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Rethinking the response to jihadist groups across the Sahel

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Summary

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- Rather than the ideology of global jihad, the driving force behind the emergence and resilience of non-state armed groups in the Sahel is a combination of weak states, corruption and the brutal repression of dissent, embodied in dysfunctional military forces.
 - The dominant narrative of a global jihadi threat has overshadowed the reality of the key role played by military nepotism, prevarication and indiscipline in generating and continuing conflict in the Sahel – problems that long predated the ‘war on terror’. Moreover, it has pushed the international community to intervene to regulate local conflicts that have little to do with global terrorism or religious indoctrination.
 - Mali offers a clear example of this. The widespread use of poorly controlled militias, the collapse of its army, two coups – in 2012 and 2020 – and a weak state presence in rural areas, on top of a history of repression and abuse suffered by its northern population, has done much more to drive the growth of insurgent groups than did the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, Salafist indoctrination, or alleged support from Arab countries.
 - It is time to rethink the role of the international community and acknowledge its limits in this context. Today, success depends first and foremost on the goodwill (much more than on the capacity) of political leaders to reform and renew their social contract with citizens, especially in rural areas. International efforts that seek to support military action against armed groups will fail as long as impunity prevails and local armies can kill civilians and topple governments without consequence.
 - The recent experience of Niger might not offer a model that can be replicated in its entirety in Mali, or elsewhere in the Sahel, but it demonstrates that there are possibilities for improvement. Though by no means perfect, Niger’s democratic experience shows that it is possible for states in the region to overcome the legacy of their bloody and divided past.

01

Introduction

Structural problems that long predate the ‘war on terror’ underline that poor governance and the weakness of state security mechanisms lie at the root of violence in the Sahel.

The liberation war of Mali is over. It has been won. The intervention of the French military has helped this country to recover its sovereignty, restore its democratic institutions, organize elections, and foster national unity.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, 2014¹

Rather than the ideology of global jihad, the driving force behind the emergence and resilience of non-state armed groups in the Sahel is a combination of weak states, corruption and the brutal repression of dissent, embodied in dysfunctional military forces. These are structural problems that long predate the ‘war on terror’, and they serve to underline that bad governance and the weakness of state security structures, including police and justice, lie at the root of violence in the region.²

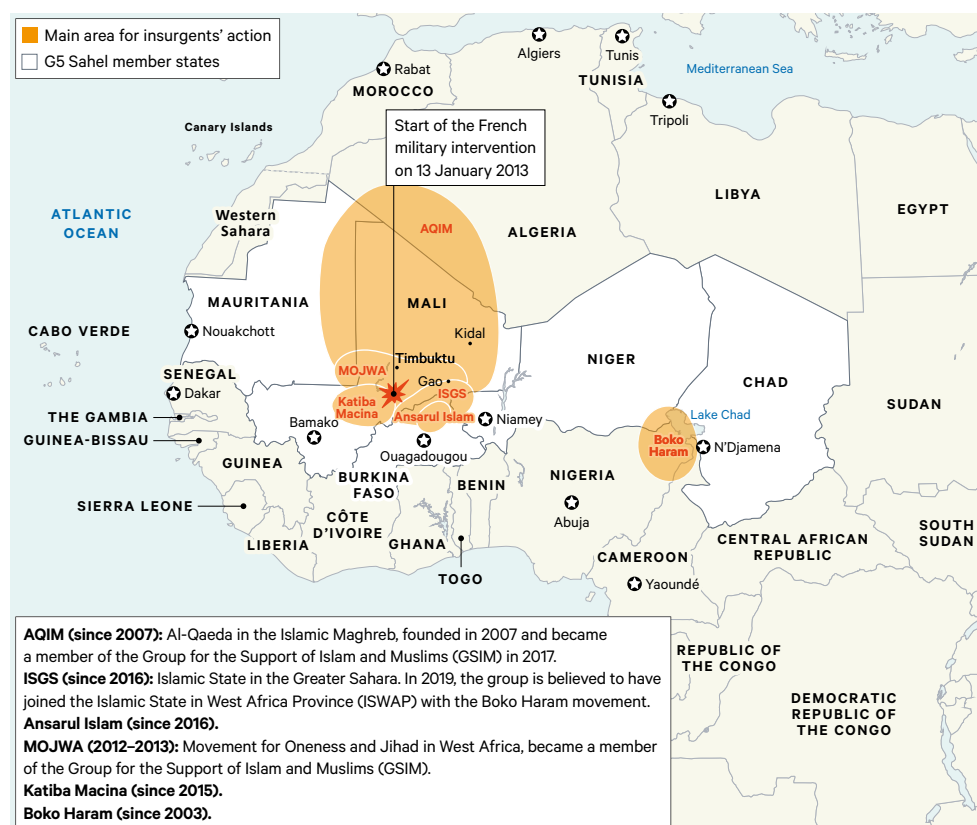
Mali offers a clear example in this regard. The collapse of its army, two coups – in 2012 and 2020 – and a weak state presence in rural areas, on top of a history of repression and abuse suffered by its northern population, have done much more to drive the growth of jihadist groups than did the fall of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya in 2011 or the rise of so-called ‘radical Islam’, the power of Salafist indoctrination and alleged support from Arab countries. By contrast, the relative resilience in recent years of Niger, a country that shares many of the structural and historical challenges faced by Mali, demonstrates that progress is possible if more inclusive governance can be built.

¹ At the time of this statement (translated here by the author), Jean-Yves Le Drian was France’s defence minister. République Française (2014), ‘Interview de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, ministre de la défense, avec RMC et BFM TV le 20 mars 2014, sur la situation en Ukraine et sur les interventions militaires au Mali et en Centrafrique’, 20 March 2014, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/190745-interview-de-m-jean-yves-le-drian-ministre-de-la-defense-avec-rmc-et>.

² In terms of geography, history and climate, the Sahel borders the southern fringe of the Sahara, from Cabo Verde to Eritrea. French decision-makers, however, tend to reduce it to the western part of the region. This space covers five francophone countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, otherwise known as the G5 Sahel) that have all signed military cooperation agreements with France.

In such a context, international responses that seek to support military action against armed groups without tackling deeper challenges of governance, especially in the domain of police, defence and justice affairs, are very unlikely to succeed. The dominant narrative of counterterrorism and religious extremism obscures underlying political grievances and dysfunctionality, and the widespread use of poorly controlled state-aligned militias to tackle insurrection – in the absence of effective state military capacity – has only served to fuel violence and worsen intercommunity tensions.³

Figure 1. Jihadist group presence in the Western Sahel



Note: The boundaries and names shown and designations used on the map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by the author or Chatham House.

