

CHAPTER 13

Hybridity and Fragmentation: Implications for Regional Security Policy in the Sahel and Beyond

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Introduction

Of the global milestones reached as 2019 drew to a close, none was more sobering than the events in the Sahel, witness to the most rapid increase in violence of any region for the year.¹ Over the past decade, the Sahel – an ecoclimatic, biogeographic zone of transition stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea – has experienced the near collapse of the Malian state, the proliferation of diffuse and adaptable armed groups with ties to global terrorist organisations, and a startling increase in intercommunal violence driven by ethnic militias.

Despite the myriad challenges driving the regionalisation of insecurity, and numerous experts citing poor resource management, underdevelopment, and climate change (to name a few) as drivers of conflict, western policymakers continue to focus on extremist groups and radicalising ideologies as the chief threats to Sahelian states, and increased militarisation of the region through counterterrorism and peacekeeping missions as the one-size-fits-all solution. Unfortunately, the blood and resources committed to military intervention have yet to make a significant impact on the crisis, despite more than 20,000 international and local personnel deployed, and it could be argued that such interventions have actually made things worse, given the unceasing attacks on civilian targets.²

The spiralling violence and insecurity have decoupled longstanding formal and informal authority structures between communities and the state, and disrupted patterns of relatively peaceful coexistence between tribal groups (for example, those in Burkina Faso),³ underscoring the capacity of militant groups to take

advantage of vulnerable political seams within and across state borders. This was perhaps best put in a recent brief by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED): “[T]hese dynamic [re]arrangements are actively reconfiguring the political geography of states at a time when ideologies and alliances are in flux across the Sahel.”⁴ As such, the Sahel, which was once described in the context of shared geographies and human terroir, is now best framed as a zone of conflict and ambiguity centred on three states: Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Although the armed groups and cascading violence are an appropriate and worthy subject of investigation and evaluation, widening the analytical aperture reveals a complex system of relationships, bargains and concessions that, prior to 2012, held up the facade of state consolidation and stability, and has over the past decade fragmented into the morass of competing actors and priorities we see today. All political arrangements, from the lowest system of organisation to the highest levels of multilateral cooperation, are hybrid orders built on coalitions and power-sharing agreements.

The Sahel Summit of January 2020, called by President Emmanuel Macron of France, convened the heads of state of Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Mauritania (known as the G5 Sahel),⁵ laying bare a clear example of the macro-level dynamics of geopolitical hybridity at play. France, concerned about rising anti-French speech spreading across Sahelian states, wanted the African heads of state to make clear their support for the continued French military presence and counterterrorism mission – even if such declarations might weaken the already fraught political positions of said heads of state at home. Worse, the death toll for which jihadist groups were responsible (859) versus national security forces (597) for Burkina Faso in 2019 (with similar trajectories in its regional neighbours) speaks to the challenge created by the state’s pernicious exercise of violence, which undermines its counterterrorism mission through the creation of civilian suffering and an increased recruitment opportunity for terrorist organisations.⁶ By the end of 2019, at least 2,000 civilians had been killed in the area where the borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso meet.⁷

This example is one lens through which to understand the broad-spectrum insecurity within and between polities with vested interests in the Sahel, demonstrating the benefit of a systems approach to understanding the context in which the broader region has descended into violence and instability. It also raises the

question of what, given the evidently tenuous nature of the hybrid environment, ‘stability’ in the region looked like prior to this context of collapse. Given that the actors remain largely the same, what characterises the current context of a collapse as opposed to the pre-context,⁸ which evidenced similar levels of intercommunal conflict-based security challenges? Is it enough to claim, as do circles in the Sahelian public discourse, that the parochial agendas of jihadists and western powers alike were the tipping point? Systems and complexity-aware approaches⁹ are promoting a local-first approach to intervention, but policy solutions – such as counterterrorism missions and security coordination – remain at the high political/geopolitical level. What can be gained from looking at the foundation, the very human social domain, upon which these low and high politics rest?

In this chapter I will investigate the extent to which hybridity¹⁰ in governance and security has contributed to the rapidity of collapse, what specific dynamics within these orders trend toward fragility and vulnerability, and which might be leveraged for better policy. Understanding hybrid orders is critically important, as security strategy drives interventionism and policy related to public and state authority, especially in the transhumance areas of the Sahel where non-state actors, including jihadists,¹¹ have – as a result of a largely absent and/or predatory state – taken on security and justice provision roles.

This chapter will begin with a review of the current security landscape, followed by a discussion of hybridity, situating the Sahel within the conceptual framework of multi-layer hybrid security governance. The final sections will illuminate the dynamics of micro-, meso- and macro-level fragmentation of these hybrid orders, using examples mainly from Mali and Niger, with some coverage of Burkina Faso and other states, and discuss implications for counterterrorism and security policy as regional and international actors seek to halt the flow of terrorism south and westward from the Sahel.

Origins of Regional Insecurity and Vulnerability

To understand the expansion of the terrorist threat in West Africa and the Sahel, one must look to some of the core factors undergirding regional instability and vulnerability. This section discusses how the nature of the state, the experiences

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of communities affected by insecurity, and histories of conflict have created a fertile security environment for opportunistic violent and criminal actors.

