



*Malian soldiers consider maps or tactics during Operation Barkhane, circa December 2015. Terrorism is a growing threat to West African stability. (Shutterstock/Fred Marie)*

Topic: **Terrorism** Region: **Africa**

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# Three Things the US Can Do to Save the Sahel

June 29, 2026

By: **Robert Dussey**

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*Washington has taken important steps toward re-engagement, but the jihadist threat is outpacing policy.*

The [jihadist threat](#) expanding across [West Africa](#) is not a distant regional problem. It is a direct danger to American security interests—and the window to address it is narrowing. Washington has begun to recognize this, taking meaningful steps toward re-engagement with [Mali](#), [Burkina Faso](#), and [Niger](#) after years of counterproductive isolation. But those steps, while welcome, are not sufficient. More needs to be done.

The situation in the [Sahel](#) has not stood still. Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin ([JNIM](#)), [Al Qaeda](#)'s Sahelian affiliate, has reached its highest operational capacity since its founding. Entire communities have been [emptied across](#) northern Mali, western Niger, and broad swaths of Burkina Faso. According to the [Global Terrorism Index 2026](#), all three Sahel countries rank among the top five globally in terms of terrorism's measurable impact.

In late April, coordinated jihadist attacks struck three [Malian cities](#) simultaneously, killing the country's defense minister and underscoring once again the cost of American absence from the region. The threat is actively seeking [access](#) to the West African coastline. This development puts not just African nations at risk but also increases the chance of threats reaching American shores. Terrorist attacks in [northern Togo](#), once unthinkable, are now tragically real. The window to prevent this crisis from becoming irreversible is narrowing.

The response to this emergency, for too long, was isolation. When the governments that came to power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023 took office, [Washington](#) followed a familiar logic: pressure must be applied, aid conditioned, military cooperation suspended. Isolation did not restore civilian governance. It pushed three governments, facing existential threats they could not meet alone, toward whatever partners were willing to engage without conditions. Global [competitors](#) moved quickly to fill the vacuum. And as those arrangements failed to deliver lasting security gains, the violence only worsened. Foreign policy must be judged by its consequences, and the consequences of isolation were disastrous.

Washington appears to have recognized this, and its current approach emphasizes shared interests: counterterrorism, economic partnership, and engagement on terms these governments can accept. [Intelligence sharing](#) with Mali may soon resume. [Sanctions](#) on senior Malian defense officials have been lifted. A five-year, \$147 million health cooperation [agreement](#) with Burkina Faso has been signed. State Department officials have visited Burkina Faso and Niger. These are meaningful steps, and they deserve acknowledgment.

But they are not sufficient. Three concrete things still need to happen.

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**First**, the US travel bans must be revisited. The United States added Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to its [travel ban list](#) in December 2025. However understandable from a border security perspective, those bans contradicted months of painstaking diplomatic work and complicated humanitarian operations, and handed a propaganda victory to those who argue that American engagement is conducted in bad faith. So too should the broader sanctions architecture be reviewed, including financial restrictions and limitations on multilateral lending that directly undermine Washington's own stated goal of replacing aid with trade and investment in the region.

**Second**, investment must replace assistance. As American development infrastructure contracts, strategic investment must expand to fill the space. Washington's 2025 [National Security Strategy](#) calls explicitly for



transitioning from aid to trade and investment with Africa, a framework the Sahel's governments welcome, and its mineral wealth makes viable. The [minerals](#) are there: uranium, lithium, and gold. That transition requires the [US Development Finance Corporation](#) to establish concrete frameworks for the region—risk guarantees for mineral extraction, infrastructure financing for the logistics corridors that connect landlocked Sahelian economies to global markets, and trade facilitation mechanisms that make American capital competitive with what others are already offering.

**Third**, military cooperation must be restored and expanded. The three governments have established a [joint force](#), now expanded to 15,000 troops, to combat the jihadist threat. That force needs equipment, training, and intelligence support that only capable partners can provide. Washington should commit to being one of them. Every foreign military trainer operating in the Sahel today occupies ground that American partners vacated. The choice is not between engagement and neutrality. It is between engagement and ceding the field entirely.

[Togo](#) continues to do its part. In April, we hosted the most significant diplomatic gathering regarding the [Sahel](#) in years. The capital city of Lomé brought together ministers from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, along with the [ECOWAS](#) Commission president, special envoys from the European Union and France, and representatives of the African Union and the United Nations. It was the first formal interaction between the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS officials in nearly a year, and it marked the launch of our new [2026–2028 Sahel Strategy](#), focused on political dialogue, economic integration, and security coordination.

A region where terrorist networks operate unchecked and where outside powers pursuing their own strategic interests are consolidating their presence is not a region the United States can afford to ignore. The Sahel is not lost. But the jihadist movements expanding across it do not distinguish between Sahelian and coastal, African and Western. They see weakness and exploit it. The only answer is an American commitment commensurate with the crisis—one that treats the Sahel not as an emergency to be managed from a distance, but as a threat that will not remain distant if ignored.

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