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FROM AFISMA TO AES: ECOWAS, SUBSIDIARITY AND THE FAILURE TO OWN SAHEL SECURITY, 2012–2026

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ABSTRACT

When the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) took legal effect on 29 January 2025, the Community lost the three states whose insecurity had dominated its agenda for more than a decade. This article asks how the regional organisation with the continent's most developed conflict-management architecture came to be a bystander to the Sahel's security crisis. Drawing on the principle of subsidiarity within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and on a four-part conception of ownership — who authorises, who pays, who commands, who bears the consequences — we trace the arc from the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA, 2012–2013) to the Alliance of Sahel States (AES, 2023–2026). We argue that ECOWAS never owned Sahel security. The security file leaked upward to the United Nations and the African Union, outward to France, the European Union and later Russia, sideways to the G5 Sahel, and finally downward to the affected states themselves. The Community's instruments — mediation and sanctions built for constitutional crises — were mobilised repeatedly, but the counter-insurgency core of the crisis was consistently left to others. The Niger crisis of 2023 exposed the resulting gap between declaratory authority and operational capacity, and the AES emerged as a rival claim to subsidiarity from below. Critically, the AES's own attempt at ownership — formalized in the Unified Force inaugurated in December 2025 — has not arrested the violence: Islamist fatalities in the three states reached record levels in 2025–2026, validating the argument that the underlying problem is the chronic mismatch between security governance ambitions and operational capacity, not merely the identity of the responsible institution. We conclude that the failure to own security, more than any single sanctions decision, explains the rupture — and that the AES's security record since January 2025 offers a sobering postscript.

Keywords: ECOWAS; subsidiarity; African Peace and Security Architecture; AFISMA; G5 Sahel; Alliance of Sahel States; Mali; Niger; Burkina Faso; regional security governance; Sahel insurgency

1 INTRODUCTION

On 29 January 2025 the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS took legal effect. One year earlier, on 28 January 2024, the three military governments had announced their departure in a joint statement that accused the Community of having failed to assist them against terrorism, of having imposed 'inhumane' sanctions, and of having fallen under the influence of foreign powers (AES 2024a). The Community, for its part, spent the intervening year alternating between conciliation and disbelief: it lifted most of the sanctions it had imposed on Niger in February 2024,

re-elected Nigeria's Bola Tinubu as its chair in July, and in December acknowledged that the exit would take effect on the anniversary of the notice while offering a further six months of grace (ECOWAS 2024a; 2024b). None of it altered the outcome. The organisation that had pioneered regional peace enforcement in Africa in the 1990s lost, in a single day, more than half of its geographic territory — the three departed states comprising approximately 54 per cent of ECOWAS's land area — and the three member states whose insecurity had dominated its agenda for more than a decade.

We think the rupture was foretold, and not only in the sense that the notice period made its date predictable. It was foretold in the way ECOWAS had handled — or, more precisely, had not handled — the security crisis that began in the Sahel with the Malian coup of 22 March 2012. This article sets out to explain how the regional organisation with the continent's most elaborate conflict-management architecture came to be a bystander to the most consequential security emergency in its own territory. The question is worth asking because the conventional explanations, though each contains truth, do not quite add up. Capacity deficits are real, but ECOWAS had deployed forces before, in far less permissive environments and with less external support. French dominance is real, but France did not prevent ECOWAS from acting in The Gambia in 2017, nor was it France that delayed AFISMA's authorisation in 2012. Nigeria's distraction by its own insurgency is real, but Nigeria remained willing to threaten force over Niger in 2023. The nature of jihadist insurgency, which calls for counter-insurgency rather than the interpositional peacekeeping ECOWAS knew, is real too — and yet ECOWAS never seriously tried to build the former.

Our argument is that these are symptoms of a more basic pattern, which we call the failure to own. By ownership we mean something more demanding than the familiar slogan of 'African solutions to African problems' (Williams 2008). An actor owns a security problem when it assumes responsibility for the design, the financing, the command and the political consequences of the response to it. Ownership is thus distinct from subsidiarity, the principle within APSA that assigns first responsibility to the organisation closest to a crisis. Subsidiarity says who should act. Ownership asks who actually bears the weight. Between 2012 and 2025, we argue, ECOWAS claimed the first and evaded the second, and the security file leaked away from it in four directions: upward, to the United Nations and the African Union; outward, to France, the European Union and eventually Russia; sideways, to the G5 Sahel, a coalition cut to the shape of the threat rather than the shape of the Community; and finally downward, to the three affected states themselves, who in the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) made the claim of ownership that ECOWAS had never made. The AES, in this reading, is not simply a rejection of ECOWAS. It is subsidiarity inverted — the level nearest the crisis asserting the mandate against the regional body that had let it lapse.

