



*Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article*

**Challenges to The Evolution of G5 Sahel into A Regional Security Integration**

***G5 Sahel'in Bölgesel Bir Güvenlik Entegrasyonuna Dönüşmesinin Önündeki Zorluklar***

Fatih Dağ\*

**Abstract:** Established as a regional collective security organization by Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, the five countries of the Sahel, one of Africa's eco-climatic regions, the G5 Sahel is a sub-regional international organization that aims to harmonize security and development strategies and activities among its members. This promising initiative, which ultimately targeted regional security integration, is now at risk of becoming a dysfunctional and failed initiative. This paper seeks to analyze the challenges facing the evolution of the G5 Sahel towards regional security integration. Following the first part, which examines security regionalism or the regionalization of security in a conceptual and theoretical framework, the context in which the G5 Sahel Organization was created is examined within the approach of the Copenhagen School's Regional Security Complex. It focuses on what the G5 Sahel means in the Sahel as an example of a regional security complex in which violent extremism is securitized. Finally, the reasons for the current dysfunctional appearance of the G5 Sahel and the challenges to its future evolution towards regional security integration are debated around the arguments from the problems of member states, the internal dynamics of the G5 Sahel Organization, and the overabundance of international actors and activities in the region.

**Key words:** G5 Sahel, Regional Security, Sahel, Security Integration, Security Regionalism

**Öz:** Afrika'nın eko-iklimsel bölgelerinden biri olan Sahel'in beş ülkesi Moritanya, Mali, Nijer, Çad ve Burkina Faso tarafından bölgesel bir kolektif güvenlik örgütü olarak kurulan G5 Sahel, üyeleri arasında güvenlik ve kalkınma stratejileri ve faaliyetlerinde uyumu hedefleyen alt-bölgesel bir uluslararası örgüttür. Nihai olarak bölgesel güvenlik entegrasyonunu hedefleyen ve umut vaat eden bu girişim, bugün işlevsiz ve başarısız bir girişim olarak kalma riskiyle karşı karşıyadır. Bu çalışma, G-5 Sahel'in bölgesel güvenlik entegrasyonuna doğru evrilmesinin önündeki sınamaları analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Güvenlik bölgeselciliğini ya da güvenliğin bölgeselleşmesini kavramsal ve teorik bir çerçevede inceleyen ilk bölümün ardından, G5 Sahel Örgütü'nün oluşturulduğu bağlam Kopenhag Okulu'nun Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi yaklaşımı çerçevesinde ele alınmaktadır. Şiddet içeren aşırıcılığın güvenikleştirildiği bir bölgesel güvenlik kompleksi örneği olarak Sahel'de G5 Sahel'in ne ifade ettiği üzerinde durulmaktadır. Son olarak, G-5 Sahel'in günümüzdeki işlevsiz görüntüsünün nedenleri ve gelecekte bölgesel güvenlik entegrasyonuna doğru evrilmesinin önündeki sınamalar, üye devletler, G5 Sahel Örgütü'nün iç dinamikleri ve bölgedeki uluslararası aktör ve faaliyetlerin fazlalığı argümanları etrafında tartışılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bölgesel Güvenlik, G5 Sahel, Güvenlik Bölgeselciliği, Güvenlik Entegrasyonu, Sahel

\* Master's Degree Graduate, College of Law and Political and Social Sciences, Institute of Political Sciences, Conflict Resolution and Peace Governance Master Program, fatih.dag@uir.ac.ma, ORCID: 0009-0001-2327-1853.

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## Introduction

In international relations, there are two turning points in which trends towards regionalism and regional cooperation have increased: 1945 and 1990. After the Second World War, with the conjuncture of the Cold War and decolonization, many regional organizations emerged at the international level such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) -the predecessor of the current African Union (AU)-, including the European Communities (EC) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which are pioneer examples. In 1990, with the end of the Cold War and globalization becoming the dominant paradigm, the framework, which is named as the "new regionalism" and refers to a series of cooperations in a regional sense, was introduced. Within this new perspective of regional cooperation, instances such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as well as activities to adapt or strengthen existing regional organizations to the new framework were carried out and various sub-regional organizations were created in Africa (Bailes et al., 2006: 195-198). A significant type of this new regionalization is security cooperation. Although most regional organizations formed for economic or community building have security dimensions, regional organizations whose primary purpose is security cooperation are also included in this new framework. Regional security organizations are formed by states that perceive security problems as regional and aim to combat them at the regional level, in a globalized world where security problems are perceived as global threats with globalization and have a transnational or supranational content by going beyond the borders of nations.

