

**REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CRISIS: DISSECTING THE
IMPLICATIONS OF THE SAHELIAN WITHDRAWAL FROM
ECOWAS**

OLUYEMI, OPEOLUWA ADISA (PhD)

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria

AIDI, YUSUF BABAWALE

Postgraduate Student, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2026.9212>

ABSTRACT

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents one of the most significant contemporary challenges to regional integration in West Africa. This study examines the political, security, and economic factors that explain the Sahelian states' decision to exit ECOWAS and analyzes the broader implications of this development for regional cooperation and institutional stability. Drawing on qualitative analysis of policy documents, regional trade data, security reports, and existing scholarly literature, the study explores how tensions surrounding democratic governance, ECOWAS sanctions, regional security challenges, and structural economic vulnerabilities contributed to the breakdown of relations between ECOWAS and the Sahelian states. The findings reveal that the withdrawal reflects deeper structural weaknesses within the ECOWAS integration framework, including limited intra-regional trade, institutional legitimacy challenges, and inadequate collective responses to security threats in the Sahel. The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) further illustrates the emergence of alternative regional security arrangements that may reshape geopolitical alignments in West Africa. From a theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates the limitations of neo-functionalism in explaining regional integration in contexts characterized by political instability and security crises, as such conditions may generate negative spillover effects that weaken regional institutions. The article concludes that unless ECOWAS undertakes meaningful institutional reforms, strengthens diplomatic engagement, and addresses the underlying economic and security challenges facing the region, the current fragmentation could undermine the long-term prospects for regional integration in West Africa.

Keywords: ECOWAS; Regional Integration; Sahel Crisis; Alliance of Sahel States (AES); West African Security; Neo-functionalism; Military Coups in West Africa

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) marked a significant milestone in the pursuit of economic cooperation, political coordination, and regional integration in West Africa. Founded in 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos, ECOWAS was designed to promote economic development, encourage cooperation among member

states, and facilitate the free movement of goods, services, and people across the region. Over time, the organization has expanded its mandate beyond economic integration to include peacekeeping, conflict resolution, democratic governance, and security cooperation. Despite these ambitions, ECOWAS has continued to face numerous structural, political, and institutional challenges that have hindered its ability to fully achieve its objectives of regional integration and economic development (Ndao, 2023; Ansah, 2025). In recent years, one of the most significant challenges confronting ECOWAS has been the withdrawal of three Sahelian states; Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the regional bloc. This development has raised serious concerns about the future of regional cooperation, economic integration, and political stability in West Africa. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024), on 28 January 2024 the military governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger formally announced their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS, citing disagreements with the organization's policies and sanctions. The withdrawal followed a series of military coups in the region: Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger on 26 July 2023. These coups significantly strained diplomatic relations between the military-led governments and ECOWAS, which responded by imposing sanctions and demanding a return to democratic governance (Pippie, 2024; Ansah, 2025).

The decision by the three Sahelian countries to exit ECOWAS is likely to have profound implications for regional trade and economic integration. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are among the poorest countries in the world and are heavily dependent on regional economic cooperation for development opportunities. Their departure from ECOWAS has the potential to weaken economic ties within West Africa and reduce the prospects for deeper regional integration. Yingi (2024) argues that the withdrawal of these states could significantly disrupt trade relations within the region and undermine efforts to expand intra-regional commerce. Data from the ECOWAS Trade Information System (ECOTIS) indicates that in 2022, the total trade volume of ECOWAS with the rest of the world amounted to approximately \$277.22 billion, with exports accounting for \$131.36 billion. Within this trade framework, Burkina Faso contributed exports valued at approximately \$4.55 billion, Mali exported goods worth about \$3.91 billion, while Niger's exports accounted for roughly \$446.14 million. On the import side, Mali imported goods valued at \$6.45 billion, Burkina Faso \$5.63 billion, and Niger approximately \$3.79 billion (ECOTIS, 2023; Yingi, 2024). Furthermore, the geographical position of these three countries adds another layer of complexity to the situation. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are landlocked states that rely heavily on the ports and transport corridors of coastal ECOWAS members such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Nigeria for international trade. Their withdrawal could therefore disrupt existing logistical networks, increase transportation costs, and reduce revenues generated by coastal countries through port services and transit trade. Consequently, this development may negatively affect intra-ECOWAS trade flows and further weaken regional economic cooperation (Yingi, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Another major concern arising from the withdrawal of these states is its potential impact on the principle of free movement within the region. One of the core objectives of ECOWAS is the removal of barriers to the movement of people, goods, and services among member states. The exit of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso could undermine this principle and create new restrictions on cross-border movement, which may in turn discourage foreign direct investment, reduce labor mobility, and slow down regional economic integration (Yingi, 2024).

This concern is particularly significant given that intra-ECOWAS trade remains relatively low compared to other regional economic blocs. According to Ndao (2023), intra-regional trade in West Africa accounts for only about 10 percent of the region's total trade, while the region's share of global trade remains around 0.3 percent. Several structural factors contribute to the low level of intra-regional trade within ECOWAS. Salvator (2002) identifies a range of economic, political, institutional, socio-cultural, and infrastructural constraints that limit effective regional integration. Many West African economies remain heavily dependent on the export of primary commodities such as crude oil, minerals, and agricultural products, with limited diversification and industrialization. This reliance on monocultural production structures creates fragile economic systems that are vulnerable to global market fluctuations. Additionally, weak infrastructure, limited transportation networks, bureaucratic trade barriers, and inconsistent policy implementation further constrain economic cooperation within the region (Salvator, 2002; Ndao, 2023).

