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# **SAHEL:**

## **Moving Beyond Military Containment Policy Report**

**Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri**



# Atlantic Council

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# **SAHEL:**

# **Moving Beyond**

# **Military Containment**

# **Policy Report**

**Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri**

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## Executive Summary

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**A**lmost ten years after the beginning of the security crisis in the Sahel, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger face a graver predicament than ever before. In the throes of multiple insurgencies, they and their foreign patrons, including France, have shown the limits of military containment. While these three countries are the victims of terrorist aggression, their crises also have deep domestic roots, including long-standing patterns of state abuses of their populations, even in the more democratic ones; neglect of governance responsibilities and very weak capacity to provide public goods, including security and justice; exclusionary politics whereby some

communities find themselves systematically marginalized while others behave as the “owners” of the state, which feeds deep grievances against the state that jihadists exploit; and, finally, complacent political elites who are largely shielded from political accountability. To escape their predicament, Sahelian states must reinvent themselves in ways that build on their historical legacies, including Islam, rather than trying to mimic ill-fitting Western models. Donors can help by moving away from antiterror kinetic operations toward civilian protection and projects that better embed the state in local social relations and strengthen local communities in the face of difficult natural conditions.

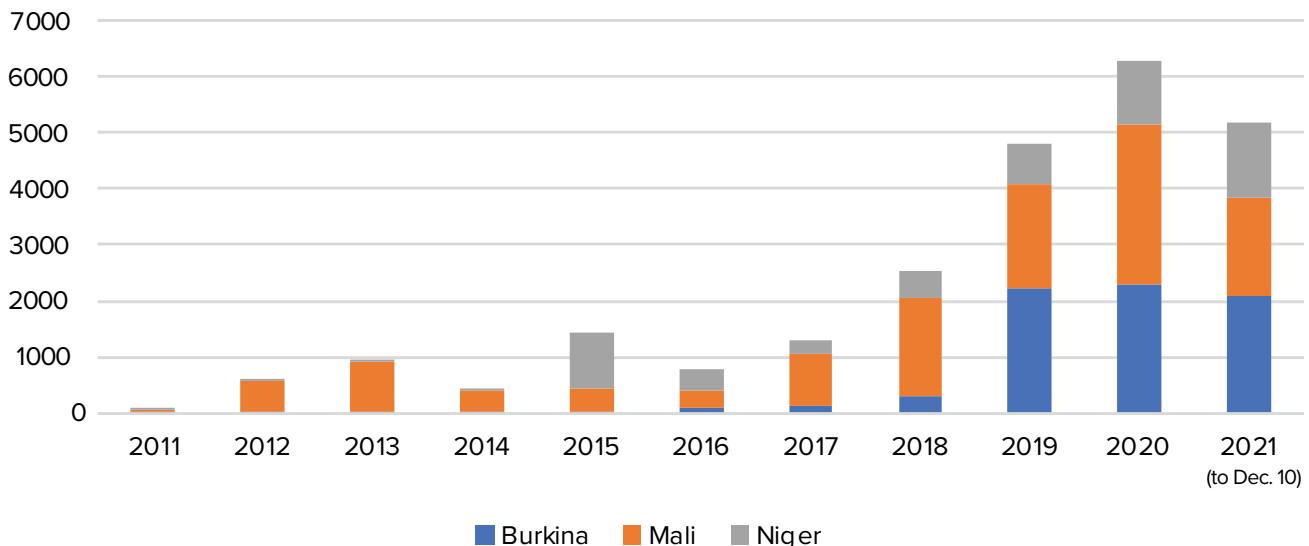
# Introduction

The crisis in the Sahel began in the wake of the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya in 2011 and with the subsequent separatist-then-jihadist insurrection in Mali, which led to the military overthrow of the Malian regime, the loss of territorial control of the government and, finally, the military intervention by France in 2013.

Almost ten years and multiple interventions later, things are worse than they were then. Domestic and international violent extremists are active in a broader area of Mali, as well as in Burkina Faso, Niger,<sup>1</sup> northern Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>2</sup> The French military is still deployed (for now) across the region with no clear exit strategy, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is at great pains just to protect itself. Terrorist violence is on the rise across the region (see Figure 1) every year, while local self-defense groups and national militaries also mete out violence with broad impunity.

Domestically, Mali is once again under military rule, having suffered two coup d'états in August 2020 and May 2021. Its 2015 peace agreement with the northern separatists lies in tatters and none of the reforms it pledged in it have been implemented. What once was largely a "Tuareg problem" has now spread to the center of the country and violence has engulfed all communities in the Mopti and Ségou regions, with Dogon and Fulani at the center of the conflict. In Burkina Faso, the overthrow of Blaise Compaoré in a popular insurrection in 2014 ushered in a breakdown of the security apparatus, which facilitated the spread of jihadist violence from Mali. Both the north of the country and the east, and increasingly the southwest, are now in the throes of a toxic cocktail of community and jihadist violence as well as banditry, and the state is in retreat. On January 24, 2022, Burkina Faso's civilian regime was overthrown by military putschists in a pattern emulating Mali. In Niger, early successes against Boko Haram-derived violence in the far-eastern province of Diffa have given way

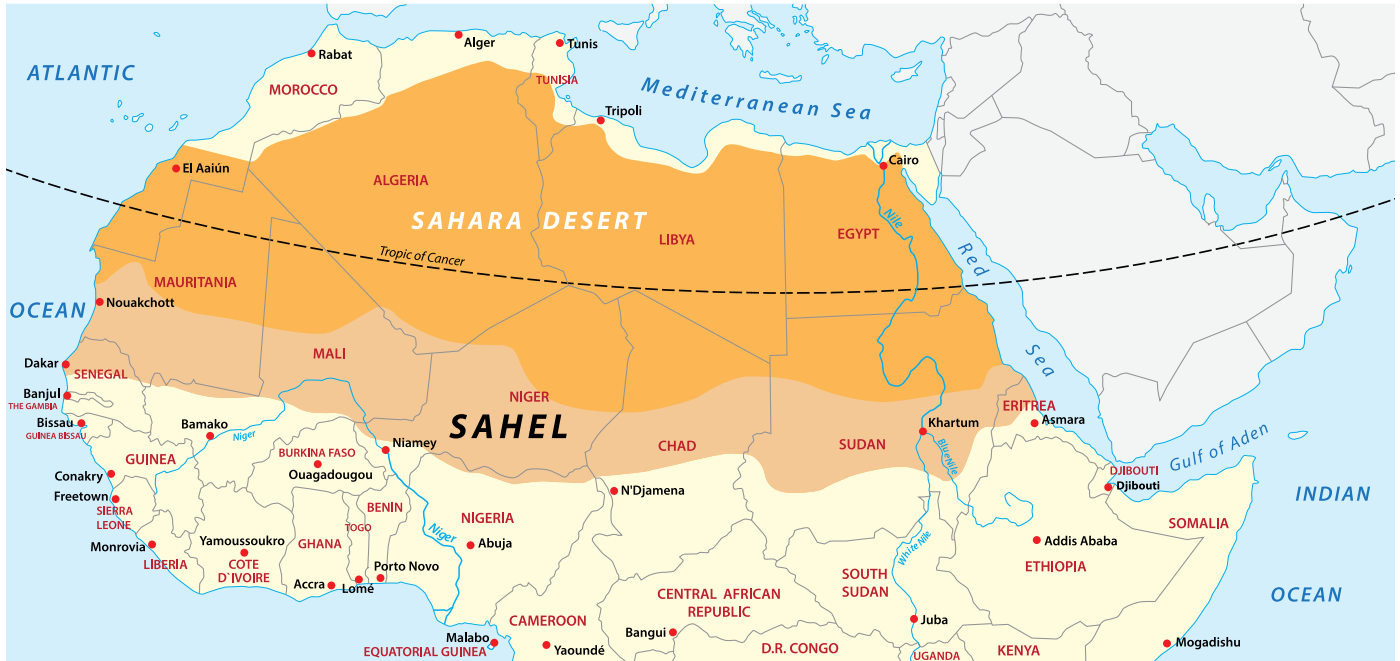
**Figure 1**  
**Sahel: Fatalities from Political Violence**



Source: acleddata.com

1 This report mostly focuses on these three countries. There is also significant jihad-related violence in Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon.  
 2 Héni Nsaibia, "In Light of the Kafolo Attack: The Jihadi Militant Threat in the Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast Borderlands," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLEDD) Project, August 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/24/in-light-of-the-kafolo-attack-the-jihadi-militant-threat-in-the-burkina-faso-and-ivory-coast-borderlands/>.





Shutterstock/Rainer Lesniewski

to recent setbacks and the spread of violence from Mali in the Tillabéri region, much closer to the capital Niamey.

This policy report discusses the causes of these multiple failures and the nature of the Sahel crisis—fundamentally a crisis of the state itself—and suggests alternative approaches that could facilitate long-term solutions, including deemphasizing military responses and focusing on genuine state restructuring rather than making token reforms

at the local level. The report begins with a review of the current situation and an assessment of both the ongoing spread of the security threat in broader areas of West Africa, including coastal states, and the twin failures of foreign and domestic responses. Next, the report presents a diagnostic of the nature of the crisis, which focuses on the nature and performance of Sahelian states, and ends with suggestions on alternative policy responses for both local authorities and foreign partners.

# A Multifaceted Crisis at Risk of Spreading Further

The crisis that began in Mali in 2012 has spread in the region and considerably accelerated in the past few years. Since 2019 alone, for example, political violence has increased 35 percent in the triborder area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.<sup>3</sup> Political violence among armed groups, between armed groups and security forces, and targeting civilians has steadily increased in all three countries. The violence in the Tillabéri region of Niger specifically is rapidly growing while disproportionately targeting civilians.<sup>4</sup> In 2020 alone, 292 incidents were logged in Tillabéri—compared to 377 incidents total for the previous three years from 2017-2019.<sup>5</sup> In 2021, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project, there have been 5,195 civilians killed between January 1 and December 10.<sup>6</sup>

The burden of violent conflict in the Sahel has over time fallen more and more heavily on civilian populations. Many are forced to either flee their homes or to reconcile their livelihoods and security by passively or directly engaging with armed groups for protection. This survival tactic, however, is perhaps becoming unsustainable as the humanitarian situation worsens, and assistance agencies struggle to gain access to communities in need. The Sahel passed two million displaced persons in January 2021, with the number of food-insecure civilians surpassing two million.<sup>7</sup> In Burkina Faso, the food insecurity of more than two million people along the triborder areas of the Sahel and Centre-Nord regions is considered “catastrophic” by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), and so far in 2021, estimates of food-insecure people in the Tillabéri region of Niger exceed 500,000.<sup>8</sup>

The violence is directly tied to civilian displacement. Some examples include the deadly March 21, 2021, attack in Niger that left 137 dead and an estimated 1,400 civilians displaced from their homes.<sup>9</sup> In November, sixty-nine people were killed in an attack in Banibangou, Niger’s triborder zone with Burkina Faso and Mali.<sup>10</sup> The same month, there were fifty-three casualties in northern Burkina Faso in an attack by militants on military police.<sup>11</sup>

The direct attacks on communities in all three countries—and particularly in Niger, where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has expanded its control and uses mass violence against civilian targets—have led to constant states of emergencies and travel impediments, further stressing the populations of herders and pastoralists who seek income-generating opportunities outside their home communities and oftentimes in markets. Thus, the burden of political violence conducted by security forces and/or armed groups again falls on civilians.

## A Mosaic of Violent Actors

Although the Sahel crisis was first prompted by the actions of secessionist Tuareg rebels and then by domestic and foreign jihadist actors, it has now spread to a multitude of groups with diverse objectives that thrive or develop opportunistically in an environment of limited and dysfunctional statehood.

