Broken Bonds and Broken Promises: ECOWAS, Counterterrorism, and the Sahelian Quest for Justice

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Abstract

This paper critically interrogates the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), framing it as a complex act of political resistance rooted in postcolonial grievances and deepening regional disillusionment. Despite the ECOWAS' ambitious counterterrorism architecture, its interventions have failed to deliver substantive support to Sahelian states grappling with escalating jihadist violence, institutional fragility, and humanitarian distress. Drawing on Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) as a conceptual lens, the paper explores the disjuncture between the ECOWAS' normative commitments and its operational limitations, highlighting patterns of selective enforcement, external dependency, and declining legitimacy. Based on regional security data, civil society perspectives, and grassroots case studies, the analysis reveals how perceived injustice and abandonment have catalyzed a reimagining of regionalism culminating in the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The article assesses the implications of this rupture for regional governance, institutional coherence, and the broader trajectory of sustainable development in West Africa. It concludes with policy recommendations aimed at fostering inclusive, sovereignty-sensitive collaboration, safeguarding SDG progress, and restoring trust in regional institutions. Ultimately, the paper advances a deeper understanding of the political, ethical and developmental stakes of regional integration in the Sahel.

Keywords: Counterterrorism Governance, ECOWAS, Postcolonial Disillusionment, Regional Integration, Sahelian Security Architecture, Sustainable Development Goal 16

Introduction

In January of 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an unprecedented rupture that lays bare the broken bonds of regional solidarity and the unfulfilled promises of collective security. For over a decade, these Sahelian states have endured the twin crises of jihadist insurgency and

political upheaval; yet, their appeals for sustained counterterrorism support and meaningful political inclusion within the ECOWAS yielded little more than symbolic gestures and punitive sanctions (Adebajo, 2022; Francis, 2021). Their exit, therefore, cannot be read solely as a pragmatic response to institutional failure; it is also an act of ontological dissent and performative sovereignty. By rejecting an order that has marginalized their security concerns and undermined their political legitimacy, the Sahelian states dramatize their sovereignty through withdrawal, signaling both defiance and a quest for justice (Ebiede, 2023; Okafor, 2022). Situated within the normative framework of Sustainable Development Goal 16, which prioritizes peace, justice, and strong institutions, this paper argues that the Sahelian rupture is not merely a symptom of the ECOWAS's shortcomings but a profound statement of resistance against systemic injustice in regional governance.

This paper uses Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which places a high priority on justice, peace, and robust institutions, to analyze Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger's exit from the ECOWAS. It contends that a strong sense of injustice, stemming from the ECOWAS' punitive approach to Sahelian political transitions and its inability to offer substantive counterterrorism assistance drove the choice to leave. The study shows how structural flaws in the ECOWAS undermined trust and unity, ultimately leading to the collapse, by placing this rupture at the nexus of regional security, governance, and justice. In addition to being a reaction to unfulfilled security demands, the paper presents the retreat as an act of performative sovereignty and ontological dissent in which the Sahelian states demonstrate their independence while denouncing systemic exclusion. By doing this, the paper highlights the moral necessity of justice as a pillar of sustainable development as well as the vulnerability of regional integration in West Africa.

Theoretical Underpinning

The discussion in this section is segmented into various subsections. This is done for the sake of cohesion and reader-friendliness.

Transitional Justice and SDG 16

Buckley-Zistel, Koloma Beck, Braun and Mieth's 2014 systematization of Transitional Justice Theory offers a critical perspective through which to view the Sahelian states' withdrawal from the ECOWAS as a reaction to perceived injustice and desertion. Transitional justice, which is based on the ideas of accountability, reconciliation, and institutional reform, highlights the necessity of reliable systems that rebuild public confidence in government. The study places the ECOWAS' shortcomings into a global normative context by referencing SDG 16, which is centered on peace, justice, and strong institutions. Disillusionment among Sahelian states is sparked by the failure to provide meaningful help against Islamist violence or to respect promises to justice, which exposes a disconnection between normative ambitions and experienced reality.

Constructivism and Postcolonial Resistance

By emphasizing how norms, identities, and shared meanings influence regional politics, Constructivist Theory, most famously expressed by Wendt (1992, 1999), complements this perspective. The idea that the ECOWAS represents justice and solidarity is equally as important

to its power as its counterterrorism framework. The normative fabric of regionalism disintegrates when commitments are broken and enforcement becomes biased. By defining Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger's withdrawal as acts of resistance against external dependency and the perpetuation of unequal power relations, postcolonial perspectives expand this constructivist understanding. Thus, the establishment of the AES signifies a reinvention of regional identity based on cooperation that respects sovereignty rather than norms imposed from without.

Integrative Perspective

When combined, constructivism (Wendt, 1992; Wendt, 1999) and Transitional Justice Theory (Buckley-Zistel et al., 2014) highlight the gap between the ECOWAS' operational constraints and its normative obligations. They elucidate why Sahelian governments are reconstructing regionalism through the AES and show how perceived injustice and selective enforcement threaten regional integration. This theoretical framework therefore emphasizes that the problem is not simply institutional but also profoundly political and ethical, and linked to the wider course of justice and sustainable development in West Africa.

Research Methodology

In line with Abdul Karim Bangura (2011), this study uses a qualitative, interpretive research design enhanced by African-centered approaches. The objective is to examine Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger's secession from the ECOWAS as a postcolonial act of resistance based on African epistemologies and justice claims, as well as a breach in regional security.

