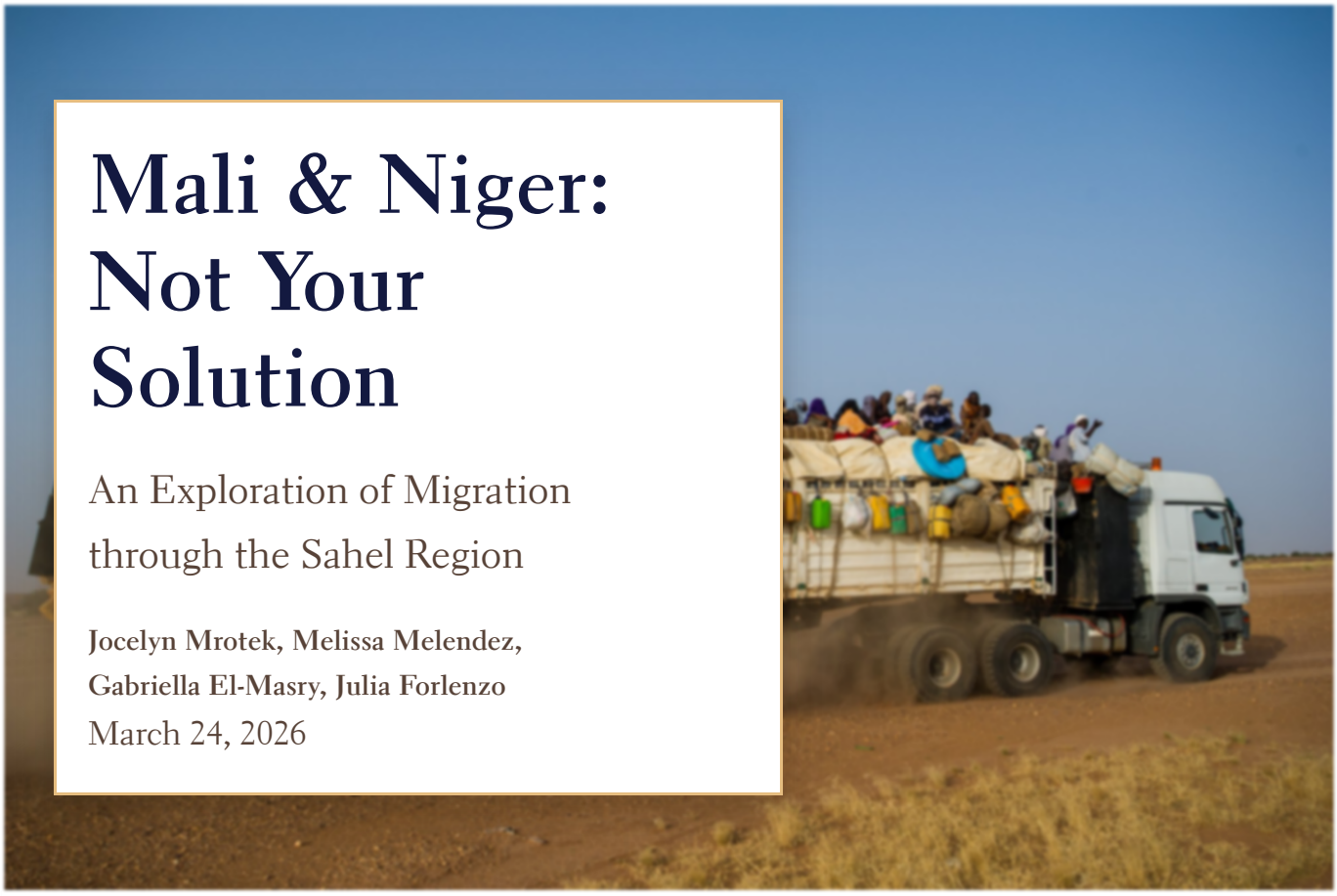


Mali & Niger: Not Your Solution

An Exploration of Migration through the Sahel Region

Jocelyn Mrotek, Melissa Melendez, Gabriella El-Masry, Julia Forlenzo

March 24, 2026

Their Voice Must Be Heard

This StoryMap was only possible due to the support and partnership with Mustapha Manneh, founder and CEO of Their Voice Must Be Heard. This non-profit organization is based in The