## International and Local Islamic Groups

Violent Islamic groups active in the three countries are of two types: an international outfit connected to global

3 ACLED, *Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021*, February 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/02/ten-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2021/#1612195879250-fd67dc25-cc2c>.

4 ACLED (data), 2021.

5 UN OCHA, “Niger Situation Report,” March 27, 2021, <https://reports.unocha.org/fr/country/niger>.

6 Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen, “Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, No. 5 (2010), 651-660.

7 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Grim Milestone as Sahel Violence Displaces 2 Million Inside Their Countries,” Summary of Spokesman’s Remarks, January 22, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2021/1/600a92e4125/grim-milestone-sahel-violence-displaces-2-million-inside-countries.html>.

8 UN OCHA, “Burkina Faso Humanitarian Situation Brief,” March 10, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-aper-u-de-la-situation-humanitaire-au-10-mars-2021>; and UN OCHA, “Niger Situation Report.”

9 UNHCR, “News Comment: Six Refugees among 137 Killed in Niger’s Recent Attack,” April 1, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2021/4/60658d3b4/news-comment-six-refugees-among-137-killed-nigers-recent-attack.html>.

10 “Niger Declares Two Days of Mourning after Nearly 70 Killed,” *Al Jazeera*, November 4, 2021, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/4/dozens-dead-in-west-niger-village-attack-officials>.

11 Henry Wilkins, “Death Toll from Burkina Faso Attack Rises to 53,” *Voice of America News*, November 17, 2021, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/death-toll-from-burkina-faso-attack-rises-to-53-/6317271.html>.



terrorism, and local groups, often operating in loose alliances. These alliances typically share characteristics such as geographical roots, ethnic solidarities, and generational identities.<sup>12</sup> Among the former are al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), ISGS, and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Among the local groups, one of the most active is Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM),<sup>13</sup> a coalition of several organizations under the leadership of a former Malian Tuareg secessionist-turned-jihadist, Iyad ag Ghali.<sup>14</sup> Although its main focus is Mali, it also conducts operations in Burkina Faso and Niger. JNIM relies on a mix of local criminal networks and on psychological operations to exploit inter- and intracommunal tensions, often ethnically aligned, to generate revenue, gain access to new geographies and populations, and recruit new members.<sup>15</sup>

The Macina Liberation Front, also known as Katiba Macina, is currently the most active group in Mali, where it is mostly deployed in the central region around Mopti and Ségou. Its leadership is largely composed of Fulanis. Its beginning in 2015 represented the most significant spread of terrorist violence in the region and heralded its contagion in Burkina Faso and Niger, and more recently the border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire.

In Burkina Faso, the main jihadist group was Ansarul Islam, which operates mostly in the regions of Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord, Est, and Boucle du Mouhoun. Launched in 2016, Ansarul Islam is also largely associated with the Fulani community and was established by preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko. After the death of its leader, members have been absorbed by JNIM and ISGS, though the group appears to be associated more with JNIM, and it is close to the Katiba Macina. At its creation, Ansarul Islam was perceived as both a Burkinabe insurgency and an instance of Malian contagion. In the East of the country, where the

dominant population is the Gourmantché, ISGS is also active.

Compared to Burkina and Mali, Niger has relatively little domestic religious extremism.<sup>16</sup> Its Islamic terrorism has mostly foreign roots. At first it suffered significantly from Boko Haram incursions into its Diffa province from Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> Most recently, it is mostly ISGS from Mali that has spilled over into Niger's Tillabéri region, much closer to the capital, Niamey. It started mounting attacks into Niger from Ménaka in Mali. It appears that some Fulanis from Niger have now joined it to protect themselves from exactions and cattle thefts by Tuaregs from Mali.<sup>18</sup> This is the group that in 2017 killed four US Green Berets, as the Army Special Forces are known.

Across the region, there is some degree of competition and conflict between some of these organizations. There have been particularly strong tensions between ISGS and JNIM since spring 2019, mostly in Mali's Inland Niger Delta area and in the Liptako-Gourma region on both sides of the Mali-Burkina Faso border.<sup>19</sup> However, leaders on all sides have also at times brokered local nonaggression pacts in order to focus on defeating their common enemies: French and Sahelian defense and security troops.<sup>20</sup>

### Local Self-Defense Groups and Ethnic Militias

In addition to groups linked to JNIM or ISGS, ethnic militias and other community-based groups have also increased their violent engagements against Islamists and with one another. Local violent groups typically get involved in the violence out of two overlapping dynamics. First, they organize to protect their communities against attacks by jihadists. In the process, they also often use the opportunity of violence to settle accounts with other communities and/or to make economic gains at their expenses, promoting similar responses from these other communities. Second,

12 Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 13.

13 Its name means Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims.

14 JNIM includes Ansar Din (ag Ghali's organization), al-Murabitoun of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and the Macina Liberation Front of Amadou Koufa. JNIM is formally an affiliate of al-Qaeda, but some factions within its membership have also claimed allegiance to Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

15 Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," Africa Security Brief No. 38, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 1, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/publication/puzzle-jnim-militant-islamist-groups-sahel/>.

16 Lisa Mueller, "Religious Violence and Democracy in Niger," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 6, No. 1 (2016): 94.

17 This report does not directly focus on Boko Haram. For more information on this group, see Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad," International Crisis Group, October 19, 2020.

18 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, Chapter 5.

19 Flore Berger, "Sahel: A New Battlefield between IS and al-Qaeda?," *Africa Report*, Jeune Afrique Media Group, June 4, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/29184/sahel-a-new-battlefield-between-is-and-al-qaeda/>; and Judd Devermont and Marielle Harris, "Rethinking Crisis Responses in the Sahel," Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS Brief, December 22, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rethinking-crisis-responses-sahel>.

20 Héni Nsaibia and Caleb 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*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>; and MENASTREAM (@MENASTREAM), "#Mali: Local social media news site stated that #GATIA's General Alhaji Ag Gamou has agreed to non-aggression pacts with #ISGS and #JNIM, although this seems to have been the case since the spring of 2019," Twitter, December 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/menastream/status/1341162919447412736?lang=en>.



Sahel Region, Burkina Faso. Wikimedia Commons/Adam Jones, Ph.D. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:View\\_over\\_Bani\\_-\\_Sahel\\_Region\\_-\\_Burkina\\_Faso.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:View_over_Bani_-_Sahel_Region_-_Burkina_Faso.jpg))

they can get instrumentalized by the state to fight on its behalf, particularly in regions where the state is too weak to project its own power.<sup>21</sup>

In Mali, most of the intercommunal violence has affected the center of the country, where the Dogon and Fulani (about 6 percent and 9 percent of the population, respectively) live, particularly in the Mopti region that numbers about 1.6 million people.<sup>22</sup> There have long been tensions between the Fulani, who are seminomadic cattle herders, and the Dogon, who are sedentary farmers. Recurring and worsening droughts have made the situation of the Fulani particularly precarious, while the Malian government adopted policies that tended to favor sedentary communities.<sup>23</sup> Starting in 2015, violence by jihadists erupted in central Mali and, with the state on the run, local communities turned to their own armed groups. Dogon, Fulani, and

Bambara all established their own militias to protect their respective communities, prompting a cycle of intercommunity violence.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, population growth has led farmers from the dominant Mossi group (about 50 percent of the population) to migrate first west then north, increasing demographic pressure on an area largely populated by Fulani and affected by climate deterioration, thereby facilitating land speculation. Some Mossi then appointed their own chiefs in these communities in ways that threatened Fulani leadership. Around 2015, when jihadism spilled into the region from neighboring Mali, they found fertile grievances among the Fulani and were able to recruit among them. Eventually, the group Ansarul Islam became the main local jihadist insurgency under the leadership of a Burkinabe Fulani preacher.

21 Rida Lyammouri, "Central Mali: Armed Community Mobilization in Crisis," RESOLVE Network (a research and policy consortium countering extremism), November 2021.

22 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence*, Report No. 293, November 2020.

23 ICG, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent*.



Across the country, the Mossi started developing a self-defense organization around 2015 named Koglweogo (guardians of the forest), largely in response to the lack of effective state-provided security. There are an estimated 4,400 Koglweogo groups across most parts of the country, each usually comprising twelve members.<sup>24</sup> They have progressively assumed new prerogatives, including taxation, administration of justice, policing, and even army operations. The Koglweogo also spread to the north, where some see them as the armed front of Mossi expansionism, and became engaged in responding to perceived Fulani violence. In January 2019, they were responsible for a massacre in the village of Yirgou, where forty-nine to 210 civilians were killed.<sup>25</sup> The Fulani communities have in turn sought the protection of either the jihadists or the Rougha, Fulani groups charged with protecting herds.

To a lesser extent, Niger has also witnessed intercommunity conflicts. Some Djermas, who are sedentary farmers, have migrated north over the last decades under demographic and climate pressure, encroaching upon land of the Fulani and Daoussak.<sup>26</sup> The Fulani have relied upon groups called Ganda Izo (“sons of the soil”), which originated among non-Tuareg communities in Mali before 2012. ISGS has also offered protection to some Fulani communities. As a result, the Tillabéri region has witnessed a growing number of extrajudicial killings based on ethnic affiliations.<sup>27</sup>

In several instances, local governments have found it convenient to rely on some of these groups to wage a proxy war on their behalf against the jihadists. Although they have been widely criticized for doing so, such strategies are somewhat rational for resource-deprived governments, which often rely on some mode of indirect rule via local elites over peripheral regions.<sup>28</sup> In Mali, the government has long leaned on GATIA, a Tuareg group opposed to the secessionists, to fight both insurgent Tuareg factions and jihadists. It has also instrumentalized Dan Na Ambassagou in the Mopti region to fight Katiba Macina. In Burkina, the government has made no secret of its reliance on Koglweogo and has abstained from punishing them for

their abuses and exactions. In November 2019, President Roch Marc Chistian Kaboré called for the mobilization of “volunteers for the defense of Faso” (or VDP) to fight “terrorists.” Two months later, the government passed a law calling for training of VDPs hired as backup for the defense of villages and sectors. By and large, the state has been unable to control or manage the Koglweogo.

### Bandits and Traffickers

On top of jihadists and ethnic militias, and often blending in with them, are a large number of bandits and traffickers operating from the coasts of West Africa across the Sahara and into the Mediterranean countries. They smuggle cigarettes, hashish from Morocco that finds its way to Libya via Western Sahara, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, cocaine from Latin America, and would-be migrants.

Across the Sahel, the management of trade routes is associated with certain ethnic groups, including Arabs, Tuaregs, and Fulanis, and with certain social hierarchies within these groups.<sup>29</sup> Alex Thurston, an expert on Islam and politics in West Africa and North Africa, speaks of “mafias” that function “just like a state.”<sup>30</sup> This traffic significantly alters communities. Young men who could not find employment enter the trafficking business and prosper socially and economically, challenging previously established authorities within their region and ethnic groups.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, when governments rely on local militias to fight insurgents, they might reward them by allowing them “access to criminal networks.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the state itself becomes involved in trafficking. As for the jihadists, while they rarely appear to be themselves directly involved in trafficking, they can tax trafficking routes, as is occurring in northern Mali.<sup>33</sup> Jihadists also are involved in the kidnapping economy, which can rely on bandits and smugglers as intermediaries.

### Violence by State Agents

Though this report will return to this issue as part of its diagnostics, it bears highlighting here that state military and

24 Author interview (Pierre Englebert) of Amado Kaboré, researcher, Ouagadougou, July 3, 2019; Ludovic Kibora, Patrice Kouarogo, and Amado Kaboré, “Les groupes d’auto-défense ‘Kogl-weogo’ au Burkina Faso: Entre légitimité et contestation, quel avenir?” *Recherches africaines*, No. 20, July 2018, 310.

