# Global Fragility Act in Coastal West Africa: Policy Lessons from US Engagement in the Sahel

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## Introduction

With the recent United States Department of Defense (DoD) completion of its withdrawal from Niger and redeployment of US military personnel and equipment to coastal West Africa, it would be prudent for the DoD to consolidate gains from the civil-military engagements and partnerships that built strong community resilience against violent extremist expansion. Since 2012, when jihadists began expanding from Mali into other neighboring Sahelian countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso, there has been several tactics that groups like Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb have used to consolidate their presence. These tactics have included co-opting or creating jihadist groups, integrating themselves into communities where conflict or grievance exists, exploiting those grievances to gain support, stifling dissent, and exploring other areas in which to expand once their base is fully consolidated.

The security partnership between the DoD and Niger's Ministry of National Defense is a case study of how Civil Affairs personnel can assist with the prevention and resiliency against violent extremist expansion into communities in the region where civil vulnerabilities exist. As Russia steps in to fill the security void and conduct disinformation campaigns in the Sahel, the DoD and the wider United States Government (USG) should preserve the lessons learned from these previous civil-military engagements. By conducting similar assessments and engagements, Civil Affairs personnel can reduce the impact of further attempts by violent extremist groups to expand into coastal West Africa while reducing the appeal of the Russian way of war.

## Background

Current US military engagement efforts in northwest Africa can be traced back to the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership initiative, which is by all accounts now considered a failure. Despite the strategic blunders, there have been some successes in tactical operations across the region with US Army Special Operations Forces units like Civil Affairs. Since 2009, Civil Affairs teams operating in the Sahel region of Africa have worked to integrate defense, diplomatic, and development objectives within US Embassy Country teams in the region. By specializing in governance, assessing socioeconomic issues, and

resilience building, they have extended the US DoD lines of effort to project stability in under-governed spaces, as evidenced by their success in  Mali. However, as the political realities in the Sahel shifted as a result of differing objectives between France and countries like Mali, militaries overthrew their governments.

This activity can be very destabilizing to the region.  As the USG implements the Global Fragility Act (GFA) through its 10-year strategic plan to prevent conflict and promote stability, military governments make it impossible for regional collaboration. The GFA was passed by US Congress in 2019 to address some of the vulnerabilities that states have that can be conducive to conflict and facilitate increased cooperation amongst the US interagency to address such vulnerabilities.  However, DoD security cooperation with governments overthrown by their militaries is blocked, which misses a key stability piece as the GFA countries of Ghana, Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire are bordered by Mali or Burkina Faso. Thus, a lack of stability in Mali or Burkina Faso has inevitably spilled over into the coastal West African states.

According to law, in section 7008 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, the DoD is prohibited from providing military training and equipment to a country's military forces where an overthrow of an elected head of government by force or a coup has taken place. This creates a potential conundrum for the potential redeployment of DoD personnel to other countries in the region where democratic values are not as entrenched. DoD security cooperation partnerships with countries with new or emerging democracies can be fragile, so it is imperative that partners are thoroughly assessed for democratic vulnerabilities before an agreement is signed to avoid future complications like in Niger.

Since 2020, most of the countries that the DoD has partnered with in the Sahel have, one way or another, fallen due to military coups, changing the nature of future security cooperation partnerships in the wider West Africa region. For example, the DoD had a drone base in Niger in the northern city of Agadez which was finally opened in 2018. This drone base was used for surveillance of terrorist groups operating in the Sahel and was vital for the support of French military operations in the region. However, in July 2023, the leader of the Presidential Guard, Abdourahamane Tiani, deposed the democratically elected President Mohammed Bazoum in a coup d'état. Despite this politically tenuous situation, the US military remained in the country until a delegation from the State Department and DoD visited the country in March 2024. After this visit, the US military was quite arbitrarily ordered to leave the country without delay, which culminated in a complete withdrawal by September 2024.

With this, great power competitors like Russia have stepped into the void left by France and the United States. France, being the former colonial power of many countries in West Africa, with military bases and strong economic ties, has recently faced a wave of anti-French sentiment.  This has given rise to the popularity of military strongmen who took control of the governments in the Sahel.  Russia has propped up authoritarian governments in the Sahel

that the United States or the West at large would never support. By copying its playbook from the Central African Republic, where they [trade regime protection](#) and arms transfers for mining concessions, Russia has become the new partner of choice instead of the United States. American and Russian presence in Africa dates back to the times of the [Cold War](#), where there was a geopolitical competition for influence. Many countries in Africa, such as Ethiopia, in their quest for regional supremacy in the 1970s, [relied on](#) Soviet (current day Russia) or US security assistance to resist against foreign occupation. With the fall of the Soviet Union and Russia's resurgent behavior on the continent, US security cooperation in Africa now has a competitor who navigates some of the political realities in West Africa better than the US, despite current efforts.

