



CRISIS IN THE SAHEL: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND THE PATH FORWARD

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

State of Affairs

The Sahelian states have faced major challenges such as ethnic conflict, drug and human trafficking, and terrorism, caused by bad governance, population growth, resource trafficking, military coups, and marginalization of the youth. The crisis in Mali is a microcosm of the region's troubles.

Potential Solutions

Implementing the Algiers Accords (decentralization, national reconciliation) can be a start. Governments and foreign donors should focus on development, mainly infrastructure, digitalization, transport, and public health.

Inadequate Responses

Focus on security, rather than development programs, has exacerbated problems in the Sahel without providing any long-term solutions. Securitization policies and presence of outside forces have produced more insecurity and resentment toward foreign troops.

Re-engaging the States

Given the absence of states, it is necessary to assist Sahelian governments to initiate genuine development and youth programs. But development programs need good governance, and development of institutions requires the assistance of multilateral organizations.

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THE SAHEL: A COMPLEX REGION

The Sahel region lies astride the Maghreb States and stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Horn of Africa (Indian Ocean), spanning around 10 million square meters. It is rich in minerals which external powers have sought to exploit. Though resource rich, the region's inhabitants, apart from in Algeria, are extremely poor. During the last two decades, the Sahel has been perceived as a potent security threat due primarily to the inability of the Sahelian states¹ to control their rural areas. This immense region has porous borders, which historically have been crossed at will by traders and by traffickers of drugs and arms.² Yet, it is also a zone of interaction between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa in which multifaceted human, financial, and religious exchanges take place.

Today, the region is characterized by a demographic explosion, terrorism, conflicts, instability, coups, as well as drugs and human trafficking. It is also suffering from the impact of climate change,³ generating in rural areas increased incidences of drought, flooding, and erosion that threaten agricultural livelihoods and contribute to displacements (migration).⁴ The demographic trend, with the current Sahelian population of the G5 (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) at more than 80 million⁵ and forecasted to reach 200 million by mid-2050, intensifies the dangers.⁶

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Movement of Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al-Mourabitoune, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and other violent extremist organizations (VEOs) had already transformed the region into an inviting space for terrorists and traffickers. The fallout of the Libyan civil war in 2011 enhanced AQIM's capabilities at a time of increased insecurity, and with weapons stolen from Libya's stockpiles during the war.⁷ The crisis in Mali, particularly in the uncontrolled northern part, represents one of the fallouts of the Libyan civil war. Other internal developments due to bad governance, inter-ethnic conflicts, climate change, and divisions within

the Tuareg tribes, have exacerbated the already poor conditions in the country: the Malian crisis, exemplified by political instability, coups, presence of terrorist groups, and Tuareg separatism, is of grave concern to all in the Sahel.

This issue brief examines the multifaceted, complex crises in the Sahel and the perceived threats it represents for diverse local, regional, and international actors. The main argument is that the Sahel faces continuous multidimensional challenges caused partly by bad governance, the legacy of colonialism, foreign interference, and, above all, the absence of concerted development strategies. Mali represents a microcosm of conditions in the Sahel; therefore, as this brief will show, the situation in Mali mirrors the problems that pervade the entire Sahelian region, including contiguous parts of Algeria.

THE SAHEL IN THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The United States, the European Union (EU), Algeria (which shares a 1,300 km border with Mali), and other states consider the Sahara-Sahel region a security threat.⁸ After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Washington launched, in 2002, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI),⁹ as U.S. officials had predicted that al-Qaida and other militant groups would relocate to the Sahel as a "safe haven", a notion that has become prominent in U.S. foreign and defense policy.¹⁰ Because of the peculiarity of the terrain and the fragility of the Sahelian states,¹¹ in 2005, the United States launched the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP)¹² (initially Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative) to counter the perceived menace.¹³ The return from Libya to northern Mali of heavily armed Tuareg, who had served as an ancillary force in Qaddafi's military, aggravated already complicated conditions.¹⁴

For neighboring Algeria, the strongest military power in the Sahel, this enduring crisis represented a serious threat to its national security, which the authorities endeavored to contain to protect the territory and to stem a potential influx of violent ex-

tremists, the growing inflow of transiting migrants to Europe, and the spread of drugs and human trafficking.¹⁵ Despite the billions of dollars disbursed through the TSCTP, the joint military maneuvers (e.g., Flintlock),¹⁶ and France's military presence through operation Serval in 2013 and its successor¹⁷ Operation Barkhane since 2014,¹⁸ neither the United States nor France has succeeded in bringing peace to Mali or to the Sahel. Indeed, "the US-backed wars against terror in the region have more than often resulted in civilian casualties, pervasive human rights abuse and widespread corruption."¹⁹ By 2020, France had basically lost its war in the Sahel.²⁰ A 900-person European force, called Takuba,²¹ composed of Danes, Estonians, Czechs, Swedes, Italians, Greeks, and French, was deployed in the Sahel, with the exception of Algeria. Although not all European countries deployed troops, EU members spent €4.72 billion (equivalent of \$5.21 billion) on assistance to G5 Sahel between 2014 and 2020.²²