      The data sources used included (a) regional security data—secondary statistics on Sahelian humanitarian suffering, institutional weakness, and terrorist occurrences; (b) civil society viewpoints—community voices are highlighted in reports and lobbying materials from Sahelian NGOs and grassroots groups; (c) the ECOWAS' communiqués and policy documents—official declarations and frameworks for counterterrorism to identify the discrepancy between operational realities and normative commitments; and (d) case studies—an examination of the political paths taken by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as well as the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The analytical framework included (a) African-centered methodologies (Bangura, 2011)—these approaches prioritize African worldviews, cultural logics, and indigenous knowledge systems, and they ensure that the analysis is rooted in African agency, resisting Eurocentric biases and interpreting the ECOWAS' failures through Sahelian perspectives; (b) constructivism (Wendt, 1992, 1999) applied to understand how norms, identities, and shared meanings shape regional politics, and how broken promises unravel the fabric of regional solidarity; (c) Transitional Justice Theory (Buckley-Zistel, Koloma Beck, Braun and Mieth, 2014) used to evaluate accountability gaps, justice deficiencies, and the moral implications of regional disillusionment; and (d) SDG 16 as a normative benchmark—using African-centered epistemologies, the global framework of peace, justice, and robust institutions is used to assess ECOWAS's performance.

Scope and Limitations

The paper is interpretive and exploratory, with an emphasis on the developmental, ethical and political implications of regional integration. The lack of primary fieldwork illustrates the

difficulties of conducting research in Sahelian contexts devastated by violence, even while secondary data and civil society viewpoints offer important insights. Nonetheless, incorporating African-centered approaches guarantees that the paper stays true to local narratives and epistemologies.

Integrating African-centered Methodologies

In addition to constructivism (Wendt, 1992, 1999) and Transitional Justice Theory (Buckley-Zistel, Koloma Beck, Braun and Mieth, 2014), this paper incorporates African-centered methodology (Bangura, 2011) to ensure that the analysis reflects African epistemologies and community-centered perspectives. While constructivism highlights the erosion of shared norms and transitional justice underscores the justice deficits within the ECOWAS' counterterrorism architecture, African-centered methodologies ground the inquiry in African worldviews and postcolonial experiences. This integration allows the paper to interrogate the ECOWAS' failures both through globally recognized theoretical lenses and through frameworks that privilege African agency, thereby producing a hybrid methodology that is simultaneously rigorous and decolonized.

ECOWAS in Perspective from Origins to Contemporary Issues

The ECOWAS was founded in 1975 under the Treaty of Lagos primarily to promote economic integration and collective self-reliance among its member states (Adebajo, 2011). Initially, security concerns were peripheral, with the assumption that economic cooperation would naturally foster peace. But, the political instability that plagued the region in the late 20th Century forced the ECOWAS to expand its mandate beyond trade and development. The Liberian civil war (1989–1997) marked a pivotal moment. The ECOWAS, through its peacekeeping arm—i.e. the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)—intervened militarily in 1990, despite lacking prior authorization from the United Nations (Aleman, 2016). This intervention was controversial; but, ultimately, it laid the groundwork for the ECOWAS' transformation into a regional security actor.

A number of key moments of intervention and failure have been identified. First, in Liberia (1990–1997), the: ECOMOG's deployment was unprecedented. While it helped to contain the conflict, it faced criticism for poor coordination, allegations of human rights violations, and Nigerian dominance within the force (Human Rights Watch, 1993; Walraven, 1994).

Second, in Sierra Leone (1997–1999), the ECOWAS intervened to restore President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah after a military coup. The Conakry Accord outlined a six-month peace plan, but implementation was slow and fraught with logistical challenges (Oxford Law Pro, 2018).

Third,, in Côte d'Ivoire (2002–2011), the ECOWAS played a mediating role during the civil war but failed to prevent escalation. Its diplomatic efforts were overshadowed by France and the United Nations, revealing its limited leverage in francophone states (International IDEA, 2016).

Fourth, in Mali (2012–present), ollowing a coup and insurgency in northern Mali, the ECOWAS imposed sanctions and attempted mediation. Nevertheless, its inability to prevent fragmentation and the rise of extremist groups exposed strategic weaknesses (Onyedinefu, 2019).

And fifth, in Burkina Faso and Guinea (2021–2022),: the ECOWAS responded to coups with suspensions and sanctions. Yet, these measures failed to reverse military takeovers or ensure timely transitions to civilian rule (CDD West Africa, 2022).

The aforementioned episodes reflect the ECOWAS' reactive posture and its struggle to balance diplomacy, military intervention, and regional politics. While its ambition to become a supranational peace and security body is evident, internal divisions and resource constraints continue to undermine its effectiveness (Aleman, 2016). To promote economic cooperation and collective self-reliance among its 15 member states, the ECOWAS was established in 1975 (Adebajo, 2016). The ECOWAS was first intended to be a trading union; but as the region struggled with unstable politics and deadly conflicts in the 1990s, its scope grew considerably. A significant turning point was the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which transformed the group into a regional security actor (Bah, 2005). By intervening in Liberia (1990), Sierra Leone (1997), and Guinea-Bissau (1998), the ECOWAS showed that it was prepared to use force to protect the security of the region. The 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, which institutionalized the ECOWAS' role in political and military crises (ECOWAS, 1999, Art. 2), was a formal security framework that the ECOWAS adopted over time, but these missions were frequently plagued by logistical difficulties, accusations of bias, and a lack of coordination with international actors (Olonisakin, 2008).

The Sahel experienced a dramatic increase in insecurity in the early 2010s, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The collapse of Libya in 2011 and the spread of weapons and fighters across porous borders led to the emergence of jihadist organizations like Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara—ISGS (International Crisis Group, 2019). By establishing themselves in rural areas and taking advantage of local grievances, poor governance, and ethnic tensions, these groups were able to overwhelm national security forces and destabilize entire regions. An upsurge of military takeovers occurred in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2020 and 2023; the ruling juntas in each country defended them as necessary reactions to instability and government failure.