An important postscript imposes itself. The AES's own attempt to exercise ownership — formalised in the Unified Force (Force Unifiée, FU-AES) inaugurated at Bamako on 20 December 2025 — has not reversed the insurgency. Militant Islamist fatalities in the three states reached record levels in 2025–2026, Burkina Faso was ranked the world's most terrorism-affected country by the Global Terrorism Index (Vision of Humanity 2025), and JNIM imposed a fuel blockade on Bamako beginning in September 2025 (ADF Magazine 2025a). This record does not vindicate ECOWAS's earlier inaction, but it does complicate the normative claim embedded in the AES's subsidiarity argument: proximity to a crisis is not a sufficient condition for successful ownership if the operational capacity and political cohesion required to act are absent. We incorporate this update into our analysis and our conclusion.

The account that follows moves chronologically from AFISMA to the post-withdrawal period, tracing the four leakages as they occurred and their consequences after January 2025. We draw on ECOWAS communiqués, Security Council resolutions, AU instruments and the founding documents of the AES, read alongside the scholarly literature on the Sahel crisis and recent reporting from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED) and the Africa Defense Forum. We do not attempt to evaluate the security record of the juntas or of their Russian partners in isolation; where it bears on our argument about ownership, we address it.

2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: SUBSIDIARITY, OWNERSHIP AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF EXPECTATIONS

APSA was built on a layered promise. The Protocol establishing the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) in 2002 declared that the Union bore 'primary responsibility' for peace and security on the continent while recognising the regional mechanisms as 'part of the overall security architecture' (African Union 2002, Article 16). Six years later the Memorandum of Understanding between the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) listed the principles that were to govern their relationship — subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage — without ranking them or defining what any of them required in a given case (African Union 2008). The resulting ambiguity has been well documented. Laurie Nathan has shown how it produced recurrent disputes over who should mediate what (Nathan 2017); Alex Vines, reviewing the architecture's first decade, found an institution rich in norms and poor in the means to apply them (Vines 2013); Paul Williams and Arthur Boutellis, examining the UN–AU relationship, described a partnership in which authority, funding and operational burden were persistently misaligned (Boutellis and Williams 2013; Williams and Boutellis 2014). Malte Brosig's notion of regime complexity captures the outcome: overlapping

mandates, negotiated case by case, in which the question of who leads is settled less by principle than by who turns up (Brosig 2015; see also de Coning, Gelot and Karlsrud 2016).

Within that architecture ECOWAS occupied a special position. It had acted before the AU existed, deploying the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) into Liberia in 1990 and Sierra Leone in the late 1990s, and it had codified the experience in the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security (Adebajo 2002; Williams 2016). The Mechanism created a standing Mediation and Security Council, a Council of Elders and a Standby Force, and it spelled out — in Article 25 — the circumstances in which it could be triggered, from aggression and internal conflict threatening humanitarian disaster to the overthrow of a democratically elected government (ECOWAS 1999). The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance added a normative layer, defining unconstitutional change of government and prescribing graduated sanctions for it (ECOWAS 2001). The literature on this apparatus is large and, on the whole, admiring of its ambition, though sober about its execution (Adebajo and Rashid 2004; Kabia 2009; Obi 2009; Söderbaum and Tavares 2011). What matters for our purposes is that by 2012 ECOWAS had a legal basis, an institutional machinery and a historical reputation for acting first. Subsidiarity, in West Africa, was less a doctrine than an expectation.

Expectations, however, are not the same as responsibility. It is here that we want to separate ownership from subsidiarity and give the former some analytical content. We propose that ownership of a security response can be assessed along four dimensions, each posed as a question. Who authorises the response — that is, under whose legal mandate does it proceed? Who pays for it? Who commands it, in the sense of shaping its doctrine, objectives and rules of engagement, not merely providing a figurehead? And who bears the political consequences of its success or failure — who is credited, and who is blamed? An actor that answers all four questions with itself owns the response. An actor that answers only the first, or none, does not, however loudly it claims subsidiarity. The distinction has an obvious affinity with the debate on partnership peacekeeping, where the divergence between who authorises and who pays has long been recognised as the central pathology of the UN–AU relationship (Williams and Boutellis 2014; de Coning 2017). We extend it to the REC level and to the specific case of the Sahel.

The four dimensions also allow us to specify what we mean by leakage. When authorisation migrates from ECOWAS to the Security Council, or financing to a donors' conference, or command to a foreign general staff, or blame to a national army, the security file has leaked. The four directions identified above — upward, outward, sideways and downward — are simply the destinations to which the leakage flowed. In earlier work we have argued that the Sahel security order between 2012 and 2025 is best understood as a hybrid regional security complex whose interdependence was externalised, managed by actors from outside the region rather than by the region's own institutions (Umar 2026). The present article can be read as an account of the institutional mechanism by which that externalisation happened: not through a single act of abdication, but through a series of decisions in which ECOWAS asserted its authority declaratively and then allowed the substance of the response to be carried by others. Each time the gap between what the Community declared and what it could do reopened, the cost was paid in legitimacy — a cost that came due, as we shall see, in Niamey in August 2023.