Source: Map extract by the author and Eric Opigez, IRD-CEPED, based on map published in Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2018), *L'Afrique, nouvelle frontière du djihad?* Paris, La Découverte, pp. 20–21; translations for this extract by Chatham House staff.

³ The designation of insurgent groups is very political. International humanitarian law uses the word 'combatants', not 'terrorists' or 'jihadists'. In this paper, it is assumed that states in the Sahel region deal with guerrilla movements that have a social basis and whose members are commonly called 'jihadists' because they took up arms in the name of Islam, yet fight also to loot or to settle communal and personal scores. From a military point of view, the challenge is to unpack violence into different categories: terrorist, separatist, criminal, ethnic, etc. On the ground, it does not always make sense to do this, because different factors are intertwined, and combatants can easily move from one group to another according to their own needs. For the misuse of the qualification and disqualification of insurgents, see Stampnitzky, L. (2013), *Disciplining terror: how experts invented "terrorism"*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2018), *Déconstruire la guerre. Acteurs, discours, controverses*, Paris: Éditions Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

It has also resulted in the pursuit of ineffective and often counterproductive policy by international actors, which risks building resentment among Sahelian governments and citizens alike, and which over time may undermine the political will to maintain costly military cooperation at all. Undoubtedly, insurgencies in the region are a pressing issue. The ‘terrorist’ threat is the main driver of foreign support in the Sahel. Yet it might not be as global a threat as it is perceived to be, and its existence does not justify why other unstable African countries receive less attention. Moreover, international support always risks providing a security net that deters the military and the ruling class from reforming governance. In Mali, for instance, strong international support did not prevent a coup in 2020 or the expansion of so-called jihadi groups since 2013. Reframing policy away from hard-edged counterterrorism towards a more inclusive view of human security, and an emphasis on tackling the underlying challenges of governance, impunity and development, may offer a route out of the acute policy dilemma faced by those seeking peace in the Sahel.

02 Governments and armies in the Sahel: structural failures

In many states of the Sahel, pervasive impunity and indiscriminate repression have undermined popular trust in government and fuelled further conflict by pushing victims into the arms of jihadists.

States in the Sahel are diverse and face different challenges.⁴ But the repeated failures of regional militaries to contain the threat from armed groups is a product of common features of state weakness and dysfunctionality, including endemic corruption, structural disorganization, and the deliberate weakening of military cohesion and control by national leaders worried about the threat of coups. Military forces are often made up of hastily recruited, poorly trained, under-equipped and unpaid soldiers, with little knowledge of the terrain in which they operate. The result is pervasive impunity and indiscriminate repression that undermines popular trust in government and, rather than ending violence, fuels further conflict by pushing victims into the arms of jihadists.

Governments across the Sahel have little control over their security forces at the local level. In states that have transitioned from military dictatorship to democratic governance, there is significant mistrust between elected presidents and the

⁴ Among the five members of the G5 Sahel, Mali and Burkina Faso are usually seen as the weakest, in contrast to Chad and Mauritania, while Niger is perceived as being 'in between'. In the case of Mauritania, see Melly, P. (2019), *Mauritania's Unfolding Landscape: Elections, Hydrocarbons and Socio-Economic Change*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-04-11-Mauritania%27s%20Unfolding%20Landscape.pdf>.

militaries that held power before them, for example in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and, to a lesser extent, Mauritania. Out of fear for their own position, some leaders have deliberately weakened their regular armies.⁵

Corruption also impedes state control over troops on the ground. The misappropriation of soldiers' pay leads to mutinies or desertions, as has occurred in Nigeria, and contract fraud leaves them poorly equipped. In Niger, for example, an audit carried out in 2020 revealed that nearly 40 per cent of the \$312 million committed by the Ministry of National Defence between 2017 and 2019 was lost through over-invoicing or contracts that were never honoured.⁶ Even worse, security services have often been involved in arms-trafficking that directly or indirectly supplied insurgents. Again in Niger, an army captain in Niamey and a prison director in the Diffa region were caught selling part of their stocks to Boko Haram fighters in 2013.⁷ In Chad, Boko Haram obtained weapons from military officers in N'Djamena in return for vehicles stolen in Nigeria.⁸

Militaries in the Sahel are predominantly non-professional. Since independence, they have rarely fought against other states, instead being used largely for the internal repression of political opponents.

In addition, militaries in the Sahel are predominantly non-professional. Since independence, they have rarely fought against other states, instead being used largely for the internal repression of political opponents. Recruits have joined for material benefits, rather than to fight for their country, and are reluctant to confront highly motivated insurgents. Today, jihadi groups see regional militaries as very weak. Members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), for instance, are said to consider the Malian military as a mere 'inconvenience', and the UN peacekeepers as 'target practice'.⁹ Professional military observers have dismissed the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) as 'bureaucrats in uniform' or 'a comical theatre group, suitable only for military parades'.¹⁰

⁵ In Burkina Faso and Cameroon, Presidents Blaise Compaoré and Paul Biya thus created praetorian units (the Presidential Security Regiment – RSP – and Rapid Intervention Brigades – BIR, respectively) that were better paid and better equipped than regular forces, to ensure their loyalty.

⁶ Aksar, M. (2020), 'Niger lost \$120 million in arms deals over three years: government audit', Reuters, 27 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-arms-audit/niger-lost-120-million-in-arms-deals-over-three-years-government-audit-idUSKBN233215>. Similar scandals have also been seen in Nigeria and Mali. See Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2019), 'Boko Haram et les limites du tout-répressif au Nigeria: de nouvelles perspectives?', Notes de l'Ifri, July 2020, Paris: IFRI, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/boko_haram_et_les_limites_du_tout-repressif_au_nigeria_-_de_nouvelles_perspectives.pdf.

⁷ Mangan, F. and Nowak, M. (2019), *The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking*, Briefing Paper, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, p. 11, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-West-Africa-Sahel-Connection.pdf>; de TESSIÈRES, S. (2017), *Measuring Illicit Arms Flows: Niger*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, p. 5, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP1-Niger.pdf>.

⁸ Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2018), *L'Afrique, nouvelle frontière du djihad?*, Paris: La Découverte, p. 219.

⁹ Interview, 8 October 2020, between the author and Stephen McGown, Al-Qaeda's longest-held hostage in the Sahel. A South African national, McGown was detained between November 2011 and July 2017.

¹⁰ Tull, D. (March 2019), 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners', *International Affairs*, 95(2), p. 412.

The integration of former rebels into national military forces has amplified these challenges. In Mali, some Tuareg rebels were integrated into the army in 1992, only to desert in 1994 before contributing to further revolts in 2006 and 2012. Likewise, in Niger, peace agreements signed in April 1995 provided for the integration of Tuareg combatants into the National Forces for Intervention and Security (FNIS); they ultimately deserted and joined the rebellion of the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ), set up in May 2007 by a former FNIS captain.