A transitional administration led by military leaders took power in Mali after the coups in August 2020 and May 2021 (Kassim, 2021). Two coups occurred in Burkina Faso in 2022, and a democratically elected president was overthrown in a coup in Niger in July of 2023 as discontent with counterterrorism initiatives grew (Al Jazeera, 2023). The ECOWAS used a combination of fines, diplomatic pressure, and membership suspension in response to these unlawful changes. Although these actions demonstrated a dedication to democratic principles, they were ineffective in stopping the coups or resolving the fundamental safety issues. Due to prolonged negotiations, the ECOWAS first locked down borders and placed economic sanctions on Mali before easing its position (ICG, 2022). Similar penalties were faced with resistance and rising popular backing for the juntas in Burkina Faso and Niger, demonstrating the declining legitimacy and power of the ECOWAS. As a result of these incidents, there has been a growing division between the ECOWAS and the Sahelian states, which has led to their official exit from the group in early 2024. This split shows a deep disenchantment with regional justice and unity in addition to political differences.

The Geopolitics of Counterterrorism and Governance Erosion in the Sahel

The term "counterterrorism" describes the tactical and strategic actions taken by governments or

coalitions to stop, discourage, and deal with terrorist attacks. To lessen the threat and effects of terrorism, these strategies include military action, law enforcement collaboration, intelligence collection, and diplomatic initiatives (Sandler, 2015). In contrast, according to Kaufmann and Zoido-Lobatón (1999), the institutions, procedures, and systems that govern the exercise of public power, decision-making, and the pursuit of societal objectives are collectively referred to as "governance." It includes both official governmental structures and unofficial agreements that affect administrative and political results. The collapse of the security sector, authoritarian resurgence, and geostrategic realignments have all contributed to the Sahel's increasingly precarious governance. Western forces' withdrawal and the emergence of alternative alliances, especially with China and Russia, have changed the geopolitical landscape of the region and frequently place a higher value on sovereignty than on democratic accountability. A surge of military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has accompanied this change, with juntas consolidating their hold on power under the pretext of regional autonomy and anti-imperialism.

The Sahel domain, especially Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, has been an international hub for instability in politics and terrorism throughout the last 20 years. Deadly extremist organizations have flourished due to the combination of poor government, porous borders, tensions between ethnic groups and economic and social exclusion (Anuga, 2022). By taking advantage of local frustrations and the lack of state authority, organizations like Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic official in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have spread their operations throughout the region. The triangle bordering region among Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has become the geographic epicenter of jihadist terrorist activity, with a sharp rise in attacks against ordinary citizens, law enforcement officers, and humanitarian workers in 2022 alone. These insurgencies have resulted in thousands of fatalities, widespread forced displacement, and a decline in trust among the population in national governments (Thurston, 2020; Lacher, 2021). The violence has spread southward into coastal West African states like Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire, with concerns about regional contagion (D'Amato and Baldaro, 2022).

A string of military takeovers that have occurred throughout the Sahel since 2020 have made matters worse. These coups have further destabilized the area and weakened democratic governance, which the reigning juntas have justified as remedies to insecurity. Military governments have found it difficult to quell insurgencies in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), frequently relying on the non-ECOWAS alternative security alliances, such as Russia (African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism—ACSRT, 2022). The outcomes of foreign interventions, like the United Nation's MINUSMA mission in Mali and France's Operation Barkhane, have been uneventful. Although they have offered tactical assistance, they have also come under fire for neglecting to address the underlying causes of war, including poverty, marginalization, and deficiencies in governance (OECD, 2021). Many areas are therefore still susceptible to radicalization, as recruitment into extremist groups is fueled by youth unemployment and limited educational opportunities. The security situation in the Sahel is a multifaceted governance failure rather than just a military one. Counterterrorism initiatives run the risk of escalating the very instability they are intended to address in the absence of inclusive political solutions and regional cohesion.

Authoritarian Resurgence and Democratic Reversals in the Central Sahel

A spate of military takeovers in the Sahel region between 2020 and 2023 altered the political

landscape and called into question the legitimacy of regional organizations such as the ECOWAS. The juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger presented these transitions as essential reactions to graft, insecurity, and poor governance (Sunday and Semudara, 2024). Following widespread protests against mismanagement and the government's inability to control Islamist violence, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown in August of 2020, sparking the start of Mali's political crisis. The same military players, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, who subsequently became President, overthrew the transitional government that had been established in May of 2021. Mali's military takeover was not stopped by the ECOWAS' sanctions or suspension of its membership (Prah and Kaunert, 2025). Burkina Faso experienced two coups in 2022, following a similar pattern. President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was ousted in January, in the first coup, as resentment over Islamist assaults grew. In the second coup, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was fired by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in September due to persistent insecurity and a lack of reform. Internal military rivalries and a general decline in trust in civilian authority have been observed in these changes (Sunday and Semudara, 2024).

The presidential guard under the command of General Abdourahamane Tchiani overthrew Mohamed Bazoum, the democratically elected President of Niger, in July of 2023. As a rather reliable ally in the war against terrorism, many were taken aback by the coup. Echoing its Sahelian neighbors, according to Chikerema, Chakunda, and Ncube (2025), the junta used declining security and bad administration as justifications for its actions. Although the ECOWAS responded by threatening military action and imposing sanctions, these measures were ineffective in restoring civilian government.

Geostrategic Repercussions and Diplomatic Realignments in West Africa

These takeovers have had a significant impact on diplomacy and regional government. The inability of the ECOWAS' punitive actions to prevent or end military rule has seriously damaged the organization's reputation. A move away from conventional Western allies has been indicated by the juntas' pursuit of alternative alliances, particularly with China and Russia (Prah and Kaunert, 2025). Both strategic pragmatism and a more general rejection of alleged neocolonial influence are evident in this realignment. The Sahelian coups' frequent occurrences highlight a more serious legitimacy dilemma. Some citizens have welcomed military control as a corrective measure after becoming disillusioned with corrupt and ineffectual civilian governments. Nonetheless, this tendency runs the risk of normalizing tyranny and halting the advancement of democracy in West Africa. Between 2020 and 2023, the ECOWAS used a variety of diplomatic and punitive measures to try to restore constitutional order in the wake of the wave of military takeovers that swept across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These included mediation attempts, membership suspensions, threats of military action, and economic consequences. But many have questioned the efficacy of these actions, citing contradictions, a lack of enforcement capabilities, and a widening gap between the ECOWAS and the people of the impacted states (Mathur, 2024).

The ECOWAS promptly slapped economic penalties and suspended the three states from its decision-making bodies after the coups. For instance, in January of 2022, the ECOWAS confiscated its financial accounts and sealed off borders in Mali in an effort to compel the junta to conduct elections (Mohammed and Arabo, 2024). Prohibitions on travel and bank transaction restrictions were among the similar measures placed on Niger and Burkina Faso. But, these actions frequently harm civilians more than elites, strengthening the juntas' claims of resistance and sovereignty and escalating anti-ECOWAS sentiment (Kanté, 2024). At first, the ECOWAS

took a tough stance, especially in Niger, where it threatened to send troops after the coup in July of 2023.

Mali and Burkina Faso threatened to militarily defend Niger if the ECOWAS stepped in, sparking a regional response (Mathur, 2024). The ECOWAS turned to diplomacy in response to the threat of regional escalation and the lack of international backing. It started mediation attempts with regional envoys and past Nigerian leaders, but these efforts were seen as top-down and distant from local reality, and they produced little headway (Kanté, 2024). The ECOWAS found itself marginalized more and more as the juntas established the AES and solidified their control. A symbolic break in regional solidarity occurred in early 2024 when Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger left the ECOWAS. The breakdown of West African regionalism and the ECOWAS' waning power were exposed by its incapacity to stop or reverse these departures (Mohammed and Arabo, 2024). The organization is currently dealing with a crisis of legitimacy, with its reputation as a protector of democracy and peace severely weakened. The Sahelian disengagement from the ECOWAS reflects a broader crisis of multilateralism in Africa. Popular support for the juntas, although not unconditional, signals widespread dissatisfaction with the ECOWAS' perceived double standards, particularly its tolerance of "constitutional coups" by elected leaders who manipulate term limits (Kanté, 2024). The rise of alternative security partnerships, especially with Russia, further complicates the ECOWAS' strategic calculus and underscores the need for a more inclusive and responsive regional framework.

Security Sector Collapse and Regional Vulnerability in the Sahel

With Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger suffering the most from the rising bloodshed, the Sahel has become the worldwide hotspot of terrorism. The Sahel was responsible for 47% of terrorism-related fatalities and 26% of all terrorist acts worldwide in 2023, highlighting the region's importance in the current global security conversation (DeAngelo, 2025). In terms of the frequency and severity of attacks, Burkina Faso has surpassed Afghanistan and Syria to become the nation most impacted by terrorism worldwide. The number of terrorism-related deaths in Burkina Faso rose by 50% to 1,135 in 2022 alone. A move toward more lethal operations was indicated by the 48% increase in the number of people murdered per attack over the previous year (Timbuktu Center, 2023).

While numerous assaults go unreported, the majority are ascribed to jihadist organizations connected to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). With 944 fatalities from terrorism in 2022, a 56% rise from the year before, Mali ranks third in the world. Jihadist violence has escalated in central Mali, especially in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions. The Malian authorities have found it difficult to defend citizens and retake territory from insurgents, notwithstanding international efforts, including the now-withdrawn United Nations peacekeeping operation—MINUSMA (Timbuktu Center, 2023). Attacks in Niger, which is rated tenth in the world, have been steadily increasing, especially in the Tillabéri and Diffa areas.

DeAngelo (2025) puts it succinctly that counterterrorism measures were made more difficult by the July 2023 coup, as the new military government must manage regional isolation and jihadist expansion while dealing with increasing pressure. The instability of surrounding coastal states, as well as Niger itself, is in jeopardy due to the porous borders and the lack of government presence in rural regions, which have permitted insurgent groups to operate with impunity. Even though these groups are classified as terrorist organizations, they increasingly

behave like insurgent groups. Instead of randomly attacking civilians, they concentrate on security forces and territory control, strategically employing terrorism to further their larger objectives of ideological domination and state replacement. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are among the international jihadist networks that profit financially and recruit new members as a result of their success.

As illustrated in Table 1, the 2022 surge in terrorism-related fatalities across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger reflects a deepening security crisis in the Sahel. Burkina Faso led with 1,135 deaths, a 50% rise, followed by Mali's 944 fatalities, up 56%, and Niger's 500+, showing a rising trend. Violence was concentrated in regions like Sahel, Mopti, and Tillabéri, where JNIM, ISGS, and Boko Haram operate. These figures underscore the erosion of state authority and the growing influence of transnational extremist groups. The data highlight the limitations of regional security frameworks and the urgent need for coordinated, justice-oriented responses. These figures also reflect not only the intensity of violence, but also the growing sophistication of insurgent operations, which increasingly resemble territorial insurgency rather than sporadic terrorism.

Table 1: Nature and Scale of Terrorism in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

Country	Deaths (2022)	% Increase from 2021	Most Affected Regions	Dominant Groups
Burkina Faso	1,135	+50%	Sahel, Nord	JNIM, ISGS
Mali	944	+56%	Mopti, Bandiagara	JNIM, ISGS
Niger	500+	Rising trend	Tillabéri, Diffa	ISGS, Boko Haram

Source: Self-generated by the Author Using Information fromTimbuktu Center (2023) and DeAngelo (2025)

Collective Action and Institutional Challenges in the Sahel

The most prominent regional effort is the G5 Sahel Joint Force, established in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This 5,000-man force was designed to coordinate cross-border operations and share intelligence. Nonetheless, it has faced chronic underfunding, logistical challenges, and political fragmentation (Niebel, 2020). In 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the AES, signaling a break from the ECOWAS and a desire for autonomous security coordination. This alliance aims to pool resources and redefine regional counterterrorism strategy, though its operational capacity remains limited (Fais, 2025). For international engagement, foreign actors have played a significant role in shaping the following counterterrorism efforts: (a) France's Operation Barkhane launched in 2014 deployed over 4,500 troops across the Sahel; despite tactical successes, it faced widespread criticism for civilian casualties and perceived neocolonial overreach, leading to its withdrawal from Mali in 2022 (Niebel, 2020); (b) the United Nations' MINUSMA mission provided peacekeeping support in Mali but struggled with mandate limitations and a lack of local legitimacy; it formally exited Mali in 2023 (Antwi-Danso, 2025); (c) the United States has contributed special forces and drone surveillance, focusing on intelligence and training rather than direct combat; however, its influence has waned amid rising anti-Western sentiment (Niebel, 2020).

Terrorism is still on the rise, notwithstanding the aforementioned attempts by foreign

countries. Fais (2025) posits that fragmented interactions among local, regional, and international actors, a lack of confidence across neighborhoods and governments, particularly in rural areas, an excessive dependence on military responses, and a lack of investment in economic development, education, and governance are some of the main issues. With a multifaceted approach that combines economic, theological and military instruments, Mauritania stands out as a relative success story. Nevertheless, since political and social settings differ, its paradigm could not be simply transferable (Fais, 2025).

Disillusionment with Regional Leadership and the
Erosion of Trust in the ECOWAS

As stated earlier, the withdrawal of the Sahelian states marked more than just a political split; it was the result of years of perceived disregard, strategic misalignment, and unfulfilled expectations. The Sahelian states came to perceive the ECOWAS as remote, reactionary, and biased in favor of coastal elites and Western interests, despite the organization's stated commitment to regional security and integration (Ansah, 2025). The inability of the ECOWAS to offer sufficient assistance in combating terrorist activities is one of the most frequently mentioned complaints. Howard and Czaja (2025) attribute this to financial limitations and a lack of cooperation that have hindered the implementation of the anti-terrorism initiatives enacted by the ECOWAS. Member states have found it challenging to carry out their own projects due to the anticipated $2.6 billion yearly cost of the ECOWAS' security force, particularly in the Sahel where the threat is greatest. They argue that since its coup in 2022, Burkina Faso alone has seen over 15,500 terror-related fatalities, with over 6,000 of those killings taking place in 2024. Nonetheless, rather than provide real security support, the ECOWAS's response remained primarily symbolic, consisting of penalties and suspensions. They lament further that accusations of abandonment have been strengthened by this discrepancy between words and deeds.

Also, there is diplomatic alienation and political bias. Sahelian leaders have also criticized the ECOWAS for its perceived political bias. The organization's swift condemnation of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger contrasted sharply with its muted response to "constitutional coups" in other member states where elected leaders manipulated term limits to remain in power (Ansah, 2025). This double standard has led to claims that the ECOWAS functions as a "club of elites" rather than a neutral arbiter of regional stability (Konyinsola, 2025).

In terms of the susceptibility of civilians and humanitarian consequences, terrorist organizations, including Boko Haram, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), have specifically targeted civilians, schools, marketplaces, and places of worship. Many people have been displaced by these attacks; by mid-2024, Burkina Faso alone had more than two million internally displaced people –DPs (Haoumalik, 2023). Food insecurity and economic collapse have resulted from the destruction of agricultural livelihoods and the emptying of entire villages in Mali and Niger. Anuga (2022) argues that a culture of terror and trauma has been brought about by the indiscriminate nature of attacks, which frequently involve mass kidnappings, executions, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Both extremist violence and harsh counterterrorism operations which have also been accused of violating human rights trap civilians.

Justice as a Pillar of Peace and Development in the SDG Framework

Economic growth alone does not determine development; it includes freedom in its expansive form. Sen (1999) politically frames development as the expansion of freedoms. Justice is to ensure that these freedoms are guaranteed. In other words, justice is imperative for development to thrive. One of the 2030 Agenda's most fundamental and politically controversial goals is Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16). It demands the development of inclusive, peaceful societies, universal access to justice, and the establishment of strong, responsible institutions at all levels (Dursun-Özkanca, 2021). SDG 16 is existential rather than merely aspirational in areas like the Sahel that are impacted by violence. SDG 16 is relevant to regional security because it acknowledges the connection between security and development, which holds that development is impossible without security and that sustainable peace cannot be attained without inclusive governance (Dursun-Özkanca, 2021). This relationship is especially critical in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger where political unrest, institutional breakdown, and terrorism have produced a multidimensional crisis.

Restorative justice focuses on helping victims of crimes. Accordingly, the Sahel states need to be helped, as sanctions would worsen the situation. Key Targets of SDG 16 relevant to the Sahel are the following: 16.1 significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates; 16.3 promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice; 16.6 develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions; and 16.a strengthen national institutions to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime.

The preceding targets directly intersect with the Sahel's challenges. The absence of justice mechanisms, the erosion of state legitimacy, and the proliferation of armed groups all point to the urgent need for SDG 16-aligned reforms. For regional security and institutional fragility, in West Africa, particularly within the ECOWAS, as observed by International IDEA (2024), the execution of SDG 16 has not been the same. While some member states have made progress in institutional reform, others, especially those facing insurgencies, have struggled to uphold basic governance standards. The Sahelian states' withdrawal from the ECOWAS reflects a deeper crisis of trust in regional institutions and their ability to deliver justice and security. Moreover, the militarization of counterterrorism responses has often undermined SDG 16's emphasis on human rights and accountability. Without a shift toward inclusive governance and community-based justice, regional security efforts will perpetuate cycles of violence and exclusion (DCAF, 2021).

Justice as Fairness, Inclusion, and Institutional Responsiveness

Justice in the Sahel cannot be reduced to courtroom procedures or constitutional texts; it must be understood as a lived experience shaped by access, dignity, and trust. In regions plagued by insurgency and state fragility, justice must be fair, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities (Dursun-Özkanca, 2021). Justice as fairness, drawing from Rawlsian Theory, emphasizes equal treatment and the protection of basic liberties. In the Sahel, this principle is often violated by both state and non-state actors. Counter-terrorism operations have been marred by extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and ethnic profiling, undermining the very legitimacy of the state (Anyanwu, 202). When justice is perceived as selective or punitive, it fuels resentment and radicalization. Justice as inclusion requires that all groups, especially women, youth, and ethnic minorities, to have access to legal remedies and decision-making

processes. In Mali, for example, rural communities often rely on customary justice systems due to the absence of formal courts. While these systems are locally trusted, they may lack procedural safeguards and gender sensitivity (International IDEA, 2024). Bridging the gap between formal and informal justice mechanisms is essential for building legitimacy.

Justice as institutional responsiveness suggests that responsive institutions are those that adapt to local needs, deliver timely services, and uphold accountability. In Burkina Faso and Niger, weak judicial systems and under-resourced local governments have failed to respond to the grievances that fuel conflict. Corruption, delays, and lack of transparency erode public trust and generate space for armed groups to offer alternative governance (Anyanwu, 2023). SDG 16 calls for institutions that are not only effective but also trusted. In the Sahel, this means investing in justice systems that are community-based, culturally relevant, and resilient to political shocks. Without such reforms, justice will remain an abstract ideal rather than a tangible reality.

Conceptual Reflections on Justice, Regionalism, and Sovereignty in Postcolonial Contexts

The Sahelian rupture with the ECOWAS is not merely a geopolitical event - it is a postcolonial reckoning. It reflects a deeper critique of regionalism as historically shaped by colonial legacies, Western liberal norms, and elite-driven governance structures. Postcolonial Theory offers a powerful lens to understand this moment, emphasizing the need for justice that is rooted in sovereignty, historical memory, and structural transformation (Nyhus, 2025). Postcolonial justice challenges the liberal teleology of transitional justice, which often prioritizes legalism, reconciliation, and institutional reform without addressing the structural injustices inherited from colonial rule. In the Sahel, these legacies include centralized governance, extractive economies, and externally imposed security paradigms (Nyhus, 2025).

As Aidan Nyhus argues, "colonialism is understood as a form of structural injustice…perpetuated by international, transnational and local unjust social processes" (2025, 3). This critique resonates in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger where citizens increasingly view the ECOWAS as an extension of Western influence rather than a vehicle for African sovereignty. The demand for justice is therefore not just legal; it is existential, rooted in the desire to reclaim agency over political and security decisions.

Regionalism in Crisis amid the ECOWAS' Sovereignty Dilemma

As noted earlier, the exit of the Sahelian states from the ECOWAS reflects a crisis in regionalism. While the ECOWAS was founded to promote integration and collective security, its supranational ambitions have often clashed with national sovereignty. The Sahelian states argue that the ECOWAS has failed to respect their political autonomy, especially in its response to military coups and counterterrorism strategies (Ansah, 2025). This tension is symbolic of what Godwin Onuoha calls the "postcolonial moment": i.e. a space where African states navigate between inherited colonial structures and the aspiration for self-defined governance (2017,).

The formation of the AES is thus both a rejection of the ECOWAS and an assertion of postcolonial sovereignty. In this context, sovereignty itself becomes a form of justice. It is the right to define security priorities, choose allies, and construct governance models that reflect local realities. For the Sahelian states, justice means breaking from imposed norms and building institutions that are accountable to their own people, not to external actors or regional elites. This

theoretical lens reframes the Sahelian crisis not as a breakdown of order, but as a transformative moment—an opportunity to reimagine regionalism through the prism of postcolonial justice and self-determination.

The ECOWAS and the Tensions between Regional Integration and National Sovereignty

As stated earlier, t5he withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the ECOWAS in 2024 was not simply a geopolitical maneuver; it was a protest against what they perceived as regional injustice. These states accused the ECOWAS of applying punitive measures selectively, undermining their sovereignty, and failing to support their existential fight against terrorism. Through a postcolonial lens, their exit can be interpreted as a rejection of a regional order that they believe perpetuates structural inequality and external domination (Ansah, 2025). After its 2020 and 2021 coups, Mali faced swift ECOWAS sanctions: border closures, asset freezes, and diplomatic isolation. Yet, when other member states manipulated constitutions to extend presidential terms, the ECOWAS remained silent. This double standard was seen by Mali's leadership as a form of political injustice: punishing military regimes while tolerating civilian autocrats (Konyinsola, 2025). The perception was that the ECOWAS enforced democracy selectively by privileging stability over fairness.

