

Geopolitical Panorama Of The African Sahel Region



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Abstract:

The African Sahel is a rapidly shifting geopolitical zone shaped by climate stress, political instability, and growing global competition. Research highlights how desertification, water scarcity, and degrading farmland fuel local conflicts, displacement, and pressure on already fragile states. Armed groups exploit these tensions, spreading insecurity across borders. Recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have accelerated a diplomatic realignment away from traditional Western partners toward alternative actors like Russia, reshaping security cooperation in the region. Economically, weak infrastructure, limited diversification, and contested resource zones deepen vulnerability and external dependence. Overall, studies describe the Sahel as a convergence point of climate pressures, internal instability, and rival international interests, where long-term governance and adaptation reforms matter more than short-term military responses.

Keywords: Sahel; Geopolitics; Climate insecurity; Armed groups; Regional realignment

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Introduction:

Each region of the world possesses distinct features and characteristics that differentiate it from other areas and enable its own patterns of development and growth. These attributes can also serve as strategic factors that attract external powers, which may seek to leverage such dimensions in ways that allow them to shape and influence the trajectory of events.

After Africa as a whole, and the Sahel region in particular, had long served as a strategic hinterland for several European Union states, especially France, during the colonial phases on the continent, competition over the region intensified in the post-Cold War period. China entered the arena as a major competitor alongside the United States, in addition to several rising regional powers. This shift suggests that the continent has entered a new phase in which it is becoming a theater of strategic operations and a magnet for influence, as well as a site of contestation over strategic spheres of control, resources, and wealth. These dynamics unfold amid persistent hardship experienced by the majority of the populations of Africa and the Sahel, while international and regional powers strive to secure the largest possible share of the region's abundant assets.

This study seeks to shed light on the various geopolitical frameworks of the African Sahel, which render this geographical expanse a focal point of international competition. Accordingly, the central research question is formulated as follows: What are the geopolitical frameworks that allow for the construction of a comprehensive, panoramic understanding of the African Sahel region?

1- Defining the Concept and Boundaries of the African Sahel Region:

The definition of the African Sahel region rests upon several conceptual approaches that can be outlined as follows:

1.1 The Linguistic Concept of the African Sahel Region

The terminological diversity associated with the names attributed to the African Sahel serves as a key to understanding its geographical delineations, which have varied across different historical periods. The region has been known by several names, the most prominent of which are: Bilad al-Sudan, Bilad al-Siba, the Greater Sahara, and the Saharan Sahel. "Bilad al-Sudan," an Arabic term, was used by Arab explorers (Bernard, 2009, p.47) to denote the transitional zone between North Africa ("White Africa") and Sub-Saharan Africa ("Black Africa"), where the Kingdom of Ghana was located during the Islamic expansions into West Africa. (Mehdi, 2009, p.15) The term "Bilad al-Siba," or "the Unsubdued Lands," refers to the areas south of the Sahara that remained outside the sphere of Islamic governance at the time of the rise of Islamic kingdoms in North Africa.

In classical Arabic texts, the region was also referred to as the Land of Peace "Bilad al-Salam" (Mehdi, 2010, p.01). The Greater Sahara is recognized as the largest desert region in Africa, located in the northern part of the continent. It stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east, forming a vast desert zone that serves as a natural barrier between North Africa and central Africa. The Sahara extends approximately 3000 km from west to east, from the Sudanese region and the onset of the equatorial zones in the south up to the Mediterranean coast, which spans about 1500 km. (Milburn, 1984, p.91)

The term African Sahel is of Arabic origin and traditionally refers to the "shore" or the southern edge of the desert. Geographically, the Sahel stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, acting as a transitional zone between the Sahara to the north and the savannas to the south. It extends westward from Senegal across Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, and reaches Ethiopia in the east. (Mehdi, 2006, p.06)

Figure 01: Depicting the Countries of the African Sahel Region



Source: Nabile.M. "Afrique, Cartes, Mali, RegionsSahel: Cartes du Sahel ", *The briefing.Info*: Disponible sur:

<http://thebriefing.info/cartes-du-sahel/>

1.2 The Broad Concept of the African Sahel Region:

According to the broad conceptualization, the African Sahel constitutes the transitional zone between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, stretching from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. This definition encompasses an arc that includes Sudan, Chad, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and extends to the Atlantic coast, thereby incorporating parts of West Africa.