Demographically, West Africa represents a significant economic market with an estimated population exceeding 400 million people. However, despite this large population and economic potential, many ECOWAS member states rank among the least competitive economies globally according to the World Economic Forum (2024). This situation reflects persistent challenges such as weak governance structures, low industrial capacity, high unemployment rates, and limited technological development across the region. Beyond economic implications, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso also raises serious political and security concerns for West Africa. The decision by these countries to leave ECOWAS and establish the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represents a significant geopolitical shift in the region. The AES, formed on 16 September 2023, was created as a mutual defense and political cooperation pact among the three Sahelian states. The formation of this alliance has raised questions about the future of regional political integration and collective security mechanisms in West Africa (Ansah, 2025). The governments of these countries justified their withdrawal by accusing ECOWAS of imposing what they described as "inhumane, illegal, illegitimate, and irresponsible" sanctions following the military coups in their respective states. They also criticized the regional bloc for what they perceive as its failure to effectively support their efforts in combating terrorism and insecurity in the Sahel region (Al Jazeera, 2024). However, ECOWAS maintains that its actions were consistent with its normative commitment to democratic governance. Article 45 of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) stipulates that sanctions may be imposed when democratic order is abruptly interrupted or when there are serious violations of human rights within a member state. The enforcement of this protocol became particularly relevant following the military takeovers in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). These coups led ECOWAS to impose sanctions and demand a transition back to civilian rule. Nevertheless, critics argue that ECOWAS sometimes applies its democratic principles inconsistently. Ansah (2025) notes that the military governments in the Sahel have accused ECOWAS of selective enforcement, claiming that while military regimes are sanctioned, some civilian governments with authoritarian tendencies are not subjected to similar measures.

Additionally, geopolitical dynamics have played an important role in shaping the tensions between ECOWAS and the Sahelian states. The leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have increasingly portrayed ECOWAS as an organization heavily influenced by Western powers and dominated by political elites aligned with external interests. According to Ndiaye (2023, as cited in Ansah, 2025), this perception has contributed to growing mistrust between the

Sahelian military regimes and the ECOWAS leadership, thereby accelerating the process of geopolitical realignment within the region. From a security perspective, the withdrawal of the Sahelian states could have far-reaching implications for regional stability. Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah, ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, warned that the exit of these countries could generate unintended consequences for regional security cooperation (Odeniyi, 2024). The Sahel region already faces severe security challenges due to the presence of armed insurgent groups, porous borders, and weak state institutions. The fragmentation of regional cooperation mechanisms may therefore weaken collective defense structures and reduce the effectiveness of joint counterterrorism efforts. Indeed, the Sahel region has become one of the global epicenters of violent extremism. Terrorist organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have increasingly exploited weak governance structures, ungoverned territories, and socio-economic vulnerabilities to expand their operations across the region (Mohammed & Arabo, 2024). According to the Global Terrorism Index (2025), Burkina Faso ranked first globally in terrorism impact in 2024, while Mali ranked fourth and Niger fifth. These rankings highlight the severity of the security crisis facing the region and underscore the importance of coordinated regional responses.

The humanitarian consequences of the security crisis have also been severe. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that between 2020 and 2024, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Burkina Faso, Mali, and western Niger increased dramatically, with displacement levels nearly tripling during this period (Project 21, 2025). This growing displacement crisis reflects the escalating violence and instability affecting the Sahel region. Despite these challenges, the Sahelian states argue that ECOWAS has not provided sufficient support in addressing the region's security threats. They contend that the organization has played a relatively limited role in sub-regional counterterrorism operations and that existing security cooperation mechanisms remain poorly coordinated. Weak intelligence sharing, inadequate joint military operations, and insufficient logistical support have hindered the effectiveness of regional counterterrorism strategies. As a result, extremist groups continue to exploit gaps in regional security cooperation to expand their influence across the Sahel (Mohammed & Arabo, 2024). Essentially, the weakening of regional cooperation caused by the withdrawal of these countries may have significant consequences for both economic integration and political stability in West Africa. The fragmentation of regional institutions could slow the progress of economic integration initiatives while simultaneously undermining collective efforts to address security threats. Consequently, the situation presents a critical challenge for the future of ECOWAS and the broader project of regional integration in West Africa.

In light of these developments, this study seeks to critically examine the political, security, and economic implications of the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS and its broader consequences for regional integration in West Africa. Specifically, the study addresses three key questions: what political and security dynamics explain the decision of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to withdraw from ECOWAS? How does the withdrawal of these Sahelian states affect the trajectory of regional integration within West Africa? And what are the broader implications of the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) for the institutional authority, legitimacy, and future effectiveness of ECOWAS as a regional integration framework? By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to existing scholarship on regional integration, institutional resilience, and security governance in Africa

while providing a deeper understanding of the evolving geopolitical dynamics shaping West Africa.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Neo-functionalism theory of regional integration, which provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the processes and dynamics of regional cooperation and integration. Neo-functionalism was primarily developed by Ernst B. Haas in the 1950s and 1960s during the early stages of European integration. The theory emerged as a response to earlier functionalist ideas and sought to explain how and why sovereign states gradually transfer authority to supranational institutions within regional organizations. Neo-functionalism emphasizes that regional integration is driven by shared interests, mutual benefits, and the gradual expansion of cooperation among states (Haas, 1958; Kurra, 2020). According to Babarinde (1996), as cited in Kurra (2020), Neo-functionalism evolved from the assumption that states recognize the advantages of cooperation in areas where collective action can produce mutual gains. The theory suggests that when states cooperate in specific sectors such as trade, infrastructure, or economic policy, this cooperation tends to generate pressures for further integration in other related sectors. In this regard, regional integration becomes a gradual and dynamic process that evolves as states realize the benefits of collaboration and seek to expand cooperative arrangements.

Neo-functionalism adopts what scholars often describe as a “top-down” approach to integration, in which supranational institutions play a critical role in promoting and sustaining cooperation among member states. Goldstein (2009) argues that economic integration often generates political consequences because closer economic ties require coordinated political decisions and institutional mechanisms to function effectively. As a result, integration in one sector often necessitates deeper cooperation in other sectors, ultimately encouraging states to expand integration beyond purely economic matters. A central concept within the Neo-functionalist framework is the idea of “spillover.” Haas introduced this concept to explain how integration in one functional area can create pressures for integration in related areas. Spillover occurs when cooperation in a specific policy field produces incentives for actors such as governments, interest groups, and bureaucratic institutions to support further integration in additional sectors. Atai (2020) notes that the spillover mechanism explains how regional integration can evolve incrementally over time, with each stage of cooperation creating the conditions necessary for further institutional and political integration.