25 Lamine Traoré, “Au moins 210 morts lors du massacre du 1er janvier, selon un collectif,” Voice of America (VOA) Afrique, 2019, <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/au-moins-210-morts-lors-du-massacre-du-1er-janvier-selon-un-collectif/4771648.html>.

26 Luca Raineri, “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1828078>.

27 Rida Lyammouri, “Tillabéri Region, Niger: Concerning Cycle of Atrocities,” Policy Center for the New South, March 24, 2021, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/tillaberi-region-niger-concerning-cycle-atrocities>; see also ICG, “Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger’s Emerging Communal Crisis,” Briefing No. 172/Africa, May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/b172-murder-tillabery-calming-nigers-emerging-communal-crisis>.

28 M. A. Thomas, *Govern Like Us: US Expectations of Poor Countries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

29 Guillaume Soto-Mayor, “Trafics et Trafiquants: Éléments Structurants des Sociétés Sahéliennes,” *Recherches internationales* 117 (January-March 2020): 117-135.

30 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 119.

31 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 119.

32 Soto-Mayor, “Trafics et Trafiquants,” 126.

33 Eizenga and Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel.”

other security forces are among the greatest perpetrators of violence against civilians in the region. There is ample evidence, for example, that the Malian armed forces have executed Fulani civilians, and benefit from systemic impunity.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Burkinabe military has committed summary executions of civilians and in some cases the scale of violence perpetrated by the army against civilians (often Fulanis) has prompted entire villages to side with the jihadists.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, an estimated seven hundred suspected jihadists are detained in Burkina Faso without trial. In Niger, the government first offered a heavy military response to violence in Tillabéri, but has since resumed some limited focus on dialogue.<sup>36</sup>

### Other States of West Africa under Threat

For those who see the breakdown of the Sahel as a local crisis of little significance outside its area, the progressive expansion of the region's violence to other parts of West Africa, and its connections to other regions of the world via trafficking and migration, should serve as wake-up calls. The UN's special representative for the region and other delegates recently reported to the UN Security Council that insecurity has spread into areas previously considered safe such as Côte d'Ivoire and Benin.<sup>37</sup> In Côte

d'Ivoire, attacks by alleged jihadis against state security forces along the northern border with Burkina Faso have been recurring since 2020, with the most recent deadly attack on March 29, 2021.<sup>38</sup> French authorities have said the expansion effort into the Gulf of Guinea countries is led by al-Qaeda and its affiliates.<sup>39</sup> More recently, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have also been spotted in Northern Benin, where two Beninese soldiers were killed in December 2021 in an attack by a JNIM affiliate.<sup>40</sup>

Western powers are aware of this danger. In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on April 20, 2021, US Army Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, commander of the US Africa Command, called for a "firebreak across the Sahel" and "fire prevention efforts in the littoral states."<sup>41</sup>

The democratic erosion or reversals observed in the region are making the bed of future insurgencies by feeding grievances among the youth and others who find themselves excluded from access to power increasingly monopolized by an aging class of incumbent elites. The removal of term limits in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, the manipulation of elections in Benin, and the harassment of opposition in Senegal all make these coastal states more susceptible to potential jihadist threats.

34 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*.

35 "Exécutions sommaires à Konga (Sourou): 'Ils me disaient: mieux vaut mourir que de rejoindre ces terroristes,'" *LeFaso.net* (online news site), May 29, 2019, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article89942>.

36 Author interviews (Pierre Englebert) with state security actors, Niamey, June 2021.

37 UN Security Council, "Militants Continue to Stage Deadly Attacks as Insecurity Expands into Previously 'Safe' Zones in West Africa, Sahel, Top Official Tells Security Council," Press Release, January 11, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14406.doc.htm>.

38 John Campbell, "Concern Grows About Jihadi Activity in Ivory Coast," Council on Foreign Relations, March 31, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/concern-grows-about-jihadi-activity-ivory-coast>.

39 "Côte d'Ivoire: de nouvelles attaques contre les forces de défense et de sécurité," France 24 (state-owned channel), March 29, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210329-c-percentC3-percentB4te-d-ivoire-de-nouvelles-attaques-contre-les-forces-de-d-percentC3-percentA9fense-et-de-s-percentC3-percentA9curit-percentC3-percentA9>.

40 "Au Bénin, l'armée subit les premières attaques terroristes de son histoire," *Le Monde*, December 3, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/12/03/au-benin-l-armee-subit-les-premieres-attaques-terroristes-de-son-histoire\\_6104643\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/12/03/au-benin-l-armee-subit-les-premieres-attaques-terroristes-de-son-histoire_6104643_3212.html).

41 US Africa Command (@USAfricaCommand), "Gen. Townsend continues answering @RepVeasey, speaks to creating a firebreak across the #Sahel to prevent the spread of violent extremism, #HASC," video of US Army Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, US Africa Command commander, testifying before the House Armed Services Committee, Twitter, April 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/USAfricaCommand/status/138456308777443845>.

# Diagnostic 1: A Combined Failure of International and Domestic Interventions

The crisis in the Sahel has brought about multiple international military and peacekeeping interventions, including troop deployments by the French, civilian and military personnel from UN member nations (via MINUSMA), US troops providing training and drone operations, as well as coordinated operations by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, known as the Sahel G5. These external interventions have come on top of multiple domestic attempts to respond to the crisis. This review highlights their significant shortcomings; for foreign interventions, the focus is mostly on the French Barkhane operation.

## Failure of Foreign Intervention

Operation Barkhane began in 2014, in the wake of Operation Serval, through which the French recaptured the main cities in the northern half of Mali on behalf of the Malian state. As of September 2021, 5,100 troops were scattered around the entire Sahel region.<sup>42</sup>

In many ways, the seven years of Barkhane's existence have been increasingly unproductive. Since the Pau Summit in January 2020, which claimed a strategic shift but ultimately once again prioritized the military approach, the levels of violence in the triborder area have been the highest on record.<sup>43</sup> While some Western partners continue to express public support for the French-led mission in the Sahel, its image and reliability as a military partner for African states is damaged.<sup>44</sup> Already under significant scrutiny one year after the February 2020 decision to increase their military presence by six hundred personnel, France is struggling to gain traction outside of the forces

committed by the G5 Sahel countries and a handful of European states.<sup>45</sup> Even worse, as public support wanes both among French citizens and also populations within the West African Sahel (as discussed below), both Chadian and French forces have been accused of human rights violations; a UN fact-finding team found that a French strike killed and injured civilians attending a wedding.<sup>46</sup> To date, the lack of accountability by French leadership for French actions is emblematic of a wider resistance to change its strategic calculus.<sup>47</sup>

Without considering a realignment of their strategy, French policymakers are seemingly faced with a no-win dilemma: to remain or to leave. France can continue prioritizing the same tools and tactics of warfare to target the persistent presence of VEOs in the region, or it can slowly begin implementing a force-reduction plan as a part of an eventual withdrawal, as seems to be the case. Either way, the French find themselves in a corner, as either choice means that VEOs will remain an effective threat to local security forces.

Notably absent within this environment of vulnerability are productive responses and even a persistent presence of Operation Barkhane forces—both French and regional—capable of providing responsible civilian protections. While the Barkhane strategy addresses governance, justice, and development, these critical components of stabilization are more like afterthoughts, with French President Emmanuel Macron saying at the February 2021 summit that these efforts will be emphasized “once military victory is obtained.”<sup>48</sup> The singular focus on the military-first counterterrorism approach is blinding the operation to the threats faced by civilians—with the January 2 and March

42 “Opération Barkhane,” *Le ministère des Armées*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/afrique/bande-sahelo-saharienne/operation-barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane>.

43 “G5 Sahel–Pau Summit–Statement by the Heads of State,” French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs (website), January 13, 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/2020/article/g5-sahel-pau-summit-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-13-jan-2020>.

44 “Secretary Blinken’s G5-Sahel Regional Summit Remarks, 2021,” US Embassy in Chad, February 16, 2021, <https://td.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinkens-g5-sahel-regional-summit-remarks-2021/>.

45 Denis Tull, “Operation Barkhane and the Future of Intervention in the Sahel,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/operation-barkhane-and-the-future-of-intervention-in-the-sahel/>.

46 Rida Lyammouri (@rmaghrebi), “#Sahel: Chadian Army already making its presence felt, however; the wrong way. Women reportedly been raped by Chadian soldiers at Tera, Tillabéri Region, #Niger. Recently deployed to tri-border area and praised by the international community for their ‘effectiveness.’ #Mali #Chad”; and “#Niger: Troubling as human right commission confirmed that the rape indeed took place. Victims include 11 year old girl, 2 married women (including one pregnant). #Sahel #Chad,” Twitter, April 2, 2021, <https://twitter.com/rmaghrebi/status/1378056496253169668>; and United Nations, “UN Investigation Concludes French Military Airstrike Killed Mali Civilians,” UN News (website), March 30, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088722>.

47 “In Mali, France’s Defense Chief Defends January Airstrike that UN Report Says Killed 19 Civilians,” France 24, April 2, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210402-in-mali-france-s-defence-chief-defends-january-airstrike-that-un-report-says-killed-19-civilians>.

48 Lisa Bryant, “For France and Sahel Partners, Many Ideas Emerging But No Clear Strategy,” Voice of America, February 23, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/france-and-sahel-partners-many-ideas-emerging-no-clear-strategy>.

15 alleged ISGS massacres of civilians of Djerma ethnicity in Niger examples of failed intelligence and patrolling of the area.<sup>49</sup> If the military option alone remains the priority of the Barkhane operation, as well as the newly created European-centered Takuba Task Force, then the concerning increase in the levels of violence against civilians will most certainly continue.

The widely criticized French operation and an outdated, decade-old European Union strategy, combined, struggle with defining the threat beyond naming the enemy.<sup>50</sup> France recently had some success in targeting VEO leaders in the region, such as AQIM Emir Abdelmalek Droukdel in June 2020 and JNIM senior operative Bah ag Moussa in November 2020,<sup>51</sup> and more recently the killing of ISGS founder and leader Adnane Abu Walid al-Sahraoui in August 2021.<sup>52</sup> Although these operations eliminated high-value targets and have generally held the line between the Sahel and Libya, France has thus far been unable to either quell tensions and violence in Mali or slow their transmission into the Central Sahel and Coastal West Africa.

As a part of the 35-percent increase in political violence against civilians, militants, and security forces, both Barkhane troops and MINUSMA peacekeepers are frequently targeted and killed. On April 2, 2021, for example, four MINUSMA peacekeepers were killed and nineteen were wounded in a direct attack on their complex in the Kidal region of northern Mali, increasing the number of peacekeepers killed since 2013 to 245 people.<sup>53</sup> The steady increase in targeted, remote attacks on French forces by groups aligned with al-Qaeda and ISGS continues despite the growth in French operations. Across the three-border region, armed groups are increasingly turning to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to disrupt security operations and control territory, using mines as supply

sites for explosive materials.<sup>54</sup> In Mali, IEDs detonated and killed two French soldiers in January 2021; the incident occurred only one week after an IED attack killed three French soldiers, bringing the total to fifty deaths since intervening in 2013.<sup>55</sup>

While France and the G5 Sahel countries have largely focused on ISGS, JNIM has continued to bolster its presence. This focus on ISGS came after a series of the group's attacks killed more than two hundred people in late 2019; however, the shift was perhaps misguided as JNIM appears to have a wider reach in the region.<sup>56</sup> This operational misdirection could become more of a concern as French troops abandon bases in the Timbuktu and Kidal regions, where JNIM and its leader, ag Ghali, enjoy wide support. Perhaps reflecting its own indecision, France announced in February 2021 it would focus on al-Qaeda and JNIM.