Gambia and works with local communities to support migrants and educate people on the dangers of irregular migration. Their Voice Must Be Heard has been vital in helping us faithfully represent the harsh reality of the migration journey by amplifying the voices of people that have experienced it themselves.[1]

Looking For A "Better" Life

“I am a trained plumber. I worked hard, but I could not earn enough to take care of my family. Every day felt like survival, not progress."
"I saw friends who went to Europe. They came back successful. People respected them. I wanted that life not just for me, but for my family."
"So I left."

-Ansumana Mannah

Ansumana Manneh is a citizen from The Gambia that has experienced the migration journey first hand. His story is one of many in which Gambians are pressured or desire to leave their home in hopes of more opportunity elsewhere, especially in Europe. Before leaving, many family members, friends and the media will portray migration to Europe as an accessible and easy opportunity to find wealth and success.

This is not true.

Migration through North Africa is a journey filled with risks that many are not aware of, and each person will discover the truth behind these misconceptions for themselves. This is especially true in the Sahel region, where dangers have only been increasing: military coups, ethnic rivalries, and government exploitation of migrants, to name a few. The Sahel is home to Mali and Niger, two

central migrant hubs acting as origin, transit, *and* destination countries. These conflicting roles lead to complicated government actions, and the background, stability and policies of these countries can have grave impacts on their citizens and all people moving through the region.

Despite human movement being a natural part of life, government actions by Mali and Niger have created a dangerous environment for migrants. Political instability and an increasing focus on security and sovereignty have caused typical migration routes to shift, bringing along with them a whole host of new dangers and consequences. These are the types of dangers that people like Ansumana discover on their journey, often when it is already too late. A glimpse into Mali in Niger's past and present state can help paint a picture of what migrants may actually face while traveling through this region, and why many live to regret it.

"It is not what you think. The journey is full of danger, lies, and pain. You can lose your life, your dignity, everything. It's sad."

-Ousman Jaiteh

The System in Place - Regional Background

Many factors are at play when considering migration through Mali and Niger, and the region's complex history has had immense impacts on the state it finds itself in today. Government instability, ethnic tensions, and language barriers all play a part in the migrant experience, so it is important to have an understanding of that context, and how it has shaped the experiences of migrants in the current system.

Regional and Historical Context

The Sahel region includes many varied ethnic groups, like the **Tuareg, Hausa, Fulani, and Malinke**, which are some of the largest groups in Mali and Niger. Before the colonization of Africa, these groups coexisted peacefully for the most part. Trade existed between groups, as well as conflict, and naturally differentiation took place and ethnic borders developed. However, because of colonization the political borders drawn completely ignore the presence of different ethnic groups and have trapped territorial competition within state borders. Violence has become very common between ethnic militias and state militaries, especially in Northern Mali. Currently the Tuareg hold a great deal of control over Northern Mali, which in the past has been a common route for Gambian migrants traveling to the northern coast. It is more likely than ever that migrants will be stopped traveling through this region of Mali, and there is an even higher risk of violence against migrants.

> *Near Timbuktu: "You will be passing vehicles that are completely burnt down. You can notice that was a* ***fight***

> *which they said was* ***between the rebels and the soldiers***"
>
> Anonymous Interviewee

In addition to physical and legal boundaries, linguistic borders constructed by the colonial powers in Africa add more challenges to a migrants journey. For example, because the French colonized the Sahel, most states in the region have a common ground for communication: French. However, the farther north one travels from the Sahel, the main language shifts from French to Arabic. When telling the stories of Gambian migrants, this issue becomes even more prevalent. For them, the language border is an even greater struggle because they speak English. Due to their location (being within Senegal), they face a linguistic border even sooner in comparison to other African migrants. This context is crucial to understanding not just the legal and physical struggles, but the social ones as well. In addition, this language barrier puts Gambian migrants at higher risk of exploitation and violence.

