
Responding to Islamic Extremism in the Sahel

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Abstract: The rise of Islamic extremism in the Sahel has destabilized the region and drawn attention from much of the international community. Groups like Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, Ansaroul Islam, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara have largely operated in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and those states have been unable to adequately address the crisis. International interventions have come primarily from France and the UN, and those missions have partnered with African bodies such as the G5 Sahel Joint-Force to fight the growing insurgency. These responses have largely failed in their efforts, and jihadist leaders continue to exploit ethnic conflict and waning faith in the state to increase their power. This paper focuses on evaluating the extremist groups in the region, the causes of their rise to prominence, and the subsequent responses. An understanding of this conflict will help us to better understand its causes, and how to better address similar conflicts in the future.

Introduction

Following their successful elections in 1992, Mali was heralded as an ideal example of democracy in Africa. For almost twenty years, the nation once ruled by Mansa Musa managed to maintain a single constitution, and continually hold elections. They had seen multiple peaceful transitions of power. Unfortunately, although the government had survived rebellions before, this reality began to unravel in 2012.¹ Separatist movements, military coups, militias, and terrorist groups have all jockeyed for control of the nation as a power vacuum quickly opened. Groups like Al-Qaida and the Islamic State arrived and looked to capitalize on the growing discontent. As the violence grew, it quickly spilled over the Malian borders into Burkina Faso and Niger, sending the entire Sahel region into crisis. Since 2012, the crisis has drawn aid and military intervention from around the world to curb the spread of Islamic terrorism, but the threat has continued to grow in magnitude.

This paper has three main parts. First, I will discuss the crisis itself, including both the humanitarian concerns and important Islamic terrorist groups in the region. This section will also touch on a few possible causes for the destabilization. This will be necessary information in order to understand why the violence in the Sahel is important, and why it is happening. The second part of the paper outlines

¹ George, "Mali's Irrevocable Crisis."

the response to these events by international actors. Most important in this description and analysis are France and the U.N., as their respective operations have been the largest in scale and impact. Finally, the third section of the paper will seek to utilize important theories on counterinsurgency to analyze the case of Mali and its neighbors. Through these three phases of description and analysis, we can gain a better understanding of why the crisis is happening, what is being done about it, and how effective those responses have been.

Central in this analysis is the role of Sahelian states in the crisis, and their relationship to domestic constituencies and international powers. Failing institutions are the core causal factor that has allowed violent, extremist insurgencies to grow in the Sahel. Sahelian governments fail to project power meaningfully into remote areas of their countries, continue to disenfranchise minorities at risk of radicalization, and have ultimately lost legitimacy to many of their constituents. The international response to this crisis has supported those institutions enough to prevent their collapse but fail to enact any reform, thereby perpetuating the violence.

The Crisis

Humanitarian Concerns

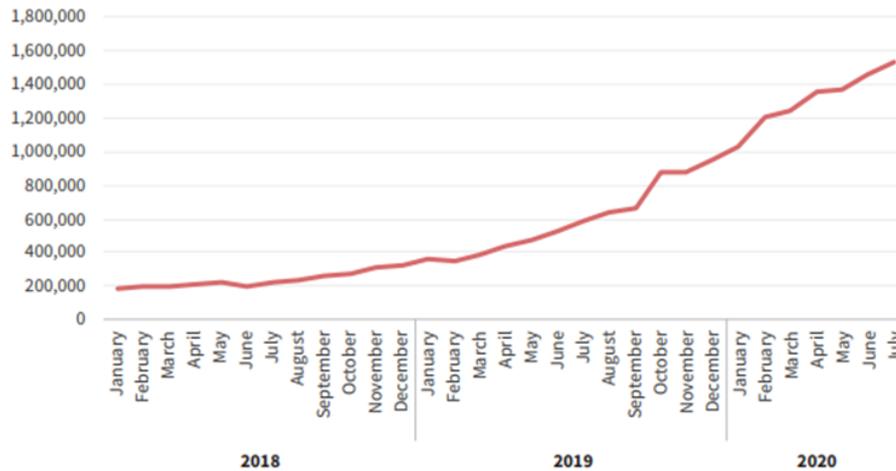
An important aspect for consideration when addressing the crisis in the Sahel are the humanitarian effects that the violence has had on the region. According to the United Nations High Council for Refugees, there are currently over two million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the region, over half of whom reside in Burkina Faso (Figure 1). In addition, there are over 900,000 refugees or asylum seekers who have fled the region entirely. Adding in people who have returned home and ‘others of concern,’ the total number affected has reached about 4.2 million.² Children have been affected the most, as malnutrition is currently threatening around 5 million children. The Norwegian Refugee Council also points to education as a critical challenge of the situation, citing “more than 4,000 schools closed or not functional and 900,000 pupils affected.”³

² “Situation Sahel Crisis.”

³ “Humanitarian Emergency at Unprecedented Level in Sahel.”

Significant obstacles exist that block efforts to alleviate this aspect of the crisis. Most pertinent among these to the Sahel are the lack of proper security personnel in the face of the state’s withdrawal

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Trends in the Central Sahel



Source: Operational Portal Refugee Situations. *Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger* (2017-2020), distributed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/countries/>.

from some regions. Violence in the region, “in addition to direct attacks on and kidnappings of aid workers, non-state actors have diverted aid and demanded bribes for passing through areas under their control.”⁴ This means that humanitarian aid workers often require security assistance, which is in and of itself problematic. When humanitarian workers are perceived to be aligned with Sahelian governments or Western interventions, it calls into question their neutrality.⁵ It is almost impossible to both safely traverse the region while entirely maintaining the needed neutral reputation. This makes it increasingly difficult for aid workers to build a rapport with locals in need of their services.

While many will choose to focus on the traditional security aspects of the Sahel crisis, it is also important to consider the human security crisis that has unfolded as a result of the violence. Understanding this will be key for proper analysis of the international response, in particular the response by the United Nations and some charitable NGOs. A key feature of such a response could include more open dialogue with Islamic terrorists, as this could help to alleviate questions of humanitarian neutrality and allow an easier flow of services in the region.

Extremist Groups

Violence in the region has been largely, but certainly not exclusively, perpetrated by Islamic extremist terrorist groups. Terrorist connections in the region largely stemmed from the Armed Islamic

⁴ Murphy “Security Fragmentation Hinders Humanitarian Response in the Sahel.”

⁵ Murphy.

Group (GIA) a faction of jihadists fighting against the Algerian government in their Civil War.⁶ The Jihadist presence was bolstered by the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya in 2011, who came home to Mali with large quantities of weapons.⁷ Today, the main groups who threaten the Sahel are Jama'at Nasr al-Islam Muslimin, Ansaroul Islam, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. These groups will be the main focus in this section, as they have drawn the most international attention of violent actors in the region.

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin

JNIM was not founded in the traditional sense that many other terrorist groups are but formed by a merger of four existing Salafist terror groups. The first of these is a branch of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), known as the Sahara Emirate of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM Sahara). AQIM Sahara began to operate in Northern Mali in the early 2000s.⁸ They were followed quickly by the group Ansar al-Dine, who emerged as an ally to the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. Their leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, would later become recognized as one of two key leaders of JNIM. Ghali was a Tuareg Malian who participated in Tuareg separatist movements as far back as the 1990s and also served as a hostage negotiator for AQIM.⁹ In 2013, two groups who had split from AQIM, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and, al Mulathamun (the Masked Ones), joined together under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Muhajir al-Masri to form al Mourabitoun.¹⁰ This group focused primarily on French military personnel and other Western targets, as opposed to groups like Ansar Dine who had a more local agenda.

The most recently developed group within JNIM is the Macina Liberation Front, (FLM, or Katiba Macina). The group states that they seek to restore the “former theocratic Macina Empire, which from 1818 to 1863 encompassed a large territory comprising Ségou, Mopti, and Timbuktu regions. The Macina Empire, which was dominated by the Fulani ethnic group, applied Islamic rule across its territory.”¹¹ Their leader, Amadou Koufa¹², was another Imam who, as a skilled orator, was able to recruit many Fulani with his preaching. Koufa fought with Ansar Dine during the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and led an offensive that pushed closer to Mali’s capital Bamako than any other attack had. Koufa built a large network of jihadists and Fulani over this period, and the FLM began their first attacks in 2015.¹³

⁶ Zimmerman, “Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel.”

⁷ MARSH, “Brothers Came Back with Weapons.”

⁸ Zimmerman, “Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel.”

⁹ Eizenga and Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel.”

¹⁰ An Egyptian, Masri fought against the Soviet Union and the United State in Afghanistan

¹¹ Le Roux, “Confronting Central Mali’s Extremist Threat.”

¹² It is believed that Koufa was radicalized while in Quranic school after contact with a Pakistani group known as Dawa

¹³ Le Roux, “Confronting Central Mali’s Extremist Threat.”