Public support for Operation Barkhane is weakening both in France and in Africa. A January 2021 French opinion poll showed support among 49 percent, a decline of twenty-four points since February 2013.<sup>57</sup> In recent months, Malian civil society groups have repeatedly called for France to leave and for an evaluation of foreign troop presence.<sup>58</sup> These calls were only heightened by a series of allegations of human rights abuses against civilians by French and other Barkhane and G5 Sahel forces, as described above.

Even as families demand justice and prosecution of the individuals involved in a botched airstrike, France has described the report findings as “unverifiable local testimony”—language that negates any ability to capture local support or goodwill for their mission.<sup>59</sup> In other instances, French troops killed a civilian in Gao in 2020, as well as a female bystander during a 2021 operation targeting JNIM

49 Lyammouri, “Tillabéri Region, Niger.”

50 Bryant, “For France and Sahel Partners, Many Ideas Emerging.”

51 “France Says Its Army Killed al-Qaeda’s Abdelmalek Droukdel,” *Al Jazeera*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/6/france-says-its-army-killed-al-qaedas-abdelmalek-droukdel>; and “French Troops Kill Commander of al-Qaeda-linked Group in Mali” *Al Jazeera*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/13/french-troops-kill-top-al-qaeda-commander-in-mali>.

52 “France Killed Top West Africa ISIS Leader in Drone Strike.” National Public Radio, September 16, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/16/1038032130/france-kills-top-west-africa-isis-leader-in-drone-strike>.

53 United Nations, “Four Peacekeepers Killed in Complex Attack on UN Base in Mali,” UN News (website), April 2, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1088982>; and “Total Fatalities Since 1948,” United Nations Peacekeeping (website), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>.

54 Will Brown, “The Sahel Squeeze,” *Africa Report*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/25128/the-sahel-squeeze/>.

55 “Two French Soldiers Killed during Operation in Mali,” France 24, January 2, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210102-two-french-soldiers-killed-during-operation-in-mali>; and “Three French Soldiers Killed by Explosive Device in Mali Operation,” France 24, December 28, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201228-three-french-soldiers-killed-in-mali-operation>.

56 Jason Burke, “Sahel Faces Surge in Violence from Terror Attacks,” *Guardian*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/22/sahel-faces-surge-in-violence-from-terror-attacks>.

57 “Mali: 51% des Français sont défavorables à la présence militaire de la France,” *Afrique Actuelle*, January 12, 2021, <https://afriqueactuelle.net/2021/01/12/mali-51-des-francais-sont-defavorables-a-la-presence-militaire-de-la-france-sondage/>.

58 Denis Tull, “Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention and the Politics of Truth in Mali,” *Critique Internationale*, January 2021, [https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_CRIL\\_090\\_0154--contesting-france-rumors-intervention.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CRIL_090_0154--contesting-france-rumors-intervention.htm); and “Malian Police Disperse Protest against French Military Presence,” Reuters, January 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN29Q0SG>.

59 Amandla Thomas-Johnson, “Families of Victims Seek Justice over French Air Strike in Mali,” *Al Jazeera*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/2/families-of-victims-seek-justice-over-french-air-strike-in-mali>.



fighters.<sup>60</sup> The French forces are not the only ones alleged to have committed human rights abuses. In Niger, Chadian forces contributing to G5 Sahel and collaborating with Barkhane are accused of raping women and girls, assault, and confiscation of private property.<sup>61</sup>

These allegations have eroded the support of local political actors. Northern Mali politicians recently accused the French of killing six civilians in airstrikes in late March, though the French government has continued to insist the airstrikes only hit militants.<sup>62</sup> The rhetoric of a French government insistent upon denying that military targeting methods are flawed increases the skepticism and outspokenness of local officials and traditional leaders representing populations—neighbors, friends, constituents, and fellow community members—said to be terrorists. Operation Barkhane was intended to create a space for local governments to operate without jihadist influence, but losing the support of local leaders weakens the role of France and other partners in advancing political and community stability.

Sahelian governments have mixed opinions about Barkhane. Acting Mali President Bah N'daw reaffirmed his support for the counterterrorism mission and met with French President Macron to discuss security cooperation ahead of the February 2021 N'Djamena Summit.<sup>63</sup> However, this commitment faced another setback after the May 2021 coup d'état in Mali, with the removal of N'Daw making way for the appointment of Colonel Assimi Goïta.

Meanwhile, Niger's new president, Mohamed Bazoum, freshly inaugurated following an alleged coup attempt, has called the operation a "relative failure, it's a shared failure, a failure of the entire coalition," and suggested a partial French retreat would have a minimal impact on the counterterrorism mission.<sup>64</sup>

The hesitations of Sahelian partners reflect in part French inconsistency regarding force increases and withdrawals,

and its implausible claims to have no local political ambitions.<sup>65</sup> French officials suggest the proliferation of violence along ethnic lines and the emergence of ethnic and community militias lie outside Operation Barkhane's apolitical mandate, ignoring the ways in which these dynamics of insecurity create conditions for VEOs to exist, and causing further mistrust among local populations unaware of such nuances.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, France's increased focus on aerial operations since 2019 has created an imbalance on the ground where JNIM and ISGS's face-to-face strategy is better at gaining support. This absentee approach compounds problems associated with G5 Sahel security forces, which continue to face structural problems, including low human and financial resources, inefficient logistics, and lack of credibility and accountability. European countries, for their part, are hesitant to provide security and defense funding to African militaries. It is highly unlikely that G5 Sahel armies would be able to significantly hinder VEO advancement if France ends operational support and technical assistance. The Takuba Task Force, a European burden-sharing initiative that sends ground forces to the region, has been slow to gain traction, and the deployment of troops from other European countries does little to mitigate the strategic challenges of the French-led efforts.

At a time when France is progressively removing its troops from the Sahel, a Russian paramilitary organization with close ties to Putin is making its way into the region. In early September 2021, rumors of a potential deal between Malian elites and Russia's Wagner Group sparked concerns among French officials, with Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian expressing his opposition to the deal, citing past abuses and violations by the Russian group.<sup>67</sup> The deal would allow close to 1,000 Russian mercenaries into Mali, at a time when France's operation is undergoing a restructuring. Some Wagner troops apparently arrived in Bamako, from Libya, in late December 2021.<sup>68</sup> The

60 Felix Nkambeh Tih, "51 Percent of French Oppose Military Presence in Mali," AA (Turkey's state news agency), January 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/51-of-french-oppose-military-presence-in-mali/2107534>; and "Mali: une femme décédée, un enfant blessé dans un incendie pendant un raid français," *La Provence*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.laprovence.com/actu/en-direct/6311783/mali-une-femme-decedee-un-enfant-blese-dans-un-incendie-pendant-un-raid-francais.html>.

61 "Chad Arrests Soldiers Accused of Rapes in Niger," Reuters, April 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-niger-security-chad/niger-rights-commission-calls-for-probe-after-alleged-rapes-by-chadian-soldiers-idUSKBN2BQ0AO>.

62 Paul Lorget and Tiemoko Diallo, "Northern Mali Officials Say French Strike Killed Civilians, France Denies," Reuters, March 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-france/northern-mali-officials-say-french-strike-killed-civilians-france-denies-idUSKBN2BJ0HZ>.

63 "Mali-France: ce qu'Emmanuel Macron et Bah N'Daw se sont dit," *Jeune Afrique*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1113217/politique/mali-france-ce-qu'emmanuel-macron-et-bah-ndaw-se-sont-dit/>.

64 Agence France Press, "Niger Leader Calls France's Sahel Force 'Relative Failure,'" Yahoo, March 29, 2021, <https://autos.yahoo.com/niger-leader-calls-frances-sahel-145533839.html>.

65 Tull, "Contesting France."

66 "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy," ICG, February 1, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/299-course-correction-sahel-stabilisation-strategy>.

67 "Reports of Russian Mercenary Deal in Mali Trigger French Alarm," France 24, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210914-reports-of-russia-mercenary-deal-in-mali-alarm-france>.

68 Tim Lister and Sebastian Chukla, "Arrival of Russian Wagner Mercenaries in Mali Condemned by European Governments," CNN, December 24, 2021, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/24/africa/russia-mercenaries-mali-intl/index.html>.

involvement of Russia could undermine current counterterrorism efforts and jeopardize funding from international partners. In the Central African republic, where Wagner is also deployed, its human rights violations have amounted to war crimes, according to the UN.<sup>69</sup> While France has been the most vocal opponent of the Russia-Mali alliance, fifteen European nations as well as Canada have condemned the deployment.<sup>70</sup> The US State Department also expressed its “alarm” at the deal, estimated to cost US\$10 million per month.<sup>71</sup> In addition to fears of growing violence, the deal has challenged France and its allies’ dominance in the country, and to a greater extent, in the region. Recent Russian deals with Ethiopia and Nigeria have signaled Russia’s growing influence and military expansion in Africa.<sup>72</sup> However, with an increasing dissatisfaction toward the French presence in the country, public opinion in Mali has grown fonder of a partnership with Russia.<sup>73</sup>

Additionally, Algeria recently expressed a willingness to take on a larger role in Mali, with a September 2021 visit by its foreign affairs minister, who offered financial support in Mali’s fight for stability.<sup>74</sup> In the past, Algeria was a pivotal actor in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel and had carried out several cooperative initiatives such as the Fusion and Liaison Unit, an intelligence service coalition between Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Nigeria,<sup>75</sup> and the CEMOC (Joint Operational Staff Committee), a joint committee between Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.<sup>76</sup> However, these efforts remained marginal and were never properly capitalized.

Algeria’s renewed interest in the Sahel crisis, which follows the appointment of Foreign Affairs Minister Ramtane

Lamamra, comes at a pivotal time in the decade-long fight for stability in the region.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, the breaking of diplomatic ties between Algeria and Morocco in August 2021 could yet impair Algiers’ strategic operations in the region.<sup>78</sup>

## Failure of Sahelian States

As suggested by the new president of Niger, the excessive focus by the French on military counterterrorist operations parallels a failure in the response of Sahelian states. Although the responses of the three countries have varied to an extent, they have precious few results to show. Observing these states’ respective responses to what is very much an existential threat, one gets the impression of a disconnect, of lip service, of business as usual, and of a tendency to delegate to others the resolution of this crisis.

While large segments of their territories and populations face tragic circumstances and fall under the control of alternative sources of authority, Sahel’s political elites remain concerned about control of the apparatus of the state in the capital city and, mostly, access to its resources. Their “relative complacency” contrasts with the seriousness of the crisis.<sup>79</sup> Across the three countries, corruption remains high (on Transparency International’s latest corruption-perception index, Mali ranks 129, Niger 123, and Burkina Faso 86).<sup>80</sup> Some elites are themselves involved in trafficking.<sup>81</sup> In Mali, protests against the decaying regime of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita led to a coup in 2020 by the very army that should be off fighting the insurgencies. In Burkina Faso and Niger, elections have taken place these last few months but have seemed disconnected from the reality

69 Declan Walsh, “Russian Mercenaries Are Driving War Crimes in Africa, U.N. Says,” *New York Times*, June 27, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/world/asia/russia-mercenaries-central-african-republic.html>; and “Mali-Russia: Bamako to Sign Contract with Wagner Group,” *Africa Report*, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/127421/mali-russia-bamako-to-sign-contract-with-wagner-group/>.

70 “Mali: West Condemns Russian Mercenaries ‘Deployment,’” BBC, December 24, 2021, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59777385>

71 Ned Price, “Potential Deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali,” US Department of State Press Statement, December 15, 2021, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/potential-deployment-of-the-wagner-group-in-mali/>.