These excessive ad hoc security arrangements in the Sahel have resulted in what has been dubbed a "regional security traffic jam."²³ Moreover, the presence of foreign forces, particularly those of the former colonial power, France, created mistrust and hostility within the populace,²⁴ negating alleged attempts at peace building, which was one of Barkhane's objectives. The justification for France's intervention in Mali was to fight terrorism; however, undeniably, economic interests also played a major role,²⁵ especially since the country boasts important unexploited minerals, such as oil shale, gold, zinc, uranium, bauxite, limestone, and phosphates,²⁶ while its neighbor, Niger, possesses uranium, coal, and gold.²⁷ This explains why "some people think [France's presence in West Africa] that rather than preventing the region and its people from terrorists, it is about the natural resources including gold, uranium and oil."²⁸

France's military intervention, which lasted until February 2022, and its presence in its former Sahelian colonies is underscored by its substantial economic interests²⁹ while Sahelian states remain among the poorest on earth.³⁰ In 2014, France set up a security

architecture that was not part of the United Nations, which regroups Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger, known as the G5 Sahel (with a financial cost of close to \$1 billion a year).³¹

France believed that the Malian armed forces and regional military alliances were incapable of defeating jihadist groups.³² France gave little credence to Algerian-led initiatives, although they could have been an essential part of a regional architecture. The creation of the G5, which did not include Algeria, hindered these regional initiatives,³³ but did "[not arouse any regret on the part of the French authorities. On the contrary, they see it as an excellent opportunity to counter Algeria's military and strategic influence on the Sahel-Saharan strip.]"³⁴ France adopted this attitude despite Algeria's cooperation; Algeria allowed French warplanes to use Algeria's airspace to reach Mali.

While terrorism, illicit trafficking, and illegal migration have been advanced to justify a foreign (non-African) presence in the Sahel, the region is important not only because of its natural resources³⁵ but also because of fears of an ostensible domino fallout from violent extremist activities that would exacerbate the already existing conflicts in the region.

MALI: THE CENTER OF THE SAHELIAN CRISIS

With a population of about 20 million, Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. The population comprises at least a dozen ethnic groups,³⁶ some of which are involved in inter-ethnic conflicts.³⁷ Landlocked in the Sahel, the country has faced years of jihadist attacks and intercommunal clashes.³⁸ The problems that Mali faces are epiphenomena of the structural crisis of this fragile state. Since its independence from France in 1960, the country has experienced various insurrections, mainly initiated by the Tuareg ethnic group and military coups. Extreme poverty, corruption, unemployment, and droughts have further aggravated the political and socioeconomic conditions. Such conditions provided the justification for the

EU to pay greater attention to Mali and the Sahel, as it was worried about the political instability, insecurity, and humanitarian consequences that could affect the Sahara-Sahel region. More importantly, the EU has been concerned about the impact of the conditions in the region on its own economic interests and on the spillover effects on migration toward Europe.³⁹

Mali holds an important place in this Sahelian strategy. Indeed, “the EU has undertaken a stabilization action in Mali under Article 28 of the Treaty on European Union”⁴⁰ and supported the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)⁴¹ in which some EU members are involved. Though these programs address economic development, the primary focus is security. The four pillars of the EU’s approach are “(i) the fight against terrorism, (ii) strengthening the capabilities of national defense and security forces and of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, (iii) deployment of the State, administrations, and basic services in a context of stabilization, (iv) development actions.”⁴² Although the EU’s new strategic vision pays greater attention to governance, securitization remains the priority and it is precisely this almost exclusive security approach that is deficient in addressing the ongoing conflict in the region.

Furthermore, foreign forces working with the Malian and other armed forces in the region are themselves corrupt and abusers of human rights. Since the end of 2019, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and other NGOs have recorded over 600 unlawful killings by the security forces of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger during counterterrorism clashes.⁴³ In Mali, French troops have also committed atrocities against civilians. In January 2021, for instance, a strike by France’s Barkhane forces killed 19 civilians who were attending a wedding ceremony in Bounti village.⁴⁴ The military’s abuses persisted into 2022.⁴⁵ In the eyes of the local population, the presence of foreign troops, mainly France’s, is reminiscent of colonial domination. Malian troops in northern Mali are particularly vulnerable because they are poorly equipped.⁴⁶

Mali is also a crossroads for drug traffickers.⁴⁷ These cartels have found alternative routes that allow them to transport drugs, especially cocaine, through the Trans-Saharan region and West Africa, to Europe.⁴⁸ In northern Mali, many officers and high-level officials are involved in drug trafficking,⁴⁹ while ordinary soldiers are under-equipped and destitute. This is not unique to Mali but to the Sahel in general, with documented evidence indicating that there are politicians in the sub-region who are involved in drug trafficking.⁵⁰ There are even some who have financed their election campaigns with money from drug trafficking.⁵¹ In addition to other threats (arms, women and child trafficking, and terrorism), drugs have become an important security concern.