We add a fifth analytical point that our post-2025 update makes necessary. Ownership does not guarantee success. The AES's experience since December 2025 demonstrates that a REC's failure to own a crisis does not mean that any actor closer to the crisis will succeed. What ownership does do is concentrate political accountability: a government that owns its security problem cannot blame a distant organisation when it fails. This is, in itself, a valuable institutional function, and one that subsidiarity is designed to promote. The Sahel since 2025 has shown, however, that ownership and capacity are two different things, and that the region's crisis may exceed the resources of any single tier of governance, however proximate.

2.1 From AFISMA to AES: A Chronology of Leakage

2.1.1 Mali, 2012–2013: Planned in Abuja, Fought from Paris

The Malian crisis of 2012 has been analysed from almost every angle — its roots in a decade of governance by collusion (Bøås and Torheim 2013; Bergamaschi 2014), its northern political economy (Raineri and Strazzari 2015; Bøås 2015), the coup itself and the strange legitimacy it briefly enjoyed in Bamako (Whitehouse 2012; Wing 2013), and the cacophony of external readings it provoked (Lecocq et al. 2013; Marchal 2013; Chauzal and van Damme 2015). Our interest is narrower: what ECOWAS did in the fifteen months between the coup of 22 March 2012 and the transfer of authority to the United Nations on 1 July 2013, and what those months reveal about ownership.

The Community's first response was fast and, within its own terms, effective. It suspended Mali, imposed sanctions in early April, appointed Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaoré as mediator, and within little more than a fortnight extracted a framework agreement under which the coup leader, Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, ceded power to an interim president, Dioncounda Traoré (International Crisis Group 2012; Arieff 2013). This was the toolkit of the 2001 Protocol

working as designed: a constitutional crisis met with suspension, sanctions and mediation. The difficulty was that the constitutional crisis was the lesser of Mali's two crises. In the days after the coup the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and its jihadist allies took Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, and on 6 April — the same day as the Ouagadougou framework agreement — the MNLA declared the independence of Azawad. By July the jihadist groups had pushed the MNLA aside and controlled the north (Thurston 2020). ECOWAS had answered the governance emergency with practised speed; it now confronted a territorial one for which its instruments were untested.

It is important to record that ECOWAS did try. Through the spring and summer of 2012, the Community planned a mission — initially designated MICEMA, later reconceived as AFISMA — of some 3,300 troops, and it sought Security Council authorisation for it. What followed was an education in the limits of subsidiarity when the subsidiary body cannot fund, equip or fully justify its own plan. The Council's Resolution 2056 of 5 July 2012 expressed readiness to consider a request but asked for more detail; Resolution 2071 of 12 October asked for detailed and actionable recommendations within forty-five days (UNSC 2012a; 2012b). The Malian authorities themselves were ambivalent, Sanogo's camp openly hostile to foreign troops in Bamako, and Traoré's formal request came only in September. ECOWAS adopted a harmonised concept of operations at an extraordinary summit in Abuja on 11 November, the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed it two days later, and on 20 December the Security Council, acting under Chapter VII, authorised AFISMA for an initial period of one year (ECOWAS 2012; UNSC 2012c). Even then the authorisation was hedged: it set benchmarks for training and readiness before offensive operations, provided no assessed UN funding, and anticipated full deployment only in the second half of 2013. The Community had its mandate. It did not have the means, the money or the time.

Time ran out on 10 January 2013, when jihadist columns took Konna and threatened the road to Mopti and, beyond it, Bamako. On 11 January France launched Operation Serval at the request of the interim president. Within weeks French and Chadian forces had retaken the northern towns and were fighting in the Adrar des Ifoghas; Chad, which is not a member of ECOWAS, deployed a contingent of roughly 2,000 troops that bore the brunt of the hardest ground fighting and was only subsequently folded into AFISMA's order of battle (Marchal 2013; Wing 2016). AFISMA's own deployment was accelerated, with Nigeria providing the Force Commander, Major General Shehu Usman Abdulkadir, and the largest ECOWAS contingent of approximately 1,186 troops, alongside Togo (723), Niger (675), Burkina Faso (498), Senegal (501), Benin (300), and Ghana (125), totalling some 6,167 deployed by March 2013 (AU 2013). A donors' conference in Addis Ababa on 29 January 2013 — convened by the AU, not ECOWAS — raised pledges of precisely \$455.53 million, the largest contributors being Japan (\$120 million) and the United States (\$96 million, subject to Congressional approval), with the EU pledging \$75 million and the AU \$50 million; the bulk of these pledges were slow to materialise (Maru 2013). Then, on 25 April, Resolution 2100 established the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with an authorised strength of up to 11,200 military and 1,440 police personnel, and on 1 July AFISMA was re-hatted into it (UNSC 2013). ECOWAS's mission in the Sahel had lasted, as an operational entity under its own flag, roughly four months.