72 Elliot Smith, “Russia Is Building Its Military Influence in Africa, Challenging U.S. and French Dominance,” CNBC, September 13, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/13/russia-is-building-military-influence-in-africa-challenging-us-france.html>; and Serge Daniel, “L’Algérie veut renforcer sa position au Mali et dans le Sahel,” Radio France Internationale (RFI), August 30, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210830-l-algerie-veut-renforcer-sa-position-au-mali-et-dans-le-sahel>.

73 Durmaz, “Talk of Wagner Mercenary Deal.”

74 Christian Eboulé, “L’Algérie veut renforcer son influence dans le Sahel et au Mali,” TV5MONDE, August 30, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/l-algerie-veut-renforcer-son-influence-dans-le-sahel-et-au-mali-422400>.

75 “Sahel : Pour une approche globale,” *Sénat*, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-720/r12-72013.html>.

76 Laurence Aida Ammour, “La coopération de sécurité au Maghreb et au Sahel: l’Ambivalence de l’Algérie,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, February 18, 2012, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ASB18FR-La-coopération-de-sécurité-au-Maghreb-et-au-Sahel-l-Ambivalence-de-l-Algérie.pdf>.

77 Farid Allat, “Algeria: Foreign Affairs Minister Lamamra Prioritises Diplomacy,” *Africa Report*, September 14, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/126281/algeria-foreign-affairs-minister-lamamra-prioritises-diplomacy/>.

78 Francis Sahel, “Les États du Sahel déchirés entre l’Algérie et le Maroc,” *Mondafrique*, September 6, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://mondafrique.com/les-etats-africains-dechires-entre-lalgerie-et-le-maroc/>.

79 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 194.

80 “Corruption Perceptions Index, 2020,” Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/ner>.

81 Raineri, “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa; and “UN Documents for Mali,” Security Council Report (transparency organization’s website), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/mali/>.

of the country, with large parts of the territory unable to vote in Burkina Faso and a degree of repression occurring in Niger. The Kabore regime in Burkina Faso never fully got its bearings and was overthrown in January 2022 after several earlier threats.

## Mali

Of the three Sahel states under consideration in this policy report, Mali is the most delinquent when it comes to responding to its security crisis. While it has barely lived up to its commitments under the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord with northern Mali's armed groups, the Malian government has nevertheless continued until recently to operate under its framework, largely unable or unwilling to adapt its response to the dramatically different crisis it now faces, where the main actors and the main regions of conflict are vastly different. The weakness of its security response has been well documented elsewhere;<sup>82</sup> here we focus on its broader response.

The Malian government seems to be going from one initiative to another. Ministries and other state actors compete with each other more than they coordinate for success. The government gives an impression of doing busy work and of pretending more than acting. Its continued attachment to its sovereign prerogatives, despite their empirical erosion, undermines its willingness to listen to local communities and work for them. As a result, all government plans so far have had "inadequate implementation."<sup>83</sup>

Mali has a Ministry of National Reconciliation and, since 2017, a National Reconciliation Support Mission tasked with organizing dialogues and mediations among communities in the Mopti region. None of the dialogues it has sponsored has resulted in lasting peace, in part because they usually exclude jihadists. In 2017, the government also launched the Integrated Securitization Plan for Central Regions (PSIRC). The plan's ambitious goals to address local grievances, reduce exclusion, and provide security, public services, and development contrast, however, with the absence of state capacity to implement them. Ministries were unable to coordinate local action and the state fell back on its usual emphasis on security, which often translates into violence toward local civilians. In December 2019, the government came up with a Stabilization Strategy for

Central Mali that was meant to focus more on governance and politics than PSIRC, but once again no significant resources or capacity were dedicated to it. In 2020, the government fell back to a more conventional military response with Operation MALIKO (which translates as "for peace"),<sup>84</sup> aimed at regaining control of the center of the country. It was predictably accused of violence against civilians (mostly Fulanis) and focused more on jihadists than on addressing intercommunal violence. Moreover, Mali armed forces, (known by a French acronym, FAMa) were reported to have abandoned some outposts in the region.<sup>85</sup>

When there have been agreements or cease-fires among local violent actors, it seems to have been largely without or despite the state. Mediation by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Swiss nongovernmental organization, led to cease-fires in 2019, including between Fulani and Dogon chiefs in the Koro circle. On March 14, 2021, the High Islamic Council (HCI) managed to broker a one-month cease-fire between Katiba Macina and local Dozo fighters in Niono (Ségou region). The HCI envoys had met nine times with the jihadists and some thirty times with multiple Dozo factions.<sup>86</sup> The Niono agreement allowed jihadists to preach in local mosques, required women to wear the veil, forgave the crimes of all actors, provided for a dual justice system between local and jihadist courts, allowed the Dozos to keep their traditional outfit and weapons, provided for the release of prisoners, and demanded the departure of the FAMa from their base in the Farabougou village within a month. Yet, the government refused to comply with this final item, suggesting it cares more about affirming its authority and projecting its power than about local peace and the safety of its populations. So far, however, the agreement has held.<sup>87</sup>

## Burkina Faso

Although Burkina Faso is usually deemed a somewhat more capable state than Mali, it has also struggled to get any traction in articulating coherent policies that can be implemented against political violence. Very little happened in the first few years of the insurgency, as the country was going through a difficult transition from twenty-seven years of a relatively authoritarian regime, and it was not until March and May 2019 that the government launched two large military operations in the East and in the North

82 Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard, and S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle: Improving Counterterrorism Capabilities*, RAND Organization, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1241>.

83 ICG, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent*, 26.

84 "Maliko" also is a song by Malian artists who banded together as Voices United for Mali, calling for peace. See "The Strand Archive: Voices United for Mali," BBC, January 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0138v61>.

85 ICG, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent*, 18, 21.

86 David Baché, "Dans les coulisses de l'accord de Niono au Mali," RFI, April 12, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/reportage-afrique/20210411-dans-les-coulisses-de-l-accord-de-niono-au-mali-1-4>.

87 David Baché, "Mali: l'armée reste à Farabougou mais le cessez-le-feu est maintenu pour les populations," RFI, April 16, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210416-mali-l-arm-percentC3percentA9e-reste-percentC3percentA0-farabougou-mais-le-cessez-le-feu-est-maintenu-pour-les-populations>.

(Operations Otapuanu and Doofu, respectively). Otapuanu seems to have disrupted the jihadists for a while, but according to ACLED, “despite being touted as a major success, [...] operation [Otapuanu] resulted in only temporary withdrawal by militants from the region, and in a corresponding increase in attacks elsewhere in the country.”<sup>88</sup> Operation Doofu was in turn widely criticized for its violence against civilians including summary executions.

Aside from these two actions and a few other smaller ones, Burkina’s forces are still completely absent from 30 percent of the territory and unevenly distributed over another third, with only 28 percent of the forces on the front line.<sup>89</sup> The security forces are also hampered by significant divisions among their different units. There is a paralyzing rivalry between the police and the gendarmerie, which has hampered the effectiveness of the National Intelligence Agency (created in 2015), and the prioritization of a Special Intervention Unit of the gendarmerie by President Kaboré has created army discontent.<sup>90</sup> The military is also paying the price of decades of neglect as the Compaoré regime starved the regular forces while saving resources and equipment for the 1,300-men strong President Security Regiment, which was dissolved by President Kaboré in 2015, leaving him with a dearth of competent forces.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Burkina Faso has largely relied on local self-defense groups in its response to the crisis, first and foremost the Koglweogo, which are deployed across the entire Mossi- and Gourmantché-populated areas of the country. Although a law was passed in 2020 to regulate the recruitment and training of such self-defense forces, the Koglweogo are quite autonomous from the state, even sometimes administering their own justice, and are known to practice corporal punishment. While it is unclear whether they are able to successfully fight jihadists, they contribute to the multiplication of violent actors across the territory.

Aside from military operations, Burkina’s main response to its crisis has been the adoption of the Sahel Emergency Plan (PUS) in July 2017. PUS is a complex plan that includes socioeconomic and governance “pillars” and aims to bring development to the northern region as a long-term

solution to the crisis. It lacks credibility in a country where the North has long been politically and economically marginalized, and is poorly adapted to the unstable security environment. Only about half of its planned activities were carried out in its first two years.<sup>91</sup>

## Niger

Generally, Niger stands out in the Sahel as more capable and more responsive to crisis than its neighbors. According to Alexander Noyes et al., the country “has made strides over the past five years toward building better defense institutions and improving its defense management practices. Niger’s political leadership—at the highest levels—appears to be genuinely interested in reforms aimed at improving the professionalism and performance of their defense and internal security forces.”<sup>92</sup> Sebastian Elisher also notes that Nigerien forces “display a higher degree of internal cohesion and discipline than their Malian counterparts.”<sup>93</sup> The country also has an established history of seeking to integrate its minorities and promoting co-optation of religious clerics.<sup>94</sup> However, these qualities have not spared Niger a significant deterioration of its security situation over the last few years.

In the first phase of the crisis, Niger used a multiplicity of largely successful strategies and managed to avoid a breakdown like Mali experienced. Mahamadou Issoufou’s administration allocated more resources to the northern part of the country in the wake of the Libyan regime’s collapse; launched military operation Malibero, which dissuaded Tuaregs heading from Libya to settle in Niger; increased Tuareg and Arab participation in the government (Brigi Rafini, a Tuareg, was prime minister from 2011 to 2021, an unprecedented degree of Tuareg integration by Sahelian standards); and furthered decentralization, which gave northerners important positions in their region.<sup>95</sup>

The second phase of the crisis was characterized by spill-over violence from Nigeria’s Boko Haram. This phase was largely concentrated in the far-east Diffa region. From 2005 to 2014, the government met with some success there. Seeing terror as a foreign import, people rallied to the state, which displayed some degree of implementation

88 “A Vicious Cycle: The Reactionary Nature of Militant Attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali,” ACLED (website), accessed January 5, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2019/05/31/a-vicious-cycle-the-reactionary-nature-of-militant-attacks-in-burkina-faso-and-mali/>.

89 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, Africa Report 287, February 24, 2020, 17.

90 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 19.

91 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 25.

92 Alexander Noyes, Ashley Bybee, and Paul Clarke, “How to Build Better Militaries in Africa: Lessons from Niger,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-build-better-militaries-africa-lessons-niger>.

93 Sebastian Elisher, “Defying the Odds? Nigerien Responses to Foreign and Domestic Security Challenges,” *West African Papers* (series), No. 11, OECD Publishing, 2018, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1787/104d1c6d-en>.

94 Elisher, “Defying,” 12.

95 Alex Thurston, “Political Settlements with Jihadists in Algeria and the Sahel,” *West African Papers*, No. 18, OECD Publishing, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0780622a-en>.

capacity.<sup>96</sup> The response was military in form and repressive, with a state of emergency and civilian displacement.<sup>97</sup> Yet the sense of violated sovereignty might have bolstered support for the government.<sup>98</sup>

Starting in 2014, however, ISGS-inspired violence spread from Mali into the Tillabéri region that lies between the capital and the Malian border. The Niger government followed the path of its neighbors and partnered in 2017 with nonstate armed groups from Mali, mainly GATIA and the *Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad* (MSA), two allies of the Malian government, to fight ISGS in Tillabéri. These two groups being composed mainly of Tuaregs and Daoussak ethnics, meted out violence against local Fulani communities, making things worse and heightening interethnic tensions.<sup>99</sup> Niger switched tactic in 2018 and has since tried to promote reconciliation and inhibit jihadist coalition building.<sup>100</sup>

To do so, it has relied on the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP), an institution that dates to 1995 and was created in the wake of Tuareg insurgencies. This is a rather unique institution in the region and is directly under the authority of the president. The HACP sought to co-opt local elites in Tillabéri by recruiting more locals in the security forces and working with select chiefs to channel food aid to communities. A dozen influential Fulani with broad ties to militants throughout the region were appointed as *chargés de mission* and sought to integrate local recruits.<sup>101</sup>

Despite its best efforts, however, HACP has had limited success and violence has flared anew in the Tillabéri region since 2019.

