SAHEL: 10 YEARS OF INSTABILITY

Local, Regional and International Dynamics

edited by **Giovanni Carbone** and **Camillo Casola**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**

ISPI

SAHEL: 10 YEARS OF INSTABILITY

Local, Regional and International Dynamics

edited by Giovanni Carbone and Camillo Casola

ISPI

Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

Sahel: 10 Years of Instability. Local, Regional and International Dynamics
Edited by Giovanni Carbone and Camillo Casola

First edition: October 2022
Cover image by Francesco Fadani

Print ISBN 9788855267823
ePub ISBN 9788855267830
Pdf ISBN 9788855267847
DOI 10.14672/55267823

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5
20121, Milan
www.ispionline.it

Catalogue and reprints information: www.ledizioni.it

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

This Report is realized with the support of the Policy Planning Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967.

Table of Contents

Introduction

If dates hold a symbolic significance in our way of reading the world, 2022 is a fitting time to stop and reflect on the developments of the ongoing crisis in the Sahel, which marks this year a decade since its inception. It was 2012 when a rebellion headed by a Tuareg armed movement broke out in northern Mali. Since then, a wave of instability developed in a wide area from Mauritania to Chad, even threatening the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea. The severity of the situation does not seem to be alleviated by the influx of economic and strategic resources largely invested by the European partners to boost the area's security: on the contrary, the roots of instability seem to grow wider and deeper as time goes by. As a decade of instability in the Sahel runs its course, this 'anniversary' feels more like a watershed, as the recent turnaround in France's security strategy in the area marks the beginning of a new, different phase for European securitisation efforts in the region.

Remarkably, the announcement of the French change of pace came on the same day as a long-awaited summit between the European Union and the African Union was kicking off in Brussels. While representatives of the two continents confronted each other in an event seeking to define a *common ground* between the two sides of the Mediterranean, deep cracks were showing in the Sahel with the tensions between France and the Malian junta as well as with the spreading of anti-Western sentiment in public opinions in the region.

From the perspective of a Europe shaken by the geopolitical earthquake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, managing the Sahel crisis would seem to be a marginal priority in the European and global security agenda. Yet, blurred as it may appear in the haste of dealing with an extraordinarily tense political agenda and a looming energy crisis, the Sahel actually offers an eloquent litmus test on political challenges going way beyond its borders.

France losing the grip in the region, with the fallout between Paris and Bamako, the increasing presence of the Wagner group, and a renewed understanding between Russia and countries traditionally in the European sphere of influence, all draw the attention towards shifting alliances in the area – a theme that is more striking than ever at a time when Africa is looked upon as a region that needs to be 'unbalanced' between a Western and an anti-Western camp pitted against each other, with Cold War overtones.

Meanwhile, an authoritarian backsliding can be seen in Sahelian countries. The area has seen as many as four coups d'état since 2020. By the time this report was going to press, a fifth was unfolding in Burkina Faso (the second in only one year for the country), outlining an even more uncertain situation regarding Ouagadougou's political transition and its positioning with respect to international dynamics.

International dynamics mutually shape the dynamics on the ground: ten years after the inception of the crisis, these are as complex as ever, with the actions of armed groups and communal violence intersecting with environmental crises and the activities of criminal networks.

This report examines these intertwining aspects, tracing the highlights of a decade of terrorist activity and international intervention, outlining the evolution of the main actors, showing the extent of governance challenges in the region, and how these factors of fragility have influenced each other. By touching on the various aspects of this multifactorial crisis, the complexities are brought to the surface to better understand the crisis in the Sahel and shed light on the way forward. The

evolution of this scenario is effectively summarised by Camillo Casola's introductory chapter, summing up the major changes in a region with some of the most severe governance challenges in the world.

With 'instability' being an inevitably recurring keyword when talking about the Sahel, understanding the inability of state institutions to guarantee security in some areas requires examining the structural factors of their fragility, as done by Leonardo Villalón through an analysis of the impact of the 'politics of democratisation' that have shaped the process of defining state institutions in recent decades. Where there is a lack of effective governance from state institutions, militant groups strive to impose their dominance and social order. Héni Nsaibia outlines this by explaining the dynamics of armed activism and their intersection with international counter-terrorism efforts and communal conflicts in the crucial Liptako-Gourma region, the so-called three-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso that has become the epicentre of a vicious cycle of violence against the population at unprecedented levels of severity.

Luca Raineri's chapter widens the regional perspective even further through an insight into the link between armed conflict and the trafficking of drugs and weapons, human trafficking and gold mining. The political economy of illicit activities in the region is examined in light of the pivotal phases of the conflict, mutated actors on the ground, and the impact of foreign intervention.

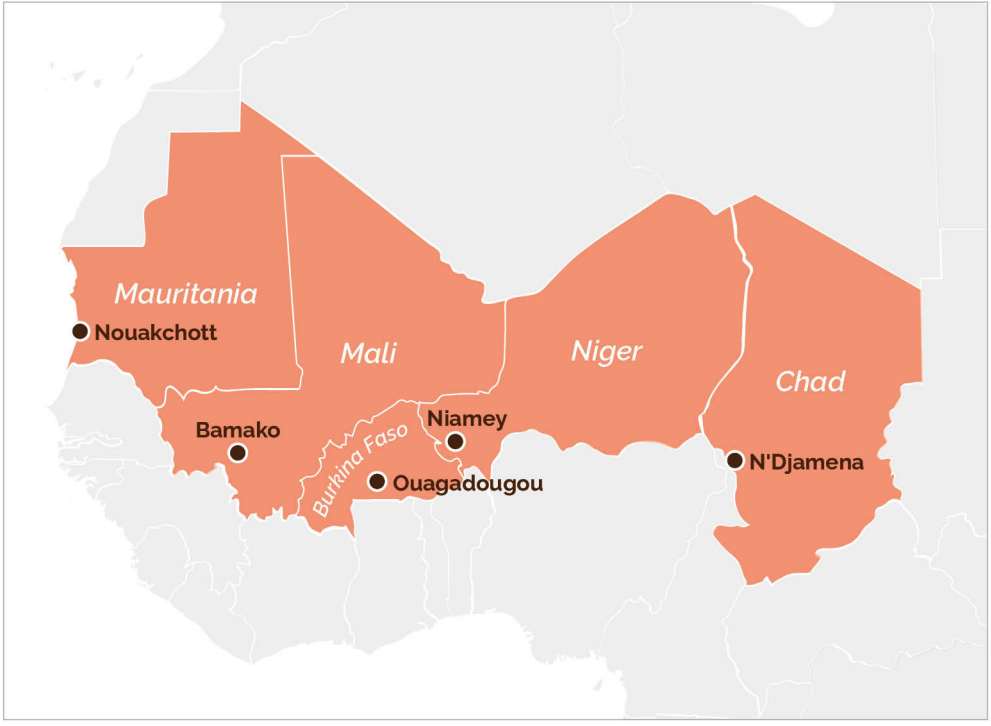
The fragilities of the Sahelian countries do not stop at governance and military challenges. Kheira Tarif offers a very much necessary, although sometimes overlooked analysis of the role of climate change and its bi-directional relation with conflict and humanitarian emergencies, identifying general trends and specific patterns of risk in countries that are among the most vulnerable in the world to this kind of threat.

The focus broadens further to the international level through Denis Tull's analysis of how European states, France in the lead,

have mobilised in the region, observing how the Sahel has been for France and the European states a test for European cohesion in matters of defence and security. This theme could not be more topical nowadays. The turnaround of France, followed by the boost of Russia's engagement in the region, has brought even more attention to the balance of power between traditional and non-European foreign military actors in the area. Babacar Ndiaye and Pathé Dieye outline the means, priorities and rhetoric through which Russia, China and Turkey, among others, have strengthened their presence in the Sahara-Sahel.

Giovanni Carbone's conclusions anchor the elements gathered throughout this report to policy recommendations stressing that for dealing with such a highly complex crisis, long-term solutions are needed. Under the pressure of common challenges in an extraordinarily tense international scenario, responding not only to military and security needs but also to reaching development objectives and building mutual trust is key. The way ahead will show whether the struggles in the Sahel and beyond will crack open new rifts or will be addressed as common challenges, on a common ground.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President


Mauritania
Nouakchott
Mali
Bamako
Burkina Faso
Ouagadougou
Niamey
Niger
Chad
N'Djamena

1. The Sahel Crisis at 10

Camillo Casola*

"Today, the last military unit of the Barkhane Force present on the Malian territory crossed the border between Mali and Niger. It came from the Operational Desert Platform of Gao, which was handed over to the Malian armed forces this morning. In compliance with the decision made by the President of the French Republic on 17th February 2022, the Barkhane Force in Mali has been reorganised outside the country, in less than six months and after 9 years of presence".[1]

On 15 August 2022, France officially turned the page in Mali, after almost a decade of military presence. The decision to leave the country, as a result of a sharp deterioration in political and diplomatic relations with the ruling regime in Bamako, and the reorganisation of the Barkhane force in the Sahel and West Africa, opened a new phase in its multidimensional engagement in the region. Long gone are the times when President François Holland was hailed as a hero by a cheering crowd in Timbuktu, having rid the "City of the 333 Saints" of the jihadi occupation, in February 2013. Today, the freeze on France-Mali relations is emblematic of the transformations that have occurred in regional balances. The extent of this turnaround is even more striking when considering the loss of legitimacy suffered by France among local populations, and the rapid shift in alliances

* The opinions contained in this chapter are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the European Commission.

[1] "Ministère des Armées, Opération Barkhane: Ré-articulation de la force hors du Mali", Communiqué de presse de l'État-major des armées, 15 August 2022.

of the Malian regime, whose political and military relations with Russia are being strengthened substantially, as shown by the alleged takeover of the Gao base by Russian security forces after the French departure.[2]

The changing role of France in Mali only partly explains how the situation in the Sahel has evolved over the last ten years. The war first erupted in 2012 as a nationalist rebellion led by a Tuareg-based armed movement (Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad, MNLA) allied to jihadi groups close to al-Qa'ida, and it was initially confined to the Azawad – covering the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu in north Mali. The collapse of the Libyan regime in 2011, and the subsequent return of heavily-armed Tuareg fighters to Mali, accelerated the outbreak of a crisis which was, however, deeply-rooted in pre-existing dynamics of fragility: a dysfunctional governance system based on neo-patrimonial practices; the marginalisation of local communities living in rural areas far away from the capital; the social entrenchment of Salafi-jihadi actors mostly coming from North Africa and pushed southwards as a result of a brutal crackdown by the military regime in Algiers; the development of drugs, arms and human being trafficking networks.[3] Ten years on, the social, political and economic cleavages at the heart of the crisis are still there. Yet, significant changes have taken place.

Reshaping Regional Balances: Political and Military Dynamics at the Heart of the Crisis

From 2014 to 2015, intertwined processes converged in shaping new regional balances. From a security perspective, in July 2014 French *Opération Serval* – launched in north Mali by

[2] "Au Mali, des forces russes en uniforme repérées à Gao, après le retrait de l'armée française", *Le Monde Afrique*, 17 August 2022.

[3] M. Bøås and L.E. Torheim, "The Trouble in Mali. Corruption, collusion, resistance", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 7, 2015.

President Hollande's decision to halt the jihadi advance towards the town of Sévaré, supporting efforts by Malian institutions to restore the territorial integrity of the state, and eradicate the jihadi presence from the country[4] – was replaced by a regional counterterrorism operation. *Opération Barkhane* was part of an overall reorganisation of the French presence in Western and Central Sahel. The trans-state and cross-border dimension of the jihadi presence and activities prompted French authorities to redefine the main axes of the country's military engagement in the region, based on a rationale of cooperation and partnership with the UN, US-EU allies, regional armies and the newly established G5 Sahel. 3,500 soldiers were deployed across Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. The mission was headquartered in N'Djamena, permanent bases were located in Niamey and Gao and temporary advanced operating bases set up close to regional borders to serve as logistic platforms. Operation Barkhane aimed at providing African security forces with military training, coordination, equipment, as well as direct operational support, curbing any leeway enjoyed by militants and disrupting regional jihadi supply chains.[5] It then further evolved and gradually increased its potential, as well as the number of troops and military means, while the strategic location of temporary advanced bases changed depending on shifting regional balances and the situation on the ground.[6]

Alongside security-focused interventions, the overarching goal of stabilising the Sahara-Sahel region involved political and diplomatic efforts to settle the disputes between former nationalist rebels – which had gathered in the Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) – and pro-government

[4] S.D. Wing, "French intervention in Mali: strategic alliances, long-term regional presence?", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016.

[5] E.R. Goffi, *Opération Barkhane: entre victoire tactique et échec stratégique*, Centre FrancoPaix, Rapport de recherche, no. 3, June 2017

[6] During the France-G5 Sahel summit convened by President Emmanuel Macron in Pau in January 2020, a 600-unit surge was announced, bringing the number of Barkhane units to its peak (5,100).

militias, part of the so-called *Plateforme*. Lengthy negotiations were conducted in parallel between the state and the armed actors in North Mali, with Algerian mediation at the forefront. Former rebel groups were required to give up demands for independence of the Azawad, and to comply with principles of national unity, territorial integrity and secularism. On the other side, the government committed to ensuring better institutional representation for northern populations, adopting targeted policies for economic development in the region, and implementing decentralisation reforms. A Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme aimed at armed groups, and an Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC) should have eased the return of national security forces to the north.[7]

The "Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali", resulting from these negotiations, was signed in Bamako in 2015. The provisions of the arrangement, however, have been only partially implemented since. Transitional authorities were appointed in 2017, suffering from a lack of financial means and administrative training to perform their functions. Interclan tensions and occasional armed confrontations between pro-government militias and former rebels, as well as violent clashes between national security forces and the CMA, have long hampered the return of state authorities in Kidal, while only a few thousand members of armed groups – out of more than 80,000 – were involved in a preliminary phase of the process to reintegrate them into the regular army. The setting up of MOC mixed units, made up of regular army soldiers and members of the armed groups as part of the agreements, was slowed down by a series of terrorist attacks, such as the one against a military camp in Gao, killing nearly 80 people in January 2017. The potential dividends of peace – in terms of political assets and financial resources – paradoxically provided an incentive for the

[7] C. Hull Wiklund and C. Nilsson, *Peace in Mali? An analysis of the 2015 Algiers agreement and its implementation*, FOI, November 2016.

proliferation of new armed actors eager to claim a role in the political and military transition, otherwise threatening to resort to political violence. On the other hand, a lack of inclusiveness of the agreements was among the main reasons for their own weakness: the process was largely perceived as forced upon local actors by external partners without any involvement of northern communities in decision-making processes; by contrast, people in the south remained utterly hostile to the reintegration of former rebels in state institutions, and worried about legitimising a possible secession of the Azawad.[8]

More recently, non-state actors in the north reiterated their engagement to fully implement the peace deal. In May 2021, representatives of the CMA and the Plateforme met in Rome to sign a political document setting the stage for the establishment of a new institutional structure, the Cadre Stratégique Permanent (CSP), to coordinate efforts to negotiate with the government.[9] On 2 February 2022, the "Accord de Principe de Rome" was adopted by a delegation of the CSP, led by MNLA Secretary General Bilal ag Acherif, and the Minister for National Reconciliation, Ismaël Wagué, committing the transitional authorities and the CSP to cooperate towards the implementation of the Algiers agreements.[10]

Despite challenges and outstanding issues, French-led counterterrorism activities and efforts for political appeasement between the state and former rebels contributed to reshaping the security landscape in north Mali. While not eradicating the jihadi presence from the region, Operation Barkhane was rather effective in limiting the mobility of al-Qa'ida-linked armed groups in the Sahara-Sahel by strengthening the control of northern borders. The new regional environment pushed the

[8] M. Pellerin, "L'accord d'Alger cinq ans après : un calme précaire dont il ne faut pas se satisfaire", International Crisis Group (ICG), June 2020.

[9] E. Baldaro and C. Casola, "Italy in the Sahel: A new national projection towards a Greater Mediterranean", Policy Brief, ISPI, July 2021.

[10] "Mali: un accord trouvé entre le gouvernement et les groupes armés signataires", RFI, 3 February 2022.

jihadi leadership to adopt a "deconcentration strategy" towards Central Sahel, feeding social cleavages, inter-ethnic tensions and widespread hostility against the state actors and leading to new fronts of armed insurgency to open up.

Jihadi Insurgencies and Community Conflicts: A Changing Security Landscape

In recent years, the regional environment has been marked by a sharp increase in armed violence and human rights violations perpetrated by a wide range of actors, from jihadi insurgents to self-defence ethnic militias and armed security forces, with severe repercussions for civilian populations. The resulting context has been marked by a worrying overlap of conflicts, internal displacements and food insecurity. The multidimensional crisis in Mali has gradually taken on a regional scope, with insecurity spreading across the border with Burkina Faso and Niger – mostly affecting the so-called Liptako-Gourma area. In Mali, conflict fatalities in the first half of 2022 (June) have outnumbered the annual figures for 2021 (+39%). A notable rise in violent attacks against military actors and local populations was recorded mostly in the central region of Mopti and the territories of Gao and Ménaka, bordering Niger. In Burkina Faso, a new epicentre of regional insecurity following a relentless increase in armed violence since 2019, the number of conflict fatalities by mid-2022 is almost 90% of the annual death toll for 2021, mostly concentrated in the Sahel, Est, Centre-Nord and Nord regions. In Niger, a growing record of violent attacks and victims has been observed in the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua, as well as the Diffa area bordering Nigeria and Chad.[11]

[11] Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), as of 30 June 2022. See C. Raleigh, A. Linke, H. Hegre, and J. Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2010, pp. 651-60.

What was known as a "Tuareg question" in the north – exploited for almost a decade by al-Qa'ida-linked armed groups, thanks to social alliances, penetration strategies and the capacity of former nationalist leaders to catalyse consensus among local communities – was de facto replaced by a "Fulani question". Jihadists leveraged political and social demands from marginalised Fulani pastoralists and young disenfranchised people, offering them protection, basic service delivery and justice, to acquire social consensus in occupied areas. The ethnicisation of community conflicts between farmers and herders further exacerbated insecurity for local populations, indiscriminately targeted by violent attacks and reprisals.[12] In a vicious circle of violence, the role of state actors has been crucial. Actions by national security forces reproduce the same dynamics of ethnic targeting towards Fulani civilian communities, which are broadly associated with jihadi insurgents, accused of supporting them and made victims of extra-judicial killings.[13]

The jihadi landscape has gone through aggregation processes and leadership changes, resettled into a new regional environment, and strengthened insurgent governance structures in rural areas under militant control.[14] The shifting balances of armed activism and political violence from northern Mali towards Central Sahel, through the establishment of local katiba of al-Qa'ida as well as the rise of Fulani preachers mixing religious extremist discourses and anti-state rhetoric, went together with structural "Sahelisation" of jihadi leaderships. In 2016, the merging of locally active groups and brigades (Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, Katiba al-Fourqan, al-Murabitun) into

[12] C. Raleigh, H. Nsaibia, and C. Dowd, "The Sahel Crisis Since 2012", *African Affairs*, vol. 120, no. 478, January 2021.

[13] L. Raineri, "If victims become perpetrators. Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel", International Alert, 2018.

[14] D. Lounnas, "Jihadist Groups in North Africa and the Sahel: Between Disintegration, Reconfiguration and Resilience", Working Papers, no. 16, MENARA, CIDOB, October 2018.

a single organisation – Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) – led by notorious Malian Emir and former Tuareg rebel Iyad ag Ghali, was part of this process. It reached its climax with the killing of the Algerian leader of al-Qa'ida au Maghreb Islamique (AQMI), Abd al-Malik Droukdel, and other high-ranking members of the Qaedist network by French counterterrorism forces.

The regional balance of power among insurgent non-state actors and the primacy of al-Qa'ida-linked groups became increasingly threatened with the creation of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Between 2019 and 2020, the cohabitation between the two jihadi networks in the Central Sahel gave way to open warfare, triggered by territorial skirmishes in central Mali and ISGS's daring recruitment of militants from JNIM/Katiba Macina. The intra-jihadi infighting has seen the al-Qa'ida-affiliated organisations prevailing over ISGS, despite the latter's resilience, forcing it to reassert control over areas traditionally under its influence, in south-western Niger and eastern Mali.[15] The death of ISGS' leader, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, killed in a French counterterrorist operation, and the elimination of the whole command chain of the group between 2020 and 2021, has further weakened its potential to challenge al-Qa'ida in the Sahel, though not wiping out its capacity to reorganise and act as a threat to national security forces and hostile local communities.

As the security situation in the Sahel deteriorates, the risk of the spill over of violent extremism and insecurity towards the Gulf of Guinea is just as alarming. Since 2020, the northern regions of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo have been increasingly targeted by terrorist attacks, claimed by JNIM and al-Qa'ida-linked katiba. As in the Central Sahel, political violence in West Africa is first and foremost triggered by local drivers, such as the ethnicisation of community conflicts over access to land, pastures and water

[15] H. Nsaibia and C. Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 7, July 2020.

between semi-nomadic herders and sedentary farmers, and the detrimental impact of natural resource conservation policies on the livelihoods of local communities. Corruption of state authorities, militarisation and mismanagement of biodiversity resources, as well as state abuses (informal taxation, racketeering practices, harassment) at the expense of pastoral communities, have pushed marginalised groups to ensure support for jihadi insurgents' struggle against the state.[16]

In spite of the *sursaut militaire* urged by French authorities at the Pau summit in January 2020, and the success claimed by the Barkhane forces – mostly made possible by an increase in the use of remote warfare techniques, such as lethal drones – security-focused counterterrorism measures achieved only modest results in terms of regional stabilisation. The spread of violent extremism in the region was not curbed, nor were local authorities able to systematically reassert control over occupied rural areas.

Against this backdrop, governments in the region have been facing mounting pressures to open talks with local jihadi insurgents. In Mali, the first attempts to negotiate with armed groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida date back to 2017, when the Salafi imam Mahmoud Dicko was tasked with a short-lived mission of good offices to establish contacts with the Qaedist leadership. In 2019, the concluding remarks of the Dialogue National Inclusif (DNI) urged Bamako to initiate talks with jihadists as an essential precondition for the resolution of the conflict.[17] The political space for the concrete development of peace negotiations, however, was narrowed by the strong opposition of France and international partners. The second military transition in 2021 gradually changed things. The willingness of the provisional government to explore the option of dialogue as a viable crisis resolution strategy in Mali

[16] L. Raineri, "Sahel Climate Conflicts? When (fighting) climate change fuels terrorism", EU Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Brief, no. 20, November 2020.
[17] F. Bouhlel, "(Ne pas) dialoguer avec les groupes 'jihadistes' au Mali?", Berghof Foundation, 2020.

contributed, among other factors, to deteriorating political relations with Paris. The deepening diplomatic crisis, in turn, provided the new military rulers with an incentive to push forward and build an autonomous crisis management strategy, in a more conducive environment – marked by the gradual resizing, and eventual withdrawal of the French military presence in the country.[18] The most recent *montée en puissance* (increase in power) of the Malian army against jihadists groups has put aside discourses on peace negotiations; yet, it could be seen as an attempt by the junta to start negotiations from a position of strength.

Mali de facto opened the way for other governments in the region to explore dialogue options with insurgent actors as a viable strategy to cope with a security situation that is largely out of control. In Burkina Faso, unconfirmed rumours about ongoing negotiations between Kaboré's government and jihadi groups were heard throughout 2021; during the first months of 2022, putschist authorities openly recognised the need to engage traditional and religious leaders in the search for a political solution to the crisis involving local-based agreements with jihadists. In Niger, President Mohamed Bazoum announced in February 2022 that he had mandated envoys to initiate a dialogue with jihadi leaders, with the aim of stabilising the south-western region of Tillabéri, while confirming the liberation of several armed militants in the framework of negotiations.[19] This marked a change of pace in the governance of the crisis in Niger, as previously he had dismissed any discussion of negotiating with jihadists, describing militant activities in the country as the result of an external threat spilling over from Mali and Burkina Faso to Niger.

[18] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM", Africa Report no. 306, December 2021.

[19] "Niger: Mohamed Bazoum libère des 'terroristes' en vue d'ouvrir le dialogue", *Jeune Afrique*, 27 February 2022.

Flawed Democracies and Authoritarian Backsliding

Transformations in national and regional balances have also occurred in regard to governance models and regimes. Fragile political contexts and flawed democratic systems, neo-patrimonial practices and deep socio-economic cleavages have triggered acute institutional crises, paving the way for military élites to suspend constitutional legality and take power, justifying their actions behind the need to restore security, stability, and address governance failures. A series of military coups in Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso – to which a failed coup attempt in Niger can be added – proves that an authoritarian backsliding trend has gained momentum in the region since 2020.