> "*Most people know about the migration route and* ***if they realize that you cannot speak the language either French, they will try to take money from you at Mali***".
>
> Anonymous Interviewee

(Left) **Ethnic map of Africa - Every color represents its own distinct ethnic group** © National Geographic (Right) **Linguistic Map of Africa** © geographyeducation.org

> *Near Gao: "there are UN Soldiers and you see them moving with their weapons. And at the other side, there are rebels and* ***you need to pass through the rebels to go to Algeria****"*
>
> Anonymous Interviewee

An Unstable Region - Securitization Efforts and Outcomes

November 19, 1968

1st Malian Coup: President Modibo Keïta is ousted in a military coup led by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, who promotes himself to a general and establishes Mali's first military junta and single party regime. During this regime's rule, free speech is punished and opposition is met with violence, including student led protests.

April 1974

1st Nigerien Coup: Hamani Diori, the Republic of Niger's first president is forcibly removed from office after 20 year rule, the constitution is put on hold, and the National Assembly is dissolved. Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountche, who led the coup, forms the Supreme Military Council (SMC) and takes control of government. About 20 people were killed in the process.

May 28, 1975

Economic Community of West African States (**ECOWAS**) organization established through the Treaty of Lagos, which aimed to promote economic cooperation and growth among member states, as well as to promote improved standards of living. Mali and Niger were both founding members.

March 26, 1991

2nd Malian Coup: Traoré is removed from power in a coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, who then becomes head of state during transition to multiparty democracy. He steps down after the presidential election.

1980s-1990s

The "**lost decade**", a period of economic crisis and famine for the Sahel region. During this period many civilians were displaced and left even more vulnerable to the violence of the state and non-state groups.

January 1996

2nd Nigerien Coup: Led by military officers, the second coup overthrew President Ousmane and P.M. Amadou. Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, the country's new leader, claims the aim of the coup was to encourage a new start and multiparty democracy.

April 1999

3rd Nigerien Coup: Leader and orchestrator of 1996 coup, Mainassara, is assassinated by military forces at airport. Daouda Malam Wanke, the commander of the presidential guard, takes power and announces that there will be a presidential election and a return to civilian rule by 2000. The following election was generally considered fair by international observers.

2010

4th Nigerien Coup: Led by General Salou Djibo, a military group calling themselves the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (**CSDR**) captures President Tandja and his ministers after a gun battle. From there, the constitution is suspended and state entities are dismantled. The military governments claims that they want to make Niger an example of democracy. Presidential elections are later held in 2011.

2012

Humanitarian crisis of Sahel region, famine induced by ongoing drought left people malnourished and especially vulnerable to the corruption of the region.

March 2012

3rd Malian Coup: In Mali, an alliance of separatists and militias take over northern Mali led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, resulting in a military intervention by France to stop advance to the capital, Bamako. Despite these efforts, a military junta is established and remains after an interim leader is appointed. Meanwhile, Northern Mali becomes occupied by militant Islamist groups, and the negative effects of their presence still threaten the civilians of the region.

2012

Founding of **EUCAP Sahel Niger**, a European Union established organization aimed at strengthening overall security and minimizing its threats.

2015

Founding of **EUCAP Sahel Mali**, a European Union established organization to improve security and establish inter-governmental transparency and accountability.

August 18, 2020

4th Malian Coup: Colonel Assimi Goïta leads a military coup ousting President Keïta, and establishes a military junta. A Transitional Charter is written that will keep the junta involved in Malian political affairs. Against ECOWAS' demand that the junta cede to a civilian government, they name an interim president that is also a retired member of the armed forces.

May 24, 2021

5th Malian Coup: Just 9 months after the previous coup, the Malian government faces another coup. President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, the leaders of the transitional government, are arrested by Malian soldiers and taken into custody and are charged with concealing information from Vice President Colonel Assimi Goïta. They resign in custody, making way for Goïta to take over as interim leader.

