy for the Sahel should incorporate a human rights action plan. Washington should extend support to the national human rights commissions of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, enabling them to monitor and report on the alarming rise of hate speech. The strategy should also recognize the rising threat of disinformation, its effects on social cohesion and peace, and the need for local and regional partnerships to address these issues. Additionally, Washington should continue to support multilateral institutions' early warning and prevention mechanisms to prevent the escalation of conflicts and crises in the region.

In line with these measures, Washington should facilitate the documentation of human rights abuses by permitting independent investigation teams to access areas where the US military has a presence. It is essential to maintain a strong stance on human rights abuses through public statements, advocate for transparency in ongoing investigations, and, where appropriate, commission inquiries into alleged massacres.

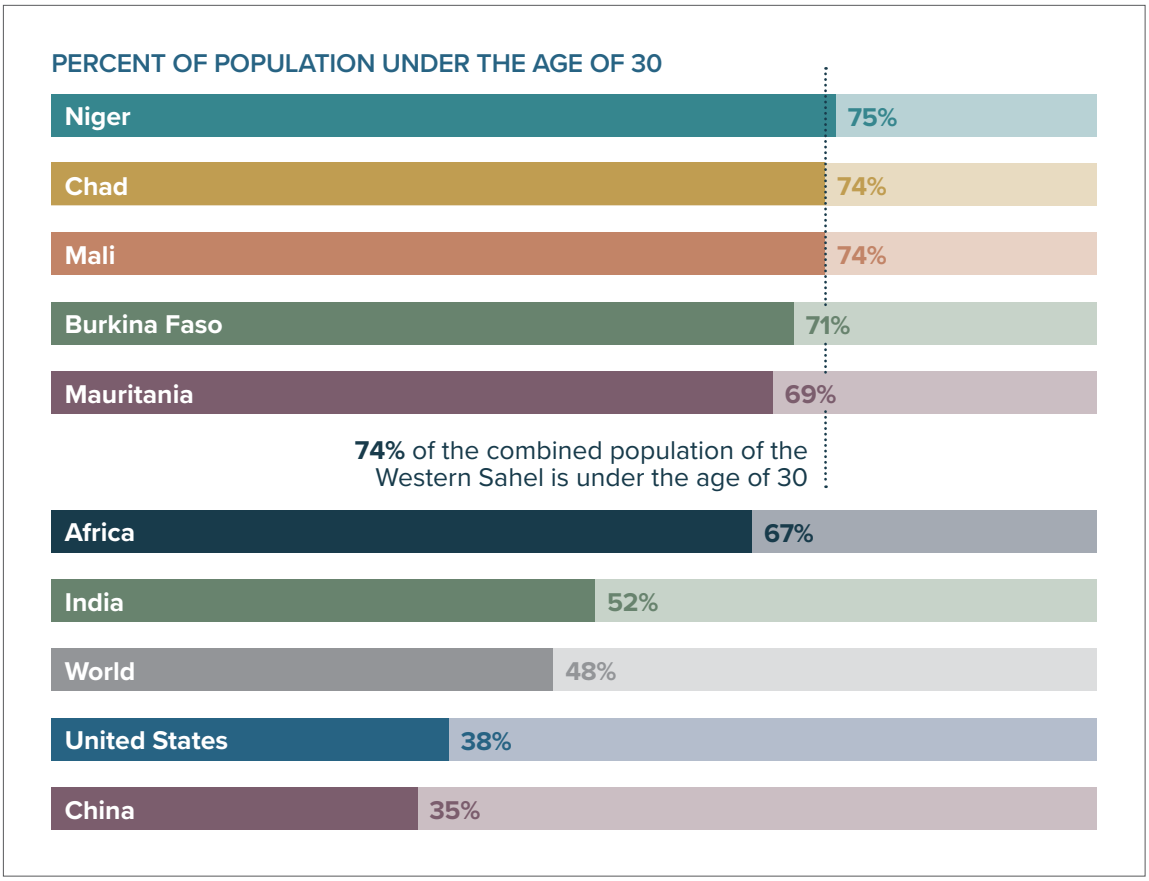
FOSTER ECONOMIC GROWTH BY INVESTING IN YOUTH

Hopes for the long-term stability and prosperity of the Sahel depend on nurturing a robust private sector that can drive the regional economy and provide jobs for the overwhelmingly youthful population. The United States is well positioned to spur the development of the private sector, given the United States' positive image among the Sahelian public as a champion of capitalism and a proponent of public-private engagement.