## Chad

Although we focus on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as the main theater of terror and counter-terror in the Sahel, it is worth addressing Chad's role, as Chad is the main outside intervener in the region besides France. Sharing borders with Libya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, Chad is a crucial element in regional security and France's first ally in the region.

The April 2021 death of President Idriss Déby, apparently in combat with rebels from the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), led to a power grab by a military junta under the leadership of his son, Mahamet.<sup>102</sup> France's reliance on Chad as a Sahelian security partner was visible in its lack of condemnation of this coup and in Macron's presence in N'djamena for the elder Deby's funeral, seated next to the son. The display of support was not in vain as Mahamet Deby confirmed his intentions to keep Chadian troops in the G5 Joint Force.<sup>103</sup> However, in August, the Chadian transitional government announced the withdrawal of half of its troops, or about 600 elements, to better deal with Chad's own rebels.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the rebel group FACT, mainly based near the Libyan border, and ISWAP around Lake Chad remain a threat to the Chadian regime at a time of significant political uncertainty and with the new leadership trying to consolidate its power. Nevertheless, Chad's partial withdrawal is a blow to the collective military strategy in the triborder area, where it has been a very active participant with frequent joint operations with Burkina Faso and Niger's militaries.

96 Mueller, "Religious Violence and Democracy in Niger," 95-96.

97 Eric Komlavi Hahonou, "Stabilizing Niger: The Challenges of Bridging Local, National, and Global Security Interests," Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016, accessed October 15, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13463.5>.

98 Mueller, "Religious Violence and Democracy in Niger."

99 Raineri, "Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa," 8-9.

100 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 195.

101 Author interview (Pierre Englebert) with Gen. Abdou Tarka, HACP Director, Niamey, June 2021.

102 Grégoire Sauvage, "Qui sont les rebelles qui auraient tué le président tchadien Idriss Déby?" France 24, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210422-qui-sont-les-rebelles-qui-auraient-tue-le-president-tchadien-idriss-deby>, accessed September 22, 2021.

103 "Chad-France: What Mahamat Idriss Déby and Emmanuel Macron Discussed," *Africa Report*, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/106790/chad-france-what-mahamat-idriss-deby-and-emmanuel-macron-discussed/>.

104 "Chad to Halve Its Troops Fighting Sahel Militants, Spokesperson Says," Reuters, August 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chad-halve-its-troops-fighting-sahel-militants-spokesperson-says-2021-08-21/>.



## Diagnostic 2: The Nature of the Crisis

This section digs deeper into the roots of the crisis and of the failed external and domestic interventions. There has been a rise of violent extremism and intercommunal violence in the Sahel as the result of patterns of state abuse, state weakness and neglect, the politics of exclusion, and a lack of accountability of political elites.

### A Pattern of State Abuse, Even for Democracies

The states of the Sahel may appear as benign creations from a distance and they certainly do not harbor the repressive dimensions of countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, or Sudan. Yet, they remain steeped in their colonial legacy and engage with their societies in command-heavy, top-down relations where abuse remains common and largely unchallenged. As a result, they produce a significant degree of alienation and grievances among their citizens, which feed ongoing patterns of violence.

In Mali, the International Crisis Group has noted that the state, unable to manage local disputes, has instead demonstrated abuse of authority. State representatives, particularly gendarmes and water and forestry officers, are at the origin of many instances of abuse against local populations. Locals do not trust government officials whom they see as predators and corrupt, and whom they accuse of improperly collecting taxes. Discontent created by these maltreatments is at the base of the state's poor reputation and sometimes the reason for its rejection.<sup>105</sup> It is important to note that democratization at the top of the state does not appear to affect the daily behavior of state agents at the local level.

There also is a long history of impunity for state actors and security forces in Burkina Faso, best illustrated by the notorious Zongo affair in which a journalist was killed by security forces in 1998. As noted by Sven Hagberg, “the official or quasi-official” status of the perpetrators shielded them from sanction, creating a culture of impunity in which the most inhumane acts could be carried out without fear or repercussions.<sup>106</sup> Although there was regime transition in 2014 and greater democracy since then, the current

political elites are by and large the same as back then, and the moment of accountability brought about by the regime change has not lasted. Similarly, the current government has not condemned violent exactions by the Koglweogo in the northern area.

State abuse need not be violent to trigger grievances. There has been a systematic pattern in Burkina Faso of abuse by local authorities of the land management prerogatives they acquired with decentralization reforms.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, the 2009 Rural Land Law encouraged private land sales and undermined local populations' land rights, as did the privatization of forests and the creation of protected areas and hunting reserves in the eastern area, which directly correlates with the rise of extremist violence in the same region. Since the Compaoré regime, the pattern has been one of privatization of the state and use of its power to appropriate resources, leading to widespread alienation and frustration. It is no surprise that 80 percent of violent extremism in Burkina Faso targets “mayors, judges, traditional chiefs, politicians, and other symbols of the state,”<sup>108</sup> and that the jihadists in the East promise local populations to restore local access to resources.<sup>109</sup>

Even in Niger where forces often appear to behave with more restraint, Luca Raineri notes “abuses by state authorities—including . . . arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, etc.”<sup>110</sup>

In all three countries, there is also significant abuse of civilians by nonstate groups that often act on behalf or with the blessing of the state.

### A Pattern of State Neglect and Incapacity

When the local state is not abusive, it is too often negligent, truant, or incompetent. Sahelian states are fundamentally weak in their ability to design and implement policies, and cope and respond to crisis. This deep structural weakness is at the root of their problems. This comes from far more than a lack of will, “poor governance,” or corruption. It is a structural deficit of statehood that results from the broad mismatch between the ambitions of sovereign territorial states, the overwhelming scope of challenges in vast and

105 ICG, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent*, 20.

106 Stefan Hagberg, “Enough Is Enough: An Ethnography of the Struggle against Impunity in Burkina Faso,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 40, No. 2 (2002): 231.

107 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 7.

108 Anouar Boukhars, “The Logic of Violence in Africa's Extremist Insurgencies,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, No. 5 (2020): 120.

109 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 6.

110 Raineri, “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa,” 2.



underpopulated countries with minimal infrastructure, and the extremely limited resources at their disposal. Burkina Faso has eight civil servants per one thousand inhabitants. Mali has six and Niger three. France has 89.<sup>111</sup> Domestic tax revenues amount to \$71 per person in Burkina Faso, \$97 in Mali, and \$46 in Niger.<sup>112</sup> In France, it reaches \$21,280.<sup>113</sup> One cannot simply speak of the necessity to restore or rebuild the state; one must come to terms with its basic unsustainability in its current form in the Sahelian context.<sup>114</sup>

The kind of governance crisis experienced by Sahelian states echoes this structural deficit. In Mali, for example, the state is unable to mediate and arbitrate disputes between local communities, a basic function of classical statehood. The dispute management mechanisms exist but are ineffective; rules are unclear; central authorities intervene inconsistently in local disputes and with little knowledge of local realities; legal dualism between customary and public law creates many problems; and the presence of the Malian state in peripheral rural zones is so thin as to make it almost impossible to administer justice. In the end, the state struggles to convince people of its usefulness.<sup>115</sup>

In Burkina Faso, the state is weak everywhere. That is why the Koglweogo have arisen among the dominant and geographically central Mossi ethnic group. Yet the state's reach is particularly limited in the North and the East where Fulani and Gourmantché communities reside and where most of the violence is concentrated. Judd Devermont has shown that the violence in Burkina Faso is geographically related to the lack of under-five DPT vaccination (for immunization against diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus), a clear indicator of the lack of reach of the state.<sup>116</sup> President Compaoré governed on the cheap for twenty-seven years, controlling the countryside through a web of personal alliances that enabled him to neutralize threats to his authority, but did not allow for institutional buildup or policy outreach.

In Niger, the state might be better than its neighbors at projecting military power, but it is unable to avoid regular

food shortages.<sup>117</sup> Life expectancy is a mere fifty years; only 41 percent of children are in school; and 43 percent of its population remains in extreme poverty.<sup>118</sup>

Instead of thinking of jihadist terror as an exogenous problem affecting the region, it is more fruitful to conceive of it as an opportunistic infection in a diseased body: the Sahelian state. To think of the state as the problem rather than the solution can help in thinking of new ways to address the crisis. Indeed, jihadist ideology is appropriated by local Muslim activists who use it to tap into the larger grievances against the state.<sup>119</sup> There is a strategic element to that, for, as Thurston notes, jihadism is most active in places far from capitals where it can outcompete the state and evade security.<sup>120</sup> Yet there also is a broader claim of competition with the state and a replacement agenda. Jihad presents itself as a solution, an alternative. Jihadists want to overthrow existing states and remake political order, and they engage in “political modes of day-to-day operations.”<sup>121</sup> It is important to recall that Islam has a strong political pedigree in the region. Nineteenth-century jihadist movements waged by Sufi Fulani sheiks provide a historical narrative for counter-states and alternative political projects. As a matter of fact, the Macina Liberation Front makes a direct reference to the nineteenth-century Fulani Macina jihad state. In this respect, religious fervor is not the main mobilizer. State weakness is.

### Who's In? Who's Out? Exclusionary States

African states, and Sahelian states in particular, are not all equal when it comes to their “national design,” historical legitimacy, or social contract.<sup>122</sup> Because of the constraints of history, territory and resources, they also project their power and govern differently in different parts of their territories, not unlike their colonial predecessors.<sup>123</sup> As a result, they tend to practice a politics of inclusion of some groups and exclusion of others that mediates the manner in which communities relate to the state and what they can expect from it.

111 Alex Thurston, “The Hollowness of ‘Governance Talk’ in and About the Sahel,” Commentary, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, April 13, 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026>.

112 International Centre for Tax and Development, Government Revenue Dataset, <https://www.ictd.ac/dataset/grd/>, accessed January 5, 2022.

113 Catriona Craven-Matthews and Pierre Englebert, “A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction,” *African Security* 14, No. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2017.1419634>. The figure for France is from 2013, per Thomas (2015:79).

114 Regarding the inadequacy of the good governance agenda in low-income countries, see Thomas, *Govern Like Us*.

115 ICG, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent*.

116 Judd Devermont, “How Fraym Explains Extremist Violence in Burkina Faso,” Fraym (website), 2019, <https://fraym.io/violence-in-burkina-faso/>.

117 Elisher, “Defying,” 10-11.

118 “The World Bank in Niger,” World Bank (website), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/niger/overview>.

119 Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, “The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations,” *West African Papers*, No. 7, OECD Publishing, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1787/eb95c0a9-en>.

120 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 193.

121 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 3.

122 Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

123 Catherin Boone, *Political Topographies of the African States* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Both geographically and demographically, Sahelian states can be thought of as having cores and peripheries. The latter are incorporated into the state under different terms than the cores, which typically own the state and find representation in it. Peripheries are more often under regimes of “administrative occupation,” sometimes indirectly. As a result, states are “bifurcated.”<sup>124</sup> The developments of the last five to ten years in the region suggest that this differential mode of national integration and the subsequent marginalization of some communities and regions lie at the root of the grievances that feed insurgencies.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, and increasingly in Niger, Fulani communities are both at the center of the crisis and at the periphery of the nation. They suffer from a failure of nation-building, climate change, and a flawed relation between the state and pastoralist modes of production. They are poorly integrated into the state and tend to be discriminated against in terms of access to land and employment. Their underrepresentation in the armed forces, in particular, favors abuses toward them and impunity for such abuses.<sup>125</sup> They are not, however, the only communities that suffer from exclusionary state-building in these three countries.