This research article focuses on the G5 Sahel, one of Africa's sub-regional organizations, which is one of the recent examples of regionalization and regional cooperation, particularly in the security dimension. The G5 Sahel, which was created as a military cooperation in 2014 by the five countries of the eco-climatic Sahel region-Mali, Mauritania, Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso-has evolved over time into a regional security organization where cooperation in security and development is planned. However, today, Mali's withdrawal from the organization, the military coup in Mali in 2021, followed by two coups in Burkina Faso in 2022 and the last military coup in Niger in July 2023, and the transformation of the region into a zone of influence for international actors, Chad's unease with the international implications of the organization, and the organization's structural and institutional shortcomings are prompting discussions about the functionality of the G5 Sahel and its future. Based on this information, the study seeks to answer the following question: What are the challenges to evaluating the G5 Sahel into a sustainable and effective security integration?

The study consists of three parts. In the first part, the conceptual and theoretical basis of the phenomenon of regionalism will be addressed and the regionalization of the security dimension will be discussed on the basis of the new theory of regionality. In the second part, the G5 Sahel, as an example of a regional security organization whose theoretical basis was discussed in the first part, will be covered with reference to the regionality of security problems in the Sahel within the framework of the regional security complex approach, the process of setting up the organization and background information on the organization. Finally, the challenges facing the transformation of the G5 Sahel into a security integration today, both from member states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, and from the institutional and sectoral shortcomings of the organization, as well as actual multitude of international actors, will be analyzed.

### Security regionalism: conceptual and theoretical framework

Regionalism, according to Emerson, is the rational organization of more or less geographically related states, societies, or economies that come together in a region formed or shaped, in various forms and at various levels, around activities that create or promote common goals and a common identity, improve conditions and solve problems, or project influence outside the region (Emmerson, 2009: 12). Moreover, for Stephen Bates as quoted by Bhattacharyya, a region represents the process of interstate cooperative behavior based on institutionalized cooperation, which starts with the idea of a region and ends with its implementation on a practical basis (Bhattacharyya, 2010: 74). In other words, regionalization cites the process by which states, societies or economic actors combine tools and

resources around common interests and objectives that they agree upon at the regional level as opposed to the national and supranational levels. Regionalism has two fundamental dimensions as an objective and a method. The objective addresses to the desired conscious ultimate situation in the region where regionalization is aimed. There are two kinds of objectives here, total and partial regionalism. Total regionalization refers to the political unity of sovereign entities that were previously separate and later on united. But partial regionalism refers to a more elaborate and focused union on more specific issues such as security, economy or socio-economy. The two methodical dimensions of regionalism are cooperation and integration. Cooperation represents a more traditional alliance, while integration is a deeper transition. For example, socio-economic regionalism may start with cooperation such as free trade agreements, and in the process evolve into integration such as a common industrial base, customs union, financial and monetary union. However, if security regionalism starts with a vision of integration, it is usually limited to cooperation among sovereign states (Kennedy, 2005: 4-5).

First generation regionalism efforts, corresponding to the 1950s and 1960s, were primarily based on security motives, although they were ostensibly created around economic objectives. These regionalization tendencies had a logic that considered nation-states as a problem and sought a solution beyond the nation-state (Hettne, 2008: 403-404). The theories of these first generation regionalizations were federalism, functionalism and neo-functionalism.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, on the other hand, a distinction is made between the "new regionalism", which is said to have emerged since the second half of the 1980s, and the first generation regionalism (*Ibid.*). The new regionalism that has appeared with the end of the Cold War and globalization includes the strengthening of old-style regional organizations and the establishment of sub-regional organizations around specific motives in economic or security dimensions (Hettne et al., 2000). Early examples of theoretical studies of security regionalization have generally focused on security concerns raised by the threat of regional conflicts as factors that compel countries to cooperate on security matters. The conceptualization of conflict regionalization has content such as the outward spillover of conflicts at the local level or their spillover to neighboring countries, the military or diplomatic intervention of a regional organization in that conflict, or its involvement in conflict resolution (Lake et al., 1997: 3-19).

