The Exit of Sahel States and the Fragmentation of the ECOWAS: The Clash of Civilization Revisited

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Abstract

A crucial turning point in the development of West African regionalism was the exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the subsequent establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Through the lenses of Roxanne Doty's post-positivist perspective on identity and foreign policy and Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis, this paper examines the political, economic and security implications of this rupture. The study emphasizes the discursive and performative aspects of Sahelian state identity construction by giving priority to "how-possible" issues above causal explanations. It contends that ontological and civilizational divisions between coastal and Sahelian imaginaries and Western-aligned versus sovereignty-driven ideologies are what cause the ECOWAS to fragment rather than being a sign of institutional weakness or changing geopolitical interests. Based on historical antecedents and post-positivist insights, the paper argues that the Sahelian departure is a purposeful act of identity reconstitution that reconfigures the architecture of West African integration and challenges dominant regional norms. Policy suggestions for readjusting the ECOWAS' integrative processes to accept pluralistic identities and prevent further fragmentation are provided in the conclusion.

Keywords: ECOWAS Fragmentation, Sahelian Identity Politics, Post-positivist International Relations, Clash of Civilizations, Regional Integration in West Africa, Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

Introduction

The phenomenon of Sahelian states exiting the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has become imperative. A complex mix of sovereignty concerns, security issues, economic considerations, and human rights concerns led to Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger's choice to leave the ECOWAS. Although it represents a desire for more independence, the phenomenon also adds complications that may have an impact on regional cooperation and stability (Aliyu, 2025; Gadu,2025; United Nations News, 2024) and therefore needs to be

analytically explained. It is not the first time that a member state has exited the regional body; Mauritania (in 2002) exited from the ECOWAS before. *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) by Samuel Huntington raised the possibility that the bloc's internal fragmentation is caused by ingrained ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions among its member nations. There may be conflicts and obstacles to regional integration because the ECOWAS comprises states with diverse colonial histories, dialects, and religious affiliations. Huntington's concluding pages issued a warning to the West to get ready for the "clash." It has a prophetic flavor, but it is predicated on the "realist" view that conflict is unavoidable and that a balance of power must be established to safeguard the interests of the Western nation best. Huntington provides some "realist" and "power-based" short- and long-term guidance for this purpose.

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the Sahel States' decision to leave the ECOWAS and the subsequent breakup of the regional organization. This is a significant issue because the ECOWAS has long been seen as one of Africa's most effective regional institutions, promoting political stability, economic integration, and collective security. The organization's cohesiveness is put to the test by member state withdrawals, which also raise serious concerns about the long-term viability of regionalism in West Africa. In light of this, the article examines three fundamental questions. First, what security, political, and economic factors are causing the current disintegration of the ECOWAS? It is crucial to answer this question because it will help academics and decision-makers to pinpoint the root causes of instability and foresee potential crises. Second, how may the Sahel States' exit change the course of the ECOWAS' possible disintegration? Since it connects current events to more general worries about institutional longevity, this investigation is essential. Third, how much does the disintegration of the ECOWAS represent more profound ideological, cultural, or civilizational divisions in West Africa? By placing the issue inside Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm, the analysis is elevated beyond local politics and integrated into international discussions about identity, conflict, and the tenacity of transnational institutions.

This paper's objectives are to (a) assess the significance of Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis in explaining emerging fault lines; (b) place the analysis within international discussions on identity and conflict; and (c) investigate the implications of the Sahel States' withdrawal for the cohesion and survival of the ECOWAS, connecting recent developments to more general questions of regional integration. It also evaluates possible paths for further fragmentation, including the possibility of complete dissolution, highlighting how urgent the problem is. In order to ensure contributions that are both academically sound and pertinent to policy, the study concludes by examining ways to strengthen regionalism and lessen fragmentation in West Africa.

Research Methodology

The article uses a qualitative descriptive case study methodology, which is especially well-suited for analyzing intricate institutional processes in their actual setting. The approach allows for a comprehensive investigation of the political, economic, and security elements causing fragmentation by concentrating on the Sahel States' exit from the ECOWAS.

Also, the qualitative approach emphasizes contextual richness and depth, thereby capturing the subtleties of regional integration through policy papers, academic literature, and documentary evidence. The study's questions, which call for an investigation of cause, influence, and theoretical relevance rather than quantifiable measurement, support this strategy.

Huntington's Clash of Civilizations and the
Fragmentation of the ECOWAS

Huntington acknowledged the Islamic world as a substantial civilization. One could argue that the exit of these Sahelian states signifies a return to civilizational self-awareness and a shift away from systems thought to be dominated by the West or other civilizational blocs. According to Huntington's civilizational perspective, the recent departures of three countries with the largest Muslim populations from a certain political or geographical bloc indicate a realignment along the Islamic civilizational line. This situation aligns with Katzenstein's 2010 perspective, which suggests that global politics is shaped by civilizational identities, thereby strengthening Huntington's thesis that cultural differences drive international conflicts. Intuitively, therefore, because of their religious and cultural ties, other Muslim-dominated countries may be more inclined to embrace this realignment. This is possible in two ways: (1) the formation of alliances beyond the ECOWAS and (2) security and regional fragmentation.