The African Sahel is geographically extensive and highly significant, covering an area of more than 9 million km². It stretches from the northeastern protrusion of the continent along the southern approaches to the Red Sea to the Atlantic coastline, spanning approximately 4,830 km. From the southern reaches of North African countries to the northern boundaries of the African rainforests, it extends about 21,930 km, lying between 12° and 20° north of the equator. This makes it one of the largest regions on the African continent.

1.3 The Geopolitical Concept of the African Sahel Region

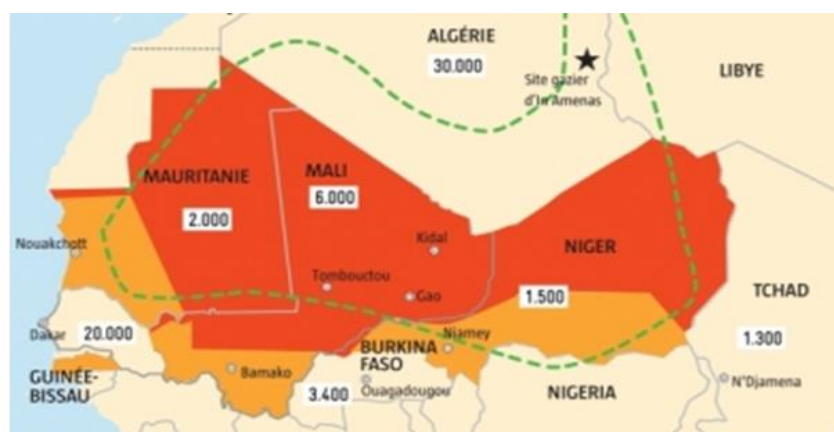
The geopolitical concept of the African Sahel is linked to delineating the region based on its political developments, taking into account the range of regional and international projections that have been applied to it. The definition and boundaries of the Sahel vary depending on the geopolitical perspectives of the regional and international actors involved.

The Intergovernmental Committee for Drought Control, established in 1971, defined the African Sahel as the strip including Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. Later, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and, due to desert encroachment, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya (Mehdi, 2006, p.06) were added. Some scholars describe the Sahel as the "Black Poverty Belt," encompassing Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Mauritania. From the perspective of ethnic problems and crises, it is referred to as the "Arc of Crises," which includes Sudan, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania.

From a political standpoint, the Sahel denotes a broad region of countries facing long-standing economic, political, and environmental crises, beginning in the 1970s, with key countries including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Equatorial Guinea, covering an area of approximately 5 million km². (Poncet and Marchal, 1993, p.p 306-307)

In terms of the European Union's Security and Development Strategy for the Sahel – "A Strategy for the Sahel", a narrower definition is used. Here, the African Sahel extends from Mauritania in the west through Mali, southern Algeria, northern Burkina Faso, Niger, and up to northern Chad in the east. The core Sahel region is identified as Mauritania, Mali, and Niger—the three main Sahelian countries—alongside Burkina Faso and Chad. (Simon, 2012, p.09)

Figure 02: Illustrating the Core Countries of the African Sahel Region



Source: Stéphane Joahny, "60.000 Français au Sahel et autant de cibles", *Le Journal du Dimanche*, (20. Janvier.2013): Disponible sur:

<http://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Actualite/60-000-Francais-au-Sahel-et-autant-de-cibles-587082>

2- The Strategic Importance of the Countries of the African Sahel Region

The countries of the African Sahel region possess a wealth of natural resources, which has drawn the attention of major global powers, particularly the European Union and the United States. Beyond its vast oil reserves, the African Sahel also contains substantial mineral resources, which can be summarized as follows:

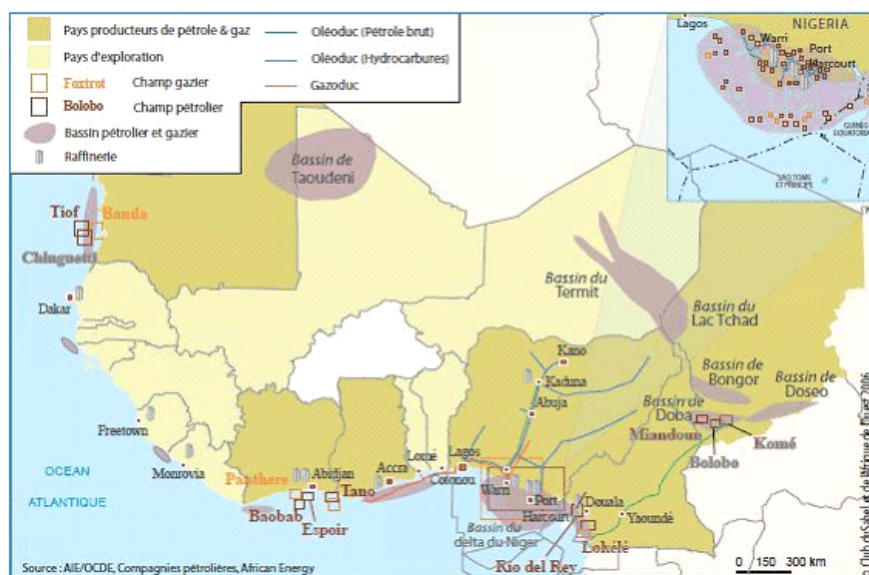
2.1 Energy Resources:

Africa contains approximately 10% of the world's proven crude oil reserves, (Centr for security studies, 2008, p.02) with around 60% of these reserves concentrated in the Sahel region, particularly in three major producing countries: Nigeria, Algeria, and Libya. As for natural gas, the continent holds about 8% of global proven reserves, with more than 50% of this share located in Nigeria and Algeria. (Commission économique des Nations Unies pour l'Afrique, 2010, p.14)

In addition to its considerable oil and gas wealth, Africa's hydrocarbon resources are characterized by relatively easy extraction and marketing, largely due to the continent's geostrategic location—especially in relation to Europe and the United States.

Moreover, the region cannot be regarded solely as a hub for secure oil production. Several projects have been proposed to establish oil pipelines extending from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean through the Sahel region, as well

as from Nigeria toward the Mediterranean as part of the joint Algeria–Lagos initiative.(Jacques, 1989, p. 190)



Source: Sahel: Pour une approche globale.(12. Aoute 2016): Disponible sur:

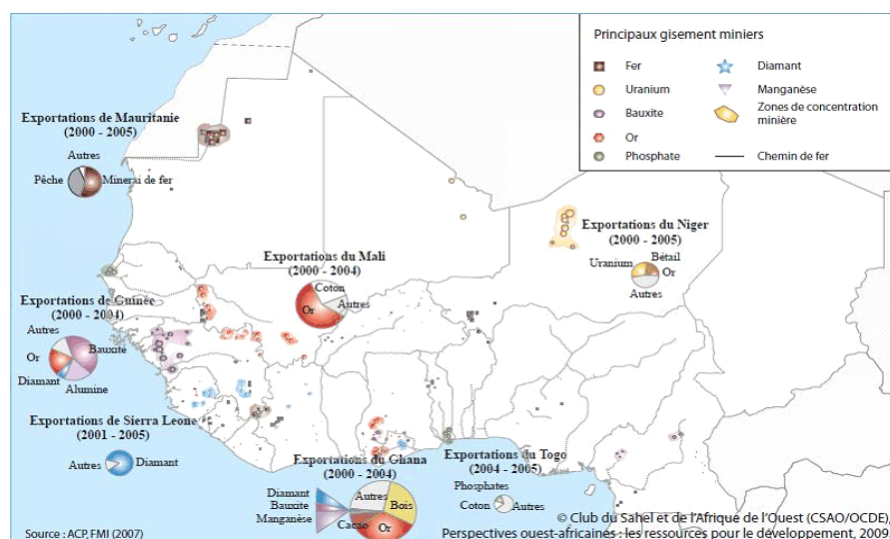
<http://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-720/r12-7208.htm>