Set against our four questions, the episode is instructive. Authorisation had migrated upward from the outset: ECOWAS did not proceed on the authority of its own Mechanism, as it had in Liberia in 1990; it sought, and waited for, a Chapter VII mandate, and when the mandate came it was conditional. Financing was external, pledged at a conference convened by the AU and honoured, when it was honoured, by bilateral donors. Command was nominally Nigerian, but the decisive operational decisions of January–March 2013 were French and Chadian, and after July 2013 they were made in New York under a stabilisation doctrine whose implications for Mali were the subject of intense debate (Karlsrud 2015; de Coning 2017; Charbonneau 2017). Political consequence, finally, attached to everyone except ECOWAS: France gained the credit for Serval and the burden of what followed; the Malian army was blamed for Konna; the UN inherited the north. The Community's traditional lead state was, at the moment of decision, looking elsewhere. Nigeria, whose weight had made ECOMOG possible in the 1990s (Adebajo 2002; Bach 2007), was consumed by the insurgency in its own north-east — a state of emergency was declared in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa on 14 May 2013 — and from July 2013 began repatriating part of its AFISMA contingent, citing the demands of that war. The first ownership moment in the Sahel thus ended with the security file in other hands, and with a lesson that the Community appears not to have drawn: that a subsidiarity claim which cannot be converted into finance, command and consequence within weeks will be overtaken by those who can.

2.1.2 Mediation without a Security Strategy: From Ouagadougou to Algiers, 2013–2015

If ECOWAS could not own the military response, it could reasonably claim the political one. Mediation was the Community's comparative advantage in the vocabulary of the 2008 Memorandum, and Compaoré's mandate gave it a lead role. The Preliminary Agreement signed in Ouagadougou on 18 June 2013 between the transitional government and the MNLA and its allies was a genuine achievement: it allowed presidential elections to proceed in July and August 2013, brought Ibrahim Boubacar Keita to office and gave Mali a constitutionally elected interlocutor for the reconstruction to come. It was also, by design, preliminary. The sequencing — elections first, then a comprehensive settlement — had been pressed by France and the wider international community, and it left the hard questions of the

north, above all the status of Kidal, where the MNLA remained in de facto control and the Malian state did not return, to a later process (Charbonneau 2017).

That later process did not belong to ECOWAS. The comprehensive negotiations opened in Algiers in July 2014 under Algerian leadership, with ECOWAS one member of an international mediation team that also included the AU, the UN, the EU, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and Mali's neighbours. The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali that emerged was signed in Bamako on 15 May 2015 and, by the Coordination of Azawad Movements, on 20 June. Its implementation was entrusted to a monitoring committee chaired by Algeria and was dependent, in practice, on MINUSMA's presence and on the French force that had by then replaced Serval. ECOWAS's mediation had, in other words, delivered a transition and then handed the substance to Algiers — sideways leakage, in our vocabulary, and one that was hard to contest, since Algeria was the state with the most leverage over the northern armed movements and the longest history of brokering agreements with them. There was a further, almost symbolic, loss. Compaoré, the mediator on whom ECOWAS's role had rested, was overthrown by a popular uprising in Ouagadougou in October 2014. The Community's mediation capacity in the Sahel had been personal rather than institutional, and it fell with the person.

We do not want to be unfair. Mediation is what regional organisations can most plausibly do, and the ECOWAS record in the Malian transition compares reasonably with its earlier work in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. The point is rather that mediation without a security strategy is a governance instrument, not a security one. It can deliver elections; it cannot deliver Kidal. By 2015 the Malian state's inability to return to the north, the persistent dissonance between Bamako and its partners over the rebuilding of the army (Tull 2019), and the gathering spread of violence southward into the Mopti region and across the borders into Burkina Faso and Niger were setting the terms of the next decade. On none of these did ECOWAS have an operational position. It had a seat at the Algiers table and a Standby Force on paper.

2.1.3 The G5 Sahel and the Geography of Bypass, 2014–2022

The most revealing episode of the middle years is one in which ECOWAS scarcely appears. On 16 February 2014, in Nouakchott, the presidents of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad founded the G5 Sahel, a framework for security and development cooperation among the five states most directly affected by the crisis. Its membership is worth dwelling on. Three of the five — Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger — were ECOWAS members. Mauritania had formally withdrawn from the Community in December 2000 following a notice given in December 1999 (Britannica 2024). Chad belonged to the Economic Community of Central African States. The G5 was, in short, a security geography cut to the shape of the threat and, not coincidentally, to the shape of the French deployment: Operation Barkhane, which replaced Serval on 1 August 2014 and was headquartered in N'Djamena, operated across precisely these five states (Powell 2017). The AU had a year earlier launched its own coordinating framework for the region, the Nouakchott Process, in March 2013 — upward leakage of the coordinating function, and an implicit judgement that the RECs were not the right level for a problem that straddled them.