The correlation between regionalism and security can vary. One such correlation is related to the unit of analysis. For example, Barry Buzan's description of the "regional security complex (Buzan, 1991 : 190)" as a situation in which the major security concerns of a group of states are inseparably linked on a realistic basis. Another link between regionality and security relates to the regional consequences of local conflicts. These are related to the nature of the security complex and the security problems being likely caused in certain areas and may vary from one area to the next. The third relationality is the conflict management role of the region that has become an organization in conflicts within the region or between the region and the immediate environment or the world order. In short, in the correlation between regionalism and security, the region can be both a cause of security problems, a tool for solving security problems and a solution to security problems (Hettne, 2008: 404).

Regionalization of security or regional security cooperation can be understood and conceptualized in the following four models, examples of which can be seen in the 21st century: alliances, collective security, security regimes and security communities. Alliances are one of the oldest and most traditional models of international security cooperation for both defense and military attack against a common external or internal threat or enemy. Cooperation here is a tool for member states rather than a common interest per se, and membership in such an alliance requires positioning an enemy. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and NATO are examples of regional security cooperation with an alliance model. Then, the conceptualization of collective security developed in the 20th century against the repetition of previous bad experiences and the ineffectiveness of old-fashioned balance of power politics or old-fashioned alliances in joint decision-making. The collective security system, which was

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information on federalism and functionalism, see: Mitrany, D. (1966). *A Working Peace System*. Chicago : Quadrangle Books. ; on neo-functionalism, see : Haas, E. (1958). *The Uniting of Europa: Political, Social and Economic Forces*. Londra: Stevens and Sons, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press.

established as a body with the United Nations (UN) regime, whose foundations were laid with the League of Nations, is established to prevent war or control conflicts by providing a response to any attack or threat to the peace established among its members. In addition to the UN at the international level, large-scale regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) can be cited as organizations targeting collective security. Another type of regional cooperation is the security regime. A security regime may refer to general rules of conduct on the non-use of force and respect for existing borders, or it may focus on regulating more concrete issues such as the manufacture and use of certain types of weapons. The security community, on the other hand, is a concept developed by Karl Deutsch in the late 1950s and refers to the community of states in which the members of that community come together around an assurance that they will not engage in physical warfare with each other and that they will settle their differences peacefully. As an example of a security community can be referred European Union (EU) (Bailes et al., 2006: 199-201). Although these four models function as conventional conceptualizations in the regionalization of security, new models of regional security cooperation have emerged, especially since the 1990s, based on the new regionalism. In particular, sub-regional security organizations rather than large-scale regional organizations are attracting attention as new models. The G5 Sahel, which is also the focus of the study, is a regional organization that can serve as an example of new models of security regionalization, where the five countries of the Sahel, the eco-climatic region of Africa, aim to create an institutional framework for cooperation in development and security. To analyze the current challenges of this organization based on military cooperation and aimed at regional security integration, it is necessary to first explain the context in which the organization was created, its structure and its characteristics as a regional security organization.

#### **Sahel as a regional security complex and G5 Sahel Organization**

Currently, the Sahel refers geographically to a climatic zone that combines the physical characteristics and social differences of two different regions covering the countries of the Sahara and Sub-Saharan Africa. In a broader perspective, it includes the countries of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, and parts of countries such as Nigeria, Libya, Algeria and Cameroon (Ismail et al., 2018: 7). Yet the Sahel region, on which regional security studies are now focused, generally contains Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso. The study also covers the G5 Sahel, the regional collective security organization formed by these five countries. This part focuses on regional security threats and the context in which the G-5 Sahel was created.