Even Chad, a state seen as a pillar of security in the Sahel, is not free from these challenges. In power since 1990, President Idriss Déby has withstood coup attempts from numerous armed groups. In 2008, his regime would have collapsed were it not for the reported bombing by French forces of rebels approaching the presidential palace in N'Djamena. Furthermore, the Chadian military is reported to have been involved in looting, human rights violations and supporting rebel groups in the Central African Republic. In 2015 the UN asked the Chadian government to remove its troops from the country.¹¹

Human rights abuses

It appears that all the member states of the G5 Sahel also share common characteristics when it comes to abuses against civilians. Governments have done little to respond to accusations of human rights violations, either because they endorse them, because they want to protect their reputation, or because they could not punish military personnel they do not control. Laws and regulations that could be employed to bring undisciplined or criminal soldiers before judicial bodies are not applied, or are circumvented in the name of security priorities, with accommodations reached behind closed doors that very often result in the transfer of suspects rather than bringing them to justice.

The case of Mali is emblematic in this regard. The government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (who took office in 2013) has broadly avoided taking responsibility when the army or allied militias have committed atrocities, as for example in the central and southern regions of the country in 2018 and 2019. Under international pressure, the authorities condemned these crimes at the highest level and appointed commissions of inquiry, but no official reports were ever published and no trials took place.¹² The Malian state also absolved Captain Amadou Sanogo, the leader of the March 2012 coup that ousted president-elect Amadou Toumani Touré. After military intervention from France and the election of Keïta to the

¹¹ See International Crisis Group (2016), *Chad: Between Ambition and Fragility*, Africa Report No. 233, Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/chad-between-ambition-and-fragility>; International Crisis Group (2015), *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, Africa Report No. 230, Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/central-african-republic-roots-violence>.

¹² Human Rights Watch (2020), 'Combien de sang doit encore couler?' *Atrocités commises contre des civils dans le centre du Mali, 2019*, New York: Human Rights Watch, p. 70, <https://www.hrw.org/fr/report/2020/02/10/combien-de-sang-doit-encore-couler/atrocites-commises-contre-des-civils-dans-le>. Geel, F., Rabecq, A., Traoré, D. and Carayol, R. (2018), *Dans le centre du Mali, les populations prises au piège du terrorisme et du contreterrorisme: Rapport d'enquête*, Paris: International Federation for Human Rights, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fidh_centre_du_mali_les_populations_prises_au_pie_ge_du_terrorisme_et_contre_terrorisme.pdf.

presidency, Sanogo was in fact promoted to the rank of general. He did not pay compensation to the families of his victims or reimburse the public funds he was accused of misappropriating. His deputy at the time of the coup, Ibrahima Dahirou Dembélé, was reinstated in the army and was eventually appointed as minister of defence in May 2019, despite strong suspicions that he was involved in the assassination of loyalist troops during the coup. For fear of mutiny and further coups, the Malian government simply did not have the authority to sanction its own security forces.

03

The case of northern Mali

The dynamics that have seen the emergence of jihadist groups in the north and centre of Mali are deep-rooted, notably in the military response to the Tuareg rebellions of 1963 and 1990.

Taken together, these military and governance failings have been pivotal to the emergence, proliferation and persistence of armed groups across the Sahel, a pattern that is perhaps most deeply entrenched in Mali. The Malian military has played a key role in the development of jihadist groups in the north and centre of the country by failing to protect civilians, who were then forced to accept the presence of armed groups alongside their communities, or by committing abuses that pushed some into joining the insurgency. These dynamics have deep roots in Malian history, most notably in the Tuareg rebellions of 1963 and 1990.

In 1963, a simple theft of arms degenerated into insurrection because of the disproportionate response of local auxiliaries – the so-called *goumiers*. At the time, more than half of the young Malian army was mobilized in the north: up to 2,200 soldiers with armoured vehicles were sent to fight some 250 rebels. Unlike the French colonizers who had recruited Tuaregs to patrol the desert, the Malian government sent as reinforcements southern Bambara who saw the Tuaregs, whom they called *peaux rouges* ('red skins'), as enemies, and who did not understand either their rivals or the reality on the ground. Military operations caused hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deaths, and up to 40 per cent of the livestock herds in the area were lost, including through deliberate slaughter. One army commander, Captain Diby Sillas Diarra, came to be known as the 'Butcher of Kidal' after carrying out summary

executions of civilians around Kidal, Telabit and Aguelhoc in February 1964. Wells were poisoned, and women, children and Muslim clerics were killed, imprisoned or driven into forced labour.¹³

Such practices horrified not only the local population, but also the *goumiers*, some of whom joined the ranks of the insurgents, and even a former sergeant in the Malian army testified to these atrocities in his memoirs.¹⁴ ‘The brutal repression of the Malian army’, as the historian Pierre Boilley has summed it up, transformed ‘an isolated protest into a real rebellion’. It was ‘the best supplier of rebellion in men, by the hatred that it engendered’.¹⁵

The uprising of 1963 was suppressed quickly, but it left indelible traces. Politically, the Tuaregs felt completely excluded from power in Bamako. Economically, the slaughter of their livestock, the poisoning of wells and the destruction of trees to flush out the rebels and deprive them of critical resources and supply lines, exacerbated by the impact of the drought of the 1970s, pushed many into exile in revolutionary Algeria and Libya, where their radicalization laid the foundations for the rebellions of the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁶

The second Tuareg revolt, of 1990, was thus collectively perceived as a continuation of the first, in order – among other things – to avenge the deaths of 1963. Initially, the region’s nomads were rather wary of ‘Westernized’ exiles who had returned from Libya with modern and revolutionary ideas that set them against the local chieftaincy. The insurgents therefore had to pay attention to the needs of the population. Unlike in the 1963 uprising, when they had retreated to rear bases in Algeria, they decided in 1990 to stay within Mali to try to protect civilians from the security forces’ excesses.¹⁷ Instead of cutting the guerrillas off from their surrounding environment, the brutality of the repression again legitimized the revolt.

The operations of the Malian army were intended to terrorize and humiliate the Tuareg and Moorish communities. Likened to a campaign of ethnic cleansing – and called *Kokadjè* (‘cleansing’) in the Bamanakan language of the southern Bambara – they led young people to join the ranks of the insurgents. Intercepted radio communications at the time showed that the authorities had given express orders to shoot suspects in public ‘without any other form of trial’. At I-n-Abalan near Ti-n-Essako, on 29 July 1990, soldiers were to execute some unarmed 94 nomads, who were first forced to dig their own graves. Over the period from June to December 1990, it is estimated that the security forces killed between 200 and 500 civilians, including at least 125 in the first two months of the insurgency.¹⁸

¹³ Boilley, P. (1999), *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan français au Mali contemporain*, Paris: Karthala, p. 328 and Chapter 9; Lecocq, B. (2010), *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali*, Leiden: Brill, Afrika-Studiecentrum Series, vol. 19, pp. 168 and 175.