The G5's transformation into a military coalition made the bypass explicit. In February 2017 its heads of state agreed to create a Joint Force of some 5,000 troops to operate in the border zones; the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed it in April, and in June the Security Council welcomed it in Resolution 2359 while declining — despite African and French lobbying — to place it under Chapter VII or to give it access to UN assessed contributions (UNSC 2017b; International Crisis Group 2017). The Joint Force was financed instead by the EU, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and bilateral donors, and it depended on Barkhane for intelligence, air support and logistics. The Joint Force was the first African-flagged combat formation in the central Sahel since AFISMA. ECOWAS had no part in its design, its command or its financing. Subsidiarity had been applied, but to a coalition of the affected rather than to the regional community, and the coalition's external sponsor was in Paris.

ECOWAS's response to being bypassed was late and declaratory. At an extraordinary summit in Ouagadougou on 14 September 2019, devoted for the first time specifically to terrorism, the Authority of Heads of State and Government adopted a priority action plan for 2020–2024 and pledged one billion US dollars to it (ECOWAS 2019). No evidence emerged in subsequent communiqués that any substantial portion of that sum was mobilised from member-state contributions, and the plan did not appear as an operational programme with deployed assets. What the summit did signal was recognition — seven years after the Malian coup — that the Sahel crisis was a Community security problem and not merely a series of governance crises in three member states. By then the crisis had changed shape dramatically. Violence had spread from northern Mali into the Mopti region, into Burkina Faso's north and east, and into Niger's Tillabéri region; JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP, also known as ISGS) were competing across a tri-border area that no single state controlled, and the stabilisation strategy built around Barkhane, MINUSMA and the G5 Joint Force was visibly failing to contain them (Eizenga and Williams 2020; Bøås, Cissé and Mahamane 2020; Bøås and Strazzari 2020; Thurston 2020; International Crisis Group 2021). Between 2013 and 2025, ECOWAS did not deploy a single combat unit under its own flag into the central Sahel.

The G5 itself did not survive the coup wave. Mali withdrew in May 2022, after the other members declined to let it assume the rotating presidency; Burkina Faso and Niger announced their withdrawal at the end of 2023, and Mauritania and Chad acknowledged in December of that year that the organisation had effectively ceased to function. Its failure left no regional security institution in its place. The sideways leakage had emptied the space that ECOWAS might have occupied, and when the coalition collapsed the space stayed empty.

2.1.4 The Gambia Interlude: Ownership within Reach, 2017

It would be wrong to suggest that ECOWAS had lost the capacity to own a crisis. In the same period it demonstrated, in The Gambia, exactly what ownership looked like. When Yahya Jammeh refused to accept his defeat in the presidential election of 1 December 2016, the Community first mediated and then threatened; when the threat was ignored it deployed. On 19 January 2017, the day Adama Barrow was sworn in at the Gambian embassy in Dakar, a Senegalese-led ECOWAS force, ECOMIG, crossed the border with Nigerian and Ghanaian participation; the Security Council, in Resolution 2337 adopted the same day, endorsed ECOWAS's efforts without explicitly authorising the use of force under Chapter VII (UNSC 2017a). Jammeh left the country on 21 January (Hartmann 2017; Wilén and Williams 2018).

Against our four questions the contrast with Mali is complete. ECOWAS authorised the operation under its own protocols, with the UN endorsing rather than mandating. Its member states — Senegal above all, with Nigeria providing air and naval assets — commanded and paid. The Community bore, and reaped, the political consequence: The Gambia became the reference case for ECOWAS's coercive diplomacy and for the AU's willingness to back a REC (Wilén and Williams 2018). Why here and not in the Sahel? The answer has little to do with will and much to do with fit. The Gambia was small, coastal and entirely surrounded by the lead state; the crisis was constitutional, with a clear legal trigger under the 2001 Protocol; there was no insurgency, no contested territory, and no external mission already in place. Ownership was within reach because the problem fitted the instruments. The Sahel fitted none of them.

2.1.5 The Coup Wave and the Sanctions Reflex, 2020–2022

The coups that began in Bamako on 18 August 2020 tested ECOWAS on the terrain it knew best — unconstitutional change of government — and the Community responded as its protocols prescribed. Mali was suspended and sanctioned; the sanctions were lifted in October once a transition charter installed a nominally civilian president and prime minister. When Colonel Assimi Goïta removed them both on 24 May 2021, the Community suspended Mali again but stopped short of economic sanctions, relying on Nigeria's former president Goodluck Jonathan, appointed mediator after the first coup, to press for elections. It was the transitional authorities' proposal, in late 2021, to extend their tenure by up to five years that produced what the Authority would call the harshest measures in the Community's history: at an extraordinary summit in Accra on 9 January 2022, ECOWAS closed borders, suspended financial transactions and trade in all but essential goods, froze Malian assets in regional central and commercial banks, and recalled ambassadors (ECOWAS 2022a). Guinea had also been suspended after Mamadi Doumbouya's coup of 5 September 2021, and Burkina Faso was suspended after Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba overthrew Roch Kaboré on 24 January 2022, and again after Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew Damiba on 30 September 2022. The immediate trigger for Damiba's fall was widely cited as his failure to contain jihadist attacks, including the killing of more than forty gendarmes at Inata in November 2021 (Charbonneau 2021). Each suspended state avoided the scale of sanctions imposed on Mali.