A recent article by Joan Ricart-Huguet powerfully illustrates the geographically uneven nature of political representation in West Africa by mapping out the regional origins of ministers from 1960 to 2010 across the region, showing clear biases for certain groups. In the Sahel too, Ricart-Huguet’s data show the unevenness of political representation and, combined with other sources, the extent to which underrepresentation correlates with violence. It clearly indicates that Malian ministers come largely from the south, Burkinabè ones from the center, and Niger ones from the south-western region near Niamey.<sup>126</sup>

The southern communities who largely “own” the Malian state are mainly Bambara, Malinke, and Soninke, groups that are at the core of the historical construction of Mali, even in precolonial times. Northern Tuaregs have had a degree of representation over time, resulting from the settlement of many conflicts. Central communities, particularly

Fulani, where the violence is taking place, are significantly underrepresented. They are also decentered from the core of the state, in the Mopti and Ségou regions. In many ways, the state’s lackadaisical response might be a function of the remoteness of the violence and its limited impact on core regions and communities.<sup>127</sup> In this context, it is not surprising that Afrobarometer indicates that only 50 percent of Malians identify as only Malian or more with their Malian identity than with their ethnic one.

In Burkina Faso, the centrally located Mossi and western populations (Bobo, Senoufo, Samo) are overrepresented in government. Fulani and Gourmantché (northern and eastern) are underrepresented. The violence overlaps with areas of Fulani communities (northern), of recent settlements by Mossi migrants (central-northern), and of Gourmantché communities (eastern).<sup>128</sup> In eastern Burkina Faso, jihadists preachers have targeted sermons at different communities, mainly Gourmantché and Fulani, which are deprived of access to water, gold deposits, pastures, and hunting and fishing grounds.<sup>129</sup> There also is “extreme underrepresentation” of Fulani within the administration, and particularly the security forces.<sup>130</sup> Here also, it is not surprising that only 39 percent of Burkinabe identify first or only as Burkinabe over their ethnic identity.

The situation is somewhat different in Niger. While Fulani (Peul) and Tuareg are also historically underrepresented (despite recent gains for the Tuaregs), violence is located in areas populated by Djerma (Zarma) and Songhai, who are politically dominant, and driven by relations with local Fulani communities. The fact that the violence affects a core region and community of the state might explain Niger’s somewhat more forceful response to the crisis compared to Burkina Faso and Mali. Although the Hausa are the largest community, the Djerma are politically dominant.<sup>131</sup> The Djerma also form the traditional officer class in the military and are reluctant to absorb more border community representatives into their ranks.<sup>132</sup> Mahamane Tidjani Alou illustrates some of the exclusionary practices of the Nigerien state. He notes that Nigerien citizenship remains unequal. There are “social orders” that continue to value divisions based on social origins inherited from the

124 Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

125 Modibo Ghaly Cissé, “Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>.

126 Joan Ricart-Huguet, “Colonial Education, Political Elites, and Regional Political Inequality in Africa,” *Comparative Political Studies*, March 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414021997176>.

127 See Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “The Roots of Mali’s Conflict,” Clingendael Institute, March 2015, “Map 4, Ethnic Groups,” accessed January 5, 2022, [https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the\\_roots\\_of\\_malis\\_conflict/2\\_rebellion\\_and\\_fragmentation\\_in\\_northern\\_mali/images/map\\_4\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_mali.png](https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/2_rebellion_and_fragmentation_in_northern_mali/images/map_4_ethnic_groups_mali.png).

128 “Regional Overview: Africa, 8-14 November 2020,” ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/2020/11/18/regional-overview-africa8-14-november-2020/>.

129 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 14.

130 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 33.

131 Mueller, “Religious Violence and Democracy in Niger.”

132 ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger’s Tillabery*, Africa Report 289, June 3, 2020, 21.

past. The state “tolerates and maintains practices that are antinomic to its own frames of reference,” such as slavery among the Tuareg, Fulani, and Arab nomads, as well as in urban centers.<sup>133</sup> Still, the large proportions of Hausa (54 percent) and Djerma-Songhai (21%) might account for why 70 percent of Nigeriens identify as nationals only or more than as ethnics.

### Complacent Political Elites Shielded from Accountability

Weak, vulnerable, and unpredictable governments with political elites more focused on their careers and benefits than on public policy or the fate of their citizens represent another factor that lies both at the roots of the violence and as part of the difficulties in curbing it. All triborder countries have undergone coups and attempted coups by their militaries in recent years and months. The May 2021 coup in Mali followed one in August 2020, which came after the 2015 coup and a 2016 attempted coup in Burkina Faso, and preceded the March 2021 attempted coup in Niger.<sup>134</sup> It is a plausible inference from this coup activity that at least some segments of these countries’ militaries are more focused on taking power or improving their lot than on fighting insurgencies.

Even before the coups of May 2021 and August 2020, Mali had become a broken democracy, paralyzed by social

conflict and a government that did not know its way out of traditional patronage politics. Burkina Faso and Niger might seem like more functional democracies, but they are exceedingly fragile and rather superficial. The 2020 elections in Burkina Faso were held despite many precincts in the North and in the East being unable to vote. Once again, marginalized communities were kept voiceless. Since then, the main opponent has been appointed minister in a common pattern in the region that undermines the capacity of democratic regimes to promote accountability and to maintain checks and balances. In Niger, the 2020-21 elections suffered from some repression of opponents and Internet blackouts.

Both at the national and local levels, there tends to be an absence of genuine leadership. Malian authorities largely delegate their security response to foreign actors.<sup>135</sup> As French scholar Roland Marchal suggests, “most politicians in Bamako are inclined to believe that a mere restoration of the old system will be enough.”<sup>136</sup> Although there is an office to fight corruption in Mali, the government never takes any action based on its critical annual reports. In Burkina Faso, security forces are consumed with internal squabbles over political turf, a parliamentary commission to design a security strategy drags on, and the government blames the French and the previous regime for their troubles. Meanwhile, Niger’s army has been rocked by accusations of corruption in procurement contracts.

133 Mahaman Tidjani Alou, “Démocratie, exclusion sociale et quête de citoyenneté: cas de l’association Timidria au Niger,” *Journal des africanistes* 70, No. 1-2 (2000): 173-195.

134 Melissa Bell, Sarah Dean, and Richard Roth, “Arrests Made in Niger Attempted Coup, Days before President-elect’s Inauguration,” CNN, March 31, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/31/africa/niger-attempted-coup-intl/index.html>.

135 Craven-Matthews and Englebert, “A Potemkin State.”

136 Roland Marchal, “Briefing: Military (Mis)Adventures in Mali,” *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 487.

## What Alternatives for the Sahel?

Violence in the region is at an all-time high, and civilians are more vulnerable than ever. VEOs have benefited from the lack of state-provided services, increased ethnic conflict, and diminishing equitable access to natural resources to bolster their ranks, stoke conflict, and further destabilize the region. Although foreign partners have long recognized poor governance as a root cause of the worsening security situation in much of the West African Sahel, efforts to tackle the inability of Sahelian states to provide equal access to public goods and the lack of accountability in many of their institutions, including in the police and military, have remained secondary to existing efforts in the realm of security and development.

Creating opportunities for good governance by opening the political and humanitarian space is now made more challenging by the sharp increases in violence, alleged human rights abuses by security forces and nonstate armed groups, and general mistrust. To be sure, Sahelian populations need a lot more than some token and financially unsustainable improvement in governance. Despite its dire humanitarian consequences, the crisis presents an opportunity for something more fundamental and more salutary, both for African states and for their international partners. For the former, the time has come to embark upon real reforms and shed their fetishistic dedication to postcolonial territorial sovereignty, top-down centralized power, and largely failed emulation of the French model of statehood. It also is high time to stop stigmatizing Islam as a political project, to recognize its potential contributions to governance, and to show greater flexibility with respect to the secularism of the state. International partners for their part must rethink the kind of military assistance they provide, for it is both largely ineffective at improving security and too effective at tilting the state-society balance in favor of states that are already insufficiently accountable and disposed to domination. Outside of security, donors might also want to focus their assistance on projects that help Sahelian societies deal with their climate, resource, and energy crises.

### Better Adapted States that Empower Local Communities

Sahelian states suffer from “isomorphic mimicry,” a practice of institutions pursuing legitimation “by adopting the

forms of successful organizations and states . . . without their functions.”<sup>137</sup> They look like sovereign territorial states more than they actually are, and much of their statehood is theater-like performance that is designed, in the words of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (while writing about nineteenth-century Bali), “to express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and at the same time to shape the existing conditions of life to be consonant with that reality; that is, theatre to present an ontology, and by presenting it, to make it happen—make it actual.”<sup>138</sup>

The state they imitate, by and large the French centralized interventionist model, is, however, a very poor fit to their material conditions and an unlikely candidate for eventual state-building success. This state arose in Western Europe after the 1600s in the wake of demographic transitions and the rise of long-distance trade, as it displayed an organizational comparative advantage over local alternatives such as city-states, guilds, and city-leagues.<sup>139</sup> Now, more than sixty years of experience suggest that it is a misfit for the Sahel.

Fortunately, the region has other, more adapted precedents to rely on. Before the French invasion, multiple state formations had existed over centuries in the Sahel, from the Ghana Empire of the 700s to the Mali and Songhai Empires (1200-1600), to the Macina Caliphate and others of the 1800s. With the possible exception of the latter, discussed more below, these states had little to do with contemporary statehood and were instead loose confederations of largely autonomous clans and kingdoms with little shared administrative practice and unencumbered by the complex and multiple demands that burden contemporary states, particularly in the era of good governance. Annual tribute to the sovereign constituted most of the relationship to the center for many.<sup>140</sup> The Mali Empire even developed rules of democratic governance with the Mandan Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga, which can provide contemporary inspiration for culturally embedded accountable rule. Moreover, these empires thrived on trans-Saharan trade, which is now largely outside the control of contemporary states and the near monopoly of a variety of traffickers.

It is worth pausing here to reflect upon the scourge of trans-Saharan trafficking. More than an exogenous

137 Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock, and Matt Andrews, “Looking Like a State: Techniques of Persistent Failure in State Capability for Implementation,” *Journal of Development Studies* 49, no. 1 (2012): 7–9.

138 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

139 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1992); and Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

140 Francis Simonis, “L’Empire du Mali d’hier à aujourd’hui,” *Cahiers d’histoire: Revue d’histoire critique* no. 128 (2015): 30.

affliction, it might be a manifestation of the mismatch between territorial states and long-established patterns of economic activity. The Sahel region has historically been built around long-distance trans-Saharan trade. Territorial states that partition the area have set themselves up in opposition to these flows. Their trade is instead mostly with the former colonial power. Actors involved in long-distance trade have drifted toward trafficking, capitalizing on the comparative advantage of state weakness of the region to facilitate illicit trade flows.<sup>141</sup>

Dissolving postcolonial Sahelian states is obviously not a realistic policy prescription. Yet diluting their arbitrariness and tempering their incongruence to local societies might be. Multiple rounds of decentralization reforms in all three countries have yielded few positive benefits in large part because they produce little local autonomy, require nonexistent financial resources, and promote a form of metastasis of central governance flaws rather than local empowerment. In the Sahel, decentralization is more a multiplication of the layers of statehood than it is a delegation of sovereignty.

Federalism would come a lot closer to approximating past forms of successful governance in the region, particularly if it were accompanied by a genuine union of the states at the supranational level. It would start by recognizing that sovereignty belongs to local communities, not to postcolonial states, and build up from there. Local communities and regions could claim local authority over a large realm of public policies, as well as over the tools of generating their own resources. The federal state, with limited and constrained authority, could more successfully focus on a smaller set of functions. Among these would be security. A dilution of international borders could make it more feasible to design effective security responses and to confront violent extremist organizations seamlessly, from Chad to the Atlantic coast. The G5 joint force provides a ready-made shell that could be the embryo of such a large-scale response.