In March 2012, in the middle of the security crisis in north Mali, a group of non-commissioned officers based in Kati staged a military coup against the then President Amadou Toumani Touré, making power in Bamako even more fragile and accelerating the fall of the national army in the fight against nationalist rebels and jihadi militants.[20] Eight years later, in August 2020, Mali was again the setting for a military putsch. In between, a lengthy, troubled process of democratic consolidation, started in 2013 with the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (also known as IBK) for his first term as President of the Republic of Mali, had taken place. Social unrest broke out in Bamako in early 2020, following contested local elections. People fed up with IBK – re-elected only a few months earlier, although turnout was very low – gathered in the Malian capital to protest against the government, displaying the lack of legitimacy of the regime, which turned out to be unable to tackle the many challenges of the country – a deteriorating security situation, a severe socio-economic crisis – and the dysfunctionalities of state governance. In May 2021, Colonel Assimi Goïta was

[20] B. Whitehouse, "The Force of Action: Legitimizing the Coup in Bamako", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 47, no. 2-3, 2012.

proclaimed Head of State, as the same military élites behind the 2020 coup decided to remove the civilian authorities previously appointed at the top of provisional governing bodies, and to formally assume the leadership of the transition.[21] The so-called "coup within the coup" marked a tipping point for regional balances, paving the way for a turnaround in the country's choice of international partnerships and alliances, and a full shift towards authoritarian modes of governance. The radical change imposed by the Malian junta on the country's political direction in international relations – culminating with the decision to withdraw its membership from the G5 Sahel in June 2022, and the relentless undermining of the UN stabilisation mission (Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali, MINUSMA) – has found support from a large sector of the population hostile to France, accused of not having been able to efficiently address the insecurity in the country, and even to support (and cooperate with) terrorists – meaning both jihadi insurgents and former rebels in the north.

The comeback of military actors to the political scene has not only affected Mali, but the entire Sahel region. In April 2021, the sudden death of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno on the frontline against the armed rebels of the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT), paved the way for the army to seize power, and for Déby's son, General Mahamat "Kaka" Déby Itno, to be appointed as President of the Transitional Military Council. Bending the constitutional provisions – according to which, the Chair of the National Assembly would replace the Head of State in case of a power vacuum – the military formalised what was already a de facto leading role in Chad's politics. In three decades, a neo-patrimonial system based on patronage and clan-based clientelism had granted Zaghawa military élites centre stage in the political and economic dynamics of power in N'Djamena.[22] The "soft coup" of April 2021 brought about

[21] A. Sandor, "Le coup d'État au Mali et la construction d'une transition", *Bullettin FrancoPaix*, vol. 6, no. 12, 2021.

[22] E. Le-Yotha Ngartebaye, "La disparition du maréchal Idriss Déby Itno: entre

a "change in continuity" of the military control of political processes and structure. Nevertheless, what has not changed in essence (or only partially did) was the privileged relation between France and like-minded partners with N'Djamena, one of the West's strongest allies in the efforts to securitise the region. Unlike Mali, France and the European Union have been cautious towards Chad's military regime, supporting the junta's plans for national inclusive dialogue and a democratic transition to keep the country close to Western positions.

The *coup d'état* in Burkina Faso, in January 2022, was far from unexpected. Even prior to his November 2020 re-election, Kaboré's legitimacy had been declining steadily due to a worsening security situation – with the country overtaking Mali as the primary location of violence in 2021 – and a skyrocketing number of IDPs, worsening social and economic inequalities, corruption, embezzlement of public funds, and accusations of being "France's puppet in the Sahel". The democratic progress made since 2015, when the fall of the former authoritarian ruler, Blaise Compaoré, laid the ground for a promising democratic transition, was undermined by the lack of reforms addressing popular social demands. An escalating wave of terrorist attacks against civilians and against the military exacerbated popular protests and the frustration of the security forces – unpaid, poorly equipped and exposed to enormous risks in confronting jihadi insurgencies – against the regime and the international presence in the country. This ultimately pushed Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba – one of the officers promoted as part of out-of-time security sector reform adopted by Kaboré just a few weeks earlier – to take power.[23] The pragmatism shown by the West in addressing Burkina Faso's authoritarian drift reflected the need to avoid a further disintegration of the security cooperation architecture in the Sahel. On 30 September 2022, however, a new coup in

coup d'État et continuité du système", *Bulletin FrancoPaix*, vol. 7, no. 1-2, 2022.

[23] O. Moderan and F.R. Koné, "What caused the coup in Burkina Faso?", Intitute for Security Studies (ISS), Africa, February 2022.

Ouagadougou abruptly showcased the existence of profound rifts within the army, substantiating further the institutional breakdown in the country. Due to a strong discontent with the political and military direction taken by the transitional government, regarding international alliances – presumably, the decision not to strengthen relations with Russia – and the lack of progress in the struggle against violent extremism, Damiba was forced to resign, and captain Ibrahim Traoré took over as head of the Mouvement Patriotique pour la Sauvegarde et la Restauration (MPSR).

Foreign Presence (and Shifting Priorities) in the Sahel

Over ten years, a plurality of foreign state actors has expanded their presence in the Sahel. Alongside France, the EU and its member states and the US strengthened their footprint and gained room in the area too, as did China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf powers.[24]

Stabilising the region has been a priority for the EU since 2014. The migration crisis in the central Mediterranean refocused the agenda of some of its member states towards the need to fight human trafficking networks and irregular migration flows, enforce Sahelian governments' capacity to control borders, and ease repatriation processes. In 2015, a summit between EU and African leaders was convened in La Valletta (Malta) to address migration issues. The establishment of a European Union Emergency Trust Fund (€1.8 billion) was designed to address the root causes of insecurity by creating jobs, improving governance, and strengthening the resilience of local communities. Mali and Niger, as the main transit states for West African migrants, were prioritised in terms of resource

[24] C. Casola, "Controterrorismo e rivalità strategiche: una lettura della cooperazione di sicurezza nel Sahel", in E. Baldaro and L. Raineri (Eds.), *Jihad in Africa: terrorismo e controterrorismo nel Sahel*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2022.

mobilisation. In Niger, political and financial incentives to dismiss smuggling networks and local infrastructures supporting human mobility proved to be particularly effective: anti-smuggling legislation was enforced, having a severe impact on local societies and economies. The criminalisation of local *passeurs* (smugglers) and the inability to provide sound alternatives in terms of occupation and livelihoods pushed a large part of them to adhere to criminal organisations, while the securitisation of the Agadez route forced migrants to find more expensive and dangerous ways to reach the Mediterranean. The externalisation of European borders into the Sahel and the security-focused policies enforced by the EU and Sahelian governments reduced the number of migrants reaching Europe, but increased the pressures on economic and social systems.[25] The adoption of a new strategy for the Sahel in 2021 has shown a partial change in narratives, placing greater emphasis on a political dimension and the need to improve the quality of local governance as a way to stabilise the region.[26] From this perspective, the Sahel strategy incorporated inputs from the N'Djamena summit of February 2021, resulting in the set-up of a new framework for political and security cooperation in the region, the Coalition for the Sahel, based on the relevance given to governance issues alongside security and development.

Curbing irregular migration and tackling organised crime and trafficking networks, even more than fighting violent extremists, remains a priority for several European member states. Italy, in particular, has systematically strengthened its diplomatic and military presence in the Sahel and bilateral relations with regional governments to this aim. Including the Sahel region within the "broader Mediterranean" notion was instrumental in the prioritisation of strategic interests concerning regional security and migration control, and a way to reshuffle political

[25] T.T. Abebe, *Securitisation of migration in Africa. The case of Agadez in Niger*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Africa, Report no. 20, December 2019.

[26] "Sahel: Council approves conclusions on the EU's integrated strategy in the region", Council of the European Union, 19 April 2021.

balances in Europe and towards the EU's allies. Its strategic goals have been corroborated by concrete actions on the ground: since 2017, Italy has opened new embassies in Niamey, Ouagadougou, Bamako – plans for a new diplomatic mission in N'Djamena are on the table – and signed defence and military cooperation agreements with Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as a memorandum of understanding on migration and security with Mali. It has deployed a bilateral military training mission in Niger (Missione bilaterale di Supporto alla Repubblica del Niger, MISIN) and ensured strong military participation in the Takuba task force, before its announced withdrawal in 2022.[27]

Non-traditional foreign actors – global powers like China, middle or regional powers – have also increased their influence over Sahelian regimes, formally adhering to the multilateral architecture for cooperation while pursuing strategic interests and feeding power ambitions. China's security involvement in the Sahel translates into the commitment to support UN-based multilateral security cooperation and the active (though risk averse) participation in the MINUSMA mission since 2013.[28] This has allowed Beijing to depict itself as a responsible power, directly engaged in finding peaceful solutions to African conflicts. Of course, China's role as a security provider is closely linked to economic goals and political objectives: securing support from local regimes for its One-China policy and building consensus around its positions in multilateral fora. Turkey's penetration strategy in the Sahel has developed quite recently – Ankara's traditional strategic focus being the Horn of Africa – and relies on hard and soft power instruments, such as the delivery of military training and capacity building programmes, arms and lethal drone sales, intelligence sharing, or the influence of the Turkish Islamic model on local political Islam.[29] The security

[27] Baldaro and Casola (2021).

[28] J.-P. Cabestan, "China's Involvement in Africa's Security: The Case of China's Participation in the UN Mission to Stabilize Mali", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 235, July 2018.

[29] H.R. Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel", International Crisis Group (ICG),

cooperation of the Gulf powers in the Sahel has for years mirrored the intra-Gulf competition dynamics between the Saudi-Emirates axis and Qatar. Political, economic, religious and military assets have been leveraged to pursue strategic objectives: the international diplomatic isolation of Qatar (and Iran) and the struggle against political Islam, on the Saudi-Emirati side; the search for partnerships, markets and resources beyond the Gulf region and the promotion of Islamic models of political activism, on the Qatari one.

Although Russia's "return to Africa" can be traced back to 2017-19 – when military cooperation agreements were signed with Chad and Niger (2017), Burkina Faso (2018) and Mali (2019) – Russian influence in the Sahel has recently made headlines, due to the proximity relations of influential junta members to military and political élites in Moscow. The agreement allegedly signed by the transitional government – allowing Wagner Group private military contractors to deploy in the country, train Malian armed forces, support their efforts in fighting against jihadi armed groups and ensure protection for ruling authorities, in return for financial compensation and mining concessions – is a source of concern for Western actors.[30] In the current highly-polarised global context, marked by major geopolitical competition between global and medium powers, the capacity of Russian state-sponsored actors to expand their reach in a region traditionally under French influence, and fill the strategic void left by traditional donors, is significant. Even more, if considering the broad popular consent for a stronger Russian presence and the widespread anti-French sentiment, exacerbated by disinformation campaigns sponsored by pro-Russia networks.[31]

July 2021.

[30] "Le Mali verserait 10 millions USD par mois à Wagner, selon un général américain", *Le Figaro*, 3 February 2022.

[31] Y. Guichaoua, "The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel", *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 4, July 2020.

The presence of both traditional and new players in the Sahel has contributed to the militarisation of the region, and transposed a global power competition within its boundaries. However, it has also offered local state actors a unique opportunity to strengthen their own agency: diversifying partnerships and strategic alliances allows regional governments to gain a competitive edge in terms of economic agreements or military concessions, as well as more room for political manoeuvre, in a context marked by a gradual erosion of the proto-democratic credentials of local regimes.

2. The Political Roots of Fragility in the G5 Sahel Countries: State Institutions and the Varied Effects of the Politics of Democratisation

Leonardo A. Villalón

By any standards, the countries of the G5 Sahel[1] present some of the most challenging governance contexts in the world. Their populations, often spread over vast and arid terrains, are characterised by some of the globe's lowest human development indicators. Weak and small economies heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture and pastoralism result in chronic food insecurity. Rapid population growth and a huge youth bulge,

[1] This essay draws in part from L.A. Villalón, "The Politics of Democratization and the State of the State in the Sahel," in J. Harbeson (Ed.), *Africa in World Politics: Sustaining Reform in a Turbulent World Order*, Routledge, Forthcoming 2022, as well as on material published in collaboration with others, including: M. Bodian and L.A. Villalón, "The Democratic Struggle in the Sahel", in L. Villalón (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021; and L.A. Villalón, and A. Idrissa (Eds.), *Democratic Struggle, Institutional Reform, and State Resilience in the African Sahel*, Lexington Books/Rowman and Littlefield, 2020. I am indebted to my colleagues for their insights and many discussions. The central argument here is my own.

This essay discusses the original members of the G5 Sahel as established in 2017: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. Senegal, while a Sahelian country and frequent actor in regional dynamics, is not part of the group and is not discussed here. In May 2022 Mali announced its withdrawal from the G5, effective 30 June 2022.

along with extreme vulnerability to climate change, present additional burdens on governments. These challenges – to name only some of the most obvious – make clear that the region's fragility has many roots.

Indeed, considering these structural factors, the most pertinent question to ask ourselves might be not "why is the Sahel fragile?" but rather why, given such a challenging context, has the region historically in fact been relatively peaceful? As recently as 2013, two keen analysts of African conflict could note that "conflict levels in the Sahel as a region remain regionally among the lowest on the continent".[2] A decade later that is clearly no longer the case, and the news presents us daily reminders of the incapacity of Sahelian states to ensure security and control violence. The question of immediate concern is thus about the roots of the crisis that has swept the region in the past decade. How and why did the current situation of "fragility" come to pass?

There is no single explanation for this complex situation, and the structural vulnerabilities noted above certainly played their role. In this brief essay, however, I propose to explore the specifically political sources of state fragility, an exercise which also allows me to hypothesise (or, perhaps more accurately, to speculate) about the reasons for the not-insignificant variations in the resilience and capacities of countries in the region.

My point of departure is the conviction that the security crisis that concerns us now is in fact piggybacking on a more fundamental political crisis. It did not come about through a security failure, or emerge inevitably from the region's poverty or underdevelopment, but rather it is the product of political processes, of a long decline in state legitimacy, and hence in the state's capacity to manage the social manifestations of the region's chronic structural points of vulnerability. This also has long roots, arising from the cumulative effects of what

[2] C. Dowd and C. Raleigh, "Sahel State Political Violence in Comparative Perspective", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, p. 10.

"state-building" has meant, and how that has been pursued. This is not the place to explore that long history fully, but it may merit reminding ourselves briefly of the broader limitations of state-building in Africa.

If the uniquely extractive logic of African colonial states bequeathed a legacy that has shaped states across the post-colonial period, as Young so insightfully demonstrated,[3] the effects in the remote and poor zones deemed *l'Afrique inutile* – in many ways exemplified by the colonies that became the G5 countries – was particularly damaging. As elsewhere in Africa, the initial post-independence optimism about state- and nation-building quickly gave way to a focus on maintaining order, and in all five countries military regimes displaced the initial civilian governments.[4] In the years that followed, the international community did little to encourage investment, either economically or politically, in state building. Rather, inspired by analyses of Africa that assumed that the state was itself the problem, and that it thus needed to be reined in and limited rather than expanded and strengthened, countries were pressured to adopt Structural Adjustment Programs, and explicitly non-governmental groups in civil society and private sectors actors were encouraged to replace state action. It should be no surprise if African states are weak; decades of political choices were designed precisely to ensure that outcome.

And yet, the wave of global liberalisation of the early 1990s and the era of democracy it ushered in nevertheless promised a new start and new potential, in the Sahel as elsewhere. That optimism, of course, has long faded, not just because of the fitful progress on democratisation. We are faced as well with the need to recognise that in many places the political dynamics of the past three decades have had very mixed consequences on the building of effective state institutions. There is significant

[3] Y. Crawford, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994.

[4] S. Elischer, "Militaries in Sahelian Politics", in L. Villalón (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

variation across countries in terms of how this has played out, but it is noteworthy that the weak link among the G-5 countries, and the epicenter of the crisis that threatens Sahelian states most fundamentally now, was also the democratic darling of the region: Mali.

To be clear, I do not intend to argue that pursuing democracy was the problem, or a bad idea. There is no reason to think that strong states are incompatible with democracy. But there are also no indications that the pursuit of "democracy" as practiced in the Sahel, and most centrally in Mali, had any positive impact on building resilient state institutions, and there is good reason to think that it may well have undermined them.

State Institutions and the Politics of Democratisation in the Sahel

Responding to the global democratic "third wave" of the early 1990s, the countries of the Sahel displayed the full range of outcomes of democratic transitions in Africa described by Bratton and Van de Walle.[5] Most notable for our purposes were the two celebrated cases of "successful" democratisation. In both Mali and Niger, strong social mobilisation against authoritarian regimes led to the convoking of "sovereign national conferences" – a model of transition pioneered by Benin and emulated with varying degrees of success across much of Francophone Africa.[6] In Mali, the conference followed the overthrow of the 23-year authoritarian regime of Moussa Traoré, while in Niger President Ali Saïbou was forced to agree to convening a conference himself, but was quickly sidelined

[5] M. Bratton and N. van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

[6] J.F. Clark, "The National Conference as an Instrument of Democratization in Francophone Africa", *Journal of Third World Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1994, pp. 304-35; P. Robinson, "The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1991, pp. 575-610.

in the process. In both countries transitional governments put in place by the conferences then oversaw the writing of new constitutions, the holding of elections, and the inauguration of new governments.[7]

In the "flawed transition" cases of Burkina Faso and Mauritania, incumbent presidents who had come to power in coups managed to deflect calls for national conferences by pre-emptively declaring a process of democratisation, and then organising carefully controlled elections to assure their own victories.[8] While these regimes were formally declared "civilian", their respective militaries in fact remained central to the new political dispensations. And in Chad, while Idriss Déby's fragile regime also found it necessary to convoke a national conference in 1993, he was nevertheless able to drag out the process and eventually declare his victory in the country's first-ever contested presidential elections of 1996.[9]

There was much attention to explaining the relative success or failure of these efforts at democratisation, but in retrospect it is clear that the initial "transition outcomes" were only ephemeral and highly contingent political phenomena. Transition outcomes marked not the end point, but rather

---

[7] For discussions of these histories see: L.A. Villalón and A. Idrissa. "Repetitive Breakdowns and a Decade of Experimentation: Institutional Choices and Unstable Democracy in Niger", and L.A. Villalón and A. Idrissa, "The Tribulations of a Successful Transition: Institutional Dynamics and Elite Rivalry in Mali", in L.A. Villalón and P. VonDoepp (Eds.), *The Fate of Africa's Democratic Experiments*, Elites and Institutions, 2005.

[8] On these two cases see: E. Harsch, *Burkina Faso: A History of Power, Protest, and Revolution*, London, Zed Books, 2017; A. Loada, "Democratic Struggles and State Building in Burkina Faso: Manipulation and Resilience of Institutions", in Villalón and Idrissa (Eds.), (2020); B. N'Diaye, *Mauritania's Colonels: Political Leadership, Civil-Military Relations and Democratization*, London, Routledge, 2018; and Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Controlled Democratization, Institutional Reforms, and Political (In)Stability in Mauritania", Villalón and Idrissa (Eds.), (2020).

[9] On Chad, see: R. Buijtenhuijs, *Transition et elections au Tchad, 1993-1997: Restauration autoritaire et recomposition politique*, Paris, Karthala, 1998; L. Toulou, "State Building and the Democratic Quest in Chad: Legacies of War and a Political Agreement", in Villalón and Idrissa (Eds.), (2020).

only the beginning, of what would prove to be protracted political struggles around the issue of democracy. In each case, transitions left the central work of building the core institutions of a democratic state incomplete, passed on to be undertaken by post-transition governments. Although there remained a strong persistence of the idea that states should be built on democratic institutions, and there were oft-stated formal commitments to that goal, the specific forms of such institutions remained a source of contestation and conflict in each country. Politics across the region were thus marked by recurrent attempts by ruling elites to manipulate existing institutions to their benefit, often in the name of "democratic reform", and by resulting counter-pressures from opposition and civil society groups mobilised under the banner of defending democratic achievements.[10] Tellingly, these dynamics have been strikingly similar across countries regardless of the nature of the initial transitions themselves.

In the decades following the transitions, then, what I have elsewhere labeled "the politics of democratisation" remained the hallmark of political struggle in the region.[11] By "politics of democratisation" I intend to invoke the complete set of political dynamics set in motion by the launching of institutional reforms under the banner of democratisation, regardless of whether regimes that might be qualified in any way as "democratic" in fact resulted. These dynamics include constant efforts by some actors to manipulate, harness or subvert institutions so as to consolidate power and limit contestation. Indeed, the processes that led to the rise of "electoral authoritarian" regimes in such countries as Burkina Faso and Chad were themselves a direct outcome of the politics of democratisation in the Sahel.[12]

---

[10] Bodian and Villalón, (2021).

[11] L.A. Villalón, "The Politics of Democratization and State Building in the Sahel", in Villalón and Idrissa (Eds.), (2020).

[12] D. Eizenga, "Managing Political Liberalization after Multiparty Elections: Regime Trajectories in Burkina Faso, Chad and Senegal", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Florida, 2018.

Again, much attention was focused over the years to how these political dynamics shaped the democratic quality of regimes. Two decades after the initial "transitions," the ongoing struggles for and against democracy in each of the Sahelian countries had produced recognisable patterns of politics, which in many ways seemed to define their respective regime types along the democracy continuum. Yet again with hindsight, it seems clear that the focus on the measures of democratic quality obfuscated the very uneven consequences of the politics of democratisation at a more consequential level: in the building of capable state institutions and in establishing their legitimacy. I believe that it is on this dimension that we need to examine the sources of state fragility that have led to the current Sahelian condition.

The pressures of the security crisis that was to sweep the region following the effects of the Arab Spring, most directly the aftermath of the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, quickly showed that the utility of examining these regimes by their apparent level of democracy was as limited as the yardstick of "transition outcomes" had been. The relative resilience or fragility of state institutions in the Sahel was profoundly tested by the events of 2011-12, and these were to expose the varied impact of twenty years of political struggle on state-building, in ways that have shaped trajectories in each country ever since.

The Libyan Collapse as a Stress Test of Sahelian States, and Divergent Outcomes

As the events of the Arab Spring unfolded to their north in 2011-12, each of the G-5 states found itself at a delicate political moment. In Mauritania and Niger, coups in 2009 and 2010 had led (in very different ways) to new governments still struggling to establish their legitimacy. In Burkina Faso and in Chad, long-incumbent presidents were challenged by significant social unrest and simmering mutinies and rebellions by restive militaries. And in the region's putative democracy, Mali, there were great uncertainties and ongoing

tensions about key institutions to manage the upcoming 2012 elections. Yet while outside actors focused on the Maghreb, little attention or thought was given to the impact on the Sahel. In the region, however, the degradation of the situation in Libya led to rising concerns about the impact of the flow of arms southwards and of the involvement of Sahelian, namely Tuareg, communities in the conflict.

And indeed, unexpectedly for the international community, the aftermath of the Libyan collapse was to prove to be a harsh "stress test" of the resilience of Sahelian states.[13] Specifically, it was to expose the extent to which the politics of democratisation in the Sahelian countries had fostered or undermined the development of political institutions able to capture and channel political demands, as well as the socio-religious dynamics that had resulted from processes of liberalisation since the early 1990s. The open question was to what extent political dynamics in the "democratic decades" of the 1990s and 2000s had contributed to developing capable and resilient states likely to maintain stability in the face of external shocks. As events were to demonstrate, there was significant variation in this respect, and no obvious correlation with the reported progress on democratisation in each case.

To the extent that there were fears of destabilisation from the Libyan conflict, Niger initially raised the greatest concerns. The country's history of successive coups and transitions gave little confidence as to the resilience of the newly-inaugurated regime of Mahamadou Issoufou. Between the inauguration of its Third Republic in 1992 and Issoufou as President of the Seventh Republic in 2010, the country had experienced three coups, four transitions, and five constitutions – including one adopted by extra-constitutional means in an effort to circumvent presidential term limits. Moreover, Niger's shared border with Libya suggested that it would be particularly

[13] M. Soumano, "Stress-testing Democratic Institutions in Mali: The Political Elite and the Breakdown of the State", in Villalón and Idrissa (Eds.), (2020).

vulnerable to spillover pressures. But to the surprise of virtually all international observers, and indeed of many regional actors, it was Mali that proved to be the weak link in the Sahel.

In many ways it is possible to conceive of the broader contemporary Sahelian crisis as having "metastasised" from Mali, to borrow the metaphor of cancer evoked by Raleigh, Nsaiba, and Dowd (2020). While virtually the entire region is in crisis now, the central political tap root of the instability across the Sahel today has its origins in Mali's fragility. The core question is thus why, in spite of its apparent democratic successes, did the Malian state collapse so unexpectedly and so dramatically in 2012? It is striking that neither analysts nor policy makers saw Mali's collapse coming. Certainly, various observers had pointed to shortcomings in Mali's much-vaunted democracy,[14] and there were reasons for concern, but the assumption was that what was at risk was the quality of Malian democracy, not the persistence of the state itself.