¹⁴ Mariko, A. (2001), *Mémoires d'un crocodile: du sujet français au citoyen malien*, Bamako: Editions Donniya.

¹⁵ Boilley (1999), *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*, pp. 324 and 344; author’s translation.

¹⁶ Lecocq (2010), *Disputed Desert*, p. 189.

¹⁷ They actually succeeded in doing so, at least in the beginning. The losses recorded between June and December 1990 were much higher for the Malian military (between 539 and 1,333 deaths) than for the insurgents (between 17 and 31), with a ratio of ‘twenty soldiers killed for each rebel’. See Boilley (1999), *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*, pp. 462–3 and 470.

¹⁸ Lecocq (2010), *Disputed Desert*, p. 258ff; Amnesty International (1994), *Mali: Ethnic conflict and killings of civilians*, London: Amnesty International; Boilley (1999), *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*, Chapter 12.

The conflict then escalated when the rebels began to attack sedentary communities in retaliation, which in turn drew in militias from the affected ethnic community, the Songhaï, from May 1994, further worsening the situation of civilians caught in the crossfire. Nomadic Tuaregs probably suffered 10 times more casualties than the sedentary communities. An estimated 2,500 to 3,500 civilians were killed in fighting and extrajudicial executions, with their deaths being officially attributed to rebels, militias or ‘uncontrolled military elements’.

Despite demands for justice from victims’ families, however, the authorities did not attempt to investigate these cases in order to prosecute the culprits. Instead, entire communities were stigmatized and pushed into the arms of insurgents. The so-called ‘peaux rouges’ and ‘peaux blanches’ (Tuaregs and Moors, respectively) were easy to recognize and were automatically suspected of having sympathy for the rebellion. They could no longer prove their allegiance to the government by showing identity cards or tax receipts. Young men were targeted and imprisoned simply because they were wearing turbans or, more specifically, underpants, a practice that was uncommon in the region and was therefore supposed to prove residence abroad – in this case in Libya. In order to restrict the movement of insurgents, the authorities also poisoned wells, blocked roads and prohibited the civilian use of four-wheel-drive vehicles. Such repressive measures had terrible consequences for residents, and it is no surprise that surveys show that levels of trust in the Malian security forces are still lowest among the Tuaregs of Kidal.¹⁹

Militias and the spiral of violence

Mali has repeatedly compensated for state weakness by resorting to use of informal militias who are even less accountable to the central government than the regular military. In May 1994 Songhaï elements of the Malian army contributed to the creation of the Ganda Koy (‘Masters of the Land’) patriotic movement, which was led by the ‘red berets’ of an airborne unit who may have been encouraged to desert in order to have a free hand in repressing Tuareg civilians, while still operating in uniform and equipped with weapons from the Malian military.²⁰

Mali has repeatedly compensated for state weakness by resorting to use of informal militias who are even less accountable to the central government than the regular military.

Instead of attacking Tuareg combatants much further north, the Ganda Koy mainly targeted the ‘peaux blanches’ in the Inner Niger Delta. Barely a month after their establishment, they had already killed some 500 civilians. The insurgents retaliated by starting their own campaign of terror against sedentary communities in July

¹⁹ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bureau Bamako (2020), *Mali-Mètre. Enquête d’opinion politique ‘Que pensent les Malien(ne)s?’*, No. 11, 12–26 November 2019, Bamako: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, pp. 17 and 74, <http://www.fes-mali.org/index.php/mali-metre/25-malimetre/158-presentation-de-mali-metre-xi>.

²⁰ Lecocq (2010), *Disputed Desert*, pp. 285–8.

1994, polarizing the conflict around ethnically motivated clashes. Since then, the Ganda Koy spirit has never really disappeared. Officially dissolved in March 1996, the movement re-emerged under the name Ganda Iso ('Sons of the Land'), and announced their intention to resume fighting when the Tuaregs declared the independence of Azawad (as they called northern Mali) in April 2012. One of Ganda Iso's former commanders, a Dozo hunter called Youssouf Toloba, formed the armed branch of a Dogon self-defence group, Dan Na Amba Sagou ('Hunters who Trust in God'), in December 2016.²¹

The Malian army has continued to rely on militias to fight groups it regards as 'terrorists', jihadists or separatists. When it was forced to withdraw from the city of Kidal in May 2014, it supported the formation of a Tuareg Imghad and Allied Self-Defence Group (GATIA), which mobilized Tuareg, Moorish and Songhai loyalists to defend the territorial integrity of the country. At the time, the Malian military turned a blind eye to the looting of their arsenals by these militias, and often directly supplied them with weapons, ammunition, vehicles and motor fuel.²² Similarly, they used Dozo hunters as scouts, informers or auxiliaries to take part in the fighting when jihadist groups began to descend further south into the Inner Niger Delta and the central region of Mopti, outside the French army's areas of operation.

As in the past, the proliferation of self-defence groups then led to communal violence. Fulani farmers from Koro and Djenné responded to the establishment of Dan Na Amba Sagou by forming their own group, the Alliance for the Salvation of the Sahel (ASS), in January 2018. And in August 2019, another movement called Dana Atèm ('Guardians of the Tradition') emerged to try to bring Dogon and Fulani together against jihadi insurgents. All of these groups are still active today.

²¹ International Crisis Group (2020), *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*, Africa Report No. 293, Brussels: International Crisis Group, p. 15, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali>.

²² Mangan and Nowak (2019), *The West Africa-Sahel Connection*.

04 Niger: a counterexample

Niger, too, has a long history of insurrection and violence, but it has taken specific policy steps to guarantee minority groups political representation and some level of access to power.

The recent experience of Niger shows that Sahelian states are not doomed to repeat their history. Mali and Niger share many characteristics in terms of poverty, vulnerability to climate change, common Saharan borders, physical geography and colonial military history. Like northern Mali,²³ Niger was ruled for a very long time by uniformed officers. The country experienced its own ‘Malian momentum’ under successive military dictatorships; it has suffered from corruption and a weak security sector, and, like Mali, has a long history of internal insurrection and violence.

Relations between the authorities and the Tuareg began to deteriorate under General Seyni Kountché, who came to power in Niger in April 1974. His regime abolished the Ministry of Saharan Affairs, which the first post-independence president, Diori Hamani, had created as part of efforts to reach an accommodation with nomads, and purged the army of its Tuareg elements after an attempted coup involving northerners in March 1976.²⁴ As in Mali, the drought in the Sahel also pushed some unemployed youth into exile – the so-called *Ishumar* (from the French ‘chômeur’, meaning an unemployed person), who sometimes undertook military training in Libya. In May 1985, for instance, clashes occurred between the army and refugees returning to the small locality of Tchintabaraden in northern Niger, which became emblematic for the insurgency to come.