In March of 2017, Ansar Dine, AQIM Sahara, Al Mouribtoun, and Katiba Macina merged to become JNIM. In the announcement of this merger, the group’s new leader Iyad Ghali (still leading Ansar Dine) declared “the group’s intention to ‘stand in front of the occupying Crusader enemy’ and pledged allegiance to al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.”¹⁴ JNIM’s strategy in Mali has sought to capitalize on the distrust of the local governments by pastoral communities, as well as to fill the security vacuum that has been a result of the state’s weakness. This has been largely driven by Amadou Koufa, as the FLM has been by far the most active of the four groups comprising JNIM. The withdrawal of state forces has also left a need for services in some regions. “By the end of 2018, 478 schools were closed in Mopti and Ségou regions, representing 68 percent of schools in Mopti. Sixty-five percent of all closed schools in Mali are in the central region. Only health structures have been preserved.”¹⁵ FLM and other JNIM components have sought, with some success, to offer the services of a traditional government that many in Mali had previously been denied or are now denied by the withdrawal of the state. If the Malian government were a more stable institution, it would be capable of providing security for all of its citizens, judicially mediating disputes between farmers and herders, and delivering the services that their people require. Instead, groups like FLM have become viable replacements to many in the region. The replacement of the state with JNIM has not been a positive in all ways though, as could be expected. Reports from the region indicate that

“JNIM militants enforce conservative Islamic governance by forbidding the celebration of weddings and baptisms, outlawing some traditional local customs, taxing civilians, and forcing men to attend sermons in local mosques. While some areas are sporadically controlled by JNIM, certain areas of central Mali are under such consolidated jihadist control that one local analyst likened it to ‘a Caliphate’.”¹⁶

Along with controlling and governing territory, JNIM has conducted traditional attacks against state and international security forces (Figure 2). In fact, the rate of such attacks has increased, with Jared Thompson pointing out that “the first four months of 2019 saw a monthly average of 32 violent events attributed to JNIM in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger compared with 41 average monthly events over the same period in 2020 and 59 in 2021—representing a 43 and 84 percent increase over 2019 levels, respectively.”¹⁷

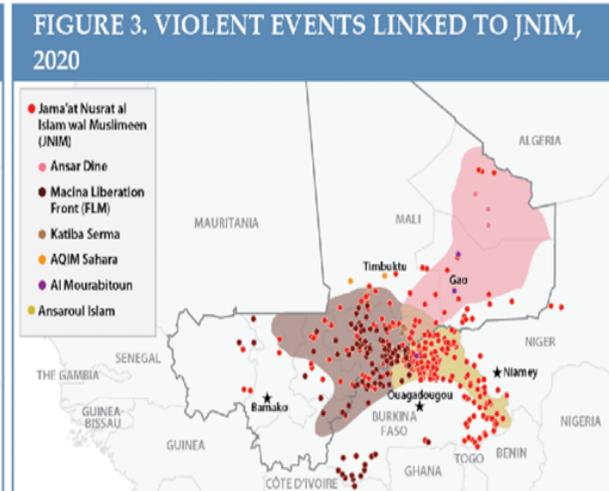
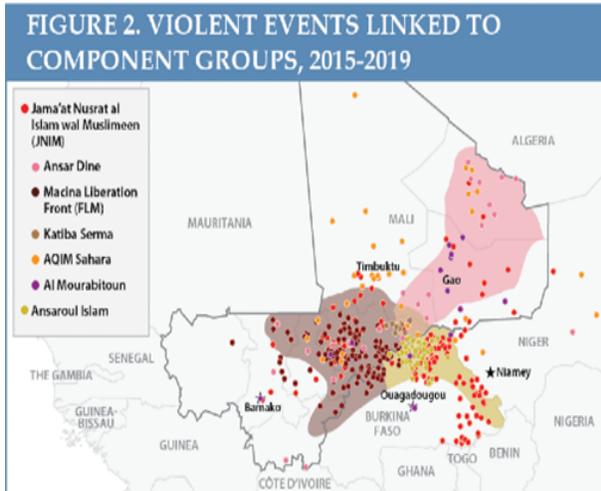
¹⁴ Thompson, “Examining Extremism.”

¹⁵ Le Roux, “Confronting Central Mali’s Extremist Threat.”

¹⁶ Thompson, “Examining Extremism.”

¹⁷ Thompson.

With JNIM’s history, leaders, goals, and activities summarized, there are a few key points to make for a more thorough understanding of the group’s role in the region. One of these finer points is the extent to which they are a unified group. To some extent, each group comes from a different perspective. Ansar Dine was originally aligned with the Tuareg rebellion, and their leader Ghali was himself a Tuareg. This is a largely domestic movement fighting for independence. Al Mouribitoun placed a much greater



emphasis on fighting the international, largely Western, presence in the region as France and the United Nations sent troops. Similarly, AQIM Sahara is a branch of a larger, more internationally motivated movement in AQIM. FLM looks to create a small caliphate-like body based on Fulani history and agendas. Although it is also local, it is not necessarily the same as the Tuareg and Ansar Dine. Considering JNIM a consolidated group, rather than an affiliation of independent Jihadist groups working together, makes it far more difficult to accurately diagnose a solution. Additionally, the groups often use different tactics in their attacks and operate in loosely identified geographic areas separate from one another. This vague organizational structure has strengthened JNIMs position in the region. Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams emphasize this reality, saying that

“This ambiguity reduces the scrutiny given to each component group making it more challenging to track specific groups’ operations and methods. This, in turn, inhibits a targeted response to confront each JNIM member. By treating all incidents as from a single organizational structure, security forces have found themselves using a blunt response that has at times worsened relations between communities and the security sector, all to the benefit of the JNIM groups.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Eizenga and Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel.”

An integral part of any response to the security threat posed by JNIM must acknowledge the operational and ideological differences between its components. Neglecting to do so furthers the groups' aims of sowing confusion and discontent through the region.

Another key aspect of JNIM is their relationship with Al-Qaida. Connections to larger movements can often drive the policy and tactics of Western nations like the United States and France. As referenced before, upon the announcement of the JNIM merge, the group simultaneously swore allegiance to Al-Qaida and their leader al-Zawahiri. The connection between the two groups came primarily through AQIM Sahara and Al Mourabitoun, whose members still had connections through AQIM in Algeria. It is important to acknowledge that the extent to which this connection has been maintained is unknown, as some key leaders have been killed who may have primarily kept the relationship afloat. Specifically, the deaths of “Djamel Okcha and Ali Maychou (AQIM Sahara), and Mohamed Ould Nouini (al Mourabitoun), [have] likely hastened the erosion of any direct influence the global al Qaeda network could claim over JNIM-affiliated fighters,”¹⁹ Confusion over the continued existence of JNIMs relationship with Al-Qaida further complicates a proper evaluation of the group. JNIM's ties to Al-Qaida are a key factor in determining their importance within the global landscape of terrorism, so the possible change is an important point.

Ansaroul Islam

Founded by Ibrahim Malam Dicko in 2016 Ansaroul Islam's rise in Burkina Faso demonstrates the spread of this crisis beyond Malian borders. Dicko was a radicalized Imam who gained relevance teaching in Quranic schools around the Sahel, and from his two radio shows, which he used to discuss topics like regional politics, Islam, and climate change. Dicko eventually became associated with FLMs leader Amadou Koufa, who is said to be his mentor.²⁰ This connection meant that Ansaroul Islam and JNIM would build a strong relationship. In a similar fashion to Koufa, Dicko relied on the narratives of disenfranchisement and lack of government services to recruit in his home province of Soum, which is primarily Fulani.

Dicko reportedly died in 2017 after fleeing a French raid. This threw the group into confusion and ultimately led to its downfall. Ibrahim's brother, Jafar Dicko, took over the group, but his lack of leadership skills meant that Ansaroul Islam quickly deteriorated. In addition, increased pressure from state and international security forces has restricted the operations of Ansaroul Islam. While the group

¹⁹ Eizenga and Williams.

²⁰ Le Roux, “Ansaroul Islam.”

Figure 3, demonstrates the scope of Ansaroul Islam

VIOLENT EVENTS LINKED TO ANSAROUK ISLAM IN 2018

VIOLENT EVENTS LINKED TO ANSAROUK ISLAM IN 2019



does still exist and operate (Figure 3), it is believed that several of their fighters have deserted to either JNIM or ISGS.²¹

The decline of Ansaroul Islam serves as an example of both the growing network of Jihadists that exist in the region, and as proof that the conflict has spread beyond the borders of Mali. While influenced by various outsiders, Dicko was firmly a Burkinabe leader, and his movement was very localized to the issues of Burkina Faso. Many of the same problems that plagued Mali, such as a corrupt Forest Service and militias attacking Fulani communities²², also affected the population of Burkina Faso. A report from the International Crisis Group state that “the distant relationship between state and populations in Burkina’s Sahel region also fuels the crisis. The contrast between the north’s economic potential and its lack of infrastructure feeds a sense of abandonment amongst its population.”²³ Burkina Faso is another example of a country whose government has largely failed to represent all its people and properly moderate disputes between its different ethnic groups.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi first came to prominence as a member of MUJAO, and later as a commander in al Mouribitoun. He split from the group when leaders in al Mouribitoun, allied themselves with Al-Qaida, rejected his allegiance to the Islamic State. Sahrawi would take this opportunity to form a group that could better reflect his IS aspirations: Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which

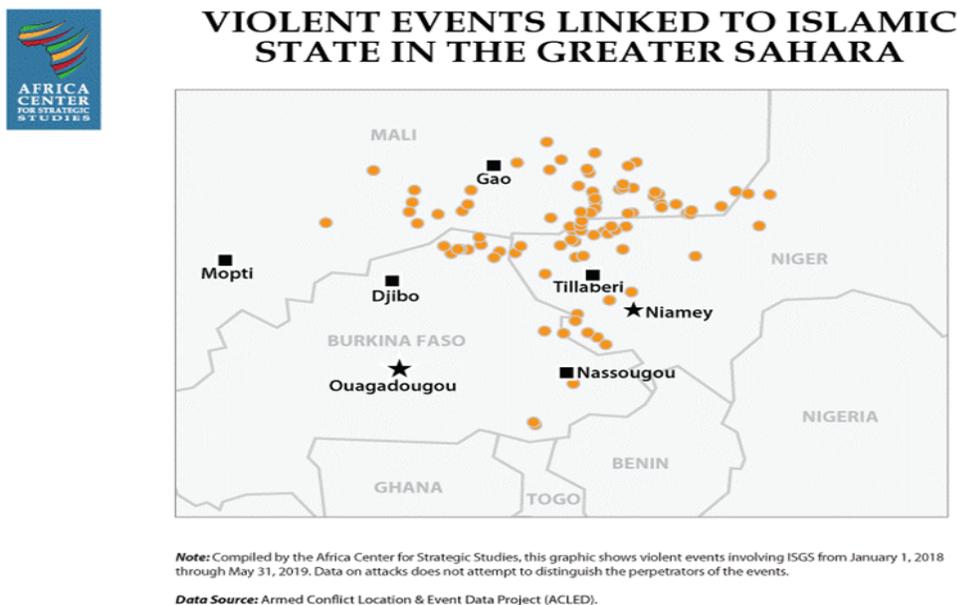
²¹ Le Roux.