## Building upon Islam's Political Legacy

Mired in their struggles with good governance, Sahelian states continue to cling to colonially derived notions of *laïcité* (secularism) as foundations for legitimacy. Yet even in France today, the principle is challenged for its

inability to reconcile multiracial and multireligious societies. In contrast, and largely reflecting the fears and prejudices of Westerners and Westernized elites, Islam is a political scarecrow in the Sahel. Yet more than 90 percent of Malians and Nigeriens, and more than 50 percent of Burkinabe, are Muslim. Between 25 percent (Burkina) and 70 percent (Niger) of Sahelian populations want their country governed primarily by religious law.<sup>142</sup> In Mali, 55 percent favor sharia for family law and 47 percent for criminal law, while 58 percent believe Islam should be the state religion.<sup>143</sup> Lasting progress in local governance is unlikely if these preferences are not taken into account.

The historical relationship between the state and Islam varies across the three countries with greater political mobilization around Islam in Mali and more state control of the religion in Niger.<sup>144</sup> Yet everywhere, including in Burkina Faso, which has a sizable Christian minority, the relative rejection of Islam as a source of principles and mechanisms of governance undermines the legitimacy of the state, and misses the opportunity to capitalize upon the experience of precolonial political formations such as the Mali and Songhai Empires, which were based on Islamic law, or the Fula and Tukulor theocratic states that now feed instead the narratives of violent jihadists. Max Weber famously defined the state as a “human community,” but the state making short shrift of this community’s cultural identity undermines its legitimacy in the Sahel.<sup>145</sup> Islam can be a resource for Sahelian states, a repository of social capital, especially at a time when corruption and nepotism have thrived under democratic reforms. Writing about Mali, Roland Marchal suggests that, “While the postcolonial state always defined itself as secular, in reality Islam is mobilized as a solution for all private matters and has had an increasing presence within the public sphere since the deepening [of] the state crisis in the 1990s and 2000s. . . . bringing an end to the Mali crisis may require religion to play a greater, not lesser, role in national politics.”<sup>146</sup>

It is indeed important to note that, for all their criminal activities, contemporary violent jihadists are also providers of governance and at times credible competitors to the state. In the Tillabéri region of Niger, Islamist rebels set up communication channels for reporting crimes and sought to win the trust of local populations by administering justice and restoring order after 2016. Locals viewed affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as a ruling

141 Soto-Mayor, “Traffics et Trafiquants.”

142 World Values Survey, accessed November 20, 2021, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

143 “Les questions ethniques et religieuses au Mali,” *Great Savoir* (think tank newsletter), no. 53, May 2015, 1.

144 Bruce Whitehouse, “Mali’s Existential Threat: Jihadism, or the French?,” *Bridges from Bamako* (blog), October 9, 2020, <https://bridgesfrombamako.com/2019/11/15/malis-existential-threat-jihadism-or-the-frenh/>; Elisher, “Defying.”

145 Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77.

146 Marchal, “Briefing: Military (Mis)Adventures in Mali,” 496.



authority in resolving land disputes and providing services like protecting livestock against raiders, and therefore tolerated the *zakat* (taxes) taken by the jihadists.<sup>147</sup> In Mali, the Macina Liberation Front, claiming heritage from the Macina Caliphate, also somewhat governs, using sharia to solve disputes, imposing behavioral rules, and taxing.<sup>148</sup> In Burkina's East, ISIS protects local hunters, who state security forces have been harassing.<sup>149</sup>

Not all of these initiatives are welcomed by local populations and some are particularly harsh, fundamentalist, and reactionary. At times, there is resistance and apprehension. In the Tillabéri region of Niger, for example, disputes over the ISGS levying taxes on local populations are a key vulnerability for the ISGS. Similar situations are coming to light in Mali, as well, with one testimonial of a Gao resident saying, "Everyone has to pay [taxes], and we don't have anyone to defend us. Either we pay, or we lose everything."<sup>150</sup>

Yet there is a lot more to Islamic governance than these excesses. Bringing Islam back into politics need not equate to an Iran-style repressive theocracy. However, it could imply a greater representative, if not legislative, role for Islamic associations, of which there are hundreds in the region and which now tend to be controlled top-down by the state; constitutional or legal provisions that could build on Islamic culture, justice, and doctrine and provide a more ethical environment for governance; or a better integration of Koranic schools into the state's education system, which could reduce the alienation of youth, for example (Western-inspired schools are often spaces of failure, with low effective literacy upon school completion and high drop-out rates). Moreover, recognizing a role for political Islam would provide a foundation to negotiations with jihadists, which are much overdue. Not all of them would be amenable to such negotiations, as some thrive on the ongoing chaos or harbor extreme agendas, but enough would and it could at least create wedges among them.<sup>151</sup>

## A Different Kind of Military Assistance

More than eight years ago, France deployed troops into Mali and later into the wider Sahel region to counter the presence of VEOs. Since then, the geographic scope of the conflict has expanded, and the shapes and aims of the nonstate armed groups have evolved. However, the

French strategy has very much rejected the notion that it, too, must evolve to meet the moment. The reaffirmation of this strategy at the Sahel Summit in February 2021 is the reaffirmation of a counterterrorism strategy that hinges on a military-first approach to defeating jihadism despite eight years of poor overall results. The failure to pursue a strategic reorientation will hinder any future legitimate efforts to make positive progress toward eliminating the VEO threat and stabilizing a region that is further deteriorating under the stresses of humanitarian and governance challenges due to the protracted conflict.

Steps must be taken by France to realign its counterterrorism strategy with the realities of the moment. First and foremost, any adjustment to the Barkhane strategy must put civilian protection at the forefront. Civilians are becoming a strategic tool of warfare for all VEOs and nonstate armed groups operating in the region—especially those affiliated with ISGS—and they are often the first victims of any violence. For France's counterterrorism actions, this means they should consider making their targeting methodologies publicly available while undergoing an internal review to find, address, and revise the insufficiencies. However, overall, other adjustments to the French strategy would require setting aside the military-first approach to focus on using the military as a tool for the wider political strategy of eliminating the VEO threat.

Beyond the French intervention, other providers of security assistance, including the United States and the rest of the European Union, stand to gain from rethinking their approach. Drone-supported intelligence by the United States, for example, facilitates the French focus on killing jihadist leaders, which tends to produce more local grievances, partly because of civilian casualties, and to generate new leaders, displacing and replacing fighters more than it eliminates them. In this sense, the US focus might inadvertently help reproduce and worsen the problem it seeks to solve. Similarly, the training of African forces, including the European Training Mission (EUTM), has very little to show for its efforts.<sup>152</sup> At bottom, it is doubtful that the military failings of Sahelian states are derived from a lack of training. They might instead reflect recruitment strategies that are part of patronage systems. The combat effectiveness of the Chadian military, untrained by Westerners, suggests there is plenty of potential local capacity. Inadvertently, when they help strengthen local militaries with training and

147 ICG, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 4-6.

148 Eizenga and Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel."

149 Author interview (Pierre Englebert) with staff at Direction du Contre-terrorisme, Burkina Faso, 2019.

150 Adam Sandor (@adam\_sandor), "Grim data collected in rural #Gao. Locals bear a huge burden in the form of taxation by (mostly) #ISGS. Succinctly stated by a man from Gabelo: 'Tout le monde est obligé de payer et on n'a personne sur qui compter pour nous défendre. Soit on paye, soit on perd tout ce qu'on a.'" Twitter, April 10, 2021, [https://twitter.com/adam\\_sandor/status/1380939051373629447](https://twitter.com/adam_sandor/status/1380939051373629447).

151 See Thurston, "Political Settlements with Jihadists."

152 Tull, "Operation Barkhane."



resources, Western partners worsen the balance of power between state and society to the benefit of already unaccountable states. Terror is not defeated in the process, but civilian alienation and grievances worsen.

Practically, there might be two alternatives to the current forms of military assistance. To some extent, bearing in mind that some of the violent actors in the region are part of broader multinational coalitions whose real enemies are Western powers, there is ground for direct, targeted interventions against these actors. A UN Chapter 7-authorized and NATO-implemented mission might be an option. Its goal would not be to protect Sahelian states but to engage an enemy of the West operating in the Sahara-Sahel region. The second alternative might be more appropriate for the defense of Sahelian societies. In this case, Western and multilateral donors could provide specific security-focused support limited to effective cross-national, integrated military collaborations so as to incentivize collective federal-like operations over the reinforcement of parasitic domestic militaries. Such support should avoid training missions and focus on weapons and equipment procurement.

### A Different Focus for Foreign Aid

Beyond security-sector assistance, there also is a need to rethink overall official development assistance in order to: better address the root causes of fragility; help make public institutions more accountable to local populations; protect civilians; and help local societies face climate, resources, and energy crises.

At the core of the insecurity are community-level tensions and disputes that, when unaddressed, create openings for VEOs to exploit. Inter- and intracommunity tensions, often along ethnic lines such as the sharp increase in ethnic violence this year in Tillabéri, should be seen as a first priority in stabilization. Through a justice-and-rights lens, donors can help shift the focus to the resolution of conflicts and disputes at local levels to ease tensions. While such a process might require dialogue with armed groups, these dialogues could result in localized peace settlements that quell the amount of political violence. This approach could be especially important as a part of a preventive strategy to build stability and resilience in areas outside of the triborder areas where JNIM and ISGS are attempting to spread their influence.

As the region has illustrated this past year, an election is not evidence of governmental strength or a pillar of democracy standing strong. Good governance in the Sahel

requires reconciling the state with local populations who have developed a deep distrust of their government over decades of corruption and a general lack of presence to address their needs. Much of the geographic area is actually governed space, as discussed above, often by nonstate actors. While the issue of a deep reform of the state will take time, donors can help in the meantime by recognizing and supporting the effective provision of governance by any willing and accountable actor as a safe and reliable alternative to governance by violent actors.

France is currently struggling to effectively respond to reports of civilian casualties. While the Chadian government has at least taken some measures of accountability by arresting its soldiers accused of rape, France has yet to accept any responsibility for the alleged targeting of civilians through their air and ground operations. In many ways, the Barkhane operation must grapple with how it can be effective at all in its mission when high-ranking government officials make public comments that suggest local populations are seen as terrorists first.

Supporting the development of community-led and -based committees for reporting instances of human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict—not just Barkhane soldiers—could be one step toward giving communities the power to feel their rights are taken seriously. Moreover, good governance is not just an issue for the triborder region countries. France should engage with its government partners to reflect on what processes of healing must occur within the communities disproportionately affected by the violence perpetrated under the banner of Operation Barkhane. This requires a transparent, open dialogue and an acceptance that the French strategy has broken trust, support, and relationships across the region and also at home.

Finally, donors would be well inspired to increase their support for ongoing initiatives in the fields of climate, environment, and energy, which hold the keys to many socioeconomic problems in the region. Burkina Faso and Niger have electricity access rates of about 20 percent, and Mali 45 percent. Grid and off-grid solutions including solar energy exist and require collaborations across the region. Donors can help promote these, as with the Lake Chad Ministerial Roundtable at the World Bank/International Monetary Fund spring meetings in 2021 or with the Sahel Alliance, which aims to double electricity access for G5 countries by 2023. Another similar collaborative approach that would call for increased support is the Great Green Wall, a reforestation initiative started in 2007, which attempts to reverse the region's environmental degradation that has caused severe disruptions.<sup>153</sup>

153 Great Green Wall (website), an African Union initiative, <https://www.greatgreenwall.org/>.

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