²³ Officially brought under the authority of the colonial government in Bamako in 1922, the Malian region of Adrar des Ifoghas, for example, had its first civilian administrator only in 1948. From 1968, eight years after independence, it was taken over by the junta of Moussa Traoré. See Boilley (1999), *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*, p. 74.

²⁴ Guichaoua, Y. and Pellerin, M. (2017), *Faire la paix et construire l'Etat: Les relations entre pouvoir central et périphéries sahéliennes au Niger et au Mali*, Etude de l'IRSEM, No. 51, Paris: Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire, p. 30.

In May 1990, as in Mali, small-scale incidents degenerated into full rebellion due to the brutality of military repression. Residents stormed the prison and gendarmerie of Tchintabaraden to force the release of Tuareg youths who had been arbitrarily arrested some time earlier. The demonstrators, who were unarmed, seized weapons. In retaliation, the Nigerien government deployed parachutists who, under the command of Captain Maliki Boureima, destroyed nomadic camps, killed civilians, hanged prisoners, hacked suspects to pieces and burned or buried people alive. The official death toll was 19 summary executions and 50 deaths by torture or abuse. The real number of victims was most likely higher: up to 600, according to testimonies collected by international organizations, and perhaps as many as 1,000 according to the rebels.²⁵

Delegates attending Niger's National Conference, which was established to organize the country's democratic transition, condemned the Tchintabaraden massacre. Meeting in Niamey in July–November 1991, the conference deplored the 'excess' of the army, 'both in the use of force and in a command that transformed a law enforcement operation into a punitive expedition'.²⁶ As in Mali, however, impunity prevailed. There was no judicial inquiry or trial. Even though the perpetrators were identified, and some arrested and detained, they were released in February 1992 under pressure from the rank and file, when the transitional government was facing mutiny. This outcome reinforced the Tuaregs' conviction that only violence could avenge the dead. As in Mali, the rebellion was fuelled by the mistakes of a civilian government that did not dare to punish their armed forces for fear of provoking a coup.

Indeed, abuses continued with impunity. In August 1992, for example, the Nigerien army acted to round up some 200 Tuareg officials from Agadez who were accused of complicity with the rebels and detained without trial. The operation was concealed by the Nigerien authorities. Again in Agadez, in September 1994, soldiers attempted to sabotage peace negotiations with the rebels, killing four people in a grenade attack on a meeting of a Tuareg political party, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS). The insurgents targeted were accused of being 'terrorists'.

Positive lessons?

Since the 1990s, however, there have been some positive developments in Niger. Despite the established pattern of violence between Tuareg communities and the Nigerien state, when Tuareg exiles left Libya in 2011 they passed through Niger without stopping to settle old scores with the country's authorities, instead moving on to Mali. In part, progress has been possible because of structural demographic and economic factors. Tuareg communities are more mixed and more widely

²⁵ Grégoire, E. (2011), 'Niger: un État à forte teneur en uranium', *Hérodote*, No. 142, pp. 206–25. See also the account of the leader of the Tuareg political party, UDPS (Union for Democracy and Social Progress): Dayak, M. [1992], *Touareg, la tragédie*, Paris: Lattès.

²⁶ Boilley (1999), *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*, p. 457; Casajus, D. (1995), 'Les amis français de la "cause touarègue": Note critique', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 35(137), pp. 237–50.

distributed throughout Niger, whereas in Mali they are highly concentrated around Kidal. Furthermore, unlike northern Mali, the northern part of Niger has its own sources of income, notably from uranium mining, and its capital Agadez is easily accessible from Niamey, being situated at the crossroads of very old trading routes, with the city of Zinder to its south. Kidal, in Mali, is difficult to reach from Bamako, and its trade has mainly been directed towards the north – to the extent that, by some estimates, more than half of its population has Algerian nationality.²⁷

Much of Niger's relative progress has been due to deliberate policy decisions. First, all of Niger's minority groups, including the Tuaregs, have been guaranteed political representation and some level of access to power. In the three decades following independence in 1960, the Tuaregs, who make up less than 10 per cent of Niger's population, could count an average of two ministers in the government in Niamey, while the Hausa, five times more numerous, had four.²⁸ Moreover, the government decentralized some administrative functions and allowed local authorities to spend 15 per cent of locally generated mining revenues, a process which helped to consolidate a Tuareg 'elite' thanks to uranium extraction in the north.

Much of Niger's relative progress has been due to deliberate policy decisions. All of Niger's minority groups, including the Tuaregs, have been guaranteed political representation and some level of access to power.

Second, the Nigerien government has taken greater care to integrate rebels into the state and security apparatus. The state, which returned to a parliamentary regime under an elected president in 2011, has also been more proactive in its dealings with insurgents and has tried to stop the spiral of ethnic reprisals. In contrast with Mali, Niger was one of the few Sahel countries – along with Chad and Mauritania – that really sought to contain localized responses that could risk compromising the state's monopoly on the use of violence. In particular, the Nigerien government was quick to disband the Fulani and Arab militias it had briefly supported in Diffa, N'Guigmi and Tassara to counter the onslaught made by Tuareg and Tubu rebels in 1991.²⁹ Similarly, from 2017, it dissuaded the Fulani and Tubu from setting up self-defence groups to drive Kanuri and Buduma Boko Haram fighters out of the Lake Chad region.³⁰

²⁷ Guichaoua and Pellerin (2017), *Faire la paix et construire l'Etat*; Grégoire, E. (2010), *Touaregs du Niger, Le destin d'un mythe*, Paris: Karthala, https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/2441/Etude_IRSEM_n51_2017.pdf.

²⁸ Salifou, A. (1993), *La question touarègue au Niger*, Paris: Karthala.

²⁹ Guichaoua and Pellerin (2017), *Faire la paix et construire l'Etat*, p. 68; Grégoire (2010), *Touaregs du Niger*.

³⁰ Magrin, G. and Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (eds) (2018), *Crisis and Development: The Lake Chad Region and Boko Haram*, Paris: Agence Française de Développement.

Niger has not entirely avoided the stigmatization of elements of the country's population in the name of security. For instance, during the period of emergency rule in Diffa in early 2015, when (as in Mali, with the aforementioned 'underpants test') the authorities systematically arrested young people who had long and dirty fingernails, seen as evidence of a guerrilla life in the bush, or burn marks, which could equally have been caused by the use of firearms or by a defective kitchen stove.³¹ But unlike its Malian counterpart, the government of Niger has shown commitment to republican ideals of national unity. To date, it has remained careful not to deploy ethnic militias that risk provoking communal violence.

