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Watering the Grassroots: The Importance of a Comprehensive Approach to Conflict in the Sahel

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**Watering the Grassroots:
The Importance of a Comprehensive Approach
to Conflict in the Sahel**

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Abstract

The withdrawal of French troops from Mali in August 2021 has revealed massive structural problems with crisis intervention and conflict mitigation in Africa. The purpose of this research is to reveal how foreign intervention in the Sahel has failed to stabilize the region in the face of mounting political, socioeconomic, and environmental crises. This paper examines Mali and France, two countries that are centered in crisis in the Sahel, and how the politics of intervention have resulted in the current situation. While the crisis in the Sahel does not yet have a clear result, this project seeks to contextualize current conflict in past and present manifestations of violence to better assess the ways in which foreign intervention is or is not successful.

Introduction

In the post-9/11 era, counterterrorism is at the forefront of foreign policy. As the threat of extremism grows, counterterrorism policies are constantly updated and revised as the international community grapples with how to solve this global issue best. However, despite these robust policies, violent extremism remains an issue that countries must contend with. More specifically, as the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) suffers prolonged crises, jihadist and extremist groups have infiltrated vulnerable populations in struggling states. As a result, many Western states, like the US, Britain, and France, are heavily involved in threatened and at-risk states. For this project, however, French counterterrorism efforts will be evaluated against the Malian crisis. Since the height of terrorist attacks in France between 2015 and 2017, France has become entrenched in counterterrorism initiatives in the Sahel, particularly in Mali. However, despite France's long-term involvement in Sahelian affairs, Operation Barkhane was pulled out of Mali in 2021. The withdrawal of French forces from Mali and surrounding countries has marked a new era in the future of the Sahel. With political, socioeconomic, and environmental issues still tormenting the Sahel, uncertainty, and concern for the stability of the region looms as foreign intervention mission are reevaluated.

To begin, brief country profiles on Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya are presented to situate the Malian crisis within a regional context. The borders of the Sahel are infamously porous, which has allowed conflict and instability in neighboring regions and country to spill over. The Sahel and North Africa are both fragile and unstable regions due to exploitation from the Global North. North African countries are rich in oil and gas but prone to democratic backsliding that bars these countries from achieving lasting economic success. Moreover, the Sahel is a major exporter of cotton and precious metals but does not have the economic or political infrastructure to support development efforts.

The Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa

Country Profile—Mali

Mali is surrounded by multiple influential countries on the sub-Saharan political stage. Mali itself is politically influential due to its location in West Africa. It borders Algeria in the North and six other Sahelian countries. Mali is home to nearly 16.3 million people who reside primarily in the Southern region of the country. The dominance of the South has time and time again created political and economic problems for Mali. Bamako, Mali's capital city, remains at the center of political and socioeconomic strife. Mali's post-independence history is wrought with troubling political transitions and bouts of failing democratic practices. Furthermore, Mali is amongst the lowest income countries in the world, with 40 percent of its population in extreme poverty. Like other Sahelian countries, Mali severely lacks development that supports better living conditions for civilian populations.

Country Profile—Burkina Faso

Like Mali, Burkina Faso is a landlocked country that borders many other influential countries like the Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire) and Ghana. Burkina Faso's capital city Ouagadougou has recently made international headlines due to a military coup that placed Captain Ibrahim Traore in the presidency in October. Burkina Faso is prone to the same environmental, political, and socioeconomic problems that plague the rest of the Sahel. In fact, Burkina Faso experiences strikingly similar economic and political issues that Mali does. As a result of the porous borders between Sahelian countries, the conflict in Mali has overflowed into

Burkina Faso. Heightened militancy, violent extremism and insurgencies, and other forms of conflict has haunted Burkina Faso since September with the military coup.

The Sahel and North Africa

Country Profile—Algeria

Algeria, a former colony of France, is the gateway between Africa and Europe. Thousands of sub-Saharan African migrants traverse through Algeria to reach Europe each year. As an upper-middle income country, Algeria enjoys a more stable political and socioeconomic environment than neighboring sub-Saharan Africa. However, Algeria is not a stranger to political turmoil. In the war for independence against France in the 1950s and 60s, Algeria was privy to brutal internal and external conflict that rocked the new nation. As a neighbor to Libya and Tunisia, Algeria has experienced instances of violent extremism and Islamist insurgency that runs rampant throughout North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

Country Profile—Libya

Libya is currently engaged in political stalemate that has resulted in mass human rights abuses. Thousands of people remain displaced after the end of the 2019 Tripoli War. Additionally, armed groups terrorize civilian populations with arbitrary detention and extortion regularly. Libya's political chaos has deeply impacted the political landscape of Mali. Due to its location, insecure borders, and political instability, Mali is prime territory for exploitation from regional leaders. As a result, violent extremist and armed Islamist groups from Libya infiltrated Mali during the 2011 Libyan War. The introduction of armed groups to Mali spurred the onset of the 2012 Tuareg Rebellion and complicated the response of the Malian army due to arms dealing linked to Libyan extremist groups. While Libya does not border Mali, its political instability has influenced conflict in the Mali and throughout the Sahel.

Methodology

As a student bearing witness to international wars, stabilizing missions, and countless humanitarian crises, the War on Terror and its implications has settled itself in both my studies and my world view. In my studies as an International Studies major and French minor, I've examined state formation in the Francophone world, particularly on the African continent. Originally, I had planned to write about how state development markers may contribute to a country's vulnerability to instances of violent extremism. However, when news of French withdrawal of Operation Barkhane from Mali hit international news media outlets in August 2021, I was called to write about the Malian crisis. As I sat in classes that discussed humanitarian intervention in unstable, fragile, and failed states all over the world, I became fascinated by the dynamic between intervention and ongoing crises in the Sahel. Therefore, this thesis project serves as an analysis of the Malian crisis that will hopefully reveal the discrepancies in intervention in the Sahel.

To do so, I have collected scholarly research that uses varying perspectives and methodologies to conceptualize the crisis in the Sahel. I have pulled knowledge from political, economic, anthropologic, and ecologic backgrounds to provide a well-rounded discussion of intervention failures in Mali. To begin, the history of modern Malian affairs will be offered to ground this research in the historical contexts and implications of state development in Africa. Then, a brief discussion of the current crisis in the Sahel is presented to ground this project in current West African affairs. Next, I offer Malian and French cases studies that specify each countries contribution to the Malian crisis. Finally, I analyze the implications and consequences of state fragility and intervention failures in the Sahel. Through this discussion I will draw attention to the way in which African state development is hindered by international intervention efforts that fail to affirm African political, economic, and environmental realities.

Background

Historical Overview-1: The Keita Administration

To understand how the conflict in Mali has created the crisis in the Sahel, understanding how the colonial remnants of governance, economic strategies, and state development impacted the formation of a new, postcolonial state is crucial. The political economy of the colonial state and immediately after independence set the stage for modern manifestations of conflict in Mali, which has since spread into neighboring countries like Burkina Faso, Chad, and the Ivory Coast.

Shortcomings of a Newly Independent State

In September 1960, Mali gained independence from France after existing as an independent territory after World War II. While France may have left Mali physically, the political and economic institutions established during the colonial period remained. The establishment of the Office of Niger during the colonial era, and the subsequent dependence on the former colonial power, created a conundrum for Malian government officials as they worked to reorganize the state. The odds were against the early leaders of the newly independent republic. Mali, “underwent much less transformation during the colonial period than did the coastal areas,” like Senegal and Ivory Coast because development focused on expanding French power through trade¹. While there was some agricultural development in Mali during the post-World War II era, much development occurred on the coast, leaving development in Mali to wane. The lack of development in Mali is partly due to its landlocked nature. Due to much of the country being inaccessible to the coast and its vital trading ports, Mali’s agricultural landscape depends on nomadic and pastoral means of production. However, under colonial rule, Mali’s agricultural sector was altered to fit within Western production systems. The Office of Niger played a crucial role in the creation of irrigation systems that centered political and economic institutions in the south, and therefore, solidifying southern majorities in Malian political affairs. Because the development of better economic practices was most relevant to the Office of Niger, the Malian government found itself dependent on the aid of former colonial agencies. The seat of power in the postcolonial age, then, still rested in the hands of French officials. Therefore, Malian efforts to turn back toward a decentralized form of governance were thwarted by dependence born out of decades of colonial domination and structural changes to political-economic institutions.

Political Thought and Theory of a New Republic

In the years following independence, Malian leaders worked to build a functioning republic that would affirm Malian traditions and society. Mali’s first president, Modibo Keita, was one of the leading voices advocating for a united postcolonial reality. Built upon traditional Malian values and lessons learned in the colonial age, Mali’s first socialist republic established under President Keita reveals that as people cross borders, political thought and theory develop cross-nationally, giving rise to a unique kind of socialistic state.

Modibo Keita was educated in Mali’s capital Bamako, and Senegal's Dakar. His formation as an adolescent and as a budding political philosopher was influenced by the close relationship between Mali and Senegal in the pre-independence and postcolonial eras. His political thoughts, then, were also deeply influenced by his Malian and Senegalese educations.

¹ Zolberg, Aristide R. “The Political Revival of Mali,” *The Royal Institute of International Affairs, The World Today, 1965*. pg. 153.

Just after independence in 1960, Mali and Senegal were united under the Union soudanaise—RD.A as one territory. Therefore, joined by political affiliations and shared histories, Mali's political formation was also influenced by its relationship with the Union soudanaise—RD.A, which allowed Keita's socialism to inherit a specific type of nationalism that celebrates African identity. During the formation of the Malian independent state, Keita was explicit in his determination to foster African unity. Keita found that the values of the Union soudanaise shared "the sense of dignity and especially of brotherhood which has always been at the root of the policies of the Union soudanaise, which remain the very base of the Mali character" (Snyder 90). Establishing the policies of the Union soudanaise as both Malian and of a shared African identity cultivates a political, social, and economic unity that is founded upon similar understandings of postcolonial realities.

In a discussion of foreign policy plans for the newly formed Republic of Mali, Keita explained that

"certain common viewpoints on international policy and economic policies are necessary, together with an understanding of the contradictions contained in economic planning, and the necessity for each State to consider its economy within the framework of one large African economy, if it is to constitute an entity with the other States," (Keita 436).

In extending wishes to ally African states together, Keita expresses his socialism in action. He finds that in the era of independence, uniting newly independent African states in politics and economics is crucial to the prosperity of the new republics. In doing so, Keita's socialism gains a unique edge. Instead of only uniting his nation's people, he seeks to unite all Africans together in pursuit of a more peaceful transition into the postcolonial era. However, to unite African people together, African states must shed vestiges of their colonial history and reimagine their futures without the dependence sowed by colonial powers.

Similar to other African states, Mali's history of French colonialism informed the conception of the Malian republic and has therefore primed the republic to dismantle colonial remnants through the cultivation of African unity. In the same discussion of the creation of Mali's foreign policy, Preside Keita states that

"If we want Africa to be independent tomorrow and our peoples to look to the future with confidence, we who today have the responsibility for her destiny must have the will to renounce everything that might tomorrow compromise the success of our policies, the freedom of our people, and—who knows? —the freedom of the African peoples," (Snyder 90).

Decolonization and independence are processes Keita hoped to undergo with other recently independent African states. He believed that without working collectively to weed out threats to their independent states, then Africa may never be free.

By subscribing to the politics and economic institutions left by previous colonial powers, African states remain under foreign influence instead of establishing a uniquely African state of being. To achieve this mission, Keita was convinced that "the States of Africa will never be independent, in the full sense of the world, if they remain small States, more or less opposed on to another, each having its policy, its economy, each taking no account of the policy of the others," (Keita 435). According to Keita, true independence was to be achieved through African

unity. By creating a sense of unity amongst African states, dismantling colonial institutions becomes easier. In addition, working as a collective aligned newly independent African states together, arming them with the tools necessary to combat other forms of domination and exploitation. However, such an alignment is only made possible by leaving behind colonial histories and stepping into a postcolonial reality.

North vs. South: Tuareg Dissatisfaction

Modern Malian leaders have since been forced to grapple with introducing political-economic policies that stabilize and pacify local populations that have been forcibly moved, exploited, and ignored by colonial institutions. After Modibo Keita, Mali's first independent leader, established his socialist regime with the support of the USSR, he "created a sense of nationalism, consolidating the Mali State and its territory,"². However, a sense of nationalism and a taste of stability was not enough to hide the issues left behind by French colonialism. The most pressing issue faced by the newly independent Malian state was quelling separatism from the Tuareg ethnic minority in the North and a growing authoritarian trend in Lieutenant Mousa Traore's 1968 regime. The Tuareg are an ethnic Berber group spread across the Sahel and parts of North Africa. Unlike other ethnic groups in the Sahel, the Tuareg share more genetic markers with Arab populations in the North and with East African populations found in Sudan, for example. Historically, the Tuareg have been a nomadic, pastoral people spread across the Sahel and North Africa. Tuareg populations are spread throughout Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, and Algeria but move between the porous borders of North Africa and the Sahel. In total, the Tuareg number over 1 million throughout the Sahel. Genetic research suggests that the nomadic and pastoral lifestyles of the Tuareg encouraged them to migrate into West Africa where many reside currently. The Tuareg in the Sahel have historically been a critical element of trade. Many Tuareg groups mastered trade routes, established regular caravans, and solidified their place as expert merchants who connected sub-Saharan with North Africa and the rest of the world. To a certain extent, Northern Mali never lost its trade and commerce experts after independence; instead, conflict and violence changed traded goods to reflect the turmoil unfolding in the country³.

Furthermore, genetic researchers have speculated that desertification "could have entrapped Tuareg populations coming from North Africa to the Sahel belt together with other pastoralists such as the Chadic speaking peoples coming from East Africa and Fulani nomads coming from West Africa,"⁴. Modern Tuareg groups have maintained their cultural differences and have adapted to the changing political, socioeconomic, and environmental changes to their homes. However, throughout Malian history, but particularly in the post-independence period, the Tuareg have essentially become enemies of the state as conflict between Northern and Southern populations have been blamed on this minority and their ties to North Africa.

Despite Tuareg groups being scattered across the Sahel, "Tuareg political unity took shape as a constellation of a number of similarly structured and organized tribal federations

² Ronconi, Giordano Bruno Antoniazzi. "The Situation in Mali," *UFRGS Model United Nations Journal*, 2013. pp.73.

³ Ba, Boubacar, and Morten Boas. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, Norway, 2017, pp. 5, *Mali: A Political Economy Analysis*.

⁴ Pereira, Luísa et al. "Linking the sub-Saharan and West Eurasian gene pools: maternal and paternal heritage of the Tuareg nomads from the African Sahel." *European journal of human genetics : EJHG* vol. 18,8 (2010): 921. doi:10.1038/ejhg.2010.2.

ruling particular Tuareg regions and, at least until the French colonial conquest, neighboring populations,”⁵. Tuareg society, before the advent of colonial rule, flowed across the Sahel. Fluid movement through the Sahara was critical to survival and cultural expression. The imposition of colonial rule, however, altered Tuareg society in that the creation of fixed borders restricted the freedom of movement Tuareg populations previously enjoyed. The restriction of Tuareg movement through Sahelian territories resulted in troubled relationships between both colonial powers and post-independence leaders who upheld the same fixed borders and restrictions. Even after independence, the Tuareg way of living nomadically and freely was fundamentally changed as urban economic development took precedence over traditional agricultural means of production and development.

Historical Overview-2: 1990s-2012: Building Democracy Amidst Uncertainty

Despite Keita’s aspirations, Mali faced chronic problems from within. Internal politics encouraged further instability in the country. Understanding Malian politics from a historical framework is critical to pinpoint causes of the crisis currently unfolding.

Incongruent Political Realities

Keita’s political thoughts of a united Africa boasted grand ideas, but the execution of his ideas produced a political reality that did not align with his vision for Mali’s future. By the end of his regime in 1967, Keita had established the new Malian republic as a repressive state by creating close ties with communist states. At the same time, the new Republic faced deepening economic and financial problems. Therefore, after attempts to appease his party and the civilian population, Keita was ousted in a coup and succeeded by Moussa Traore in late 1968. Despite his grandiose thoughts and hopes, Mali’s first president ultimately led the country into a string of repressive authoritarian regimes.

As a result, recurring military coups and mediocre leadership have plagued Mali with corruption, illegitimacy, undemocratic practices, and human rights abuses that have proved arduous to overcome. As a postcolonial state grappling with reconstruction after the end of French colonial rule, “Malian democracy was rooted in the country’s cultural heritage and heavily influenced by a French colonial legacy that included, perhaps most importantly, a strong presidency,”⁶. But, while Malian democracy was rooted in a long history of cultural and colonial legacies, creating a functioning democracy that served all the needs of a freshly liberated state revealed chasms that would later lead to a weakened state. After the removal of Modibo Keita from office, Moussa Traore assumed control over Mali. Under Traore, Mali grew increasingly authoritarian and witnessed a worsening economic crisis. A critical aspect of the Malian government that continued after Keita was a culture of dialogue between regional and local authorities. But, under Traore, “a lack of resources and commitment on the part of the government meant that these dialogues, which were also used to address education and electoral reforms failed to bring a lasting resolution to several important issues, including recurring

⁵ Lecocq, Baz, and Georg Klute. “Tuareg Separatism in Mali.” *International Journal*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2013, pp. 425. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24709398>.

⁶ Wing, S. D. “Mali: Politics of a Crisis.” *African Affairs*, vol. 112, no. 448, 2013, pp. 477., <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adt037>. Wing also notes here that Malian democracy had the foundation of a strong democracy, such as a civilian government with regular elections that was decentralized. However, due to a variety of reasons, Malian democracy was, and is, wrought with struggle.

rebellions, a weak educational system, and electoral irregularities.”⁷. Traore’s failure to address systemic issues that threatened the stability of Mali’s democracy in favor of engaging in corrupt acts pushed Mali toward rebellion by the end of his regime in 1991. The foundation of Malian democracy was crumbling as early leaders of the Malian state engaged in harmful, destabilizing acts. Malian stability was quickly declining as “Mali was facing economic instability, resulted from Traore’s structural adjustments to the IMF norms,”⁸. Declines in economic prosperity, crop production, and political freedoms resulted in the first Tuareg Rebellion in the 1990s. In the years following the first Tuareg Rebellion, further instability spread throughout the country, which culminated in the 2012 Tuareg Rebellion that currently ensnares the country in violence and extremism. Changes made by French colonialism to the Malian political economy forever altered the future of the state and laid the foundations for widespread instability and insecurity throughout the region.

Economic Crisis Strikes

The Traore administration caused irreversible damage to political and economic institutions which caused injustice to spread throughout the country with few remedies, ultimately causing the beginning of the first Tuareg Rebellion. After the coup that ousted Keita, Traore inherited a growing economic crisis. By the end of the Traore regime, Mali was set to undergo economic reforms that would restructure the economy to fit into a more modern, postcolonial reality. However, prior to these structural reforms, “deficient control over fiscal policy, large fiscal imbalances and a rise in indebtedness plagued macroeconomic development in Mali prior to the start of the reform process,”⁹. Mali’s economic independence process was just as difficult as the political process. Both Keita and Traore found that breaking from patronage under France and reestablishing a Malian economy was crucial to finding a sense of stability. Despite their best efforts, Mali still underwent a period economic crisis. Attempting to decentralize economic mechanisms shocked the Malian economy and vital agricultural sectors. Insecurity in agricultural sectors aggravated building tensions between the North and South as nomadic and pastoral populations took the brunt of the crisis. Mali was, and still is, one of the poorest countries in the world. Economic development in Mali is often hindered by “severe ecological and climatic constraints (shortage of water and fertile land, irregular rainfall, recurrent droughts, desertification) that put severe limits on the structure and performance of the economy,”¹⁰. On average, some 40 percent of the Malian population lives below the national poverty line. Mali, categorized as a low-income country is prone to the same kinds of conflict seen from the start of independence through current day.

However, despite a struggling economy and an agitated public, Traore engaged in acts of corruption that plunged the state into further disrepair. As discussed previously, Malians were subjected to discrimination and disparities that undermined their economic prosperity during colonial rule. Similarly, amid an economic crisis and corrupt regime, Malian were, again, put at a disadvantage in their economic standing. Thus, throughout Traore’s regime, economic problems formed deeper cracks in the Malian government. Such problems were so overwhelming that “to introduce acceptable fiscal and economic reforms, [or] to convince foreign investors the country

⁷ Wing, S. D. “Mali: Politics of a Crisis,” pp. 478.

⁸ Ronconi, Giordano Bruno Antoniazzi. “The Situation in Mali,” *UFRGS Model United Nations Journal*, 2013.

⁹ Bourdet, Yves. “Economic Reforms and the Malian Economy.” *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, vol. 27, no. 1/2, 2002, pp. 38. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43658054>.

¹⁰ Bourdet, Yves. pp. 25.

is a good financial risk,” was a laborious task the current regime was unwilling to complete, and the Malian state was unable to endure¹¹. By the time the economic crisis was truly acknowledged, the fate of the Malian state was already set. Simultaneously, as the first two Malian leaders, Keita and Traore, attempted to establish a strong republic and a stable economy, discontent was brewing in the north amongst the Tuareg people.

Uncertainty, Instability, Insecurity

Drought and Northern Economic Tension

The Sahel is a semi-arid to arid region that is prone to drought, desertification, and other ecological happenings. Instances of drought impact Sahelian countries more deeply than others because they tend to reveal infrastructural and institutional failures to protect the vulnerable public from consequences of prolonged drought. While Mali’s history has been marked by drought and other ecological disasters prior to colonial rule and independence, the drought in 1984 was disastrous to the already struggling state. Between 1983 and 1985, Mali experienced an extreme drought that exposed the state to ongoing aid and intervention. At the height of the drought, water and food insecurity, deforestation, land degradation, and desertification wrought havoc on the state and attacked vulnerable populations. In a traditionally nomadic and pastoral cultural, drought altered the way in which many Malians lived. To escape the effects of prolonged drought, “many pastoralists have sought work in towns such as Mopti and Bamako, or have drifted into refugee camps,”¹². Drought in Mali restricted access to food and water, which resulted in growing water and food insecurities that eventually caught the attention of humanitarian aid organizations. At the same time, Mali had begun to reform its economic institutions. Ultimately, drought during this time exposed Mali to worsening economic hardships, shifts in cultural norms, and foreign intervention. Although the Sahel is prone to drought and other environmental crises, “some would further argue that insensitive colonial policies and inappropriate development schemes have increased the vulnerability of many rural people,” because methods of living with drought and famine were essentially erased along with traditional ways of living during colonial rule¹³.

Furthermore, due to an inability to address worsening drought and famine, international humanitarian aid organizations, like the Red Cross, were called into Mali to administer lifesaving food and water programs. However, like current humanitarian efforts, attempts to administer widespread aid was hindered by misunderstandings of traditional ways of living. In many food programs, “too little attention is paid to traditional food habits in emergency food-distribution programs,” often leading to further disruption of food habits already impacted by drought¹⁴. Food-distribution programs had to be tailored to fit into the nomadic and collectivist cultures that the most vulnerable populations lived by. Distribution programs, then, slowed while more and more Malian civilians were plunged into poverty and food insecurity as the drought continued.

¹¹ Turriffin, Jane. “Mali: People Topple Traoré.” *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 52, 1991, pp. 103. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4005962>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

¹² Binns, J. A. “After the Drought: Field Observations from Mali and Burkina Faso.” *Geography*, vol. 71, no. 3, 1986, pp. 250. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40571127>. Accessed 28 Dec. 2022.

¹³ Binns, J. A., pp. 252.

¹⁴ Jacks, Birgitta. “Living Conditions and Nutrition of Some Tamasheq Groups in Mali under the Influence of Drought.” *Ambio*, vol. 23, no. 7, 1994, pp. 444. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4314250>. Accessed 28 Dec. 2022.

Additionally, the introduction of humanitarian aid into the region strained existing political and economic tensions due to the more rural regions, primarily the North, being too large and inaccessible to receive adequate care.

Insecurity in Tuareg Populations

Longstanding tension between northern and southern populations in Mali combined with widespread economic and financial struggle has resulted in ongoing conflict that has spread from the North with the Tuareg people, resulting in a modern crisis rooted in a century of history. Since the inception of colonial rule, the Tuareg have strongly resisted colonial powers and later post-independence formations of governance¹⁵. In these manifestations of resistance, the idea of an independent Tuareg state is strong amongst Tuareg populations. However, “there is no formal irredentism, this is there have been no structural efforts to unite all Tuareg into one territorial state,” despite ideas of secession swirling for decades within Tuareg communities¹⁶. Fundamentally, Tuareg populations do not fit within the constraints and borders imposed by colonial powers and reinforced by new state leaders. Thus, despite a history of nomadic, pastoral living, “the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s led to a change in Tuareg economy and lifestyle away from pastoralism to agriculture and urban wage-earning in adjacent countries,” which has also exacerbated political and socio-economic issues that directly impact how the Tuareg are viewed by other ethnic populations in Mali¹⁷.

Furthermore, due to the structural changes to the economy, the current Tuareg Rebellion is deeply embedded in the history between the North and South; it is a direct result of years of discrimination and inequality that was perpetuated throughout colonial rule and enshrined in the creation of the republic. During the independence era, Malians were forced to build a modern state from the ground up with the tools left behind by their colonial oppressors. Therefore, “when these ruling elites decided to free themselves from the colonial rule, they had to find a way to assert political authority over the whole Malian territory and used strategies to do so that ranged from favoritism and patronage to economic marginalization, divide-and-rule strategies, and military control,”¹⁸. The Malian strategy to target, marginalize, and discriminate against the Tuareg was born out of colonial history that established a hierarchy that placed Tuareg populations above southern populations who then assumed power during the independence period. The reversal of roles upset existing tension between the North and South as Southern government leaders plotted to undermine the position of the Tuareg in socio-political hierarchies. However, by actively working against the prosperity of Tuareg populations, “establishing an independent centralized state, based on the political and economic subordination of the north, the postcolonial elites laid the foundations for northern rebellions and future state failure,”¹⁹. In pursuit of a united republic, Southern leaders sowed deeper divisions between the North and South by engaging in political strategies and tactics that actively disadvantage Northern Tuareg populations.

¹⁵ Lecocq, Baz, and Georg Klute. “Tuareg Separatism in Mali.” *International Journal*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2013, pp. 424. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24709398>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2022.

¹⁶ Lecocq and Klute, pg. 424.

¹⁷ Lecocq and Klute. pg. 425.

¹⁸ Chauzal, Gregory, and Thibault van Damme. “The Roots of Mali’s Conflict - Clingendael Institute.” *The Clingendael Conflict Research Unit (CRU)*, Mar. 2015, pg. 17. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/The_roots_of_Malis_conflict.pdf.

¹⁹ Chauzal and van Damme, pg. 17.

As a disadvantaged population, calls for Tuareg separatism and secession from the Malian state never quieted even as the Malian Republic worked to heal from colonial ruin. The political actions of the southern-led Malian government marginalized northern populations, pushing them closer toward rebellion. To dispel any ideas of revolt or rebellion amongst northern populations, “Malian authorities also tried to unilaterally assert their presence all over the national territory, and especially the north, by appointing loyal (i.e., southern) civil and military servants,” who kept a watchful eye on Tuareg political movements²⁰. In doing so, however, the Southern-based government installed itself as an oppressive authority. Tuareg communities and Northern populations did not enjoy the same participation in government and were widely ruled without representation. Thus, “this policy greatly contributed to a deep discontent among Arab and Tuareg populations, who interpreted it as a second colonization and never accepted this legal authority,” which led to even deeper, more consequential rifts between the north and south²¹. Therefore, while tension grew between the North and South in the aftermath of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s, the 2012 crisis was beginning to unfold as neighboring North Africa experienced structural changes throughout the Arab Spring.

Instability in North Africa: Impact of the Arab Spring

Thus, in the wake of the mass disruption of political regimes and processes during the Arab Spring, the 2012 Tuareg Rebellion was transformed into an increasingly more complex security situation as transnational terrorist organizations infiltrated vulnerable parts of Northern Mali and have since created serious implications for the security of the Sahel. While the political stability of Mali was in disarray, the Southern-led government only worsened the country’s growing instability by adopting an increasingly militaristic approach to containing the North. To successfully execute a military strategy that minimized the perceived threat of another Tuareg rebellion, proxy combatants hired by the Malian government “allowed Malian authorities to portray the northern region mainly as a security problem, and thereby legitimate their military approach to the situation,” and, again, marginalize northern populations in pursuit of a “united” republic. Subsequently, the militaristic and aggressive actions taken by Malian authorities only pushed northern and Tuareg populations to call even louder for secession from the republic and seek support from old nomadic connections with Arab populations spread throughout northern Mali and into parts of North Africa. While northern populations sought support from regional neighbors, “a constant lack of interest on the part of the Malian authorities, associated with postcolonial longing for a mythologized Tuareg state, have encouraged local populations to welcome and support some neighboring countries’ interference,”²². Therefore, while Malian authorities worked toward unity, the methods and approaches used ultimately pushed the North further from a united reality. In fact, by actively pushing northern populations out of the political landscape through lack of representation and military intimidation, northern Mali eventually became a hub regional leaders deemed as critical to securing the region in the face of ongoing instability in North Africa. Northern populations welcomed such attention from regional leaders, but this collaboration called into question the North’s willingness to truly launch a secessionist campaign. Indeed,

“poverty, bad governance, marginalization, the exclusion of large sections of the Malian populace from the political and economic processes and the failure to address

²⁰ Chauzal and van Damme, pg. 21.

²¹ Chauzal and van Damme, pg. 21

²² Chauzal and van Damme, pg. 22

fundamental grievances by the ruling and governing class in Mali created the breeding ground for Islamist extremists to gain a foothold and organize profitable criminal enterprises that became mutually beneficial to all stakeholders,”²³.

Additionally, due to the influence the region had over northern Mali, the instability in surrounding countries and regions impacted the political, military, and economic stability of the Malian state. In existing in such a volatile situation, the conflict brewing in Mali was soon to boil over. And, in 2012, Mali was plunged into the beginnings of a conflict and crisis that has lasted for a decade. In the face of the Arab Spring and the Libyan War, the North African and Sahel region experienced a fundamental change in political stability. The insecurity caused by democratic backsliding and massive protests allowed for violent extremism to proliferate within vulnerable populations, like amongst Tuareg communities in Northern Mali. In attempts to shape modern Malian politics and economy in a way that served all of Mali’s population, even those on the margins, Tuareg communities turned to jihadist groups. One of Mali’s prominent jihadist groups, the *Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l’Azawad* (MNLA), took advantage of Mali’s political instability to strategically align itself with Ansar al-Din, another Islamist jihadist group. Additionally, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is also active in the Sahel. In comparison to other jihadist and violent extremist groups in the Sahel, AQIM’s mission aims to uproot the Algerian government but has spread insurgency campaigns throughout the Sahel. While AQIM perpetrates acts of violence in Mali, they employ a slightly different undertaking that aligns itself well with Muslim-Tuareg groups in the North. AQIM uses “clear strategies of integration in the Sahel, based on a sophisticated reading of the local context,” that other, perhaps more peaceful efforts, do not bother to address²⁴. Rooted in local contexts, “AQIM operatives present themselves as honest and pious Muslims,” and therefore, ally themselves more closely to frustrated Northern populations that do not trust local (i.e., Southern) governance²⁵.

As insurgencies expand their influence over Mali, violence permeates alongside instability throughout the country because as the grievances of the North remain unaddressed “both the Tuaregs and the diverse Islamist groups [are] united in their fight against their common enemy, the government of Mali,”²⁶. The instability created by a combination of jihadism and weak government control over the evolving situation marked a shift in how the crisis would evolve. Multiple military attacks on critical cities encroached on Bamako’s ability to gain the upper hand. Most notably, the January 2013 “military attack on Konna changed the direction of the Malian crisis because events on the ground now dictated the nature and urgency of the response to it, shifting the focus from political dialogue to military action,”²⁷. Gone were Keita’s hopes of a Malian state capable of settling dispute and conflict through dialogue. Instead, the violent developments of the 2012 crisis pushed the Malian state toward a future of prolonged military violence and intervention.

²³ Francis, David J. “The Regional Impact of the Armed Conflict and French Intervention in Mali.” *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, Apr. 2013, pp. 5.
<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163177/f18726c3338e39049bd4d554d4a22c36.pdf>.

²⁴ Ba and Boas, pp. 17.

²⁵ Ba and Boas, pp. 17.

²⁶ Francis, pp. 5.

²⁷ Francis, pp. 3.

The Crisis in the Sahel

Poor Economic Development

In conjunction with weak political institutions and democratic practices, the Sahel faces vast economic issues that undermine attempts at peace, security, and stability, as thousands of Sahelian civilians are forced to contend with long-term economic insecurities. Nearly 80% of people living in the Sahel live on less than \$2 a day. Widespread poverty in the Sahel is exacerbated by struggling economies, dependence on international aid, and ongoing climate crises. According to recent Human Development Reports produced by the United Nations, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad rank in the bottom two percent of countries on the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures social and economic development through four factors: life expectancy at birth, gross national income per capita, mean years of schooling, and expected years of schooling. Ranking low on the HDI indicated political and socioeconomic problems that impact the quality of life for the average person in the Sahel. The region has the lowest GDP per capita on the continent. With low HDI rankings and even lower average GDPs, the introduction of any type of income is bound to upset already fragile economic systems. Economic fragility has, therefore, introduced illicit drug trading and trafficking into a region that is ill-prepared to combat the proliferation of illegal activity. For many Sahelian states “any and all sources of revenue, including international aid, become objects of intense competition, and the money resulting from the drug trade, which has emerged into public view only in the past decade, greatly undermines local governance and corrodes traditional solidarities,”²⁸. Without robust economic development, the Sahel will continue to fall victim to illicit trade and trafficking that target and brutalize vulnerable populations.

So, while aid money may seem like a logical solution to many of the economic problems in the Sahel, the fragility of economic systems and institutions in the region allow aid to be subverted and used to undermine attempts at peace and security. The Sahel, with its many issues, has become dependent on international aid, which “has become not only a major source of income for the region but also a vehicle for individuals and groups to elevate their political and social status relative to others. It has given rise to a new class of political entrepreneurs reminiscent of the intermediaries between local communities and colonial administrations, referred to as “aid brokers.””²⁹. Without proper development of economic infrastructure and with the injection of aid money, the Sahel is dependent on foreign aid to hold together crumbling economies and keep the region from plunging deeper into fragility. Thus, as political and economic instability introduce aggression and conflict to the region, environmental factors further complicate the crisis because they undermine both regional and international response capabilities.

Worsening Climate Crises

The Sahel, while prone to drought and desertification, continues to face mounting levels of water and food insecurity. Sahelian populations have historically managed water and food insecurity by relying on traditional methods of environmental management. However, prolonged violence and conflict have disrupted such methods, pushing millions of people toward acute

²⁸ Pezard, Stephanie and Michael Shurkin, “Toward a Secure and Stable Mali: Approaches to Engaging Local Actors.” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013. pp. 5.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR296.html.

²⁹ Pezard and Shurkin, pp. 5.

thirst and hunger. Moreover, water insecurity is a source of conflict because “the lack of water or concern over access or issues relating to quality and quantity of the water contribute to the conditions in which terrorist groups operate and thrive,”³⁰. Environmental insecurity in the Sahel breeds conflict as terrorist and insurgent organization prey on vulnerable populations desperate for safety and security.

Furthermore, environmental changes, like land degradation and desertification, have brought farmers and herders into conflict with each other as “the quest for greener pastures by herdsmen usually brings them in contact with the sedentary population who are involved in crop productions,”³¹. Territorial disputes over farmland and grazing pastures have added to the instability in the region due to shrinking areas of fertile land, access to water, and expanding market competition. The environmental crisis in the Sahel has produced complex conflicts that jeopardize both the future of individuals and of Sahelian states. Climate change shows no signs of stopping and neither does climate-driven conflict in the Sahel. Conflict born out climate crises and environmental changes has proven to be destabilizing to the region because it introduces levels of conflict and violence Sahelian states are not equipped to handle. The economic and environmental hardships endured in the Sahel have created a security situation that is increasingly complex.

³⁰ Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, March 2022. pp. 53. <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

³¹ Oyama, Shuichi. “Farmer-Herder Conflict, Land Rehabilitation, and Conflict Prevention in the Sahel Region of West Africa.” *African Study Monographs. Supplementary Issue.*, The Research Committee for African Area Studies, Kyoto University, 1 Oct. 2014, pp. 104. <http://hdl.handle.net/2433/189724>.

Modern Mali

The Malian Response: A Question of State Capacity

The Malian crisis is a complex, evolving security situation that involves three main components: Tuareg separatism, the breakdown of democracy, and the injection of violent extremism into an already unstable state. While the Tuareg separatist sentiment has always been present in Mali's political and social fabric, the 2012 rebellion represented a shift in Malian politics toward heightened and prolonged violence. The rebellion has aggravated "the tensions and violent relations between Tuareg rebels and Malian soldiers, on the one hand, and between Tuaregs and other ethnic groups in the south and east of the country, on the other who "blame" the Tuaregs for the current crisis in the country,"³². The militarization of the North in years of attempts to quell Tuareg separatism has led to violent clashes between Tuareg rebels and Malian soldiers that have destabilized the North. Although, the 2012 rebellion, and subsequent crisis, is not solely rooted in Tuareg separatism. Instead, it is closely related to consistent democratic failures. The crisis afflicting Mali has been centered on Tuareg separatism, but the fault lies within democratic failure, surrounding wars, and the introduction of transnational terrorism. In fact, instead of being fueled by Tuareg separatism, fixation on solving a nonexistent problem allowed for deeper, structural problems to destabilize the state.

Malian economic and political institutions have been undermined by decades of dictatorship, resulting in failures that have disrupted the state in its pursuit of greater security. The 2012 crisis was aggravated at its inception by the state's inability to respond to the political and economic grievances coming from the North. Therefore, when the crisis erupted, the state was ill-equipped to quell the ensuing chaos, which also left Malian soldiers underprepared to execute an adequate response. Upset by the government's lack of resources and attentiveness to the unfolding security situation in the North, "disgruntled soldiers turned a mutiny against President Touré for his ineffective response to the Tuareg rebellion into a military coup on March 22, 2012, that deposed the president and suspended constitutional rule, ahead of planned democratic presidential elections in April 2012,"³³. Weakened by the already unstable internal political and economic problems, Mali was influenced by surrounding conflict, particularly from Arab countries. The combination of the military coup and a growing Tuareg insurgency allowed for Mali's borders to be permeable to transnational actors looking to gain a stronghold in the region.

The violence produced in response to conflict in Mali has manufactured a wider crisis across the Sahel due to mass displacement, increased foreign intervention, and widespread economic instability. Civilian populations in the hinterland of Mali are most vulnerable to violent conflict. Civilians are often caught in the crossfire between extremist groups and state military troops. Furthermore, the lives of Malian civilians are threatened as the chaos exposes them to food insecurity, water insecurity, human and drug trafficking, and recruitment into extremist groups. The living conditions for many Malians are abysmal as the state continues to fail to provide adequate support and development for conflict-ridden regions. As a result, thousands of Malians have fled the country since the onset of the 2012 crisis. Mass movement of people is not new to Malian society; Mali's social history is grounded in nomadic behavior. However, the mass displacement of Malian people as a response to the crisis is unprecedented and has added to

³² Francis, pp.22.

³³ Francis, pp. 3.

the global refugee crisis. Malian refugees and displaced people typically seek security in neighboring countries—most notably, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast, and Mauritania. However, “Malian refugees are often unable to find the necessary protection in the Niger and Burkina Faso as insecurity is spreading across the Sahel region, targeting more and more civilians, while exploiting underlying social tensions,”³⁴. The Malian government’s failure to administer governance across the country has left Mali’s borders porous. The porosity of Mali’s borders has allowed for conflict to flow in from surrounding countries and out into the Sahel, allowing for further destabilization. Thus, as the crisis in Mali unfolds, the security of the whole Sahel region is threatened as violent extremism and political and economic pressure spread throughout the Sahel. The crisis in Mali, then, is not exclusively a Malian problem; it has advanced into a Sahelian crisis that may endanger peace and security throughout the region.

The International Response—MINUSMA

The Malian crisis, though, could have been contained if domestic and foreign intervention measures addressed the destabilization of the state more cohesively. As the crisis in Mali worsened, international powers—particularly France—descended on hotspots of conflict with military force. In 2013, France initiated Operation Serval, which was eventually folded into Operation Barkhane, to combat violent extremism in hopes of stabilizing the country. At approximately the same time, the United Nations (UN) launched the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) which worked to bring stabilization to the country, decrease the number of civilians killed in violent conflict, and facilitate the return of displaced people. However, “the lack of a comprehensive peace agreement and heightened activity by various armed groups has made Mali into one of the most complex settings for a UN peacekeeping operation,”³⁵. Mali became the focus of security missions and operations for many intervening actors. Over the course of the crisis, Mali has received increasingly larger foreign financial aid packages. The European Union (EU), which is heavily invested in the security of Mali, has given more than 446 million euros of humanitarian aid to Mali. While aid money is beneficial, intervention cannot be administered successfully without addressing the systemic issues that have created the crisis at hand. MINUSMA was able to reinstate elections in 2013 and facilitate the peace process that resulted in the Algiers Agreement.

Though, despite these successes, MINUSMA and other intervention efforts could not completely rid Mali of conflict. Intervention in Mali has consisted primarily of military efforts and an influx of money thrown into the country. While these efforts have had marginal successes, they do not completely address the systemic problems that destabilize the Malian state. Mali’s economy is broken; it is continually weakened by ecological crises, like droughts, and by inequalities that have impacted both the political and economic landscapes of the country. Because Mali’s economy has been consistently dysfunctional, stabilization efforts have fallen short because there is no foundation for intervention to take hold. Without a strong, stable foundation for Mali to rebuild from intervention in the form of aid money has created another issue for the Malian state entirely. Excessive foreign money injected into a failing economy has

³⁴ “Country Profile: Mali.” *Migrants & Refugees Section*, 24 May 2021, <https://migrants-refugees.va/country-profile/mali/>.

³⁵ Vermeij, Lotte. *MINUSMA: Challenges on the Ground*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2015. pp. 2. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07988>.

created a dependent relationship between Mali and intervening states. Therefore, while sending humanitarian aid funds to Mali may seem like a solution to many economic and developmental problems, aid has become “a permanent part of what seems to be needed to keep the state of Mali running”³⁶. The case of aid money to Mali is yet another example of how intervention efforts have failed to address the issues that continue to destabilize the state. While intervention in Mali has not outright failed, it has only created more problems for the already unstable state. The Malian state desperately needs intervention policies and initiatives that examine the root of the instability that plagues Mali and the rest of the Sahel.

The French Response

French Operations Serval and Barkhane were originally deployed as a joint task force in collaboration with the Malian government in 2013. Alongside UN peacekeeping troops and EU personnel, French troops were deployed in Mali and throughout the Sahel to stabilize the region. With Operation Serval, France had fully involved itself militarily after helping to push jihadists back from Bamako at the request of President Touré. French involvement in this key offensive move against jihadists marked a change in French intervention tactics in Mali. France and Mali would now work jointly to secure northern Mali alone. While France had initially been asked by President Touré to help secure Mali, French intervention had soon overstayed its welcome as the security situation continued to deteriorate. Furthermore, the failure to contain conflict and instability in Mali has impacted the rest of the Sahel, especially as insecurity spreads across the region.

The introduction of long-term militarism poses concerns for the rest of the Sahel because as conflict and terrorism spread throughout the region, the likelihood of sustained military intervention grows, despite the Malian case revealing that such intervention does not effectively solve state development problems. The international trend to turn toward militarism to combat violent extremism and secure fragile states has allowed for military interventions to become more permanent and, at times, preferable despite their narrow scope. The interventions used in Mali “are part of a wider global trend towards stabilization and counterterrorism, requiring fewer troops on the ground, but also making host governments “largely immune from pressure to improve their repressive treatment of citizens and political opponents” due to their status as reliable partners in the ‘war on terror’”³⁷. The ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric that surrounds state fragility as transnational terrorism spreads allows for intervening actors to make specific policy decisions that dictate the types of response deployed. Although, by aligning stabilization and security with counterterrorism, intervention efforts in unstable states like Mali have neglected to hold intervening actors and host countries accountable for the actions that have created mass human suffering, violence, and insecurity. Without focusing on the factors that have created a security situation in need of intervention, attempts to facilitate peace and security militarily “are likely to lead to more oppressive governments and more disillusioned people joining the ranks of the opposition and terrorist groups” because they do not address the root cause of the security problem³⁸. French intervention missions have used militarism as a long-term solution that is

³⁶ Walker, Scott. “Instability in Mali.” *New Zealand International Review*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 11. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48551390>.

³⁷ Karlsrud, John. “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism.” *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2018, pp. 14., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2018.1502040>.

³⁸ Karlsrud, pp. 15.

narrow in its scope. Evidently, when Operation Barkhane was withdrawn from Mali in August 2021, Mali's security situation had not improved much over the decade-long operation.

Operation Barkhane and Serval strategically used African support of French intervention to build a growing military presence in the Sahel, but because these missions were not deployed with the tools or policies required to fix Malian political and socio-economic problems, they could not serve Mali in the fullest capacity. Although, French militarism in Malian intervention efforts is not uncommon in more modern methods of intervention. The shift toward counterterrorism and militarism in intervention has also pushed intervening states and actors to be more mindful of financing war and conflict. As a result, "these states are pursuing 'good enough' solutions rather than realizing what may seem as lofty liberal ideals," meaning that intervention has allowed the 'War on Terror' to influence the way in which aid is administered³⁹. The 'War on Terror' has disproportionately affected how intervention is both received and administered in fragile states; it has been marked by increased militarism that has not been able to end conflict through force alone. Therefore, as conflict and security crises worsen in the Sahel, military intervention must be paired with more comprehensive approaches to mitigating the effects of conflict.

The emphasis on counterterrorism in security missions in the Sahel has influenced French intervention to prioritize militarism over other, more structural, obstacles to stability in Mali. In the wake of deadly terror attacks in the Global North, like 9/11 in New York City and the November 2015 attacks in Paris, counterterrorism has been at the forefront of international stabilization policies. Combatting terrorism, however, has created a need for growing military influence. As extremist networks expand transnationally, international actors have turned toward military strength and intelligence to wage war against terror, but heightened military presence in conflict-ridden, fragile states has perpetuated violence and imperiled civilian lives. In declaring a 'War on Terror,' "France, along with regional and international partners, justified intervention and subsequently the establishment of multiple military bases across the Sahel"⁴⁰. French intervention in Mali has emphasized a sprawling military presence to secure the region. For France, securing the region represented more than just a peaceful Sahel. It also worked in the favor of domestic politics that had often villainized African migrants, especially Black African migrants. Conflict in the Sahel sends waves of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers across the African continent and over the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. As former colonizing power in West Africa, many migrants from the Sahel seek citizenship in France. However, "the worldwide surge in migration gave rise to all sorts of foreboding projections and scenarios and seared in citizens' minds the fearful image of uncontrollable, unstoppable waves of migrants (including refugees)," which has ultimately impacted French migration policies⁴¹. In response to public outcry against African migrants, France has securitized migration by implementing similar systems used in the United States, like detainment and interdiction. Securitizing migration, therefore, positions migration from the Sahel as a security threat to French society⁴². Intervention

³⁹ Karlsrud, pp. 15.

⁴⁰ Wing, Susanna D. "French Intervention in Mali: Strategic Alliances, Long-Term Regional Presence?" *Taylor & Francis*, Feb. 2016, pp. 60, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2016.1123433>.

⁴¹ Bourbeau, Phillippe. "Migration, Resilience and Security: Responses to New Inflows of Asylum Seekers and Migrants." *Taylor & Francis*, July 2015, pp. 1965, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1047331>.

⁴² Bourbeau, pp. 1970.

in the Sahel, then, has evolved into a French domestic security project to intervene in Sahelian conflict before waves of Black, African migrants cross the Mediterranean.

Security in Mali, though, does not hinge on the physical security of the country that can be ensured by a strong foreign and domestic military presence. Instead, Malian security depends on political and socioeconomic stability, both of which cannot be secured with arms and ammunition. Therefore, military intervention in Mali that lacks development efforts for the sociopolitical socioeconomic, and environmental issues that perpetuate conflict has introduced lasting militarism to the Sahel as insecurity spreads throughout the country. The paradigm shift from liberal peacebuilding to counterterrorism in international intervention efforts has created new intervention norms that do not address the structural and systemic issues that perpetuate violent conflict in the Sahel. Military intervention “has significant effects on the resolution of the Malian conflict as the binaries of war and peace, and intervention and sovereignty are no longer opposites but blurred into the emerging ‘new normal’ of permanent military intervention,” which defines how intervening actors respond⁴³. While such an approach may seem most effective for these actors, they neglect the local and regional needs of struggling states. By focusing predominately on terrorism, “French Barkhane/Serval practices distinguished Malian identities and spaces from Sahelian terrorists, without much attention being paid to the instability, inadequacy and consequences of such labeling, including out the characterization(s) of the conflict enabled and authorized particular policy responses,”⁴⁴. These responses often confined Malian peace and security into one reality; one where military intervention would become normalized and expected.

Because of an international shift toward countering terrorism through military force instead of through state stabilization, “the militarization of the fight against radicalism may further obscure for France and the United States alike the non-military aspects of the problem, everything that encourages radicalism and keeps the state of the Sahel fragile,”⁴⁵. Military intervention in the Sahel targets one part of the wider crisis. Therefore, to bring security and stability to the Sahel, intervening actors, like France, must take a more comprehensive approach to intervention. While military intervention may be a quick fix to insecurity in the Sahel, such a looming presence has not allowed for other methods of stabilization to work. Long-term military presence in the Sahel may, in fact, exacerbate political and economic tensions due to its inability to address the root of state fragility.

⁴³ Charbonneau, Bruno. “Intervention in Mali: Building Peace between Peacekeeping and Counterterrorism.” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2017, pp. 416., <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2017.1363383>.

⁴⁴ Charbonneau, pp. 418.

⁴⁵ Shurkin, Michael. “France Gets Tougher on Terrorism.” *RAND Corporation*, 29 July 2014, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2014/07/france-gets-tougher-on-terrorism.html>.

Discussion and Analysis

Democracy in the Sahel

As seen in Mali and other Sahelian colonial histories, “the struggle for democracy in the Sahel was thus shaped from its birth by some fundamental tensions born of the effort to reconcile French institutional and philosophic models of democracy with Sahelian social realities,”⁴⁶. Sahelian democracy is marked with attempts to decentralize power. Decentralization, while key to democratization, has presented a challenge to Sahelian states because of their ties to French ideas of republican democracy. Democracy in the Sahel, therefore, has been represented as strong-man governments that fail to represent the collective identity of Sahelian countries. Identity struggles have been most notable in Mali, in the West, and in Sudan, in the East. As Sahelian states make attempts at democratization, attempts at forging a representative government is critical to state stability. In Mali, representation has “resurged as central to the debate about accommodating different identity groups through constitutional and institutional design within the contested national community,” but with ethnic tension steeped in centuries of history and violence, governing parties have not yet been able to create such a reality⁴⁷. As a result, formations of democracy in the Sahel have faltered because they do not align with the reality of the plurality.

Thus, as Sahelian countries grapple with struggling democracies, they become vulnerable to external forces that are ultimately destabilizing. One such example is the Arab Spring, or more specifically, the impact of the Arab Spring on sub-Sahara Africa. The introduction of arms and arms trafficking was produced out of the Libyan War just after the onset of the Arab Spring. The influx of arms into Sahelian states has directly influenced the way in which conflict has manifested throughout the Sahel. Arms from North Africa and the Middle East, as well as new alliances between Sahelian minorities and foreign militaries, has made conflict in the Sahel increasingly more violent and explosive. Furthermore, as stated by Nathaniel D. Danjibo:

“Many other states in the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa are likely deposits of large catchments of arms and ammunitions circulating in the region, making these countries potential grounds for conflicts and instability. Unfortunately, many of these states are not internally strong; in fact, most are very fragile. In other words, these state often do not have the capability to confront armed insurrection of non-state armed actors, because of the sophistication of their arms and the employment of guerilla tactics in their fight against the state,”⁴⁸.

Moreover, while North Africa and the Middle East contend with uprisings that altered political landscapes, the Sahel also faces the implications of political unrest in neighboring states and regions. The situation in the Sahel has grown too large for Sahelian states to address alone. However, the inability to address Tuareg concerns of disenfranchisement, the influx of arms and ammunition, and the proliferation of Islamic terrorism, has left the Sahelian in a state of disrepair

⁴⁶ Bodian, Mamadou, and Sebastian Elischer. “The Democratic Struggle in the Sahel.” *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, edited by Villalón Leonardo Alfonso, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2021, pp. 381–473.

⁴⁷ Bodian and Elischer, pp. 390.

⁴⁸ Danjibo, Nathaniel D. “The Aftermath of the Arab Spring and its Implication for Peace and Development in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa .” *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, vol. 35, ser. 2, 2013, pp. 26.

as instability has worsened. While the armed conflict and democratic weakness have contributed to instability in the Sahel, it is exacerbated by economic shortcomings that aggravate already present dissatisfaction.

Military Intervention in the Sahel

Discussions of intervention in the Sahelian crisis is rooted in foreign intervention efforts that have turned to militarism to combat what seems to be the most pressing problem: violent extremism. However, the crises that face Sahelian countries, like Mali, are far more complex. They face political instability, economic failure, and environmental concerns that have altered the landscape of sub-Saharan Africa. Policy recommendations and solutions offered by international scholars and humanitarian intervention experts have a heavy focus on combatting violent extremism. These recommendations rightfully emphasize one of the most pressing issues that will impact the future of the Sahel, but these types of solutions are short-term. A more comprehensive analysis of crisis and conflict in the Sahel is necessary to formulate long-term solutions that return independence to impacted countries. As it stands, current intervention efforts fall in alignment with neo-colonialism as long-term military interventions litter the Sahel without much improvement. Scholars and witnesses to the Malian crisis have repeatedly stated that stability in the Sahel will require a reimagination of intervention. Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin have claimed that

“France, moreover, has not addressed any of the conditions and drivers that brought about the crisis in the first place, nor does it appear to be working toward putting in place viable political and security arrangements that are necessary to ensure that the benefits of its intervention survive the withdrawal of French troops. In other words, the situation risks reverting to the status quo ante, and the threat once represented by northern Mali’s Islamist militants is all but certain to return unless there are significant changes to the current intervention in Mali.”⁴⁹

Security in the Sahel, then, is contingent on intervention measures that address the entirety of the crisis, including political, economic, military, and ecological concerns. However, political and military concerns have taken precedence over economic and environmental concerns that equally destabilize Sahelian states. Therefore, as Pezard and Shurkin recommend, a more dynamic approach to intervention in the Sahel is needed to facilitate stability to the region.

The literature surrounding the Sahel has a clear emphasis on democratization and military intervention to secure the region. Much of such literature recommends continued military intervention to secure the Sahel. Military intervention from France and the European Union (EU) have partnered with the Malian army by providing training, equipment, and personnel. The Malian army, like the rest of the country, is a disjointed force that is ill-equipped to work comprehensively against stability threats. Morten Boas and Liv Elin Torheim of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre explain that

“The issue of the Malian army is a problem that goes much deeper than just the lack of training that the planned European Union Mission to Mali suggests. It may need more up-

⁴⁹ Pezard and Shurkin, pg. 1.

to-date training and equipment, but the structural problem is the lack of a unified national moral compass to underwrite its military operations,”⁵⁰.

The politics behind military intervention is complex and has been justly emphasized in scholarship of the Malian crisis. However, over-emphasis on military intervention detracts from other causes of destabilization in the Sahel. Wolfram Lacher and Denis Michael Tull state that

“Paradoxically, France’s intervention may prove “too successful”—in the sense that the government in Bamako, propped up by French and African military support, could refuse to enter into meaningful negotiations. Now that extremist groups have weakened, France and AFISMA should aim to shift the focus back to the actual problem—the conflicts between Mali’s elites,”⁵¹

Such an emphasis speaks to the political nature of crises in the Sahel; however, it fails to address other underlying causes of instability, like extreme poverty and desertification. The politics of crisis in the Sahel has distracted both scholars and intervention experts from other possible reasons for insecurity, which has ultimately left a gap in both the literature analyzing said crises and in intervention responses. The gap in the analysis of Sahelian crises has left room for error in intervention responses because they lack a robust and holistic approach to increasingly complicated conflicts. Therefore, as Sahelian crises grow increasingly complex so must intervention responses.

Through the explanations presented above, recommendations to continue military intervention in Mali lack cohesion and overwhelmingly ignore the core of the problems in the Sahel. Similarly, recommendations centered on the renewal of democratic practices ultimately ignore the reason for why the political processes in the Sahel initially fail. The complexity of crises in the Sahel warrant intervention measures equipped with holistic attempts to evaluate conflict from political, socio-economic, and environmental standpoints. Approaching Sahelian situations with only one objective is bound to create further conflict as the root of such problems have not yet been mitigated. When one piece of the Sahelian crisis is not addressed, progress on the other pieces is bound to slow.

Conclusion

The African continent is victim to centuries of exploitation in service of the Global North. Resource exploitation and over consumption has undermined African states’ ability to develop alongside the states they support. African economies, like those in the Sahel, are repeatedly exposed to hostile policies and programs that hinder development⁵². The crises experienced by African states is a direct result of the exploitation endured through colonial, post-

⁵⁰ Boas, Morten, and Liv Elin Torheim. “Mali Unmasked: Resistance, Collusion, Collaboration.” *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, Mar. 2013, pp. 3, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162494/aa8b1177c49658bb15a2a1da1d320ffd.pdf>.

⁵¹ Lacher, Wolfram; Tull, Denis Michael (2013) : Mali: Beyond Counterterrorism, SWP Comments, No. 7/2013, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, pp. 6.

⁵² Momoh, Zekeri. “African Solutions to African Problems: A Critical Appraisal.” *ResearchGate*, Dec. 2016, pp. 45., https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319290174_African_Solutions_to_African_Problems_A_Critical_Appraisal.

colonial, and neo-liberal periods. While the international community is quite aware of the systemic issues plaguing the African continent, foreign intervention and aid does little to ease conflict and violence, as evident from the Malian case. However, without addressing the problems African states face, violence and conflict will only worsen. In the face of worsening crises, President Keita's aspirations for African unity are echoed as African states look inward to create a brighter future. The solutions presented by the international community do not acknowledge the unique experiences of suffering populations in Africa. In fact, they fail to adequately support development on the African continent and instead work contrary to political and socioeconomic development.

Therefore, my hope is that this project will help push the international community to rethink intervention efforts that align with African ideas of peace and security for the African continent. Using the current Malian crisis as a lens to analyze the wider Sahelian struggle, the pitfalls in French intervention reveal that international responses to crises in the Sahel must take a more comprehensive approach that addresses violence and conflict more holistically. While political and socioeconomic solutions are vital to stabilizing the Sahel, looking beyond democratization and decentralization is also crucial to a more peaceful future. Conflict in the Sahel is complex and constantly evolving. Solutions that attempt to bring stability and security to the region should be flexible enough to move with crises and adapt to unforeseen complexities. Further research should examine the efficacy of stabilization and aid missions that prioritize local and regional contexts against past missions like France's Operation Barkhane that emphasize military involvement.

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