2.2 Primary Resources

Africa constitutes an immense reservoir of primary resources, producing approximately 80% of the world's platinum, more than 60% of its diamonds, 20% of its gold, 40% of its phosphates, and 30% of its cobalt. Mali, for instance, is among the countries whose economies rely heavily on mining activities, particularly the extraction of gold, diamonds, copper, and phosphates. Niger, although primarily an agricultural country, also possesses a wide range of mineral resources, including iron, copper, silver, phosphates, and petroleum, in addition to key energy resources such as uranium and coal—both of which represent the country's most important mining assets. (Ahmed, 2011, p.10)

Similarly, Chad and Burkina Faso are endowed with significant reserves of carbon, gold, iron, uranium, and zinc, underscoring the substantial mineral wealth of the region.

Figure 04: Illustration of Primary Resources in the Sahel Region Countries



Source: Le Sahara par les cartes un espace riche, parcouru et convoité.

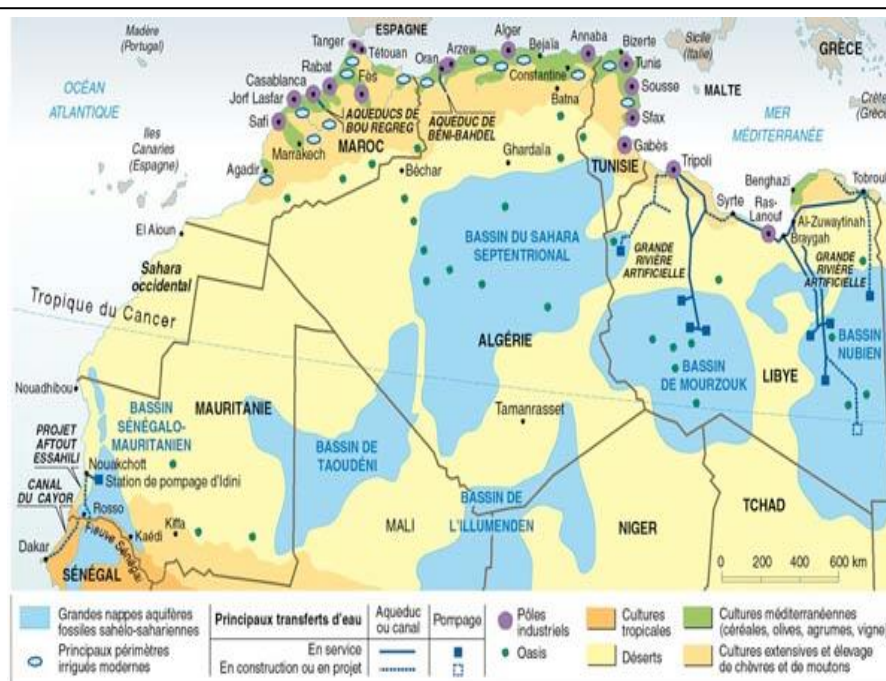
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2.3 Water Resources

With regard to water, Africa is classified as the second driest continent after Australia. Nevertheless, estimates indicate that the continent possesses approximately 4,000 km³ of renewable freshwater resources annually—an amount considered significant relative to the water scarcity experienced by populations in other parts of the world. In the Sahel region, several major freshwater rivers traverse these countries. The most notable is the Niger River, an international watercourse that crosses the region from the southwest, extending roughly 550 km from the Malian border toward Benin and Nigeria. (Aquastat, 2005, p.03)

The Congo River, stretching about 4,160 km, is another major water system, in addition to the Senegal River, which ranks sixth globally in length and fifth in basin size. It is anticipated that this region may become a focal point of competition among major powers, particularly as projections increasingly suggest that future conflicts will center on water scarcity. This is especially concerning given the absence of robust international or bilateral agreements in the Sahel to regulate the use and management of shared water resources.