The fall of the Qaddafi regime and its aftermath – notably in sparking a new Tuareg rebellion – certainly contributed to the timing of Mali's collapse and might be considered the immediate precipitating trigger, but cannot be said to have ultimately *caused* the collapse. And despite longstanding fears of Islamic radicalisation in the region, we also cannot attribute the Malian collapse to destabilisation by radical jihadi groups. While al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb had been widely portrayed for years as a threat to various interests in the global war on terror,[15] its limited numbers and resources didn't render it a threat to state stability, and it had no demonstrated capacity to displace states. AQIM and related groups, however,

---

[14] M.-F. Lange, "Insoumission civile et défaillance étatique: les contradictions du processus démocratique malien", *Autrepart*, vol. 10, 1999, pp. 117-34 ; L.A. Villalón and A. Idrissa, "The Tribulations of a Successful Transition: Institutional Dynamics and Elite Rivalry in Mali", in Villalón and VonDoepp (Eds.) (2005), pp. 49-74.

[15] B. Lecocq and P. Schrijver, "The war on terror in a haze of dust: Potholes and pitfalls on the Saharan Front", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2007, pp. 141-66.

did prove to be well poised to be the parasitic *beneficiaries* of instability, as events quickly following the Malian coup of 2012 demonstrated. In short, the Malian collapse and the resulting crisis in the region did not come about by a security failure, but by a political one. The underlying causes, I believe, must be sought in the cumulative effects of political dynamics over an extended period of time as these added up to undermine the institutional capacity of the state to resist external shocks.

A definitive autopsy of Mali's demise remains to be done, but in retrospect we can identify some key elements of the contributing political dynamics over two decades of democratic experimentation, and especially during President Amadou Toumani Touré's (ATT) tenure in office from 2002-12. Strikingly for a "model democracy",[16] Mali never developed legitimate and well-established electoral institutions. With the plausible exception of the founding elections of 1992, Mali in fact never held robust and widely-accepted elections. The conduct of the second elections in 1997 was so flawed that they were invalidated by the courts, and the opposition then boycotted the new ones. Key aspects of the Malian electoral system were never agreed upon, and despite constant talk of "reform" it remained underdeveloped and poorly institutionalised at the end of the first democratic decade. When ATT announced that he would stand in the presidential elections of 2002, key potential opponents deferred to him given his status as hero of the 1991-92 transition, and the limitations of the electoral system itself then seemed a moot point. This logic was repeated with ATT's reelection in 2007, even if discussions continued about reforming the country's institutional architecture. As the 2012 elections approached, then, the existing electoral system remained highly contested and many key issues remained unresolved, even on the eve of what would have been crucial elections for a third democratic president.[17]

---

[16] A. Thurston, "Mali: 'The Disintegration of a 'Model African Democracy'", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013.

[17] M. Bodian, *The Politics of Electoral Reform in Francophone West Africa: The Birth and*

Beyond electoral shortcomings, ATT's method of rule eroded those institutions that did exist. In the name of "consensus politics", his tenure was marked by the de facto suspension of political competition, which was replaced by cronyism and cooptation as a means of governance. ATT's preference for attempting to resolve conflict and to settle elite disputes personally and informally – *entre maliens* – served to undermine institutional capacity. The politics of informality and pie-sharing fed corruption and did nothing to address serious structural issues and problems, including smuggling and narco-trafficking in the Sahara, from which some were allowed to profit. In many ways the international community not only tolerated but enabled these dynamics. At the very least we can note that the huge amount of aid that flowed to Mali after 1992 did not help to build state structures.[18] In the eager search for a democratic success in Africa, the outside world and the democracy aid industry were clearly complicit in a charade.

This was evident in a variety of showcase arenas. In the guise of demonstrating the popular benefits of democracy, Mali's official numbers showed sharp rises in school enrollment rates, this despite virtually no improvement in the quality of education; indeed, the country had the weakest and least effective school system in the region. Outside donors likewise invested heavily in pet projects described as key democratic institutional reforms, the most significant of which may have been the massive years-long project of decentralisation, eventually producing no less than 703 official administrative government units, but with no substantive power or resources. In many ways, the Malian democratic state was a hollow shell which existed largely to broad international applause, what has been evocatively labeled a "Potemkin state".[19] The institutions

---

Change of Electoral Rules in Mali, Niger, and Senegal, University of Florida, Ph.D. Dissertation, Political Science, 2016.

[18] I. Bergamaschi, "The Fall of a Donor Darling: The Role of Aid in Mali's crisis", *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* vol. 52, no. 3, 2014, pp. 347-78.

[19] C. Craven-Matthews and P. Englebert, "A Potemkin state in the Sahel? The

of Malian democracy and the elite that populated them had little popular legitimacy, and this despite the fact that they were much praised by the international community.

I would argue that these two facts – the deep unpopularity of Malian democracy at home, and the enthusiasm for it abroad – are not coincidental; indeed, they are directly related. The West's enchantment with Mali was based on a series of characteristics – a commitment to secularisation, to a reduction of state power via extensive decentralisation, and to promoting elite urban-based civil society movements supporting modernising social reform processes – about which Malians themselves were much less enthusiastic. The straw man of Malian democracy thus quickly went up in flames with the spark of the new Tuareg rebellion, itself spawned by Libya's collapse.

In the shadow of the French intervention in 2013, there was a hasty return to electoral politics in an attempt to reestablish the pre-collapse *status quo ante*, and the opportunity was missed to question the fundamental premises of Malian democracy. Unsurprisingly, and although it managed to survive for some years in the context of the occupation of the country by outside forces, the experiment was to ultimately fail. The final trappings of a democratic structure in Mali were again upended with the coup of August 2020, and buried with the subsequent one of May 2021. With weak institutions and little legitimacy, the prospects both for democracy and for stability in Mali remain dim.

In considering the vulnerabilities of Mali that led to its collapse, it is instructive to contrast it to Niger, with which it shares striking demographic, economic and cultural similarities. In the political context of the region, many saw the collapse of Mali as only the first of what would be a sequence of falling dominos, with Niger next in line. "After Mali comes Niger", analysts predicted in what seemed almost inevitable at the time.[20] Against expectations, however, this was not to be.

---

empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction", *African Security*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-31.

[20] S. Elischer, "After Mali Comes Niger", *Foreign Affairs*, 12 February 2013.

Certainly many factors, including the rapid mobilisation of an international presence in the Sahel, may help to explain this result. But importantly, there were also indications that the Nigerien state was in fact more capable and resilient than many had expected given the historical instability of its regimes. Thus, for example, in 2015 the Swedish Defense Research Agency noted in regards to the influx of fighters from Libya:

> the Nigerien government appears to have been better adept at dealing with those who did arrive than was Mali, efficiently disarming and reintegrating them into society. For example, the Nigerien government … enacted a 'veteran reinsertion and reintegration policy' that … provided former Tuareg rebels with jobs in both the private and public sector.[21]

This observation is noteworthy in that it points not only to the government's policy decisions, but also that it suggests the effective capacity of the Nigerien state to implement them.

And indeed, those observations have remained relevant. Despite the regional context of extreme pressures and instability, in February 2021 Niger concluded presidential elections that led to the country's first transition of power from one elected president to another. Despite fears of terrorism and logistical challenges, Niger's 2020-21 electoral process proceeded according to schedule. Mohamed Bazoum, candidate of the ruling party and presumptive frontrunner, publicly proclaimed his confidence during the campaign that he would win in the first round, yet in the end he received only 39% of the vote and was faced with a runoff (against no less than Mahamane Ousmane, the first democratically elected President of Niger in 1993).

Although there were tensions about the electoral process in the lead-up to the first round, most opposition parties subsequently agreed to retake their seats in the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). The second round

[21] Swedish Defense Research Agency, "Explaining the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali and lack thereof in Niger", FOI Memo 5099, 2015..

took place in a context of real uncertainty as losing candidates from the first round threw their support behind one or the other of the second-round candidates. To be sure, Bazoum's victory in the second round with 56% of the vote was contested by Ousmane's supporters, and demonstrations and some violence revealed the limits of public confidence in the process and raised legitimate question about transparency. But for our purposes here, this process was also indicative for what it suggests about the cumulative effects on institution-building of three decades of intense debate, struggle, conflict, and at times compromises, over electoral processes and political institutions in Niger. The contrast with the experiences of Mali in this regard are sharp. As Tidjani Alou has suggested in discussing "the Nigerien paradox", Niger's very instability seems to have fostered political dynamics which incrementally and cumulatively helped to build relatively more functional political institutions for exercising democratic processes, or at least for maintaining stability.[22]

Retrospectively considering how and why Niger was to differ so fundamentally from Mali, the contrast between the politics of democratisation in the two countries appears central. Niger's first democratic experiment after its "successful transition" was to last only from 1993-96, ended by a coup which was provoked by the perverse effects of institutional choices made at the transition. In the aftermath of that coup, the international community largely withdrew from democracy support programs in Niger, leaving the country in many ways to attempt to find its own way forward on the democratic agenda.[23] The US Agency for International Development (USAID), which focused much of its work in Africa on democracy promotion in the 1990s, for example, withdrew completely from Niger following the 1996 coup. When it returned ten years later,

[22] M. Tidjani Alou, "The Nigerien Paradox: Institutional Consolidation through Political Instability", in Villalón and Idrissa (Eds,) (2020).

[23] Although I cannot elaborate here, I would argue that the accommodation of religious dynamics was one key difference in the two countries' respective strategies.

democracy had completely disappeared from the agenda, in the agency's stated mission:

> USAID development assistance to Niger, re-instituted in 2006 following a ten-year hiatus after the 1996 coup, supports the Government of Niger and partners in enhancing resilience to climatic shocks among the most vulnerable populations, addressing chronic food insecurity in the country, and countering violent extremism.[24]

Conclusion

I have attempted to argue in this essay that the political roots of fragility in the Sahelian countries lie neither in the nature of the "transition to democracy" that established new regimes some three decades ago, nor in the seeming democratic quality of the resulting regimes as measured by conventional indicators of democracy. By contrast, comparative configurative analyses of the cumulative effects of the iterative politics of democratisation on state institutions, and on their acceptance by both political actors and in popular sentiment, may yield greater insights. To be sure, this is not easy, and the correlations are never fully clear, but I would suggest that this approach provides a potentially more fruitful entry point for understanding the relative degrees of state resilience or fragility in the Sahel. A final caveat is in order here, however: as the Sahelian security crisis has proliferated and deepened, the core regional political dynamics have been fundamentally shifted. In any given regime the politics of democratisation are now inextricably intertwined with the politics of security demands. All regimes in the region are attempting to navigate between the twin imperatives of claiming adherence to the goals of democratisation and to ensuring progress in the reestablishment of security. The longer-term consequences of the resulting tradeoffs are far from clear.

[24] USAID, "Working in Crises and Conflict; Niger".

3. Armed Insurgencies in the Liptako-Gourma: Between Jihadism, Counterterrorism, and Community Conflicts

Héni Nsaibia

At the Centre of a Regional Conflict

The Liptako-Gourma region lies at the intersection of the borderlands between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, also known as the tri-state border area. It is inhabited by marginalised populations composed of a variety of ethnic groups who subsist on a range of activities, including livestock, agriculture, artisanal mining, fishing, poaching, and smuggling. In a narrow sense, regions that fall within the Liptako-Gourma, include the Sahel in Burkina Faso; Mopti, Gao, and Menaka in Mali; and the Tillaberi in Niger, as well as parts of adjacent regions. As of September 2022, approximately 8,000 civilians have been killed as the result of nearly 3,000 attacks targeting civilians in the aforementioned regions alone since the beginning of the crisis, according to moderate estimates.[1] Each of these regions has unique characteristics but they also share many

[1] Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), as of 1 September 2022. See C. Raleigh, A. Linke, H. Hegre, and J. Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2010, pp. 651-60.

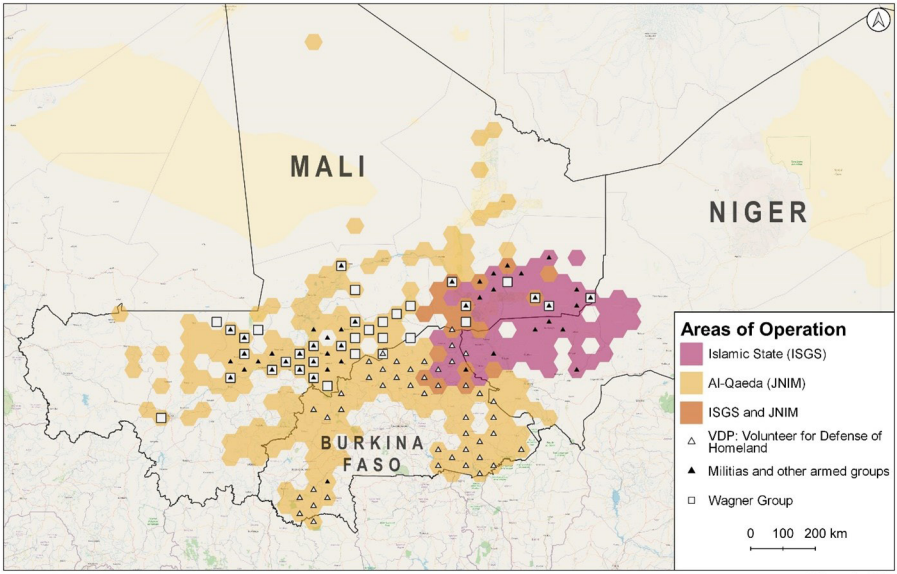
commonalities, most crucially, they are the most affected by the "Sahel crisis". As the conflict has dragged on for more than a decade and continues to escalate, the Liptako-Gourma region has become the epicentre of conflict enmeshed in militancy, counterterrorism, and ethnic conflict.

This generally poor, remote, and neglected region, plagued by insecurity, provides a prime example of the evolution of a regionalised conflict that is constantly transforming. At the heart of the crisis is a jihadist insurgency led by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) – respectively the regional branches of the global terrorist organisations al-Qa'ida and Islamic State. JNIM and ISGS emerged from the reconfiguration of pre-existing and predominantly local militant groups, which play a key role in the larger conflict ecosystem as they evolved into the most active violent actors in the central Sahel. Despite their affiliation with transnational militant organisations, they exhibit hybrid forms of violence that intertwine self-defence, armed insurgency, banditry, and violent extremism.[2] However, the violent interplay between the competing projects of jihadist militant groups, external interveners, local state forces, and self-defense groups and militias more profoundly shapes the conflict.[3]

[2] M. Pellerin, "Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?", IFRI, November 2019.

[3] E. Baldaro, "Rashomon in the Sahel: Conflict dynamics of security regionalism", SAGE Journals, 27 August 2020.

Fig. 3.1 – Areas of operation – Non-state armed groups (2022)



Liptako-Gourma links several of the major urban centres of the central Sahel via the main transit routes from Gao to Niamey and from Ouagadougou to Niamey. Despite this connectivity, the region is strongly characterised by its remoteness, underdevelopment, and deep-rooted insecurity, as it includes several peripheral regions that are far from the power centres of the regional capitals, in many ways denoting a deeper disparity between centre and periphery. A passage attributed to the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, bears comparison to the geographic aspects and the strategic importance of the Liptako-Gourma: "Ground which forms the key to three contiguous states, so that he who occupies it first has most of the Empire at his command, is a ground of intersecting highways".[4] However,

[4] Sun Tzu, "The Nine Situations", in *Art of War*, SunTzuart.com, chapter 11.

none of the violent actors engaged in the Liptako-Gourma region, is able to control either the region or the course of the conflict. In this ongoing war of attrition, the jihadist militant groups have suffered numerous losses, counted in thousands, yet the evolution of the conflict in general and in the Liptako-Gourma region in particular, shows that jihadist militant groups continue to expand and succeed in imposing their social orders compared to their opponents in these highly contested territories. The fact that the area has become the main frontline of jihadist rivalry proves this.

Becoming the Main Battleground

The Liptako-Gourma gained the attention of militant groups years before the crisis began,[5] but was particularly exposed to the establishment of rebels and militants at the onset of the 2012 crisis, which was triggered by a Tuareg rebellion and the subsequent jihadist takeover of northern Mali. Northern Mali was co-ruled by a coalition of jihadist groups, including the regional Algerian-led al-Qa'ida affiliate al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Tuareg-dominated local jihadist group Ansar Dine, and the al-Qa'ida-linked Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (better known by its French acronym MUJAO), which was led by Sahelian Arabs from Mali, Mauritania, and Western Sahara. Although the jihadists' "occupation" lasted only about six months, it provided a training ground for their future spread as fighters relocated or recruits returned to their areas of origin to form new cells. The French military intervention Operation Serval ended jihadist rule and drove the jihadists out of the major towns in northern Mali and dispersed them to rural areas, of which the Liptako-Gourma became a vital retreat. On the Malian side, Malian

[5] A. Thurston, "Burkina Faso: Reading Through Wikileaks Cables on Blaise Compaoré and AQIM", Sahel blog, 2 January 2019; "Orphans of the Sahara | Rebellion", *Al Jazeera English* (YouTube), 17 January 2014.

forces were pushed out, and the administration withdrew early when the conflict erupted, and their return has been slow despite support from intersecting missions, including the United Nations peacekeeping mission MINUSMA, the European Union's capacity-building program EUTM, and the French-led counterterrorism force.

In neighbouring Niger, authorities were accommodating to Nigerien militants recruited mainly into the ranks of MUJAO, which fought the Tuareg rebels. Several early Nigerien MUJAO recruits eventually gained extensive combat experience and later became seasoned ISGS commanders. Some argue that the deteriorating security situation served the interests of certain politicians, where the weak presence of defence and security forces in the Tillaberi region, as well as social and political distrust of a politicized regime-serving system, combined to fuel the process of growing militancy in Tillaberi. Ultimately, this initial tacit support contributed to the spread of militant networks and increased recruitment, thus laying the groundwork for future militant activity. For many years, militancy in Niger was dismissed as exogenous, originating in neighbouring countries, despite growing domestic roots.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the former regime under Blaise Compaoré appears to have accommodated Malian militants and tacitly allowed them to use Burkinabe territory as a retreat and logistical pipeline. The Compaoré regime's involvement in facilitating the release of hostages held by militants fueled speculation about possible regime complicity. This view persisted for years after Compaoré's fall, and the new regime under former President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré frequently described the growing militancy in the country as a manoeuvre by Compaoré and former members of his Regiment for Presidential Security (RSP) to destabilise the country.[6]

[6] "L'extension des attaques terroristes est une 'campagne de déstabilisation' au Burkina selon un minister", *VOA Afrique*, 1 November 2018.

In the wake of the French intervention, which was transformed into the French transnational counterterrorism mission Operation Barkhane, jihadist groups began to regroup and reorganize, with existing groups restructuring and new groups emerging. In 2013, MUJAO merged with Muwaqqi'un Bid-Dima (or Signatories in Blood), led by notorious Algerian militant commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, to become al-Mourabitoun; it primarily operated in the border regions of Liptako-Gourma and carried out spectacular high-profile terrorist attacks in cities across West Africa. However, the group split in 2015 when al-Mourabitoun's Western Saharan commander, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.[7] Sahrawi and his men established their base in the border area between Mali and Niger, from where they carried out cross-border raids in all three countries. Those who did not defect with Sahrawi, renewed their allegiance to al-Qa'ida and joined the Sahelian branch of AQIM known as the Sahara Emirate.

Also in 2015, the Tuareg-dominated Ansar Dine, which had operated in northern Mali in the past, established new branches in other parts of the country, including Katiba Macina in central Mali, Katiba Khalid ibn al-Walid in the Sikasso region of southern Mali, and cells operating south of the Niger River that evolved over time into the two semiautonomous groups, Katiba Gourma and Katiba Serma, both operating on the Mali-Burkina Faso border, or northern Mali's southern borderlands locally referred to as Gourma or Arabanda.[8] The following year, in 2016, the first domestic jihadist group, Ansaroul Islam,

[7] H. Nsaibia and C. Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict Between the Islamic State and Al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 7, 2020, pp. 1-14.

[8] Katiba Gourma and Katiba Serma were originally referred to as Ansar Dine fil-Janub (Ansar Dine in the South) or Ansar Dine Janub al-Nahr (Ansar Dine South of the River), referring to the areas in which they operate south of the Niger River, particularly in the Gourma-Rharous and Douentza administrative districts, respectively in southern Tombouctou region and northern Mopti region.

was founded in Burkina Faso. The founding members of Ansaroul Islam already had ties to Malian militant groups such as Katiba Macina, AQIM, and MUJAO. These ties became apparent during the group's "baptism of fire" in late 2016 involving a large-scale attack on a military base in the village of Nassoumbou, in Burkina Faso's northern Soum province, carried out in collaboration with Katiba Macina and Katiba Serma.[9]

Outdated Counter-Militancy Strategy and Counterinsurgency Disunity

With the spread of jihadist groups and subgroups in the Liptako-Gourma region, the focus of France's Operation Barkhane gradually shifted to the tri-state border area. The regional G5 Sahel force, created to pool resources, improve coordination, and strengthen border security in the fight against jihadist groups, conducted several large-scale joint operations in the area but at times was hampered by logistical challenges, a lack of funding and capabilities, and more recently political disorder. Despite frequent tactical successes by the French Operation Barkhane and local forces, both JNIM and ISGS have demonstrated remarkable resilience and the ability to rebuild, grow, and even expand. Contrary to claims that jihadist groups enjoy limited support they are in fact highly entrenched, which explains their resilience in a multi-front war against international forces, regional government forces, and various militias. Another explanation for their resurgence is the relatively low proportion of counterinsurgency targeting clandestine and auxiliary networks *vis-à-vis* the overt guerrilla component, i.e., fighters concentrated in the bush. In other words, the overall approach is excessively enemy-centric and

[9] M. Le Cam, "Burkina Faso: confessions d'un ancien djihadiste", *Le Monde*, 10 December 2017; H. Nsaibia and C. Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2018.

military operations are time-limited, failing to protect the population from reprisals when forces withdraw or to re-establish a permanent presence in critical areas.

State forces in the region favour the use of brutal and coercion-based strategies that tend to be indiscriminate and have proved ineffective in containing militancy. Instead, they reinforce resentment among the local population. Indeed, accusations of abuses, arbitrary mass arrests, and extrajudicial executions are widespread, fostering militant recruitment and further instability. So far in 2022, violence targeting civilians by state forces have reached record levels in the central Sahel,[10] and especially in central Mali and the Liptako-Gourma. Another feature of local forces' approaches to combating militancy is their emulation of Western counterterrorism concepts. In some ways, foreign-inspired counterterrorism distorts local counterinsurgency by pursuing a purely military model that does not alleviate the conditions that drive insurgencies and refuses to acknowledge the multidimensional domestic roots of militancy. Therefore, the mutually reinforcing effects of foreign military presence and heavy-handed strategies to combat militancy will continue to act as incubators and fuel regional militancy. Immediate demands for counterinsurgency results also play a role in influencing public opinion. However, the strategic communications that governments rely on are often half-baked and outdated, and their reliability and credibility are regularly questioned. An approach that does not work well in the age of connectivity, which requires broad-based and savvy approaches to countering militancy. This while militants skillfully leverage technology to compensate for their asymmetric disadvantages in order to agitate and indoctrinate by spreading their propaganda locally and globally.[11]

[10] "The Sahel Mid-Year Update: Persistent, Expanding, and Escalating Instability", Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED),, 16 August 2022.
[11] H. Nsaibia and R. Lyammouri, "Digital Dunes and Shrublands: A Comparative Introduction to the Sahelian Jihadi Propaganda Ecosystem", GNET, 27 October 2020.

The G5 Sahel force is a case in point in terms of the ineffectiveness of the larger countermilitancy effort, in which the Liptako-Gourma has become the main battleground. In 2019, it became clear that the force had failed to achieve its underlying objectives when JNIM and ISGS launched a simultaneous campaign in the tri-state border area, with both groups tactically and methodically outmanoeuvring local government forces. In Burkina Faso's northern Soum province, the militants deliberately destroyed numerous bridges to isolate the province and disrupt military supply routes before attacking several military outposts, including in Koutougou, Baraboule, Nassoumbou, and Tongomayel, all of which were overrun and abandoned by Burkinabe forces.[12] When Burkinabe forces withdrew, the fighters turned to Mali and similarly overran the Boulkessi and Mondoro bases near the border with Burkina Faso.