²² Le Roux.

²³ “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North.”

would go on to become ISGS.²⁴ The Islamic State did not recognize Sahrawi’s pledge immediately. It was not until the group’s first attack in September 2016, a prison break of Boko Haram and AQIM fighters in Nigeria, that the Islamic State claimed any ties between the two groups. A press release from the Islamic States news agency acknowledged the group in October following the attack, but the link was considered informal until April 2019. This was when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recorded a video praising and encouraging the group’s work. The group has grown over this period to cover the largest geographic landscape of any in the region.²⁵

Figure 4, demonstrates the geographic area of ISGS, the largest of the three groups (Le Roux, “Exploiting Borders in the Sahel.”)



Like the two previous groups, ISGS has found success in exploiting ethnic tensions and government ineptness. The group conducted attacks throughout 2017 and 2018 targeting Malian civilians, most of whom were Tuareg. When Tuareg defense groups would retaliate against Fulani communities, tensions between the two groups would again grow. They also target schools and are considered responsible for the closure of over one thousand schools in Burkina Faso.²⁶ By targeting the lack of services and ethnic tensions that often cause herders to join Jihadist groups, ISGS has been able to grow and deepen the conditions in which they thrive. One local Fulani leader says that “having weapons gives you a kind of prestige—young people from the villages are very influenced by the young armed bandits

²⁴ Thompson, “Examining Extremism.”

²⁵ Thompson.

²⁶ Le Roux, “Exploiting Borders in the Sahel.”

who drive around on motorbikes, well dressed and well fed. Young herders are very envious of them, they admire their appearance.²⁷ This attitude towards being armed reflects the impact of the security vacuum on the everyday citizens of Sahelian nations, and how Jihadists have found their place in that vacuum.

Sahrawi was killed by a French drone strike in August of 2021²⁸, but ISGS remains an integral part of the crisis in the Sahal. JNIM and ISGS have previously collaborated and even orchestrated joint attacks. This dynamic was considered an exception to the rule that Islamic State and Al-Qaida forces compete with one another and is likely due to the interconnected nature of groups in the regions. That said, “ideological tension—including a push from the Islamic State core for ISGS to become more aggressive toward JNIM—as well as a series of high-profile defections of JNIM fighters to ISGS, led the two into open conflict beginning as early as summer 2019.”²⁹ Perhaps this dynamic could no longer exist once the Islamic State officially recognized ISGS, but for whatever reason, the cooperation seems to be over.

The Islamic State in the Great Sahara represents the West’s greatest fears of terrorism in the region, as it has grown significantly in scale and emphasized its global ties. While their leadership may be disrupted, the withdrawal of French forces from the region will allow more opportunity for the group to operate and grow. Before describing the response by the international community to this crisis, or posing an evaluation of said responses, we must seek an explanation for the violence. As we will see, many responses disregard real causal factors. Whether this is the case due to ineffective policy or because of ulterior interest in the conflict will be an important question in this analysis.

Causes of Extremism

A few possible explanations have been put forth by those in media and academia to explain the Sahel crisis. These are important to explore before evaluating the efficacy of responses to the crisis. It would be reasonable to assume that an effective response would properly account for causal factors of extremism, but this has largely not been the case for external actors in the Sahel.

Climate Change

A narrative has formed that a major cause for the violence of the Sahel is climate change and desertification.³⁰ It argues that diminishing land and resources increases the competition for those resources. This idea has featured prominently in policy, as it has been incorporated in the doctrine of both

²⁷ Le Roux.

²⁸ Roger and Diallo, “Mali.”

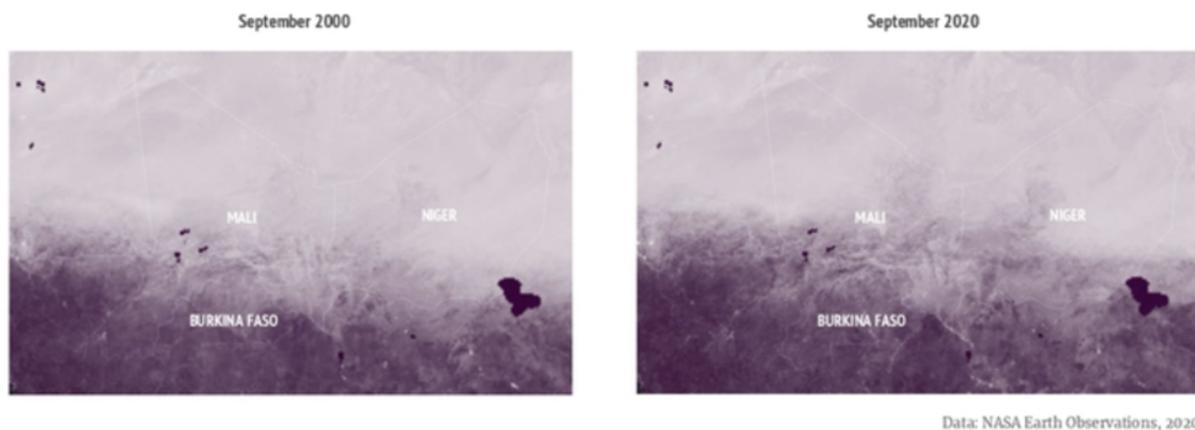
²⁹ Thompson, “Examining Extremism.”

³⁰ “The Central Sahel.”

the European Union and the African Union, among other organizations. This phenomenon has not been proven.

In an article published by the European Union Institute for Security Studies, Luca Raineri argues not only that the link between terrorism and climate change is unsubstantiated, but also about “whether, and what, climate variability and change is being experienced in the Sahel.”³¹ For example, while Mali has seen significant temperature increases, its neighbor Niger’s temperatures are rising slower than the global average. In another example, Raineri points out that “compared to the last decade, for instance, rainfall has significantly increased in some parts of the Sahel.” NASA satellite imagery (Figure 1) supports the belief that the Sahel is far greener than it had been thirty years prior.³² While the Sahel does have a very volatile climate, and this can make it hard to measure gradual changes characteristic of climate change, there is currently no conclusive evidence that climate change is affecting the Sahel.

Figure 6, NASA satellite imagery over the past twenty years suggests that fears of deforestation may be



exaggerated (Raineri, “SAHEL CLIMATE CONFLICTS?”)

If this is the case, then why has climate become such an integral piece of the Sahel discourse? A report from the International Crisis Group³³ points out that terrorism and climate change are two of the most lucrative international issues for which donors are willing to give. Raineri also supports this argument, saying that the issue “offers international donors the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone by addressing jointly what are arguably the most pressing issues facing the international community to combat the effects of climate change.” Such attitudes would culminate in 2019 with a plan investing \$400 billion over eleven years to combat climate change in the Sahel.³⁴ This reality speaks to the

³¹ Raineri, “SAHEL CLIMATE CONFLICTS?”

³² Raineri.

³³ “The Central Sahel.”

³⁴ “The Central Sahel.”

motivations of Western donors. Despite the lack of evidence for such linkages, the very suggestion that they could fight both climate change and terrorism drew support. Bypassed in this narrative is the reality that climate change is not the prime causal factor, and that this strategy will not help the people of the Sahel.

The argument that climate change affects violence in the Sahel hinges on the assumption that climate change has decreased access to resources. While the role of climate change is perhaps exaggerated by many scholars, this is not to say that there are no links between violence in the Sahel and resources. Some examples of land disputes have been due to an increase in resources, and the resulting scramble to gain access to them. The ICG essay states that,

“local conflicts affecting central Mali are less the result of dwindling resources – in reality, resource production has increased overall in central Mali – than of increasing tensions surrounding land use. The climate, in this case a prolonged drought in the 1970s and 1980s, has had a significant impact on the region, but its repercussions on conflict were indirect and can only be understood through a broader analysis of the transformations in agro-pastoral production systems.”³⁵

This nuance is an important one to understand, as it implies very different policy solutions than a more direct causal relationship between terror and climate would. The article goes on to say that in the post-drought reality of the Sahel today, the addition of new resources fuels more violence than any shortage. In one example, when the Malian government constructed new wells on a pastoral reserve, to be used by herders, farmers quickly moved into the area and settled.³⁶ The land that had previously been uninteresting to farmers was now a tenable home. Tensions quickly rose, and the territory later became an area of dispute between jihadist groups and armed militias. This type of conflict must be well understood to properly address radicalization in the Sahel, but unfortunately, Sahelian governments have continued to handle climate issues with ineffective policy.