There is also a connection between drug traffickers and jihadist groups⁵² who move cocaine across the Sahel to Europe to fund their terrorist actions. Not only Mali but most of the Sahelian region has turned into an important passageway for drug trafficking coming from Latin America, heading for Europe or the Arabian Peninsula. Drug smuggling has become a major security worry since clear connections between terrorists and drug traffickers have been confirmed. AQMI has provided storage, also, in exchange for payment.⁵³ In the last two years, drug trafficking has increased due to dysfunctional governance.⁵⁴ Traffickers and terrorists often take advantage of the socio-political and security environment to conduct their illicit activities. The absence of the state in northern Mali and its fragility has placed Mali at the center of drug trafficking in the Sahel.⁵⁵

Mali is also a victim of the natural resource curse. The country is Africa’s third largest exporter of gold, with 1/3 of about 70 tons of total production coming from artisanal mining, engaging over one million workers.⁵⁶ Mali’s misfortune is that even its gold wealth is subjected to trafficking. Thus, armed groups and terrorists use the illicit gold trade with Dubai to fund their violent activities, as they did recently to control Mali’s Gourma region.⁵⁷

Tuareg separatism in northern Mali has also been a destabilizing factor. This longstanding issue is one

of the consequences of French colonialism, which had dispersed the Tuareg people while arbitrarily demarcating West African borders.⁵⁸ Under General Charles de Gaulle, France had promised that the Tuareg would have their own state but reneged once Mali obtained its independence in 1960.⁵⁹ The first Tuareg rebellion in Mali occurred in 1963–1964, the second in 1996, and, of course, in 2012 the one with the Tuareg returnees from Libya. The Tuareg question is important because there are Tuareg populations in southern Algeria, Niger, and other Sahelian states which may develop similar irredentist and separatist aspirations.⁶⁰ These military coups constitute yet another challenge to Mali and other Sahelian states.

MALI'S ENDURING POLITICAL CRISIS

Since its independence, Mali has experienced five military coups. From 1992 to 2012, Mali was considered a stable democracy. But since the coup in 2012, which preceded France's intervention, Mali has been engulfed in an unending political crisis. The 2012 coup was orchestrated under the pretext that the military had to take power away from the politicians to halt the advance of AQIM and Iyad Ag Ghali's Ansar Dine in eastern and central Mali. The latest coup occurred in May 2021 when the junta felt sidelined by the transitional President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, whose new government did not include important military figures, some of whom had taken part in the previous coup in 2020. Colonel Assimi Goïta, who eventually led the coup in May 2021, had been involved in the previous coup.⁶¹ Unlike the 2020 coup, this one has not garnered popular support for the removal of the civilian government by the junta. The persistence of the military to cling to power has prompted sanctions from Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and E.U. Furthermore, the Malian military government steered a collision course with France and demanded that the latter's military mission, as well as those of other European militaries, leave the country.⁶² Thus, this recent coup has been more far-reaching than previous ones partly because

of the confrontation it triggered between Mali and its former colonial power, France, whose forces had reached 5,100 troops.⁶³

The French military presence led to criticism from the Malian population for its failure to eradicate terrorism and for continuing instability in the country. In fact, French President Emmanuel Macron had already decided to reduce the number of French troops during the summer of 2021 because of local hostility to a continued French military presence.⁶⁴ The demand of the new Malian transition government for France and other European forces to leave the country has raised questions about the legality of their presence in the first place⁶⁵ and provided nationalistic rhetoric against the now contested French presence. Having said that, French and European forces are withdrawing from Mali but not from the Sahel. They are being repositioned in Niger and the Gulf of Guinea.⁶⁶ In a speech he gave in July 2021, Macron had made it clear that he would now focus military efforts in the "[three borders]" zone, between Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, "[where many more economic interests are located than in Mali.]"⁶⁷

The recent wave of coups like those in Mali and Burkina Faso on January 24, 2022 are indicative of the failed policies in the region. Although the main reason for the coup was serious security concerns,⁶⁸ the fact that in both cases the coup leaders were mostly from a younger generation is symptomatic of the intolerable longevity of rule of most African leaders, who are in their late seventies and eighties. Foreign interference has also become indefensible.