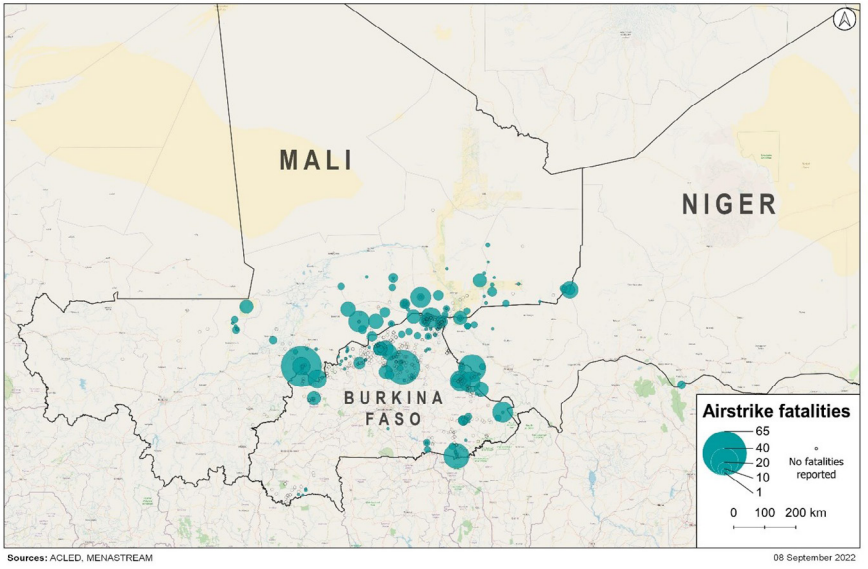
All of these attacks - except for the Koutougou attack were claimed by JNIM. Shortly thereafter, ISGS launched a series of attacks in the Malian regions of Gao and Menaka, namely in In-Delimane and Tabankort (Akabar), before advancing into Niger, where Nigerien forces in Chinagodrar and In-Ates met the same fate as Burkinabe and Malian forces earlier. As government forces in all three affected countries were forced to withdraw from border areas, the previously disputed territories came under the control of jihadist fighters. During this episode, ISGS perpetrated some of the deadliest attacks on military forces ever recorded in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Although the offensive was conducted simultaneously by JNIM and ISGS, each group focused primarily on attacks in their respective spheres of influence. The campaign also underscored the lack of effective coordination and interoperability among the affected member states of the G5 Sahel force. Ultimately, the militants' offensives triggered a French-led counteroffensive, after which

[12] H. Nsaibia, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines", Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED),, 17 June 2021.

the government forces regained momentum but failed to recapture much of the territory they had already lost.

It should be noted that the G5 Sahel force have not conducted operations in the tri-state border area since "Operation Sama 3" in March-April 2021. At that time, a "Sahelization" of the larger effort briefly remerged as regional states and their external supporters conducted a series of joint operations in various constellations that saw unprecedented coordination among forces from Burkina Faso, Chad, France, Mali, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire. Political upheaval soon interrupted the emerging momentum, however, as the G5 Sahel force was shattered by several coups in member states, including Mali, which joined forces with mercenaries from the private Russian military firm Wagner Group, eventually severed ties with its longtime ally France, and withdrew from the G5 Sahel force in May 2022. Wagner's entry into Mali accelerated the French withdrawal from Mali, which was fully completed by August 2022, and made neighbouring Niger the central hub of continued French military operations. Despite the breakup of the counterterrorism alliance, Burkina Faso and Niger continued to mutualise efforts through bilateral operations that became more frequent, including the joint operations nicknamed Operation Taanli 1, 2, and 3, conducted along the shared border in June 2021, November-December 2021, and April 2022, respectively. While these joint operations disrupt militant activity, the prevailing patterns are that the permanent presence of state forces either continues to diminish or remains small-scale, something that is particularly pronounced in Burkina Faso and Mali, although defense and security infrastructure in Niger also remains weak. To compensate for their continued weak presence on the ground, states have increasingly resorted to fighting the militants with force from afar through air and drone strikes in an ever-growing air war.

Fig. 3.2 – Airstrikes in Central Sahel
(1-Jan. 2020-2 Spt. 2022)



A Divided but Growing Insurgency

The disunity shown by the counterterrorism alliance, led and arguably held together by France for years, became similarly evident in the jihadist camp. The relationship between JNIM and ISGS was characterised for many years by "collusion, coexistence, and tacit territorial arrangements".[13] Despite different proclaimed loyalties, the two groups had common roots, long-standing personal ties among rank-and-file and leadership, shared objectives, and common adversaries. However, increasing competition between JNIM and ISGS paralleled the collusion between the two groups. JNIM's

[13] H. Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On", ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 3 March 2021.

opposition to sharing territory in its traditional strongholds, ISGS' constant poaching of JNIM members and even entire units,[14] and JNIM's pragmatic policies toward certain non-jihadist armed groups and their associated communities likely led to mutual distrust and hostility between the two groups. As tensions increased, the first skirmishes between the two camps occurred in 2019, coinciding with an emerging power struggle in the form of an "outbidding campaign",[15] in which the two groups launched large-scale attacks against government forces throughout the Liptako-Gourma region, turning it into a major battleground. This showdown was about loyalties, measuring forces, asserting control, and territorial demarcation.

Rising tensions prompted ISGS and JNIM to match forces and take simultaneous action against government troops in the three Sahel countries, although by early 2020 hostility reached another level as the groups fought each other head-on. Early on, JNIM fighters drove out ISGS from their traditional stronghold in the Inner Niger Delta, the flood-prone and vegetated wetlands in the regions of Mopti and Segou in central Mali. Meanwhile, the Liptako-Gourma region would soon become the main frontline as the two sides in the conflict engaged in a full-scale turf war. JNIM gained the upper hand and was particularly successful in eliminating ISGS presence in central Mali and then in the eastern region of Burkina Faso and parts with smaller pockets of ISGS presence. However, ISGS disputed JNIM's hegemony and still poses a serious challenge for JNIM in the Liptako-Gourma, where ISGS fighters continue to assert their influence and strengthen their positions.

As a result of earlier defections, JNIM was forced to restructure its chain of command and strengthen cohesion within the organisation through a system that combined greater autonomy for the various brigades with a sort of mandatory interdependence through support between them. Nevertheless,

[14] Ibid.

[15] J. Zenn and C.P. Clarke, "Al Qaeda and ISIS Had a Truce in Africa - Until They Didn't", *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2020.

JNIM ultimately outstrategised ISGS and consolidated control in several regions. JNIM's superiority in manpower, its deeper socio-political ties, larger and more complex alliances and geographic reach outmatched the smaller ISGS, whose profile resembles a sophisticated variant of roving bandits. If the prevailing trend between 2017 and 2019 was that JNIM fighters defected to ISGS, this trend reversed in favour of JNIM with the outbreak of conflict between the two groups. The fighting between JNIM and ISGS observed in 2020 began to show signs of a weakened insurgency as militants "wasted human resources, and exposed the groups to surveillance and airstrikes".[16] However, the fighting gradually subsided and became cyclical and of much lower intensity. Although the outbreak of war between the two groups was initially seen as encouraging for counterinsurgency efforts, in hindsight it arguably led to renewed mobilization and strengthened both JNIM and ISGS.

JNIM and ISGS exhibit different patterns of violence. As the weaker group and due to ideological considerations of aligning with the Islamic State parent organisation, ISGS seeks to stand out as a tougher and more uncompromising alternative that is less selective and more indiscriminate in its use of violence compared to its al-Qa'ida counterpart JNIM – which in turn portrays itself as a popular and political alternative that takes a "softer" and more reasonable approach that offers something of a "big tent" alliance by appealing to a broader base of local communal and ethnic groups.

JNIM and ISGS differ in the way they "invoke similar global narratives and navigate and exploit local conflict environments".[17] However, the two groups employ similar strategies to exacerbate the situation and make the environment favourable for insurgency. The longer the conflict lasts and the

[16] H. Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On"…, cit.

[17] H. Nsaibia and C. Raleigh, "The Sahelian Matrix of Political Violence", Hoover Institution, 21 September 2021.

more brutal it becomes, the more vicious and widespread the militant tactics also become, "as these groups commit mass atrocities, forcibly displace populations, and impose embargoes to suffocate villages and towns",[18] in their quest to impose their increasingly divergent visions of insurgent social order.

Ethnic Tensions and Communal Wars

An important dimension of the conflict ecosystem in the Liptako-Gourma is the number of self-defence organisations, vigilante groups, and ethnic and community-based militias that has grown steadily over the years. More generally, the regional insurgency has submerged and exacerbated a number of hyperlocal conflicts in these disputed areas. This group of actors includes former rebels and pro-government militias that formed at the beginning or in the midst of the crisis, while others have emerged more recently in response to the growing jihadist threat. Most of these groups have participated to some degree in counterterrorism operations. This has triggered cyclical episodes of local intercommunity violence characterised by attacks and reprisals between jihadist militant groups on one side and militias and self-defence groups on the other, and against their respective perceived constituencies. The proliferation of these groups has arguably exacerbated ethnic rivalries rather than making a useful contribution to counterinsurgency efforts. In many cases, however, predation and the excessive use of force by militant groups prompted communities to take up arms because state forces could not protect them from attacks, looting, and extortion.

While some of these groups engage in sporadic fighting with groups such as JNIM and ISGS, several conflicts can be described as communal wars. For instance, one of the most important "communal wars" in the Liptako-Gourma is the conflict being fought in Mali's Gao and Menaka regions between ISGS on one

[18] Ibid.

side and the rival ethnic-based groups of the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and the Tuareg Imghad and Allies Self-defence Group (GATIA) on the other. This conflict, rooted in rivalries between pastoralist populations in the Mali-Niger borderlands, has dragged on for several years and has claimed many hundreds of lives, although it has never been as deadly as in 2022 when ISGS launched an offensive on an unprecedented scale. Along the river area between Gao and Labbezanga, ISGS fighters have cracked down on militia resistance to the group. Some militiamen from groups such as Ganda Izo, Ganda Koy and the Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance (CMFPR) have subsequently switched camps, and several former militiamen have become local commanders.

In the Sahel region of Burkina Faso and neighbouring regions, JNIM and ISGS are engaged in duelling campaigns against the state-backed Volunteers for the Homeland (VDP). The VDP are local defence fighters recruited by the government in 2020 mostly from settled communities to support the regular armed forces. ISGS fighters have waged a years-long campaign against the VDP, recruited from Songhai and Bella communities in towns and villages in Oudalan and Seno provinces. JNIM fighters have frequently been involved in battles with VDP fighters recruited primarily from the Foulse and Mossi communities in Soum province, and the two groups have also conducted simultaneous campaigns against the VDP in the Arbinda area and in Yagha province, in neighbouring provinces in the Nord and Centre-Nord regions, and in other parts of the country.

Fledgling militias of ethnic Arabs, Zarma, and Tuareg formed in many villages in four departments, including Ouallam, Banibangou, Tillia, and Tassara, in the Tillaberi and Tahoua regions. Most militias emerged in "Zarmaganda", or the Land of the Zarma. Particularly deadly clashes between ISGS and Zarma militias occurred in the Banibangou Department. ISGS referred to the militias in Tillaberi as "people's defence militias" in its propaganda, although they are better known locally as vigilante committees.

Moving Forward

The violent transformation of the Liptako-Gourma continues as JNIM and ISGS wage a multi-front war against a variety of adversaries, including international forces, local forces, and a growing number of self-defence organisations and militias that have been unable to adequately respond to the ever-growing militant threat. Jihadist groups exploit the weaknesses of their adversaries by infiltrating communities and building effective intelligence networks. Over the years, these groups have evolved into relatively well-armed small armies that have become full-fledged fighting forces with extensive experience in combat and guerrilla warfare.

Local governments and armed forces struggle to develop coherent strategies and acquire adequate capabilities to fight irregular armed groups, even as they adapt and gain experience. Measures deemed necessary to deal with perceived threats and strengthen capabilities include minimising dependence on external sources, diversifying partnerships, mobilising popular support, strengthening bilateral military cooperation, and acquiring critical assets. For example, Mali recently shored up its air force fleet through a series of deliveries of Russian aircraft and attack helicopters. There are also increasing reports that Sahelian and West African littoral states, including Burkina Faso, Niger, and Togo either are in the process of obtaining or have already begun deploying Turkish-made Bayraktar drones. In central Mali, the Malian transition government's new partner Wagner is playing a central role in civilian targeting, which had already reached record levels by mid-2022. As Wagner gradually expands its footprint in the northern regions of Gao and Menaka, it initially exercised more restraint when conducting operations in those regions.[19] However, there are early indications that these regions will see developments similar to those in central Mali and adjacent areas.

[19] L. Serwat, H. Nsaibia, V. Carbone, and T. Lay, "Wagner Group Operations in Africa," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 30 August 2022.

The expansion of military operations and the mutual intensification of efforts appear to have accelerated the militants' shift from a "hearts and minds" strategy to an "either you are on our side or we will kill you" strategy, as evidenced by the increasing mass atrocities, forced displacements, and blockades imposed by these groups. This response may well be out of frustration with the various forms of counter-mobilisation, and countries in the region are pooling efforts, albeit bilaterally, and making use of recently acquired aerial assets. Nevertheless, there remains concern that these efforts could be overwhelmed again, as has been repeatedly demonstrated. Growing competition is another important factor, as the two competing poles of influence, JNIM and ISGS, continue to vie for the loyalty of local groups in an increasingly brutalized conflict environment saturated by a growing number of armed actors.[20]

In a context where states are weak and the presence of government forces is small or occurs in boom and bust cycles of military engagement and disengagement, comparatively weaker armed groups, including militias and self-defense groups, face the dilemma of supporting allied state forces during periods of military operations and surviving during periods of government force withdrawal only to find themselves alone on the front lines. Regardless of whether counter-mobilisation to fight militant groups is community-led or state-sponsored, yesterday's intercommunal violence has gradually evolved into communal warfare and has become one of the deadliest forms of violence in an environment where identities are militarised and communities are armed, leading to a vicious cycle of violence between armed groups and against their real or perceived social bases. Heavy-handed tactics deployed by state forces and the arming of local communities have greatly exacerbated the crisis, encouraged the recruitment of militant groups, and contributed to a sharp increase in attacks on civilians. It is clear that patterns

[20] H. Nsaibia, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines", Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 17 June 2021.

of violence are changing in dangerous ways. The most significant impact of the violence is the increase in mass atrocities and targeting of civilians caught up in conflicts between a growing number of actors. This year has already seen some of the deadliest attacks since the crisis began. As the Liptako-Gourma region is at the centre of the crisis, it is literally at a crossroads.

4. Sex, Drugs and Rocket Launchers: Traffics and Conflicts in the Sahara-Sahel

Luca Raineri

The Sahara-Sahel has always been a space of circulation. Across history, caravan trades and transhumant pastoralism suggest that in such a barren space, survival and wealth depend less on the soil's (poor) productivity than on the mobility of goods and people.[1] While trans-regional flows of different sorts have long criss-crossed the Sahara-Sahel, some of them have raised growing concerns in light of the conflict escalation observed in the region over the past decade. In particular, it is feared that the trafficking of weapons, narcotic drugs, precious metals and human beings – now widespread across the region – are contributing to fuelling conflict dynamics. A variety of mechanisms are hypothesised which could possibly link illicit trafficking and conflict in the Sahara-Sahel. Trafficking could be exploited by non-state armed groups – including terrorist formations – to raise money (gold, drugs), might (weapons) and manpower (human beings) and help further their destabilising agenda. It could also erode the legitimacy of weak state institutions by fostering clientelism, corruption and unaccountability, thereby eliciting dissent, polarisation and unrest. Trafficking could likewise stimulate violent banditry,

[1] J. McDougall and J. Scheele (Eds.), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012.

prompting the proliferation of armed protection and arms smuggling; and could pave the way for the rise of smuggling cartels, organised crime and money laundering, with the capacity to pose a long-lasting threat to the resilience of local economies and political systems.

While media sensationalism and politicisation have contributed to popularising these fears, a more sober approach should consider the legitimacy of alternative views. Albeit illicit, trafficking provides jobs and livelihood opportunities to disenfranchised local populations, possibly increasing their resilience *vis-à-vis* the impact of conflict and climate change in the region. Critical research, moreover, suggests that criminal organisations could also end up strengthening social and political stability – if not acquiescence – through the enforcement of a *pax mafiosa*.[2]

The relationship between criminal(ised) trafficking and conflict is therefore far from straightforward and lends itself to multiple interpretations. Building on this uncertainty, this chapter explores the complex interactions between illicit trafficking and armed conflict in the Sahara-Sahel and asks whether and how the former help fuel the latter. To this end, it provides a fine-grained analysis of the political economy of Sahara-Sahel trafficking. After a brief introduction of the genealogy of regional trafficking infrastructure, the analysis proceeds empirically by disaggregating the most significant trafficked goods – drugs, weapons, migrants and gold – and highlights the structures (routes, volumes) and actors (traffickers, protectors, buyers) of the various flows.

The sensitivity of the topic warrants a note of methodological caution. Weak Sahelian states often lack the capacity and political determination to collect and share meaningful data regarding phenomena that are inherently opaque (illicit trafficking) or politically contentious (armed conflicts), even

[2] F. Strazzari and G. Zanoletti, "North Africa: organised crime, the Sahel-Sahara region and state (un)making", in F. Allum and S. Gilmour (Eds.), *Handbook of Organised Crime and Politics*, Cheltenham, Edwar Elgar Publishing, 2019.

more so when these take place in remote regions where the penetration of state institutions is shallow, if not entirely absent. These observations cast serious doubts on the reliability of national and international metrics of the criminal activities, illicit trafficking and armed violence taking place in the Sahara-Sahel region. In order to circumvent these obstacles, the analysis presented herein complements statistical data with qualitative evidence, collected by the author in almost ten years of engagement with the region, and triangulated through the meticulous analysis of the most authoritative reports, enquiries and studies on the topic. This approach has the potential to illuminate the positionality of different actors involved in these domains, and therefore make statistical data gaps equally meaningful.

The Infrastructure of Trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel

A widespread narrative suggests that the Sahara-Sahel's vulnerability to trafficking – including of illicit goods – can be largely attributed to the porosity of regional borders, which often amount to elusive "lines in the sand" poorly patrolled by local weak states. By lending significant explanatory weight to material aspects such as natural landscape and power projection, however, this narrative runs the risk of overlooking important political-economic factors which have made of regional states not only the victims but the agents of illicit trafficking.

In the 1970s and 1980s, countries on either edge of the Sahara found themselves on opposite sides of the winners and losers of the oil crises. Labour demand in Mediterranean "Arab" countries to the North, and catastrophic economic and food crises in Sahelian countries to the South triggered major population flows. Ethnic and family networks scattered across the region helped consolidate the trans-Saharan infrastructure of migration and mobility. At the same time, oil-producing countries such as Algeria and Libya exploited their newly

acquired wealth to entrench the survival of local authoritarian regimes by sponsoring generous programmes of public subsidies targeting goods of wide consumption, such as fuel, foodstuffs and textiles. These dynamics nourished a thriving informal economy of subsidised goods smuggled from the North to the South of the Sahara, prompting the rise of what became locally known as "*al-frud*", the fraudsters economy.[3] In the 1990s, the high demand for tobacco in North African countries, combined with international sanctions regimes, paved the way for a thriving trade of contraband cigarettes through West Africa, reportedly accounting for an estimated 30-70% of local consumption in Libya and Algeria.[4]

Different understandings of legitimacy between local practices on the one hand and international (and national) norms on the other contributed to normalising these informal flows of otherwise licit goods across the Sahara.[5] At the same time, local authorities often demonstrated a limited resolve to decisively clamp down on these activities. Hardly perceived as threatening, they were instead viewed as providing a valuable tool for co-opting and controlling social and ethnic groups otherwise left at the margins of post-colonial states. Protection rackets and informal value extraction, however, contributed to entrenching patronage networks and neopatrimonialism across the majority of local regimes.[6] While the smuggling of oil, subsidised goods and tobacco arguably continues to provide the largest share of aggregated profits accruing from informal

[3] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development /Sahel and West Africa Club, *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel. Geography, Economy and Security*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2014.

[4] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational trafficking and the rule of law in West Africa: a threat assessment*, Vienna, UN, 2009.

[5] T. Reitano and M. Shaw "People's perspectives of organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel", ISS Paper 254, Dakar/Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 2014.

[6] M. Tidjani Alou, "Monitoring the neopatrimonial state on a day-by-day basis. Politicians, customs officials and traders in Niger", in D. Bach and M. Gazibo (Eds.), *Neopatrimonalism in Africa and Beyond*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel, in the long run these dynamics proved instrumental in catalysing the structuring of more organised criminal enterprises.

Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel started in the 1990s and has boomed since the early 2000s. Its rapid development owes much to the existing infrastructure of cigarette smuggling, in terms of networks, routes, organisational arrangements and political protection. That the jihadist leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar was nicknamed Monsieur Marlboro and rumoured to be involved in drug trafficking, too, provides a valuable illustration of these overlapping trafficking flows.

The first narcotic drug to be trafficked across the region was cannabis resin – hashish – which to date continues to represent the steadiest and possibly most profitable drug flow in the area. Growing demand in Europe and in the MENA region, combined with diminishing supplies from traditional producing countries such as Lebanon and Afghanistan stimulated production in Morocco, whose authorities allegedly bought the political acquiescence of the Rif region by turning a blind eye to local extra-legal economies. Yet, enhanced border controls in Algeria and Spain, prompted respectively by regional rivalries and EU policies, encouraged Moroccan traffickers to seek new trade routes.[7] Circumventing Algeria, by crossing deep into the Sahara Desert, appeared to provide a valuable alternative. Local traders scattered across the region eagerly harnessed their own resources – shared ethnicity, community networks, patronage politics, smuggling expertise – to turn to drug trafficking. Subaltern tribes saw in the business of drug trafficking an opportunity of social mobility and political prominence. At

[7] M. Herbert and M. Gallien, *A Rising Tide. Trends in production, trafficking and consumption of drugs in North Africa*, Geneva, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2020.

the same time, armed formations positioned along the route – including, since the 2000s, the Polisario Front, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Tuareg rebel groups in Mali and Niger, and para-state militias in Libya – saw an opportunity to enforce protection rackets and raise revenues to further their own agendas.[8]

Critics contend that the bonanza of drug trafficking ended up perverting the original goals of these armed groups, turning politically motivated rebels into opportunistic, profit-seeking criminal networks. While the claim remains contentious – being grounded more on one's political positioning than on (poor) empirical evidence – there are indeed indications that armed groups in the Sahara-Sahel may have negotiated the discontinuation of hostilities in exchange for the continuation of their own involvement in trafficking. The Mouvement Nigerien pour la Justice (MNJ), which led the "second" Tuareg rebellion in Niger, could be viewed as a case in point. The condoning, if not protection, of drug trafficking by state authorities ultimately made of the Sahara-Sahel a fertile ground for transnational drug flows and criminal networks.[9]

The region has also become the target of transnational cocaine flows since the mid-2000s. The hegemony acquired by Mexican organised crime in the American market prompted Colombian and Peruvian cartels to seek new business opportunities in Europe. And West Africa appeared strategically located to provide a valuable logistical hub. Around 2008-10, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that approximately one quarter of Europe's cocaine consumption transited through West Africa, amounting to a flow of 40-50 tons per year, with an estimated value of $1.8 billion at street prices. A significant share of this flow appeared to transit through the Sahara-Sahel

[8] S. Julien, "Le Sahel comme espace de transit des stupéfiants. Acteurs et conséquences politiques", *Hérodote*, no. 142, 2011.

[9] L. Raineri and F. Strazzari, "Drug Smuggling and the Stability of Fragile States. The Diverging Trajectories of Mali and Niger", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022.

region.[10] The tested solidity of the local trafficking infrastructure helps explain this otherwise counterintuitive trajectory. The infamous "Air Cocaine" case provides a glaring illustration of the extent and organisation of cocaine trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel at the time. In November 2009, the burnt-out fuselage of a Boeing 727 believed to carry 10 tons of cocaine was found in the Tilemsi valley, north of Mali. Subsequent investigations revealed the complicity not only of Malian narco-traffickers, but also of local businessmen, senior policymakers, high-ranking security and military officers, and trusted advisors to the President. The lack of follow-up is indicative of the extent and influence of the patronage networks that profit from drug flows in the region.

Over the last ten years, the conflict that has ravaged the region, spilling-over from Mali to the entire Sahara-Sahel, appears to have reshuffled the roles of individual placeholders without disrupting the overall infrastructure. Drug flows across the region continue unabated. Although evidence is too scant to accurately estimate their volume, the frequency and magnitude of reported drug seizures in the Sahara-Sahel – some of which are unprecedented in scale – is in keeping with the overall doubling of hashish and cocaine production observed respectively in Morocco and the Andean region over the last decade. In the last few years, multi-ton seizures of Moroccan hashish have occurred in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Algeria; at the same time, several hundred kilos of cocaine have been seized in Mali and mostly Guinea-Bissau, on their way to Mali. In many of these instances, the drug flows appear connected to well-known drug barons in Mali or Niger, who have manifestly managed to stay in business despite growing instability in the region.[11]

---

[10] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *The Transatlantic cocaine market*, Research Paper, Vienna, April 2011.

