

# Navigating Rivalries: Prospects for Coexistence between ECOWAS and AES in West Africa

Dirk Kohnert <sup>1</sup>

**Cartoon:** *Mali-Burkina-Niger: from split to federation ?*



Source: © [Damien Glez](#), *Jeune Afrique*, 16 February 2024

**Abstract:** The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), created in September 2023 by the three military governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as a counterweight to ECOWAS and the post-colonial influence of France and other Western countries, announced the creation of a confederation of its three countries in July 2024. The AES have more in common than the other countries of the Sahel. First, they are the centre of the Sahel and most vulnerable to jihadism. They figure among the least developed countries, with 40% to 50% of the population living in poverty. They are also landlocked countries with vast desert areas, making them more vulnerable to climate change. Finally, they are the countries with the highest population growth in the Sahel, with an average of six children per woman. The creation of the AES came amid a decade of escalating unrest in the Sahel, fuelled by the aftermath of the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011. The resulting instability caused rampant arms trafficking and the rise of armed groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The Sahel region accounts for a staggering 43% of global terrorist deaths, more than South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa combined. AES counterinsurgency operations will focus on the Liptako-Gourma region, the vast and porous border area where the three states meet, a borderland notorious for its instability. Previous leaders have often put French interests ahead of those of their own people, allowing the continued exploitation of the region's natural resources, including uranium, gold and manganese, without much benefit to the local population. In the face of critical comments from the AU about the AES countries' exit from ECOWAS, the former rejected any interference in their internal affairs. The AES confederation will expand the operational space of the junta alliance and consolidate its military and economic partnership with Russia and China, as well as Turkey and Iran. However, the AES secession undermines the legitimacy of ECOWAS by hindering regional economic and security integration and further complicating the return to democratization. The confederation will seek to absorb new members such as Chad, Guinea and Sudan to further strengthen its power and legitimacy as an alternative regional bloc. However, a divided Sahel will make tackling regional challenges even more difficult. If the AES were to replace the CFA franc with its own currency, as announced, and other Francophone countries in the UEMOA were to follow suit, this would require a fundamental restructuring of both the UEMOA and ECOWAS and finally also call into question the introduction of the ÉCO, the new common West African currency, planned for 2027.

**Keywords:** [Alliance of Sahel States](#), [West Africa](#), [Sahel](#), [ECOWAS](#), [UEMOA](#), [Jihadism](#), [Decolonization](#), [Nationalism](#), [Sovereignty](#), [Sustainable development](#), [good governance](#), [CFA franc](#), [Mali](#), [Niger](#), [Burkina Faso](#), [Guinea](#), [Nigeria](#), [France](#), [Russia](#), [China](#)

**JEL-Code:** F15, F35, F52, F53, F54, H77, N17, N47, O17, O55, Z13

<sup>1</sup> Dirk Kohnert, associated expert, [GIGA-Institute for African Affairs, Hamburg](#). Draft: 30 July 2024

# 1. Introduction

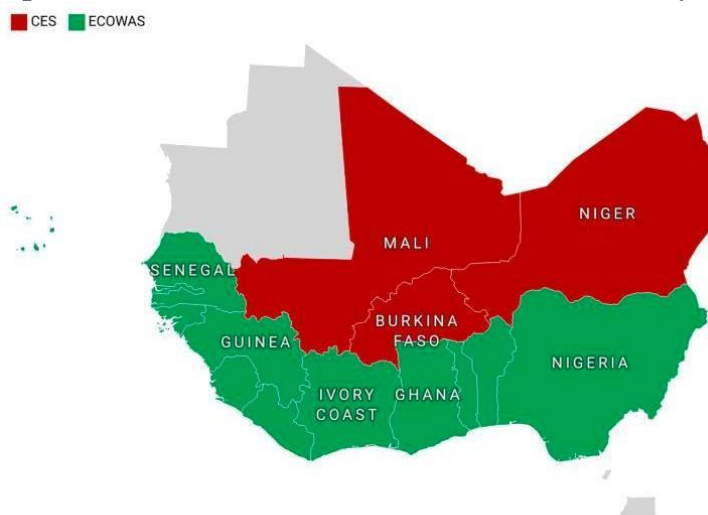
**Cartoon 2:** 'When those suspended (from ECOWAS) suspend their participation (in ECOWAS)',<sup>2</sup>



Source: © [Damien Glez](#), *Jeune Afrique*, 29 January 2024

Since the military coup d'état of Lieutenant General [Mamady Doumbouya](#) in [Guinea](#) on 5 September 2021, a wave of coups has swept through the [Sahel](#) in [Western Africa](#). The coup plotters and military leaders of [Mali](#) ([Assimi Goïta](#), 2021), [Burkina Faso](#) ([Ibrahim Traoré](#), 2022) and [Niger](#) ([Abdourahamane Tchiani](#), 2023) followed suit. The coups have been strongly condemned by West Africa's regional economic and political organisation [ECOWAS](#) as well as the African Union ([AU](#)) and the international community. When ECOWAS leader, the Nigerian President [Bola Tinubu](#), threatened to intervene by force, the three military regimes of [Burkina Faso](#), [Mali](#) and [Niger](#) decided to establish a new regional organisation, the [Alliance of Sahel States](#) ([Alliance des États du Sahel](#), AES) to defend themselves. By forging closer ties and even seeking to join [BRICS](#), these countries expressed their desire for genuine independence and self-determination. These ambitions reflected not just a regional realignment, but a broader effort to dismantle the vestiges of colonial exploitation and build a future where African nations control their own resources and destinies (Bailey, 2024).

**Graph 1:** ASE (CES) vs. ECOWAS Countries in West Africa ?



Map: Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute • Created with Datawrapper

Source: © Karr, 2024

<sup>2</sup> The cartoon shows the current President of Nigeria and Chairmen of ECOWAS, [Bola Tinubu](#), who cautions the AES, represented by the three military leaders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, [Assimi Goïta](#), [Abdourahamane Tchiani](#), and [Ibrahim Traoré](#).