2023

5th Nigerien Coup: President Mohamed Bazoum was placed under house arrest and a new military junta takes the power of the government and suspends the constitution. The coup was triggered by President Bazoum's plans to replace all military leaders and the head of the presidential guard.

July 2025

Extremist Islamist terrorist organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda, the JNIM, coordinated seven attacks targeting Mali’s main overland trade routes as an economic strategy to cut off the capital of Mali, Bamako.

Neither state, Mali or Niger, has made any sustainable securitization progress since the expulsion of the Western presence in 2022 (Mali) and 2023 (Niger), which has resulted in porous borders, increased violence within both states (from state and non-state militias), and riskier migration routes. Finally, since the expulsion of western powers, the Sahel region has been looking to Russia for strategic

guidance, causing more international tension, which puts more pressure on the Malian and Nigerien governments to act against irregular migration.

Who's Already There - Displacement within Mali and Niger

Factors that we have seen, such as the **increasing instability from armed military groups, poverty, lack of job opportunities, and climate change consequences** have all contributed to internal displacements in Mali and Niger. Each country in the Sahel Region (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) has experienced a military coup in the last five years, contributing to not only an increase of human rights violations, but humanitarian needs as well.

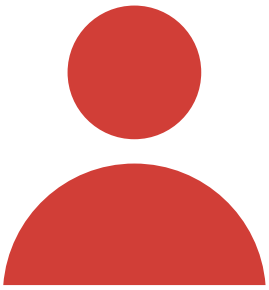
Forced Displacements in Sahel Region 2015-2025

Source - Government, IOM

3,

24

5,



The extreme amount of internally displaced people in Mali and Niger is telling for the state of the region. Entire communities are disrupted, which puts more strain on resources and support in the few stable locations and causes many Malians and Nigeriens to emigrate themselves. A safety net that is already overused by citizens is sure to be even weaker when it comes to supporting additional people entering the region. Similar problems in home countries may inspire movement across Africa, but Mali and Niger are in no place to serve as refuge from these challenges.

If Malians and Nigerians are fleeing from their very own home, can others really be safe here?

> *"Across the Central Sahel, around 5.4 million people are experiencing crisis levels of food insecurity. At least 22,500 people face daily risk due to starvation or disease."*
>
> International Rescue Committee

On the Move - Migration through Mali and Niger

Despite the challenges present within Mali and Niger for their own citizens, both countries do serve as common transit or destination countries for migrants from other nations in the region.

03

9

Internally Displaced Persons in the Sahel Region (2026)

Main Migration Routes in Northwest Africa



Blue - Western African Route | Gold - Western Mediterranean Route | Red - Central Mediterranean Route

The three routes shown above are the most commonly used through North Africa and the Sahel Region. Irregular migration is highly adaptive and will be unique to each person. Because of this, there is no way to predict the experiences and encounters of any individual migrant or the path they will take. However, focusing on some of the most common paths allows us to reveal how the most prominent dangers would play out during the journey.

The Route Then: A Historical Perspective

Central Mediterranean Route

Powered by Esri

1 Gao, Mali

"Women were especially targeted. Some were harassed or forced into situations they didn't want. You feel powerless because the men controlling you have weapons."

-Fatou Jallow

Gao, Mali acts as the first major checkpoint after migrants reach Mali. Gao is known for being Mali's main transit city, due to its easy access to a variety of common migration routes. Gao is usually a short stop for migrants to make money or regroup. However, even during short times in cities like these, refugees can be trafficked into situations such as sex slavery or forced labor schemes. Women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, but the dangers exist for all migrants throughout their time in Mali and Niger, as many checkpoints lie on common trafficking routes. This danger encourages migrants to move on as quickly as their money and circumstances will allow, though this is often out of their control.

2 Agadez, Niger

“From Mali up to Agadez, we were paying bribes”

"We spent more time there [Agadez] because the truck was not full. We only move when they have a maximum number of migrants."

-Anonymous Interviewees

Agadez is one of the most central spots in the journey, as Niger is one of the largest migrant hubs in the region, and Agadez is their most prominent city in the migration industry. Many migrants, especially those well into their journey, will stop here to work and save money back up. The migration industry is a major presence in Agadez, and people can make a living by selling goods, transporting or housing migrants, smuggling or requiring bribes for safety. This system often removes autonomy from the migrants, as they lose control of their journey.