Neo-functionalism was initially developed to analyze the process of European integration, particularly the development of institutions that eventually led to the formation of the European Union. In explaining this process, scholars such as Lindberg (1970) argued that regional integration involves a gradual shift of political authority from national governments to supranational institutions. This process occurs as political and economic actors pursue their self-interests within a regional framework, thereby promoting policies that encourage deeper cooperation. According to Lindberg (1970), there exists a continuum between economic integration and political union, where integration begins with technical and economic issues and gradually expands to include political and governance-related matters. Furthermore, Neo-functionalism highlights the importance of supranational institutions in facilitating and managing the integration process. Kurra (2020) explains that Neo-functionalists emphasize the

role of regional organizations in coordinating policies and administering integration frameworks across member states. These institutions are expected to operate beyond the narrow interests of individual nation-states and instead promote collective development and regional welfare. In doing so, supranational organizations play a crucial role in deepening cooperation, harmonizing policies, and promoting long-term integration objectives.

Another important aspect of the Neo-functionalism theory is its emphasis on the role of political actors and interest groups in driving the integration process. According to Kurra (2020), Neo-functionalism predicts that political leaders, economic elites, and organized interest groups within member states will gradually recognize that their interests are better served through regional cooperation. Consequently, these actors may advocate for policies that strengthen economic liberalization, reduce trade barriers, and expand institutional coordination at the regional level. Over time, such developments are expected to encourage the transfer of certain policy responsibilities from national governments to regional institutions. The Neo-functionalism perspective also suggests that successful regional integration requires the establishment of specialized administrative institutions at the supranational level. These institutions are expected to coordinate policies, monitor agreements, and promote cooperation among member states. By demonstrating the practical benefits of regional collaboration, such institutions can strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of integration initiatives. In addition, they help to manage external influences and internal policy differences that might otherwise undermine regional cooperation (Kurra, 2020).

In relation to this study, Neo-functionalism provides a useful framework for analyzing the dynamics of regional integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The theory suggests that regional integration typically begins with economic cooperation and gradually expands into political and security cooperation through the process of positive spillover. When ECOWAS was established in 1975, its primary objective was to promote economic integration through trade liberalization, economic cooperation, and the free movement of goods, services, and people across West Africa. According to the logic of Neo-functionalism, successful economic integration within ECOWAS was expected to generate further cooperation in areas such as governance, political coordination, and regional security. However, recent developments within the region appear to challenge this theoretical expectation. The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in 2024 suggests the occurrence of what can be described as negative spillover. Rather than experiencing deeper political cooperation as a result of economic integration, the region has witnessed increasing political instability, military coups, and declining trust among member states. These developments have weakened regional cohesion and undermined the integration process envisioned by Neo-functionalists.

The withdrawal of the Sahelian states highlights the limitations of ECOWAS in maintaining political stability and ensuring compliance with regional norms. Although ECOWAS possesses institutional authority to promote economic cooperation and democratic governance, its ability to influence the internal political dynamics of member states has remained limited. The occurrence of military coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) demonstrates the challenges faced by ECOWAS in enforcing democratic norms and mediating political crises within the region. Furthermore, the emergence of persistent security challenges in the Sahel region including terrorism, insurgency, and political instability has complicated

the integration process. These challenges have weakened regional cooperation and reduced the capacity of ECOWAS to effectively coordinate collective responses to security threats. As a result, the departure of the Sahelian states may indicate a breakdown in the early stages of integration envisioned by Neo-functionalism. Musa (2024) observes that Haas's Neo-functional framework assumes that integration begins with technical and economic cooperation before expanding into broader political and social domains. In the case of ECOWAS, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso suggests that this transition from economic cooperation to political integration has encountered significant obstacles. Rather than reinforcing regional unity, political instability and security crises have generated tensions among member states and undermined confidence in regional institutions. Therefore, the Neo-functionalism theory provides an important analytical lens for understanding both the achievements and limitations of ECOWAS as a regional organization. While the theory explains the initial rationale behind economic integration in West Africa, recent developments reveal that integration processes can also experience setbacks when political instability, governance challenges, and security threats disrupt cooperation among member states.

2.1 Structural Economic Challenges and the Sahelian Exit from ECOWAS

Before examining the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), it is important to consider the structural economic conditions that have historically shaped trade and integration within the regional bloc. While ECOWAS was established with the objective of promoting economic cooperation and fostering regional development through trade liberalization and market integration, empirical studies suggest that the region continues to face significant structural constraints that limit the effectiveness of these goals. These constraints include limited export diversification, trade barriers, weak institutional frameworks, and infrastructural deficits that continue to hinder deeper economic integration among member states (Shuaibu, 2015; Adam, 2012; Iloh, 2021). One major challenge confronting regional economic integration in ECOWAS is the persistence of tariff and non-tariff barriers that continue to restrict the free movement of goods across member states. Despite the adoption of trade liberalization policies under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS), implementation gaps remain significant. Shuaibu (2015) notes that bureaucratic procedures, inconsistent policy implementation, and weak institutional enforcement mechanisms have slowed the pace of trade integration in the region. These challenges are particularly problematic for smaller and landlocked economies that depend heavily on cross-border trade for economic survival.

In addition to tariff barriers, cumbersome administrative procedures have also limited the effectiveness of trade integration in West Africa. Iloh (2021) highlights that complex export documentation requirements and inefficient customs procedures continue to undermine regional trade facilitation. These administrative challenges disproportionately affect landlocked countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which rely heavily on transit trade through neighboring coastal states to access international markets. The excessive documentation requirements, combined with delays at border checkpoints, increase the cost of trade and reduce the competitiveness of exports from these countries. Another structural challenge relates to the overall quality of trade facilitation mechanisms within ECOWAS. Studies indicate that trade facilitation in the region remains significantly below global standards due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and slow border clearance processes.