First, for the formation of cooperations beyond the ECOWAS, according to Osabo (2025), Huntington had predicted that there could be alliances based on religious cum cultural orientations. Huntington's "Kin-country syndrome," as he calls it, would make states band together to defend people with whom they have cultural and religious ties, according to Huntington, who refers to this as the "kin-country syndrome." This could help explain why other countries with a majority of Muslims could be more likely to back the Sahelian states that have exited, even if doing so comes at a political or financial cost. The birth of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), formed by the Sahelian states that have withdrawn from the ECOWAS, is an indication of emerging alliances beyond the ECOWAS. Countries would attempt to form cooperations within their respective groups of civilization. The Sahelian governments' increased ties with Russia and other non-Western entities indicate a shift away from the ECOWAS and its Western-aligned policies.

Second, for security and regional fragmentation, Olubiyo and Ayodele (2024) posit that following military takeovers, the ECOWAS has placed diplomatic pressure and sanctions on these states. According to Huntington's thesis, these pressures may exacerbate civilizational divisions and strengthen the notion that these countries are looking for partnerships outside of the ECOWAS. The civilizational conflict concept developed by Huntington is a source of support for realists, neo-conservatives, and geopolitical theorists. The viewpoint of the geopolitical theorists, such as Abrahamian (2003), aligns with Huntington's ideas, particularly after the September 2001 attacks by the Islamic fundamentalists. This is typical of the Russia-West relations cum the Ukraine Conflict. Huntington predicted tensions between Western and Orthodox civilizations, particularly between Russia and the West. This is typical of the conflict between the two, which has been interpreted through this lens, with Russia asserting its Orthodox Slavic identity against Western influence. Mahdi (1992) theorizes civilizational conflicts dangling around the relationship predominantly between the West and Islamic societies, thereby giving support to Huntington's thesis on cultural conflicts shaping global order. Lewis's 1990 position sits well with the view of Huntington that historical tensions between Western and Islamic civilizations contribute to global instability, aligning with Huntington's civilizational conflict framework.

Conversely, scholars, especially of the post-colonial and constructivist perspectives, critique Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. For example, Seif-Amirhosseini's 2023 cultural essentialism, Smith's overgeneralization (2023) and Swan's 2020 civilizational determinism have

downplayed the importance of cultural cum religious affinity as influencing the determination of decisions of states in the international arena. They argue that civilizations are socially generated categories influenced by political, historical and discursive processes rather than being natural, fixed entities. This viewpoint contradicts Huntington's essentialist and deterministic interpretation of cultural identities and international conflict.

Factors that Could Escalate the ECOWAS' Current Fragmentation into Full Disintegration

Disintegration and fragmentation are two distinct but connected concepts with differing consequences for regional unity, particularly in light of the continuous instability in West Africa and the ECOWAS. The progressive deterioration of the ECOWAS' political unity, institutional cohesiveness, and common economic goals among its member states is referred to as fragmentation. Divergent national interests, uneven adherence to community norms, and unilateral actions that impede group decision-making are common manifestations of this dynamic (Akindele and Bassey, 2022; Olaniyan, 2021). The ECOWAS may cease to exist as a viable regional organization if fragmentation is allowed to continue unchecked. In this sense, disintegration is the breakdown of the rules and procedures that unite member states. It is imperative to identify factors that can worsen the integrative attribute of the ECOWAS. This is aimed at revamping the regional body from the seemingly path of disintegration, a situation that is unappetizing for the regional cooperation of member states and their people. According to Adeoye (2024), The ECOWAS' fragmentation is a structural issue that jeopardizes the fundamental basis of West African regional integration, not just a short-term setback. The removal of important players, the failure of regional infrastructure projects, and the reduction of intra-regional trade and mobility are all signs of this frequently gradual process.

Adebajo (2023) highlights key factors that can exacerbate the tense situation, arguing that a path of disintegration is indicated by the (a) suspension and eventual withdrawal of more member states, (b) the emergence of rival coalitions, (c) insecurity in the region and the security deficit, (d) economic disunity, and (v) the decline in institutional credibility. This result is not inescapable, although. The ECOWAS can still regain its position as a pillar of regional prosperity and unity if it makes a concerted effort to restore unity, uphold democratic standards, and address the underlying causes of instability.

Suspension and Eventual Withdrawal of More Member States

A widening division within the bloc is exemplified by the military takeovers in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), which resulted in their expulsion from the ECOWAS and the establishment of the AES (Pandora Editorial Staff, 2024). These events represent a shift away from the democratic government and regional cooperation upon which the ECOWAS was established. In addition to being political, the division is also institutional. The ECOWAS has had difficulty enforcing its procedures, especially those pertaining to constitutional order and democratic transitions. The bloc's reputation has been damaged by its incapacity to stop or undo illegitimate changes in government, which has given other governments the confidence to question its legitimacy. Aduloju, Aduloju and Akinyemi (2025) claim that this decline in legitimacy is a sign of a larger state fragility crisis in West Africa, where poor governance and weak institutions have made it harder to maintain regional integration. The emergence of

alternative alliances such as the AES adds conflicting ideas of security cooperation and sovereignty, further complicating the regional environment.