The Sahelian countries face problems such as drought due to global warming, migratory movements, rebellions, or military coups at the state level. On the other hand, the following three security problems involve threats and effects at the regional level: drug trafficking, organized crime and violent extremism stemming from terrorism and the activities of armed groups (Ibid.: 8-11). It is reported that since the mid-2000s, drug trafficking has become one of the most threatening security problems for the Sahel region. This is largely due to the use of West Africa as a transit route to Europe for the cocaine trade, whose the point of departure is Latin America. Even before it was a transit point for the cocaine trade, the Sahel was a smuggling route for illegal products such as cigarettes, powdered milk, dates, and oil, and for drugs such as cannabis and hashish (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2013: 35). Illegal trade has been on the rise in the Sahel since the 1980s and has led to the emergence of organized gangs of human traffickers, particularly those traveling between the borders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Algeria, who group together and operate in these regions. These organized crime gangs are responsible for the transportation and marketing of all forms of contraband throughout West Africa, particularly Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. This long-established network has been continuously maintained and is now used for a variety of purposes, among which drug smuggling, illegal human trafficking, arms smuggling, and the smuggling of many illegal products are carried out by these gangs. Of course, gainings generated from this smuggling are also used in funding other security problems and the activities of armed groups in the region. For example, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a leading operative of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), was involved in cigarette smuggling activities (Lacher, 2012 :5). Drug trafficking and organized crime activities threaten the security of the Sahel in different ways (Mesa, 2022) and each

country is touched at different levels by the consequences of these security problems. Some countries are more vulnerable to these security problems. In addition, these activities have disrupted the local economic order and have allowed illegal capital to enter areas with problems such as hunger, drought, and unemployment (Ismail et al., 2018: 11). These illegal activities are also respected by the local population for these reasons. Although some countries in the region are victims of domestic extremism, terrorism in the Sahel stems from local complaints in the region, from radical extremist ideas awakened in the world and in Algeria, and from the violence produced by Tuaregs who came to the region after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya (Boas, 2015: 311). With the Tuareg rebellion that began in northern Mali in 2012, terrorist and armed groups operating in the region since the late 1990s have found a more conducive environment for extremism. Today, terrorism and extremism have reached the point where they threaten nearly three-quarters of Mali and the five Sahel countries (Normand, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022). Terrorist groups in the Sahel today include: Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), comprising al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) allies operating in North Africa, Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front (MLF), Al Mourabitun, and the Sahrawi branch of AQIM, while Ansarul Islam and the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are active in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; Boko Haram (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad), the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) (Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya), Ansaru (aka Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan) are active in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad (Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique, 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2022).

The fact that violent extremism is not the problem of a single country in the region and that this security threat can only be addressed and eradicated through collective regional securitization turns the Sahel into a regional security complex. The concept of a regional security complex was introduced by Barry Buzan in 1983. In the book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* written by Waever and Buzan in 2003, it was further developed and theorized as one of the Copenhagen School approaches to security. The set of actors/units whose basic securitization or de-securitization processes, security problems cannot be understood or solved separately, is called a regional security complex. The basic premise of the theory is: “*most states historically have been concerned primarily with the capabilities and intentions of their neighbours*”. *Processes of securitisation and thus the degree of security interdependence are more intense between the actors inside such complexes than they are between actors inside the complex and those outside it.*” (Buzan et al., 2003: 4). Geographic proximity is the most influential factor in security relationships, the effects of which apply to all military, political, social, and environmental sectors of security (*Ibid*: 30). The security relationships of actors within a regional complex may develop around friendships or hostilities that may result from the distribution of power in the region, deep-rooted historical relationships, border disputes, ethnic relations, and shared culture (Buzan, 2007: 159). Briefly, regional security complexes must include an active securitization process at the regional level (Buzan et al, 2003: 56). There are two models of securitization: One is to securitize a problem as a common security threat (positive securitization); the other is to securitize directly as security threats to each other (negative securitization) (Buzan et al., 2009: 256).

States in the region perceive violent extremism, i.e., terrorism, as a common security threat. With this positive securitization, the Sahel, which has become a regional security complex, has resorted to establishing regional military cooperation. As part of this purpose, the creation of the G5 Sahel as a subregional security organization was decided by Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger at a summit held in Mauritania in February 2014. In 2015, the organization was launched to coordinate the five countries' strategies and activities in the areas of security and development (Official Website of G5 Sahel, 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2021). When the organization was first conceived, the focus on development included further economic integration among the five countries and the creation of a common airline called Air Sahel, but as the process went on, the organization focused on the security component and took shape of the appearance of a regional security organization. Briefly, the development component remained only an initial objective. The organization has two important activities in the security field. The first was the military college established in Mauritania. The other was the official announcement of the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in early 2017 (ICG, 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2018). The tasks of this Joint Force (G5S-JF) can be listed as fighting terrorism and criminal networks, restoring state authority,