Adeyinka (2023) argues that high transaction costs, administrative delays, and weak regulatory coordination among member states have significantly impeded the smooth movement of goods and services across borders. Similarly, Hatzenberg (2011) observes that institutional weaknesses and lack of coordination among customs authorities have created bottlenecks that discourage intra-regional trade and undermine economic integration.

Infrastructure deficits also represent a major obstacle to regional economic integration in West Africa. Poor transportation networks, inadequate rail systems, and inefficient port facilities have contributed to high logistics costs and reduced trade competitiveness. Many ECOWAS member states have limited industrial capacity and remain heavily dependent on primary commodity exports, which restricts opportunities for value-added production and export diversification. Furthermore, landlocked Sahelian countries depend largely on coastal states such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Ghana for access to international markets through seaports. This structural dependence creates vulnerabilities, particularly during periods of political tension or economic disruption. Empirical evidence further illustrates the limited level of intra-regional trade within ECOWAS compared to other regional economic blocs. Ametoglo, Guo, and Wonyra (2018) examined the relationship between regional integration and economic inequality among the fifteen ECOWAS member states over the period between 2004 and 2013. Using trade data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the study found that intra-regional exports within ECOWAS remain relatively low. In 2015, intra-ECOWAS exports accounted for only about 10 percent of total exports within the region. This figure is considerably lower than that of other regional economic organizations such as MERCOSUR, where intra-regional trade accounted for approximately 19 percent of exports, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with about 24 percent, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries where intra-regional trade accounted for approximately 73 percent of total exports (Ametoglo et al., 2018).

Similarly, Orji et al. (2022) analyzed the impact of regional integration on economic growth among ECOWAS member states between 2010 and 2020. Using historical data obtained from the African Development Bank (2020), the study found that the economic performance of ECOWAS countries experienced a gradual decline during the period under review. The average annual growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP) in the region decreased from approximately 8.51 percent in 2010 to about 3.99 percent in 2020. More specifically, the study revealed that between 2010 and 2013, the average economic growth rate declined from 8.51 percent to 5.80 percent. This downward trend continued between 2014 and 2016 when growth rates dropped further from 5.91 percent to only 0.57 percent. These findings suggest that regional integration within ECOWAS has not consistently translated into sustained economic growth across member states. Income-level classifications also highlight the structural economic disparities within the ECOWAS region. According to the World Bank (2024), countries are categorized based on their Gross National Income (GNI) per capita into four groups: low-income, lower-middle-income, upper-middle-income, and high-income economies. For the year 2023, low-income countries are defined as those with a GNI per capita of \$1,145 or less, while lower-middle-income countries have a GNI per capita between \$1,146 and \$4,515. Upper-middle-income countries have a GNI per capita between \$4,516 and \$14,005, and high-income countries have a GNI per capita above \$14,005.

Based on this classification, most ECOWAS member states fall within the low-income or lower-middle-income categories. Countries such as Nigeria, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Senegal are classified as lower-middle-income economies, while Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, and Togo fall within the low-income category (World Bank, 2024). The concentration of many ECOWAS countries within the lower income brackets indicates the limited level of economic transformation within the region. It also highlights the persistent economic inequalities that may limit the equitable distribution of the benefits of regional integration. For the Sahelian states in particular, these structural economic weaknesses may have contributed to growing dissatisfaction with the integration process. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are among the poorest countries in the region and face additional challenges related to their landlocked geography, limited industrial capacity, and heavy reliance on external markets. These conditions may restrict their ability to fully benefit from regional trade liberalization initiatives within ECOWAS.

Moreover, the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS following the military coups in the Sahelian states may have further exacerbated these economic vulnerabilities. Measures such as border closures, trade restrictions, financial sanctions, and suspension from regional financial institutions disrupted existing trade networks and increased economic pressure on these already fragile economies. Given the heavy dependence of the Sahelian countries on cross-border trade and access to coastal ports, these sanctions significantly affected their economic stability and trade connectivity. Consequently, the decision of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to withdraw from ECOWAS may be interpreted not only as a political or security response but also as a reaction to longstanding structural economic challenges within the regional integration framework. The persistent limitations in trade facilitation, infrastructure development, export diversification, and institutional coordination may have reduced the perceived economic benefits of ECOWAS membership for these countries. Therefore, the Sahelian exit reflects a broader combination of political, security, and economic factors that continue to shape the evolving dynamics of regional integration in West Africa.

2.2 Implications of the Sahelian Withdrawal from ECOWAS on Regional Integration

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents a significant turning point for regional integration in West Africa. The decision has created profound political divisions within the region and has raised questions about the future effectiveness of ECOWAS as a regional integration mechanism. At the core of the crisis is a deep ideological divide between the military-led governments of the Sahelian states and ECOWAS, particularly concerning governance principles, democratic norms, and approaches to regional security. One of the most immediate consequences of this ideological divergence has been the emergence of political fragmentation and legitimacy crises within the region. The governments of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have consistently accused ECOWAS of operating under the influence of external powers and failing to adequately address the pressing security challenges confronting the Sahel. They further argue that the organization has deviated from its founding objectives after more than five decades of existence. According to Adebajo (2021, as cited in Ansah, 2025), the leaders of the Sahelian states increasingly portray ECOWAS as a “club of political elites” that prioritizes the enforcement of democratic norms rather than addressing the national interests and security concerns of member states.

