

Second Annual Scholars/Practitioners Forum on the Sahel

Organized by:
The Sahel Research Group and the International Crisis Group

17 April 2023, 8:30 am - 5:45 pm
Grinter Hall, room 404
University of Florida



**Sahel Research Group /International Crisis Group
Second Annual Scholars/Practitioners Forum on the Sahel**

**17 April 2023
The University of Florida
Gainesville**

8:30-8:45 *Welcome and introductions*

Alioune Sow, Interim Director, Center for African Studies (SRG)
Jean-Hervé Jezequel (ICG) and Leonardo Villalón (SRG)

Session I *Scanning the horizon: Sahelian politics at a crossroads*

Panels in this session will be organized as roundtables followed by open discussion

8:45-10:00 *Panel 1: Jihadism in motion/ The evolving shape of insurgencies*

Chair: Leonardo Villalón (SRG)

Panelists: Olivier Walther (SRG)
Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim (ICG/SRG)

The presence of Jihadist groups and their ability to seize and hold territory in the central Sahel has grown in the last decade. As recently documented by the International Crisis Group, new places like the “Park W”, shared between Niger, Burkina Faso and Benin, have become way stations for jihadist groups seeking to move south toward the coast. Counter-insurgency strategies have largely failed to contain the advance of these groups. Negotiation between states and jihadist groups, which has only been tried in a very cautious and limited manner, has not yielded significant results. Yet despite their growing presence and influence, the next step for jihadists’ strategy remains unclear. On the one hand, jihadists have unprecedented opportunities, and it is no longer unrealistic to imagine a Sahelian state falling into jihadi hands. On the other hand, these groups remain largely present in rural areas, avoiding urban centers while cementing their control in the regions. Inter-jihadist rivalries, particularly between *Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), also present a major challenge to jihadist groups. This panel aims to analyze the dynamics shaping the future of jihadist groups—from internecine conflicts to governance issues in rural areas—and discuss different scenarios for the evolution of these groups.

10:00-10:30 *Coffee break*

10:30-12:00 **Panel 2: Governance in question: Shaky military regimes and fragile democracies**

Chair: Jean-Hervé Jezequel (ICG)

Panelists: Ibrahim Maïga (ICG): Mali
Mathieu Pellerin (ICG): Burkina Faso
Azizou Garba (CNESS): Niger
Baba Adou (SRG): Mauritania

A series of military coups have recently struck the Sahel and indeed the wider West Africa region: Mali in August 2020 and May 2021, Chad in April 2021, Guinea in September 2021, Burkina Faso in January and October 2022. A failed coup in Niger in March 2021 also pointed to the vulnerabilities of the remaining elected regimes. While the juntas have officially committed to organizing elections and handing over power to civilians, a new generation of military leaders determined to replace the aging and largely discredited ruling elite seems to be emerging and consolidating their hold on power. In both Mali and Burkina Faso, new regimes have also gained significant popularity in part by turning their backs on French influence and promising better outcomes, yet their capacity to in fact do better than their predecessors in addressing the security crisis is far from certain. Yet popular sympathy for these new military regimes has created new challenges for neighboring democratic systems. This panel will attempt to sketch out the factors shaping the evolution of current regimes in key countries.

12:00-12:15 **Break**

12:15-1:15 **Panel 3: International realignments: The end of the Sahel stabilization system?**

Chair: Michel Liégeois (Université Catholique de Louvain)

Panelists: Jean-Hervé Jezequel (ICG)
Tania Smirnova (Program FrancoPaix, Université de Montréal)

The decade-long crisis of the central Sahel has recently entered a new chapter. The situation is defined by an increased uncertainty and a newfound fluidity. The political and institutional architecture of the French-led stabilization efforts since 2013 is falling apart, while multilateral regional stabilization efforts are in an increasingly difficult situation. The G5 Sahel is struggling to remain relevant after Mali's withdrawal. MINUSMA is facing worrying withdrawals from national contingents, and an internal review recently raised the prospect of the force's full withdrawal. Operations Takuba and Barkhane are both over. The region has seen a wave of so-called "anti-French sentiment", leading to the departure of French forces from Mali and Burkina Faso and the erosion of France's historical leadership role in the region. Sahelian countries seem to be increasingly turning to bilateral agreements to solicit security partners both within and outside the region. Russia has emerged as Mali's favorite military partner. Yet despite all the geopolitical noise, the conflict continues unabated, with regional governments largely struggling to make headway against the jihadist threat. This panel will interrogate these shifts and explore prospects for the future of stabilization efforts in the Sahel.

1:15-2:15 **Lunch**

Session II Resource competition, ethnic tensions, and the challenge of climate change

15 minutes presentations, followed by comments and discussion led by panel chair

2:15-3:30 *Panel 4: Resources and new dynamics of conflict*

Chair: Cory Dakota Satter (SRG)

Panelists: Rhoumour Ahmet Tchilouta (University of Grenoble and SRG):
“Environmental challenges and conflict dynamics in the Saharan gold
rush: Insights from northern Niger.”