The Decline in Institutional Credibility

A clear illustration of how fragmentation might result in institutional rupture is the 2025 AES pullout, which eliminated over 76 million people from the ECOWAS's population base (Pandora Editorial Staff, 2024). Additionally, outside parties like China and Russia have taken advantage of these differences by negotiating bilateral security and economic pacts with specific nations, which has reduced the ECOWAS' overall influence. The transition from merely fragmentation to the potential for disintegration is greatly accelerated by the ECOWAS' deteriorating institutional credibility. Member states start to lose trust in the regional mechanism when its institutions—the Commission, the Court of Justice, and the regional standby force—fail to uphold community principles and act forcefully in times of political and security emergencies. As demonstrated by the military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, this degradation of legitimacy makes it harder for the ECOWAS to coordinate collective action or impose sanctions against unlawful changes of government (Adebajo, 2023; Olaniyan, 2021). Member states frequently take unilateral action to circumvent the community structure and further divide when basic institutions are seen as biased or ineffectual.

In addition, the ECOWAS' coherence is further undermined by parallel structures that arise from institutional failure, which leaves a gap of which other sub-regional or ideological alliances can take advantage. Disillusionment with the institutional and normative underpinnings of the ECOWAS might lead to alternative blocs with conflicting goals, as seen by the emergence of the AES (Adeoye, 2024). Without urgent institutional reforms to restore credibility, enforce democratic standards, and ensure fair participation among members, the existing fragmentation could crystallize into irreversible disintegration. The long-term viability of the ECOWAS as a vehicle for regional integration thus hinges upon its ability to regain institutional trust and reassert collective governance principles (Ezirim and Onuoha, 2023).

The Emergence of Rival Coalitions

The formation of competing alliances in West Africa such the AES poses a serious threat to the ECOWAS' unity and heralds a perilous shift from fragmentation to collapse. The values of the ECOWAS, particularly its position on unlawful transfers of administration and democratic governance, are frequently directly opposed by these new partnerships. These coalitions challenge the central authority and legitimacy of the ECOWAS by establishing parallel regional blocs with different political ideologies and security frameworks (Adeoye, 2024; Adebajo, 2023). The feeling of collective identity and shared purpose that supports regional integration is undermined by member states' retreat and affiliation with alternative frameworks. Rival coalitions erode the ECOWAS' institutional and normative foundation as they become increasingly powerful and well-coordinated, resulting in inconsistent policies and disjointed regional responses to emergencies. Member state mistrust is increased as a result of these splinter groups' frequent pursuit of conflicting regional security plans and foreign affiliations that go against the ECOWAS mandates (Ezirim and Onuoha, 2023).

The ECOWAS faces the existential threat of losing its position as the main regional grouping in West Africa as other coalitions like the AES start to formalize their frameworks for

diplomacy, security, and the economy. Citing the bloc's inability to solve its particular security and governance issues, the AES has already indicated its intention to seek autonomous security arrangements and economic cooperation outside of the ECOWAS organizations. The authority and credibility of the ECOWAS may be threatened if these coalitions continue to generate rival institutions, especially in areas like diplomatic coordination, commercial facilitation, and peacekeeping. This division is not just symbolic; rather, it represents a more profound trend toward regional realignment, in which collective governance is becoming less important than nationalism and regime survival (Anderson, 2025). Also, the ECOWAS' incapacity to enforce adherence to its protocols exacerbates the decline of its authority, leading to a void that other coalitions are keen to fill (Aniche and Iwuoha, 2025). The ECOWAS runs the risk of gradually disintegrating and being replaced by a patchwork of sub-regional alliances with conflicting goals if immediate changes and a renewed commitment to integration are not implemented.

Furthermore, the emergence of coalitions in more deliverable channels such as the agricultural products may hinder the effectiveness of the ECOWAS' resolve to integrate the region economically. For example, according to Business Insider Africa (2025), the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger initiated the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)-Sahel initiative. The alliance wants to lessen reliance on imports and encourage locally adapted seed systems. The AES is moving toward greater economic independence, as seen by the creation of APSA-Sahel.

External Factors and Geostrategic Reorientations

The coherence and strategic autonomy of the ECOWAS are under threat due to new geopolitical dynamics brought about by the expanding influence of external countries like China, Russia, and Turkey in West Africa. Regional agreement is becoming more difficult to attain as individual member states ally themselves more and more with these entities, frequently through bilateral military support, infrastructural expenditures, and ideological cooperation. The ECOWAS' normative authority on governance and security issues has been eroded, for example, by Russia's security interventions in Mali and Burkina Faso through the Wagner Group (Rupiya, 2023; Adebajo, 2023). According to Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2022), China's infrastructure diplomacy and Turkey's expansion of soft power through educational and religious institutions have also generated alternative allegiances that compete with the ECOWAS' collective ethos.