The border region of Mali and Niger, one of several regional hot zones, has housed an array of separatist, criminal and insurgent networks for decades. Two events in particular have contributed to the insecurity of the region, in addition to the large swathes of under-governed and low-access territories across both states' neighbouring countries: the Algerian civil war (1992-2002) and the collapse of Libya in the aftermath of the intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2011.¹²



Figure 1: Map of West Africa Sahel Region¹³

The 2012 military coup in Mali further destabilised the region, with the spill-over of arms and fighters from Libya reviving the longstanding Tuareg rebellion. Though long viewed by security partners in the west as a reliable bulwark against violent actors and extremists in the Sahara, particularly after the successful peace agreement of 2005, the contemporary collapse of the Malian state has contributed to the proliferation of militant fighters and violent extremists operating in the broader Sahel.¹⁴

Of the numerous active insurgencies and criminal organisations in the region, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Boko Haram top the long list of violent actors contributing to

regional instability, presenting the greatest threat to states and communities, and increasingly articulated in terms relating to the security interests of the United States (US) and Europe.¹⁵ Each of these groups has engaged in transnational activities, clustered in the border regions of the Lake Chad Basin (Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria), and in the intersection of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Their positioning lends directly to lucrative smuggling and trafficking initiatives, both within the region and across the Sahel, to Mediterranean ports and European markets. Though the smuggling of goods and peoples exiting the continent has been a chief focus of international actors, the transregional movement of goods is a historic and critical component of local and regional economies. The illicit movement of goods within Africa complicates efforts to institutionalise border controls, strengthen licit markets and curtail illicit flows. Last, intergroup interactions with local armed actors lend to a cycle of group consolidation, fracturing and indiscriminate violence as social capital, political capital and resources produce fertile opportunities for competition and collaboration.

Nigeria serves as a pertinent example of how the nature of the state has a direct impact on creating vulnerability to the development of violent extremist organisations and empathetic communities. Historically, Nigeria's security services, both police and military, have adjudicated their role in the context of communal ethnic and religious composition, which is further impacted by competition for federal and local government resources and services. The state has violently suppressed popular movements expressing grievances against national economic and development policy. The ongoing crisis in the country's Niger Delta is yet another example of state excess driving further insecurity. Lack of trust between communities and security actors has resulted in a culture of impunity on the security-actor side, and resentment on the community side. These dynamics directly led to the spark that transitioned Boko Haram from a civil society religious organisation to the virulent and violent extremist actor it is today.¹⁶

While state capacity and security orientations, as well as citizen and community perceptions of both, range to either extreme of the example provided by Nigeria, similar dynamics exist across and within the impacted states in the region. The countries in the Sahel have long ranked towards the bottom of development indices. Social and economic marginalisation and deprivation, particularly centre-periphery inequalities, are a key driver of grievance and vulnerability to

extremist and separatist narratives in Sahelian states. Described as “frontiers of discontent”, poverty, political exclusion and socio-economic exclusion lead to participation in informal and illicit economic activity, and dependence on contraband and trafficking for daily subsistence.¹⁷ Reliance on the illicit movement of goods and the networks operating informal trade contributes to a sense of shared experience and identity that transcends state loyalty, which can easily be shifted into outright antipathy.

The broader region is a priority for international development organisations due to its complex security situation, vulnerability to climate change, resource insecurity, high poverty rates, and weak governance and institutions.¹⁸ Though development needs remain high, funds earmarked by international partners to assist Sahelian countries focus largely on security cooperation or outright economic coercion,¹⁹ a trend reflected in other regions impacted by terrorist violence.²⁰ Unfortunately, focus on the security rather than the economic dynamics of grievances in the region does little to resolve perceptions of deprivation, and thus misses the root conditions driving communities into the arms of terrorist and other armed groups.

Current Threat Landscape: Terrorism, Non-State Actors and Sectarianism

Understanding the threat landscape requires both horizontal and vertical analysis of the dynamics of localised and community insecurity, state capacity and predation, and the inherently transnational nature and objectives of violent terrorist and criminal organisations. Levels of deprivation, both contextual and relative, further inflame grievances leveraged by these groups.²¹ Across the continent, and particularly in Sahelian West Africa, localised conflicts and insecurity in areas largely bereft of a functional, formal institutional presence in some cases lead to protracted isolation and vulnerability. In areas characterised by limited or alternative governance, challenges presented by population movements, food and water security shocks, or the encroachment of foreign actors can quickly move from manageable to intractable crises. These factors drive community mobilisation processes, including armament, self-protection and resource competition, which in turn generate greater levels of violence,

deepen inter- and intra-communal feuds, and ultimately create fertile ground for terrorist groups to mobilise and recruit in pursuit of revisionist and ideologically driven objectives.

The cycle of localised, state-wide and transnational fragility and violence has played out in predictable and, to date, largely unstoppable ways in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Burkina Faso. Though this section describes three categories of non-state security actors emerging from and influencing conflict and grievance dynamics, it must be noted that these group types are dynamic and fluid, intersecting and overlapping, and they take on similar roles within the context of local, state and international narratives and interventions.

Terrorism

As the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda lose territory in the Middle East and seek new bases, criminally oriented outshoots and ideological affiliates have made marked gains in the Sahel, capitalising on the vulnerabilities articulated above and grievances fostered by state predation and incapacity.

In 2018, the JNIM leadership issued a call for the Fulani people to commit to jihad across West Africa, calling out Cameroon specifically.²² That country has been racked with internal discord between Anglophone and Francophone populations as it combats the cross-border insurgency of Boko Haram, and it presents fertile ground for violent extremist groups to take advantage of the chaos and expand their regional presence. ISIS militants based in the region have also laid claim to attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali, and continue to operate with near impunity across the impacted territories.²³

Despite repeated claims of victory by the Nigerian government,²⁴ Boko Haram remains a critical threat to security in the north-east of the country and across borders in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Boko Haram's declaration of allegiance to ISIS in 2015, and the later-stage fracturing of the group into two competing extremist organisations, demonstrates the sustainability of the foothold the groups have in the region.²⁵ Figure 2 displays the extent to which terrorist activity expanded in the Sahel/West Africa in 2017 alone, and the cross-border contagion effect of localised insecurity.



Figure 2: Regional snapshot of terrorist attacks in 2017²⁶

Non-State Actors and Community-Based Armed Groups

Community-based armed groups (CBAGs) is a new name for an old phenomenon in Africa. CBAGs vary by their purpose, mission, historical origins, operational focus, deployment of violence, risks and measures of success. Although non-state actors, CBAGs are not necessarily antagonistic to the state and sometimes cooperate with it. Groups form and proliferate in places where communities experience limited governance, historical inter- and intracommunal conflicts or enmity, marginalisation, or deprivation in relation to the state security apparatus.²⁷ In other cases, CBAGs form to counter localised violent extremist and insurgent threats. Relationships and affiliations to the state and the community, including sources of legitimacy, funding, and socio-cultural norms around the exercise of violence, define and transform CBAGs over time. The inherent tensions embedded in shifting bounds of legitimacy versus illegitimacy in the state-society relationship are central to the CBAG phenomenon.

These groups present an opportunity to expand collaboration outside the formal state to further secure outlying areas. At the same time, the potential for malignant external actors to leverage these groups against the state is equally perilous. Money and arms placed in the hands of militias, vigilantes and other armed

groups could lay the foundation for conflict, particularly in areas with valuable natural resources. The conflict in the Central African Republic is one example of how foreign actors can exploit and deepen existing insecurity.²⁸ An encroaching China and Russia, one bringing money and the other muscle (each with questionable ethical standards), have the potential to disrupt tenuous relationships between state actors and the CBAGs that have proliferated due to deepening insecurity and the rise of jihadists across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.²⁹

Outside the reach of the state, responsibilities that would be handled by formal security actors are filled by armed non-state actors, only some of whom bear political or ideological animus toward the international entities. Many others are fixtures of local communities, with deep knowledge of the terrain, and of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, which many militaries – domestic or international – lack the ability to obtain in any period of time. As security, and often securitised, actors, CBAGs play an integral role in the overall security environment, having the potential to be leveraged by domestic and foreign actors, and to serve as a bellwether for understanding the overall state of security-sector governance in both functioning and fragile countries.

Sectarianism, Separatists and Insurgents

Separatist and insurgent groups, much like CBAGs, come in many forms and exercise violence in different ways. Some are holdovers from the colonial period, while others mobilised in the crucible of independence movements following the Second World War. Many other separatist and insurgent groups have emerged as contemporary states struggle to address social and political marginalisation, corruption, and the capture of resources by elites. These groups are perhaps best viewed as manifestations of shared identity and sovereignty, with revisionist narratives placing identity-based communities in opposition to predatory or marginalising state governance strategies.

The Tuareg groups of Mali have held one of the longest-standing coordinated separatist movements in the region, engaging in four major uprisings since the 1960s.³⁰ Following the collapse of the 2005 peace agreement (the fifth of its kind) and a surge of violence across the country in 2012, the contemporary security environment is characterised by numerous insurgent and self-protection groups competing for territory, access to lucrative smuggling routes, and the influence

and arms that come with opportunistic alliances with violent extremist groups.³¹ The strongest and most prestigious rebel insurgent group is the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which has been known to associate with transnational terrorist groups such as AQIM.

The involvement of radical Islamists, transnational organised crime and international terrorist organisations in the Malian conflict has drawn regional and international attention and resources, including military support. Since May 2014, the rebels have managed to hold as much as three-quarters of Mali's landmass.³² Both bilateral French-supported campaigns and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA, a peacekeeping mission led by the African Union) have failed to stabilise the country, as ongoing conflict limits the ability of internal and external stakeholders to reconsolidate the state outside of urban areas near the capital.

Approaching the threshold of a full-blown insurgency, the Anglophone-Francophone conflict in Cameroon has driven internal displacement and civilian casualties, and has ramped up militarised state security tactics.³³ Beginning in 2016, aggrieved Anglophone Cameroonians began advocating against perceived policies of political and economic marginalisation by the Francophone government. A heavy-handed response to protests, including jailing some English-speaking activists and sympathisers, has mobilised the broader Anglophone population to support armed separatist groups.³⁴ The state's focus on suppressing Anglophone actors rather than the broader threats presented by Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram serves only to further inflame conflict dynamics. As one of the region's largest economies and an important security partner for French, British and American interests, the dual insurgent threat in Cameroon has the potential to become the next flashpoint in the region.

As demonstrated through these examples, the surge in sectarianism, terrorism and armed community mobilisation throughout West Africa and the Sahel must be viewed at the intersection of local, regional and global conflict and security dynamics. Historic and contemporary state governance, longstanding grievances, political and socio-economic grievances, and securitisation narratives and practices emerging from bilateral and international governance schemas must also be taken into account towards generating a nuanced understanding of the scope of the threat.

It is at this point that it is most useful to shift the frame to an analysis of hybrid orders, and how contestations between and within these transregional orders have led to the wicked challenges presented and perpetuated by indigenous and international armed groups.

1. Hybrid Orders as Areas of Ambiguity

In establishing why Sahelian states can be described as hybrid orders, it is important to reiterate that all political arrangements – from the lowest systems of organisation to multilateral cooperation – are hybrid orders built on coalitions and power-sharing agreements. Most state-based political orders contain elements of pluralism, expressed through elite brinkmanship, party politics, labour unions and so on. The Sahelian states, like other fragile governance environments, have state institutions that are more likely to be centralised with authoritarian tendencies and a pluralised security governance landscape, progressively more so towards the periphery and border areas.

It is important to historicise hybridity in the Sahel, understanding it as a perpetual condition³⁵ that has to date served as a facade concealing the failure to achieve substantive state consolidation – but not as the diametric opposite of consolidation. For instance, in the dichotomy of customary versus formal governance, there might be some opposition, but there is also, more importantly, complementarity and some kind of continuation of status, service, and flows of legitimacy between the community and the state. The customary continues the formal governance in areas where the latter institutions have failed to grow. In considering the Sahelian states as embodying constantly shifting zones of ambiguity rather than static state-like apparatuses, the act of constructing sustainable and effective policy must evolve from a short-term, one-size-fits-all affair to a nuanced, adaptive and holistic strategy that negotiates political, security and economic determinants across multiple layers of human and physical terrain.

The particulars of Sahelian hybridity are legible across political, economic and security frames. The presence of customary and traditional justice and service-provision mechanisms viewed by the polity as equally valid as state-based institutions constitutes one layer. These states feature intentionally blurred boundaries between state and non-state regulation, as opposed to the state

functioning in a role that defines boundaries and authority. In Mali, informal systems exist parallel to the state, whereas in Niger the role of traditional authorities in conflict resolution and local governance is formally integrated into state political mechanisms.³⁶ For both states, centre-periphery identity politics are a key area of contestation in consolidating state power – “since independence, in Mali and to a lesser extent in Niger, state power, which has its political and social bases in the southern parts of both these countries, is struggling to establish legitimacy in the north”.³⁷ Mali and Niger have chosen different routes in managing the distribution of authority and assets,³⁸ and the sometimes violent exchanges between the governors and the ungoverned.

“The states of Mali and Niger have used seemingly similar procedures for ‘peace-making’, although Niger appears much more advanced through an integrated political framework and an innovative tension control and conflict prevention tool: the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP).”³⁹

In short, hybrid governance in Mali has stronger strains of failed consolidation, whereas Niger demonstrates an intentional hybridisation that has, to date, better managed contestation at the periphery, where nefarious actors have proven deft at mobilising communities on the margins.

An analysis of hybrid market governance⁴⁰ and the nexus of licit and illicit trade crossing the Sahel⁴¹ could fill volumes. From artisanal mining and informal market vendors living at the margins, to large-scale narco-, arms and human trafficking,⁴² the diversity of currencies of interest motivate just as varied political and criminal agendas. State authority, whether complicit or controlling, has an impact on the exercise and expression of economic transhumance across the region. Insecurity has ratcheted up the conflict dynamics over economic assets in the past several years, especially in border areas.⁴³ The levels of violence track with the ways Niger and Mali have diverged in their manifestations of hybridity:

“Unlike in Mali, where competition for control over drug trafficking routes fuels violence between armed groups, drug trafficking violence in Niger has been relatively contained, thanks in part to political efforts to calm flare ups and manage their fallout.”⁴⁴

These political efforts, part and parcel of the intentional integration of traditional authorities into statutory authorities, act “as a social safety valve”.⁴⁵

“...the grey economy can produce integration when it is controlled by a small circle which channels the involvement of autonomous actors, or even co-opts and retains them. This configuration, which is fragile and risky in the medium/long-term, is a short-term element of social peace.”⁴⁶

The precarious state of politics and economics impacts the manifestation of ‘security’, lending to a “particularly pernicious form of state power in which political and economic leaders on both the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ [or opposition and empowered] consciously enable violent groups to proliferate in order to protect their perks and maintain control”.⁴⁷ These groups come in the form of CBAGs for self-defence and policing,⁴⁸ identity-oriented militias that manage (sometimes violently) contested resources and terrain, warlords, transnational criminal groups, and proxy forces aligned to political actors.⁴⁹

Given the numerous intersecting actors (some described in the previous section on the security landscape), interests and systems of governance, one can appreciate the difficulty of identifying key nodes of authority when attempting to implement local, national and geopolitical policy. In the Sahel, sovereign governance, from a conventional Westphalian standpoint,⁵⁰ is often only skin deep, with a glacier of local conflict and contestation taking place outside the capital cities.

2. Strategic Hybridity: (Un)governing at the Nexus of Continuity and Complementarity

Having described what these orders are and given examples of how hybridity manifests in Sahelian contexts, one might rightfully ask how these orders came to be in the context of the dynamics shaping and conditioning the zones of ambiguity and fragility therein. Decades of elite bargains,⁵¹ exchanges, and political and communal concessions set up precarious governance environments.⁵² The necessity of these bargains⁵³ to secure territorial and political control across numerous ethnic, tribal, language and religious groups conditions the inherent fragility of

the semi-consolidated state. The state – a euphemism for empowered elites and their allies – relies on negotiated and coercive bargains between groups rather than a statutory social contract and monopoly on violence.⁵⁴ These relationships, though in some cases contributing to stability (notably, not functionality) within the state apparatus, are nonetheless necessarily short-term. The balance of power is constantly subject to pressure from local political economies, identity politics and social support bases, as well as an enduring *realpolitik* rendering those local relationships and political economies more unstable, insecure and increasingly violent.⁵⁵ As a result, policy that does not take this instability into account will necessarily be as short-termed and as precarious.

Hybridity survives under the guise of a coexistence between fixed formal written law and evolving informal customary law, a delicate balance that manages inherent vulnerability – but only to an extent. In this section, I explore these vulnerabilities, and how internal and external actors leverage them. In understanding the zones of ambiguity characterising the sub-national, regional and geopolitical organs of governance, the dynamics of their potential for fragmentation become legible.

Hybrid governance met its nadir at the hands of development actors lionising the conceptual shift from good governance to ‘good enough’ governance, in their efforts to strengthen fragile and weak governments emerging from war or struggling to achieve various development goals and markers of statehood.⁵⁶ At the same time, security practitioners have traditionally expressed concern about involving non-state actors in reformation and consolidation projects because they violate the western-centric Weberian conception of the state monopoly on service provision and defence. This is perhaps a contradiction, as the process of peace and reconciliation has continually included a platform for inclusion of armed groups and other non-state contestants in the violent state-building processes of the past decades. These convergences and divergences of the external-actor perspective on the practical role of non-state actors create challenges in programming in insecure, conflict-affected environments that can be characterised as hybrid orders.⁵⁷

Hybrid orders, though pluralistic in theory, contain actors straddling multiple boundaries, and creating/formalising governance linkages between them can “disrupt, strengthen or weaken governing mechanisms within the state in

unpredictable ways”.⁵⁸ Though deft at creating seams where cleavages between the state and community would otherwise exist, these orders are not built to manage complex emergencies and collective-action challenges. Violent extremism, climate change and resource management, and competition over political, security and economic resources, each contribute to the buckling of these fragile structures.

Hybrid orders also present the challenge of legitimacy at the same time as seeking to dispense legitimacy as a currency to those most deft at wielding it – both inside and outside the state. If all actors are equally valid or influential, or dependent on a specific political contextual moment, who determines who has most legitimacy in decision-making, governance processes or resource distribution? The core assumption of positive hybridity is that non-state actors have more legitimacy in local communities than state actors, but it leaves open the question as to which is most appropriate to engage in achieving the broader goal of state institutional strengthening and governing capacity.

Many African states play host to numerous non-state actors, including international non-governmental organisations, regional multilateral platforms and programmes, and peacekeeping and stabilisation missions. They are also sites of deep civil society engagement. While it is assumed that non-state actors have more legitimacy in communities than state actors, the following questions remain: is legitimacy about the exercise of violence, service provision or both? How do external actors fit into the legitimacy ecosystem?⁵⁹ According to international development specialist Kate Meagher and colleagues, “hybrid arrangements with dubious non-state orders may create low-cost solutions to governance problems in the short run, but [they] risk eroding local legitimacy and consent in the long run”, and “may strengthen or weaken elements within the state in unpredictable ways”.⁶⁰

3. Dynamics of Fragmentation: Triggers and Trajectories

Having established what hybridity looks like, and the inherent vulnerabilities presented by the bonds of formal and informal agreements uniting pluralistic entities, the chaos of the Sahel brings into clarity the dynamics of fragmentation as these hybrid orders collapse upon themselves. Where and how these fractures

occur can also explain to some extent the different trajectories of insecurity exhibited by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and cast into relief what the trajectories of their southern and western neighbours might be if similarly triggered.

Micro Level

At the community level, fragmentation is most readily seen in the reduced capacity of traditional authorities to manage conflict resolution and intercommunal relationships, and the relative vanishing of whatever local state authority existed in these spaces.

In Niger, the role of state and traditional authority is vested in traditional chiefs, who have been targeted and kidnapped to cow their communities into acceding to armed-actor agendas. In Mali, without a process integrating traditional authorities into statutory governance, customary bodies are subject to top-down and bottom-up pressures seeking to leverage their legitimacy for area access (humanitarian groups), intelligence (military missions), or territorial control and recruitment (armed groups). In Burkina Faso, mass displacement has contributed to sharp increases in intercommunal distrust. With the state moving to support mass armed community mobilisation through the creation of village-based vigilante groups,⁶¹ the micro-dynamics of fragmentation lead to a potential increase in intercommunal violence. In each setting, the absence of systems to manage conflict leads local communities to pull further apart, eroding the possibility of the reconstitution of local political orders to support access to state authority and governing resources.

Meso Level

In assessing cross-border dynamics, the disparate treatment of ethnic groups on a state-by-state basis creates a meso-dynamic of fragmentation of hybridity. The treatment of the Tuareg in Mali versus Niger is one example, lending to the ability of armed actors to mobilise ethnic communities as the situation demands. The Fulani are another cross-regional group whose treatment at the hands of state and non-state actors contributes to the fragmentation of regional economies and relationships, and increased contestation between settled and nomadic peoples (see Madeline Vellturo, this volume).

The growing focus on border policing and security by G5 missions and their

partners increases the presence of violent state authority in areas previously open to transhumance communities, disrupting local political economies and bargains that both criminal and civilian communities relied upon. The mass displacement of people, just as it impacts trust at the local level, also disrupts cross-border relationships because the increased presence of ‘strangers’ makes it easier for nefarious groups to operate, and more difficult for security actors to protect their own forces or identify targets.

Macro Level

External actors, be they western states,⁶² transnational criminal organisations, or internationally linked jihadist groups, have complicated the hybridised security environment with competing parochial agendas that have the unfortunate shared result of limiting or reducing the legitimacy of the central state as a key contributor to providing solutions to the insecurity racking the region.⁶³ Western-actor bilateral support to struggling state actors is contrasted with the predation carried out on local communities by criminals and terrorists, further pulling the constituencies apart and making policy addressing governance and security concerns at the same time all but impossible.

Projecting the Spread

Many West African states share, to some extent, the micro, meso and macro characteristics of Sahelian states that contribute to their vulnerability to collapse and insecurity. In projecting ahead to the next cases, watchers should be focusing on: shoring up states with similar fault lines and seams in pluralistic governance environments; indications of failed consolidation, especially predatory elites and security actors operating with increasing impunity at the threat of terrorism; and the potential for highly armed mobilisation and the presence of numerous armed groups. Countries that have been largely ‘ignored’ by external actors in terms of the provision of security coordination and assistance might be the highest on this list, all else given equal consideration.⁶⁴

When ignorance turns to attention under the guise of strategic urgency, the vacuum tends to be filled by deposits of currency and political legitimacy into the central state, eliding the underlying dynamics that contributed to its weakness in the first place. The injection of securitised cash and programming, which

featured prominently under the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) framework (led by the US), has the potential to be replicated as the nation and its multilateral partners move to implement new strategies aimed at shoring up fragile and weak states.⁶⁵ Countries in West Africa, hungry for support and the benefits of strategic engagement with the west, should be cautious of such a bellwether, and work intentionally to ensure that the distribution of funding provides services to those most at risk of being targeted by nefarious actors for the purpose of undermining the state's capacity to respond to complex challenges, including violent extremism.

4. Implications for Policy and Practice

Looking ahead to the next stages of conflict within the zones of contestation and ambiguity that characterise the Sahel, where can policymakers and relevant stakeholders be most effective in identifying key leverage points to resist short-termism, mitigate the role of armed actors within pluralistic security landscapes, and support the reconstitution of functioning coalitions for effective and stable governance? This section will discuss policy developments to watch for and potential tripwires to avoid, and make specific recommendations for the development of a holistic framework to address contemporary security challenges in Sahelian West Africa.

External Actors and Global Coordination

As demonstrated in previous sections, external actors acting without coordination have the potential to disrupt tenuous political economies of governance and violence. Despite the challenges and expanding insecurity, the appetite of external actors for intervention in the region remains complicated in its articulations and in situ response dynamics. In early March 2020, the US general in charge of American troops in the region warned that terrorist organisations are “on the march”. At the same time, US domestic policymakers are discussing whether to reduce their troop presence in the Sahel, which is currently 1,000 boots on the ground providing intelligence support to French missions as well as training regional security actors. The potential departure of the US forces has alarmed France, which has pushed forward with its kinetic counterterrorism activities

despite political consternation within regional partners.

Contributing to the uncertainty surrounding America's commitment to the region, the US State Department has appointed a special representative to the region, charged with "combating the growing threat of violent extremism by boosting fragile governments in the region, their security forces and their legitimacy and control over their territory".⁶⁶ The focus on security forces, in particular, runs a high risk of further consolidating elite power bases through injections of cash rather than supporting the extension of governing authority and legitimacy in vulnerable areas – at the cost of effective security-sector governance and stabilisation missions. A recent World Bank report assessed whether increases in service provision – including security provision – resulted in an increased perception of state legitimacy, and found that it did not.⁶⁷ In the case of the Sahel, the goals of bilateral and multilateral external-actor coordination, on the face of it, seem prescriptive, but they run the risk of further inflaming local dynamics by perpetuating a top-down approach to addressing the hyper-localised drivers of conflict and insecurity.

Further Hybridisation

One of the main challenges facing Sahelian states will be reconstituting political constituencies and collective (or elite) bargaining mechanisms that have been polarised by the widespread identity-based conflict and intercommunal violence. The tactics Niger used to integrate different ethnic groups into government and the security forces might not work. Traditional chiefs might not want to be associated with the state, breaking the continuity of legitimacy between customary and formal governance. Some of this has already been witnessed, especially in Mali, where customary authorities are caught between jihadists, ethnic militias and state security actors. The spate of kidnappings and killings targeting traditional authorities reflect how aware violent actors are of the positive potential these leaders have as bridges between the community and the state, and the roles they often play on the frontlines as bearers of the most in-depth knowledge of armed-group movements.⁶⁸

In the interest of self-protection, as insecurity progresses, and in the absence of a reliable state partner, we may see an increase in hybridisation and decoupling from the central state. This may mean an expansion of illicit activities undertaken

for survival. As stated in an International Crisis Group report, “policies seeking to tackle trafficking as a driver of insurgency or terrorism should consider how informal/illicit economies, if managed well, may alternatively provide much-needed forms of economic and political stability”.⁶⁹ In the short term, pockets of stability may indeed appear, but in the long term the presence of non-statutory armed groups and authorities will make reconciliation and reformation of national identity more difficult.

Recommendations for a New Approach

Given the low returns on military-based approaches to address and mitigate the spread of terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel, a different method might prove more fruitful. The following section seeks to provide recommendations to both state and international partners based on this author’s conceptual Prevent, Disrupt, Deny framework, with the goal of achieving both short- and long-term strategic priorities in addressing the threat of terrorism across the region. Where complementary efforts exist, they should be supported. Where capacity slows the rate of implementation, there should be support through funding and technical assistance. Where state actors are complicit, mechanisms to improve legitimacy and social accountability should be viewed as a top priority for governments and partners in institutional strengthening.

Prevent

Violence – political, communal and extremist – is endemic in the region. One way to prevent the proliferation of terrorist organisations in the Sahel is to increase local-level resilience and state-level institutional capacity. Communities in rural and border areas are of particular concern. These areas are difficult to police, making them logical routes for illicit trafficking, and havens for the opportunists and corrupt officials who benefit from criminal activity. Although the state is often unable to effectively reach these areas, the communities themselves have mechanisms that development partners can strengthen to reduce their vulnerability. Customary justice and security providers, if given the proper training and social accountability mechanisms,⁷⁰ can provide both intelligence on groups using the areas for nefarious purposes as well as a rule-of-law-informed process for dealing with the low-level criminality that often serves as a precursor to more able groups.

Rather than relying solely on security provision and kinetic counterterrorism assistance, foreign governments should revive development funding, particularly for democracy, rights and governance programming. Improving community resilience to environmental challenges and food insecurity, as well as other efforts to reduce poverty, will provide a long-term runway to stability for the region.

Disrupt

Jihadi and insurgent groups in the Sahel survive largely off local-level criminality (extortion and community predation), transnational criminal networks (smuggling people, cigarettes, etc.) and the less material benefits of being public participants in global jihad. Conducting catastrophic attacks against western, state and civilian targets is a means of demonstrating how lethal they are and their commitment to causes promoted by international terrorist groups – a potent tool for recruitment and fundraising from empathetic audiences. Disrupting the capability of insurgents to amass the resources and personnel to conduct illicit business and terrorist attacks is critical for near- and long-term counterterrorism goals.

It is difficult for foreigners to counter local criminality which, to some extent, can be addressed through some of the prevention mechanisms discussed above. Interrupting and curtailing the flow of illicit financing is crucial in the short term. Impeding a group's ability to make money, or benefit from the diversion of arms, can reduce the lustre of participating in the organisation for those more likely to be involved due to financial incentives as opposed to true believers. A smaller threat is more easily contained.

Unfortunately, groups that feel pressure from counterterrorism or other security operations are more likely to attempt increasingly devastating attacks to regain prestige and reputation. This is where the final 'D' in the framework comes in.

Deny

Denying territory can be a near impossible task in countries like Niger or Mali. Weak or predatory centralised governments have little capacity to deploy troops into rural border communities, and when they do, they are often party to abuses and violence that stoke additional grievances and drive communities into the

arms of terrorist groups. Reducing access to recruits and resources can move groups to escalation and, potentially, miscalculation through overexposure. The conflict with Boko Haram is a clear example of the complexity of combating an insurgency that relies on captive or empathetic communities. As discussed above, empowering local interlocutors to conduct policing and limited military activities can provide desperately needed formalised coverage in under-governed and low-access areas. These actors can also provide crucial on-the-ground insights and intelligence that military forces can leverage.

Once communities are stabilised and the capacity of groups to recruit members and conduct illegal business is reduced, it is then up to state security actors and the partners assisting them to deny these groups access to territory and communities. At this point, aggressive military action can be restricted to tactical deployment against insurgent leadership and core personnel.

In the final stages of the framework, once local communities are secured through legitimate interactions and the insurgents reduced to a limited set of actions, tried-and-tested kinetic counterterrorism tools can be used to their greatest effect. This is where western weapons platforms and personnel are most effective – targeted strikes, verified through the assistance of local knowledge brokers, with the goal of neutralising the leadership and enemy disruption.

Conclusion

There is a dire need to reframe our approach, from looking at jihadists and militant armed actors as drivers of insecurity, to forming a systemic and symptomatic response which accepts that fragility is not something that merely ‘happens’ to countries but is inherent in states that have failed to consolidate the monopoly of violence and consensus-based social contract in post-colonial construction. The key is to understand how to manage the inherent vulnerabilities of hybrid orders, how to identify fulcrum points in the trajectories of hybridity, and how to develop pluralistic and inclusive capacity, while keeping the house of cards from collapsing under the weight of illegitimacy. The complex dynamics on the ground that facilitate transnational criminal networks and state predation might also contain localised areas of resistance and resilience that make it equally difficult for jihadis to achieve long-term strategic goals as it is for weak and fragile

states to deter them.

A holistic (top down and bottom up) approach to counterterrorism and broader insecurity might provide the Sahelian states and their security partners with a means of sustainably managing and mitigating the threat from both existing theatres and future outbreaks. Focusing on grievance reduction; increasing human security; strengthening multilateral institutions; and using military tools for strategic, targeted missions are the ingredients for achieving short- and long-term objectives. As long-term efforts provide increased returns on security and stability at both the state and regional levels, the perception and reality of the threat will hopefully decrease.

With decades of lessons available on what works and does not work in African counterterrorism engagements, as well as those prosecuted in other locales impacted by terrorism, it is imperative that all stakeholders move forward with a clear-eyed understanding of what mechanisms are most important to fund, and which efforts most important to prioritise. Looking ahead to the next stages of the conflict, the question remains as to who has the will (within the state and the general populace), who has the capacity, and who has neither.⁷¹

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Endnotes

- 1 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020.
- 2 Kishi, 2020; Dewast, 2020.
- 3 In discussing Burkina Faso with Dr Molly Ariotti, she noted in particular the rapidity with which the Burkinabe community has collapsed in on itself, having previously demonstrated an unusual level of consolidation in terms of national Burkinabe identity.
- 4 Kishi, 2020.
- 5 The G5 Sahel was created by the region's leaders as a way of taking their security into their own hands and encouraging regional development by coordinating their efforts (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2019).
- 6 This data reflects numbers reported at the time of writing this chapter. In the intervening period, conditions on the ground across the Sahel have further deteriorated. Violence in the region left just under 1 million people displaced at the end of 2019, with over 500,000 fleeing their homes in Burkina Faso alone (BBC News Africa, 2020a).
- 7 Finnegan & McLaughlin, 2020.
- 8 As discussed in a June 2018 report by International Crisis Group, local communities in the border area, armed and mobilised as far back as the 1990s, have now become increasingly polarised and warlike amid recent military operations because they are often forced to choose between siding with the state or with jihadists (Armstrong, 2019).
- 9 Leroux-Martin & O'Connor, 2017.
- 10 The term 'hybrid governance' has emerged to refer to these new organisational arrangements, incorporating local institutions and popular organisations, which fill gaps in state capacity (Meagher et al, 2014). I contend that there is nothing new about the organisational arrangements for Sahelian governance.
- 11 "As the jihadist groups have implanted themselves deeper into communal conflicts, they have developed systems of coercion and control over populations that Sahelian governments struggle to cope with by military means." (Armstrong, 2019)
- 12 Grant, 2018.
- 13 Africa Faith & Justice Network, 2018.
- 14 Lewis, 2012.
- 15 Cooke, 2016.
- 16 Thurston, 2018.
- 17 Boukhars, 2018.
- 18 Zielcke, 2018.
- 19 Madowo, 2018.
- 20 Foreign Assistance, 2020.
- 21 Østby et al, 2009.
- 22 Menastream, 2018.
- 23 ACLED, 2020a.
- 24 Freeman, 2018.
- 25 Mahmood & Ani, 2018.
- 26 START, 2020.
- 27 Agbiboa, 2019.
- 28 Hauer, 2018.
- 29 Friend, 2018.
- 30 Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015.
- 31 Fessy, 2013.
- 32 Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015.
- 33 McAllister, 2018.
- 34 Cocks, 2018.
- 35 Meagher et al, 2014.
- 36 Idrissa et al, 2019.
- 37 Since independence, in Mali and to a lesser extent in Niger, state power, which has its political and social bases in the southern parts of both these countries, is struggling to establish its legitimacy in the north (Pellerin & Guichaoua, 2018).
- 38 The Nigerien integration system goes beyond this. Built around the existing government – the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) – it operates by controlling dissenting voices, and by distributing government revenue which it monitors closely. (Pellerin & Guichaoua, 2018)
- 39 Pellerin & Guichaoua, 2018.
- 40 Meagher et al, 2014.
- 41 Grant, 2018.
- 42 These trafficking economies are inherently volatile and require careful management – new shocks can prove extremely disruptive. Furthermore, Niger's approach to trafficking is not without its own set of risks. (Armstrong, 2020)
- 43 "Although ethnic groups have competed for decades over rights and resources in the Mali-Niger border zone, fighting there has risen to unprecedented intensity over the past several years, with armed factions keen to control valuable cross-border trafficking routes." (Armstrong, 2019)

- 44 Armstrong, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020.
- 45 Pellerin & Guichaoua, 2018.
- 46 Guichaoua, Y. as quoted in Pellerin & Guichaoua (2018).
- 47 Kleinfeld, 2018.
- 48 Agbiboa (2019) notes that “a definition of CBAGs has proven difficult due to their many types and characteristics, and the fact that they are often located in zones of ambiguity between the presence and absence of law and order”.
- 49 “Niger and the commanders of Operation Barkhane should not think that by returning to the use of proxy militias to go against the Islamic State and its local allies, they can remotely defeat them. Doing this would more likely aggravate communal conflicts even further and give the Islamic State more opportunities to expand its foothold in North Tillabery.” (Armstrong, 2019)
- 50 “Term used in international relations, supposedly arising from the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 which ended the Thirty Years War. It is generally held to mean a system of states or international society comprising sovereign state entities possessing the monopoly of force within their mutually recognized territories.” (Oxford Reference, 2019)
- 51 Since Mali’s government relies on majority support to stay in office, political leaders must think strategically about building alliances that can keep them in power (Ariotti, 2019).
- 52 “In May 2017, faced with the Islamic State threat emanating from Mali, authorities in the Nigerien capital Niamey initiated cooperation with Malian Tuareg and Daosahak armed groups, the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA) and Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), both of which have ties to the Malian government and drew upon France’s military venture in the Sahel, known as Operation Barkhane, for support.” (Armstrong, 2019)
- 53 “The Nigerien state attempted to extend patronage to the Tuareg and Peul by absorbing young men into the armed forces, but this effort has served to further provoke the Islamic State.” (Armstrong, 2019)
- 54 Given that the state is the highest form of organisation an armed group can achieve, the conditions of relationships between political security and communal polarities exhibit similar currencies of authority, legitimacy and exercises of violence (RESOLVE Secretariat, 2020).
- 55 “Their sweeps in North Tillabery (the region surrounding Inates) seemed to halt the jihadist threat in the short term but also caused tit-for-tat ethnic massacres and drove even more Peul and other fighters to ally with the Islamic State” (Armstrong, 2019).
- 56 Meagher et al, 2014.
- 57 Many donors are likely to reject a non-state security-sector-reform strategy because it precludes the venerated state monopoly of legitimate force; this ideal, however, has proven highly elusive in many state-building programmes (Lawrence, 2017).
- 58 Meagher et al, 2014.
- 59 While France has a legal mandate from the five Sahel countries justifying its presence in the region, it now wants these countries’ populations to recognise its legitimacy as well (Okello, 2020).
- 60 Meagher et al, 2014.
- 61 Ndiaga, 2020.
- 62 Picking sides and intervening via local proxies often makes matters worse, not better, in the countries of the Sahel (Lebovich, 2020).
- 63 The significant involvement of international actors in hybrid governance processes further complicates assumptions that messy hybrid arrangements can lead to positive processes of state formation (Meagher et al, 2014).
- 64 Cote d’Ivoire, with its history of recent civil conflict, large caches of weapons, and countrywide networks of decommissioned combatants with links to elites in political and security institutions, is a strong candidate to receive support under the new framework.
- 65 The 2020 Global Fragility Act dedicates \$1,15 billion over the next five years for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, to be implemented by the US Department of State, US Department of Defense, and US Agency for International Development (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2020).

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- 66 Finnegan & McLaughlin, 2020.
- 67 McCullough & Papoulidis, 2020.
- 68 SABC News, 2019.
- 69 Armstrong, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020.
- 70 The US Institute of Peace has engaged in justice security dialogue programming for over a decade, focused on countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the Sahel and West Africa. The goal of justice security dialogue programming is to assist communities in developing locally informed accountability mechanisms for security actors. Learn more from United States Institute of Peace (n.d.).
- 71 Devermont, 2019.