[11] United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Reports of the Panel of Experts on Mali, established pursuant to resolution 2374(2017)*, New York, UN, 2018, 2019, 2020; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern*

The attitudes of Niger's and Mali's authorities *vis-à-vis* these dynamics appear to have diverged quite sharply.[12] In Niger, after an initial phase of appeasement, drug traffickers have been progressively marginalised: after the death of Chérife Ould Abidine (nicknamed Chérife Cocaine), Niger's drug godfather, in 2016, his prospective heirs have been prevented from ascending to prominence; military and security forces thought to be colluding with drug trafficking have been side-lined; and in March 2021, a few days after Mohamed Bazoum became President, another well-known local drug lord was arrested. In Mali, on the other hand, drug traffickers are proving capable of perpetuating their influence by negotiating – violently, if need be – their appointment to key positions in the framework of the peace process, such as regional authorities and reconstituted armed forces. Furthermore, UN investigations suggest that the Malian intelligence service has leveraged (some of) the profits of Malian drug barons to sponsor pro-governmental militias, with a view to countering Tuareg irredentism.[13] The continuity of such practices under the presidencies of both Amadou Toumani Touré (2002-12) and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (2013-20) is worth noting. As a result, Arab and Tuareg armed groups of the "Platform" alliance[14] are now viewed as deeply embroiled with drug trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel.

Mali, Africa Report no. 267, 2018; International Crisis Group (IGC), *Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger*, Africa Report no. 285, 2019; M. Micallef, R. Farrah, A. Bish, and V. Tanner, *After the Storm. Organized Crime Across the Sahel-Sahara Following Upheavals in Libya and Mali*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019.

[12] Raineri and Strazzari (2022).

[13] United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, established pursuant to resolution 2374(2017)*, New York, UN, 2020.

[14] The "Platform" is an alliance of self-defense movements from the North of Mali. It was born in June 2014, as part of the peace negotiations between the government of Mali and non-state armed groups. It includes ethnic-based armed groups (Arab, Tuareg, Songhay and others) which are considered close to – if not proxies of – Mali's government.

There are instead few indications that jihadist armed groups take advantage of these flows. This contrasts with past observations, which attested the involvement of AQIM's Sahara *katiba* – led by the infamous terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar – and of the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in the protection if not organisation of drug trafficking in the region over the 2007-12 period. Today's most prominent jihadist formations – JNIM and Islamic State – appear to rely on alternative sources of revenues, such as taxation, goldmining, and kidnapping for ransom. These observations prompt the uncomfortable conclusion that in the Sahara-Sahel a crime-terror nexus is probably less cogent than a crime-counterterror nexus, whereby non-state (yet state-sponsored) armed groups are involved in both counterterrorism operations and drug protection rackets. AQIM's component of JNIM may represent a possible exception, given the allegations of its involvement in drug trafficking along the Mali-Mauritania border.

The combination of drug profits, conflict economies and patronage politics contributes to the resilience of the situation depicted here. Two emerging trends may nevertheless unsettle it. In the first place, the development of container trafficking has provided drug cartels with a cheaper and safer alternative to connect producing and consuming nations. The large-scale drug seizures recently seen in Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Italian, Balkan and Algerian ports and waters illustrate the growing prominence of sea-routes which completely bypass West Africa and the Sahara-Sahel. Reports indicate that Libyan ports controlled by local militias – al-Khoms, Misrata, Tobruk – are becoming key hubs in the transnational value chain supplying drugs to the European and MENA markets, while limited local consumption could lead to a rapid decline in the Sahara-Sahel's role.[15]

[15] J. McDermott, J. Bargent, D. den Held, and M.F. Ramírez, *The cocaine pipeline to Europe*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2021.

In the second place, the boom of synthetic drugs is establishing a trend that could disrupt existing drug markets. The Sahara-Sahel is not immune to these dynamics. A few rudimentary facilities have been identified in Burkina Faso and Nigeria for the production of methamphetamines, whose precursors are relatively easy to procure and difficult to intercept. Most importantly, the trafficking of Tramadol, a synthetic opioid painkiller, is booming across the Sahara-Sahel. Produced mainly in India and China, it is shipped to West African ports, mainly in Nigeria, Benin and Togo, and then proceeds to the Sahara-Sahel. Low prices and limited social stigma help explain Tramadol's popularity on local markets, especially among workers enduring hard conditions, such as miners, farmers and lorry drivers. A sizeable part of Tramadol flows, however, is rerouted to North Africa, where high demand and greater purchasing power enable a considerable mark-up. Tramadol trafficking is booming especially in Niger, where it has helped reabsorb part of the job losses resulting from the clamp-down on irregular migration. So far, however, Tramadol trafficking appears less structured and organised than that of hashish and cocaine, and the presence of centralised crime syndicates, drug barons and armed protection rackets is less apparent.

Arms Smuggling

The Sahel has been exposed to significant arms smuggling flows since at least the end of the Cold War. The broader region's proneness to civil wars – including in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Libya, Western Sahara, Sudan, as well as Mali, Niger, and Chad themselves – has fuelled both the demand and the supply of trafficked weapons. These mostly originated from the looting of local stockpiles, thereby turning the region pivoted on the Sahara-Sahel into a self-sufficient system of arms, with limited inputs coming from outside.[16] The

[16] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organised*

overall fragmentation which has characterised the emergence of a regional market is the outcome of the scattering of potential suppliers, diffusion of demand, and the limited costs and logistics involved in the trade of small weapons.

Until 2010, an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 small arms were allegedly circulating in the region. Since 2011, the Libyan civil war has represented a game changer. While the NATO-led military intervention managed to destroy Gaddafi's prohibited chemical weapons, it failed to prevent – rather, it triggered – the trans-Saharan spill-over of an estimated 10-20,000 small arms looted from Libyan arsenals. Part of these flows ended up in Sudan, Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, and even Syria.[17] But the largest share of Libya's trafficked weapons – light and heavy alike – were shipped to Mali by disgruntled loyalist militias of Sahelian origin, mostly hailing from Gaddafi's Tareq Bin Zayed, Tende and 32nd Brigades. This massive inflow of Libyan weapons contributed decisively to catalysing the seeds of revolt that were brewing in the north of Mali, precipitating the rise of local armed groups, the eruption of a multi-faceted civil war, and the collapse of the Malian state.

Libyan weapons also helped boost the strength and ambitions of jihadist groups present in the region, whose purchasing power exceeded that of rival factions because of the unparalleled revenues accruing from kidnapping activities. Early allegations that Sahelian jihadist groups had received additional weapons from malevolent foreign backers – among whom Qatar and Algeria were mentioned – proved baseless.[18]

Subsequent developments, however, have contributed to further restructuring the regional arms trafficking market. On the one hand, the breakout of the so-called second civil war in Libya in 2014 led to an inversion of arms trafficking flows,

---

Crime in West Africa: A threat assessment, Vienna, UN, 2013.

[17] Conflict Armament Research, *Investigating cross-border weapon transfers in the Sahel*, London, CAR, 2016.

[18] H. Anders, "Expanding arsenals. Insurgents' arms in northern Mali", in *Small Arms Survey 2015: Weapons and the World*, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2015.

which were reattracted to Libya by pressing domestic demand and comparatively higher purchasing power. On the other hand, the deployment of military operations along Libya's borders contributed to significantly curtailing the large-scale export of weapons from Libya. The step-up of Algeria's border protection forces, and the launch of the French Operation Barkhane – tasked with disrupting jihadists' supply lines from its bases in Chad, Niger and Mali – led to a sharp increase in arms seizures across the Sahara Desert, subsequently discouraging traffickers.

As a result, today, only a negligible proportion of the weapons that fuel Sahelian conflicts are trafficked from outside the region. Libya remains the main conduit, albeit to a much smaller extent. As Libyan factions are constantly fed with new equipment by their Emirati, Turkish or Russian partners, weapons (and fighters) occasionally trickle down from southern Libya into Chad or Niger.[19] Their impact on local conflicts is, however, marginal. Instead, available data suggest that most of the weapons used by Sahelian non-state armed groups, including jihadist organisations, originate from the stockpiles of the Sahelian state forces formally tasked with combating them. The exponential increase in Sahelian states' defence and security budgets, which European partners have sponsored politically and economically, ensures the constant replenishment of local arsenals which represent easy prey for local armed groups, experts in looting and pillaging.

Irregular Migration

Intra-regional and seasonal migration patterns have long characterised human mobility from the Sahel to North Africa, across the Sahara. Until recently, the phenomenon was hardly considered of security relevance, if not in positive terms, as migration provided an escape valve to compensate for the

[19] S. De Tessières, *At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger*, Report, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2018.

exponential demographic growth and limited job absorption capacity of Sahelian countries.

Things have changed markedly since the outbreak of the second civil war in Libya in 2014. The fragmentation of Libya's security forces and the collapse of border controls significantly eased prospective migrants' access to Libya, and the possibility of onward shipment to Europe. Strategically located at the northern terminal of bus lines from West Africa, the Nigerien town of Agadez soon became a hub of migration flows to Libya, eclipsing previously popular routes to North Africa via Mali or Mauritania. Northbound transits of migrants through Agadez increased from an estimated 40-60,000 crossings per year in the early 2010s, to 330,000 in 2016, largely originating from Nigeria, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Mali and Niger itself.[20]

Observers feared that large-scale irregular migration could feed armed groups, criminal organisations and terrorist formations. In Libya, armed groups reportedly established protection rackets over migratory flows, while the involvement of organised crime remains disputed and that of terrorist formations is in fact poorly substantiated. In the Sahel, and in Agadez in particular, it appears instead that migration provided job opportunities which helped reabsorb former Tuareg rebels, who in turn strived to steer away from contacts with terrorists in order to avoid attracting unwanted attention on their businesses. Collusion between Nigerien traffickers and authorities was also observed, suggesting the problematic convergence between trafficking and regime stability.[21]

The growing concern of European audiences *vis-à-vis* irregular migration, however, has led EU authorities to adopt an unprecedented combination of incentivising and

[20] M. Micallef, R. Horsley, and A. Bish, *The Human Conveyor Belt Broken. Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2019.

[21] L. Raineri, "Human smuggling across Niger: State-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2018.

dissuasive measures to stem irregular migration from and across the Sahara-Sahel since 2016. The reluctance and hesitancy of Sahelian countries' cooperation, however, testifies to the difficult balancing exercise between domestic interests, societal resilience and reliance on international aid. Niger, for instance, adopted harsh provisions to criminalise, deter and repress migrant smuggling and human trafficking, yet their implementation remains haphazard and exposed to the volatility of political opportunity. As a result, migrant traffic through Agadez has fluctuated significantly in the last few years: it drastically declined in 2017, only to progressively resume in the subsequent years. In 2020-21, the border restrictions implemented in Niger, Libya and Algeria to combat the spread of Covid-19 reduced opportunities for regular migration, but did not curb demand, thereby leading to an increase in irregular crossings facilitated by smugglers.

At the same time, the focus of law enforcement anti-migration measures on Agadez has prompted the restructuring of irregular trans-Saharan migration. A myriad of alternative routes has been carved out, or resumed, channelling smaller volumes of migrants to Libya via north-east Niger and Chad, or to Algeria via west Niger (Tahoua and Arlit) and north Mali (including Gao and even Timbuktu), or to Morocco and Spain via Mauritania. Overall, Algeria and Morocco appear to have replaced Libya as the favoured destination (or transit) country of migrants from West Africa.[22] The logistical, security and political challenges involved in traveling these remote routes, however, have raised the entry barriers to the migrant smuggling market, leading to the progressive marginalisation of the horizontal, social-networked arrangements that previously helped ensure migrants' agency and safety. One could therefore argue that anti-migration measures have paradoxically contributed to strengthening the grip of better structured criminal cartels

[22] A. Fereday, *Niger. Routes shift amid post-covid increase in human smuggling*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022.

– most notably from Nigeria and Libya – in the organisation of irregular migration flows across the Sahara-Sahel.

Overall, however, the volume (as well as political salience) of trans-Saharan migration appears to have declined compared to the peak of the so-called migration "crisis" of 2015-16. Exogenous dynamics have contributed to this outcome: stricter border enforcement in Libya and Algeria, including on their Mediterranean shores to the north, and massive expulsion to the south have arguably had a dissuasive impact upstream. In this context, booming labour demand in artisanal goldmining and the rise of Tramadol trafficking have provided an opportunity to partly reorient and repurpose the infrastructure of irregular migration in the Sahara-Sahel. These dynamics have contributed to a provisional shift from migrant smuggling to human trafficking activities, including the exploitation of children around mining sites, as well as that of women in the Malian towns of Gao and Timbuktu.

Artisanal Goldmining

That the Sahel's soil is brimming with gold has been known since the Middle Ages, and crucially contributed to inciting the European colonisation of West Africa. Industrial and artisanal goldmining have proliferated in independent Sahelian countries, with gold replacing cotton as Mali's and Burkina Faso's main export in the 2000s. More recently, a combination of high gold prices prompted by the 2008 economic crisis and cheap technologies originating from China has led to the discovery of a particularly rich gold vein stretching across the Sahara Desert from east to west. After the first finds in 2012 around Jebel Amir, in Sudan, rich gold deposits were subsequently discovered in the Chadian Tibesti area in 2013, then in Niger's Agadez region in 2014, and finally in north Mali and Mauritania in 2016.[23] As a result, Sudan,

[23] R. Chevrillon-Guibert, L. Gagnol, and G. Magrin, "Les ruées vers l'or au Sahara et au nord du Sahel. Ferment de crise ou stabilisateur?", *Hérodote*, no. 172, 2019.

Mali and Burkina Faso have become respectively the third, fourth and fifth most important gold producers in Africa.[24]

The boom of artisanal goldmining represents a potential game-changer for the region. Recent discoveries of goldmining sites have turned the Sahara-Sahel not only into a space of transit and circular migration, but also of inward migration. Goldmining – especially when entrusted to local, small-scale enterprises – has become one of the main job providers in the region. It has consequently contributed to propping up local economies, strengthening social resilience, and luring disenfranchised youth away from criminal and armed groups. At the same time, considerable challenges arise from the remoteness of the newly discovered goldmining sites, where weak local states struggle to project governance and law enforcement.

In the first place, goldmining runs the risk of fuelling money laundering and illicit financial flows. The largest share of gold extracted in the Sahara-Sahel is smuggled out of the region, escaping state oversight. Available reports estimate that the amount of gold illegally smuggled out of the Sahara-Sahel is far greater than that outflowing from the Great Lakes region, and its aggregate economic value higher than that of drug or migrant smuggling. Gold is first shipped to regional hubs such as Mali, Togo and Libya, where the complacency of local authorities and the opacity of local regulations enable onward air shipment, Dubai being the main destination.[25] The problematic management of gold imports contributed to relegating the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the Financial Action Task Force's grey list in 2022. However, it remains unclear to what extent criminal organisations, whether regional, transnational or foreign, are involved in existing smuggling schemes.

---

[24] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Gold at the Crossroads. Assessment of the Supply Chains of Gold Produced in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*, Paris, OECD, 2018.

[25] M. Hunter, *Pulling at Golden Webs. Combating Criminal Consortia in the African Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining and Trade Sector*, Research Paper 08, Pretoria, ENACT, 2019.

In the second place, the high availability of valuable resources combined with poor regulation makes artisanal goldmining sites prone to conflict, which could easily escalate in the explosive regional context of the Sahara-Sahel. This situation has prompted non-state armed actors to step in and provide ambiguous protection and dispute settlement mechanisms, often in exchange for a substantial protection fee. The modalities and providers of such informal regulations vary, depending on contextual arrangements and power relations. The management of the large goldmining site of Tchibarakaten, close to Niger's border with Algeria, is informally entrusted to prominent members of the local Tuareg elite, many of whom are known for their former engagement in rebel movements and smuggling activities. In the north of Mali, Tuareg leaders and rebel groups hailing from the CMA (Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad) ensure the governance of Kidal's and In-Tahaka's goldmining sites. Elsewhere, the fear that violent bandits, regime opponents or jihadist formations may profit from goldmining revenues has prompted local governments to close the sites and forcibly evict the miners, as happened in the Djado (north-east Niger) or, more brutally, in Chad's Tibesti region. Goldmining sites in north-east Burkina Faso appear to be the most problematic: the de facto evacuation of state authorities has afforded jihadist groups the opportunity to establish protection rackets and enforce strict moral codes inspired by jihadist governance ideals. The deployment of clever propaganda combining social grievances with religious legitimacy underpins the jihadists' claims to protect people's livelihoods from corrupt state capture.[26]

The overall impact of the recent boom in artisanal goldmining in the Sahara-Sahel is further compounded by the rise of banditry in the region, the exploitation of child labour, and the environmental degradation that rudimentary gold extraction

[26] L. Raineri, "Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking", *The International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2020.

techniques entail. Popular pressures for the reopening of the Djado goldmine, and the hesitancy of Niger's administration suggest that this is likely to remain a contentious and polarising domain for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion: Conflict, Trafficking and International Interventions

The question as to whether, how and to what extent trafficking contributes to fuelling conflict in the Sahara-Sahel eschews simplistic and reductionist answers. The largest share of regional trafficking – in terms of diffusion, volume and aggregate value – does not involve illicit goods, but goods of daily consumption and limited security relevance such as fuel, textiles, foodstuff and cigarettes. Such flows are therefore more likely to contribute to social resilience than to conflict and armed violence.

Drug trafficking remains acutely worrisome. Over the years, it has led to the emergence of criminal networks featuring some symptoms of organised crime: widespread corruption, state capture and impunity. Drug profits have contributed to fuelling armed violence. Disturbingly, however, the armed groups which have profited the most from drug revenues appear to be less insurgents than militias: that is, less the challengers than the partners of local states. For international interveners, then, partnering with Sahelian countries to counter drug-fuelled violence may be a self-defeating strategy, unless rule of law is prioritised in all domains (including peacebuilding) and targeted institutions and individuals are empowered on the basis of fine-grained vetting.

That arms smuggling is connected to armed conflict is a truism, and the Sahara-Sahel makes no exception. Yet, while there is no doubt that large-scale arms smuggling from Libya was instrumental in catalysing the outbreak of the conflict in Mali in 2012, today, arms proliferation and smuggling is less the cause than the consequence of ongoing conflicts. On the one hand, this suggests that international efforts to curb

regional arms trafficking have been successful, and arguably helpful in reducing the destabilising potential of non-state armed groups. On the other hand, the observation that non-state armed groups – including rebels, militias and jihadists – have ended up sourcing their weapons essentially from state stockpiles through robberies, raids and opaque deals provides an additional reason to reconsider international stabilisation strategies that prioritise security and military build-up.

The contribution of irregular migration to armed conflict in the Sahara-Sahel is scant. Early claims to the contrary have proved poorly substantiated. In both Mali and Niger, the involvement of organised crime and armed groups – let alone jihadist formations – in the recruitment, organisation, protection and exploitation of irregular migration is limited. Paradoxically, though not entirely unpredictably, it has (slightly) increased *as a result* of internationally sponsored measures of mobility interdiction and border restriction. Overall, irregular migration appears to be less a resource for, than an alternative to, the strengthening of non-state armed actors.

The boom of artisanal goldmining manifests a disruptive potential and warrants close monitoring. On the one hand, available reports suggest that job absorption in artisanal goldmining helps inhibit the "push factors" of irregular migration and armed group mobilisation in the Sahara-Sahel. On the other hand, though, artisanal goldmining catalyses human trafficking, arms smuggling and Tramadol trafficking. The involvement of transnational organised crime networks is not unlikely, yet still to be proven, while there is ample evidence that non-state armed groups are taking advantage of the defective governance of goldmining sites by local states. Informal but substantial involvement in gold production and trade governance provides rebels, militias and jihadists with resources and legitimacy that could arguably be leveraged to further a destabilising agenda. Although the international community has been slow in recognising the significance of these dynamics, subjecting goldmining to transparent and

participatory state-led governance should be considered a priority.

These observations suggest the need for more nuanced and context-sensitive international interventions in the Sahara-Sahel. Neglecting the challenges of trafficking and organised crime could further entrench the fragilities that make the Sahara-Sahel prone to conflict, yet mismanaging such challenges could make existing conflicts intractable.

5. The Complex Interactions Between Climate Change and Conflict in the Sahel

Kheira Tarif

The Sahel region is highly exposed to the effects of climate change. In the next 20 to 30 years, the region will see unprecedented temperature and precipitation changes, which will increase the frequency and severity of both droughts and floods. Climate change will affect seasonal rainfall patterns, freshwater availability, crops and livestock, and the communities that rely on them.

Alongside the physical effects of climate change, vulnerability to climate change is informed by the readiness of Sahelian countries to adapt. According to the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Chad, Niger and Mali are among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, due to both high national climate exposure and low national adaptation readiness.[1] The picture of climate exposure is more diverse locally. Some areas of the Sahel, like Mali's Inner Niger Delta and Sikasso regions, support a range of natural resource-based livelihoods. Others, in northern Burkina Faso and the Lake Chad Basin, are very environmentally degraded.

Different groups also experience the effects of climate change in different ways, creating distinct climate vulnerabilities. Farmers, herders and fishers depend on seasonal rainfall and

[1] ND-GAIN, Country Index, July 2021.

often have limited livelihood alternatives. Groups with low levels of education, marginalised groups, like women and minorities, and groups with limited mobility, like people with disabilities and the elderly, are less resilient to shocks overall. Vulnerability and resilience are also informed by the presence and legitimacy of formal and informal institutions that can support climate-affected communities. Governance plays a role in defining whether an external shock produces tension or collaboration.

There is stark evidence that climate change produces and/or accentuates a range of human security risks. The effects of climate change create new – or worsen existing – vulnerabilities and, in so doing, can produce climate-related security risks, including conflict. But in a region as large and diverse as the Sahel, there is a real risk of both overstating and understating the relationships between climate change and conflict.

This chapter explores how the effects of climate change interact with conflict in the Sahel region. It introduces the latest data on climate change in the region, before exploring how rising temperatures and changing rainfall interact with existing vulnerabilities. It outlines insights on four pathways of climate insecurity before concluding with the implications of climate change and conflict for policymaking in the Sahel region.

Climate Change and Climate Vulnerabilities

Climate change and climate vulnerability are two sides of the same coin. Biophysical changes caused by an increase in global temperatures have different impacts in different regions, countries and communities. This section introduces key climate trends and climate vulnerabilities in the Sahel.

Current and future climate change in the Sahel

The Sahel region is named after the eponymous bioclimatic zone: a band of grassland and sparse tree cover, high average

annual temperatures and low average annual rainfall. Extreme weather events are a regular occurrence, but data on observed and projected climate change for the Sahel is increasingly alarming. In 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that the effects of climate change are more severe than previously expected. Projections are bleak, and not just by the end of the century, but by the end of this decade.

Mean annual and seasonal temperatures in the Sahel have increased by 1-3°C since the mid-1970s and heatwaves are measurably hotter and longer than they were 40 years ago. Annual precipitation decreased markedly between the 1960s to 1980s, driven by man-made aerosol and greenhouse gas emissions. Reduced global aerosol emissions led to a slight recovery in rainfall in the 1990s, but precipitation in the Sahel remains heavier and less frequent than it used to be.[2]

The 2015 Paris Climate Accords achieved international consensus to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, but even this goal will lead to irreversible damage to Sahelian ecosystems. At 1.5°C of global warming, mean annual temperatures in the Sahel are projected to increase by at least 0.6°C more than 1994-2005 levels. Droughts and heatwaves are expected to occur more frequently and with greater intensity. Precipitation is projected to decrease in the western Sahel, delaying the rainy season. Rainfall may increase in eastern regions, with a wetter monsoon season between May and July that will increase the risk of floods. Despite rainfall increases, growing regional temperatures mean that, overall, the Sahel will likely become drier and more drought-prone.[3]

---

[2] C.H. Trisos et al., "Africa", in H.-O. Pörtner et al., (Eds.), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Working Group II contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

[3] F.J. Doblas-Reyes et al., "Linking Global to Regional Climate Change", in V. Masson-Delmotte et al. (Eds.), *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental*

Climate vulnerability in the Sahel

Climate change has direct, physical impacts on people in the Sahel. Higher temperatures pose a significant health risk, particularly to poor, marginalised and very young and elderly groups. Droughts and floods decimate food sources, homes and lives. People with the means to do so must leave increasingly uninhabitable areas.

Climate change has direct effects on land cover in the Sahel. Aridification, drought-induced tree mortality, declining tree biodiversity and local losses of tree species have all been recorded, while vegetation cover has increased where grasslands and deserts meet.[4] These changes also impact human activities, for example in the agricultural sector. Livestock account for as much as 40% of the regional agricultural sector, and at least 70% of livestock herders rely primarily on north-south seasonal migration to access pasture and water.[5] In all, some 50 million people depend on livestock and agriculture in the Sahel, making them highly vulnerable to climate change. Women make up 40% of regional agricultural labour.[6] With 1.5°C of global warming, West Africa and the Sahel will see a reduction in sorghum crop yields and lose 40% of the land suitable for maize cultivation.[7] If serious adaptation efforts are not undertaken, by 2050 the effects of climate change on water availability could reduce the Sahel's combined GDP by 11.7%.[8]

Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

[4] C. Parmesan et al., "Terrestrial and Freshwater Ecosystems and their Services", in H.-O. Pörtner et al. (Eds.) (2022).