There have been several occurrences in which policy imposed to fight climate issues has served only to further the disenfranchisement of pastoral communities. Perhaps the most notorious of these is the Forest Service. In an effort to fight logging, and by extensions desertification, these agencies were empowered far beyond the typical extent for such a body. Increased penalties and fines, usually levied against the pastoral communities in the North, have come to resemble extortion by the Forest Service

³⁵ “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North.”

³⁶ “The Central Sahel.”

agents who administer them.³⁷ Another example of such blunders comes in food production policy. Policies to address food insecurity focus heavily on agriculture, as opposed to animal-based solutions that would help herders. This preference exists “not only for the perceived greater food output of the former, but also, and importantly, because of its alignment with the ideological and economic interests of ruling elites in Sahelian capitals.”³⁸ These practices reinforce the idea that Sahelian governments are against pastoral communities and allow jihadist leaders to capitalize on existing anti-government sentiments within those communities. This herder/farmer dynamic, in addition to cultural and economic differences, typically falls along ethnic lines.

Ethnic Conflicts

The ethnic makeup of West Africa is diverse, and the violence in Mali and its neighboring countries has increasingly fallen along these ethnic lines. Previously, many extreme Islamic groups had been associated with the Tuareg separatist movement. The Tuareg are an ethnic group who had resisted colonial rule heavily and found themselves split between five post-colonial nations. They were responsible for uprisings against the Malian government in the 1990s and early-2000s.³⁹ The Islamic groups from those uprisings have largely divorced themselves from the separatist movement’s objectives, but still exist with a force made up of Tuareg fighters. In contrast, the recent surge in violence has been largely propelled by increased participation in jihadist groups among the Fulani. The Fulani are a herding people, made up of somewhere between 25 to 40 million people throughout West Africa (Figure 6).⁴⁰ In the Sahel, they represent a significant but small minority, with 16.2 percent of the total population in Mali, 7.6 percent in Niger, 30 percent in Mauritania, and 6.3 percent in Burkina Faso. Fulani in Mali have long been the targets of violence; by the Tuareg separatists, by Jihadist groups, by the Malian government themselves, and by armed militias from farming-based communities.⁴¹ As charismatic leaders have emerged from the Islamic extremist groups in the regions, they have targeted the anger and discontent in Fulani communities as an opening for recruitment.

³⁷ Raineri, “SAHEL CLIMATE CONFLICTS?”

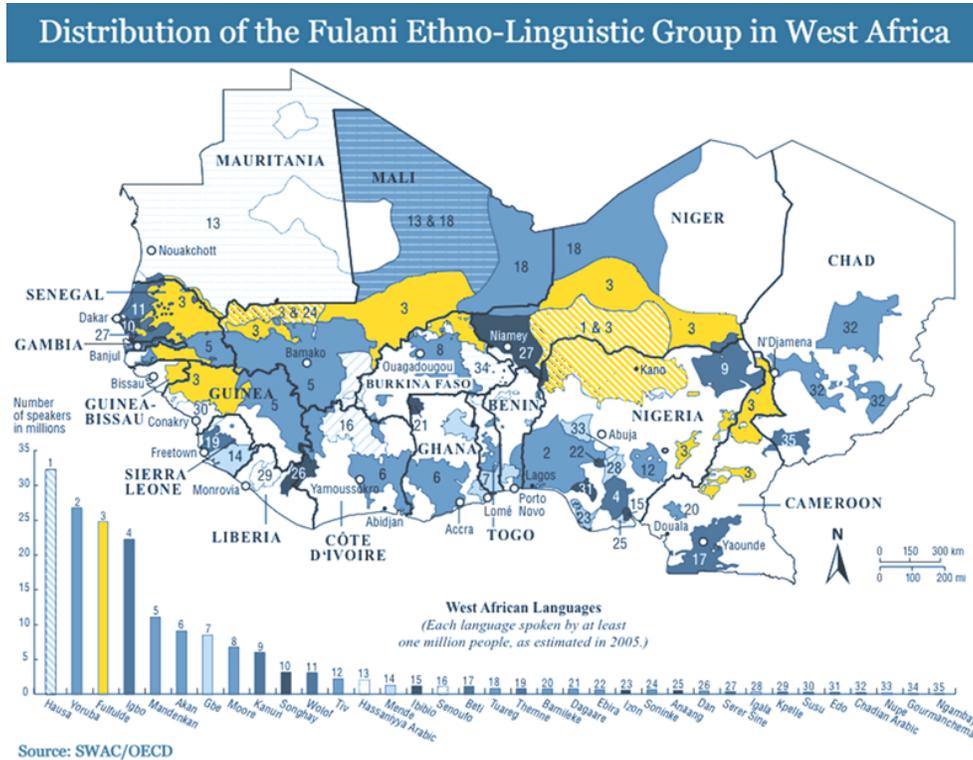
³⁸ Raineri.

³⁹ Lecocq and Klute, “Tuareg Separatism in Mali.”

⁴⁰ Cline, “Jihadist Movements in the Sahel.”

⁴¹ Cisse, “Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis – Africa Center.”

Figure 7, this map illustrates the distribution and density of Fulani populations across West Africa (Cisse, “Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis – Africa Center.”)



In an article for the Journal of Peasant Studies, Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba help us to explore this dynamic. They state that the increased presence of Fulani in jihadist terror groups is “because of an anti-state, anti-elite and pro-pastoral jihadist discourse, because they have become increasingly fatigued by and disgruntled with a predatory and corrupt state, and because the development model imposed by the state and international donors has not responded to pastoral priorities.”⁴² They point to rent-seeking behavior and a failure to resolve land disputes as two key reasons why this sentiment has developed.

Another scholar who contributes to this discourse is Lawrence E. Cline. In his article *Jihadist Movements in the Sahel: Rise of the Fulani?*,⁴³ he explains how, and why, the Fulani have become a central part of the Jihadist efforts in the region. According to Cline, the Fulani have long been subject to prejudice and rejection in the region. Jihadist leaders have used these realities to recruit the Fulani and to turn communities against the Malian government. Even independent from Islamic extremism, Fulani

⁴² Benjaminsen and Ba, “Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups?”

⁴³ Cline, “Jihadist Movements in the Sahel.”

communities often needed to arm themselves in the face of little protection from state forces. An example of this is The Dan Nan Ambassagou association, which in March of 2019 conducted raids that killed as many as one hundred and sixty Fulani civilians⁴⁴. As a result, some Fulani join jihadist groups simply as a way in which they can receive the weapons and training necessary to protect their communities. With all these realities in mind, groups like Al-Qaida and the Islamic State have been skillful in their blending of local Fulani interests with their own broader, international interests. Leaders of these groups tap into deep-rooted sentiments to further their goals of a Salafi-Jihadist regime in the Sahel.

Ethnicity is considered an important aspect of the crisis in part because of the complex identity dynamics in the region. Religion, ethnicity, social status, and profession have all intersected in Sahelian culture to create distinct groups with opposing interests. Because of this intersection, it can be difficult to isolate a single identifying factor as causal. This problem could be reframed in the words of Cedric Jourde, who asks “in countries where ethnicity has become a significant political category, including in the predominantly Muslim countries of the Sahel, how do contemporary discourses and practices associated with ethnicity affect the dynamics of Islamic group-making?”⁴⁵ The question considers how these different dynamics interact with one another, and whether or not ethnicity is the underlying factor in places we typically point to religion. In this case, the relationship between ethnicity and Jihadist terror groups distorts analysis of which factor more directly influences violence. Jourde explores such narratives in more detail with existing narratives MUJAO. Although debates remain about the exact ethnic makeup of the group, “what remained a constant was the ethno-racial discourses about this jihadist group: a vehicle to fight untrustworthy ‘ethnic others’ (the Tuaregs), or as a movement that only promotes the ‘ethnic others’ (Arabs and Moors).”⁴⁶ This idea of ‘ethnic others’ seems then to be an important fuel for jihadist recruitment in the region. This is true for both sides of the conflict. On the one hand, the agricultural-elite and Westernized state actors have labeled northern pastoralists as ‘ethnic others’ and this idea is reinforced by the activities of violent jihadist groups. When the state continues to marginalize, and even retaliate, against such communities, pastoralists themselves have in turn labeled them a dangerous ‘ethnic other,’ and look to armed jihadists for protection.

There is clear evidence that ethnic identities have exacerbated the violence in the Sahel, but to claim that it is causal may be a step too far. We have seen the intentional weaponization of such narratives by Jihadist leaders, perhaps because they know first-hand how deep seated the sentiments run in their communities. That said, these feelings could be mitigated by institutions that decline to participate in their

⁴⁴ Cline.

⁴⁵ Jourde, “How Islam Intersects Ethnicity and Social Status in the Sahel.”

⁴⁶ Jourde.

exacerbation. Weak states that we see in the Sahel instead contribute to this cycle, and therefore contribute to the continued violence.

Weak Government

Using the existing ethnic tensions in Mali and its neighbors has been an effective strategy for Islamic extremist groups. This strategy does not, however, indicate that the existing tensions have directly caused the rise of such groups, but only that extremist leaders have used such tensions to further their goals. Instead, poor governance in the Sahel seems to be the more important factor in the region's instability. The governments of these Sahelian nations are fundamentally flawed in both their lack of adequate security forces, and how the existing forces are used.