FIGURE 2.

Youth Population in the Western Sahel, 2022

The youth populations of the five Western Sahel nations—defined as the percentage of inhabitants under the age of 30—greatly exceed those of the African continent and the world as a whole, as well as those of other nations such as the United States, India, and China.



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022*, https://population.un.org/wpp/.

The Sahel has a pronounced youth bulge and a rapidly expanding population.[44] Yet no corresponding US strategy addresses this demographic time bomb. The United States should remedy this by helping to stimulate the growth of an economy that is able to absorb this enormous cohort of young people and by better preparing youth to contribute to that economy. To this end, the US government should encourage private investment in vocational and technical training in the Sahel to help create a workforce needed by critical industries (including agriculture, trade and commerce, hospitality, and telecommunications) in the region and to reduce the flow of disaffected, unemployed youth out of their countries as economic migrants and into militias and jihadist groups.

Accompanying this strategy should be robust support from the US government aimed at helping American companies mitigate investment risks and aligned with the recommendations presented in the April 2023 report of the President's Advisory Council on Doing Business in Africa.[45] Currently,

investment in the continent meets only a fraction—less than one-fifth—of the actual demand.[46] To bridge this gap, private equity, seed capital, and business investment from development financial institutions such as the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) are essential.[47] The DFC should designate the Sahel as a priority region, which would make it subject to heightened congressional oversight. By providing government-backed loan guarantees, political risk insurance, debt financing, and support for investment funds, the DFC can significantly shift risk allocation and instill greater confidence in US investors.

To complement these efforts, it is essential to work closely with Sahelian governments to implement regulatory reforms. These reforms should focus on creating a better business environment by simplifying business registration and licensing, enhancing contract enforcement mechanisms, improving access to credit, streamlining tax and customs procedures, and strengthening property rights and labor regulations. Trade facilitation measures, investor protection regulations, and infrastructure development initiatives should also be part of the reform agenda. Additionally, transparency and anti-corruption measures should be actively pursued alongside the implementation of e-government services to reduce bureaucracy and enhance efficiency.

In the ever-changing landscape of the Sahel, developing a comprehensive long-term strategy and implementing it consistently is the key to success for the United States in advancing regional peace and prosperity. Addressing deep-rooted challenges cannot be accomplished overnight; the path toward lasting stability and positive transformation must be paved with commitment and patience. By following this report's recommendations, the United States can make a difference. Positioning itself as the Sahel's preferred partner will allow the United States to help improve the lives of the Sahel's people, create a safer environment for regional neighbors, and more effectively pursue critical US interests in Africa and beyond.

Notes

1. In biogeographic terms, the Sahel is a semiarid region that lies between the Sahara to the north and the Sudanian savannas to the south and that stretches across western and north-central Africa from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east. In terms of states, definitions of the Sahel vary. For instance, some narrower definitions include Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Sudan, and Senegal, whereas other, wider definitions also include Eritrea, the Gambia, Guinea, and Nigeria. It has become increasingly common within the foreign policy field for the term "Sahel" to be used to refer only to the Western Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This report focuses on these five countries and refers to them with the terms "Sahel" and "Western Sahel" interchangeably.
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12. The US government has provided financial and technical support to the G5 Sahel, including funding for military operations, training and equipment for local security forces, and support for governance and development initiatives. The United States has also provided intelligence and logistical support to help the G5 Sahel address security challenges. The United States has recognized the importance of the G5 Sahel in addressing regional security challenges and has been a strong supporter of the organization's efforts. See US Embassy in Mauritania, "United States Strongly Support G5 Sahel Joint Force," press release, July 26, 2019, https://mr.usembassy.gov/united-states-strongly-support-g5-sahel-joint-force/.
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About the Senior Study Group for the Sahel

The United States Institute of Peace convened a bipartisan Senior Study Group in 2022, with consultations continuing through 2023, to critically assess the opportunities for peace, security, and economic development in the Sahel region of Africa. The group included and consulted with former high-level US, African, and European officials; prominent academics and researchers; and leading foreign policy analysts and experts. The study group's deliberations point toward a host of tangible actions that the United States can undertake in the region, including thwarting the expansion of terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, deterring military coups, countering the malign influence of external actors such as Russia, and fostering economic growth through investment in youth. This report presents the consensus findings of these discussions and is designed to inform the strategy and approaches of US and international partners in the Sahel.

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