supporting refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their former location, supporting and facilitating humanitarian operations in the region, and protecting and supporting regional development strategies and activities (ISS, 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2017). Technically, a two-stage activity is envisioned for this joint force of 5,000 soldiers. The first stage is the patrolling of member state borders by units formed out of this joint force. At this stage, three battalions of 650 soldiers were designed to patrol the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, two battalions for the border with Niger and Chad, and two battalions for the border with Mali and Mauritania. In the second stage, this joint force was expected to reach the equipment and power necessary to operate in any member state at any time. By the end of 2017, all member states except Mauritania sent their forces to be deployed within the G5S-JF, the command-and-control headquarters was designed with the joint force in mind, and some member states appointed staff to the G5S-JF. In October 2017, the joint force began its first activities in Liptako Gourma, the border point of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali (Ismail et al., 2018: 23-24).

The G5 Sahel is not the only actor dealing with regional security issues in the Sahel. For this reason, it is worth mentioning the relationship between the G5 Sahel and other actors operating in the region. First, we can briefly list the foreign actors in the region as follows: the European Union (EU) led by France, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as the UN peacekeeping mission on the ground, the United States by its military presence with all forms possible to fight against terrorism, the United Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia, that are only involved in financial support. France both encouraged the G5 initiative and aimed for transferring the mission of Operation Barkhane, the counterterrorism operation across the Sahel, to the G5S-JF. France also played a role in training and equipping this joint force. While the U.S. led the fight against terrorism from its base in Agadez (Niger) on its own initiative, it was not willing to financially support the G5 Sahel organization alongside the UN. The U.K. and some EU countries have provided financial support of about 300 million euros and Saudi Arabia about 100 million euros to the G5 Sahel (AFP, 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2018). The attitude of regional actors toward the G5 Sahel can be briefly summarized as follows: The African Union (AU) and the UN Security Council approve and assist the G5 Sahel initiative. However, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Algeria have reserves about the G5 Sahel, even though they have not directly declared it. Algeria is asking for membership to support the organization (Ismail et al., 2018: 25).

### **Challenges to Security Integration in the Sahel**

The G5 Sahel was a promising organization in its early days as a subregional security cooperation. It conceived of military cooperation as a transitional process and aimed ultimately to move toward regional security integration. At this point, the G5 Sahel is in the process of becoming a failed attempt for reasons based on its members, institutional, structural and external factors, and the functionality of the organization is being broadly discussed.

Many challenges confront the regional security integration in the Sahel that is desired to be lead the G-5 Sahel. In the first place, there are challenges originating from the member states. Today, the G5 Sahel's claim to be a five-member structure is no longer valid. Mali has officially announced its withdrawal from the G5 Sahel on May 15, 2022 (Jeune Afrique, 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2022). The junta, which came to power in Mali by a military coup in May 2021, cut off relations with regional actors, including ECOWAS, because it did not form a transitional government and did not set an election date for the democratic transition. The UN and the EU, especially France, suggested to military administration in Mali a democratic transition, and at the end of the process, Mali followed a policy of isolation at the regional and international level. Currently, the G-5 Sahel is in fact the G4 Sahel, meaning that the organization has lost a founding-member whose security concerns included regional threats. In addition, the claim that the military administration in Mali agreed with the Russian mercenary group Wagner has provoked reactions, especially from the EU and France (Roger, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2023). The two military coups of 2022 in Burkina Faso, another member state, and the claim that the junta that came to power in the latest coup in October 2022 was close to a deal with the Wagner group (Roger, 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 2022), have undermined the atmosphere of cooperation in the Sahel. It seems that the Sahel is turning

into a new field of competition for major international powers, and this possibility can be seen as a significant challenge to regional security integration. Finally, Chad, which is considered the initiator of the G5 Sahel, is uncomfortable with foreign influence at the moment and is reluctant to participate in joint military operations despite its experience in fighting terrorism and its more accoutered regular army compared to other states.