The imposition of sanctions by ECOWAS following the military coup in Niger in July 2023 intensified the tensions between the regional bloc and the Sahelian states. The International Crisis Group (2024) notes that the sanctions imposed on Niger including border closures, financial restrictions, and suspension from regional institutions were intended to pressure the military authorities into restoring constitutional governance. However, these measures produced unintended humanitarian consequences by disrupting trade flows, undermining economic activities, and worsening the living conditions of ordinary citizens. The sanctions therefore deepened resentment among the populations of the affected countries and further eroded trust in ECOWAS as a regional institution. From the perspective of ECOWAS, however, the sanctions represented a necessary enforcement mechanism aimed at preserving democratic governance within the region. Acho (2024) argues that ECOWAS viewed the sanctions as a legitimate instrument for upholding its democratic principles as articulated in the 2011 Supplementary Act A/SP.2/08/11 on Democracy and Good Governance. The regional organization justified its actions based on several legal frameworks that guide its operations, including the 1993 Revised ECOWAS Treaty, which emphasizes democracy, peace, and security as core principles of the organization; the 1999 Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security; and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. These legal instruments collectively empower ECOWAS to respond to unconstitutional changes of government within member states. Nevertheless, the refusal of the military governments in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to comply with ECOWAS demands has significantly weakened the organization's authority. The postponement of transitions to civilian rule in these countries has created fears of prolonged political uncertainty across the region. According to UN News (2024), delays in restoring constitutional governance have heightened concerns among international and regional observers about the future of democratic governance and political stability in West Africa.

Beyond the political implications, the withdrawal of the Sahelian states also poses serious security challenges for regional integration. The Sahel region is widely recognized as one of the most volatile security environments in the world, characterized by the proliferation of terrorist groups, armed insurgencies, and transnational criminal networks. The departure of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS threatens to weaken collective security arrangements that were designed to address these threats. Nicholas Westcott (2024) warns that the exit of the three Sahelian states could significantly increase the risk of insecurity in the region by weakening coordinated counterterrorism strategies. Similarly, Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah, ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, has emphasized that the withdrawal may undermine regional security cooperation and weaken existing mechanisms for combating terrorism and organized crime. This development could ultimately destabilize the broader security architecture of West Africa. A major concern relates to the weakening of the collective security doctrine that underpins ECOWAS security cooperation. The 1999 ECOWAS Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, commonly referred to as the Abuja Protocol, established the principle of collective defense based on a shared understanding of security threats and mutual assistance among member states. The protocol laid the foundation for joint security initiatives such as the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), which was established in 2004 to replace the earlier ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). However, several scholars argue that these mechanisms have faced significant operational and logistical limitations. For example, Balima (2024) notes that the ECOWAS Standby Force has struggled with inadequate funding, limited

coordination, and weak logistical capacity, particularly during the Malian security crisis. These shortcomings contributed to perceptions among the Sahelian governments that ECOWAS had failed to provide effective security assistance. Consequently, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso justified the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as a strategic alternative for addressing regional security challenges. According to Acho (2024), the leaders of the Sahelian alliance have described the AES as “the only effective sub-regional grouping capable of confronting terrorism in the Sahel.” This geopolitical realignment has further intensified political divisions and deepened regional fragmentation within West Africa.

Another major security implication of the withdrawal is the increased risk of terrorism spillover into neighboring coastal states. The Sahel region has become the epicenter of global terrorism, and the weakening of regional security cooperation could enable extremist groups to expand their operations into previously stable areas. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso currently serve as key operational zones for several jihadist organizations, including Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and other militant groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2025) published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the Sahel accounted for approximately 19 percent of global terrorist incidents and 51 percent of global terrorism-related deaths in 2024, representing a significant increase compared to previous years. The report further highlights that terrorist violence has increasingly spread toward coastal West African states such as Benin and Togo. The Security Council Report (2025) indicates that Togo recorded ten terrorist attacks in 2024, resulting in 52 fatalities. The jihadist group JNIM was responsible for four of these attacks, which caused 41 deaths. Similarly, the group claimed responsibility for three attacks in Benin during the same period. These developments illustrate the growing risk of insecurity spilling beyond the Sahel into other parts of West Africa. The weakening of intelligence-sharing arrangements and joint military cooperation between ECOWAS member states may further exacerbate these security threats. Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah reported that approximately 3,500 terrorist attacks occurred across the Sahel region in 2023, resulting in nearly 7,000 fatalities. Of these attacks, over 2,000 occurred in Burkina Faso, 1,044 in Mali, and approximately 500 in Niger (Punch, 2024). The scale of these attacks underscores the magnitude of the security crisis confronting the region and highlights the importance of coordinated regional responses.

In addition to the security implications, the withdrawal of the Sahelian states also poses serious challenges to the institutional credibility and legitimacy of ECOWAS. The crisis has sparked debates about the effectiveness of ECOWAS conflict management strategies and its reliance on sanctions as a primary policy instrument. Critics argue that excessive dependence on sanctions, without sufficient diplomatic engagement, may undermine the organization's ability to maintain unity among member states. According to Ulf Laessing, head of the Sahel program at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso may deepen the legitimacy crisis facing ECOWAS. As cited in Ewokor (2025), Laessing suggests that the split could weaken public confidence in the regional organization and diminish its influence in addressing governance and security challenges. Public reactions within the withdrawing countries also reveal growing dissatisfaction with ECOWAS. Reports by Global Voices (2024) indicate that many citizens in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso perceive ECOWAS as ineffective in addressing their socio-economic and security concerns. For instance, some individuals have openly expressed support for the withdrawal, arguing that ECOWAS has failed to deliver tangible benefits to their countries. Conversely, other observers have expressed

concern about the long-term consequences of the decision. Nigerian human rights activist and former senator Shehu Sani warned that the withdrawal represents a serious setback for regional unity and reflects a breakdown in diplomatic engagement within West Africa.

Furthermore, Aboagye (2025) argues that the crisis has exposed the limitations of ECOWAS' diplomatic strategies. The organization's heavy reliance on sanctions and threats of military intervention has arguably reduced its capacity to engage in constructive dialogue with member states. In situations involving legitimacy crises and unconstitutional changes of government, diplomatic negotiations and political mediation may often be more effective tools than punitive measures such as sanctions and political isolation. Summarily, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS has significant implications for regional integration in West Africa. The crisis has intensified political fragmentation within the region, weakened collective security arrangements, strained diplomatic relations among member states, and undermined the institutional credibility of ECOWAS. Unless effective diplomatic strategies and cooperative security mechanisms are developed, these developments may pose long-term challenges to the stability, unity, and integration of West Africa.