In addition to his commentary on the Fulani's connection to modern Jihad in the region, Lawrence Cline also points to the Sahelian governments as an issue. For example, Mali is currently the least policed country in the world, with a ratio of thirty-eight police officers per 100,000 people.⁴⁷ This is also true of Mali's military, which is made up of "around 15,800—about 8,000 military and 7,800 paramilitary... For comparison, France is half the geographic size of Mali but has nineteen times more security personnel—one for every 217 people compared to Mali's one for every 1,186 people."⁴⁸ Other countries in the region may not be as poorly policed as Mali, but they are not far behind. This helps us to understand why the Fulani, as well as the militias of Malian farmers, find themselves in such desperate need of protection. Sahelian states have failed to adequately create a monopoly on violence, which is required to maintain peace. Without it, militias and terrorist groups enjoy free reign throughout the nation, and civilians are inevitably caught in the fighting.

A report by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project suggests that the state is not just insufficient in their security posture, but that they are complicit in the violence against civilians.⁴⁹ In 2019, after an attack jointly conducted by JNIM and ISGS forced G5 Sahel forces to retreat, France convened a conference with G5 nations in the town of Pau. Although it was never explicitly expressed or proven that the conference condoned such actions, the conference was followed by a significant uptick in violence against civilians by state forces (Figure 7). In one example in Niger, "...security forces reportedly executed or disappeared 102 members of Tuareg and Fulani pastoralist communities over the course of a week in the areas of Inates and Ayorou. These reports were accompanied by the discovery of mass graves."⁵⁰ In Mali, the United Nations "documented 101 summary executions attributed to Malian

⁴⁷ Cline claims that the rate generally regarded as acceptable is 255 officers per 100,000

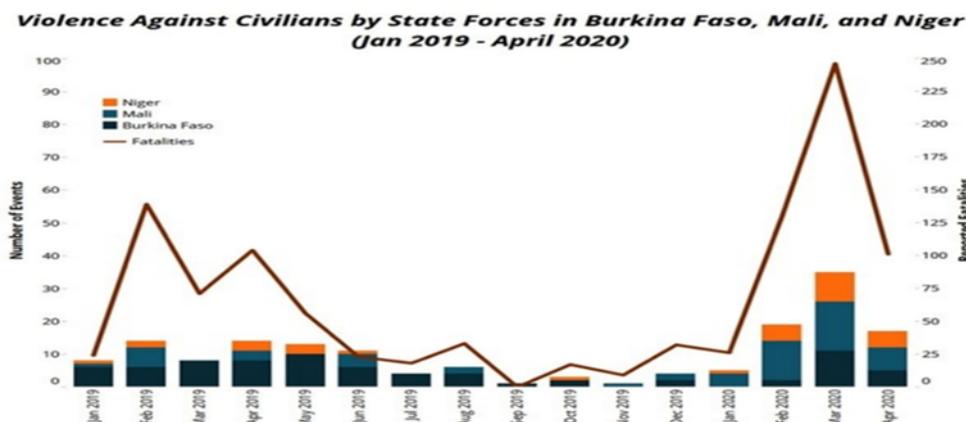
⁴⁸ Cline, "Jihadist Movements in the Sahel."

⁴⁹ "State Atrocities in the Sahel."

⁵⁰ "State Atrocities in the Sahel."

security forces, primarily targeting the Fulani community... The report also detailed evidence of torture and enforced disappearance.”⁵¹ Security forces were seemingly trying to either preempt Jihadist efforts by targeting their recruiting base or enact revenge by attacking Fulani civilians that they blamed for the attacks. These reports reinforce the extent to which the conflict in the Sahel is not a black and white issue, as these forces have clearly engaged in behavior not very different from the extremist groups themselves. That these governments are being supported by Western powers such as France, the United Nations, and the United States is additionally problematic. It is also clear that such actions serve only to reinforce the narrative among Fulani and Tuareg communities that their government will not protect them, driving them elsewhere for the weapons and training needed to defend themselves.

Figure 8, this graph helps to demonstrate the spike in violence against civilians after the Pau conference.



We see a significant spike in January of 2020, just after the conference. (“State Atrocities in the Sahel.”)

Deep seated struggles between farmers and herders in Western Africa have become embroiled in a conflict that has implications far outside the Sahel and West Africa. Within the power vacuum created by weak governments, that battle has been allowed to swell into the crisis we see today. On one side, violence and extortion have driven pastoralists away from the state and towards the jihadist terrorists who have skillfully aligned their ideals with that of the local dynamics. In truth, many of the ‘extremists’ have yet to be radicalized at all but seek only to protect themselves and their communities.⁵² On the other end, the Sahelian states like Mali, once heralded for their success, have simply become a new face for the farming elites that have always existed in the region, and have always warred with the herders. Backed by the West simply because they oppose terror groups, the governments of the Sahel have failed to mediate

⁵¹ “State Atrocities in the Sahel.”

⁵² Cline, “Jihadist Movements in the Sahel.”

or alleviate any conflict, only exacerbating the violence and partaking in it themselves. While the focus of this paper remains the Islamic extremist groups, it is important to remember this dynamic, and the key role it plays in the existence of those groups.

International Response

The global response to this conflict is a major factor in how it has unfolded. African nations in the region have largely relied on aid from stronger militaries and economies to address terrorist groups in the region. In many cases, regimes have only been able to survive due to that very aid. In evaluating the global response, I have emphasized on activities that either strengthen regional institutions, or more frequently, allow them to continue in their current state. Having identified weak states as the primary cause for the destabilization in Mali and the rest of the Sahel, using this lens will help to determine the efficacy of these responses.

G5 Sahel Joint Force and the African Union

The most immediate of the international responses for consideration is that of African nations, both those that are involved in the crisis and external African states. Because of the transnational nature of the crisis and the reality that Sahel borders remain largely unenforced, I will be including the Sahelian nations themselves as an aspect of international response. While members of the G5 Sahel may not exactly fit the description of an international response (seeing as the crisis is taking place within their borders), the multi-national effort warrants analysis.

Chief among these efforts is the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The group is made up of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, and Chad. Officially recognized by the African Union in 2017, the purpose of the Joint Force was to increase cooperation in the effort to contain Islamic extremism and better police the five nation's borders. The force, comprised of 5,000 soldiers, is comprised of three sections; "one in the Liptako-Gourma transborder area, one along the Mali-Mauritania border, and a third along the Niger-Chad border."⁵³ The G5 has been heavily backed by the United Nations and France, and these troops are intended to support the existing security forces in the region from the same parties. While border security is a worthy mission, the G5 has faced its challenges. One of these challenges has been funding, as each of the founding countries was only able to pledge \$10 Million each, far short of the originally announced \$500 million budget.⁵⁴ The alliance will rely heavily on Western financial support in order to conduct such an operation.

⁵³ Cooke, "Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force."

⁵⁴ Cooke.

One of the effects of the Joint Force has been the disruption of transnational criminal trades. While this may help to fight terrorist groups, it also exacerbates the extremism that fuels them. For many communities in the region, who were otherwise non-violent, “illicit cross-border trade constitutes an indispensable source of income for impoverished populations in remote cross-border regions.”⁵⁵ This could be lessened by additional development, but the G5 Sahel has been actively discouraged by France from focusing on economic development. Here we find another example of policy meant to curb the activities of terrorist groups that instead further the divisions in the region.

Some signs of progress do exist within the G5, and by extension the Sahelian state forces. The UN and EU have helped to put in place a human rights compliance system which includes monitoring of military units, human rights training, and investigations into possible violations.⁵⁶ Although it remains unknown if these programs have been in any way effective, it is encouraging that steps have been taken to address the wrongdoings of state forces. The ability of the five nations to collaborate is also encouraging, and the G5 Sahel could be a framework for future partnership in the region. Ultimately though, the effectiveness of the G5 Sahel will be entirely reliant on the foreign support that it receives, and it cannot be a sustainable or effective effort on its own.

The African Union (AU), while attempting to play a role in the crisis, has largely fallen short of any meaningful action. Aside from their endorsement of the G5 Joint Force, the organization has taken no significant actions. Early in 2020, the AU pledged to send a force of 3,000 troops to the region to join with the G5 Sahel, as well as French and U.N. Forces.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, this pledge has failed to come to fruition. The pledge was made by the body’s Peace and Security Commission, but after it was made, no member states pledged any troops towards such a force. In addition, funding for the group seemed non-existent. Even conservative plans to finance twenty-five percent of the mission have fallen through, and no external funding has come so far.⁵⁸ It seems that if the African Union will have an influential role in the crisis, it will not be via a security force of their own.

Operation Barkhane

France has been the most active of any external actor in the Malian crisis, and their mission in the region warrants the greatest attention. Operation Barkhane launched in 2014 as France combined efforts from Operation Épervier, a mission that began in 1986 in Chad, and Operation Serval, which had been the

⁵⁵ Cold-Ravnkilde, “International Support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.”

⁵⁶ Cold-Ravnkilde.

⁵⁷ “African Union to Deploy 3,000 Troops in Restive Sahel Region.”

⁵⁸ ISSAfrica.org, “The African Union Can Do Better for the Sahel.”