Figure 05: Illustration of Water Resources in the Sahel Region Countries



Source: Le Sahara par les cartes un espace riche, parcouru et convoité.

Op.cit.

3. Geopolitics of the Peoples of the Sahel Region

Examining the demographic, ethnic, linguistic, and religious dimensions of the Sahel region constitutes a fundamental step toward understanding the causal dynamics underlying many of the crises affecting the area. These crises are closely linked to the nature of both internal and cross-border conflicts that characterize the region.

3.1 Population Density in the Sahel Region

The Sahel region is characterized by a very low population density, accompanied by considerable religious and ethnic diversity. The population of the region reached approximately 80 million in recent years, representing a low to moderate density—less than 11 inhabitants per km². This figure is three times lower than the average population density of the African continent (32 inhabitants per km²), and five times lower than the global average, estimated at 59 inhabitants per km². In addition to its low population density, the region also suffers from significant disparities in population distribution. Some areas are almost entirely uninhabited, with densities up to ten times lower than their respective national averages. (Gérard-François, 2009, p.33).The Sahel countries share similar

demographic characteristics, most notably extremely low population density in all northern regions (Régions Septentrionales), contrasted with very high concentrations in political capitals located in the southwestern parts of these countries.

In Mauritania, for example, the *urban structure* (L'Armature Urbaine) is heavily concentrated, with a quarter of the population residing in the capital, Nouakchott (approximately 680,000 inhabitants). Other regions, however, exhibit exceptionally low densities, sometimes as low as 1 inhabitant per km². Furthermore, nomadic groups occupy nine-tenths of the national territory. (Gérard-François, 2009, p.34).

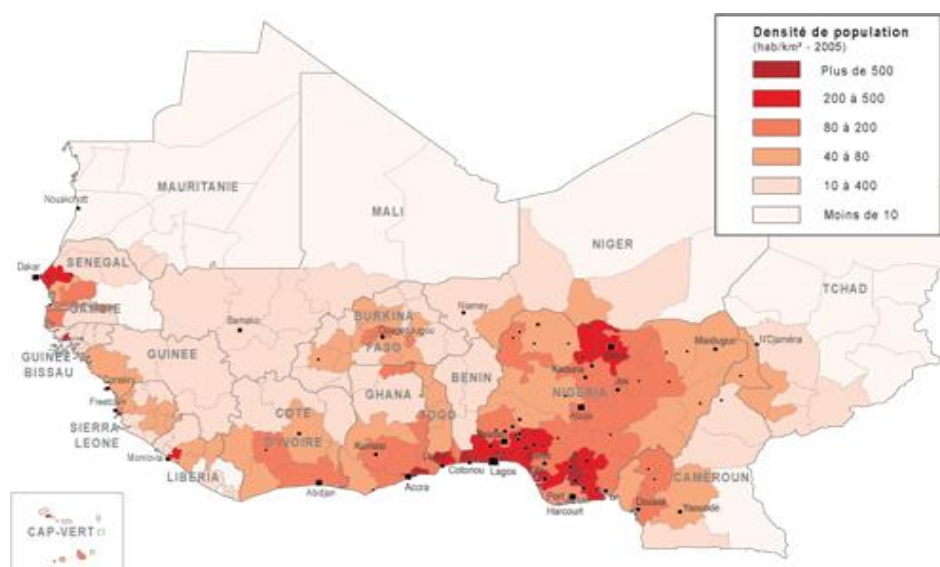
Bamako, the capital of Mali, hosts more than 1.5 million inhabitants—representing about 12% of the country's total population—while the northern half of the country remains extremely sparsely populated. Similarly, three-quarters of Niger's territory consists of uninhabited desert areas. The political capital, Niamey, exhibits a high population density with approximately 900,000 inhabitants, accounting for nearly 6% of the national population—still a modest proportion when compared to Mauritania and Mali. This pattern is largely attributable to the country's geographical characteristics: the belt extending along the Niger River is densely populated, particularly in three major cities—Zinder, Maradi, and Tahoua—the latter situated near the borders with Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, Niger's overall level of urbanization remains the lowest among Sahelian states, with only 17% of the population living in urban areas.