2.3 Comparative Perspectives on Regional Integration Crises

The decision by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents one of the most significant contemporary challenges to regional integration in West Africa. Although the crisis has distinctive regional drivers, similar tensions between national sovereignty, domestic political instability, and the authority of regional institutions have occurred in other regional organizations worldwide. Examining these comparable cases provides valuable insights into the dynamics of regional integration crises and situates the ECOWAS situation within broader global patterns of cooperation, contestation, and institutional fragmentation (Asante & Bembir, 2025; Chukwudi et al., 2025). Regional integration initiatives rarely progress in a straightforward or uninterrupted manner. Instead, they often experience periods of strain when member states question the legitimacy, effectiveness, or perceived fairness of supranational institutions. These tensions may emerge from ideological disagreements, economic disparities among member states, governance crises, or competing national priorities. Experiences from organizations such as the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), and the East African Community (EAC) demonstrate that regional integration is a complex and evolving process frequently shaped by political disputes, institutional challenges, and shifting geopolitical interests (Acharya, 2014; Hartzenberg, 2011).

One of the most widely discussed examples of a regional integration crisis occurred in the European Union with the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the organization, widely known as Brexit. Following a national referendum in 2016 in which a majority of British voters supported leaving the EU, the United Kingdom formally exited the union in 2020. Brexit marked the first withdrawal of a member state in the history of the EU and sparked intense debates about the future trajectory of European integration. At its core, Brexit reflected tensions between the principle of national sovereignty and the growing influence of supranational governance structures within the EU. Critics of European integration in the United Kingdom argued that EU institutions exerted excessive authority over domestic policy areas, thereby

limiting the autonomy of national decision-making. Although the EU possesses far deeper institutional and economic integration than ECOWAS, the Brexit episode illustrates how dissatisfaction with regional institutions can fuel withdrawal movements capable of reshaping regional cooperation frameworks (Hobolt, 2016; McTague, 2020; Ouedraogo, 2026).

In Latin America, the experience of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) also highlights the challenges regional organizations encounter when political disagreements emerge among member states. Established in 1991 to promote economic cooperation and trade integration among South American countries, MERCOSUR has periodically faced institutional tensions related to political developments within member states. A notable instance occurred in 2012 when Paraguay was temporarily suspended following the controversial impeachment of President Fernando Lugo. Similarly, Venezuela was suspended from the bloc in 2016 due to concerns regarding democratic governance and compliance with institutional obligations. These events illustrate how regional organizations may respond to political crises through mechanisms such as sanctions or suspension, although such measures can also generate diplomatic tensions and strain institutional cohesion among member states (Gardini, 2015).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) offers another important comparative perspective. Unlike ECOWAS, ASEAN has traditionally emphasized the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states. This governing norm commonly referred to as the “ASEAN Way” prioritizes consensus-building, diplomatic engagement, and quiet negotiation over coercive measures such as sanctions or political isolation. While this approach has contributed to ASEAN’s ability to maintain organizational unity despite significant political diversity among its members, critics argue that it limits the organization’s capacity to address governance challenges, human rights concerns, and democratic deficits within the region. The ASEAN experience therefore demonstrates how different institutional philosophies can shape the resilience and limitations of regional organizations (Acharya, 2014).

Within the African continent, the East African Community (EAC) provides an additional example of the complexities involved in regional integration processes. The EAC which includes Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has made notable progress toward economic integration through initiatives such as the establishment of a customs union and the implementation of a common market. Nevertheless, the organization has also experienced periodic disagreements among member states over issues including trade restrictions, regulatory barriers, and political rivalries. For instance, trade disputes between Kenya and Tanzania have occasionally disrupted regional commerce and exposed underlying tensions between national economic interests and regional integration commitments (Hartzenberg, 2011). Taken together, these comparative cases illustrate that regional integration initiatives are frequently confronted by political and institutional challenges. In many situations, tensions arise when member states perceive regional institutions as either overly intrusive in domestic governance or insufficiently responsive to their national priorities. The current crisis involving the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS reflects similar dynamics, particularly in relation to disagreements over democratic governance standards, sanctions regimes, and regional security cooperation (Asante & Bembir, 2025; Chukwudi et al., 2025).

At the same time, the ECOWAS crisis exhibits several distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from other regional integration disputes. Unlike the Brexit process, which primarily emerged from domestic debates concerning sovereignty and economic regulation, the ECOWAS crisis is closely linked to the complex security environment of the Sahel region. The region has experienced persistent challenges related to terrorism, insurgency, fragile state institutions, and military coups. In this context, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a new security and political alliance that seeks to coordinate defense and governance strategies outside the ECOWAS framework. The emergence of this alternative institutional arrangement introduces an additional dimension to the crisis by indicating not only dissatisfaction with ECOWAS but also the potential development of competing regional governance structures (Asante & Bembir, 2025; Oji & Orji, 2025). Another distinguishing feature of the ECOWAS crisis is the prominent role played by military governments in the withdrawing states. In contrast to the EU and ASEAN examples where disputes largely occur among civilian administrations, the Sahelian withdrawal involves military regimes that have challenged the democratic governance norms promoted by ECOWAS. This situation raises broader questions regarding the relationship between regional integration, democratic conditionality, and political legitimacy within African regional organizations.

From a theoretical perspective, these comparative experiences also reveal limitations in the explanatory power of Neo-functionalism as a framework for understanding regional integration in developing regions. Neo-functionalism suggests that economic cooperation among states tends to generate “spillover effects,” gradually expanding integration into additional policy areas and strengthening political cooperation. However, the experiences of ECOWAS, MERCOSUR, and other regional organizations suggest that political instability, governance crises, and security threats may instead generate negative spillovers, weakening institutional cohesion and undermining integration processes (Schmitter, 2016; Asante & Bembir, 2025). Consequently, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso highlights the fragility of regional integration efforts in contexts characterized by political instability, economic inequalities, and persistent security challenges. Evidence from comparative regional organizations suggests that while integration initiatives can facilitate cooperation, they remain vulnerable to political disruptions that challenge the authority, legitimacy, and effectiveness of supranational institutions. Summarily, examining the ECOWAS crisis through a comparative lens provides a broader understanding of the structural and political challenges confronting regional integration in the contemporary international system. The experiences of other regional organizations demonstrate that institutional adaptability, effective conflict-resolution mechanisms, and sensitivity to member states’ political realities are essential for sustaining regional cooperation. For ECOWAS, the withdrawal of the Sahelian states represents a critical test of the organization’s capacity to balance the promotion of democratic governance with the practical demands of regional security and political stability in West Africa.