³¹ Ibid.

05

The role of local militia groups

Most prominently in Mali and Burkina Faso, governments in the Sahel have repeatedly used informal militia groups as proxies for ineffective or unreliable military structures.

Responses to insurgent groups in the Sahel over the past decade seem to have drawn little on what has been learned from past experience. Instead of trying to win hearts and minds, governments have once again often resorted to emergency measures that impact on civilians – arbitrary arrests, restrictions on movement and economic sanctions – many of which still remain in place. In areas where fighting is taking place, these measures partly explain why the insurgents, now labelled jihadists and terrorists, continue to garner support from certain segments of the population. Sahelian armies have alienated people by repressive measures that have included killing civilians, banning motorcycles, extorting traders, closing borders, obstructing the passage of herds or goods, and stigmatizing entire communities, notably the Fulani of Macina, in Mali, or the Kanuri, in Niger's Lake Chad region.

Most notable is the broad and continuing use of informal state-linked militia groups as proxies for ineffective or unreliable military structures. Available statistics show that, globally, governments used militias in nearly two-thirds of the civil wars recorded between 1989 and 2010;³² today, in the Sahel, their use is most prominent in Mali and Burkina Faso. Proponents of the use of local militias claim that they can be useful to supplement regular armies and are a pragmatic response to capacity shortfalls in national security forces. They know the terrain better and cost less than professional soldiers; and working with militias can avoid the need to take on, at speed, new regular recruits whose demobilization is difficult when a conflict ends. Militias can sometimes also react quickly to emerging threats,

³² Stanton, J. A. (2015), 'Regulating Militias: Governments, Militias, and Civilian Targeting in Civil War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(5), pp. 899–923.

without needing to wait for clearance from an army's chief of staff before taking action. Governments maintain, too, that their oversight of co-opted militias prevents collateral damage and civilian deaths.

In addition, such militias are often popular in their communities and in nationalist circles. In the transboundary Liptako-Gourma region, for instance, surveys have shown that two-thirds of respondents look to traditional authorities to secure areas bordering Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.³³ In addition, almost a quarter are ready to set up self-defence units to compensate for the absence of government forces and the lack of official witness protection schemes. Surveys conducted across Burkina Faso in 2018 indicated that 90 per cent of the country's population had a positive view of the so-called Koglweogo ('bush guardians') and Dozo vigilantes who were authorized to conduct security operations in rural areas to compensate for the capacity shortfalls of security forces.³⁴

However, these claims run counter to a pattern in which the creation of militia groups has led to rises in community violence. Most militias are unvetted, untrained and non-professional. They kill without authority, are not accountable to the state, and tend to exacerbate communal tensions. Indeed, they only defend their own community, and they sometimes use their powers to settle personal scores. In Burkina Faso, for example, the Dozo hunters protect the interests of the Dioula in the west; and the Koglweogo the interests of the Mossi in the centre and north, where the Ansarul Islam jihadist movement is active. In both Mali and Burkina Faso, Fulani cattle-breeders have been stigmatized and incited to join the insurgents by massacres at the hands of militias.

³³ Keita, F. and Moderan, O. (2019), *Les populations frontalières face aux conflits et à la violence armée dans le Liptako-Gourma: Expériences et perceptions locales à la frontière Mali-Burkina et Mali-Niger*, Copenhagen: Danish Demining Group, p. 28, <https://danishdemininggroup.dk/media/5575111/ddg-experiences-perceptions-rapport-french-juillet-2019.pdf>.

³⁴ Idrissa, R. (2019), *Tinder to the Fire: Burkina Faso in the Conflict Zone*, Dakar: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, p. 37, https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/81813/Tinder_to_the_fire_Burkina_Faso_in_the_conflict_zone.pdf?sequence=1.

06

The limitations of proxy warfare

The dominant narrative of jihadi threat in the Sahel has pushed international actors to intervene to regulate local conflicts that have little to do with global terrorism or religious indoctrination.

The management of conflict in the Sahel risks repeating the mistakes made in Mali over many years. International efforts have been made to professionalize Sahelian armed forces, and thus to improve the effectiveness, conduct and oversight of the military actors at the forefront of tackling non-state armed groups. However, the structural failures of military cooperation are well known. They are not new, and are not limited to countries in the Sahel.³⁵ International efforts have largely focused on technicalities around manpower, funding, equipment and training, and have come up against numerous problems of human rights violations, coordination and interoperability. The challenges are high, and the task of reforming Sahelian armies while they are actively engaged in combating insurgent groups has been compared to ‘fixing a car while driving it’.³⁶ Usually, governments think that the solution is to recruit new soldiers on a large scale. Thus Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have increased their military personnel to an unprecedented extent since 2019; in 2020, for instance, the Nigerien government announced that it would double the number of its troops, to 50,000, over the next five years. As a result of this rapid expansion, new soldiers are being sent to the front – into unfamiliar and inhospitable territory – after minimal training.

³⁵ As early as the 19th century, for example, observers noticed the inconsistencies of ‘military instructors from all nations’ who tried to professionalize the Ottoman army with ‘different methods, many hesitations, [...] and commands that contradicted each other’. See Vimercati, C. (1852), *Voyage à Constantinople et en Egypte*, Paris: Poussielgue, Masson & Cie, pp. 139–40.

³⁶ Guichaoua, Y. (2020), ‘The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel’, *International Affairs*, 96(4), p. 908.

More importantly, military cooperation does not address the underlying problem, which is fundamentally political. Undoubtedly, the solution to the conflicts in the Sahel lies in strengthening and legitimizing weak states, which is a long-term project. But in the absence of effective security sector (and political) reform, the current approach effectively defaults to a proxy system in which foreign actors support African armies that – particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso – subcontract militias to fight jihadist groups. However, as noted above, the use of vigilante groups has not yet proved to be effective either in combating terrorist movements or in preventing communal violence. On the contrary, militias now kill more civilians than the jihadist groups themselves, according to many in Mali and Burkina Faso.³⁷

An acute policy dilemma

This highlights a serious dilemma for the international community, the French soldiers participating in Operation Barkhane and the ‘blue helmets’ of MINUSMA (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali). International governments and organizations continue to see engagement in the Sahel as critical, above all to contain and end a terrorist threat that is perceived as global, but also to promote regional stability, reduce irregular migration and limit human suffering.³⁸ But they have a very limited range of policy levers available to them.

Continuing to train and equip armies that violate human rights is tantamount to complicity, especially when – as has often been the case for French officials – diplomats knowingly avoid denouncing abuses.