French response to Tuareg uprisings in 2013.⁵⁹ The operation has seen over 5,000 French troops in the region. President Emmanuel Macron announced in June of 2021 that the operation would be ending due to an inability to work with local governments. The decision was announced shortly after Mali's second coup in as few as nine months, which put Colonel Assimi Goita into power. Instead, the French presence will now focus on supporting the UN mission in the region.⁶⁰

While Operation Barkhane did achieve military success, the mission as a whole was a failure for a number of reasons. At first responding to the advances of Tuareg rebellion groups, including Ansar Dine, the French presence was unable to effectively halt the growth of new groups such as JNIM, ISGS, and Ansaroul Islam, all of which formed after the arrival of the French. Relations with civilians in the region have also taken a turn for the worse. An article from the New York Times describes how members of the French Foreign Legion on patrol passed by a nomadic family who were in the process of moving. No words were exchanged between the two groups because "They had no common language. And if militants found out the family had spoken to them, the family could be killed."⁶¹ A lack of translators is not the only area in which the French are short on needed personnel. *Foreign Affairs* reported in 2016 that

"Expertise and experience in African affairs is not highly valued in the French diplomatic corps; many diplomats prefer safer or more politically important postings in wealthier regions... [the French have] lost substantial expertise in African affairs, partly as a result of French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius' decision, in 2012 and 2013, to purge the ministry of several well-regarded Africa experts, including some specialists on the Sahel."⁶²

With these details in mind, it is not surprising that relations with civilians in the Sahel have deteriorated, and that the political aspects of the campaign have largely underwhelmed.

This is not to say that all military aspects of the campaign have been unsuccessful. French forces were able to recapture large swaths of territory that had been taken by insurgents in Northern Mali.⁶³ The French have also been able to eliminate multiple insurgent leaders, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar of Al-Mouribitoune,⁶⁴ Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi of ISGS,⁶⁵ and Ibrahim Dicko of Ansaroul Islam.⁶⁶ France

⁵⁹ Powell, "A Flawed Strategy in the Sahel."

⁶⁰ Salaün and Irish, "France Ends West African Barkhane Military Operation."

⁶¹ Maclean and O'Reilly, "Crisis in the Sahel Becoming France's Forever War."

⁶² Powell, "A Flawed Strategy in the Sahel."

⁶³ Cooke, "Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force."

⁶⁴ "Paris Affirme Marquer Des Points Face à Al-Qaida Au Maghreb Islamique."

⁶⁵ Roger and Diallo, "Mali."

⁶⁶ Le Roux, "Ansaroul Islam."

also inflicted more casualties, killing 600 extremists since 2015 while losing only forty-four of their own soldiers.⁶⁷ These are all impressive feats militarily, and France seems to have proven their ability to project power internationally. Unfortunately for the French, the conflict in the Sahel is not exclusively a military affair.

Perhaps the biggest criticism of the French intervention, and one that this paper has alluded to, is the support it has given to weak governments in the Sahel. France's previous involvement in Chad twice prevented the overthrow of the country's president Idriss Déby, in 2006 and again in 2008, while also continuing to support the country with arms, intelligence, and logistical support. Déby's administration has been accused of repressing minorities, using torture, and running secret prisons. Additionally, the administration is weak and largely incapable of securing their nation without French support.⁶⁸ Similar criticisms can be made of France's support of Mali and Burkina Faso, as the failures of those governments have already been documented in this report. Insisting on propping up corrupt, ineffective governments does not maintain stability in the region as the French might think it does. Instead, it further marginalized communities vulnerable to radicalization, and widens the power vacuum that insurgents are eagerly taking advantage of.

United Nations

The United Nations has also played an important role in the collective international response to the crisis. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was approved by the UN Security Council in April of 2013, shortly after the French initiated Operation Serval. It is currently comprised of over 18,000 UN personnel, including over 12,000 uniformed troops, and has an annual budget of over \$1.2 Billion. Soldiers in the force are primarily comprised of African countries such as Chad, Senegal, Egypt, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Of note, Bangladesh is the second largest contributor with 1,118 soldiers joining the mission. China leads major powers with 426 soldiers contributed (Figure 8).⁶⁹ The United Nations Peacekeeping website asserts that the mission's focus is "ensuring security, stabilization and protection of civilians; supporting national political dialogue and

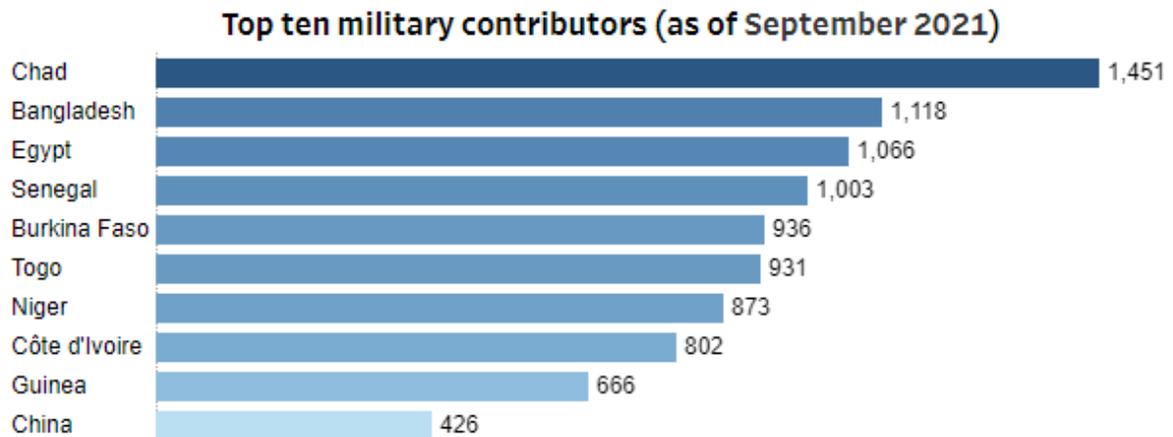
⁶⁷ Maclean and O'Reilly, "Crisis in the Sahel Becoming France's Forever War."

⁶⁸ Powell, "A Flawed Strategy in the Sahel."

⁶⁹ "MINUSMA."

reconciliation; and assisting the reestablishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights in that country.”⁷⁰

MINUSMA is an example of a new type of mission for the United Nations that has begun



a new trend. Traditionally, UN peacekeepers have been stationed in relatively small countries to enforce existing peace treaties. These missions were conducted under Chapter VI of the UN charter that requires the consent of those involved in the conflict for UN forces to be deployed. This was part of the generally accepted guidelines to UN peacekeeping missions, which are “consent of the parties, particularly the host government; impartiality; and nonuse of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate.”⁷¹

Modern operations, which include MINUMUSA, but also missions in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, are conducted differently. These missions are authorized by Chapter VII of the UN charter, which does not require the consent of those involved in the conflict. While Russia, China, and non-aligned countries have argued against these new interpretations of the charter, the more aggressive tactics have continued.⁷² The repercussions of these changes go far outside just the Sahel. The escalation represents an important change in policy from the international body, as more aggressive tactics could certainly impact the body’s impartiality, and therefore its legitimacy beyond the West. It also raises important logistical questions. As UN peacekeepers are deployed into more active and violent disputes, they must be better trained and equipped to be of any effect. The Sahel represents a good example of why this can be problematic.

Since the mission began, UN forces in the Sahel have lost 256 personnel.⁷³ That may not seem very high for conflict of this magnitude but compared to the much lower numbers of the French, it is

⁷⁰ “MINUSMA.”

⁷¹ Perito, “UN Peacekeeping in the Sahel.”

⁷² Perito.

⁷³ “MINUSMA.”

worth examination. A study from Princeton University points out that “Islamist terrorist organizations pose a fundamentally different challenge than armed groups the United Nations has faced in the past. Their objectives, regional and global reach, and designation of the United Nations as a priority target makes the threat to UN operations far more formidable.”⁷⁴ As a whole, the more aggressive operations by the UN have meant that their peacekeepers require more weapons, training, and supplies than ever. Soldiers are deployed into more remote locations and forced to deal with more hostile populations than they are traditionally used to. In addition, most of the troops come from African militaries who are already undertrained and underfunded.⁷⁵ These compounding factors make it clear that the UN forces feature major shortcomings that have affected their efficacy. Going forward, an agreement will need to be reached on whether to return to traditional, more conservative peacekeeping operations or to equip peacekeepers properly for the engagements they are being sent into today.

United States

The United States has taken a reduced role in addressing security concerns in the Sahel, at least in comparison to the UN and France. The participation of the United States has largely been in an ancillary role in military operations. U.S. operations in the region have been colored by an ambush in October of 2017 that claimed the lives of four U.S. Army Special Forces personnel. A search for a local ISIS leader (presumably a generalization for ISGS) brought the unit to the village of Tongo Tongo, Niger, where the soldiers would ultimately become surrounded. Tensions about the mission grew even further when it became clear that the soldiers were improperly prepared, both in training and reinforcements, for the mission. Concerns about the safety of the operation and the unit’s preparedness were raised from both American and Nigerian leaders in the mission, but “the team leaders’ concerns were overruled by a higher command.”⁷⁶ Attempts by U.S. officials to cover up the mission’s shortcomings were also exposed. The failure, cover up, and subsequent media backlash ultimately drew attention to U.S. operations in Africa as a whole, of which many Americans at home had remained unaware.⁷⁷

Despite domestic resistance to a US security presence in Africa, some operations have continued. Just before the Tongo Tongo ambush, the U.S. opened a drone base in Niger known as Air Base 201. 800 American forces at the base constitute the second largest deployment of troops to the continent,⁷⁸ demonstrating that while Africa may not be a top priority, American officials are taking the crisis

⁷⁴ Perito, “UN Peacekeeping in the Sahel.”