The institutional coherence of the ECOWAS is weakened by these strategic realignments, which push member states in divergent directions and favor unilateralism over multilateralism. The common objectives of integration, democratic governance, and regional stability are jeopardized when nations place a higher priority on bilateral ties with superpowers than on their regional commitments. This divergence has the potential to eventually turn current fragmentation into disintegration, especially if outside actors take advantage of internal political divisions or provide assistance to governments that violate the ECOWAS' norms (Adetula, 2021). In addition to casting doubt on the ECOWAS' ultimate relevance, the geopolitical intrusion of China, Russia, and Turkey runs the risk of establishing a multipolar regional system that would marginalize or perhaps supplant the organization.

Collective Economic Mechanisms' Failure

The goals of regional economic integration are under increasing strain due to economic

disagreements and the rise of protectionist measures among the ECOWAS member countries. Even with the establishment of the the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), unilateral trade restrictions, border closures, and enduring non-tariff obstacles continue to impede intraregional commerce. For instance, Nigeria's frequent border closures, which are supposedly intended to stop smuggling, have harmed relations with neighboring countries like Ghana and Benin and interfered with the flow of goods (Ukaoha, 2021). The cooperative attitude that supports the community's economic objective is undermined by such acts, which not only violate the ECOWAS trade protocols but also breed mistrust and economic nationalism (Olayiwola and Oyebanji, 2022). Member states may adopt more protectionist stances as economic rivalries intensify, putting their economic sovereignty before regional unity.

The legitimacy and efficacy of the ECOWAS are weakened by the inward trend, which strengthens isolationism and makes coordinated policy implementation impossible. The community's economic base, which was initially on free movement and shared markets, may crumble under the pressure of conflicting national interests if this trend is allowed to continue unchecked. As governments prefer bilateral or extra-regional commercial ties over the ECOWAS frameworks, this will ultimately turn the current fragmentation into formal disintegration (Akintoye and Oloruntoba, 2023). For example, according to Business Insider Africa (2025), it is instructive to note the collaboration between Ghana and one of the Sahelian states, Burkina Faso. The Sahelian state is establishing new avenues for trade, tourism, and diplomatic ties throughout West Africa with the launch of the Accra-Ouagadougou route, which will provide frequent commercial flights between Ghana and Burkina Faso.

Insecurity in the Region and the Security Deficit

Serious institutional vulnerabilities and member state disenchantment have been revealed by the ECOWAS' limited ability to adequately manage the expanding instability in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, including insurgency, terrorism, and transnational organized crime. The credibility of the ECOWAS as a collective security guarantee has been undermined by the ongoing actions of groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and other transnational criminal networks, which have outstripped national and regional responses (Assan, 2022; Akintola, 2023). It will be recalled, as earlier pointed out in the introductory part of this paper, that one of the reasons of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger leaving the ECOWAS was the incapability of the ECOWAS to provide security for these states. This has necessitated the states to find new partners that can replace the ECOWAS, at least those that can provide security for their states (Rupiya, 2023). As confidence in regional security mechanisms declines, the incapacity to provide coordinated and successful counterterrorism responses fuels fragmentation. Member states are increasingly taking unilateral or bilateral methods to national defense as a result of the ongoing insecurity, which undermines the ECOWAS' shared security strategy and central authority.

The regional unity required for long-term cooperation is weakened by this centrifugal tendency, which also encourages political isolationism of which the .ECOWAS runs the risk of becoming even more marginalized and irrelevant in the handling of conflicts throughout West Africa if it does not mount a strong, credible and coordinated security response. States may choose to forego the ECOWAS framework in favor of internal or external security arrangements, leading to complete disintegration if urgent reform and improved operational capability are not implemented (Aning and Pokoo, 2021; Ezirim and Onuoha, 2023).

Possible Redirection of the Region

The withdrawal of the Sahelian states may not be a singular event, but rather a part of a broader movement toward the establishment of alternative coalitions based on Islamic identity (such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation or bilateral agreements between countries with majority Muslim populations). There are serious worries that the ECOWAS may become fragmented as a result of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's leaving. The cohesion and efficacy of the ECOWAS, which have long been essential in advancing regional integration, stability, and democratic governance, are in jeopardy due to this extraordinary action (HumAngle Media, 2025; BBC News, 2024; ECOWAS, 2024). Insurgencies and terrorism are two major security issues facing the Sahel region. The decision to leave is a reflection of the perception that the ECOWAS did not adequately address these threats. A change toward regional cooperation suited to their unique security requirements is indicated by the establishment of the AES.

The efficacy of collective security initiatives and the possibility of further instability are called into question by this fragmentation. The fundamental allegations that the three juntas leveled against the regional body as the reason for their exit were woven around a lack of insecurity and ideological romanticization of the regional body. First, the juntas claimed that the ECOWAS was unable to fight off terrorism in their states; put markedly, the ECOWAS failed to provide security in their states. Second, they also alleged that the ECOWAS is romanticizing the West, notably France and the United States, a situation that can be tantamount to the struggle for civilization. As Huntington (1996) claims, states would go to war not for ideological purposes, but for the strength of civilization. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the exited states—Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger—are Muslim-dominated states as Mauritania left more than two decades ago; some nuances such as the one that happened in Burkina Faso (the change of official language from French to Hausa) and in Nigeria (the support of the exited states by the Muslim clerics) have lent credence to civilization struggle. Under the leadership of Muhammad Abubakar, the Sultan of Sokoto, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) openly opposed the ECOWAS sanctions against Niger. According to the NSCIA, such punishments are ineffective and unlikely to have a beneficial effect. Instead of using force to deal with the problem, they urged communication and a peaceful conclusion (All Africa, 2025). **Table 1** provides the religious cum cultural idiosyncrasies of the exited Sahelian states.

