

Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso | Rising insecurity

February 19, 2024



Summary

Mali and Burkina Faso formally withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on January 29 and Niger on January 30. However, the ECOWAS treaty requires 1-year notice before leaving. The countries accused ECOWAS of inadequate support in combating terrorism and insecurity. There have been tensions between the three nations and ECOWAS, as it put sanctions on them following coups in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in July 2023. The military regimes condemned the sanctions and allied with Russia to counter Western pressure and aid reductions, prioritizing security restoration over civilian rule.

Recent events and developments

On January 29, Mali and Burkina Faso formally withdrew from ECOWAS, while Niger did so on January 30. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger levelled accusations against ECOWAS, claiming it had not sufficiently aided their struggle against "terrorism and insecurity". According to them, the West sought to control terrorist groups by eliminating their cells and strengthening state institutions in each nation. Nevertheless, the approach adopted by the West fell short in safeguarding civilians, tackling governance issues, and resolving underlying political tensions fuelling instability. As a result, the Jihadi insurgency managed to regain strength in Mali following initial French military achievements in 2013, subsequently expanding into Burkina Faso and Niger. The three countries condemned the imposition of sanctions following military coups, deeming them "illegal, illegitimate, inhumane, and irresponsible". As they battle jihadist insurgencies affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State, the three military chiefs have stated that they aim to restore security before returning to civilian rule. Furthermore, the military regimes leveraged domestic anti-Western feelings to forge alliances with similar authoritarian governments, such as Russia and Iran. This strategy aims to offset the impact of Western and ECOWAS sanctions as well as the reduction in Western aid. Responses of citizens in Mali have been positive as many people have been affected by the economic sanctions.

Impact assessment

Establishing cooperation with Russia can be viewed as a direct consequence of the lack of effectiveness in tackling terrorism, lack of improvement in regional stability, and sanctions by ECOWAS. While Burkina Faso has been in discussion with Russia over cooperation since November 2023 with some alleged troops deployment in January, Mali and Niger have also been deepening their military ties in a similar manner. With the presence of Western countries and by being members of ECOWAS, all three countries were part of an accountability mechanism they had to answer to. Leaving ECOWAS can contribute to the hampering of regional responses to the spread of terrorism, causing weakened responses to terrorism in countries like Benin and Togo, where terrorism is growing. Thus, ceasing cooperation with ECOWAS will result in less intelligence cooperation which is valuable in the counter terrorism fight. Further, it can affect landlocked countries' economies if ECOWAS prohibits its members from cooperating with the newly departed. Moreover, the chances of returning to the civilian rule are not likely in the near future as it was clearly stated that all three juntas wanted to focus on minimizing terrorism, before holding elections. In Burkina Faso, while elections were set up for July 2024, these were indefinitely postponed. Finally, many citizens believe that leaving the regional body will benefit the countries as many have been affected by the economic sanctions ECOWAS imposed on the countries.

Advice from Forth Global

- Make sure contingency and security plans are updated and adequately distributed to employees on the ground. This includes the decision-making process on relocation, evacuation, and hibernation.
- Monitor local news and liaise with local contacts to be informed of relevant developments. Inform staff to not discuss plans and routes publicly.
- Make sure all employees travelling to Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger undertake a 3-day HEAT training prior to deployment.

Customized advice

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