3.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined the political, security, and economic consequences arising from the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and evaluated how this development may influence the future trajectory of regional integration in West Africa. The analysis indicates that the departure of these three

Sahelian states constitutes one of the most profound institutional challenges ECOWAS has faced since its establishment. Rather than resulting from a single political disagreement, the withdrawal reflects the intersection of several structural and political dynamics, including tensions surrounding democratic governance norms, dissatisfaction with ECOWAS sanctions, persistent insecurity in the Sahel region, and enduring economic vulnerabilities that have limited the tangible benefits of regional integration for some member states. The findings suggest that the decision by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to exit ECOWAS cannot be understood solely as a response to the organization's enforcement of democratic standards following military coups in these countries. Instead, the withdrawal reflects deeper ideological and institutional disagreements between the military-led governments in the Sahel and the leadership of ECOWAS concerning the priorities of regional governance. While ECOWAS has consistently emphasized the protection of constitutional order and democratic legitimacy as central principles guiding regional cooperation, the Sahelian military regimes have increasingly criticized the organization for what they perceive as excessive external influence, insufficient assistance in addressing regional security threats, and policy approaches that fail to adequately reflect the urgent security and development challenges confronting the Sahel. These diverging perspectives have contributed to a growing legitimacy gap between ECOWAS and the withdrawing states, further intensifying political tensions within the regional bloc.

In addition to the political implications, the study highlights the significant security consequences associated with the withdrawal of the Sahelian states. The Sahel region has evolved into one of the most fragile and volatile security environments in the world, characterized by the rapid proliferation of extremist organizations, weak state institutions, and porous borders that facilitate the movement of armed groups and illicit networks. In this context, the exit of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso risks undermining collective security arrangements previously coordinated through ECOWAS mechanisms, particularly in areas such as intelligence cooperation, joint military operations, and regional peacekeeping initiatives. The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by the three countries further underscores the growing fragmentation of the regional security architecture in West Africa. The emergence of parallel security frameworks may complicate coordination efforts and potentially weaken collective responses to terrorism and transnational criminal activities.

The economic dimension of the crisis similarly reveals deeper structural constraints affecting regional integration in West Africa. Despite decades of policy initiatives aimed at promoting economic cooperation and trade liberalization, intra-regional trade within ECOWAS remains relatively limited compared to other regional economic blocs. Structural challenges—including inadequate infrastructure, limited industrial diversification, bureaucratic trade procedures, and continued dependence on primary commodity exports have constrained the region's economic transformation. These challenges are particularly pronounced for landlocked Sahelian countries, whose economies rely heavily on access to coastal trade routes and external markets. Consequently, the economic sanctions imposed by ECOWAS in response to the military coups intensified existing economic pressures in these states, reinforcing perceptions among their governments that the tangible benefits of regional integration were insufficient.

From a theoretical perspective, the study also contributes to broader debates on the applicability of regional integration theories in the African context. In particular, the ECOWAS crisis highlights the limitations of Neo-functionalism as an explanatory framework for understanding

integration dynamics in regions characterized by political instability and security challenges. Neo-functionalism suggests that economic cooperation among states generates positive spillover effects that gradually extend integration into political and security domains. However, the experience of ECOWAS indicates that under certain conditions such as governance crises, declining trust among member states, and escalating security threats—negative spillover effects may instead emerge, weakening regional institutions and reversing integration processes. The rise of military regimes in the Sahel and the formation of alternative alliances such as the AES demonstrate how political fragmentation can disrupt previously established integration trajectories.

Comparative analysis further reveals that crises within regional integration projects are not unique to ECOWAS. Other regional organizations including the European Union, MERCOSUR, ASEAN, and the East African Community have experienced tensions arising from competing national interests and debates over the balance between national sovereignty and supranational authority. Nevertheless, the ECOWAS case is distinctive due to its close association with severe security instability and the involvement of military governments challenging the democratic governance principles promoted by the organization. These dynamics underscore the vulnerabilities faced by regional institutions operating within politically fragile environments where state capacity is uneven and security threats are pervasive. Ultimately, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso represents a crucial test of ECOWAS' institutional resilience and adaptability. The crisis highlights the need for the organization to reassess its conflict management strategies, enhance diplomatic engagement mechanisms, and adopt more flexible approaches to addressing political crises among member states. Equally important is the need to address structural economic constraints that continue to limit the effectiveness and perceived benefits of regional integration. Without such reforms, confidence in ECOWAS as a viable framework for regional cooperation and development may continue to erode.

Looking ahead, the future of regional integration in West Africa will largely depend on ECOWAS' ability to balance its normative commitment to democratic governance with the practical imperatives of regional security cooperation and economic development. If meaningful institutional reforms and renewed diplomatic engagement between ECOWAS and the Sahelian states are not pursued, the current fragmentation could weaken the region's collective capacity to address shared challenges such as terrorism, economic underdevelopment, and political instability. At the same time, the crisis presents an opportunity for critical reflection on the evolving nature of regional cooperation in West Africa and the institutional adjustments required to sustain it in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

REFERENCES

1. Aboagye, F. (2025). Regional security governance and the crisis of ECOWAS legitimacy. *African Security Studies*, 34(1), 15–32.
2. Acharya, A. (2014). *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315886732>