⁷⁵ Perito.

⁷⁶ “US Soldiers Killed in Niger Were Outgunned, ‘left behind’ in Hunt for ISIS Leader.”

⁷⁷ Carter and Swick, “Why Were US Soldiers Even in Niger?”

⁷⁸ Schmitt, “A Shadowy War’s Newest Front.”

seriously. In addition to drone operations, the base has also been used by Army Green Berets to help train local forces in Counter-insurgency techniques. Training has been a key to the U.S. mission in West Africa. This has included the training of 2,000 Nigerien Special Forces troops coming to the U.S. to train at Fort Benning (the Army's infantry school) and the National Defense University in Washington D.C.⁷⁹

The United States' policy on the region has at times included mixed messaging. Just last year, the Trump administration was internally divided on the region, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledging more support to the region while Secretary of Defense Mark Esper considered cuts, including a potential closure of Air Base 201. In addition to the threats posed by Islamic extremism, the U.S. is also weighing China's increased influence in the African sphere.⁸⁰ French and African security forces also have spoken out that they rely on American support in the region and have resisted the proposed cuts. In a phone call with former President Trump, "President Emmanuel Macron of France urged Mr. Trump to keep providing American assistance — intelligence, aerial refueling and logistics at a cost of about \$45 million a year, barely a rounding error in the Pentagon's nearly \$800 billion annual budget — until France fills its counterterrorism gaps."⁸¹ African partners have also encouraged the U.S. to stay in the region, with Senegalese Foreign Minister Amadou Ba stating at a news conference that "we hope that they will continue to support us in training and intelligence."⁸²

For now, it seems as though the United States remains committed to their regional support. Although much lower in profile than the French or UN responses, the U.S. intelligence, logistical, and training support in the region is relied on by their allies. American involvement may be heavily influenced by a desire to curb growing Chinese influence, but their impact on the Sahel should not be dismissed. Their role in supporting state powers has allowed the conflict to continue and has kept Sahelian states in power. The success of U.S. involvement hinges on the success of those states, yet no real effort has been made to improve the efficacy of those institutions. While this limited response may help to contain the violence to only the Sahel, and appeal to Pentagon budget makers, it has done little to curb the crisis as a whole.

Peripheral Responses

While the responses from African nations, France, the UN, and the U.S. constitute the most impactful operations in the region, the reaction to the crisis in the Sahel by other nations should also be noted. Most important in this are the European Union and China. While the most important role of these

⁷⁹ Schmitt.

⁸⁰ Schmitt, "Terrorism Threat in West Africa Soars as U.S. Weighs Troop Cuts."

⁸¹ Schmitt.

⁸² Schmitt.

actors is limited to funding, this aid becomes important for African nations who struggle to fund their own security forces.

One of the primary concerns stemming from this conflict, from a European perspective, is that of migration. Controlling immigration has become a central problem for European foreign policymakers in recent decades. In particular, African immigrants seeking refuge in Europe is on the rise, with no signs of slowing down. Africa has seen a large spike in population, with projections reporting “[growth] from about 900 million in 2013 to about 2.8 billion by 2060.”⁸³ This trend holds true in the Sahel, further putting strain on their economies and institutions, and promising more migration towards Europe. Looking at the continent as a whole “the International Monetary Fund (IMF)...expects a six-fold increase in migration from Africa to OECD countries, primarily Europe, in the coming decades.”⁸⁴ The European Union views stabilization in the Sahel as a way to curb the coming tide of migrants.

Other concerns by European nations in the Sahel include a more direct security threat that includes drug trafficking, and the taking of European hostages by terrorist groups in the region. Terrorist groups in Mali “gained a significant portion of their financial support, totaling several €100 million, from drug trafficking to Europe and ransom payments for the freeing of European hostages.”⁸⁵ Drug trafficking in particular seems to be a symptom of instability in the region. It is currently suspected that “10-15 % of the cocaine consumed in Europe is trafficked through West Africa” and a report from the Nigerian Anti-Drug Administration declared “drug trafficking, production and consumption had reached explosive levels.”⁸⁶ While the funding of terrorist groups is certainly important, its effects on European citizens have drawn far more funding from EU countries towards combatting terrorism. While this is consequential from an operations perspective, it also shows how Western nations have largely seen the crisis from the lens of their own interests. This is certainly to be expected to some degree. Rather than finding real solutions to the crisis, this limited interest has led such responses to focus on minimizing and containing the repercussions of the conflict.

China’s response has also been rather limited. Despite their protests in the UN’s Security Council of the expanded use of Peacekeeping Forces, they have contributed more soldiers to MIMUSMA than any other major power. This is accompanied by significant financial and logistical support of G5 Sahel.⁸⁷

⁸³ Boserup and Martinez, “Sahel.”

⁸⁴ Boserup and Martinez.

⁸⁵ Kühne, “West Africa and the Sahel in the Grip of Organized Crime and International Terrorism – Why the UN, EU and Germany Should Prepare for a Long Stay.”

⁸⁶ Kühne.

⁸⁷ “Analysis | China’s Belt and Road Initiative Invests in African Infrastructure — and African Military and Police Forces.”

These actions do not represent any particular interest in the Sahel crisis itself but are more so a part of a larger trend in Chinese foreign policy. China has increasingly invested in Africa, particularly in infrastructure, which includes the Belt and Road Initiative. Included in this larger mission is the opening of a Naval base in Djibouti, and intelligence sharing with nations like Nigeria and Ghana.⁸⁸ These represent both the protection of Chinese investments and a push by the nation to become a more involved global power.

Thoughts on the International Response

In these descriptions, we have seen an international system that has largely failed to respond to the crisis in a way that mitigates the real roots of the problem. This is in part due to the problem with incentives. Sahelian governments do not want a more inclusive government, or to negotiate with terrorist leaders,⁸⁹ as this could open up their political systems to groups who will not support their administrations. Western actors, and by extension Sahelian governments, are primarily concerned with the growth of these groups into entities with resources to launch international attacks. Curbing this does not require an end to the conflict, but only a limitation of it. Similarly, Europe and China have largely economic concerns that hinge not on the existence of the conflict, but on limiting its scope. Foreign powers are acting on interests that are adequately served by containing the violence, and that does not require the end of the conflict as a whole. It is then perhaps rational, if not moral, that these bodies would respond only so far as to slow the growth of these groups and their spheres of influence in the region. Protecting the current state systems may not be enough to end the conflict, but so far, those systems have served adequately in blunting the growth of the issue into the interests of Western nations. This dynamic may mean that the true causal roots of the violence are never addressed effectively.

Counter-insurgency Theory Applied to the Sahel

As we evaluate the international response to Islamic Extremism in the Sahel, it is also worthwhile to evaluate the broader topics of insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN). With the recent withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan, and France's announcement that Operation Barkhane will be ending shortly, one may begin to question the efficacy of such operations.

The first question to answer is why an insurgency begins at all. While this paper has posited that weak government is at the core of the problem, there are more intrinsic factors to consider when discussing what drives a body of people to take up arms against a more formidable foe. A potential answer to this can be found in Eqbal Ahmed's article *Revolutionary War and Counter-Insurgency*.

⁸⁸ "Analysis | China's Belt and Road Initiative Invests in African Infrastructure — and African Military and Police Forces."

⁸⁹ "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys.'"

Although certainly a controversial figure, Ahmed's involvement in the Algerian Civil War (a conflict that we will revisit from a far different perspective), and his subsequent analysis of the Vietnam war gave him a valuable perspective on the nature of revolution and insurgency. Most valuable for our purposes was his thoughts on the topic of legitimacy. Ahmed argues that "legitimacy comes to governments and other institutions of power when their constituents recognize their claim to authority in some principle or source outside them, or when citizens actively and meaningfully participate in the processes of government."⁹⁰ It is not hard to fathom that Sahelian governments have, via their abuses of power and failure to mediate conflict, lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the Fulani and other pastoral communities. While some may just join Islamic movements for protection or status, others may seek a system that is more responsive to their needs. It is this sentiment, Ahmed says, that makes an insurgency so hard to defeat. To sustain an effort as demoralizing as an insurgency against a stronger force, Ahmed says that "a people can summon up that resolution only if they feel morally alienated from their rulers, when the latter's very title to authority begins to be actively rejected by the masses."⁹¹ These ideas put forth by Ahmed ultimately align fairly neatly with the situation in the Sahel, and the argument put forth that weak government is the primary causal factor of the crisis. Applying these ideas to the response is also important. To date, the international response has focused entirely on preserving the current system. This effort will be ineffective if Sahelian states and Western powers cannot also find a way to restore the legitimacy of the political system, as it will never otherwise be accepted by those currently joining radical movements.

Also important in a philosophical discussion of COIN operations are the tactics themselves. There are two primary avenues that COIN operations have historically used: an enemy-based approach or a population-based approach. An enemy-centric approach more closely resembles conventional warfare, with an emphasis placed on killing and/or capturing insurgents. As colonial powers fought wars around the world against insurgencies hoping to gain independence, military leaders at the time were forced to think harder about how to successfully counter such a resistance.⁹² French Army officer David Galula is credited as being an influential figure in early practitioners of population-based COIN, which took a more political approach. Galula fought and applied his techniques in the Algerian revolution, which was ultimately a disaster for the French.⁹³ His ideas, as well as those of his contemporaries at the time, have largely remained the primary military doctrine for COIN by Western militaries. The premise of population-centric COIN is to "[focus] on the population as 'the sea' in which the insurgents 'swim' and

⁹⁰ AHMAD, "Revolutionary War and Counter-Insurgency."