Continuing to train and equip militaries that violate human rights, such as the anti-terrorist unit that killed civilian demonstrators against the Malian government in Bamako in July 2020,³⁹ is tantamount to complicity. This is especially true when diplomats knowingly avoid denouncing abuses, as has often been the case for French officials.⁴⁰ On the other hand, committing more international forces to the front line might mean taking direct responsibility for a ‘dirty war’ and provoking nationalist rejection by sovereign states.⁴¹ In Niger, the opening of a US military

³⁷ Bouhlel, F. (2020), *(Ne pas) dialoguer avec les groupes ‘jihadistes’ au Mali? Entre contradictions normatives, ‘manqués’ de la médiation ... et nécessité heuristique*, Case Study, Berlin: Berghof Foundation, p. 59, <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/ne-pas-dialoguer-avec-les-groupes-jihadistes-au-mali-étude-de-cas>.

³⁸ The EU, for instance, has adopted an integrated civilian/military approach to its engagement in the Sahel, recognizing that instability in the region ‘can provide fertile ground for the development of terrorist groups and criminal networks’ that impact on the EU and its member states. See European External Action Service (2018), ‘EU works with partners in Sahel to fight terrorism and trafficking’, https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/counter-terrorism/46965/eu-works-partners-sahel-fight-terrorism-and-trafficking_en.

³⁹ Amnesty International (2020), ‘Mali. De nouveaux témoignages révèlent l’horreur de la répression sanglante des manifestations’, 5 August 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2020/08/mali-new-witness-testimony-reveals-horrors-of-protest-shootings>.

⁴⁰ Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2020), *Une guerre perdue: la France au Sahel*, Paris: Lattès.

⁴¹ The dilemma is not limited to France. In Somalia, for instance, the US did not avoid the paradoxes of proxy wars when, in 2007, it called for the intervention of African troops in Mogadishu, while criticizing the failure of the operations led by the African Union in Darfur since 2004.

base in Agadez in 2019 gave rise to some criticism because the site was closed to local authorities, and its quasi-extraterritorial status has given the impression of infringing national sovereignty.⁴²

Such challenges highlight the limitations of the international community's capacity to respond when 'terrorists' look very much like insurgent groups or social bandits supported by some communities, and the dynamics of conflict are rooted in local politics rather than global ideological struggle. In this context, the predominant focus on religious extremism has been misleading, and resulting interventions incoherent and ineffective, with short-term or counterproductive outcomes. Deradicalization centres in the Sahel have not produced the intended results,⁴³ and community outreach and sensitization has not stopped Islamist extremist groups from co-opting local resentment at corrupt government. Moreover, the emphasis on countering Islamist groups has sometimes resulted in international actors lending support to 'secular' non-state armed groups that have subsequently allied with the jihadi groups they were meant to counter.⁴⁴

Beyond counterterrorism

The way out of this bind may be first to recognize the way that the designation of insurgents as 'terrorists' has shaped and limited the policy options open to external actors. During the Cold War era, counter-insurgency typically dealt with guerrillas and populations, and paid attention to winning the hearts and minds of residents. But counterterrorism has a predominant focus on networks and individuals, and targets them regardless of the needs of the wider population. In the Sahel, this has resulted in interventions lacking the local support that is crucial to fight an 'invisible enemy' hidden among civilians. Counterterror imperatives have also closed the door on any prospect of negotiation, have justified heavy military responses, and have pushed rebels to continue fighting. Unlike Mali (or the US in Afghanistan), France has taken a very hard line and has systematically refused to engage in peace talks with groups labelled as terrorists, fearing that this would legitimize them and force its president to publicly admit the failures of Operation Barkhane.⁴⁵

⁴² Raghavan, S. and Whitlock, C. (24 November 2017), 'A city in Niger worries a new U.S. drone base will make it a 'magnet' for terrorists', *Washington Post*, 24 November 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/a-city-in-niger-worries-a-new-us-drone-base-will-make-it-a-magnet-for-terrorists/2017/11/23/0b62bf4-cef3-11e7-a87b-47f14b73162a_story.html.

⁴³ Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2018), "'The only good jihadist is a dead jihadist': Boko Haram and de-radicalization around Lake Chad", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(5–6), pp. 863–85.

⁴⁴ The French secret services reportedly supported the Tuareg secessionists of the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) to combat jihadi groups in 2012. However, some MNLA fighters joined the terrorists when jihadi groups eventually took power in northern Mali in mid-2012. After the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship in Libya in 2011, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar was supported by Paris when he claimed to be fighting terrorism and portrayed his opponents as jihadi; yet he made a deal with Salafi groups in Benghazi to attempt to conquer Tripoli, in an operation that failed. Khalifa Haftar was a former head of Gaddafi's so-called Islamic Legion in the Sahel and had fought French armed forces along the disputed border with Chad in the Aouzou region in the 1980s. Follorou, J. (2013), 'L'avenir du Mali suspendu à la question touareg', *Le Monde*, 14 August 2013, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/08/14/l-avenir-du-mali-suspendu-a-la-question-touareg_3461280_3212.html.

⁴⁵ Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2020), 'Faut-il négocier avec les djihadistes au Sahel?', *Politique étrangère*, 85(1), pp. 175–87.

The counterterror paradigm makes even less sense when seen from the ground up. The word ‘terrorist’ simply does not exist in vernacular languages. In central Mali or southeastern Niger, residents talk rather of ‘bushmen’ or ‘bad boys’ when they refer to members of Katiba Macina or Boko Haram. For many people, their main security challenge is not jihadism but cattle rustlers, armed robbers or communal tensions. Available surveys confirm this perception gap. In 2018, out of 8,307 respondents in 10 regions of Mali, including Ménaka, Kidal, Gao and Tombouctou (Timbuktu), none reported having been a victim of a terrorist attack since 2014.⁴⁶ Likewise, less than 16 per cent of 7,275 villagers interviewed in 2018 in the Nigerien region of Tillabéri – close to the border with Mali and near where ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) had killed four US soldiers in October 2017 – mentioned terrorist attacks as a security issue.⁴⁷ Rather than highly militarized counterterror operations, a policing approach would more effectively meet local security needs.

The dominant narrative of a global jihadi threat has disguised the key role played by military nepotism, prevarication and indiscipline in generating and continuing conflict in the Sahel – problems that long predated the ‘war on terror’. Moreover, it has pushed the international community to intervene to regulate local conflicts that have little to do with global terrorism or religious indoctrination. Counterterrorism or counter-insurgency interventions, carried out by UN or French military personnel, cannot replace failing armies or heal predatory states.