In fact, these countries have more in common than the other countries of the [Sahel](#). Firstly, they are the centre of the Sahel and the most vulnerable to [jihadism](#). They are among the [least developed countries](#), with 40 % and 50 % of the population living in poverty. They are also [landlocked countries](#) with vast desert areas, making them more vulnerable to [climate change](#). Finally, they are the countries with the highest [population growth](#) in the Sahel, with an average of six children per woman (Toure, 2024).

While ECOWAS was able to agree on a provisional transition plan with [Guinea](#) to hold elections by the end of 2024, showing that such instruments can be useful (Karr, 2024), the crisis within ECOWAS deepened. On 28 January 2024, the AES countries announced their withdrawal from the regional organisation (Grütjen, 2024). The military regimes criticise ECOWAS not only for the sanctions imposed in the wake of the coups, which have now largely been lifted but also for being manipulated by [France](#) and for not supporting them enough in the fight against [jihadism](#). All three AES member states have faced deadly jihadist violence for years (Le Monde & AFP, 2024).

**Graph 2:** tri-border region (Liptako-Gourma): Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso



Source: © ActuNiger 2022

The formation of the AES comes amid a decade of escalating unrest in the Sahel, fuelled by the aftermath of the [2011 Libyan military intervention](#). The resulting instability has led to rampant [arms- and human trafficking](#) and the rise of armed groups linked to [al-Qaeda](#) and the [Islamic State](#). According to the [Wilson Center](#), the [Sahel](#) accounts for 43 % of global terrorist deaths, more than South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa combined (Daily News Egypt, 2024).

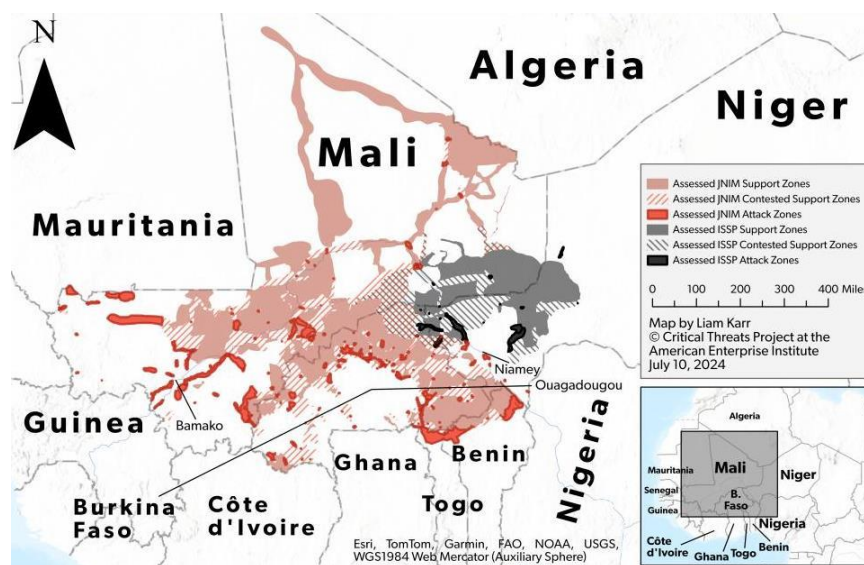
For the time being, however, the AES countries remained in the francophone West African Economic and Monetary Union ([UEMOA](#)) because they could not quickly replace their common, but increasingly resented currency, the [West African CFA franc](#). The three juntas also cancelled their cooperation within the [G5 Sahel](#) alliance, created in 2014 by five Sahel countries, [Burkina Faso](#), [Chad](#), [Mali](#), [Mauritania](#), and [Niger](#), to promote common development and security. Therefore, this alliance is currently in the process of dissolution.

Driven by growing resentment against the domination of the former colonial power, [France](#), as well as other Western countries, the [juntas](#) cancelled all military assistance agreements with Western powers and expelled the remaining contingents of Western troops, including the UN force [MINUSMA](#), established in 2023 to combat Islamist terrorists in Mali. On 6 July 2024 the juntas founded the Confederation of Sahel States

(CES) aimed at deepening their break with ECOWAS and strengthening their domestic and regional credibility (Karr, 2024).

Influenced by current geopolitical developments, including the growing influence of [Russia](#) (Kohnert, 2022b), [China](#), [Iran](#) and [Turkey](#) (Kohnert, 2023a), contradictions within ECOWAS have been simmering already for quite some time. In particular, a growing resentment against the post-colonial network of [Françafrique](#), which is still very much alive, despite numerous declarations by French presidents to the contrary (Kohnert, 2022a). Differences over planned political transitions to civilian constitutional rule also led to a growing rejection by the [juntas](#) of regional and international ties seen as encroaching on their sovereignty (Oxford Analytica, 2024a). New processes of [nation-building](#) were underway, inspired by calls for the integration of the 'vital forces of the nation' (*forces vives de la nation*), a concept often invoked in these countries (Grütjen, 2024) since the advent of [Sovereign National Conferences](#) in [francophone Sub-Saharan Africa](#), organized by the social driving forces of Sub-Saharan Africa's (SSA) nations (Benin, Togo, DR-Congo) in the early 1990s. But widespread [poverty](#) in the AES Sahel states, all three of which were among the world's 10 countries with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) in 2021, as well as the continuing threat of [Islamist terrorism](#) will undermine the West African [junta's](#) standing and coordination in the medium and long term (Oxford Analytica, 2024b).

**Graph 3: Salafi-Jihadi area of operations in the Sahel (as of June 2024)<sup>3</sup>**



Note: 'JNIM' is [Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen](#). 'ISSP' is [Islamic State Sahel Province](#).