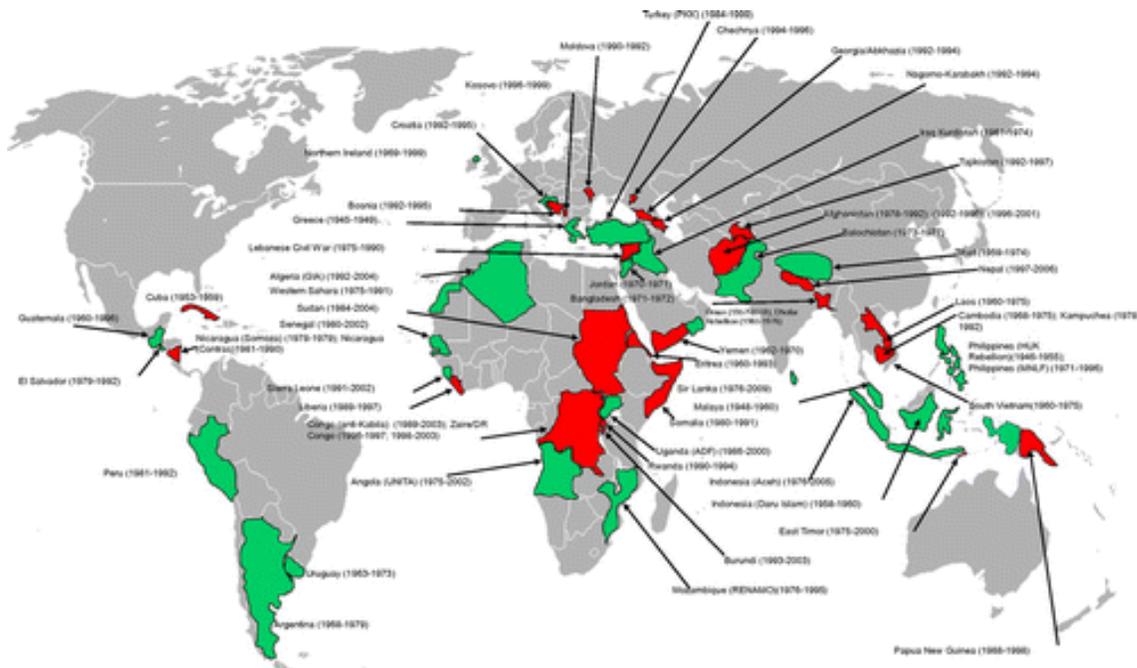
⁹¹ AHMAD.

⁹² Paul et al., "Full Article: Moving Beyond Population-Centric vs. Enemy-Centric Counterinsurgency."

⁹³ This is the same one in which Eqbal Ahmed fought for the resistance. Years later, Algeria would also be the home place to AQIM, where many of the Sahel's terrorist groups claim their roots. The story of the Sahel has many ties to Algeria (Zimmerman, "Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel.")

[it] theorizes that, if the population and its environment are sufficiently controlled, the insurgents will be deprived of the support they need and will wither, be exposed, or some combination thereof, bringing the insurgency to an end.”⁹⁴

In a case study examining fifty-nine resolved cases of counter-insurgency operations (Figure 9), data showed that “the single most important factor in determining COIN success was reducing the tangible support of the insurgents.”⁹⁵ This includes recruitment, supplies, weapons, and protection, and could come from either a population or an external supporter. Such efforts require both the direct targeting of insurgents that comprises an enemy-centric approach and the political activities of a population-centric approach. The study ultimately posits that this concept of tangible support is the most important factor to consider when confronting an insurgency and requires a more nuanced approach than is currently implemented.



In the broader theory of counter-insurgency operations, we find two complementary ideas that are relevant to the Sahel crisis. On the one hand, we see that a lack of perceived legitimacy in the Sahel governments will fuel the population’s support of insurgent groups. On the other hand, failure by Western powers to constrict tangible support of extremist groups allows the continued growth of the insurgency.

⁹⁴ Paul et al., “Full Article: Moving Beyond Population-Centric vs. Enemy-Centric Counterinsurgency.”

⁹⁵ Paul et al.

The most direct way to constrict such support from the population to extremist groups would be to restore the legitimacy of the Sahel governments.

It would seem that the French military's background in counterinsurgency and historical ties in the region would be useful in their efforts to curb terrorism in Mali. The nation's highest-ranking officer, General François Lecointre, even cited previous leaders like General Joseph Gallieni and General Herbert Lyautey as helpful figures, both of whom helped to develop such tactics in the colonial-era campaigns of the 19th and 20th centuries.⁹⁶ Whether this is actually the case is up for debate. First, it is unclear whether the current French military is even utilizing the tactical ideas posed by their former colonial Generals. While those figures touted a new (at the time) premise of emphasizing politics, current French policy in the Sahel has been primarily military in nature.⁹⁷ This is at least partly due to a French acknowledgment that they are no longer operating in a colonial environment. A French military manual discussing a COIN tactic known as the 'oil spot' method, originally theorized by General Gallieni, stated that "this method corresponded to the objective of conquest, which is no longer the current goal. For another, the reduced size of ground forces no longer permits the realization of this kind of maneuver without dangerously stripping the secured zones, and it is extremely harmful to the action of the Force to let a secured zone fall into the hands of insurgents."⁹⁸ While this may be encouraging from the standpoint that the French are adapting their policy to the times, it runs counter to the claims of General Lecointre that historical policy is guiding the modern effort. It also suggests an important problem with modern COIN operations. The tactics that these operations are based on were created to conquer a nation, but modern states have neither the will nor the number of troops to do so. Michael Shurkin claims in a review of Operation Barkhane's tactics that "There is an unmistakable family resemblance between Barkhane and the colonial campaigns of the Belle Époque, but that resemblance is superficial."⁹⁹ This reality, it seems, has led to the diminishment of population-centric tactics touted by many COIN practitioners, and towards a more enemy-centric strategy.

The use of an enemy-centric approach in Operation Barkhane comes with a few risks that ultimately led to the failure of the operation. For starters, the focus on terrorists and their elimination as the primary objective of a response diminishes the importance of identifying and addressing underlying issues. It presents insurgents as "a decontextualised threat that feeds upon local grievances, instead of

⁹⁶ This reference drew many criticisms, as it seemed to confirm many existing feelings that Operation Barkhane is a colonial-esque overreach of French military power

⁹⁷ Shurkin, "France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine."

⁹⁸ Shurkin.

⁹⁹ Shurkin.

emphasizing the local grievances and factors that enable Islamist militant groups to recruit.”¹⁰⁰ The strategy also homogenizes the terrorist groups themselves. Whether looking at conflicting interests between ISGS and JNIM, or simply JNIMs decentralized internal structure, we know that such an assumption is both incorrect and leads to poor tactical decisions. One proposed upside of the enemy-centric approach is that it allows African politicians to take the lead in securing their nations after the insurgent threat has been adequately subdued.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, the inability by Sahelian states to secure their borders and project power means that the onus continually falls on French forces to remain in the region and further police the terrorists. This dynamic inextricably ties the French operation to the failing states, which “is detrimental to a holistic counterinsurgency approach, as uncritically cooperating with the government and its military forces excludes the option of addressing the root causes of insecurity, i.e. bad governance,”¹⁰²

Tying together Eqbal Ahmeds’ thoughts on legitimacy with criticisms of Operation Barkhane’s tactics, it is clear that the mission has become too deeply tied to the root problem (the state) to be effective. France has propped up administration in Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso that many citizens no longer view as valid government. France has also failed to utilize any meaningful population-centric tactics in their response, and their rhetorical references to colonial legacy further illegitimizes their role. As France begins to withdraw troops from the region, and the extremist threat remains, these mistakes have clearly culminated into the ultimate failure of the mission.

Conclusion

The international response to rising Islamic extremism in the Sahel has been ineffective in mitigating violence in the region. This is certainly in large part due to their support of Sahelian states. Sahelian states, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have proved incapable of securing their nations, and have used their limited power in ways that have worsened ethnic tensions and further decreased their perceived legitimacy. The state must be able to provide security, judiciously mediate ethnic conflicts, and provide the services expected from a government. In addition, it must be able to do so in a truly fair manner and resist favoring the farming agricultural base that it currently does. This would undermine all of the recruiting strategies currently employed by Jihadists in the region and would begin to damage the strained relationships throughout the Sahel.

The international response has also placed too great an emphasis on military methods in their intervention. There are several factors that could create this dynamic. Looking strictly from the

¹⁰⁰ van der Meulen, “Operation Barkhane- the Risks of an Enemy-Centric Approach.”

¹⁰¹ van der Meulen.

¹⁰² van der Meulen.

perspective of Western nations, there is little incentive to invest more into the conflict than is required to contain it to the region. Additionally, the ground on which modern COIN theory is built seems to be lagging behind 21st Century realities. Taking a hard look at these policies and disentangling them from colonial legacies will help not just the response to the Sahel, but in Western military operations globally.

Research on this topic was severely hindered by an inability to conduct fieldwork. Future study of the conflict should attempt to consider in greater detail first-hand perspectives of the Fulani and Tuareg communities. In particular, tribal and religious leaders in these communities could provide valuable insights towards a possible end to this crisis.

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