Table 1: The Exited Sahelian States and their Religious cum Cultural Orientations

S/N	Country	Population, 2024	Population of Muslims	Percentage of Muslims	Cultural Orientations
1	Burkina Faso	23 million	13.8 million	60%	Arabic
2	Mali	23 million	21.9 million	95%	Arabic
3	Niger	27 million	26.5 million	98%	Arabic
4	Mauritania	5 million	5 million	100%	Arabic

Source: Self-generated by the Author Using Data from the ECOWAS (2024)

Table 2 presents the states in the Sahel region and their populations as of 2024. This composition is indicative of what may befall the regional body if the religious cum cultural nature of the composition should be a consideration in the interactions among these states and the ECOWAS. Within the ECOWAS, the Muslim community has a major influence on regional political and economic policies. In terms of political influence, large Muslim populations in

many ECOWAS member states such as Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Niger have an impact on governance and policy choices. Within the ECOWAS, attempts at mediation, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution frequently involve Islamic organizations and religious leaders. Policy changes have resulted from the growth of Islamic political movements in several nations, especially in governance, human rights, and education (ECOWAS, 2024).

In economic terms, the populations of states where Islam are the predominant religion have an impact on the organization's economic policies. For instance, states like Nigeria and Senegal have adopted Sharia-compliant financial systems as a result of the strong Muslim populations, which has promoted Islamic banking and finance. Due to common religious and cultural beliefs, trade relations with states in the Middle East and North Africa have improved. Within the ECOWAS, the halal sector—which encompasses food, cosmetics, and tourism—is growing and opening up new business prospects (Karimu, Salia, Ibrahim and Alagidede (2022).

Additionally, according to Kohnert (2023), to maintain security and stability in West Africa, the ECOWAS has established counterterrorism plans that work with Islamic academics and community leaders to stop radicalization. This is because religious extremism is still a problem, with organizations such as Boko Haram and other rebel groups using religious themes to recruit new members. Yet again, Arjmand (2017) put it succinctly that in the social and cultural realm, the Muslim community has an impact on education policies in the social and cultural spheres, with an emphasis on Islamic schools (madrasas) in addition to traditional educational institutions. The ECOWAS and Muslim-majority nations cultivate diplomatic and economic ties through cultural exchanges.

Table 2: States in the Sahel Region, Populations and Percentage of Muslims, 2024

S/N	Country	Population, 2024 (Million)	Population of Muslims	Percentage of Muslim	Cultural Orientations
Core Sahel States					
1	Burkina Faso	23	13.8	60	Arabic
2	Mali	23	21.9	95	Arabic
3	Niger	27	26.5	98	Arabic
4	Mauritania	5	5	100	Arabic
5	Chad	18	9.9	55	Arabic
Wider Sahel States					
6	Sudan	48	45	90-97	Arabic
7	South Sudan	12	0.6	5	Mixed
8	Senegal	18	17.3	96	Arabic
9	Nigeria	225	110-115	50 mostly in the north	Mixed
10	Cameroon	29	7-7.5	25	Mixed
11	Eritrea	3.7	1.8	50	Mixed

Source: Sel3f-generated by the Author Using Data from the ECOWAS (2024)

In Table 3, it is shown that after the recent exit of the three Sahelian states, there are still four states whose populations are mostly Muslims. Gambia is populated by 90% Muslims, Guinea by 85%, Senegal by 96%, and Sierra Leone by 78%, while Nigeria has a 50% Muslim

population, with the majority of Nigerian Muslims residing in northern Nigeria. This religious cum cultural idiosyncrasy is crucial in interactions among states in the international arena. Given the adverse connotations it carries, religion has been used as a pretext for numerous terrorist attacks and movements. Examples include Japan's Aum Shinrikyo affair, the Middle East's Al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS}, and Ireland's Irish Republican Army (IRA), which emerged from the European conflict between Catholics and Protestants (Idris, 2025.; Tijani, 2015). Nonetheless scholars have backed the notion that religious identification might fortify ties across countries with comparable cultural and ideological histories (King, 2003; Leite, Nobre & Dias, 2023).