## Coastal West Africa Security Implications

In Côte d'Ivoire, episodic engagements such as joint combined exchange training and joint exercises like Flintlock with participation by Civil Affairs forces have occurred frequently since 2020. These exchanges focused on the tactical, medical, and dental capacity of the security forces of Côte d'Ivoire to provide essential services to their civilian population. The intended goal of these activities is to improve the civil-military relations of security forces in the country to prevent a localized jihadist sentiment in the northern border areas. However, just as in Niger with the neighboring jihadist incursions from Mali, the northern border areas of Cote d'Ivoire face similar security threats originating from Burkina Faso. Jihadist groups have taken advantage of security vacuums surrounding porous borders to spread into these neighboring countries. Since 2020, there have been sporadic jihadist attacks [within 50 kilometers](#) of the border between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire or within the territory of Côte d'Ivoire itself.

With the recent political turmoil in the central Sahel States of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the security situation will only get worse before it gets better. As a result of the military junta's stance in power in the aforementioned states, and Russian private military contractors' conduct during operations, an overly [enemy-centric approach](#) from them will only exacerbate the conflict dynamics in the Sahel. Russian PMCs have capitalized on anti-French sentiment to entrench themselves with central Sahel states by providing security protection for the juntas in exchange for mining rights. This will further drive up the number of refugees, internally displaced people, and jihadist group movements as they plan to seek areas that are considered safe havens. Coupled with [disinformation campaigns](#) from the Russians and the juntas themselves, neighboring countries are at risk of destabilization due to the spread of false information.

In fact, the military juntas in the Sahel are playing into the tactics of Al-Qaida-aligned groups who hope to capitalize on grievances and overly abusive security forces in their operations. By deliberately targeting the Fulani ethnic group that is [heavily discriminated](#) against by the Sahelian security forces, this has led to some of them being driven into the ranks of the

jihadist groups. The Mali-based Fulani commander Amadou Koufa of the Al-Qaida subgroup named the Macina Liberation Front has [leveraged](#) these grievances and tasked other jihadis in Burkina Faso to recruit in Côte d'Ivoire.

## Regional Strategy Implementation

As the DoD conducts its potential redeployment due to the coup d'états in the Sahel to coastal West Africa, with Cote d'Ivoire considered a high priority as a location as a result of its relative stability, it would serve American policymakers to invest more in civil-military support in the northern border areas of Cote d'Ivoire. The United States' ten-year strategy to prevent conflict and promote stability in coastal West Africa outlines commendable objectives, including the enhancement of social cohesion and the improvement of government and security force responsiveness. However, it lacks coordinated efforts from the US interagency to advance them. This strategy stems from the GFA, which is a document that outlines the US government's strategy from the State Department, the US Agency for International Development, and the DoD to jointly address factors negatively impacting stability in fragile countries. From the DoD scope of support to the plan, Civil Affairs personnel are well-suited to address all three objectives. Beyond the medical-focused events that have happened so far in Côte d'Ivoire, Civil Affairs can positively improve community relations by organizing and conducting peace dialogues held between security forces and civilians. Initially, once identified, themes such as justice and topics such as civil protection are discussed at the forums between diverse groups, like Fulani refugees and other groups in the area, to see which issues may arise.

These forums, which may include stakeholders from all walks of society, such as tribal elders, religious leaders, or local prefects, can increase the social contract between the government and the population. Civil vulnerabilities identified by Civil Affairs personnel and addressed with these engagements taking place in or near centers where refugees processed from Burkina Faso can mitigate conflict. Once a social bond is formed between the populace and local security forces, this entity can serve as an early warning mechanism to prevent radicalization or implantation of jihadist ideology. It would be foolhardy to ignore the problems of the Sahel by only focusing on the coastal West African States' security, governance, and development issues. Many of the sub-regions' ethnic groups traverse borders across the Sahel into coastal West Africa due to family or economic ties. The problems that [negatively impact](#) the Sahel will impact the stability of neighboring countries.  It is all connected.