Source: © Karr, 2024

The AES states have repeatedly criticized ECOWAS for its inaction on regional security issues. Insurgents linked to [al-Qaeda](#) and the [Islamic State](#) group have for years carried out attacks in the vast 'tri-border' region [Liptako–Gourma](#) between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, despite the massive deployment of [anti-jihadist forces](#). However, up to early July 2024, the AES has only carried out one such operation since March, when Burkinabe and Nigerian soldiers conducted joint patrols over a week in early June to secure a segment of the N3 road in northern Burkina Faso. However, the AES has continued coordinating

<sup>3</sup> Map by Liam Karr, Critical Threats Projects at the American Enterprise Institute, 10 July 2024; © Liam Karr; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

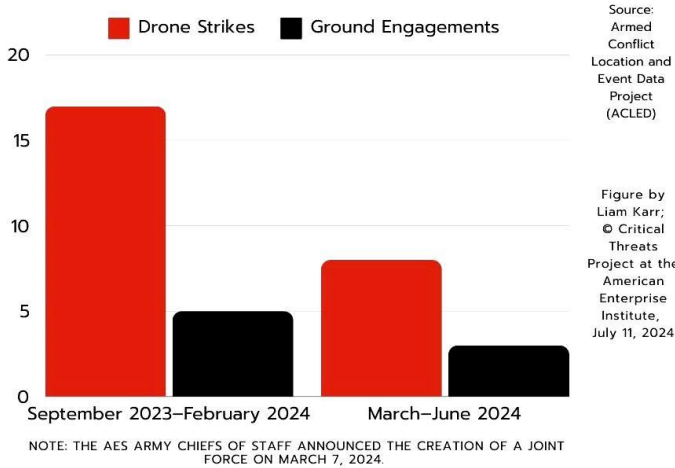


[drone strikes](#) across the borders of its member states' territories, which have been commonplace since the inception of the AES (Karr, 2024).

One of the hot issues that ASE and ECOWAS will have to address is the [free movement of goods and people](#). Until now, the [ECOWAS passport](#) has allowed Malians, Nigerians and Burkinabé to move freely within the sub-region, free of customs duties within a common market. The AES countries are fighting to maintain this advantage, believing that the reintroduction of visas would be tantamount to 'blackmailing the population', as [Abdoulaye Diop](#), Mali's current Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, pointed out. Another issue of conflict is the activation of ECOWAS as a regional force to combat terrorism. This would be problematic, as any intervention by ECOWAS on ASE territory would be strongly opposed, not least because ECOWAS is also supposed to intervene in the event of unconstitutional changes (Rich, 2024).

In terms of [external relations](#), including foreign trade and military cooperation, [Moscow](#) has been the primary security guarantor of the AES, but it has also used these ties to expand cooperation in non-military areas. [Russia](#) has had nearly 2,000 soldiers that are part of the [Wagner Group](#), renamed 'Africa Corps' in 2023, in [Mali](#), roughly 200 in [Burkina Faso](#), and at least another 100 in [Niger](#) (Czerep & Bryjka, 2024; Karr, 2024). The mercenary troops in Malian are involved in offensive operations, while the Burkinabe and Niger contingents are mainly training local forces and protecting [junta](#) leaders. In addition, numerous Russian private and state companies have signed several agreements and memoranda of understanding with the AES states since September 2023 on civil nuclear cooperation, military-technical cooperation, mining of natural resources, construction of gold refineries and telecommunications (Karr, 2024).

**Graph 4: AES joint operations 2023 - 2024<sup>4</sup>**



Source: © Karr, 2024

While Russian economic cooperation with the AES countries has been relatively limited to date, [China](#) has been a leading economic partner for the AES states, as [China](#) has been willing to work with the [juntas](#) to expand its existing investments, particularly in Mali and Niger (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022; Karr, 2024). Chinese state-owned companies have invested in crude oil, uranium, and solar power projects across the AES (Nyabiage, 2024; Karr, 2024). The Nigerien junta also signed an agreement in March 2024 with a

<sup>4</sup> Map by Liam Karr, Critical Threats Projects at the American Enterprise Institute, 7 March 2024; © Liam Karr; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

Chinese state-owned company to receive a US\$400 million advance on its share of future oil sales through the new Chinese-built [Niger–Benin Oil Pipeline](#), a 1,950 km long crude oil pipeline connecting oilfields near the oasis of Agadem in the [Ténéré desert](#) in Niger to the Atlantic Ocean Niger to the Atlantic Ocean at the port of Sémè Kraké, east of [Cotonou](#) near the border crossing with Nigeria (Balima, 2024; Karr, 2024). Exports through the pipeline began in May 2024 (Cascais, 2024).

Also, [Turkey](#) is a leading security partner for the AES. For example, all countries rely on Turkish [Bayraktar TB2](#) drones and have close personal contacts in the Turkish defence industry (Türkiye Today, 2024; 2024a; Karr, 2024; Kohnert, 2023a; Armstrong, 2021). Turkish-funded Syrian [mercenaries](#) also began operating in at least Niger and possibly Burkina Faso in 2024 to protect key economic sites in which the Turkish government has a stake, such as mines. These Turkish proxy militias have a horrific human rights record going back more than a decade (Karr, 2024; Fernandez, 2024).

Last but not least, [Iran](#) is looking to [sub-Saharan Africa](#) to strengthen its economic, political and ideological ties in the region. Already in 2008, it established for example extraterritorial food production for Iran in [Uganda](#) and [Senegal](#) to grow oilseeds and other crops (Lob, 2023). Since the formation of the AES coalition, Iran has also shown increasing interest in economic and defence cooperation with these partners (Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The French and US media also speculated about negotiations between Iran and Niger to sell uranium for weapons (Karr, 2024).

As for ASE's West African partners, [Senegal](#) will continue to have bilateral relations with Mali, which uses the [port of Dakar](#). It will be the same with Burkina Faso and Niger, where there are important Senegalese communities, and vice versa. The same holds for [Côte d'Ivoire](#), [Benin](#) and [Togo](#) because they provide the ports and transit-routes for the landlocked ASE countries (Rich, 2024).