The difficulties arising from the technical, institutional, and structural problems and shortcomings of the G5 Sahel also make integration nearly impossible. The two essential elements of regional security integration are financing and military competence. Economically, the G5 Sahel member countries are among the poorest countries in the world according to the UN Development Program report (2022), and their development indices are low (UNDP, 2022). It is not possible for member states to finance such a regional integration initiative with such an economic appearance. And what is worse, the G5S-JF is not up to the task of fighting terrorist and armed groups in terms of numbers, equipment and operational capacity. For example, in the Sahel countries, there are between twenty and twenty-five soldiers per thousand inhabitants (Quinlivan, 1995: 62). In fact, the number of soldiers needed to fight the terrorist and armed groups in northern Mali is estimated at between 90,000 and 112,500 today. But when we add all the military presences in the region, namely MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, the G5S-JF and the Malian Armed Forces, the total is less than 40,000. That is, the existing capacity is almost one-third of what is needed (Walther, 2019: 33).

Another challenge to security integration in the region is the large number of external actors and their activities in the region. At the present time, seven countries and international organizations such as the UN and the EU are conducting numerous security and development activities in the Sahel. Special military missions widely known in the region can be listed as the UN's MINUSMA, the EU's Takuba and France's Operation Barkhane - although France has announced the end of the operation in November 2022. The United States has an air base -*Nigerian Air Base 201*- in Agadez to fight terrorism. Lately, the Russian Federation has appeared in the field under the shadow of the mercenary group Wagner (Pollichieni, 2021). This makes the Sahel a multi-actor security laboratory where conflicts of interest and arm wrestling between the great powers take place. Security integration does not seem possible in the short term for a region where such a security context exists and for a geography where military cooperation in the more conventional sense is not continuous.

In addition to these, some recent events point to a further deadlock in regional cooperation in the Sahel: The military coup in Niger in July 2023, the rebellion of the Wagner Mercenary Group in Russia in June 2023 and the death of Wagner chief Yevgeny Prizgozhin in August 2023, and the course of the Ukrainian War in general. In July 2023, Niger joined the series of military coups in the Sahel, with Mali in 2021 and Burkina Faso in 2022 (Arslan et al., 2023). Mohamed Bazoum, who came to power democratically, was developing multilateral regional and international relations, balancing Niger's relations with international actors. The military junta that overthrew Bazoum's regime in the last military coup in the Sahel adopted the legitimization strategy of the military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso and resorted to "anti-French sentiment" (Haidara, 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2023). France blames Russia for the recent anti-French sentiment in the Sahel (Dönmez, 13<sup>th</sup> of June 2023). In a way, the Sahel is drifting towards a new conflict zone where the West and the East are sharing their trump cards. Niger is also on its way to becoming the "Ukraine of the Sahel" (Wadia, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2023). This is because EU countries, especially France and its allies in West Africa, seem to attach a greater significance to the coup in Niger than in Mali and Burkina Faso. For Russia, the Sahel can be interpreted as a strategy to expand its front in the Ukraine War. Russia sees Ukraine as its natural sphere of influence and perceives the activities of Western countries there as a direct threat. Western countries, especially France, on the other hand, see the G5 Sahel member states as their natural sphere of influence because they are former French colonies. Russia is said to be using proxy warfare via Wagner as a military option in its Sahel policy (Mensah and Aning, 2022:54). Andrew Mumford (2013) defines proxy warfare as the involvement of third-party actors in a conflict in order to influence strategic outcomes (Mumford,

2013:1). By increasing its influence there, Russia aims to balance Western involvement in the Ukraine War.

Following the coup in Niger, ECOWAS met on August 6, hosted by Nigeria, and discussed military intervention in Niger. However, from the very first moment of the coup, the military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have repeatedly declared that they are on the side of the military government in Niger and that any foreign intervention would be a declaration of war. Today, the military governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have signed a new agreement and announced a military alliance. According to this agreement, any military intervention in any of these three countries will be considered an act of war against all three countries (APA NEWS, 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2023). In short, the coup in Niger has brought along many different regional and international dynamics. It can be said that the struggle for sphere of influence in the Sahel, allegedly between France and Russia, has expanded to include the United States, which has a military base in Niger, and the EU, which has strategic economic relations with Niger. For the G5 Sahel organization, it can be said that integration has become much more complex, and the organization is de facto suspended. This is because at this point, military governments have come to power in the three principal members of the organization and pursue a policy distant from the organization. Besides, military governments in the three countries are cooperating to build a regional organization that will perhaps be an alternative to the G5 Sahel.