Chad displays a similar demographic distribution, with the southern regions being more densely populated, particularly the capital N'Djamena, which has around 800,000 inhabitants—representing 8% of the national population. This imbalance in population distribution is also evident in Burkina Faso, where the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso together account for nearly 63.7% of the country's total urban population, while many other cities remain scarcely inhabited. Sudan stands as the exception to this general pattern. Its population is moderately to densely concentrated in the southern regions, where the capital, Khartoum—home to roughly 8 million inhabitants, or about 20% of the national population—is located. The city of Port Sudan follows, with approximately 500,000 inhabitants due to its economic significance. Despite this, the northern third of Sudan (east and west of the Nile Valley) consists largely of desert terrain. (Conseil National de Population du Burkina-Faso, 2000, p.8)

Sudan is the only country in the region that differs from the general pattern. Population density is moderate to high in the south, largely due to the presence of the capital, Khartoum, which has approximately 8 million inhabitants, representing 20% of the national population. The city of Port Sudan follows, with around 500,000 residents, reflecting its economic significance. Nevertheless, the

northern third of Sudan—encompassing the eastern and western regions of the Nile Valley—remains predominantly desert. (Gérard-François, 2009, p.35).

Figure 06: Population Density Rates in the Core Countries of the Sahel Region



Source: Le Sahel un terreau propice au développement de la criminalité, (12 Novembre 2010).

Disponible sur: <http://goodmorningafrika.blogspot.com/2010/11/le-sahel-un-terreau-propice-au.html>

Analyzing the demographic structure of the Sahel countries reveals that it constitutes one of the most significant factors influencing a range of internal geopolitical challenges, as evidenced by the following points: (Gérard-François, 2009, p.35).

- ✓ Since gaining independence and the recognition of their international borders, the Sahelian states have sought to translate these theoretical gains into practical achievements by asserting sovereignty over their entire territories. However, in practice, this objective has proven difficult to realize. The presence of vast desert areas renders border monitoring by the central government extremely challenging. Even when the authorities attempt to develop these sparsely populated regions and establish a strong security apparatus supported by substantial military capabilities, they still face significant obstacles due to the harsh geographical conditions. The vast distances not only separate security forces from one another but also create logistical challenges in supplying essential resources, requiring extensive and costly logistics that these countries often lack.
- ✓ The inability of central governments to enforce control over all territories has fostered a sense among certain local or ethnic groups that they are the

legitimate heirs of the land, motivating attempts to assert control over portions of the national territory.

- ✓ Such circumstances can destabilize central governments in the Sahel under two potential scenarios:

Scenario One: A change in government could empower actors capable of countering extremism or rebellion, potentially triggering conflict between opposing forces.

Scenario Two: Weakness in government may allow insurgents to seize control of the central authority, transforming a local victory into a national one. (Gérard-François, 2009, p.36).

Historical conflicts in the region can often be interpreted as military victories. For example, Chad's post-independence history is marked by numerous military successes. Yet, despite such victories, military triumph alone has proven insufficient to establish peace or effectively manage vast territories with extremely low population densities. In some cases, even when central authorities successfully eliminate insurgents controlling specific areas, their advantage remains contingent upon two critical factors:

Maintaining these gains is challenging due to the potential absence or scarcity of popular support. Even if some minorities suffer from organized violence, their small numbers may prevent them from effectively supporting the government. The state lacks the necessary resources to monitor all vast territories, as doing so would require enormous military capabilities that are beyond the reach of most Sahelian countries. Beyond low population density, another key indicator for understanding the geopolitical dimension of the Sahel region is its ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity.

3.2 Ethnic Divisions and Diversity in the Sahel Region Countries

Visibly, the population of the Sahel region can be broadly categorized into two major racial groups: the light-skinned "white" population concentrated in the northern Sahel, and the dark-skinned "black" population primarily located in the southern part.