[5] U.J. Eberle, D. Rohner, and M. Thoenig, *Heat and Hate: Climate Security and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Africa*, Working Paper no. 22, Empirical Studies of Conflict (ESOC), 10 December 2020.

[6] O. Tall, *Herders vs Farmers: Resolving deadly conflict in the Sahel and West Africa*, OECD Insights, 16 April 2018; C. McOmber, *Women and Climate Change in the Sahel*, OECD West African Papers No. 27, 9 March 2020.

[7] J. Birkmannet al., "Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development", in H.-O. Pörtner et al. (Eds.) (2022); C.H. Trisos et al. (2022).

[8] M.A. Caretta et al., "Water", in H.-O. Pörtner et al. (Eds.) (2022).

Sahelian agro-pastoralist communities have a sophisticated understanding of local climate impacts. Local perceptions of temperature increases, heat waves, extremes of hot and cold temperatures match closely with observed meteorological data. Local communities already use indigenous knowledge to adapt to the adverse effects climate change. For example, during periods of high rainfall variability, agro-pastoralists diversify their livelihood sources, or adapt crop and livestock management practices to maximise natural resource use.[9] But other pressures also affect communities' adaptation capacities. The expansion of commercial agriculture to feed growing urban populations, and resulting shift towards large-scale water management for irrigation, contributes to environmental degradation through intensive natural resource use, while simultaneously restricting smallholders' and livestock herders' access to land and water.[10] The combination increases physical exposure to the negative effects of climate change, accentuates communities' vulnerability to the effects of climate change, and contributes to changing patterns of north-south transhumance and rural-urban migration.

Gender also influences how climate change impacts men, women, girls and boys, and what options they have for responding. Many women and girls in the Sahel are doubly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, having less mobility and decision-making power than men, and limited access to resources, including land and markets for generating income. Where male farmers can temporarily migrate to alternative sources of income, women often stay behind in precarious conditions. Women's reliance on the livelihood strategies defined by male family members can mean that women have less agency in defining adaptation strategies. The negative

[9] R.B. Kerr et al., "Food, Fibre, and other Ecosystem Products", in H.-O. Pörtner et al. (Eds.) (2022).

[10] L. Raineri, "Sahel Climate Conflicts? When (fighting) climate change fuels terrorism", Brief 20, European Union Institute for Security Studies, November 2020.

effects of climate change on natural resource-based livelihoods also undermine the opportunities for men to assume the traditional male roles of provider, husband and father, and can make comparatively large salaries offered by armed groups and criminal organisations more attractive.[11]

Conflict increases local climate vulnerabilities

In parts of the Sahel, the effects of climate change overlap with violent conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies. In these areas, there is a bi-directional relationship between climate change and conflict: climate change can feed insecurity, and conflict can accentuate climate vulnerabilities.

Armed groups, local militias, regional and international counterinsurgency operations have proliferated in the Sahel region, accompanied by violence against civilians, inter-communal violence and forced displacement in areas like Burkina Faso's Centre-Nord and Soum, Mali's central Mopti, Niger's northern Tillaberi and Nigeria's North West. The latest data paints a sobering picture of human insecurity. More than 30 million people in the region need humanitarian assistance and protection – an increase of 2 million in the last year alone – and the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has grown from 500,000 in 2018 to 3 million today.[12] Large numbers of displaced people are located in areas where projected temperature increases will exceed the limits of safe human habitation in the coming decades.[13] Armed conflict

[11] McOmber (2020); V. Le Masson, C. Benoudji, S.S. Reyes, and G. Bernard, "How Violence against Women and Girls Undermines Resilience to Climate Risks in Chad", *Disasters*, vol. 43, no. S3, 2019, pp. S245-S270; E.S. Smith, "Gender Dimensions of Climate Insecurity", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2022/4, March 2022.

[12] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Sahel Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview 2022", June 2022; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (n.d.) "Situation Sahel Crisis: Coordination Platform for Forced Displacements in Sahel" (Accessed 16 August 2022).

[13] Birkmann et al. (2022).

accentuates local vulnerabilities to climate change. Violence against civilians, displacement, evacuations, market and school closures and restrictions on movement threaten communities' safety, wellbeing, livelihoods and food security. Conflict also weakens formal and informal governance and dispute resolution mechanisms, meaning that local resource disputes escalate more frequently and become harder to resolve peacefully.[14] Communities living with protracted conflict, and with more limited coping capacities as a result of conflict, are therefore more vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Climate-related security risks

In addition to its human security implications, climate change also has indirect effects on peace and conflict. These operate via existing vulnerabilities, including poverty and inequality, the prevalence of climate-sensitive livelihoods and absence of viable alternatives, and weak governance.

Droughts, floods and sandstorms are not new to the Sahel region, but the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather and perceptible changes in seasonal patterns are even more serious because they compound existing vulnerabilities: high reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods, shrinking natural resource access, protracted conflicts, displacement and inequalities. These in turn interact with well-known drivers of conflict, such as inequality, exploitation, uneven development and weak representation, to create new or accentuate existing risks to peace.

Climate-related security risks are context-specific. They are mediated by social, economic and political conditions on the ground. Most importantly, climate-related security risks are not predestined but heavily informed by human actions, which offers opportunities for prevention and mitigation.[15]

---

[14] L. Bisson, I. Cottyn, K. de Bruijne, and F. Molenaar, *Between Hope and Despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso*, Clingendael CRU Report, February 2021.

[15] M. Mobjörk et al., *Climate-related Security Risks: Towards an Integrated Approach*,

Complex Interactions Between Climate Change and Conflict in the Sahel

While climate-related security risks are highly context-specific, research has identified four interconnected pathways in the relationships between climate change and conflict: *a*) worsening livelihood conditions; *b*) increasing migration and changing pastoral mobility patterns; *c*) tactical considerations by armed groups; *d*) elite exploitation of local grievances. These pathways identify when, and under which circumstances, climate change and conflict interact. They draw attention to different actors, actions, local conditions and institutions that increase the risk of conflict in climate-exposed regions.[16] This section summarises key findings on how climate change, climate vulnerabilities and conflict interact in the Sahel region.

Worsening livelihood conditions, maladaptation and local conflicts

Climate change affects temperature, rainfall and seasonal patterns in ways that increase environmental pressure and undermine livelihood security. Worsening livelihood conditions accentuate marginalisation, which feeds social, economic and political grievances, which in turn can increase tensions between groups. When alternative livelihood strategies are unavailable or unsustainable, there is a greater risk that people who rely on natural resources resort to violence to protect their access.

SIPRI, Stockholm University and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, October 2016.

[16] S. van Baalen and M. Mobjörk, "Climate Change and Violent Conflict in East Africa: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Research to Probe the Mechanisms", *International Studies Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1 December 2018, pp. 547-75; P. Nordqvist and F. Krampe, "Climate Change and Violent Conflict: Sparse Evidence from South Asia and South East Asia", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2018/4, September 2018; K. Tarif, "Climate Change and Violent Conflict in West Africa: Assessing the Evidence", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, no. 2022/3, February 2022.

Higher temperatures and irregular seasonal rainfall in the Sahel disproportionately affect climate-sensitive agriculture, pastoralism and fishery. Faced with shrinking yields and incomes, individuals and communities can adapt by diversifying their livelihoods or adopting new livelihoods altogether. Migrant pastoralists are a particularly climate-exposed group. They require fresh water and pasture access throughout the year, so they are vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but they also rarely have formal rights to natural resources and must negotiate access with local communities. As private land ownership and agriculture expand, more and more herders lose access to land and water that were previously shared communal resources.

Adapting to climate change can also have negative consequences. Maladaptation is when adaptation efforts degrade the environment, increase climate exposure and/or increase climate vulnerability. Maladaptation can also have negative consequences for peace, such as natural resource competition and conflict.[17] For example, the effects of drought in the Sahel have led some farmers to invest in livestock, and some herders to rely less on seasonal migration and more on crop cultivation. In parts of Burkina Faso and Niger, this diversification of livelihoods has created more overlap in livelihood activities and accentuated agro-pastoralist competition.[18] Farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel region are projected to grow as climate change impacts natural resource access and, consequently, livelihood security.[19] The effects of climate change on livelihoods today will have long-term consequences for vulnerable groups in the region, as

[17] E.L.F. Schipper, "Maladaptation: when adaptation to climate change goes very wrong", *One Earth*, vol. 3, no. 4, 23 October 2020, pp. 409-14.

[18] S. Traore and T. Owiyo, "Dirty droughts causing loss and damage in Northern Burkina Faso", *International Journal of Global Warming*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2013, pp. 498-513; B. Thébaud and S. Batterbury, "Sahel pastoralists: opportunism, struggle, conflict and negotiation. A case study from eastern Niger", *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 11, 2001, pp. 69-78.

[19] Eberle, Rohner, and Thoenig (2020).

demonstrated by past examples. The Sahel experienced severe droughts in the 1980s that had devastating impacts on climate-sensitive livelihoods. Thirty years later, Malian households that did not have the resources to adapt to those droughts were still poorer and less food secure than families that successfully diversified their livelihoods at the time.[20]

Climate adaptation programs are one way of building individual and societal resilience to the effects of climate change and reducing the risk of conflict. Given the relationship between climate change, worsening livelihood conditions and conflict, the Sahel region requires conflict-sensitive resilience-building: policies and programs must be designed and implemented to minimise the risk of local conflicts that might feed into larger conflict dynamics, and to actively promote livelihood security and peace.

Increasing migration and changing pastoral mobility patterns diffuse conflict risks

Climate adaptation can also take the form of migration. The search for alternative livelihoods can encourage movement to areas with better economic prospects, temporarily or permanently. But this can also increase the risk of conflict in the in-migration zone, and between migrant and host groups.[21] For example, young people – particularly young men – may increasingly migrate to urban areas as the effects of climate change undermine livelihood security in agro-pastoral communities. This can accentuate the marginalisation of low-income migrants and economic inequality in larger urban areas, increasing the risk of instability.[22]

---

[20] Birkmann et al. (2022).

[21] L. Freeman, "Environmental Change, Migration, and Conflict in Africa: A Critical Examination of the Interconnections", *The Journal of Environment & Development*, vol. 26, no. 4, December 2017, pp. 351-74; R. Reuveny "Climate Change-Induced Migration and Violent Conflict", *Political Geography*, vol. 18, no. 6, August 2007, pp. 656-73.

[22] M. Kaag, G. Baltissen, G. Steel, and A. Lodder, "Migration, Youth, and Land in

Climate-related migration towards fertile zones can also lead to a concentration of resource users and increased conflict risk, particularly when pastoral and cultivation zones are squeezed by expanding private land ownership and commercial agriculture.[23] Adaptive migration can therefore increase the risk of conflict in areas that are comparatively less exposed to climate change. For instance, research shows that Nigeria's most climate-exposed northern regions are the least prone to farmer-herder conflicts, whereas adjacent agricultural regions that are less exposed to climate change are the most prone to farmer-herder conflicts.[24] Therefore, adverse effects of climate change in one location can increase local conflict risks not only there, but in completely different areas, including as a result of changing migration and mobility patterns.

As the effects of climate change become more pronounced in parts of the Sahel, migration will be critical for individual and community adaptation. However, changing human and livestock mobility may heighten conflict risks in regions that should be less exposed, or more resilient, to climate change. In terms of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, these findings point to the need for analyses and actions that are both context-specific and anticipatory, using climate data to move beyond a narrow focus on current conflict hotspots and pre-empt future risks.

West Africa: Making the Connections Work for Inclusive Development", *Land*, vol. 8, no. 4, 8 April 2019, p. 60.

[23] J. Snorek, F.G. Renaud, and J. Kloos, "Divergent adaptation to climate variability: A case study of pastoral and agricultural societies in Niger", *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 29, 1 November 2014, pp. 371-86.

[24] I.A. Madu and C.F. Nwankwo, "Spatial pattern of climate change and farmer-herder conflict vulnerabilities in Nigeria", *GeoJournal*, vol. 86, 20 May 2020, pp. 2691-707.

Armed groups' tactical considerations, conflict escalation and resource management

Climate change can increase the risk of local conflicts, but it can also affect the dynamics of broader hostilities by altering the availability of natural, human and other resources, and by providing new opportunities for armed groups.

Armed groups have used extreme weather events to boost recruitment and adapted behaviour to capitalise on favourable weather conditions. They have also used environmental governance to fill state vacuums, establish control of local civilians and support from potential recruits, and have sought to resolve local natural resource conflicts by providing protection, dispute resolution and infrastructure to respond to local needs. In Burkina Faso, Koglweogo militias have provided animal and natural resource governance to local communities in the absence of state presence.[25] In central Mali, the Katiba Macina appealed to local grievances, such as ineffective formal resource management, iniquitous land rights and herder marginalisation, to draw local support and recruit from among pastoralist youth.[26]

The presence of armed groups in the Sahel is also linked to violent escalations in farmer-herder conflicts. Because of regional armed conflicts, and with growing difficulties in accessing water and pastures, more and more migrant herders carry small arms, which increases the risk that disputes with other groups become violent.[27] In turn, farmers also rely on force to protect their crops. In Mali, farmers have used local militias to remove migrant herders from their land.[28] In Nigeria's agricultural

[25] I. Cottyn and J. Meester, "Of Cattle and Conflict. Rethinking responses to pastoralism-related conflicts", CRU Policy Brief, Clingendael, August 2021.

[26] T.A. Benjaminsen and B. Ba, "Why do Pastoralists in Mali join Jihadist Groups? A political ecological explanation", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2019 pp. 1-20.

[27] Snorek, Renaud, and Kloos (2014).

[28] T.A. Benjaminsen and B. Ba (2019); L.V. Brottem, "Environmental Change and Farmer-Herder Conflict in Agro-Pastoral West Africa", *Human Ecology*, vol. 44, 1

heartlands, farmer-herder conflicts have sometimes exceeded the human cost of the notorious Boko Haram insurgency, creating significant displacement, destroying livelihoods and disrupting food security.[29]

Elite exploitation of local grievances, marginalisation and governance

Climate change increases the risk of local conflicts, but it can also exacerbate the risk of broader conflict when exploited by wealthy, privileged, powerful or influential individuals or groups. Weak and sometimes divisive governance also accentuates climate vulnerabilities by creating or worsening inequalities, which lead to grievances that drive conflicts.

In the Sahel, politicised ethnic stereotypes, immigration policies, election cycles, and even peace negotiations, have been found to increase the risk of local resource conflicts because they accentuate divisions between resource users, like herders and farmers.[30] Climate-related security risks are therefore undergirded by political choices, including bad governance that promotes some groups and marginalises others, and weak governance that increases peoples' vulnerabilities to a range of shocks. A great deal of research on climate change and conflict in the Sahel emphasises that governance systems create the inequalities that lead to natural resource conflicts. When parties to a dispute believe that local authorities cannot or will not assist them in resolving disputes, they are more likely to use force to secure access to natural resources. Even in resource-rich areas, like Mali's Inner Niger Delta, national policies that promote farming have limited migrant herders' access to land, compounded the negative effects of climate

September 2016, pp. 547-63.

[29] International Crisis Group (ICG), *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer–Herder Violence*, Africa Report no. 262, 26 July 2018.

[30] H. Seter, O.M. Theisen, and J. Schilling, "All about Water and Land? Resource-Related Conflicts in East and West Africa Revisited", *GeoJournal*, vol. 83, no. 1, February 2018, pp. 169-87.

change on their livelihood security, and increased the risk of conflict over water and grazing.[31]

In Niger's Tahoua region, the privatisation of fields, pastures and lakes that were previously commons resources has had similar effects. One study found that water conflicts were more common when local authorities did not enforce resource management rules, and farmer-herder cooperation was more common where authorities did enforce them.[32] Therefore the risk of natural resource conflicts increases when governance is weak, or legislation or local agreements on resource use are not implemented. Weak governance in rural areas of the Sahel also leads to unsustainable resource use that can degrade the environment and increase local climate exposure. There is some evidence that modes of "neo-pastoralism" are on the rise in the region, driven by urban elites who own large livestock herds and outsource herd management to impoverished migrant herders. Large herds require large tracts of pasture and quantities of water, which squeezes resource access for smallholders and contributes to competition.[33] In Burkina Faso, growing economic interests in the livestock sector have upended the traditional and reciprocal arrangements that predominated between farmer and herder communities, and increased the risk of conflicts around natural resource access.[34]

Governance is a central feature of climate vulnerabilities and of the risk of conflict related to the effects of climate

[31] T.A. Benjaminsen and B. Ba, "Farmer-Herder Conflicts, Pastoral Marginalisation and Corruption: A Case Study from the Inland Niger Delta of Mali", *Geographical Journal*, vol. 175, no. 1, March 2009, pp. 71-81; T.A. Benjaminsen, K. Alinon, and H. Buhaug, "Does Climate Change Drive Land-Use Conflicts in the Sahel?", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 49, no. 1, 31 January 2012, pp. 97-111; Seter, Theisen and Schilling, (2018).

[32] J. Snorek, L. Moser, and F.G. Renaud, "The production of contested landscapes: Enclosing the pastoral commons in Niger", *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 51, April 2017.

[33] M. Luizza, "Urban Elites' Livestock Exacerbate Herder – Farmer Tensions in Africa's Sudano-Sahel", *New Security Beat*, 10 June 2019.

[34] Cottyn and Meester (2021).

change. While inequitable natural resource management can lead to resource conflicts, there is also evidence that effective management can foster collaboration. The reinforcement of legitimate and inclusive governance mechanisms should be a priority for addressing conflict risks in climate-exposed regions, including across much of the Sahel.

Conclusion

There is insufficient evidence to confirm the most alarmist headlines of climate wars in the Sahel. A plethora of grievances have informed current conflicts in the region. Climate change, environmental degradation and natural resource management are just one part of a bigger picture, but they are part of the picture. Local case studies show how the effects of climate change have impacted livelihoods and adaptation strategies, migration and mobility patterns, armed groups' and elites' behaviour in ways that can increase the risk of conflict.

The bi-directional relationship between climate change and conflict in the Sahel shows that the two must be understood and addressed in tandem. For these twin priorities to be addressed simultaneously, however, will require context-specific analysis and programming. Research clearly shows the extent to which local context, local actors and local institutions intervene in the relationships between climate change and conflict. This includes the differentiated effects of climate change and conflict on men and women, boys and girls.

Responses to ongoing and future conflicts in the Sahel need to be climate-sensitive. As a baseline, "do no harm" should prevent any increase in local climate vulnerabilities. Going further, climate-sensitive conflict responses should consider the local effects of climate change in conflict analysis, and work to build local climate resilience in conflict interventions, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

The Sahel region is highly exposed to the effects of climate change and, in many places, ill-equipped to manage the results

Another 10 years of conflict and crisis, plus another 1.5°C of global warming, will significantly drain individual and societal coping capacities. People with the means to do so will adapt to climate-related security risks to the best of their abilities or relocate. For too many, there are very limited opportunities to escape these compounding risks. Vulnerable and marginalised groups will undoubtedly bear the brunt of climate change, unless the inequalities at the roots of both climate vulnerability and conflict in the Sahel are addressed.

6. France and the Rest: Testing Alliances in Europe by Providing Security in the Sahel

Denis M. Tull

Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Sahel had been indisputably the focus of European defence and security policy for almost a decade. How and why has this region, previously a strategic backwater for most if not all decision-makers in Europe, turned into a hotspot of European crisis management and stabilisation efforts? What accounts for the large-scale presence of European states today, many of which have little or no historical ties to the region? While real or perceived threats emanating from the Sahel such as illegal migration and terrorism may account for much of this engagement, a less explored explanation lies with intra-European political dynamics that have driven and underpinned military involvement in the region.

The Evolving European Footprint

Subsequent to France's military intervention in Mali in early 2013 (Operation Serval), European states and EU institutions have mobilised extensive political, security, military, development and humanitarian assistance to address violence and conflict in Mali and its neighbouring states. In particular, Europeans have provided considerable support in terms of defence and security, in both bilateral and multilateral formats. Several European

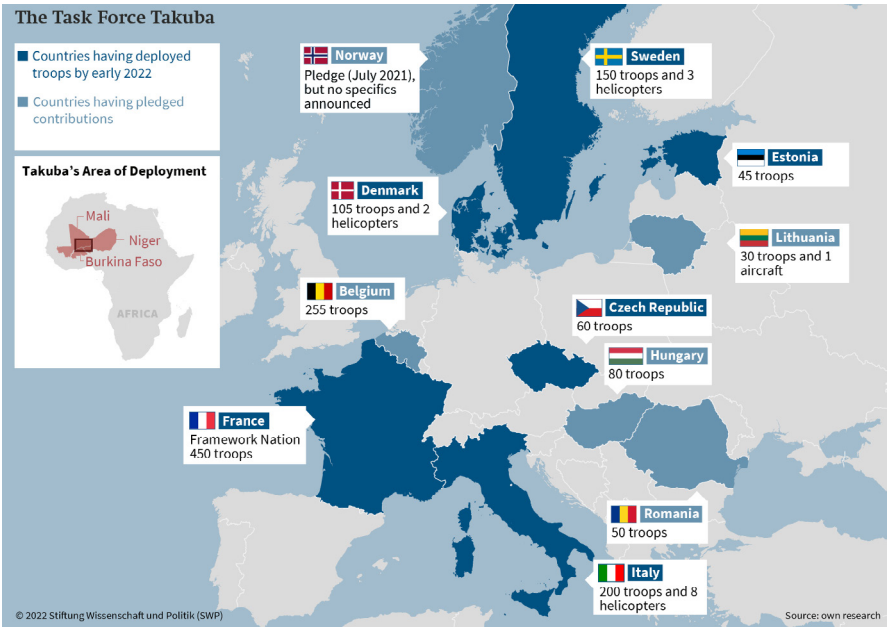
states have participated in the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA) since 2013, with large troop contingents especially from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The European Union has deployed no less than three CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) missions to the Sahel. While two of them assist local security forces (EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger), a dedicated mission was set up in 2013 to train and advise the Malian army.[1] European contributions to these multilateral formats (EUTM Mali) have been supplemented by a wide array of bilateral activities. Besides the French counterterrorism Operation Barkhane, due to pull out of Mali, which completed its exit in August 2022, these are mainly capacity-building projects, though some countries (Germany, Belgium) have deployed national light footprint military training missions to Niger.[2]

Nevertheless, Mali is further away than ever from stability and peace. The security situation has deteriorated continuously since 2017. There are many (political) reasons for this, but it also remains the case that security and defence forces, especially in Mali, have improved only marginally as a result of security force assistance. This has not dampened the engagement of European states and institutions. Instead, they have tended to double down on their efforts, both expanding and deepening their footprint in the region, until a political fallout between France and Mali's military rulers led Paris to announce the withdrawal of its Barkhane troops.

The latest addition to this process was Task Force Takuba, a military ad hoc coalition of European states to provide assistance, advice and accompaniment to the Malian army; that is, a qualitatively more ambitious form of security force

[1] D.M. Tull, "Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and its International Partners", *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2019, pp. 405-22.
[2] N. Wilén, "Analysing (In)formal Relations and Networks in Security Force Assistance: The Case of Niger", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2021, pp. 580-97.

assistance than is being provided by EU capacity-building missions. Put simply, Takuba was part of renewed efforts since 2019 to revamp and strengthen international assistance to Mali and by extension its neighbouring partners of the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania). At the Pau Summit in January 2020, renewed commitments by all sides led to the creation of a new framework – the Coalition for the Sahel – combining regional and international efforts across four pillars: fighting against terrorism, strengthening the military capabilities of the Sahelian states, and supporting the return of the state on its territory and development assistance. Schematically speaking, Task Force Takuba was designed to come under the first pillar (the fight against terrorism), though it was also meant as a contribution to military capacity-building. While this approach to security force assistance is worth exploring in its own right, this paper focuses instead on the political dynamics behind Takuba; that is, inter-European alliance politics that induced a significant number of European states to join the French counterterrorism effort in Mali.



The Europeanisation of French Interventionism in the Sahel

In the wake of its military intervention in 2013, Paris made strenuous efforts to internationalise and Europeanise crisis management in the Sahel. This was in keeping with France's post-Cold War embrace of multilateralism in support of its interventions in Africa and it has met with significant success as the rapid deployment of MINUSMA, EUTM (European Union Training Mission) Mali (both in 2013) and of EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014) indicate. In so doing, France has sought to share the financial, military and political burden of intervention with allies while seeking legitimacy for its involvement in the Sahel at home and abroad, not least in Mali itself.[3] Over time the twin aims of burden-sharing and legitimacy became ever more pressing. As the widely perceived leader of the international intervention, France struggled to fend off critics at home and abroad that questioned its objectives, methods and results. In the Sahel, an increasingly critical discourse accused Paris of strategic ineffectiveness - or worse, hidden neo-colonial motives. In France itself, domestic political pressure also mounted in the face of Mali's continued downward spiral, but also the growing number of casualties among the French military. Paris, the criticism went, was not only stuck in the desert; it was de facto alone due to the government's failure to persuade European partners to make robust militarily contributions beyond EUTM and MINUSMA. Consequently, Paris pointed out to its allies that it carried a disproportionate part in addressing not only a French, but a *European* problem. It was in this context that the idea for the Task Force Takuba was floated. It becomes evident, then, how the Takuba operation also became a *political* object, in part demonstrating European support for France's leadership in the Sahel and showing that allies were willing to share goals, risks and costs with Paris.