What we want to draw attention to is not the severity of the Malian sanctions, which has been much debated, but their logic, and the way that logic exposed the ownership gap. ECOWAS was punishing governance failure. The juntas, however, justified themselves by security failure. Goïta's second coup and Damiba's first were both explicitly framed as responses to civilian governments' inability to protect their territories, and the framing resonated with publics that had watched the state retreat for a decade (Charbonneau 2021). The Community could impose costs on a junta; it could offer nothing to the population that the junta claimed to be protecting. It did not own the security response in Mali or Burkina Faso, and so its coercion arrived without a corresponding security dividend. In the political economy of legitimacy this is a losing position, and the juntas exploited it: ECOWAS was portrayed as punishing states at war on behalf of a foreign patron whose own intervention had, by 2022, become a liability.

That portrayal was assisted by the trajectory of the external actors to whom the security file had earlier leaked. The arrival of Wagner Group personnel in Mali in December 2021 — denounced by ECOWAS, France and the EU — and France's announcement in February 2022 that Barkhane would leave Mali, a withdrawal completed by 15 August 2022, marked the redirection of the outward leakage rather than its end: the transitional authorities were replacing one external security partner with another, doing so as an act of expressed sovereignty (Umar 2026). The Community's sanctions on Mali were lifted on 3 July 2022 in exchange for a twenty-four-month transition timetable that would later be postponed indefinitely (ECOWAS 2022b). At its ordinary summit in Abuja in December 2022 the Authority declared its intention to establish a regional force capable of addressing both terrorism and unconstitutional change of government. The intention was sincere and, as far as the available record shows, unfunded. The downward leakage had begun: the affected states were seeking their own solutions, and the Community's answer was a declaration.

2.1.6 Niger, 2023: The Standby Force that Stood By

By the middle of 2023 the upward leakage was also reversing. On 16 June Mali formally demanded MINUSMA's departure, and on 30 June the Security Council terminated its mandate through Resolution 2690, with withdrawal completed by 31 December 2023 (UNSC 2023; MINUSMA 2023). The Nigerien coup of 26 July 2023, in which the presidential guard under General Abdourahamane Tchiani detained President Mohamed Bazoum, therefore arrived at a moment when the external scaffolding of the Sahel security order was being dismantled and nothing regional stood behind it. Bazoum was the last elected president in the central Sahel; Niger was the last of the three states to host French and American military forces. Tinubu, who had assumed the ECOWAS chair only on 9 July, was in the first weeks of a presidency that had promised to restore Nigeria's regional weight. The Community's response was correspondingly maximal. At an extraordinary summit in Abuja on 30 July the Authority gave the junta one week to restore Bazoum, imposed sweeping sanctions including the closure of borders, the suspension of financial transactions and the freezing of assets, and stated that it would take all measures necessary, including the use of force, if the ultimatum expired (ECOWAS 2023a). Nigeria cut electricity supplies to Niger within days. On 10 August a second extraordinary summit ordered the deployment of the ECOWAS Standby Force to restore constitutional order, and on 17–18 August the Community's defence chiefs, meeting in Accra, announced that a date for intervention had been set (ECOWAS 2023b).

The intervention did not materialise. Nigeria's Senate, meeting on 5 August, declined to endorse military action, with senators from northern states bordering Niger leading the opposition; northern governors and traditional rulers made the same case; and Nigerian public opinion, in a country with its own Sahelian border and its own unfinished insurgency, was unpersuaded. Mali and Burkina Faso, in a joint statement on 31 July, declared that any ECOWAS intervention in Niger would be treated as a declaration of war on them. Algeria, which shares Niger's longest border, opposed the use of force and offered its own mediation. The AU Peace and Security Council suspended Niger but did not endorse the military option. France's stated support for ECOWAS, in the circumstances, helped the junta more than the Community — the association with Paris was precisely the liability the juntas had spent two years exploiting. Above all, the force that the Authority had ordered to deploy did not exist as a deployable entity for the mission described: the ECOWAS Standby Force had never conducted a combat operation against a sitting military government backed by two neighbouring states and a national army that had spent a decade expanding with Western support. The threat was made in the vocabulary of ownership and could not be redeemed in its currency.

Meanwhile the sanctions fell — on Niger's population, which faced shortages of medicine, food and electricity through the second half of 2023, and on Nigeria's own border communities, whose trade was severed. The humanitarian consequences were documented by UN agencies and became a central element of the juntas' narrative against ECOWAS. On 16 September 2023, the three military governments formalised what had been implicit since July, announcing the Alliance of Sahel States in Bamako and committing to mutual defence, economic cooperation and eventual political confederation. The AES Charter — the Liptako-Gourma Charter — invoked exactly the subsidiarity logic that ECOWAS had used for thirty years: the states closest to the crisis, it implied, had both the right and the duty to respond to it (AES 2023). ECOWAS had no answer, because it had not built one.