⁴⁶ The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiiL) (2018), *Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Mali – second wave*, The Hague: HiiL, p. 55, <https://www.hiil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/HiiL-Mali-JNS-report-EN-web.pdf>.
⁴⁷ International Office for Migration (2019), *Rapport d'étude sur l'intégration et les perceptions des communautés sur la sécurité frontalière dans la région de Tillabéri*, Geneva: IOM, p. 19, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/border_security_communities_fr_1.pdf.

07 Conclusion: the end of military cooperation?

International efforts in support of military action against armed groups in the Sahel will fail as long as impunity prevails and local armies can kill civilians and topple governments without consequence.

In the context of complex and protracted conflicts, it is time to rethink the role of the international community and acknowledge its limits. Today, success depends first and foremost on the willingness (much more than on the capacity) of corrupt leaders to reform and renew their social contract with citizens, especially in rural areas. International efforts will fail as long as impunity prevails and local armies can kill civilians and topple governments without consequence. Prospects for peace in the Sahel should not exclude any option in this regard, from negotiating with jihadists to ‘naming and shaming’ those responsible for abuses perpetrated by national armies or their proxies, strengthening aid conditionality, or even considering the possibility of disengagement.

A change in international community policy in the Sahel is inevitable. France’s intervention in the Sahel has become increasingly difficult due to resentment that has built up against the former colonial power, particularly in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso with strong anti-imperialist sentiment dating back to the Cold War era. Over time, French troops who were initially seen as liberators⁴⁸ have

⁴⁸ In principle, Operation Barkhane does not aim to conquer territories or obtain political advantages; it is, rather, a war against war, or an intervention to curb violence. Francart, L. (1999), *Maîtriser la violence: une option stratégique*, Paris: Economica.

begun to be perceived as an occupying force,⁴⁹ amid suspicions that France is trying to gain control of resources and markets:⁵⁰ this view is echoed by some external observers.⁵¹ In 2013 the French government even blocked the Malian authorities from sending troops to Kidal – to avoid the risk of Malian soldiers massacring civilians in revenge for the killings of Malian soldiers there – by withholding the technical support, security and transport that the Malian military needed in order to carry out its planned operation. This act of obstruction was subsequently publicly denounced by President Keita in an interview with the daily newspaper *Le Monde*.⁵²

Not only does this damage the all-important goodwill that will be necessary for meaningful reform. There is an additional risk that continued setbacks will undermine political support within France for continuing these international efforts. Operation Barkhane, in particular, seems to have reached a peak in terms of public support in France, given the difficulties experienced by the French army in terms of recruitment, logistics and renewal of equipment.⁵³ More than 50 soldiers have been killed while deployed to the operation since 2013, and some members of the French parliament have challenged its continuation. Addressing the deep-rooted governance and development challenges that drive violence in the Sahel, and the replacement of a counterterrorism imperative with counter-insurgency approaches that focus on human security, and recognize the importance of winning hearts and minds, may be long overdue.

There are signs that some in the international community are beginning to recognize these imperatives. In a report published in 2015, for instance, members of the French parliament highlighted the contradiction of spending €1 billion a year on Operation Barkhane while cutting development budgets without tackling the root causes of the crisis.⁵⁴ Some senators went even further in recognizing that ‘justice and the fight against impunity’ were probably ‘the first demand of the people, before education or economic prosperity’.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ According to the most recent *Mali-Mètre* survey which canvassed the opinions of 2,186 people in November 2019, 79 per cent of Malians are not satisfied with Operation Barkhane as a counterterrorism force, especially in the regions of Kidal, Ménaka and Segou where insurgents are fighting. The level of mistrust is almost the same for MINUSMA, at 78 per cent. See Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bureau Bamako (2020), *Mali-Mètre*, pp. 16 and 64.

⁵⁰ Malians have accused the French military of working with terrorists, failing to protect civilians, and supporting the partition of the country. Thus, the soldiers of Operations Serval (in 2013–14) and Barkhane (from 2014) are suspected to have been sent to Mali to take control of mineral fields and support the Tuaregs. Indeed, the French military always had deep respect for the so-called ‘blue men’ of the desert, warriors whose bravery was often mentioned with nostalgia and even romanticism. While denouncing terrorist atrocities, Paris remained silent about the lootings, rapes, summary executions, and recruitment of child soldiers by Tuareg separatists in 2012. See Human Rights Watch (2012), ‘Mali: Les rebelles du Nord perpètrent des crimes de guerre’, 30 April 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2012/04/30/mali-les-rebelles-du-nord-perpetrent-des-crimes-de-guerre>. By contrast, 92 per cent of respondents surveyed in 2019 trusted their own security forces and believed they could effectively combat rebel groups, despite the long-term failures of the Malian Armed Forces. See Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bureau Bamako (2020), *Mali-Mètre*.

⁵¹ Charbonneau, B. (2008), *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London: Ashgate, p. 2. For an analysis that debunks views on the economic motives of the French intervention, see Hommel, T. and Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2019), ‘La France militaire en Afrique: un mauvais investissement économique’, *The Conversation*, 24 September 2019, <https://theconversation.com/la-france-militaire-en-afrique-un-mauvais-investissement-economique-123664>.

⁵² *Le Monde* (2013), ‘Ibrahim Boubacar Keita: “La communauté internationale oblige le Mali à négocier avec un groupe armé”’, 4 December 2013, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/12/04/ibrahim-boubacar-keita-a-kidal-la-france-a-bloque-les-maliens-pourquoi_3525285_3212.html.

⁵³ Brabant, J. and Minano, L. (2019), *Mauvaise troupe: La dérive des jeunes recrues de l’armée française*, Paris: Les Arènes; Tencheni, S. (2017), *Entre mes hommes et mes chefs: Journal d’un lieutenant au Mali*, Panazol: Lavauzelle.

⁵⁴ Guibal, J.-C. and Baumel, P. (2015), *La stabilité et le développement de l’Afrique francophone*, Paris: Rapport d’information déposé par la Commission des Affaires Étrangères, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-info/i2746.asp>.

⁵⁵ de Raincourt, H. and Conway-Mouret, H. (2016), *Sahel: repenser l’aide publique au développement*, Paris: Sénat, Rapport d’information No. 728, p. 33, <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2015/r15-728-notice.html>.

Niger might not offer a model that can be replicated in its entirety in Mali, or elsewhere in the Sahel, but it demonstrates that there are possibilities for improvement. Not least through a high voter turnout, the most recent presidential election, which took place over two rounds in December 2020 and February 2021, has so far confirmed the democratic foundations of the country. Though by no means perfect, the experience of Niger shows that it is possible for states in the Sahel to overcome the legacy of a violent and divided past. Sahelian governments and their external partners alike need to learn the lessons of history, both recent and of earlier decades, in order to avoid a repetition of past mistakes.

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Cover image: Soldiers of the Malian army patrol the site of the Tomb of Askia in Gao, 10 March 2020.

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