Burkina Faso, grappling with the deadliest insurgency in the region, received little tangible support from the ECOWAS. Despite over 15,000 terrorism-related deaths since 2022, the ECOWAS's response was limited to diplomatic condemnation and suspension. The Traoré regime argued that the ECOWAS failed to understand the urgency of the security crisis, offering sanctions instead of solidarity (Howard and Czaja, 2025). This perceived neglect fueled public support for withdrawal and the formation of the AES. Following Niger's 2023 coup, the ECOWAS threatened military intervention, a stance that many Nigeriens viewed as aggressive and externally driven, especially given France's vocal support for the ECOWAS' position. The junta and civil society groups interpreted this as an attempt to impose Western-backed governance rather than engage in genuine dialogue. The threat of force, rather than mediation, was seen as a violation of Niger's sovereignty and a betrayal of regional solidarity (Africa Agenda, 2024).

The Interplay of Justice and Sovereignty in Postcolonial Regionalism

From the perspective of these Sahelian states, the ECOWAS's actions represented a continuation of colonial logic: i.e. external actors dictating internal affairs, prioritizing elite consensus over grassroots realities, and enforcing norms that ignore local contexts. Their withdrawal was framed not as a rejection of cooperation, but as a demand for justice—justice that respects sovereignty, security imperatives, and the right to self-determination.

The reframing aligns with Postcolonial Theory, which critiques institutions that perpetuate dependency and marginalization. In this view, justice is not merely procedural; it is structural. It requires dismantling inherited hierarchies and building regionalism from the ground up, rooted in dignity, autonomy, and mutual respect.

Grassroots Reflections on the ECOWAS and the
Struggle for Justice in the Sahel

Across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, civil society organizations and activists have voiced strong critiques of the ECOWAS' handling of the Sahelian crises. Their statements reflect a growing belief that the ECOWAS has failed to uphold its founding principles of solidarity, justice, and regional unity. In a joint letter to Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, several West African civil society organizations condemned the ECOWAS' sanctions against Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as "illegal and inhumane." They argued that these measures punished entire populations rather than political elites, exacerbating humanitarian crises and undermining regional security cooperation. According to the Joint Civil Society Statement, Arewa Research and Development Project, CEDDART, JACOM, "The withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso poses a direct threat to the collaborative efforts required to combat regional security challenges…These countries, particularly Mali and Niger, are critical in the fight against terrorism and insurgency." This framing aligns with postcolonial critiques of punitive diplomacy, whereby sanctions are seen as tools of coercion rather than instruments of justice.

Betraying Its Founding Principles

When announcing their withdrawal, the military-led governments of the three Sahelian states accused the ECOWAS of "betraying its founding principles" and operating "under the influence of foreign powers". This accusation reflects a broader sentiment that the ECOWAS has become disconnected from the realities of its most vulnerable members. As Malian political activist in exile, quoted by Human Rights Watch, put it, "Since they came to power by force, these military governments have systematically failed to hold people responsible for egregious human rights abuses to account and have now reached a new low by preventing victims from seeking justice before the ECOWAS court" (2025, 1).

This quote reveals a paradox: while the Sahelian states claim to be resisting injustice, their own governance failures complicate the moral narrative. Yet, the critique of the ECOWAS remains potent- especially in its perceived failure to provide meaningful support during existential crises.

A Justice Vacuum

Human Rights Watch warned that the withdrawal from the ECOWAS would deprive citizens of access to the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, a vital platform for redress in cases of human rights violations. This concern underscores the tension between sovereignty and accountability: while the Sahelian states seek autonomy, their citizens risk losing avenues for justice. These civil society voices echo the postcolonial justice framework: justice must be rooted in sovereignty, dignity, and mutual respect, not imposed through sanctions or external pressure. The Sahelian states' withdrawal is thus both a rejection of perceived injustice and a call to reimagine regionalism from the ground up.

**Empirical Accounts of Community-level
Perceptions of ECOWAS' Failures**

It is evident that political elites were the driving force behind Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's exit from the ECOWAS. The reasons and repercussions were felt at the local level. Local leaders, displaced populations, and civil society organizations have expressed dissatisfaction with the ECOWAS' punitive actions and its inability to effectively address the security and humanitarian challenges in the Sahel. In the Mopti region of central Mali, the village of Bankass has been repeatedly targeted by jihadist groups. Following Mali's 2021 coup, the ECOWAS imposed sweeping sanctions that included border closures and financial restrictions. These measures disrupted humanitarian aid flows and trade routes, trhereby worsening food insecurity in already vulnerable areas. Local leaders in Bankass reported that the ECOWAS' sanctions felt "like punishment for surviving," as they bore the brunt of decisions made far from their communities. A community elder told researchers, "We are attacked by terrorists, and then punished by our neighbors. ECOWAS closed the borders, but the terrorists never stopped coming" (interview cited in Mohammed and Arabo, 2024, 6). This case underscores the disconnection between the ECOWAS' diplomatic tools and the lived realities of rural populations.

In northern Burkina Faso, the rise of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDH), a civilian militia mobilized by the government, was a direct response to the absence of effective regional support. The ECOWAS' suspension of Burkina Faso following its 2022 coup was perceived locally as abandonment. Grassroots organizations in Ouahigouya and Djibo reported that ECOWAS' stance alienated communities that felt they were fighting a war alone. One youth organizer stated the following: "We asked for help. ECOWAS gave us sanctions. So, we built our own defense. It's not perfect, but it's ours" (from a field report cited in Ansah, 2025, 7). This case illustrates how perceived neglect catalyzed local mobilization and a redefinition of justice as self-defense.

In Tillabéri, a region heavily affected by insurgency, women's cooperatives have long relied on the ECOWAS' Community Court of Justice to challenge land seizures and human rights violations. Following Niger's 2023 coup and the ECOWAS' sanctions, access to this court was effectively severed. Human Rights Watch reported that the withdrawal from the ECOWAS "deprives citizens of an important path to accountability and justice," particularly for marginalized groups. A women's rights advocate lamented: "We used to have hope. We could take our case to the ECOWAS. Now, we are alone. Justice is far away" (2025, 1).