Recent events in the Wagner Group, the Russian mercenary group that has recently made a name for itself in Africa, are also issues that need to be addressed for the future of the G5 Sahel organization. On June 23-24, 2023, the Wagner Group, led by Yevgeny Progozhin, left their positions in the Ukrainian War and attempted a rebellion inside Russia (The Economist, 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2023). Two months after the rebellion, which ended with the mediation of Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, the plane in which Progozhin was on crashed on August 23, and the Russian State Agency announced that Progozhin died in the crash. In the light of these developments, although there are expectations that Russia will lose control of Wagner, whom it has been actively using as part of its policy in the Sahel, in fact, the elimination of a strong leader figure (Progozhin) may lead Vladimir Putin to further increase his influence over Wagner (The Economist, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2023). It was also alleged that the Wagner Group was behind the scenes during the coup in Niger in July 2023 during this turbulent period. Today, Wagner is still making a name for itself in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. While anti-French sentiment in the region is on the rise and the French sphere of influence is shriking, Russian sympathies are on the rise and the Russian sphere of influence is expanding. After the coups in the three countries, military governments have signaled good relations with Russia, while Russian flags are prominent in demonstrations in support of the coups (Reuters, 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2023).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that while the G5 Sahel initially had a functional appearance of regional security cooperation, it is now becoming a dysfunctional and unsuccessful attempt due to various difficulties and problems. The G5 Sahel, which ultimately aims at regional security integration by conceiving a transition through military cooperation, has been experiencing difficulties due to its members, the technical, structural, and institutional shortcomings of the organization, as well as the multitude of external actors and their activities in the region.

Mali, one of the founding member states, finally left the G5 Sahel in May 2022 as a result of the deterioration of the military administration's relations with ECOWAS, countries in the region, and international actors conducting security activities across the region like France and the EU. In addition, the two military coups in Burkina Faso in 2022 and the fact that the military junta that came to power with the latest coup is adopting similar policies with the military junta in Mali raises questions about the future of another member of the organization. Furthermore, the rapprochement of the military administrations of both countries with Russia and their agreement with Wagner, the Russian mercenary group, are drawing reactions from Western international actors operating in the Sahel. Finally, one of the challenges at the state level is Chad's recent reserves to act with the organization. Although the G5



Sahel is in fact a Chadian initiative, at this point Chad is uncomfortable with foreign funding or interference in the organization. It argues that the organization should have a more independent and regionalist structure. On the other hand, the G5 Sahel lacks the two essential elements required to achieve regional security integration: funding and military power. It is now almost impossible for the 5,000-strong joint force to combat terrorist and armed groups in the Sahel. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the organization's strategies and activities will be funded by some of the world's poorest and most underdeveloped countries. Ultimately, the fact that the Sahel has now become a geography where international forces are in a tug-of-war is another major challenge for security integration. Today, the Sahel appears to be a security laboratory where seven countries carry out security and development activities and special military missions such as MINUSMA, Takuba, or Operation Barkhane. In a region where the great powers cannot reach a consensus for peace and stability, the claim to integrate around security has no solid basis.

The G5 Sahel has also been thrown into a more unpredictable state of dysfunction by several recent developments. In the Sahel, where there has been an epidemic of military intervention, the military coup in Niger in July 2023 further deepened the instability and crisis. While ECOWAS discussed military intervention in Niger, military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso declared their unconditional support for Niger. The Sahel is the scene of an East-West arm-wrestling match, generally interpreted as a struggle for spheres of influence between France and Russia. Niger is on its way to becoming the Ukraine of this struggle. Russia is widening the front of the war by expanding its sphere of influence in the Sahel in its struggle with Western countries in the Ukraine War. The rebellion of the Wagner Group, Russia's proxy in the Sahel, in June 2023 and the subsequent death of its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023 were interpreted as the mercenary group losing power and getting out of control. However, Wagner's alleged involvement in the military coup in Niger in July 2023 and the elimination of a charismatic leader like Prigozhin seem to have increased Russia's influence over the mercenary group. At this point, two questions can be asked: Can the Sahel countries cut the umbilical cord with France, their former colonizer? Can Russia or China be alternative powers for the Sahel countries to the Western countries?

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