## How Can Civil Affairs Forces be Resourced Through Personnel and Policy to Mitigate Refugee Exploitation?

The northern border regions of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana have, in recent years, [received an influx](#) of Burkinabé refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence and instability from Burkina Faso. In 2023 alone, approximately 40,000 Burkinabé [have sought safety](#) in host

communities and government-run transit centers in the northern border regions of Côte d'Ivoire. The asylum seekers are Fulani pastoralists, and the cattle they have brought with them are consuming crops and straining water resources that are already scarce in the host community. This has increased the burden of hosting the Burkinabé refugees on the local Ivorian population. As a result, increased farmer-herder tensions may lead to a decrease in social cohesion and increased interethnic violence, which may be exploited by jihadist groups. The Government of Côte d'Ivoire's policy of expulsion of certain refugees in the northern border region back into Burkina Faso will likely further exacerbate tensions and create grievances among groups vulnerable to jihadi recruitment. This might lead to further destabilization as jihadist groups recruit and entrench where poverty, lack of employment, and other grievances fester. Politically, there exist some vulnerabilities as Côte d'Ivoire is in an election year, has recently faced civil wars, and has a president who is strongly anticipated to run for a fourth term in office. All of these risk factors play into how the careful employment of Civil Affairs forces can strengthen a strategic opportunistic landscape for the USG.

Civil Affairs forces can support security forces and civil authorities of Côte d'Ivoire to address these issues. By co-locating four-person Civil Affairs teams augmented with functional specialists directly with units in the northern region, some of these civil vulnerabilities can be addressed. Based on the needs of the mission, these functional specialists can vary, but for this example, military government specialists in the skill identifier of agri-business/food, and law/border enforcement would be well suited to address the issues in these communities. For example, Civil Affairs teams, along with the agricultural specialists, can identify the specific crop or water issue that the livestock of refugees are consuming, which may negatively impact the local Ivorian farmer in the host community. Civil Affairs could then propose the appropriate sustainable solutions for watershed management, livestock management, or soil practices. Law and border enforcement specialists can advise Ivorian security forces on the rule of law, efficient practice of biometrics, and processing of refugees. This can lead to the identification and surveillance of refugees who are arriving from Burkina Faso.

Importantly, these Civil Affairs activities should be conducted in collaboration with the interagency, such as the Department of Agriculture or USAID Foreign Service Officers and Department of Justice advisors from the US Embassy. An interagency approach is recommended not just because of the Global Fragility Act but also because of the nature of the problem in West Africa at large. It requires not a heavily security-focused approach, but a governance and development-led one. Ultimately, by conducting these activities, civil vulnerabilities can be addressed, such as food insecurity and potential infiltration of jihadists or jihadist sympathizers.  If the conditions in the communities in the northern border region of Côte d'Ivoire are neglected, there could be an increase in conflict and an opportunity for groups like Al Qaida to come in and exploit the situation. As a result of such instability, the

Government of Côte d'Ivoire would face an insurgency that could threaten its existence in one of the most economically [prosperous](#) countries in the West African region. This would spread chaos into stable countries like Ghana.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, there are several recommendations that policymakers should consider to gain a strategic advantage over great power competitors like Russia in Africa. First establish a working redeployment framework that would assist in case contingencies occur where US forces are summarily expelled from countries like Niger. To avoid similar cases, the DoD should base future deployments on a democracy resiliency assessment, which weighs democratic vulnerabilities like the history of coup d'états. Second, advocate for waivers under section 7008 in countries where US national security interests are at risk and civilian governance remains a viable option so that DoD access can be maintained. Third, establish civil-military cells in high-risk border regions to facilitate regional coordination among coastal West Africa states. Finally, enhance early warning mechanisms by creating emergency operations coordination centers in vulnerable areas where Civil Affairs assessments can be fed into an interagency database that maps instability factors in communities.

## Conclusions

The lessons learned from the United States' counterterrorism strategy failure in the Sahel could inform future security partnerships in West Africa. The complex security crisis in the Sahel will eventually spread to coastal West Africa and negatively impact these more prosperous states. It would be a mistake to take a heavily security-focused approach rather than one focused on good governance practices. An increased emphasis on civil-military relations, themed assessments, fact-finding, and furthering dialogue between at-risk groups in the northern border regions can increase resiliency against the expansion of violent extremism.

The local dynamics found in these assessments, such as farmer-herder tensions and civil vulnerabilities like crop shortages, are then mitigated to prevent conflict. In the near term, recommendations for stabilization should also include regional information sharing centers, intelligence fusion cells, and [blended command systems](#) to foster that interagency collaboration which the regional strategy to prevent conflict and promote stability was designed for.