In Mauritania, the "Maures" (Maure)—light-skinned Arabs who settled in North Africa—constitute about one-third of the population. The Harratin (or Artan), descendants of enslaved Black Africans (Esclaves), are concentrated along the Senegal River and have historically been under the control of the Maures since Mauritania's independence. This situation has created a sense of oppression and marginalization among the Harratin. Consequently, Mauritania can be seen as a site of tension between the Maures (Arabo-Berbers) and the Black African population (Négro-Africains).

In Mali, there are twenty-three distinct ethnic groups, generally organized into five main tribal clusters: (Dialla, 2012, p.08)

Mandingue Tribe: Includes Bambara, Sominké, Malinke, and Bozo.

Bella Tribe: Includes Peul and Toucouleur.

Voltaic Tribe (Voltaïque): Includes Bobo, Sénoufo, and Miniankea.

Saharan Tribe (Saharien): Includes Maures, Tuareg, and Arabs.

Songhai Tribe: Songhai ethnic group.

Approximately nine-tenths of Mali's population resides in the southern region known as Mali Utile, due to its fertile agricultural land. The largest group in this area is the Mandingues, representing about 2.5% of the total population, along with other ethnic groups such as the Bambara. (Gérard-François, 2009, p.36).

Niger, located at the heart of the Sahel, exhibits the following ethnic distribution:

Hausa: Concentrated in central and eastern Niger, representing 5.6% of the population.

Djerma–Songhai: Approximately 22% of the population, wielding significant military influence.

Northern Tuareg: Comprising around 10% of the population.

Other ethnic groups in Niger include the Fula, Kanuri, Arabs, and Toubou (Gourmantché). Economically, the Hausa hold significant influence, while the Djerma–Songhai dominate militarily. (Gérard-François, 2009, p.37).

Similarly, Chad exhibits a complex ethnic composition, consisting of a variety of groups that can be categorized as follows:

Sara Ethnic Group: Located in the humid southern tropics within the Chari and Logone basins and the southern Lake region, the Sara are subdivided into numerous subgroups. They predominantly speak Sudanese dialects and belong to the Black African population, representing approximately 43% of the national population.

Semi-Arid Tropical Ethnic Groups: This category includes several other ethnicities of local African and migrant origin: Maba: Approximately 5% of the population. Hadjeräi: Around 2.6% of the population. Bilal: About 2.5% of the population. Arabs: Constituting roughly 14% of the population.

Toubou-Gorane: Concentrated in the Tibesti Mountains and the Ennedi Plateau. Yorko: Located in northern Chad, of Nilotic Black origin, representing 3.9% of the population. (Gérard-François, 2007, p. 271)

In Burkina Faso, there are around sixty ethnic groups, with the largest and most significant being: Mossi: 48.6% of the population. Fulani: 7.8% of the population. Gourmantché: 7% of the population. Bobo: 6.8% of the population. Bisa-Samo: 6.5% of the population. Gourounsi: 6% of the population. Dagari-Lobi: 4.3% of the population. Bwamu: 3% of the population. Sénoufo-Marka-Dioula: 2.2% of the population. Other smaller ethnic groups constitute 7.8% of the population. This diversity underscores the intricate mosaic of ethnic affiliations and the potential challenges for social cohesion and governance in the Sahel region. (<http://www.mae.gov.bf/population%20ethnie.html>)