Additionally, the fact that the coup leaders in Mali hired the Russian private military company Wagner⁶⁹ to train Malian troops and offer security services to senior Malian officials and presumably assist in the fight against terrorism, may signal an attempt at breaking dependence on France, which has had strong ties with the elderly leaders. The rise of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel is real. In November 2021, for instance, in Burkina Faso, a human barricade blocked a convoy of French troops heading for

Niger; though supportive of the war against terrorism, the protesters expressed their opposition to France's participation in battle.⁷⁰

France, supported by its European allies, denounced the presence of the Russians in Mali.⁷¹ The United States also opposed the presence of the Russians.⁷² The deployment of the Russian military company began in December 2021. Given the similarities of the challenges that Mali and the Sahelian states face, resolving the crisis in the former could thus provide a model for the latter.

RESOLVING THE CRISIS IN MALI: PREREQUISITE FOR PEACE IN THE SAHEL?


The presence of more than 15,000 UN peacekeepers⁷³ and 600 European troops⁷⁴ in Mali has done little to resolve the deep-rooted political and socioeconomic problems. Bad governance accounts in a large part for the conditions prevailing in the region. Therefore, no matter the level of security assistance and support, it is doubtful whether peace can be established in the country or in the Sahel. Indeed, bad governance has characterized these states since their independence. Governmental failure together with the lack of political participation and inclusion and endemic corruption, including among the security forces, is commonplace. The unequal redistribution of the wealth extracted from the exploitation of the natural resources, the benefits from which the local population is excluded, is yet another factor in explaining the failure of these states. Moreover, the Sahelian states have been unable to manage the ethnic, tribal, and religious conflicts within their borders.

The presence of foreign forces has alienated the local population and exacerbated existing domestic tensions; their presence also serves the ideology of VEOs. So, the main question becomes what solutions could resolve the conflict in Mali and the Sahel given that military/security means have failed? Terrorism, arms, drugs, and human trafficking persist, creating a prosperous criminal economy in which officials themselves share an interest.

THE PATH FORWARD

During the last twenty years, the Sahel has been the theater of multifarious conflicts. The fragility of the states, bad governance, unemployment, ethnic conflicts, climate change, foreign exploitation of resources, and external military involvement have resulted in increased poverty, hopelessness, and illegal migration. The multiplication of security initiatives by outside powers has exacerbated rather than resolved the issues. The lack of effective development initiatives, the persistence of gerontocratic leaderships, and dependency on foreign powers have complicated the political and socioeconomic conditions, resulting in military coups. A purely security approach is clearly insufficient. While the fight against VEOs is essential, it should run parallel to genuine development programs (youth and government programs focused on job creation) that address the real needs of the local population. To do so, reconciling all the components of Malian society is a requirement. The Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, better known as the Algiers Accords,⁷⁵ brokered by neighboring Algeria in 2015 and signed between the Malian government and several armed Tuareg factions in northern Mali, should be brought forth and implemented.⁷⁶ The Agreement contains important elements, such as the creation of local assemblies with very broad powers and greater representation of the northern population within national institutions, and the integration of ex-rebels into the Malian army. This agreement, while never implemented, was considered acceptable by several parties involved in this conflict. The underlying idea was to detach the local people from jihadist groups—which are often a substitute for the state in providing resources for the inhabitants—and to integrate the armed factions into a political process, thus establishing legitimate institutions that could, eventually, oppose the jihadist movements.

Successive fragile and unstable governments have failed to create the necessary conditions for the warring parties to lay down their arms. The Tuareg fear that if they put down their weapons, they would be slaughtered by the Malian army as occurred in the



past. To gain the Tuareg and other groups' trust, the Malian and Sahelian states should address first the socioeconomic, political, and cultural demands of their respective Tuareg minorities and those of civil society. In this respect, the Algiers Accords, which are supported, at least rhetorically, by the EU, UN, African Union (AU), and the United States, should focus on those factors.

Decentralization of the state, which is emphasized in the Accords, is an appealing option that can partly solve regional and ethnic tensions.⁷⁷ A thorough reading of the Accords suggests reconstruction of the state on a new, democratic, and participatory basis. The challenge, of course, is to reinstate the state's authority and integrity by impartial and efficient action involving citizen participation.

Unfortunately, at present, and short of sustained dialogue, negotiations between warring parties, and impartial mediation, any recommendation would amount to naught. The implementation of the Algiers Accords, with the concerted support of the international community, could break the impasse and serve as a model to the neighboring Sahelian states.

There is a real need to deal with the actual roots of the current conditions in the Sahel. Initiating genuine, sustainable development programs remains one of the best approaches. The governments and outsiders who need to assist in the Sahelian countries' development should focus on revamping the infrastructure (roads, electrical power, water pipes, and dams), rural development, digitalization, and transportation. It is doubtful whether an approach that emphasizes security at the expense of economic and social development would be adequate.

ENDNOTES

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