2.1.7 The Alliance of Sahel States: Subsidiarity Inverted, 2023–2025

The AES's first year was, by any measure, a period of accelerating institutionalisation. The Liptako-Gourma Charter committed the three states to mutual defence and was supplemented, over the following months, by agreements on economic cooperation, free movement, a common passport and the outlines of a political confederation. What drove the pace was not diplomatic momentum alone but the military dynamic: the departure of Barkhane from Mali and Burkina Faso, combined with the expulsion of French and American forces from Niger in 2024, removed the external security partners on whom the affected states had, whatever their rhetoric, depended. The AES was, in this sense, the institutionalisation of a necessity as much as a preference.

ECOWAS's response was to treat the AES announcement as a negotiating position rather than a strategic rupture — a reading that reflected a genuine assessment of the three states' economic dependence on their ECOWAS neighbours but did not engage with the security dynamic. At its ordinary summit in Abuja on 7 July 2024 the Authority, re-electing Tinubu as chair, warned of the risk of disintegration and designated Senegal's Bassirou Diomaye Faye and Togo's Faure Gnassingbé to engage the three states; the day before, in Niamey, the three AES heads of state had signed a treaty establishing a Confederation of Sahel States (AES 2024b). At its sixty-sixth ordinary session on 15 December 2024 the Authority acknowledged that the withdrawal would take effect on 29 January 2025 and set a transitional period to 29 July 2025 during which the Community's doors would remain open (ECOWAS 2024b). The AES, for its part, launched a common passport on the day the withdrawal took effect and declared that ECOWAS citizens would continue to enjoy free movement in its territory — an offer that neatly reversed the Community's own coercive instrument of border closure.

Read through our four questions, the AES presents itself as the mirror image of everything ECOWAS had failed to be in the Sahel. It authorises itself, under a charter that its members wrote. It finances itself, from national budgets — though

the material dependence on Russia, whose Africa Corps personnel (the Wagner Group's successor entity) supplied much of the combat capability that Barkhane had withdrawn, means that the outward leakage did not end but changed destination. It commands itself, through a joint force whose doctrine is openly counter-insurgent rather than stabilising. And it bears the consequences: the juntas have staked their domestic legitimacy on the security outcome, and no international mission stands between them and the result. Our point is institutional: the AES represents subsidiarity inverted — the principle that the level closest to the crisis should lead, invoked not by the regional community against the AU or the UN, but by the affected states against the regional community. It is what happens when a REC claims first responsibility for a decade and does not exercise it.

2.1.8 After the Rupture: Security Outcomes and the Limits of Autonomous Ownership, 2025–2026

The AES's institutional ambition was finally given operational form on 20 December 2025, when the Force Unifiée AES (FU-AES) was formally inaugurated during a ceremony at an air force base in Bamako, presided over by General Assimi Goïta. The force brought together approximately 5,000 troops from the three member states, designed to integrate air power, intelligence-sharing and coordinated ground operations. At the second AES summit in Bamako on 23 December 2025, Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso was appointed as the new Alliance chair; the summit announced that a large-scale military operation would follow the force's inauguration. By February 2026 the force had been expanded to approximately 6,000 troops (ADF Magazine 2026a). The AES had, by its own protocols and in its own territory, answered all four of our ownership questions with itself.

The security record since January 2025 has not, however, validated the claim embedded in the AES's subsidiarity logic — that proximity and ownership would produce better outcomes. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED), political violence events in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger killed more than 10,000 people in 2025 alone, an increase of approximately 46 per cent since 2021 (ACLED 2025, cited in ADF Magazine 2025b). Burkina Faso was ranked the world's most terrorism-affected country in the Global Terrorism Index 2025 (Vision of Humanity 2025). Since Captain Traoré seized power in Burkina Faso in October 2022, terrorists have killed an estimated 87 per cent more civilians than in the three preceding years, and armed groups now operate with relative freedom across up to 80 per cent of the country (ADF Magazine 2026a). In Mali, JNIM imposed a fuel blockade on Bamako beginning in September 2025, causing shortages that disrupted daily life and paralysed economic activity (ADF Magazine 2025a). In Niger, the Islamic State Sahel Province attacked the international airport in Niamey on 29 January 2026 using drone-borne improvised explosive devices — the group's first use of drones in Niger (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2026).

Violence is also spreading southward, fulfilling the trajectory that the article's earlier sections identified as the Community's deepest institutional problem. In northern Benin, JNIM killed 28 soldiers in January 2025 and 54 soldiers in a single engagement in April 2025 — the deadliest attack in that country since the insurgency began moving south in 2019 (ADF Magazine 2025c). In 2025 JNIM conducted its first confirmed attack on Nigerian soil, killing one Nigerian soldier in Kwara State (ADF Magazine 2025b). According to ACLED data, JNIM and ISSP attacks across the Benin-Niger-Nigeria border region grew by 86 per cent between 2024 and 2025, with civilian fatalities rising by more than 260 per cent (ADF Magazine 2026b). The Sahel insurgency is no longer a Sahelian problem; it is a West African one, moving through precisely the corridor left open by the absence of a functioning regional security architecture.