3 Seguedine, Niger

"Migrants travel in overcrowded trucks with little food or water... if you fall during rough journey, you will be left in the desert to die... the smugglers told us to leave them behind"

-Ansumana Manneh

At this point in the journey, migrants are well into the Sahara desert. The extreme climate makes people vulnerable, and reliance on actors such as smugglers reaches an all time high. Being left behind in the desert is almost inevitably a death sentence, so the legitimacy and reputation of the smugglers is very important at this point. When smuggling is criminalized, they are forced to hide their operations and become less accountable for the wellbeing of the migrants.

4 Tummo Crossing

“We had an attack and ambush by the bandits... They were opening fire until they reached our vehicles... They undress us nakedly to search and take money from us”

-Anonymous Interviewee

The Tummo Crossing represents the border between Niger and Libya. This means the highest concentration of border guards and armed groups. Many ethnic militia groups patrol the borders in order to demand money from the people trying to cross. If the militias, guards, or bandits are not satisfied with the migrants' compliance, they often inflict extreme violence, stripping migrants of their dignity and autonomy.

5 Sebha, Libya

Sebha is a transitory city in Libya that is one of the first that migrants pass through after successfully crossing the border. People tend to spend little time here, but are still vulnerable to many of the dangers typical for migrants in Libya such as trafficking, forced labor, and violence.

6 Tripoli, Libya

Tripoli is the last major migrant hub city in Africa, and marks either the end of the journey or a resting spot before embarking on the sea journey to Italy. In Tripoli, migrants will face many issues such as racism and discrimination, language barriers, and labor exploitation. If they do decide to stay long-term, work is difficult to find and many live in poverty with little access to healthcare or other basic necessities.

7 Italy

"I thought life would change immediately. But it was still very hard."

-Ansumana Manneh

If the migrants decide to continue to Italy, they will embark on a sea journey to Sicily. This is quite a dangerous endeavor, with overcrowded and unsafe boats. Many never reach Italy, or are intercepted by coast guards and forced to return to Libya. After reaching Italy, challenges include uncertain legal status, unavailability of jobs, discrimination, isolation, and lingering trauma.

Rewriting the Rules of Movement - Policy Changes

Migration policy in Mali and Niger has shifted significantly over the past decade. Before 2015, movement across West Africa was relatively normalized under regional frameworks like ECOWAS, and routes through Mali and Niger were stable and widely used. After the 2015 migration crisis, however, the European Union expanded its influence through initiatives such as the Valletta Action Plan and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. These programs encouraged countries like Mali and Niger to adopt stricter migration controls, often by tying financial support to enforcement measures.

A key policy shift was Niger's Law 2015-36, which criminalized migrant transport. Rather than stopping migration, this redirected it, pushing routes away from established roads and into more remote and dangerous desert paths. At the same time, EU-supported security missions increased policing and border control, further embedding migration management within broader security frameworks. Overall, these policies did not eliminate migration but instead reshaped it, making journeys more risky, expensive, and unpredictable. More recent political changes in Niger in 2023 have disrupted this system, including the repeal of Law 2015-36.

Migration policy is most visible in **Niger** because it sits at the **center of the main trans-Saharan migration routes**, especially through Agadez, which has historically been the primary hub connecting West Africa to North Africa. Because of this geographic position, Niger became a strategic focus for the European Union's externalization efforts after 2015.

Tracing Policy Change in Mali and Niger

November 2015

Valletta Action Plan

In response to the 2015 migration crisis, the EU and 37 African states, including Mali and Niger, formalized a new framework for cooperation on migration management. This agreement marked a clear shift in strategy, prioritizing the reduction of irregular migration and strengthening border enforcement. Rather than focusing solely on Europe's borders, the plan moved migration control outward, placing greater emphasis on managing movement within transit regions like the Sahel.