Table 3: Composition of ECOWAS and the Population as of 2025

S/N	Country	Population (2024 Estimate)	Estimated Muslim Population (2024)
1	Benin	14.11 million	24% of the population
2	Cabo Verde	0.52 million	2% of the population
3	Côte d'Ivoire	31.17 million	43% of the population
4	The Gambia	2.70 million	90% of the population
5	Ghana	33.79 million	20% of the population
6	Guinea	10.3 million	85% the population
7	Guinea-Bissau	2.15 million	45% of the population
8	Liberia	5.49 million	12% of the population
9	Nigeria	227.88 million	50% of the population
10	Senegal	18.08 million	96% of the population
11	Sierra Leone	8.46 million	78% of the population
12	Togo	9.30 million	20% of the population

Source: Economic Community of West African States (2024)

It is therefore instructive following Bhattacharya's 2024 proposition to hypothesize that religious and cultural affinity might influence other ECOWAS member states to join the states that have exited. It is arguable that the AES might garner support from other Muslim-majority countries in West Africa, especially when they are opposed to Western-led institutions, if Huntington's framework is applied to the ECOWAS predicament. Yet, again, Akram's 2007 *Muslim Ummah* philosophy acts as a key point of reference for collaboration among states with majority Muslim populations that are frequently in opposition to Western ideas of the nation-state. This assertion is further reinforced by the idiosyncrasies of the problems associated with the way states behave in the international arena. Tijani (2022) discusses these problems in the context of globalization deficiency, arguing that although globalization brings about interactions, it, however, exhibits some problems. He further argues that an exigency is demanded to ward off these problems associated with such interactions: i.e. cooperation. Ironically, cooperation is often absent.

According to Tijani (2022), globalization has intensified interactions among people and among states. These interactions, claims Tijani, herald the problem of cheating espoused by scholars. Laying out four prepositions for lack of cooperation in the international system, Tijani talks about (1) the problem of cheating, (2) the problem of relative gains, (3) the problem of interdependence, and (4) the problem of absolute gains. Citing Waltz (1959) and Mearsheimer

(1990), Tijani emphasizes that cheating states would continue to cheat on themselves, adding that cheating among states would erode the enforceability of decisions that can make them act cooperatively. This insight leads states to use national interests as a standard for gauging interstate cooperation. Accordingly, states feel that ensuring their security is more important than international collaboration, which they do not believe can ensure their security in the long run. It is noteworthy to state that the three states premised their withdrawal from the ECOWAS on national security.

Huntington's Clash of Civilizations and the Exited Sahelian States

As noted earlier, Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Theory posits that cultural and civilizational differences, rather than ideological or economic ones, will be the primary causes of post-Cold War conflicts. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's withdrawal from the ECOWAS can be viewed from this angle since it represents underlying geopolitical and cultural conflicts. It is worthwhile to explain the nexus between the Clash of Civilizations Theory and the development that has unfolded in the ECOWAS. To fully understand the more profound geopolitical and cultural dynamics influencing West Africa, it is crucial to investigate the relationship between the Sahelian states' exit from ECOWAS and Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations idea. According to Huntington, civilizational identities based on religion, culture, and historical legacy will be far greater in determining future international wars than ideological or economic divisions. This discourse is elucidated in three ways: (1) shared civilizational values and sovereignty, (2) emerging alliances beyond the ECOWAS—i.e. West versus Islamic civilization fault lines, and (3) security and regional fragmentation.

In amplifying shared civilizational values and sovereignty, Huntington (1996) thought that countries would align on the foundation of civilizational identities contrary to political relationships. The Sahelian states have withdrawn from the ECOWAS, which they believe is impacted by governance models supported by the West. They have placed a greater emphasis on their sovereignty and unique political path. In terms of West versuss Islamic civilization fault lines, He underlined the differences between Islamic and Western civilizations. As military-led administrations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reject outside interference, friction involving Western-backed organizations and local governance systems has grown in the Sahel area. A derivative of this is the recent policy of Niger to change its official language from French to Hausa (ICIR, 2025) and Burkina Faso to devalue French from being the official language of the government and business to a working language (African News, 2023).

Roxanne Doty's Post-positivist Perspective of the Sahelian States' Exit

The post-positivist perspective of Roxanne Doty must be incorporated in a way that enhances the theoretical uniqueness and analytical clarity of this paper. To analyze how the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the ECOWAS is not just geopolitical, but also deeply identity-constitutive, this paper builds on critical constructivism and Roxanne Doty's theory of foreign policy as a discursive activity. Foreign policy creates "us" and "them" through exclusionary narratives that justify both action and inaction, as Doty (1993) contends. The AES utilizes narratives of Islamic civilizational autonomy, post-colonial treachery and opposition to liberal Western governance principles to reposition itself as an actor outside the ECOWAS framework.

By examining how and why particular identities, norms, and power structures emerge to dominate, Critical Constructivism goes beyond the recognition that international political realities are socially constructed. It combines Critical Theory's interest in power, marginalization, and emancipation with classic constructivism's emphasis on ideas and meaning. To put it another way, it is not only about the actors' ideas; it is also about how those beliefs support particular power interests and how other viewpoints are marginalized. One dynamic and reflective branch of constructivist theory that is especially effective at examining political identities, security discourses, and regional integration—or fragmentation—is critical constructivism. In summary, the essence of the critical constructivism is to equip scholars with the means to not only explain what is occurring but also to question prevailing views of what this fragmentation signifies, whose idea of "order" is being questioned, and what alternatives might surface.