3. Acho, J. (2024). Military governance and regional diplomacy in West Africa. *Journal of African Political Affairs*, 11(2), 78–94.
4. Adam, A. (2012). Regional integration and economic performance in West Africa. *Journal of African Economic Studies*, 7(2), 45–61.
5. Adeyinka, A. (2023). Trade facilitation and economic integration in ECOWAS. *African Trade Policy Review*, 15(1), 67–84.
6. African Development Bank. (2020). African economic outlook report. Abidjan: AfDB.
7. Al Jazeera. (2024). Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso announce ECOWAS withdrawal. Al Jazeera News.
8. Ametoglo, M., Guo, P., & Wonyra, K. (2018). Regional integration and inequality in ECOWAS member states. *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues*, 8(5), 221–229.
9. Ansah, J. (2025). Military coups and regional governance crisis in West Africa. *African Security Review*, 34(1), 45–60.
10. Asante, R., & Bembir, P. (2025). Consolidating or deconsolidating security? Analyses of the security implications of the exit of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from ECOWAS. *African and Asian Studies*, 24(1–2), 37–58. https://brill.com/view/journals/aas/24/1-2/article-p37_3.xml
11. Atai, B. (2020). Regional integration theories and their relevance to African regional organizations. *African Journal of Political Economy*, 12(2), 67–81.
12. Babarinde, O. (1996). Regional integration in Africa: Prospects and challenges. *African Development Review*, 8(1), 45–60.
13. Balima, S. (2024). The ECOWAS Standby Force and regional peacekeeping challenges. *West African Security Review*, 10(3), 54–69.
14. Chukwudi, C. E., Essien, N. P., & Ezebuilo, P. C. (2025). Unpacking the political economy of member states' withdrawal from ECOWAS: The cases of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger Republic. *Perspektif*, 14(2), 134–150. <https://ojs.uma.ac.id/index.php/perspektif/article/view/15940>
15. ECOWAS Trade Information System (ECOTIS). (2023). Regional trade statistics report. Abuja: ECOWAS Commission.
16. ECOWAS. (2001). Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Abuja: Economic Community of West African States.
17. Ewokor, C. (2025). ECOWAS faces legitimacy crisis after Sahel states withdrawal. BBC Africa Report.
18. Gardini, G. L. (2015). Towards modular regionalism: The proliferation of Latin American cooperation. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 58(1), 210–229. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201500110>
19. Global Voices. (2024). Public reactions to ECOWAS withdrawal in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.
20. Goldstein, J. S. (2009). *International relations* (8th ed.). New York: Pearson Education.
21. Haas, E. B. (1958). *The uniting of Europe: Political, social, and economic forces 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press.
22. Hartzenberg, T. (2011). Regional integration in Africa. World Trade Organization Economic Research and Statistics Division Working Paper. <https://www.wto.org>
23. Hatzenberg, T. (2011). Trade facilitation in regional economic communities in Africa. Trade Law Centre Working Paper.

24. Hobolt, S. B. (2016). The Brexit vote: A divided nation, a divided continent. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(9), 1259–1277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1225785>
25. Iloh, E. (2021). Export procedures and trade integration in ECOWAS. *West African Journal of Economic Policy*, 9(3), 101–118.
26. Institute for Economics and Peace. (2025). *Global Terrorism Index 2025*.
27. International Crisis Group. (2024). *Niger sanctions and the regional political crisis*.
28. International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2024). *Strategic survey: The Sahel security crisis*. London: IISS.
29. Kurra, M. (2020). Neo-functionalism and regional integration in developing regions. *Journal of Global Governance Studies*, 14(1), 22–38.
30. Lindberg, L. N. (1970). *The political dynamics of European economic integration*. Stanford University Press.
31. McTague, T. (2020). Brexit and the future of the European Union. *International Affairs*, 96(2), 355–371. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz278>
32. Mohammed, A., & Arabo, S. (2024). Terrorism and governance challenges in the Sahel region. *Journal of African Security Studies*, 12(2), 88–103.
33. Musa, A. (2024). Regional integration and security challenges in West Africa. *Journal of African Political Studies*, 19(1), 90–108.
34. Ndao, S. (2023). Regional integration and trade performance in West Africa. *West African Economic Review*, 9(1), 23–40.
35. Odeniyi, B. (2024). ECOWAS warns of security implications of Sahel states withdrawal. *African Security Monitor*.
36. Oji, O. R., & Orji, S. I. (2025). Breaking colonial chains and the Sahel Pact of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in broader perspective. *South East Political Science Review*, 9(1), 45–63.
37. Orji, A., Ogbuabor, J., & Anthony-Orji, O. (2022). Regional integration and economic growth in ECOWAS. *African Development Review*, 34(2), 215–230.
38. Ouedraogo, M. (2026). The AES exit from ECOWAS and Brexit: A comparative reading through Hirschman's exit–voice–loyalty framework. <https://uirtus.net>
39. Pippie, R. (2024). Military coups and regional diplomacy in West Africa. *African Political Economy Journal*, 18(3), 102–118.
40. Project 21. (2025). *Displacement trends in the Sahel region 2020–2024*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Report.
41. Punch. (2024). ECOWAS warns of rising terrorist attacks in the Sahel region.
42. Salvator, D. (2002). *International economics* (7th ed.). New York: Wiley.
43. Schmitter, P. C. (2016). Neo-functionalism as a theory of regional integration. In T. Börzel & T. Risse (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of comparative regionalism* (pp. 45–74). Oxford University Press.
44. Security Council Report. (2025). *Terrorism and insecurity in the Sahel region*.
45. Shuaibu, M. (2015). Trade barriers and regional integration in West Africa. *Journal of African Trade*, 2(1–2), 54–68.
46. UN News. (2024). *West Africa: Concerns grow over delayed democratic transitions*.
47. Westcott, N. (2024). *Regional security and geopolitical shifts in the Sahel*. Chatham House Policy Brief.
48. World Bank. (2024). *World Bank country and lending groups classification*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

49. World Economic Forum. (2024). Global competitiveness report.
50. Yingi, A. (2024). ECOWAS withdrawal and its implications for regional trade integration. *African Journal of Economic Policy*, 15(2), 56–71.