The preceding case highlights how regional disengagement can erode institutional pathways for justice, especially for vulnerable populations. These grassroots experiences reveal a profound disillusionment with the ECOWAS, not just among political elites, but among ordinary citizens. The perceived injustice of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and institutional neglect has led communities to redefine justice in terms of sovereignty, survival, and self-determination. The postcolonial critique becomes tangible here: the ECOWAS' actions are seen not as protective, but as punitive , thereby reinforcing historical patterns of exclusion and external control. The Sahelian states' withdrawal is thus not only a political rupture, but a grassroots rebellion against a regional order that many feel has failed them.

Empirical Insights into Counterterrorism Shortcomings and Governance Gaps

It is now essential to tell the stories of the ECOWAS' unfulfilled promises in the Sahel. In Mali

(2012–2023), the ECOWAS found it difficult to properly address the jihadist takeover of northern Mali and the Tuareg uprising. It lacked strategic consistency in its assistance for MINUSMA and its mediation efforts were sluggish. According to Mohammed and Arabo (2024), the transitional administration in Mali was further alienated by the 2021 sanctions and accused the ECOWAS of disregarding its security requirements. In Burkina Faso (2022–2024), the ECOWAS provided no direct military support in spite of rising violence. Burkina Faso's suspension was interpreted as desertion, which led the government to organize civilian militias and look for other partners. Critics state that the ECOWAS was increasing tensions rather than promoting communication when it threatened military action in Niger in 2023 in response to the country's coup (Buchan and Tsagourias, 2023; Lawal, 2023). The ECOWAS' declining power in the region was brought to light by the junta's disobedience and the spike in public support for it (The Conversation, 2023). As the ECOWAS is increasingly seen as a remote bureaucracy that cannot adjust to the realities of asymmetric warfare and political fragmentation, rather than as a guarantee of collective security, the cumulative effect of these failures has sparked a serious crisis of legitimacy (Ansah, 2025; Bojang, 2025). The formation of the AES reflects a strategic pivot toward a new security architecture rooted in sovereignty, responsiveness, and regional solidarity (CISA Newsletter, 2024).

Furthermore, the ECOWAS' image as an impartial arbiter of justice and security has been weakened by its silence on constitutional manipulations in other member nations, which has stoked allegations of political bias and selective enforcement (Konyinsola, 2025). The erosion of confidence caused by this discrepancy between promise and reality has led Sahelian states to look for new partnerships and redefine regional cooperation according to their own standards. In response, the government mobilized civilian militias (VDH) and pivoted toward alternative alliances. Local leaders and civil society groups criticized the ECOWAS for abandoning the people in their hour of need. After the July 2023 coup in Niger, the ECOWAS issued an ultimatum and threatened military intervention.

These case studies reveal a consistent pattern: the ECOWAS' interventions have been delayed, inconsistent, and politically charged. Rather than offering coordinated support during crises, the organization has often resorted to punitive measures that alienate member states and exacerbate instability. For Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, these failures were not isolated—they were symptomatic of a broader institutional breakdown. Their withdrawal from the ECOWAS and the formation of the AES reflect a desire to build a new security architecture—one that prioritizes sovereignty, responsiveness, and regional solidarity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper concludes that the exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the ECOWAS marks a critical rupture in West African regionalism, with far-reaching consequences for governance, integration, and the achievement of the SDGs. The ECOWAS, long regarded as the continent's most active regional economic community (REC), now faces a legitimacy crisis that threatens its ability to coordinate peace, security, and development across member states. The formation of the AES introduces a competing bloc that challenges the ECOWAS' authority and coherence. This fragmentation weakens collective decision-making and undermines efforts to harmonize policies on trade, migration, and security. It also complicates diplomatic coordination with external partners that now face a divided regional landscape. SDG 16, which is focused on peace, justice, and strong institutions, is particularly vulnerable. Moreover, the political instability and

militarization of governance in the Sahel threaten progress on other SDGs, including poverty reduction (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), and education (SDG 4). The withdrawal signals a shift in normative frameworks from liberal democratic governance toward sovereignty-centered security models. This reconfiguration may inspire other states facing internal unrest to challenge the ECOWAS' supranational authority, potentially leading to a domino effect of disengagement and regional disintegration.

Accordingly, a multifaceted policy approach is desperately needed to save the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in West Africa from collapsing, particularly in the wake of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's exit from the ECOWAS. These suggestions seek to restore regional coherence, encourage inclusive governance, and strengthen institutional resilience.

The first recommendation is to restore regional trust by means of inclusive discourse. Instead of adopting punitive diplomacy, the ECOWAS could start a reconciliation process with the Sahelian states that centers on common development objectives. Reorienting collaboration on shared objectives like youth employment, climate resilience, and peacebuilding could be facilitated via a regional SDG summit that brings together the ECOWAS, AES, civil society, and development partners.

The second recommendation is to expand the variety of development collaborations. West African governments should collaborate with diaspora networks, regional development banks, and South-South partners in addition to traditional donors. This diversification can boost negotiating strength, lessen reliance, and encourage creative funding and execution.

The third recommendation is to boost national responsibility for the SDGs. In order to guarantee that implementation is locally anchored rather than donor-driven, the ECOWAS member states should make sure that SDG targets are incorporated into national development plans and budgets. With the use of strong monitoring systems and community-level involvement from all of the ECOWAS members, the planning and finance ministries should take the lead in intersectoral coordination.

ASnd the fourth and final recommendation is to combine development planning with security. Accordingly, SDG priorities must be reflected in counterterrorism strategies. This entails funding local government, livelihoods, and education in conflict-prone areas in addition to military fixes. A "human security" perspective should be adopted by regional organizations, acknowledging that peace cannot exist without development.

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