While portraying themselves as defenders of true Sahelian sovereignty and Islamic civilizational values, the AES states are redefining the ECOWAS as a "foreign" or externally compromised organization that may be too subject to Western liberal standards. Doty demonstrates that exclusion is essential to the legitimization of foreign policy and is not merely incidental. States set the stage for intervention, disengagement, or alliance-building by characterizing particular players as dangerous, illogical, or primitive. It is possible to see the AES's withdrawal as a reversal of this reasoning as they are establishing a counter-narrative in which they are the rightful guardians of regional order, rejecting the identity that the ECOWAS has forced upon them. According to Doty (1993), who cites Little (1991), a foreign policy analysis is incomplete if the how-questions are not addressed because they are crucial. Making decisions based on the occurrence of specific conditions is made possible by the why-questions that are frequently used interchangeably with foreign policy analysis. Crucially, the how questions may be more intently focused. "Traditional approaches to foreign policy analysis do not pose this kind of how-question," according to Doty (1993). Explaining why certain decisions leading to specific courses of action were chosen is the general focus of foreign policy, described by Doty as follows:

> Depending on the approach, the explanation might focus on the relative position of a state in the international power hierarchy, infighting among various government agencies, or the perceptions of decision makers. What is common to all of these kinds of explanations is that they seek an answer to a particular category of question, a why-question. The problem for analysis is to show that a certain policy decision was predictable given a particular set of circumstances. While the attempt is made to identify sufficient conditions, in most cases, analysts can only suggest that outcomes will occur with a certain amount of probability (Doty, 1993:298).

In essence, the core reason for the Sahelian states' withdrawal from the ECOWAS is not just geopolitical, but also deeply identity-constitutive.

Empirical Case Studies of African Regional Security Identities

Williams (2016) claims that the fight against the LRA insurgency, the African Union-led task force united the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Uganda, and the Central African Republic, exemplifying how informal regional security cooperation can circumvent the

formal processes of the APSA. According to Franklin (2020), this is significant because it represents a localized security identity based on a common understanding of threat, as opposed to externally imposed peacekeeping standards. In other words, the militarized mandate hindered its long-term effectiveness, but it showed how African states may respond to international challenges by forming ad hoc coalitions. Similarly, the European Union and France initially supported the establishment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which consists of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The force was established to fight organized crime and terrorism in the Sahel, but it has since asserted its strategic independence. This is significant because the G5 Sahel represents a hybrid security identity that strikes a balance between internal legitimacy and external backing. The main takeaway is that it highlights conflicts between donor-driven security objectives and African agency, particularly when certain member states resist Western conditionalities.

Given that President Yoweri K. Museveni's Uganda was a key player in determining East African security dynamics, including interventions in South Sudan and Somalia, it is also important to place Uganda's participation in East African security (2010–2015) within the framework of the development of native security identities (Walsh, 2021; Namakula, 2023; Madhuraj, 2020). It is imperative because the notion that African states are passive recipients of security rules is called into question by this case. The essence of this is that, using security operations to establish legitimacy and influence within the East African Regional Security Complex, Uganda aggressively developed a regional leadership persona.

Another indigenous identity establishment is the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram, which consists of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin. Despite being African Union-authorized, it was the result of frontline states' collaboration as opposed to top-down regional planning. It is significant because it is an example of regionalism from the bottom up in reaction to a common insurgent danger. It seems clear that the MNJTF challenges formal organizations like the African Union or the ECOWAS' monopoly on defining acceptable security responses. These examples provide a wealth of information for examining how African governments construct their own regional identities while negotiating, opposing, or redefining external security rules.

Doty's Ideas in the Context of the Sahelian States' Exit and Identity Formation

Foreign policy as identity generation, as posited by Roxanne Doty, is consistent with the aforementioned discursive practices. AES' statements and communications portray the ECOWAS as a Western surrogate authority. The AES has consistently used strategic language in its public declarations and communiqués to depict the ECOWAS as an organization that is devoid of local realities and weakened by external influences (Kohnert, 2024). For example, AES has often called the ECOWAS a Western proxy (Makama, 2025). AES leaders have occasionally described the ECOWAS as a vehicle for "foreign domination" or "neocolonial interference" (Oloyede, 2025). This is particularly evident in responses to the ECOWAS sanctions and military intervention threats following regional coups (Kohnert, 2024). With instance, following the 2023 revolution in Niger, AES governments accused the ECOWAS of working with foreign forces and former imperial masters, particularly France, as claimed by Aboagye (2025).

Aboagye (2025) claims that the Sahel states' expulsion from the ECOWAS was caused by the organization's poor response to the July 2023 coup in Niger, which involved the imposition

of quick, indiscriminate sanctions and the threat of military involvement. In light of governance improvements that have been blocked since 2015, these activities revealed a disconnection between institutional responses and regional reality. This is particularly true in the aftermath of regional coups. Although weaker social, political and economic ties with the larger members of the ECOWAS also played a role, Aboagye argues that Mauritania's main reason for withdrawing was to pursue cultural and economic ties with the Maghreb. He argues that this crisis exposed more serious issues such as the ECOWAS' inability to combat terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel and concerns about French and Western influence on ECOWAS decision-making.