[3] T. Tardy, "France's Military Operations in Africa: Between Institutional Pragmatism and Agnosticism", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2020, pp. 534-59.

The choice to conduct Takuba as an ad hoc operation was not incidental. In theory, acting through the EU should have been an option, given that the Union was already heavily engaged in security force assistance in Mali via its military training mission EUTM. However, accompanying Malian troops to the battlefield, as was intended, required an executive mandate. Transforming EUTM into an executive operation was never considered to be a feasible option, neither in Paris nor in Brussels. Indeed, unanimous decision-making and the risk aversion of many EU member states mean that, from France's point of view, the EU is currently not a suitable framework for military operations. And justifiably so. Looking at its record over the past 15 years, and except for a few maritime operations, the EU has used the military only for capacity-building missions. The EU Battle Groups have never been activated and the EU's last land-based operation dates back to 2007-09 (EUFOR Chad/Central African Republic - CAR). Although the CSDP has since then made strides in institutional terms, the EU paradoxically resorts to military means less and less often. What is more, the French belief in the immanent usefulness of institutions in the field of security and defence policy is shaky. As priority is given to solving specific problems, the thinking in Paris is that the mission should determine the format, not the other way around. This results in a fundamental openness towards institutions and formats to conduct an operation (forum-shopping). Consequently, European security policy is not equated with CSDP, and the EU is only one possible framework for action among others – explicitly alongside minilateral ad hoc coalitions. It is therefore not surprising that Paris has considered ad hoc coalitions as a more pragmatic, faster, flexible and results-oriented pathway than the thorny Brussels route. Moreover, resorting to an ad hoc format allows France, as the framework nation, to choose its partners and contributions rather than having to negotiate political compromises within existing formats.

The European Designs of Takuba

Against this background it is somewhat ironic that the French government has set up Task Force Takuba with European designs also in mind. In addition to addressing a problem in the Sahel, the operation serves the dual purpose of strengthening defence cooperation in Europe and preserving France's ability to exert military and diplomatic agency.[4]

France's National Security Strategy of 2021 sees Europe "at a crossroads" between the decision to build greater capacities to act and a strategic degradation to a mere object of competing powers.[5] At the same time, Paris acknowledges the growing gap between its own national claims of autonomous action and its current ability to act.[6] The government derives from this the necessity of broadening and deepening security and defence policy relations with European partners. The method for inching closer to the French vision of a common "strategic culture" in Europe is the expansion of cooperation at all levels (armament projects, dialogues, joint operations) and across diverse formats, including ad hoc coalitions, which are to function as vehicles of tangible progress in European security policy (e.g. interoperability).[7] In the French thinking bilateral and minilateral cooperation with politically ambitious and militarily capable European partners should catalyse strategic convergence towards European defence ("Europe de la défense") and "Strategic Autonomy". This underpins the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), launched by President Macron in 2018, seeking to tweak European allies towards greater strategic ambitions and capacities, independently of and possibly reinforcing existing institutions such as the EU's CSDP and NATO.

---

[4] A. Pannier and O. Schmitt, *French Defence Policy since the End of the Cold War*, London, Routledge, 2020, p. 151.

[5] Ministère des Armées, Actualisation Stratégique 2021, Paris 2021, p. 25f.

[6] Ministère des Armées, Revue Stratégique de Défense et de Sécurité Nationale 2017, p. 14.

[7] Ibid., p. 31 and 63.

Though no explicit links are made, Task Force Takuba is a logical incarnation of these French defense ambitions for Europe, as official French communication and confidential conversations with officials make clear.[8] The Ministry of Defense consistently associates Takuba with #EuropeDéfense, describing it as a "concrete expression of the growing strength of European defence in its operational dimension" and a "laboratory of European defence", showing that successful and pragmatic cooperation between Europeans is possible even under difficult conditions.[9] French defense journalists have described Takuba as a "showcase" for President Macron's politico-strategic ideas about a European defence policy carried forward by willing and capable partners.[10] Joint military action as part of Takuba is depicted as an investment in European security, cooperation and interoperability, also with a view to other, future operational areas. In order to underscore Takuba's comprehensive European character in the geographical sense as well, it is of undeniable importance that troop-contributing states are not only from southern Europe.[11]

Takuba's Troop Contributing Nations: Not the Usual Suspects

Until the end of 2021, ten European countries had committed to join Task Force Takuba with substantial contributions. By February 2022, when the alliance announced its intention to withdraw from Mali over the fallout in French-Malian

[8] Interviews with defence officials, 14 June and 6 July 2021.

[9] Ministère des Armées, "La Roumanie rejoint la Task Force Takuba au Sahel", 17 June 2021; N. Gros-Verheyde, "Takuba: la task-force opérationnelle. Pari réussi dixit Florence Parly", Le Blog de B2, April 2021.

[10] E. Vincent, "G5 Sahel: l'avenir de l'opération 'Barkhane' au menu du sommet de N'Djamena", *Le Monde*, 15 February 2021; V. de Gmeline, "Mali: la task force Takuba, laboratoire des combats à venir pour les forces spéciales européennes", *Marianne*, 2 Feburary 2022.

[11] Interview with French defence official, 19 May 2021.

relations, five countries had already deployed troops: Estonia, Czech Republic, Sweden, Denmark and Italy.

A seeming paradox emerges when looking at France's coalition partners. Only very few of them have strategic interests in the Sahel or show a level of engagement to suggest they have more than fleeting interests in the region. From the vantage point of most Takuba participants, the Sahel is historically, geographically and politically situated at the strategic margins. Their involvement over the past decade has rarely extended beyond the military realm, with the notable exception of Denmark, Italy and Sweden. But even military engagement is limited. Few countries are much involved beyond Takuba, though sporadic contributions to EUTM and MINUSMA occur. This begs the question of what drives these countries to mobilise scarce and precious capabilities in a risky military operation in an ultimately marginal region? This deserves attention for the simple reason that these states could free ride on French counterterrorism efforts without having to bear the costs and risks themselves. In the following, I will briefly sketch the engagement of the first four countries to have joined French troops in the Task Force, i.e. Estonia, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Denmark, before exploring the national interests that underpin their participation in Takuba.

The Czech Republic's agenda in Mali is shaped by a security and defence outlook. Its participation in Takuba (60 special forces) comes on the heels of military contributions to MINUSMA and in particular EUTM Mali.[12] For the latter, Prague has provided force protection units and trainers since 2013 (85 soldiers in late 2021) and, twice, the Force Commander (in 2020 and 2022). Prague has taken a number of measures to back up its military involvement. In 2018, it adopted an inter-ministerial Sahel strategy. The following year, the embassy in Bamako (closed in 1968) reopened. Two years later, the post of

[12] This paragraph is based on O. Horký-Hlucháň, J. Daniel, and O. Ditrych, *Stability, Sustainability and Success in the Sahel: The Next Steps for the Czech Engagement*, Prague, Institute of International Relations, 2021.

a Sahel Special Representative was created. Overall, however, the Czech footprint remains limited. Humanitarian aid and development assistance are almost non-existent. Of the small bilateral development cooperation budget (2019: €96 million) just €4 million went to the Sahel. Economic interests are marginal, with exports to the Sahel reaching €20 million in 2019. Some attention is given to migration management, due to its prominence as a major domestic policy issue. Although the Czech Republic is hardly affected by illegal migration from Africa, Prague has injected €11 million (2020-22) into migration-related policies and projects.

Estonia is a similar case.[13] While its limited political, diplomatic and economic involvement in the Sahel region is not a surprise, the extent of its military engagement is striking and to some extent outsized. Tallinn, like Prague, tries to ramp up its non-military efforts, looking for economic opportunities and diplomatic engagement, but these follow the military flag, not the other way around. Estonia has participated in EUTM Mali and MINUSMA since 2013. In 2018 it was the first partner to join France's Operation Barkhane (50 infantry troops). In 2020, it was once more the first country to pledge participation in Takuba, providing 45 special forces. With a total of 95 soldiers, Mali has become Estonia's largest military deployment abroad.

Not all Takuba coalition partners manifest a similarly stark asymmetry between their military and security focus and other forms of engagement. Denmark and Sweden have a relatively large presence in the Sahel and both vow to pursue an "integrated" approach. A mix of aid and stabilisation programs balances their equally significant military and security activities, such as their contributions to MINUSMA and CSDP missions.[14] Before joining Takuba in 2021, Denmark had deployed 70

[13] M. Mälksoo, "Que font les troupes estoniennes au Sahel ?", *Afrique XXI*, 1 October 2021.

[14] Sweden also contributed to EUTM, though not Denmark due to its CSDP opt-out. Copenhagen has however actively participated in EUCAP Sahel Mali.

troops and a helicopter as part of Operation Barkhane (2019-20), becoming the second European country after Estonia to join the French counterterrorism force.

Coalition Warfare: The Continuation of Politics by Other Means[15]

At the discursive level, official government declarations from Takuba-contributing countries echo familiar arguments that terrorism, violent conflict, and refugee and migration movements pose security risks for Europe. However, there is another, quite likely more important explanation to account for participation in Takuba.

Interviews with diplomats, defence officials and experts from troop-contributing countries strongly point to the centrality of alliance politics as an explanation. At the most basic level, European states tend to follow the lead of important allies to whom the crisis in the Sahel matters, especially if these countries – in this case France – have significant political, diplomatic and defence gravitas. In a sense, junior partners in a multinational coalition appropriate the lead nation's priorities. They do so in an effort to build their status as trustworthy, but also defence-worthy allies. A few junior partners in the Takuba coalition such as Estonia and Denmark have for a number of years pursued such an activist foreign and defence policy in the pursuit of international recognition, notably *vis-à-vis* the US and its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Put simply, the politics of contributing to military alliances seeks to acquire status, prestige and protection from major allies.[16] Recent

[15] P.A. Mello and S.M. Saideman, "The Politics of Multinational Military Operations", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2019, p. 30.

[16] A. Wivel and M. Crandall, "Punching above Their Weight, but Why? Explaining Denmark and Estonia in the Transatlantic Relationship", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2019, pp. 392-419; R.B. Pedersen and Y. Reykers, "Show Them the Flag: Status Ambitions and Recognition in Small State Coalition Warfare", *European Security*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2020, pp. 16-32; P. Viggo Jakobsen,

changes in Europe's geostrategic environment have meant that the logic of alliance politics in the guise of coalition warfare has been both reinforced and expanded to other countries.

First and foremost among these is Russia's increasingly aggressive, revisionist foreign policy, which started with the war in Georgia in 2008, followed in 2014 by the annexation of Crimea. These events have massively increased the fear of territorial threats among regional neighbours in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, fears that were confirmed by the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Second, and coinciding with the same period, was America's announced pivot to Asia (2011), followed by President Trump's (2017-21) persistent questioning of NATO. The United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU (2016), a key partner for many of these countries, was another blow which cast further doubts on collective security and defense policies, according to several interviewees. These developments have shaken traditional security premises and, from the perspective of the Central, Eastern and Northern European states, drastically reduced the predictability of their strategic environment.

Partly as a consequence, a networked approach to defence and security policies has been reinforced, where existing defence frameworks have been increasingly supplemented by minilateral and bilateral partnerships to build a "web of alliances".[17] As a 2020 Swedish defense bill explains in unequivocal terms: Sweden's participation in military missions, including ad hoc ones, "should be seen as an integral part of foreign, security and defence policy … Cooperation with actors and partners who can actively contribute to security in Sweden's immediate region is a key factor to consider".[18]

J. Ringsmose, and H. Lunde Saxi, "Prestige-Seeking Small States: Danish and Norwegian Military Contributions to US-led Operations", *European Journal of International Security*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2018, pp. 256-77.

[17] Interview with Swedish diplomat, 12 May 2021.

[18] Quoted by E. Hellquist and K. Tidblad-Lundholm, *National Defence and International Military Missions – The Swedish Armed Forces at home and abroad*

France plays a significant role in these considerations.[19] It has unique security and foreign policy features in Europe and the EU that make it an indispensable actor. In the post-Brexit EU, France has by far the most powerful army, is its sole nuclear power and the only permanent representative on the UN Security Council. Its ambitions to strengthen European defence and its operational focus make it a natural centre of gravity for many European countries in search of credible defence partners. Supporting French led military operations is a manifestation of alliance politics as a means for junior partners to develop or maintain closer political, security and defence ties with France, not only but notably as regards its military deployments as part of Nato's deterrence posture in northern and eastern Europe. Coalition partners are quite explicit as to the reciprocal nature of this solidarity, which works both ways. Recurrent phrases like "solidarity", "transactional", "give-and-take" describe the expectation that by "being a good partner", a "good ally" who "puts some eggs in the French basket", one will generate political returns, "reputation wins", or to paraphrase a Nordic diplomat: "Such contributions are helpful to be a partner to larger countries, because we want them to be our partner too".[20] For their part, French officials know that their contribution to deterrence in Northern and Eastern Europe is instrumental in convincing states from these regions to "take risks and send troops to theatres that are important for us", that is, France.[21]

Finally, many coalition partners associate Takuba with the specific purpose that military cooperation under real and non-permissive conditions enhances the capacities of their armed

---

1958–2020, Stockholm, FOI, 2021, p. 53.

[19] For the case of Estonia, see K. Stoicescu and M. Lebrun, *Estonian-French Defence Cooperation: Where Estonian Pragmatism Meets French Vision*, Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, August 2019.

[20] All quotes from government officials of Takuba-participating states.

[21] Assemble Nationale, Rapport d'information no. 2114, par la Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées.

forces as well as interoperability with allies.[22] Interoperability is the operational dimension of the strategic goal of strengthening defence cooperation with partners. This does extend beyond France. For Nordic states in particular, the opportunity to deploy alongside regional neighbours under real operational conditions is an important incentive to take part in Takuba. It is little surprise, then, that Estonia is a valued partner in Paris as a frequent first-joiner of French-led coalitions, helping to draw in other European countries.

These convergent national interests between France and its junior partner do not mean that all of the latter endorse the French vision of European "Strategic Autonomy" over fears of alienating the US. There is now an uncontested consensus for the greater need of defence and security ambitions in Europe. Divergences concern the way forward. While some insist on the political centrality of the EU (e.g. Germany), France and other countries with an expeditionary-leaning culture are frustrated by the EU's mismatch between institutional and operational progress, advocating instead for pragmatism and flexibility when conducting military operations. In this view, ad hoc coalitions such as Takuba are not only necessary in the face of the EU's frequent inability to put words into military action. In the French view, experiments such as Takuba do not undermine the EU; rather, they are complementary and support the process of strategic convergence among EU member states.[23]

While member states' frustrations about tedious decision-making processes and institutional constraints in Brussels are widely articulated, the promises of ad hoc coalitions in general and Takuba in particular may be less substantive than the official French discourse likes to concede. As has long been recognised, multinational coalitions have downsides, and ad hoc coalitions are no exception.[24] For example, for all the talk

[22] Several interviews with officials.

[23] Interviews with French defense officials, 19 May and 6 July 2021.

[24] O. Schmitt, "More Allies, Weaker Missions? How Junior Partners Contribute to Multinational Military Operations", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 40, no. 1,

about the alleged speed of ad hoc coalitions, setting up Takuba was a time-consuming process that took almost three years to conclude between the original idea (2018) and the declaration of full operational capability in April 2021. What is more, France has had to realise that leading a multinational operation places demands and heavy responsibilities on the framework nation to support and sustain its junior partners. As French officials concede, this puts a significant burden even on a politically and militarily potent state like France.

The EU's Strategic Compass of 2022 indicates that EU member states may take steps to reconcile politico-institutional considerations with more ambitious defence policies.[25] It invokes the possible activation of Article 44 of the Treaty of the EU, whereby "the Council may entrust the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task". Since an Article 44 operation would still require consensus among member states, its merits in overcoming a lack of political will are subject to discussion. However, such missions may still be preferable to its alternative insofar as they would carry the EU flag and have more political legitimacy than pure ad hoc coalitions.[26]

Conclusion

Over the past decade Europeans have deployed a diversity of instruments to help stabilise Mali and the Sahel region. One noteworthy innovation has been the Takuba ad hoc coalition which was designed to assist, advise and accompany Malian army units into operations. While anecdotal evidence suggests the potential merits of delivering security force assistance at the

2019, pp. 70-84.

[25] J. Puglierin, *Direction of force: The EU's Strategic Compass*, Berlin, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 1 April 2021.

[26] L. Scazzieri, Could EU-Endorsed ‚Coalitions of the Willing' Strengthen EU Security Policy?, London, Center for European Reform, 9 February 2022.

higher end of the military spectrum, the short life span of the operation does not allow a thorough assessment.

More relevant for the purpose of this paper are the intra-European political dynamics and the converging national interests that have underpinned the Takuba coalition, which ultimately turned Mali into a testing ground for an unprecedented European military ad hoc alliance. France, as the lead nation, has achieved significant political success by building an ad hoc coalition outside existing institutions for a risky military operation on the periphery of Europe. While Paris associated Takuba with political and military burden sharing (in that order), most of its junior partners conceived of the operation, inter alia, as a useful way to engage in "contribution warfare" where the political purpose of employing force is not so much to effect change on the ground ("stabilisation"), but to support a more powerful coalition partner.[27] Being a force provider becomes an end in itself as junior partners seek to translate their participation into reputation wins. They want to be recognised as good and useful allies who are not only recipients, but also contributors to collective security endeavours.

Highlighting contribution warfare does not mean reducing the use of force to this purpose alone. A few Takuba contributing countries have a large and diverse footprint in Mali and the Sahel, in particular Denmark and Sweden. But even in the case of these countries, the logic of alliance politics is clearly at work to strengthen strategic and operational ties with France and other European partners in the face of an increasingly insecure international environment. Russia is the single most important factor in these considerations, both with regard to eastern and northern Europe, but also increasingly as a competing actor on Europe's southern flank.

---

[27] J. Ångström, "Contribution Warfare: Sweden's Lessons of the War in Afghanistan", *Parameters*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2020, pp. 61-72.

Taken together, these factors have contributed to Takuba's emergence as a remarkable form of inter-regional European cooperation. The Task Force belies long-held beliefs about the conflicting national priorities and perceptions of Nordic/east European and south European states, which had been regarded as a structural obstacle to a common defence policy. Pragmatism increasingly determines the choice of operational formats. In the case of Takuba, national interests, not institutional CSDP politics, determine collective action. The Task Force is therefore an interesting case to explore the dynamics and prospects of European defence cooperation, which possibly reflects the operational implementation of growing defence and security policy ambitions of a growing number of European states.[28]

This should not distract from the fact that European crisis management in Mali and the Sahel has been largely ineffective over the past decade, partly due to very diverse sets of interests and approaches across national, multilateral and minilateral activities. The self-representations of the Europeans as a benign force with appropriate "comprehensive" frameworks stands at odds with the reality of a patchwork that may represent little more than the sum of its parts. The developments of recent months, with Mali's embrace of Russia and the political schism between Bamako and Paris should not blind Europeans to the necessity of critical self-introspection.[29] If involvement in the Sahel can help European security and defence policies to advance and to mature, this is good news for Europe. But it will only be meaningful if Europe's contributions to crisis management in the Sahel become more effective and pay greater attention to local concerns and priorities.

---

[28] H. Meijer and M. Wyss, "Upside down: Reframing European Defence Studies", *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 378-406.

[29] D.M. Tull, "Security Force Assistance under Geopolitical Stress: The EU's 'Strategic Review' of its CSDP Missions in Mali", Megatrends Afrika, spotlight 09, 09, 20 June 2022.

7. The Role of Foreign Actors in the Sahel Crisis: Russia, China, and Turkey

Babacar Ndiaye, Pathé Dieye

In recent years, the Sahel has been characterised by a wave of armed violence and chronic insecurity. The countries of the area have suffered repeated attacks claiming thousands of lives, while military seizures of power in Mali and Burkina Faso have contributed to fuelling regional instability. Civilian populations are the most affected by insecurity and remain the main victims of terrorism in the region. The greatest number of casualties from terrorist attacks occur in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad (as well as in Nigeria, which borders the Sahel).

Foreign military actors – such as the Barkhane force, the UN stabilisation mission and the military training mission deployed by the EU (EUTM Mali) – alongside the defence forces of countries in the region and the G5 Sahel, have put in place strategies and responses to securitise the Sahel, but the overall outcome remains mixed. This approach has shown its limits in effectively fighting terrorist groups in a context increasingly characterised by local opposition to external military presence, most notably France's.

Following the 2021 coup d'état in Bamako, relations between France and Malian authorities have been deteriorating dramatically against a backdrop of growing tensions. In 2022, after nine years of military presence in Mali, France has finally been driven out of the country by the ruling junta. In this context, third countries like Russia, China and Turkey are

gradually filling the void being left by France and its European allies – which have redeployed their military assets outside Mali and reduced their overall military presence in the Sahel – to assert their own presence in this region of Africa. From the proliferation of diplomatic representations to the funding of strategic infrastructure and the provision of security support, these three countries are increasingly strengthening their footprint. Available resources, in particular, are being employed to win back former partners or to expand their sphere of influence in the Sahel and beyond.

Russia: An Old Ally Making a Comeback in the Sahel

In August 2020, a coup d'état[1] led by Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrew Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta a year after he won re-election for a second term. Bah N'Daw, a retired colonel, took over as *interim* President. Following a disagreement arising from a ministerial reshuffle, Assimi Goïta assumed sole control over the government on 24 May 2021, through what was called "a coup within the coup".

The move met with widespread condemnation from France, which was already facing waves of opposition as Malian authorities sought to diversify their alliances to breathe new life into the fight against terrorism. The divorce did not take long. On 17 February 2022, President Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of French and European military forces from Mali nine years after the beginning of its intervention, promising to reorganise the operation in other countries of the Sahel and in the Gulf of Guinea. The collapse of diplomatic and military relations between Mali and its European partners marked the turning of the tide for Russia.

[1] A. Taylor, "The first coup d'état of the coronavirus era", *The Washington Post*, August 2020.

Russian presence in Africa has been apparent in countries such as the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Egypt. While it has arguably been more prominent in Mali in recent months than in the past two years, a brief glance at history reminds us that Mali turned to the Eastern bloc as early as 1961, led by Modibo Keita, who championed the Marxist-oriented ideals of the anti-colonial struggle. In the 1960s, the Eastern bloc was one of Mali's main trading partners, accounting for 42% of trade.[2]

Moscow is not a new ally for Bamako; rather, it is taking advantage of the new political context created by transitional military authorities and France's missteps in order to reclaim a historical position. From a political and diplomatic perspective, enjoying the support of Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council represents a significant asset for a putschist regime which is poorly legitimated and increasingly isolated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the international community.

Post-Barkhane: Wagner, the new military option

On the military front, the presence of private Russian instructors has finally been reported in Mali. The privately-owned company Wagner Group, which made headlines with its involvement in the Central African Republic, is a Russian mercenary firm operating in various theatres of conflict. It is considered to be close to the Kremlin, though Russian authorities have systematically denied this claim. With the same modus operandi applied in Sudan and CAR, Wagner has proposed a tailored response to Mali's search for security assistance. In particular, Wagner's strategy involves a three-pronged approach.[3]

---

[2] M. Touron, "Le Mali, 1960-1968. Exporter la Guerre froide dans le pré carré français", Bulletin de l'Institut Pierre Renouvin 2017/1 (no. 45), pp. 83-95.

[3] R. Parens, *The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Eurasia Program, Reports, 18 March 2022,

First, it conducts pro-government disinformation and information warfare strategies, including fake polls and counter-protest techniques. Second, it obtains payment for its services via concessions in mining industries, including precious metal extraction; in this regard, Wagner is prohibitively expensive: according to leaks, alongside the right of access to three mining deposits of gold and magnesium, 6 billion CFA francs, or about $10.8 million,[4] per month will be paid by Malian authorities for 1,000 men.[5]

Third, Wagner becomes involved with the country's military, developing a direct relationship with the Russian army, usually through training, advice, personal security guaranteed to ruling authorities and counter-insurgency operations. Throughout this process, the involvement of Russia's foreign policy establishment is clear, notably as a beneficiary of the military's relationship to a new client country.