The ongoing mediation by Senegal's President [Bassirou Diomaye Faye](#) and Togo's President [Faure Gnassingbé](#) to reintegrate the ASE into ECOWAS will, if at all, only succeed in the medium term, this is if the ASE could consider returning to the economic fold of the organisation. But this will happen only if ECOWAS abandons its political aspect, e.g. democratic governance (Rich, 2024). At the moment, the positions are so far apart that his mission is difficult or even impossible (Abba, 2024).

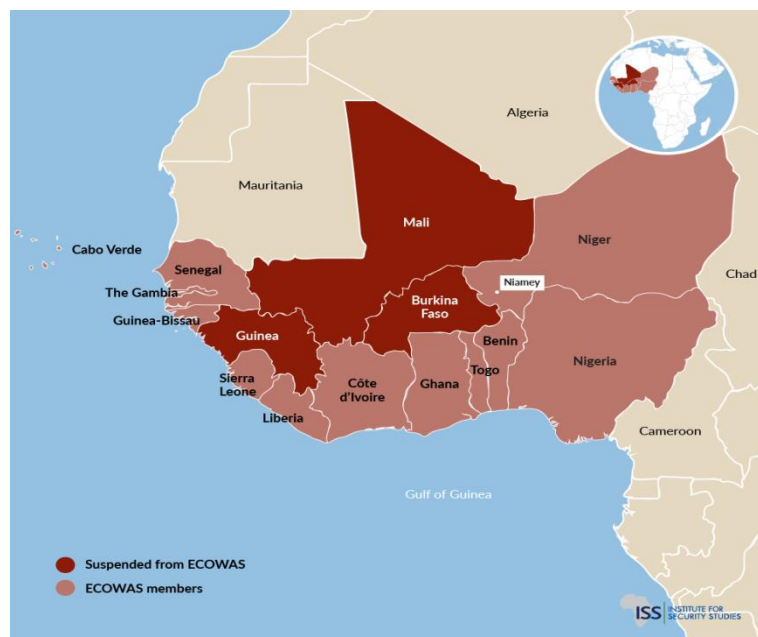
## 2. Prospects of development of ECOWAS without AES countries

**Cartoon 4:** *Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (AES), will they successively leave ECOWAS, AU and UEMOA at Putin's instigation?*



Source: © [Le regard de Glez](#), [Damien Glez](#); [rifi-fulfulde mandenkan](#), 2 February 2024

**Graph 5:** *Map of ECOWAS and secessionist ASE member countries*



Source: © AFP; ISS, [Institute for Security Studies](#), Pretoria, 9 August 2023

The history of the Economic Community of West African States ([ECOWAS](#); [CEDEAO](#) in French and Portuguese) dates back to colonial times and the rivalry between [Francophone](#) and [Anglophone West Africa](#), dominated by resource-rich [Nigeria](#), the strongest and most populous SSA country after South Africa. The ECOWAS is a regional political and economic union of fifteen West African member countries. Once, it was also a military force to be reckoned with within West Africa. Within the framework of its missions, it implemented conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms outlined in the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework ([ECPF](#)). It was meant to deal with problems, crises and

conflicts that have both political and economic causes. To achieve its objectives, ECOWAS has to rely on its member states. However, the latter were mostly characterised by a lack of political and financial commitment (Nadieline, 2016). To fully play its role as guardian of the principles of democratic governance and respect for human rights, ECOWAS could only have a decisive impact if it were accompanied by a significant and immediate investment in terms of human and financial resources, which in most cases were very limited (Yabi, 2010).

The withdrawal of three ASE member countries, which is without precedent in the history of ECOWAS, could have far-reaching implications, not only for ASE countries, but also for all the other countries in the region, in terms of the mobility of goods and people, trade, and regional sectoral policies (Balima, S., 2024). In the medium and long term, their exit could lead to a redefinition of economic relations in [West Africa](#), requiring significant adjustments at national, regional, and extra-regional levels. The successful implementation of a post-ECOWAS economic strategy will depend on the capacity to strengthen their economic resilience. Indeed, in anticipation of a spillover of [Islamic terrorism](#) into the [Gulf of Guinea](#), the coastal countries should establish relations with the AES bloc for purposes of information sharing and joint operational engagement. Given the territorial continuity between the two blocs and the nature of the threat, there is a need for dialogue and targeted cooperation in the area of security. Future peace and stability in the sub-region will depend on the ability of the blocs to interact (Balima, S., 2024).

Economically, the withdrawal of the AES could end or halt projects and programmes implemented by the ECOWAS Commission in these three countries. According to [Omar Touray](#), president of the ECOWAS commission, these projects are worth more than US\$500 million. It would also pose challenges for cooperation with regional financial institutions such as [EBID](#) and [BOAD](#) (Dossavi, 2024).

By focusing on [regional integration](#), harnessing economic potential and addressing social and political challenges, ECOWAS can achieve substantial development results even without the participation of AES countries. Overall, the prospects for ECOWAS development without the AES countries remain positive, provided there is a concerted effort to enhance regional cooperation, address security and political challenges, and invest in key sectors that drive sustainable growth.

ECOWAS members include some of the fastest-growing economies in Africa, such as [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#) and [Côte d'Ivoire](#). These countries are characterized by diversified economies with significant contributions from sectors such as oil, gas and hydropower, agriculture and services, which are drivers of regional growth. Excluding the AES countries would allow more resources and policies to be focused on increasing the notoriously low level of intra-regional trade among the remaining ECOWAS members, which remains in the order of 15 % to 20 % (Abba, 2024). This could boost local industries, create jobs and reduce dependence on external markets. Continued investment in regional infrastructure, such as transport corridors and energy projects, will be crucial. Improved infrastructure would facilitate trade and investment within the region.

However, political stability and a significant increase in the willingness to cooperate on the part of political leaders, who have so far been more concerned with their own careers, would be essential for [economic development](#). Investing in education, healthcare, and social services is vital for sustainable and inclusive development. Programs aimed at improving literacy rates, reducing poverty, and enhancing healthcare will contribute to increased productivity. Greater harmonisation of trade, investment and regulatory policies



can reduce barriers and create a more integrated market, making the region more attractive to investors. Strengthening regional institutions and mechanisms for dispute resolution, policy coordination and economic planning can enhance the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a development platform.

On the other hand, ECOWAS has a history of intervening in member states to restore peace and stability, which is critical for creating a favourable environment for development. Promoting [good governance](#) and [democratic](#) principles in member states can lead to a more stable and predictable political environment, attracting foreign direct investment and fostering [economic growth](#).

### 3. Prospects of development of UEMOA without AES

**Cartoon 5:** *The CFA franc: French monetary imperialism in Africa?*<sup>5</sup>



Source: © Antonio Medina

**Graph 6:** *Map of UEMOA (WAEMU)*



Source: Wikipedia: "Economic Community of West African States"

The West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU / [UEMOA](#), in French) had previously eight member states, namely [Benin](#), [Burkina Faso](#), [Ivory Coast](#), [Guinea-Bissau](#), [Mali](#), [Niger](#), [Senegal](#) and [Togo](#). It was characterized by countries which share the same currency, the West African CFA franc ([CFA](#)), the issue of which is entrusted to the [BCEAO](#) (Toukara, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> © Antonio Medina via *The Corner EU* (<http://bit.ly/2slfjZu>), Blog Editor, London School of Economics (LSE), 12 Juillet 2017.

The WAEMU was created by [France](#) to counter the dominance of Anglophone countries in West Africa, particularly [Nigeria](#) and [Ghana](#), over [French West Africa](#). The [Francophonie](#) in French West Africa has been mainly driven by a power elite, the '[Pré Quarré](#)' in both France and Africa. The notorious [Françafrique](#) network has determined the fate of the region for decades. This provoked a growing anti-French sentiment, which focused on three points. The first is development policy, the second is the currency, and the third is the military. France was the only Western country to maintain a significant military presence in the [Sahel](#) (e.g [Operation Barkhane](#), 2014-2022). While the number of French troops has fallen dramatically from 30,000 in the early 1960s to around 6,100 in the 2020s, political and military interventionism has not diminished. But after so many years of failed military efforts against terrorism in the region, citizens have become increasingly suspicious of France's motives for being there. However, a clear distinction must be made between anti-French sentiment and anti-French military presence. Many believe that any presence of foreign troops in the Sahel aggravates the situation by attracting extremists rather than repelling them. But this view obscures two important realities. The first is the development of a broader authoritarian movement, driven in part by [Russia](#) that is challenging democracy and its proponents. The local population scapegoats France for the deterioration of their situation on the ground. Their political leaders capitalise on hostility to the colonial legacy, including the [CFA franc](#) and military cooperation. This is fertile ground for insurgent military officers who have no legal legitimacy but a thirst for [authenticity](#). The slogan '*France, degage!* (France, get out)' has become a new means of legitimising political and military power in [francophone West Africa](#). However, for some autocrats, it is also a welcome distraction from acknowledging their own responsibility for the predicament. Africans are increasingly aware that France is in Africa for its own interests. But anti-French is not necessarily pro-coup. The axis of young, fiery military leaders, seeking legitimacy from their terrorised compatriots, exploited all sorts of populist sentiments, from [Africanism](#) to the quest for [economic independence](#). They accused Paris of supporting the terrorists, who were targeting the local population so that France could continue to siphon off their resources and plunge the country into ever greater poverty. It would be a mistake to think that telling Africans that they are being manipulated by the Russians would end the matter. Nevertheless, the African heavyweights of UEMOA, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, as well as the other member states, will keep the Union together out of self-interest, albeit on fairer terms. African public opinion is understandably very sensitive to being treated as an equal. They don't want to be lectured or mocked (Kohnert, 2023b).

In general, citizens of [WAEMU](#) member states have good perceptions of governance, peace, and security, as a survey of 'human rights and participation', 'rule of law', and 'peace and security', conducted in 2017, indicated (Adechian, 2020). Governance, Peace and Security (GPS) are also a major concern for the [African Union](#) as a prerequisite for the socio-economic and political development of Africa. In fact, it forms part of the strategic Pillars of the [African Union Commission](#), which include (i) peace and security, (ii) integration, development and cooperation, (iii) shared values, and (iv) institutional and capacity building.

In the medium and long term, the UEMOA will have to be redesigned to meet the expectations of its political leaders, no matter what Paris says. The head of the Burkinabè [junta](#), Captain [Ibrahim Traoré](#), affirmed already that after leaving ECOWAS, the AES states would attack 'probably' to the currency, the CFA franc, soon (Touunkara, 2024). This would include a redefinition of its monetary institutions, notably the [BCEAO](#), which is

entrusted with the issue of the Franc CFA. Discussions within UEMOA to overhaul the financial institution could take place this time.

Increased financing difficulties in the three ASE states could lead to excessive money creation, inflationary episodes and devaluation of the new currency. As with the [devaluation of the CFA franc](#), this renewed competitiveness could lead to a short-term revival of exports and a squeeze on imports, but without bringing about structural change. The decision to devalue the F CFA by 50 % in 1994 represented a victory for the technocrats over the old guard. But it was a [Pyrrhic victory](#). It neglected economic debate and decision-making, destroyed traditional social ties without creating new ones, and risked social and political disintegration. The decision to continue with the CFA meant a missed opportunity to develop Africa autonomously. In this respect, the creation of a new AES currency could also be a source of greater autonomy and self-determination. However, urban dwellers and civil servants in particular would risk seeing their standard of living fall (Giovalucchi & Raffinot, 2024; Kohnert, 2005; 1999).

The position of some of the WAEMU countries, which is often in line with the AES, is not necessarily what is officially stated. If a consensus is reached, the worrying issues will be put on the table, starting with the currency (Touunkara, 2024). If the UEMOA countries stick to their vision of joining the new West African monetary zone of the 'eco' as planned, at least the currency problem would be solved, provided that they can find a replacement for the central role played to date by the [Trésor](#) Français in guaranteeing the F CFA and that ECOWAS monetary institutions would cooperate. Otherwise, it is not certain that only the AES countries will leave the UEMOA, but that all the member countries will join the ideas of the AES. If an agreement is not reached that includes [Côte d'Ivoire](#) and [Senegal](#), the heavyweights of UEMOA, it will be the death knell for UEMOA.

## 4. Prospects of development of AES without ECOWAS

**Cartoon 6:** *The Alliance of Sahel States (also) values its digital sovereignty*<sup>6</sup>



Source: © [Damien Glez](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), 21 February 2024

The creation of a Joint Force of the Sahel States (FC/AES) is a key initiative to combat armed terrorist groups and transnational crime. In terms of development, the heads of state stressed the need to pool their resources to implement structuring projects in strategic

<sup>6</sup> "Who is pretending to be the AES here? ... Association of experts of Sodabi (i.e home distilled palm-wine Schnapps)" ... "The Alliance of Sahel States (also) values its digital sovereignty". © [Damien Glez](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), 21 February 2024.

sectors such as agriculture, energy, and infrastructure (Senepus, 2024). However, challenges remain, particularly in terms of diplomatic coordination and managing the consequences of their withdrawal from ECOWAS, including economic and social challenges. [Mali](#), for example, has an extreme poverty rate of 19 % and is heavily dependent on agriculture and gold exports. [Burkina Faso](#) faces severe food insecurity and high poverty rates. [Niger](#), despite projected economic growth of 11 % by 2024, needs to overcome the aftermath of the coup and manage high military spending (APA-news, 2024).

The ASE's plan to abandon the [CFA franc](#) and create a common currency, as [Guinea](#), [Mauritania](#), [Madagascar](#) and [Mali](#) have already done before, is not only politically but also economically risky. Increasing financial difficulties in the three states could lead to excessive [money creation](#), [inflation](#) and [devaluation](#) of the new currency.

**Graph 7:** *Map of AES member countries*



Source: © sahelvanguard, 2023

Budgetary constraints will be tight, especially in the event of a cessation of budget support and a slowdown in projects financed by traditional technical and financial partners. [China](#), one of the most important trading partners, no longer seems interested in increasing its financing to African countries. [Debt relief](#) from the non-Western bloc, which is now close to the AES, is unlikely and will have a limited impact given the weight of multilateral debt. The AES countries, which do not benefit from the social consensus needed to implement genuine fiscal reforms, are stepping up initiatives to increase public revenue, in particular by offensively including the [gold mining](#) sector as an industrial and artisanal activity (Giovalucchi & Raffinot, 2024).

The creation of an AES investment bank and a stabilisation fund are promising initiatives to support the development and economic resilience of the region. In addition, the establishment of an effective communication strategy to ensure sound and accessible information to the population, using national languages and public and private media, would be essential.

The strong pressure likely to be exerted by the AES countries on the new [central bank](#) to finance its expenditure by creating money will lead to high [inflation](#) and, consequently, to pressure for a more or less rapid [depreciation](#) of the new currency. Indeed, the adjustment on the foreign exchange market according to [purchasing power parity](#) leads to a depreciation of the exchange rate. This would further fuel inflation by raising the prices of imported goods. The door would then be open to a *de facto* dependence on the [CFA franc](#). Contrary to what is often thought in [West Africa](#), currency cannot simply be decreed,



especially not in economies where the [informal sector](#) and [corruption](#) dominate (Giovalucchi & Raffinot, 2024).

On 17 July 2024, a delegation from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) visited [Niamey](#) to discuss the terms of crucial financial support for the [junta](#) of Abdourahamane Tchiani, which had been discreetly trying to pay off several debts to maximise its chances (Africa Intelligence, 2024a).

[Freedom of movement](#) is a fundamental pillar of [regional integration](#), enabling not only cross-border trade and work, but also the strengthening of cultural and social ties. To date, no formal measures have been taken to introduce a visa requirement for nationals of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger travelling to certain [ECOWAS](#) countries (Senepus, 2024). However, [remittances](#) from migrants, taking advantage of the freedom to settle in ECOWAS, could be affected, with significant consequences for their regions of origin (Giovalucchi & Raffinot, 2024). These transfers sometimes exceed official development assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investment (FDI) in [sub-Saharan Africa](#). Workers' remittances more than doubled between 2000 and 2006 (Tapsoba, & Hubert, 2022). [Burkina Faso](#), for example, has a long history of migration, largely shaped by its colonial past. Receiving international remittances increases the likelihood of moving out of [subsistence agriculture](#), on which the majority of the population still depends, and into non-agricultural activities. Remittances can help households set up businesses and become less dependent on climatic conditions. Personal remittances have grown rapidly over the past 20 years, with some fluctuations due to political issues in the main destination countries of Burkinabè migrants (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali) and global issues such as the [2007 financial crisis](#) and the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). However, the poorer sections of the population used remittances mainly for consumption and non-productive expenditure (Tapsoba, & Hubert, 2022).

Exports from [Côte d'Ivoire](#) and [Senegal](#) risk falling slightly. Regional integration in the [WAEMU](#) is limited. Intra-UEMOA trade will account for less than 18 % of the zone's total trade in 2023. The main suppliers are Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal (55.9 % of the intra-community supply) and the main buyers are [Burkina Faso](#) and [Mali](#) (45.3 % of the total). The main products traded were oil, food preparations (milk, broths, etc.), local products (cereals, live animals), edible oils and construction materials. This reflects the regional hierarchy of production systems in which the AES countries are least well placed. In addition to the potential impact on the flow of goods, the port and logistics activities of coastal countries, the traditional entry and exit points for [landlocked countries](#), could be negatively affected. Indeed, the share of goods arriving in these ports and destined for the hinterland can be very significant. For example, it is 52 % for [Cotonou](#) (Benin). The share of goods in transit is 18.35 % for [Dakar](#) (Senegal) 13.44% for [Lomé](#) (Togo) and 7.92% for [Abidjan](#) (Côte d'Ivoire) (Giovalucchi & Raffinot, 2024).

The AES will rely heavily on non-Western powers. In January 2024, [Russia](#) agreed to establish military cooperation with [Niger](#), and Russian military personnel were deployed in [Burkina Faso](#) (APA news, 2024). Talks between the junta in [Niamey](#) and [Iran](#) for the supply of 300 tonnes of [uranium](#), worth about \$56 million, at the expense of the French nuclear fuel company [Orano](#), also aroused [Washington's](#) suspicions (Africa Intelligence, 2024). In return, [Tehran](#) would supply Niamey with high-capacity generators to fill the country's energy deficit and support the agricultural transformation efforts launched by Niger's transitional government. A rapprochement with Iran, and Tehran's attempts to obtain Niger's uranium supply, had determined Niamey's decision to suspend with immediate effect the military cooperation agreement signed with the United States in 2012.

Niger's decision to move closer to Iran could lead to US [sanctions](#), and Niamey could also be considered a legitimate target by the [Israeli](#) government (Agenzia Nova, 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

**Cartoon 7: 'Settling of scores in West Africa'**<sup>7</sup>



Source: © RFI / [Damien Glez](#), Glez, 2024

The 15 member countries of the Economic Community of West African States ([ECOWAS](#)), the eight Francophone West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU / [UEMOA](#)) and the three member countries of the newly formed Alliance of Sahel States ([AES](#)) represent three overlapping regional organisations in [West Africa](#), each with unique mandates and membership. The geopolitical, economic and security context of the region highlights the need for synergy and cooperation in addressing regional issues.

[ECOWAS](#) has long been a key player in promoting economic integration and political stability in the region. Over the years, ECOWAS has played a pivotal role in conflict resolution, democratic transitions, and regional economic policies. Established in 2023 by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the [AES](#) aims to address new processes of nation-building, inspired by calls for the integration of 'vital forces of the nation' and specific security concerns in the Sahel. [UEMOA](#) will survive in the medium and long run only if the AES objective of creating a new AES currency as a source of greater autonomy and self-determination meets the vital interests of UEMOA's two heavyweights, [Côte d'Ivoire](#) and [Senegal](#), and if it succeeds in finding a viable institution to replace the [French Treasury](#), which has hitherto guaranteed the stability of the currency.

The [AES](#) was established in 2023 by [Burkina Faso](#), [Mali](#) and [Niger](#) to address the specific security challenges of the [Sahel](#) region. The region has been severely affected by [Islamist terrorism](#), armed conflict and humanitarian crises. The AES aims to coordinate military efforts, enhance security cooperation and stabilise the region through targeted interventions, intelligence sharing and capacity building to stabilise the region. The secession from ECOWAS highlights the growing rift between the Western-allied elected governments in West Africa and military-run countries increasingly relying on [Russia](#), [China](#), [Turkey](#) and [Iran](#).

<sup>7</sup> Cartoon: 'Settling of scores in West Africa' -- Source: © RFI / [Damien Glez](#), Glez, Damien (2024) : [Le regard de Glez sur les junte militaires du Sahel qui confirment leur départ de la Cédéao](#). rfi-culture, 12 July 2024. - [Bola Tinubu](#) is the current Nigerian President; [Assimi Goïta](#), the Malian President and [Bassirou Diomaye Faye](#) the Senegalese President.

However, both ECOWAS and the AES still share a common interest in promoting security and stability. ECOWAS's experience in [peacekeeping](#) and [conflict resolution](#) could complement the AES's focus on [counterinsurgency](#) and localised security efforts, provided that ECOWAS redefines itself and limits the external influence of former colonial powers.

Under these conditions, the coexistence of the two institutions has considerable potential for improving security, stability and development in West Africa. While challenges exist, strategic cooperation and coordination can transform these organisations into complementary forces. By leveraging their respective strengths and promoting inclusive dialogue, ECOWAS and the AES can create a resilient and development-orientated West African region.

Economic stability is essential to long-term peace. ECOWAS initiatives on [trade liberalisation](#), infrastructure development and [regional integration](#) can support AES efforts to stabilise the [Sahel](#). Joint projects in agriculture, energy and education could foster economic resilience and reduce the root causes of insecurity. Recurrent severe [humanitarian crises](#) in the Sahel, including displacement, food insecurity and health challenges trigger [migration](#), first within West Africa, then to the [Maghreb](#), and finally to the [EU](#). ECOWAS's broader regional approach can provide a framework for addressing these issues in collaboration with AES. Last but not least, the development of strategic partnerships and cooperation agreements between ECOWAS and the AES can help to institutionalise the cooperation.

However, differences in member states' political agendas and alliances may hinder cooperation. The formation of the AES itself can be seen as a response to the perceived inadequacies of ECOWAS in addressing Sahel-specific issues, which can lead to rivalries. Overlapping institutional mandates and activities can lead to inefficiencies and duplication. Lack of commitment by national political elites to regional integration and limited financial and logistical resources may also strain both organisations. Competition for international aid and investment can create friction. Joint fundraising and resource mobilisation strategies would be one way to mitigate this challenge.