November 2015

Emergency Trust Fund for Africa

To turn policy into action, the EU created a major funding tool focused on migration, security, and development in the Sahel. This funding didn't just support development, it directly enabled enforcement on the ground, giving countries like Mali and Niger the resources to carry out stricter migration controls

April 2015

EU Sahel Regional Action Plan

Building on earlier efforts, the EU rolled out a broader strategy for the Sahel that brought together security, development, and migration. It focused on strengthening border control, combating trafficking networks, and working more closely with governments in countries such as Mali and Niger. The goal was to manage migration earlier along its route, rather than waiting until people reached Europe. The plan ran through 2020 and gradually came to an end as the EU shifted toward updated strategies and new partnerships. At the same time, growing instability in the region, especially political unrest and military coups, made long-term cooperation more difficult, forcing the EU to rethink how it engages in the Sahel.

May 2015

Niger Law 2015-36 (Anti-Smuggling Law) → Niger criminalized transporting migrants north of Agadez, disrupting established migration routes and pushing movement into more dangerous desert paths.
→ Repealed in November 2023

June 2016

EU Migration Partnership with Niger

As the EU expanded its role in the Sahel, Niger became a central partner in managing migration. In June 2016, cooperation intensified through increased financial and political support to enforce anti-smuggling laws, strengthen border control, and expand policing in key transit areas such as Agadez.

These efforts were largely driven by security concerns, reinforcing state control over migration and reshaping major transit routes across the region.

October 2020

National Migration Policy (PNM 2020-2035)

In 2020, Niger took a major step toward long-term migration management by launching a strategy covering 2020–2035, supported by a five-year action plan. The policy focused on tightening coordination between government agencies, strengthening overall governance, and reinforcing border control systems. It also aimed to better manage both internal and cross-border movement through a more organized, state-led approach.

November 2023

Samoa Agreement (EU–ACP Partnership)

The Samoa Agreement replaces the earlier Cotonou Agreement, which began in 2000 as a partnership focused mainly on development, trade, and political cooperation. Over time, that agreement gradually expanded to include migration management and cooperation on border control.

Building on this shift, the Samoa Agreement establishes a new framework that more clearly brings together migration, development, and security. It reinforces migration control through broader global partnerships, showing how EU priorities have evolved toward managing migration beyond its own borders.

Migrants abandoned in the Sahara are found by a military patrol on the route to Libya/OpenMigration © Clingendael

When Governance Changed, So Did Migration - Governance Shifts and Migration Policy in the Sahel

The shift from democratic governments to military rule in Mali and Niger reflects a clear policy change, as it alters how migration and security policies are implemented and prioritized. In Niger, before the 2023 coup, the democratic government worked closely with the

EU and adopted policies like Law 2015-36 and the National Migration Policy (2020–2035), which focused on controlling migration through enforcement and cooperation. After the military takeover, this relationship changed, leading to the repeal of Law 2015-36 and a shift away from EU-backed migration control. This demonstrates a direct policy reversal tied to a change in governance. In Mali, earlier coups in 2012 and 2020 did not overturn a single major law; instead, they resulted in weaker, less consistent policy enforcement overall. The government's reduced control over territory led to more fragmented and less effective migration policies. Together, these cases show that political shifts do not just change leadership; they reshape policy systems by either reversing existing laws, as in Niger, or weakening the state's ability to enforce them, as in Mali.

Different Systems, Different Responses

Even though both Mali and Niger were shaped by EU migration policies after 2015, they handled migration very differently. In Niger, the government worked closely with the EU and heavily enforced Law 2015-36 through checkpoints, arrests, and stricter controls around Agadez. This turned Niger into one of the EU's main migration-control partners in the Sahel and pushed many migration routes underground.

Mali was different. Ongoing conflict, political instability, and weaker state control meant migration was managed less by the government and more through local networks and informal systems. Because of this, migration routes in Mali stayed more flexible and less tightly controlled than in Niger.

When Niger repealed Law 2015-36 in 2023, migration routes quickly became more active and visible again. The repeal marked a major shift away from the EU-backed system that had shaped migration governance in Niger for years.