Mathieu Pellerin (ICG): “The future of pastoralism in the changing conflict
landscape”

3:30-4:00 *Break*

4:00- 5:15 *Panel 5: Emerging challenges*

Chair: Daniel Acosta (SRG)

Panelists: Adib Bencherif (University of Sherbrooke/SRG) and Abdoulaye
Kane (SRG) “Ethnic narratives and rising tensions: the Tuareg and Fulani
‘questions’”

Sarah McKune and Renata Serra (SRG): “Climate change, demographic
growth, and emerging challenges of health and livelihoods”

5:15-5:45 *Concluding discussion*

Reception and informal discussion

Participants

Daniel Acosta is a PhD student in Public Health with a concentration in One Health in the University of Florida Department of Environmental and Global Health, and an affiliate of the Sahel Research Group. His PhD research is on the impacts of climate change on health in the Sahel.

Baba Adou is a PhD student in Political Science and program coordinator at the University of Florida Sahel Research Group. Baba previously worked as an instructor at the University of Nouakchott and the Higher Institute of English in Mauritania. His research interests include Islam and politics, democratization, and the dynamics of semi-authoritarian regimes in the Sahel.

Rhoumour Ahmet Tchilouta is a PhD student at the University of Grenoble Alpes and a visiting scholar with the Sahel Research Group. His doctoral research is on the externalization of EU migration policies and the impact on Niger's national border management policies. He has also worked on the socio-political dynamics underlying the gold rush in Niger since 2014.

Adib Bencherif is an Assistant Professor in Political Science at the University of Sherbrooke. He served as a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. His research focuses on security issues and political violence in the Sahel and North Africa, with a focus on Tuareg political elites in Mali and Niger.

Azizou Garba is Deputy Director of Niger's National Center for Strategic and Security Studies (CNESS). He is currently a PhD candidate with the Centre for International Crisis and Conflict Studies at Université Catholique de Louvain. His research focuses on the effects of terrorism on state building in the Sahel. He was a Technical Advisor to Niger's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2013 to 2016.

Jean-Hervé Jezequel is the Director of the Sahel Project at the International Crisis Group based in Dakar, Senegal. His role requires extensive research and advocacy on the prevailing political and security issues in the central Sahel region. He has authored numerous reports and publications on violent conflicts in the region.

Abdoulaye Kane is Associate Professor of Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Florida. His research has focused on Senegalese international migration and transnationalism, on Tijani transnational religious circuits between Senegal, Morocco, and France, and currently (with Adib Bencherif) on narratives of ethnicity and the mobilization of Tuareg and Fulani identities in the Sahel.

Michel Liégeois is a Professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain where he teaches International Relations and Security Studies. He is also the president of the Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe (ISPOLE). His research focuses on peace operations and Belgian foreign policy, particularly its action in the Security Council.

Ibrahim Maïga is a Senior Sahel Analyst at the International Crisis Group. His research focuses on governance, peace and security issues in the Sahel region and Mali in particular. He previously served as regional representative for the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, as a special advisor to the Malian Prime Minister, and as Senior Researcher for the Institute for Security Studies.

Sarah McKune is an Associate Professor in the University of Florida Center for African Studies and in the Department of Environmental and Global Health in the College of Public Health and Health Professions. Her research focuses on the system dynamics that affect child growth and nutritional outcomes, including factors such as household hygiene and sanitation, livestock ownership, climate change, and gender dynamics within the household.

Mathieu Pellerin is Senior Sahel Consulting Analyst at the International Crisis Group. He is also an Associate Research Fellow at Sub-Saharan Africa Center of the French Institute for International Relations and special adviser in charge of the intra-Islamic Dialogue for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

Cory Dakota Satter is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida, and a member of the Sahel Research Group. He is interested in particular in the politics of urban management of climate hazards in Sahelian capital cities.

Renata Serra is Senior Lecturer in the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida, core faculty member in the Master in Sustainable Development Practice program at UF. Her expertise focuses, among other things, on agricultural and livestock policies, the political economy of reforms, gender issues, and household decision-making.

Tatiana Smirnova is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center FrancoPaix (Université de Québec à Montréal). Her work focuses on different forms of violence in the Sahel. She has worked on the dynamics of the student movement in Niger, the insurrectionary logics in the Sahel and the “responses” provided by international organizations and foreign forces.

Alioune Sow is Interim Director of the University of Florida Center for African Studies. He holds a joint appointment in French and African Studies at UF. His research interests include democratic transition and cultural forms in francophone West Africa, focusing especially on memoirs, theater and films in Mali, as well as migration and theater practices in France.

Leonardo A. Villalón is Professor of African Politics and founder and coordinator of the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. He is a former director of the UF Center for African Studies and former dean of the International Center. Villalón has worked on a variety of topics related to religion and democracy in countries of the Sahel.

Olivier Walther is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Florida. His research and teaching have focused on cross-border trade, cross-border cooperation, and terrorism in West Africa. His work combines spatial and social network analysis. He's an Associate Editor of *Political Geography*.

Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim is Senior Analyst Sahel based in Dakar for the International Crisis Group. His work covers Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. His research interests include Islam and politics, defense and security, political contestations, and international development. He holds a PhD from the University of Florida.

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