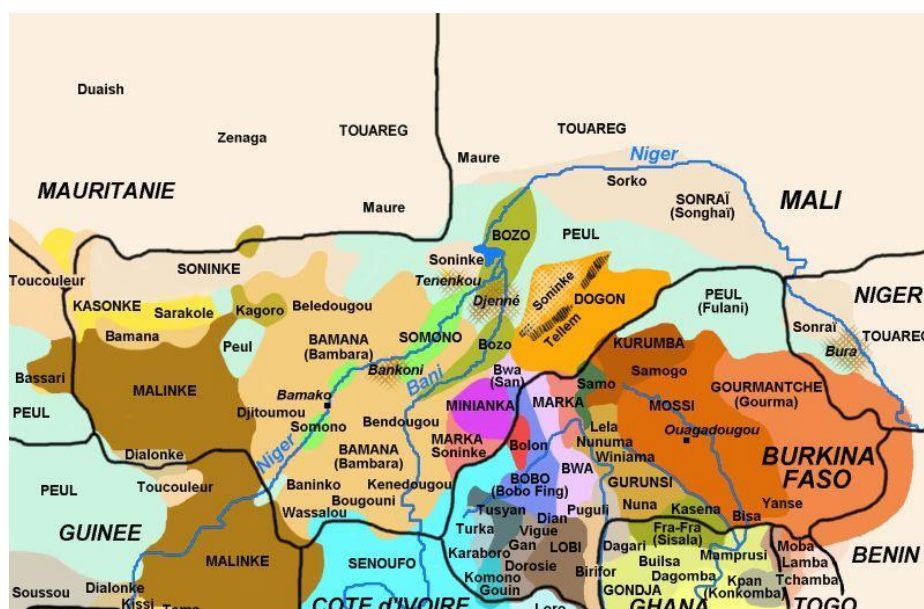


Figure 07: Ethnic Divisions and Diversity in the Sahel Region Countries

3.3 Religion and Language as Geopolitical Determinants in the Sahel Region Countries

In addition to the ethnic diversity of the Sahel countries, there is also significant religious plurality, including Muslims, Christians, and adherents of traditional African beliefs. Islam entered the Sahel through two main routes: from the north via Muslim conquerors and from the south through Libya and Egypt. In both cases, traders and commercial caravans played a crucial role in the spread of Islam throughout the region.

In Mauritania, Islam is the state religion as defined by the constitution, while freedom of worship is guaranteed for non-Muslims. Mali is composed of approximately 96% Muslims, 4% Roman Catholics, and 2% followers of traditional

African religions.(Massa,2015, p.10) Niger has a similar composition, with 95% Muslims and the remainder consisting of Christians and practitioners of indigenous beliefs. Burkina Faso exhibits a more balanced religious distribution, with 50% Muslims, 40% adherents of traditional African religions, and 10% Christians.

Chad presents a religious duality, reflecting the north–south divide: Muslims are concentrated in the north, while Christianity predominates in the south. About half of the population adheres to Islam, one-third to Christianity, and the remainder follow traditional African religions. Sudan is also divided along religious lines, with a predominantly Muslim north (about two-thirds of the population) and a Christian south (divided between Catholics and Protestants). The separation of South Sudan from the north was strongly influenced by these religious differences.

Due to these religious and cultural interactions, Islam in the Sahel has often blended with African traditions, giving rise to what is sometimes termed “localized Islam”. Religious brotherhoods, such as the Tijaniyya order, have achieved widespread influence in the region, playing significant roles not only spiritually but also politically, economically, and socially.

In addition to ethnic and religious diversity, the Sahel exhibits linguistic plurality, including Arabic, colonial languages (French and English), and local tribal languages. This fragmented social structure—ethnically, religiously, and linguistically—has weakened social cohesion and hindered societal integration. Combined with the absence of a unified national political culture, these divisions have contributed to internal crises, such as the Tuareg issue in Mali and Niger, ethnic unrest in Mauritania, and tribal conflicts in Chad.

Conclusion:

This study has provided an understanding of the various geopolitical aspects of the African Sahel region and analyzed the relationship between this geographic area and the multiple security threats it faces. The desert nature of the Sahel, its complex ethnic and tribal composition, as well as the prevailing political systems in its countries, have all contributed to creating a significant security vacuum in the region.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the key geostrategic characteristics of the African Sahel. Its strategic location, combined with abundant resources—including mineral wealth, energy reserves, and water resources—has attracted the attention of major international actors. For a long period, this region remained neglected and exploited by certain colonial powers, such as France. However, the entrance of the United States, China, and other regional and international powers into the competition for influence in the African Sahel has significantly changed the geopolitical dynamics of the area.

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