ECOWAS has responded — belatedly, but more concretely than in the previous decade. On 25 August 2025 the ECOWAS Commission President Omar Touray announced plans to activate a 260,000-strong rapid deployment counterterrorism force with an annual budget of \$2.5 billion (ADF Magazine 2025d). At the 68th Ordinary Session held in Abuja on 15 December 2025, the Authority committed to deploying a 1,650-strong anti-terrorism brigade by the end of 2026 and allocated \$2.85 million each to the five coastal states most affected by insurgent spillover — Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo (AllAfrica 2026). The contrast with the \$1 billion pledge of 2019 is instructive: the new plan, though smaller in declared ambition, is accompanied by specific deployment commitments and earmarked disbursements rather than aggregate figures. Whether it produces deployed forces where previous plans produced communiqués remains to be seen.

Three analytical observations follow from this post-withdrawal record. First, the AES's experience confirms that ownership, in the sense we have defined it, does not guarantee security outcomes. The three juntas have answered all four of our ownership questions with themselves; the insurgency has nonetheless worsened. This suggests that the capacity gap identified throughout this article — the mismatch between the functional demands of counter-insurgency and the institutional resources available to any single tier of governance in the region — is structural, not merely a product of ECOWAS's design failures. Second, the southward spread of violence has altered ECOWAS's incentive structure in ways that six years of Sahelian crisis did not. When attacks kill Beninese and Nigerian soldiers rather than Malian or Burkinabè ones, the political calculus within the Community's remaining membership shifts. The 2025 force announcement reflects this shift, even if its operationalisation remains uncertain. Third, the AES's ownership of its security failure — the accountability it cannot deflect to external partners — has not to date translated into a strategic recalibration. The juntas continue to cite sovereignty and self-reliance, even as the violence their coups were meant to

end reaches unprecedented levels. The political costs of admitting failure may prove, in time, to be the institutional cost of full ownership.

3 CONCLUSION

We have argued that ECOWAS's loss of the Sahel is best understood not as the consequence of any single decision — not the AFISMA delay, not the Malian sanctions, not the Niger ultimatum — but as the cumulative result of a failure to own the security problem that its own protocols assigned to it. From March 2012 to January 2025 the Community repeatedly asserted its authority and repeatedly allowed the substance of the response to be carried by others: upward to the Security Council and the AU, which authorised and coordinated; outward to France, the EU and eventually Russia, which fought and paid; sideways to the G5 Sahel, which was cut to the shape of the threat and the shape of the French deployment; and finally downward to the three affected states, which in the AES made the claim of ownership that the Community had never made. Each leakage was individually defensible. Together they left an institution that could sanction a coup but could not defend a border, and that in August 2023 discovered, in public, that its coercive vocabulary was not backed by a coercive capacity.

The argument has implications beyond West Africa. Subsidiarity, as APSA has practised it, is a principle about who should act. It says nothing about who bears the weight, and in the absence of ownership it produces a hollow first responder: an organisation whose declaratory primacy invites expectations it cannot meet, and whose failure to meet them is then charged to its legitimacy account. The Gambia showed that ECOWAS could own a crisis when the crisis fitted its instruments. The Sahel showed what happens when it does not, and when the organisation declines, over a decade, to build the instruments that would fit. The AES's inversion of subsidiarity is the region's verdict on that decade.

The post-withdrawal record adds a further, sobering observation. The AES's assumption of ownership has not arrested the Sahel's insurgency; by measurable indicators of violence and territorial control, the security situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has deteriorated significantly since January 2025. This does not vindicate ECOWAS's earlier non-response — there is no counterfactual available — but it does caution against the assumption that ownership is a sufficient condition for security outcomes. The underlying problem may exceed the capacity of any institution at any tier. What ownership does, in this case, is concentrate political accountability and foreclose the deflection strategies that ECOWAS used for a decade. The juntas can no longer blame France, the UN or ECOWAS for the insurgency; they must account for it themselves. The political consequences of that accountability, as the AES Unified Force confronts an insurgency that is intensifying rather than retreating, lie beyond the close of this article's analytical period.

What we can say is that the road from AFISMA to the AES was not inevitable, and that the turning was taken, again and again, in the same direction. The violence that is now spreading into Benin, Togo and Nigeria — the corridor from the Sahel to the coast that ECOWAS now confronts without the three states through which it runs — is the structural consequence of that turning. An organisation that wishes to be the first responder to the crises in its territory must be prepared to own them. Between 2012 and 2025 ECOWAS was not. The Sahel left, and it left a fire whose embers are reaching the coast.

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