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**Résumé :** *[Naviguer dans les rivalités : perspectives de coexistence entre la CEDEAO et l'AES en Afrique de l'Ouest]* - L'Alliance des Etats du Sahel (AES), fondée en septembre 2023 par les trois gouvernements militaires du Mali, du Niger et du Burkina Faso pour faire contrepoids à la CEDEAO et à l'influence postcoloniale de la France et d'autres pays occidentaux, a annoncé en juillet 2024 la création d'une confédération de ses trois pays. Les AES ont plus de points communs que les autres pays du Sahel. Premièrement, ils constituent le centre du Sahel et les plus vulnérables au djihadisme. Ils font partie des pays les moins développés, avec 40 à 50 % de la population vivant dans la pauvreté. Ce sont également des pays enclavés dotés de vastes zones désertiques, ce qui les rend plus vulnérables au changement climatique. Ce sont après tout les pays où la croissance démographique est la plus forte au Sahel, avec une moyenne de six enfants par femme. La création de l'AES intervient au milieu d'une décennie de troubles croissants au Sahel, alimentés par les conséquences de l'intervention menée par l'OTAN en Libye en 2011. L'instabilité qui en résulte a conduit à un trafic d'armes endémique et à la montée de groupes armés liés à Al-Qaïda et à l'Etat islamique. Le Sahel représente 43 % des décès terroristes dans le monde, soit plus que l'Asie du Sud, le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord réunis. Les opérations anti-insurrectionnelles de l'AES se concentreront sur la région du Liptako-Gourma, la vaste et poreuse zone frontalière où se rencontrent les trois Etats, une zone frontalière connue pour son instabilité. Les dirigeants précédents ont souvent fait passer les intérêts français avant ceux de leur propre peuple et ont permis la poursuite de l'exploitation des ressources naturelles de la région, notamment l'uranium, l'or et le manganèse, sans grand bénéfice pour la population locale. Face aux déclarations critiques de l'UA concernant le retrait des pays de l'AES de la CEDEAO, la première a interdit toute ingérence dans leurs affaires intérieures. La confédération AES élargira la portée opérationnelle de l'alliance des juntes et consolidera leur partenariat militaire et économique avec la Russie et la Chine, ainsi qu'avec la Turquie et l'Iran. Cependant, la sécession de l'AES porte atteinte à la légitimité de la CEDEAO en entravant l'intégration économique et sécuritaire régionale et en compliquant encore davantage le retour à la démocratisation. L'AES cherchera à admettre de nouveaux membres tels que le Tchad, la Guinée et le Soudan afin de renforcer davantage son pouvoir et sa légitimité en tant que bloc régional alternatif. Cependant, un Sahel divisé rendra encore plus difficile la résolution des défis régionaux. Si l'AES, comme annoncé, remplace le franc CFA par sa propre monnaie, et que d'autres pays francophones de l'UEMOA emboîtent le pas, cela nécessiterait une restructuration fondamentale de l'UEMOA et de la CEDEAO et enfin remettre également en cause l'introduction de l'ECO, la nouvelle monnaie commune ouest-africaine, prévue pour 2027.

**Zusammenfassung:** *[Rivalitäten meistern: Perspektiven für eine Koexistenz zwischen ECOWAS und ASE in Westafrika]* - Die Allianz der Sahelstaaten (AES), die im September 2023 von den drei Militärregierungen Malis, Nigers und Burkina Fasos als Gegengewicht zur ECOWAS und dem postkolonialen Einfluss Frankreichs und anderer westlicher Länder gegründet wurde, kündigte im Juli 2024 die Gründung einer Konföderation ihrer drei Länder an. Die AES haben mehr gemeinsam als die anderen Länder der Sahelzone. Erstens sind sie das Zentrum des Sahel und am anfälligsten für Dschihadismus. Sie gehören zu den am wenigsten entwickelten Ländern, wobei 40% bis 50% der Bevölkerung in Armut leben. Außerdem sind sie Binnenländer mit riesigen Wüstengebieten, was sie anfälliger für den Klimawandel macht. Schließlich sind sie die Länder mit dem höchsten Bevölkerungswachstum in der Sahelzone, mit durchschnittlich sechs Kindern pro Frau. Die Gründung der AES erfolgte inmitten eines Jahrzehnts eskalierender Unruhen im Sahel, die durch die Nachwirkungen der NATO-geführten Intervention in Libyen im Jahr 2011 angeheizt wurden. Die daraus resultierende Instabilität hat zu einem grassierenden Waffenhandel und dem Aufstieg bewaffneter Gruppen geführt, die mit al-Qaida und dem Islamischen Staat in Verbindung stehen. Die Sahelzone ist für erschreckende 43 % der weltweiten Todesfälle durch Terroristen verantwortlich, mehr als in Südasien, der Nahe Osten und Nordafrika zusammen. Die Aufstandsbekämpfungsoperationen der AES werden sich auf die Liptako-Gourma Region konzentrieren, das riesige und durchlässige Grenzgebiet, in dem die drei Staaten aufeinandertreffen, ein Grenzland, das für seine Instabilität berüchtigt ist. Frühere Staatschefs haben die französischen Interessen oft denen ihres eigenen Volkes vorgezogen und die fortgesetzte Ausbeutung der natürlichen Ressourcen der Region, darunter Uran, Gold und Mangan, ermöglicht, ohne dass die lokale Bevölkerung davon viel profitiert hätte. Angesichts kritischer Äußerungen der AU über den Austritt der AES-Länder aus der ECOWAS verboten sich erstere jede Einmischung in ihre inneren Angelegenheiten. Die Konföderation der AES wird den operativen Spielraum des Bündnisses der Juntas erweitern und ihre militärische und wirtschaftliche Partnerschaft mit Russland und China sowie der Türkei und dem Iran festigen. Die Abspaltung der AES untergräbt allerdings die Legitimität der ECOWAS, indem sie die regionale Wirtschafts- und Sicherheitsintegration behindert und die Rückkehr zur Demokratisierung weiter erschwert. Die AES wird versuchen, neue Mitglieder wie den Tschad, Guinea und den Sudan aufzunehmen, um ihre Macht und Legitimität als alternativer regionaler Block weiter zu stärken. Eine geteilte Sahelzone wird die Bewältigung regionaler Herausforderungen jedoch noch schwieriger machen. Wenn die AES wie angekündigt, den Franc CFA durch eine eigene Währung ersetzt, und dem andere frankophone Länder der UEMOA folgen würden, würde das eine grundlegende Umstrukturierung sowohl der UEMOA als auch der ECOWAS erfordern und schließlich auch die für 2027 geplante Einführung des ECO, der neuen gemeinsamen westafrikanischen Währung, wieder in Frage stellen.