Constructing a Counter-identity

The formation of AES means the construction of a counter identity-against the ECOWAS. As a reaction to failed liberal initiatives, the AES positions itself as the genuine voice of Sahelian sovereignty, grounded in Islamic civilizational values, shared history, and military-led rule. The AES is not merely leaving the ECOWAS; rather, it is rewriting the regional order by rejecting the liberal peace framework and claiming a new civilizational narrative. Instead of being an African organization that prioritizes sovereignty, self-determination, and resistance to imperialism, the declarations of AES present the ECOWAS as a platform for Western liberal ideals. The reasoning behind this framing stems from a larger criticism of the ECOWAS' interventions and sanctions, which AES leaders contend have made instability worse rather than better. For example, in their communiqué after leaving the ECOWAS, the AES members claimed that the bloc was "instrumentalized by foreign powers" and had not helped member states combat terrorism (WANEP, 2024). Three distinct ways in which the counter identity narrative manifests are (1) institutional architecture of security cooperation, (2) strategic framing of self-reliance, and (3) operational implications. These aspects are briefly discussed in the ensuing subsections.

Institutional Architecture of Security Cooperation

In September of 2023, the Liptako-Gourma Charter, which established a defense and security committee charged with directing member states' cooperative military operations and information sharing, codified the AES through the Institutional Architecture of Security Cooperation. The alliance's operational organization revolves around this committee, which represents a conscious shift away from the ECOWAS-led security procedures (CISA, 2025).

Strategic Framing of Self-Reliance

The leaders of the AES have continuously presented their partnership as a reaction to what they see as the ECOWAS and other international players' inability to effectively combat terrorism and instability in the Sahel. The AES generated a story of regional resiliency and civilizational solidarity by highlighting shared intellect, communal sovereignty, and mutual defense (Goukouni and Tchie, 2023). Moreover, the AES has positioned itself as a civilizational bloc, drawing on shared Sahelian-Islamic heritage and military-led governance models to construct a counter-narrative to liberal democratic norms promoted by the ECOWAS. This identity is reinforced through the establishment of a confederation and the establishmentn of joint military structures, which AES leaders describe as a "shield of sovereignty" against both jihadist insurgencies and external political interference (ADF, 2025; FES PSCC, 2024).

Operational Implications

The alliance has further institutionalized its military cooperation by announcing plans to establish a combined force of 5,000 troops. In addition to improving tactical coordination, this action represents a symbolic departure from reliance on coalitions supported by the West such as the G5 Sahel or the ECOWAS standby forces. According to Sputnik Africa (2025), with its air, ground, and intelligence capabilities, the force will be able to function independently throughout the AES region. This operational independence represents a strategic and symbolic shift away from dependence on Western-backed coalitions such as the ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel standby forces, which have both come under fire for their lack of effectiveness, reliance on donors, and low level of legitimacy among local populations. Sputnik Africa (2025) states that the AES's unified force serves as the Sahel's "passport to security," embodying a larger idea of regional independence and civilizational sovereignty. As a reassertion of Sahelian agency in establishing their military architecture, the alliance's leaders have presented this action as a response to the inability of foreign actors to handle the region's deteriorating security situation.

In a similar vein to Doty's examination of United States' counterinsurgency discourse in the Philippines, where the colonizer-imposed order on a manufactured "irrational other," the AES articulates the ECOWAS as a compromised liberal bastion. Here, the roles are reversed: By dismissing the ECOWAS' liberal peace as an imported myth, Sahelian leaders reposition themselves as stewards of local order.

Conclusion

Huntington's theory offers a helpful framework for comprehending the cultural, geopolitical and ideological changes driving the decision of Sahelian states to leave the ECOWAS, even though it does not precisely predict this outcome. The action is in line with broader global trends in which countries are rethinking alliances in light of security, identity and sovereignty concerns. The fragmentation of the ECOWAS is not merely a temporary setback but a structural crisis that threatens the very foundation of regional integration in West Africa. The suspension and eventual withdrawal of key member states, the rise of competing alliances, and the erosion of institutional legitimacy all point toward a trajectory of disintegration. This situation emphasizes the displacement of traditional sources of authority and the evolution of identity construction to replace it. Castells (1997) claims that as secular, universal principles proliferate and states lose some of their autonomy to global markets, many people and groups react by embracing particularistic identities such as religious, ethnic and cultural ones. According to him, identity-based resistance movements are a direct reaction to the disruptive impacts of globalization, rather than being antiquated; however, this outcome is not inevitable. Doty's 1993 work on identity formation is a foundational text for understanding how foreign policy is not merely a reaction to objective threats, but a discursive practice that constructs identities of both self and other through exclusionary narratives.

This paper concludes that disintegration would have serious repercussions, arguing that with deliberate efforts to rebuild cohesion, enforce democratic norms, and address the root causes of instability, the ECOWAS can still reclaim its role as a cornerstone of regional unity and development. West African governments would be more susceptible to transnational dangers, including organized crime, terrorism, and economic shocks, in the absence of a cohesive regional

union. The humanitarian consequences, which are already evident in the increase in food insecurity and displacement, will probably worsen. Aduloju et al. (2025) posit that the ECOWAS runs the risk of becoming outdated if it does not change to reflect the changing political landscape of its member countries. Urgent reforms are required to reaffirm common values and rebuild confidence to avoid this scenario.

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