

Sahel Crisis Simulation: Background Paper

The Sahel region in Africa, the semi-arid zone to the south of the Sahara Desert, includes some of the most economically impoverished countries in the world. Over the past decade, the inland countries have seen severe political crises which have disrupted the lives of millions of people in the region. Long-standing animosities between the governments in the region and ethnic minorities, most notably the Tuareg, resulted in a heightened state of crisis in 2012 when groups in Northern Mali began a large-scale insurgency against the Malian government. Since that time, the political situation has worsened and reached a high level of crisis by 2024.



The crisis has three interlocking dimensions:

- Crisis of National Governments.** The inland countries in the Sahel have been weekend by severe legitimacy crises over the past decade. Since 2020, [the countries of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have all had had military coups](#). Burkina Faso had two separate military coups in 2022. [In 2010, Freedom House listed](#) Mali as Free, Niger and Burkina Faso as Partly Free, and Chad as Not Free. [By 2024](#), only Niger was listed as Partly Free, and the other three were all considered Not Free. In 2024, Chad did hold democratic elections, but the victor was Idriss Deby, the son of the leader for the country since 1990 and the former leader of the Transitional Military Council which ruled the country from 2021 until 2024.
- Violence.** [The 2024 Global Terrorism Index writes](#) that “The epicentre of terrorism has now conclusively shifted out of the Middle East and into the Central Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa. There were just under four thousand deaths from terrorism in the Sahel in 2023, or 47 per cent of the total” of deaths from terrorism around the world. [Much of this comes from the spread of radical Islamist groups](#) linked to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. The widespread influence of [the Russian-connected Wagner Group](#) in the region has also been identified as a cause of violence. [Conflicts between farmers and herders](#) have also become more prominent throughout the region. Violence is not exclusive to nonstate actors as [Amnesty International has documented massacres](#) by state and international forces in the region. The UNHCR estimates that at least [4.8 million people in the region have been forced to flee their homes](#) as a result of the violence.
- Regional/International Governance.** The main regional governance organization has been the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but they are seeing a crisis of collective action in recent years. [Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have exited the organization in 2024](#). This is not limited to ECOWAS, as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court have faced severe criticisms and challenges within the region. Diplomacy outside of international organizations is also being strained. In 2024, [Burkina Faso expelled French diplomats](#), [Niger suspended military cooperation with the United States](#), and Mali was part of high-level diplomatic spats with Algeria and Mauritania.