If Malian authorities have changed their tune as a result of the failure of European armed forces to defeat terrorist groups after a decade of combat, it must be recognised that Wagner's approach is unconventional, as demonstrated by their performance in Libya and the Central African Republic, where human rights violations and widespread abuses against civilians have been reported.[6] To date, the Malian government has never confirmed the presence of the Wagner group, though the commander of AFRICOM (US Africa Command) is adamant that Russian mercenaries are present on Malian soil with the backing of the Russian military.[7] Recently, the Malian army and Wagner's mercenaries have been accused of carrying out civilian

[4] J. Irish and D. Lewis, "EXCLUSIVE Deal allowing Russian mercenaries into Mali is close – sources", *Reuters*, 13 September 2021.

[5] J.-B. Ronzon, *Russie/Afrique : une relation ancienne mise en lumière par l'intervention du groupe Wagner au Mali,* Fondation Jean Jaurès, *9 February 2022*.

[6] "Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces", *Human Rights Watch*, May 2022.

[7] A. Mahshie, "Townsend: Russia Added to Instability in Africa with New Air Defenses in Mali", *Air Force Magazine*, 26 July 2022.

massacres in the central town of Moura, where, according to the NGO Human Rights Watch, some 300 civilians were executed between 27 and 31 March 2022.[8]

A soft power that smells of weapons

Beyond the military aspects of Wagner's mercenaries, the Kremlin also spreads its influence through arms sales. After the fall of the USSR, Russian influence in the continent began to grow, starting gradually in the 2000s. Russian soft power could not have been achieved without weaponry. In 2019, Russia was the main arms dealer in Africa, accounting for 44% of arms imports to Africa.[9] Over the period 2014-2019, it provided 49% of the arms sold to the continent, far ahead of other main suppliers: the United States (14%), China (13%) and France (6.1%).[10]

At the first Russo-African summit in Sochi in October 2019, 92 agreements, contracts and memorandums of understanding were signed for a total amount of 1.004 trillion roubles.[11] The bulk of the agreements signed were in the field of "export and foreign trade, international cooperation, high technology, transport and logistics, mining and exploration, investment and banking".

Russia is still playing the military assistance and armament card in the Sahel too. Today, 80% of the Malian army's military equipment is Russian.[12] In September 2021, Mali's Minister of Defence Sadio Camara announced the acquisition of four military helicopters supplied by Russia. Colonel Camara indicated that this delivery was the product of a cooperation contract signed with Russia in December 2020 and which entered into force in June 2021. On 10 August 2022, Mali

[8] "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers", *Human Rights Watch*, 5 April 2022.
[9] "En Afrique, le commerce des armes russes se porte bien", *DW*, March 2022.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Summit Africa, Russia–Africa, Key Conclusions.
[12] "Le Mali et la Russie poursuivent leur coopération militaire 'sans Wagner'", *TV5 Monde*, 11 November 2021.

received five military jets and a combat helicopter from Russia, showing Moscow's prominent role as a close ally in its fight against a long-running jihadist insurgency.

China Can No Longer Ignore the Need to Be a Military Actor in the Sahel

Since 2001, China has propelled itself as an important economic and political actor in Africa thanks to its "open door"[13] policy, officially launched in 2001, and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[14] in 2013. While Beijing's first footprints were made in the financial and industrial fields, today China, as a global power, can no longer afford to be absent from the security challenges of the Sahel.

A military approach to defend national interests

China's involvement in the Sahel as a security provider has been primarily driven by the need to defend its growing economic interests on the continent. Indeed, it is an apparatus deployed to defend Chinese workers, as, according to some estimates, there are more than 10,000 Chinese companies in Africa, one million Chinese immigrants and approximately 260,000 workers in the "One Belt One Road" programme alone.[15]

---

[13] Three decades ago, Deng Xiaoping steered China on to the path of "reform" and "opening" to the outside world. Twenty years later, in 2001, as part of the Tenth Five Year Plan (2001-05), Chinese authorities unveiled a strategy for Chinese companies "going abroad" (*zouchuqu* 走出去, articles 1 and 2). This was a veritable turning point in China's relations with the world at large, in both the economic and political domains.

[14] The Belt and Road Initiative is one of China's most ambitious projects. It involves partnering with dozens of countries around the world through trade and infrastructure projects, such as shipping lanes, railroads, and airports. Supporters say it's a way for China to invest in emerging markets and strengthen ties.

[15] P. Nantulya, "Considérations relatives à une éventuelle nouvelle base navale chinoise en Afrique", Centre d'Etudes Stratégiques de l'Afrique, May 2022.

Now China needs to strengthen its credibility as a great power and to better position itself on geopolitical issues. Through its engagement in the Sahel, China also has an opportunity to test its military arsenal against new asymmetric threats.[16]

2011 was a turning point. For the first time, Chinese troops were deployed on the African continent when Beijing dispatched a frigate to the Libyan coast to monitor the evacuation of 35,000 Chinese citizens from the country. This episode highlighted the absence of Chinese defence mechanisms in the continent. The Sahel-China military relationship reached a real milestone in 2013, when China for the first time sent an infantry company to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 2100, to preserve the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.[17]

In recent years, China has stepped up its contribution to the UN peacekeeping budget and troops, most of which are deployed in Africa. As of July 2019 China ranked 11th in terms of troop contributions to all UN missions, and makes the largest troop contribution among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. In 2019, China pledged $45 million to the G5-Sahel joint force and $1.5 million for the operation of the permanent secretariat. At other times, it has joined forces with Russia to block certain resolutions on Mali initiated by other UN Security Council members[18].

Beyond Mali, Burkina Faso represents a diplomatic success for China in its attempt to further isolate Taiwan. In January 2019, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Burkina Faso, one of Beijing's last remaining allies pried from Taiwan, and pledged 300 million Chinese renminbi ($44 million) in support of the regional G5 Sahel force. Beijing was thus formalising its

[16] A.J. Leigh, "The Dragon's Game in the Sahel", *Accord*, 10 December 2021.

[17] G. Grieger, China's growing role as a security actor in Africa, Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), European Parliament, October 2019.

[18] "China's Foreign Policy in the Sahel: Challenges and Prospects", *Orcasia*, 25 May 2022.

commitment after gaining new diplomatic representation in the country in July 2018.

Looking at Niger, besides infrastructure building and trade China is Niamey's third largest military partner, after France and the United States. For several years now, China has been supplying equipment to the Nigerien armed forces and training officers for them every year.[19]

Turkey: A Puzzling and Growing Actor

Soon after coming to power in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared his intention of increasing the country's presence on the African continent. To this end, he has equipped Turkey with the resources necessary to pursue this policy by making more than 40 official visits to Africa and multiplying the invitations extended to African officials. With a strategy aimed at strengthening economic and commercial interests, the amount of Turkish foreign direct investment has increased from $100 million in 2003 to $6.5 billion in 2017[20].

Though some accusations border on conspiracy, evidence shows that Turkey is increasingly betting on defence. Turkey's defence exports to Africa have risen from $83 million in 2020 to $288 million in 2021,[21] a threefold increase in just one year. To date, almost half of the African states have signed a defence cooperation agreement with Turkey.[22] This revival of defence agreements is in line with the increasing militarisation of states facing multiple threats, including from Al-Shabaab in Somalia and in nearby Kenya, Boko Haram in Nigeria,

[19] J.-P. Cabestan, "Beijing's 'Going Out' Strategy and Belt and Road Initiative in the Sahel: The Case of China's Growing Presence in Niger", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 28, Issue 118, 2019.

[20] B. Gönültaş and T. Çakmak, " La politique d'ouverture de la Turquie porte ses fruits", AA GRAPHIQUE - Afrique, February 2018.

[21] M. Bayram, "Turkiye: Rising power in defense of Africa", AA Afrique, ANALYSIS May 2022.

[22] Ibid.

and civil wars in the Central African Republic, to name a few.

The Sahel is a case in point to understand the main elements of Ankara's growing engagement in the continent. Turkey is increasingly capitalising on the vacuum left by Western powers to offer training and logistical support to the regional armies. This new presence has given rise to concerns, misgivings and occasional finger-pointing.

Ankara advances its military pawns in Mali and Niger

Turkey's presence in the Sahel – which has significantly expanded since 2005, the "Year of Africa" – is largely dominated by an economic, commercial and cultural approach. But more and more, Ankara shows the need to leave its mark militarily, despite Western grumbling and competition with Arab countries. Like many other actors, Turkey quickly used the argument of providing investment to justify military engagement. In order to support the fight against Islamist insurgents in the "three borders" zone between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, Erdogan's government handed over a $5million "envelope" to the G5 Sahel Force in 2018.[23]

A year after France announced the closure of its Madama base in northern Niger, not far from the border with Libya, Ankara signed a defence pact with Niamey, thus laying the groundwork for operational support. This agreement reportedly includes training of Nigerien forces by the Turkish army and the latter's help in strengthening security on the borders with Burkina Faso.

Since 2018, Turkey has also been hosting Malian officers for training. Labelled as opportunistic and aggressive, Ankara's involvement has raised concerns in the EU and among Gulf countries – the latter even accused Turkey of financing and training terrorists – while contributing to making the already over-militarised Sahel a battleground for world powers.

[23] H. Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel", International Crisis Group (ICG), 27 July 2021.

"The force" of soft power

Taking advantage of a common religious identity, Ankara is building alliances with the construction of mosques, hospitals and export markets. The Turkish conquest of Africa has been felt particularly through the acceleration of embassy openings. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has actually quadrupled over the past two decades, reaching almost 43 embassies.[24] In the process, between 2016 and 2020, Turkish officials intensified their visits to most of the Sahel and West African countries, including Chad, Sudan, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Togo, Niger, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, Gambia and Ivory Coast.

After opening embassies in Bamako in 2010, Ouagadougou in 2012 and Niamey in the same year, Turkey renovated the Great Mosque and the Palace of the Sultan of Aïr, and built mosques in Mali. With the deployment of mobile clinics in provincial towns in Mali, such as Koulikoro and Sikasso, and the construction of hospitals in Bamako and Niamey, Ankara has made its mark in the health sector.

Turkey also leverages active diplomacy, as demonstrated in the Ukrainian crisis. The agreement signed on Friday 22 July 2022 in Istanbul under the aegis of the United Nations provides for the establishment of secure corridors to allow the movement of merchant ships in the Black Sea and the export of 20-25 million tons of grain blocked in Ukraine. In the context of price hikes linked to the war in Ukraine, specifically for grain products, African countries raised the alarm and emphasised the urgency of the crisis. Senegalese President Macky Sall, current chairman of the African Union, delivered several urgent messages regarding the food situation. In particular, he called for a return to normalcy in which African countries can purchase grain from the two countries at war. During his most recent trips, the head of Russian diplomacy reassured African officials on the progress of grain deliveries.

[24] "Turkey's Expansion in the Sahel, the Sahara and West Africa: Motivations and Ramifications", Emirates Policy Center, August 2020.

Ankara could gain points in this food diplomacy because West Africa and the Sahel region are particularly dependent on grain imports from the world's breadbaskets, notably Russia and Ukraine. As a result, rising prices and scarcity of commodities expose an additional 7-10 million people to food insecurity in the region.[25] Indeed, by proposing to open grain corridors to avoid famine, Turkey is reminding everyone of the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea basin, in which it is a major player, and its straits (Bosporus - Dardanelles).

The New Faces of Realpolitik in the Sahel

Unlike France, Russia and China do not impose any conditions related to democracy or human rights on their partnerships. Emphasising equal partnership rhetoric, Turkey prioritises investment in large-scale infrastructure development, education, agriculture and health programmes. Like China, it criticises the neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism that US and French actors are accused of. By asserting their "soft power" and using new narratives based on a balanced and "non-paternalistic" bilateral relationship, these new actors are more likely to be embraced by public opinion in Sahelian countries.

These new stakeholders, which are significant competitors for France and its allies, leverage alternative forms of cooperation with the Sahelian countries to pursue economic and geopolitical interests in a highly unstable region. The Sahelian countries must be more strategic in their choices if they wish to avoid becoming a hotbed and misinformation battleground for rivalry between the former colonial great powers and emerging nations.

Given the way these actors are redefining their strategy in the Sahel, one could already read this situation as potentially leading to a hyper-militarisation of the Sahel. All actors are

[25] S. Ehui, C. Jenane, and Kaja Waldmann, "La guerre en Ukraine aggrave la crise alimentaire qui sévit déjà en Afrique de l'Ouest et au Sahel", World Bank, 13 April 2022.

emphasising that the solution to the security crisis in the Sahel is not exclusively based on military measures, but these countries are transforming the region as a means of widening the space for geopolitical competition and influence. The Sahelian countries, in expanding their range of strategic partners, should not fall into the trap of becoming new pawns in a proxy war and finding themselves choosing between sides in rivalries that are not their own.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Giovanni Carbone

When, on 17 February 2022, Paris announced it was pulling out all of its troops from Mali ending a nine-year operation, Europe and the world were already looking somewhere else. Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, a feared prospect that materialised only a few days after the French declaration, sparking an international crisis that has dominated world affairs ever since. As with the pandemic of the previous two years, the new scenario only marginally and occasionally allowed Africa to re-enter the frame. It did so when the UN General Assembly voted on the invasion, when food inflation and food insecurity spiralled following the blockade of Ukrainian exports, and when European Union (EU) Member States began their hurried search for alternative energy supplies to replace Russia's.

Ukraine's drama thus diverted attention away from Africa, traditionally a weak spot for international interest. This was in spite of recent calls, at the highest echelons of the EU, for the continent to be made a major priority[1]. All of a sudden, much of this seemed to wane. The Sahel, in particular, for which the EU itself had adopted a new integrated strategy in 2021, was no longer the primary focus of European security concerns and policies, as Denis Tull observes in his chapter of this volume.

[1] See, for example, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Embracing Europe's Power», *Project Syndicate*, 8 February 2020; European Union - African Union, *A Joint Vision for 2030*, 6th European Union - African Union Summit, February 2022.

The recent diversion happened at a time when the West was already losing ground across, and trust among, a number of African countries, from Senegal to Ethiopia and South Africa, and most notably in parts of the Sahel. Anti-French sentiment, narratives and protests, most consequentially, had helped the military grab power in Mali and Burkina Faso. France was stepping back at a time when Russia strived to expand its cooperation with states in the region. For the Sahel, global attention, direct military presence and pro-West narratives were all on the retreat.

What was not waning, however, was the relevance of the Sahel. As a matter of fact, all the reasons that had led to European involvement in the region are still there, and far from diminished. It was not a "mission accomplished" that led France to leave Mali, but rather the unsustainable disagreements with the military junta that had installed itself in Bamako. In a vast and poorly governed region perceived to be on the doorstep of Europe, jihadi insecurity and weak capacity for managing migration flows – as well as mounting climate vulnerabilities in an underdeveloped area with some of the world's fastest growing populations – remain worrying features.

Meanwhile, concern is also growing with regard to a number of West African coastal countries, whose northern regions bordering the Sahel – and in particular Burkina Faso – have become the object of occasional jihadist raids, as in Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo. Lomé recently turned to Ankara's drones to strengthen its capacity vis-à-vis the threat posed by jihadi militants in the north. Ghana too sent reinforcement troops to patrol its frontier.

The war in Europe thus combined with France's withdrawal from Mali and opened a new phase for the European presence in the Sahel. At a time when, in the context of deepening global rivalries, Russia, Turkey and others are gaining influence in the region, there is evidence of a growing distance between Europe and significant segments of Sahelian societies.

Developments in Mali have shown this vividly. Back in 2012, a desperate government called in France for help. Ten years on, a different, junta government in Bamako showed French soldiers the door. In both cases, many Malians appeared to be jubilant. Underlying the same mood, however, were deeply changed views about France, turned from saviour to villain. While part of this popular resentment is evidently aimed at Paris – its long-established influence as much as its direct military involvement in the region – the target is actually somewhat broader.

France has long been considered Europe's, if not the West's, main arm in Africa. When France is targeted, it is the role of the West that is being questioned. Across different corners of the continent, anti-Westernism has been on the rise, as borne out by a resurgence of narratives and perceptions, feelings and choices, all of which share the idea that African countries continue to be unfairly exploited and unduly influenced by traditional partners. In Anglophone states in the region, for example, the death of Queen Elizabeth did not simply elicit widespread sympathy for British royals and mourners, but was also (legitimately) framed by African opinion-makers as first and foremost a historic rather than a media event, fuelling long-standing grievances alongside a sense of distance[2].

Yet Europe, with all its pitfalls and failures, has been by far the international partner most strongly engaged for stability in Africa. For Sahelian states and populations, besides their own efforts, European countries may still be the best bet for regaining security. (This is in spite of the narrative of France's total failure to achieve its goal of "eradicating terrorism": Paris' primary objective over the past decade was actually to help states in the region build their own capacity to restore security). Today, however, European battles are not fought on the ground alone but, more importantly, it is the hearts and minds of Africans that must be won over. The Sahel is central to this struggle, but the implications will reach beyond it.

[2] Queen Elizabeth II's death ignites sensitive debate over Africa's colonial past", *France24.com*, 12 September 2022.

The different chapters in this collective volume have dug deep into the facets and dynamics of conflicts in the Sahel, while also accounting for the underlying political developments and socioeconomic challenges. As is most often the case in war-torn and poor areas of the world, the politics, the fighting and the development side of the crisis can only be understood if taken together. And they essentially also need coordinated efforts in addressing them. In strengthening international endeavours to cope with the evolving crisis in the Sahel, the following caveats and recommendations should be part of European reflections:

1. *Winning back the minds of Sahelian populations.* Europeans must come to terms with the extent of the emerging anti-Western turn in parts of the Sahel. Efforts aimed at bringing back security and development in a neighbouring region that remains key to Europe will have to start from there. For Africans who are losing trust in Europe, that trust must be mended and rebuilt. The Sahel itself, in the medium and long term, will be best served by Western political and economic models – as difficult as their establishment, functioning and consolidation remains – based on pluralism and freedom, rather than by the autocratic schemes and practices promoted by key alternative partners. This should be done while minimising the risk of stoking and deepening geopolitical rivalries in a fragile region. In their quest for collective action EU Member States should not lose sight of the needs of local partners and make sure that there is not a mismatch between what partners need and what the EU may put on the table in terms of offers.
2. *Adopting a long-term perspective*. External support should not simply be driven by immediate security imperatives – most notably the need to defend countries from and to eradicate jihadist movements – but should invest in change over the long term, particularly with regard to strengthening state institutions, by making the latter more inclusive, effective and legitimate, and to

correcting development trajectories, again by making them more inclusive. This necessitates empowering state actors, and engaging with private sector and non-governmental groups only in ways that do not undermine or displace state institutions. Short-term actions that risk undermining long term goals should be avoided or, where indispensable, be kept to a minimum.

3. *Leveraging on a young population*. The Sahel's vast and young population largely made up of very young people – forced by circumstances to be highly entrepreneurial, risk-accepting, innovative and indeed daring – is an extremely valuable asset. Like all resources, this requires investment to be useful. Only a massive, consistent and long-term investment in education and economic activities that build opportunities for youth can add value to this resource.
4. *Maintaining a long-term goal of democratisation*. The normative goal of more democratic political systems should guide external initiatives. Building states that are legitimate in the eyes of local populations, as well as capable and resilient, requires recognising that a democracy perceived as legitimate must be one that resonates with the values of the rural, African and Muslim majorities of the Sahel, and that these may or may not entirely coincide with the values of external actors or of local elite groups with international connections. Europe should sponsor initiatives that contribute to promoting and prioritising good governance and transparency, including freedom of association and expression, investigative media, watchdog civil societies, effective anti-corruption authorities, and independent judiciaries.
5. *Supporting fair and effective governance of natural resources*. Effective formal or informal governance must ensure fair access to the natural resources that support a range of livelihoods in the Sahel – and strengthen the capacity of local communities facing climate changes –, promoting

local cooperation and containing conflict pressures. Natural resource governance is also an important entry point for building stronger collaboration between the traditionally separate peace/security and climate/environment parts of the development and peacebuilding systems.

6. *Making responses to climate change conflict-sensitive, and responses to conflict climate-sensitive*. Initiatives addressing the effects of climate change must take into account their interaction with or potential for creating local conflicts. Mitigation and adaptation programmes should be designed and implemented in a way that does not increase the risk of local violence, or feed into bigger conflict dynamics. Symmetrically, measures aimed at curbing ongoing violent conflict need to be made climate-sensitive. At a minimum, peacekeeping missions and military forces should ensure that their operations do not exacerbate local climate vulnerabilities; better yet would be the explicit inclusion of the effects of climate change on local communities in conflict analyses and peacebuilding.
7. *Promoting better governance of artisanal goldmining*. Artisanal gold mining has come to represent a key economic activity and an essential source of livelihoods for many local communities in different parts of the Sahel, especially in the remotest Saharan regions. Participatory exploitation schemes must be promoted that involve local dwellers in sustainable development and peer control.
8. *Activating Article 44 of the European Union Treaty*. To accelerate collective action in the Sahel, the EU should consider activating Article 44. The article allows the Council to assign a task in the field of common security and defence policy to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability to carry it out.

About the Authors

Giovanni Carbone is Head of the Africa Programme at ISPI and Professor of Political Science at the Università degli Studi di Milano. His research focus is the comparative study of politics, geopolitics and economic development in sub-Saharan Africa, with particular regard to political institutions. He was previously a Research Associate at the Crisis States Programme of the London School of Economics and the Principal Investigator of a research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC). His latest book is *Political leadership in Africa. Leaders and development south of the Sahara* (with Alessandro Pellegata, 2020).

Camillo Casola is a policy analyst and cooperation officer at the European Commission (DG International Partnerships), and an associate research fellow with ISPI Africa programme. His research interests are mainly focused on West Africa and the Sahel. He earned a PhD in International Studies (African history and institutions) at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy, with a dissertation on the Malian crisis and the agency of international and local actors. He was a visiting PhD at the Centre Émile Durkheim (CED), Bordeaux. He is currently working on strategic partnerships between the EU, Africa and the OACPS (Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States) at DG INTPA.

Pathé Dieye is a research fellow and project manager at the WATHI think tank. He holds a Master's degree in Political Science with a specialization in international relations. His research focuses on governance and issues related to peacekeeping and security in West African countries. A Dalberg Talent Academy laureate and One Campaign champion, he is also a blogger and novelist.

Babacar Ndiaye is the director of research and publications of the citizen think tank WATHI based in Senegal. He holds a professional Master's in International Relations and a Master's in International Public Law from the University of Auvergne Clermont 1 (France). He has been an independent consultant on security and country risk issues in West Africa for organizations based in Europe, Canada and Africa. He has also collaborated with the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC). For this organization, he followed the political and economic news of the region and wrote thematic notes.

Today, Babacar Ndiaye works mainly on issues of governance, security and terrorism in West Africa. He speaks to the African and international media and regularly publishes articles.

Héni Nsaibia is the director of Menastream, a risk consultancy that provides intelligence analysis and bespoke services. He is also a senior researcher at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), where his work focuses on political violence in the Sahel, including conflict data collection and analysis. Nsaibia's research interests center around insurgencies and their various dimensions, particularly social dynamics of insurgencies and inter- armed group relations in Sahelian countries. In addition to his research activities, Nsaibia is regularly consulted by media and various organizations on security issues in the Sahel and North Africa. He is the co-author of *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefront* (Hurst Publishers).

Luca Raineri is a researcher in security studies at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies. His work focuses on transnational phenomena of security relevance (trafficking, crime, terrorism) with reference to Africa, European borders, and EU external action in general. He is the author of numerous scientific publications in international academic journals, contributions in books and monographs - including, most recently, *La Crisi Libica e l'Ordine Internazionale* (Carocci, 2022), and *Jihad in Africa. Terrorismo e Controterrorismo in Sahel* (Mulino, 2022, co-ed. with E. Baldaro). He is regularly consulted by media, NGOs and international organisations on matters of peacebuilding, security and development in Africa

Kheira Tarif (Algeria, UK) is a Research Assistant in the Climate Change and Risk Programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and a Non-Resident Expert at the Cordoba Peace Institute–Geneva. Her current research focuses on the pathways between climate change and violent conflict, and the implications of climate-related security risks for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Denis M. Tull is a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), where he directs the research project "Megatrends Afrika". Between 2017 and 2020, he was a research associate at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) in Paris. Recent publications include: "Contesting France: Rumors, intervention and the politics of truth in Mali", in *Critique Internationale*, (2021); "The European Union Training Mission and the Struggle for a New Model Army in Mali" (IRSEM, 2020); "Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and its International Partners", in *International Affairs* (2019).

Leonardo A. Villalón is Professor of Political Science and African Studies and founding coordinator of the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. Villalón holds a Ph.D. from

the University of Texas at Austin, and degrees from the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris, The Johns Hopkins University, and Louisiana State University. His research has focused on the political role of Islam, democratisation and elections, education, and political stability in the countries of the Sahel. He has been awarded Fulbright and Carnegie Fellowships, and his research has been funded by grants from the US State Department, the UK Department for International Development, the US DOD Minerva Initiative, and the Sahel and West Africa Club of the OECD. He has published widely on the Sahel, and is editor of the *Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*. He currently serves as chair of the board of directors of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers.