THE SAHEL'S INSTABILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON AFRICAN SECURITY, POLITICS AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Abstract

The Sahel spans the southern parts of the Sahara Desert to the savanna, encompassing over 100 million people across over ten countries. Its post-colonial history contains ethnic, religious and political crises and conflicts that continue to the present with the rise of Islamic extremists such as Boko Haram, Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb over the past few decades. The security situation became of global importance after the Al Qaeda attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. However, international policies aimed at pacifying the region, such as the French Operation Barkhane, have failed to produce long-term security. The lack of security led to multiple coups d'état in the region and complicated relations between these nations and the Global North. This research focuses on the implications of the sahel's instability and its impact on african security, politics and foreign affairs.

Background on the Sahel

The African Sahel spans over 5,900 kilometres wide and roughly 1,000 kilometres in length from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. This mostly flat region, with minor ranges including the Marrah Mountains, the Ennedi Plateau, and the Aïr Mountains, is primarily savanna and lies at the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. The Sahel spans ten nations: Senegal, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea. These nations experience similar ecological and security challenges in controlling this critical territory, which transitions the continent from a desert wasteland to the lush greenery found just south of the region.

Despite the region's rich history of kingdoms, such as the Sahelian Kingdom and the Mali Empire under Mansa Musa, it quickly fell under French and British colonial rule during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The decolonisation movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the region, especially in the former French colonies, did not lead to full agency for the new nations, as many struggled to gain full autonomy from former colonial rule. Even after the end of colonisation, France and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom, continued to significantly influence the societies, economies and politics of Sahel nations.

As Gérard Prunier discusses , France's role during the Cold War consisted of combating Marxist rebel and political movements in Africa, especially in the Sahel. This led to France's involvement, whether wanted or not, in national crises and reforms. Many Africans viewed France's engagement as a neo-colonial entanglement aimed at controlling its former colonies. The end of the Cold War led to what Daniela Kroslak called the 'Paristroika' moment of shifting French political interest in their former colonies. Foreign aid and assistance shifted away from political loyalties towards Paris and the anti-communist campaign, and instead focused on good governance, proper utilisation of foreign aid and democratisation.

For many African leaders, who relied on French aid to maintain their monopoly of power, the new post-Cold War dynamic led to significant instability. Islamic extremist and separatist actors within the Sahel fostered insecurity, which remains a primary hindrance to state and economic development. The major Islamic jihadist movements include Boko Haram, Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Islamic State and other minor extremist groups. However, the Sahel's existing security crisis went beyond Islamic jihadists to also include various insurgencies, separatist movements and other terrorist actors.

This regional insecurity became a global concern after the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. In the aftermath, the US-led' War on Terrorism' went beyond just Al Qaeda to include the multiple Sahel's Islamic jihadist forces. However, as M.L.R. Smith comments, military and political decision-makers failed to recognise how terrorism is a tactic rather than a military actor. The Sahel's insecurity led to growing Global North concerns that the region could become a base for Islamic extremist groups. Thus, the Global North's attention to the region was expressed through diplomatic, financial and military means. These security operations included several US, British and French-led operations in the Sahel to combat Islamic extremist groups associated with Al Qaeda, specifically the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Several Global North operations, such as the British Operation Newcombe (2013-2022) and others based on ending the Mali War, such as Operation Serval (2013-2014) and Operation Eprvier (1986-2014) in Chad, ultimately failed to properly defeat Islamic extremist groups. French Operation Barkhane (2014-2022) was the culmination of many past anti-terrorism operations operating within the Sahel.

The rise of Islamic extremist groups and other antagonistic forces in the region was not established from just one factor. There is a plethora of factors that led to the Sahel's instability, such as the collapse of Libya, which led to the flooding of cheap weapons through the porous borders of many African nations within the Sahel. Additionally, poor governance, lack of economic development, and poor livelihoods for defence and security forces all contributed to and prolonged the conflict. Combating these antagonistic forces led to the creation of multiple anti-terrorism operations, culminating in the formation of Operation Barkhane. It was a French-led multinational force, including aid and support from European nations such as France, Denmark, Estonia, and the United Kingdom, along with the regional states of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. Despite France contributing the bulk of the forces, consisting of over 5,500 deployed. Its mandate included combating and defeating Islamic extremist groups such as Al Qaeda, Nusrat al-Islam and the Islamic State – Sahel Province. Operation Barkhane originated in January 2013, following Operation Serval in Mali, but became an independent military operation by August 1, 2014. For the next eight years, until August 15, 2022, French soldiers continued to work with their partners to unsuccessfully attempt to establish security in their deployments across five Sahelian nations: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania.

Beyond combating the Islamic irregular forces, the military operation also trained local forces, supported regional political partners and attempted to prevent the formation of some terrorist sanctuaries. While there were some successes in Operation Barkhane, such as the neutralising of Islamic jihadist forces, it failed to handle the persistent threat posed by the Islamic extremist forces. By November 9, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron ceased its operations. Despite support from many regional and Global North nations, the operation failed to secure sustainable peace by being ineffective in stopping Islamic jihadists and extremist actors within the region. By 2022, many Sahel nations that had previously welcomed France's commitment decided to terminate not only the military operation but also their relations with France. Its failure to stop those antagonistic forces should be seen as the tipping point that led not only to its end but also to the rise of coups d'état in the Sahel.

The Sahel's instability led not only to failures in military operations but also to the rise of coups in the region. By July 2024, six nations had experienced successful coups: Mali, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and, to a lesser extent, Sudan. These nations' political history of coups led to it being termed the 'Coup Belt'. Turning away from Global North concepts of liberalism and human rights, these new military leaders promised to crack down on insecurities, rebellions and Islamic extremist groups through new social contracts between government and civilians. Many of these new leaders experienced noticeable support from their citizens after growing tired of the insecurity, despite condemnation by Global North rights groups of human rights abuses and a lack of democracy.

This report focuses on how the insecurity, specifically after the failure of Operation Barkhane, affects the rest of African security, foreign affairs and politics. This focus does not intend to dismiss the previously mentioned other factors, such as weak governance, poor livelihoods for security and defence forces, porous borders that witnessed the movement of not only antagonistic forces but also weapons following Libya's collapse, and other causes of the current crisis. Instead, it focuses on how the Sahel's insecurity stemming from Islamic jihadist forces led to not only the failed French mission, Operation Barkhane, but also the rise of coups and the need to re-examine public policy in the region. The report illustrates the impact of insecurity by examining its effect on domestic security, foreign relations and African politics. After analysing and providing concluding remarks on the Sahel's insecurity and the failed Operation Barkhane, the following section presents policy recommendations for African nations based on the Sahel's experience with insecurity, which has impacted local populations and African politics.

Analysis

Security and Coups

The failure of French Operation Barkhane led to a different conceptualisation of how to defeat the existing Islamic jihadist groups in the Sahel. During the military operation, France and its allies dominated asymmetric warfare ; however, the battles were largely irrelevant, as they did not lead to the desired victory. Similar to the US war in Vietnam (1965-1973), an ill-defined strategic objective will inevitably lead to failure, despite greater operational art. Perhaps most damaging of the recent military operations' failure is the harm to the perception of French and other Global North forces. Fundamentally, the belief by Africans residing in the Sahel in the invulnerability of the international forces has largely eroded. This decrease in trust in their capabilities led Africans in the Sahel not only to question France's current and past involvement on the continent but also to consider alternatives for achieving security and stability.

The rise of coups and the decline in democratic norms in the Sahel should be viewed as a direct response to Operation Barkhane's inability to establish adequate security. Even some military-led leaders, such as Guinean President Mamady Doumbouya, justified their political actions as a response to ongoing insecurity, despite foreign interventions and support beyond military aid, including economic aid and investment. Their actions to promote security raise questions about the political norms of democracy, Kantian constructs of human rights and the relationship between the military and society. While this is an oversimplification, a growing divide exists between approaches to governance over whether they should prioritise promoting Global North concepts of Kantian human rights, democracy and individual freedoms, or focus on security concerns.

Despite this duality being somewhat reductionist, it offers insights into the radical differences between the past and current regimes. Many governments overthrown by coups often followed Global North norms, even if it meant sacrificing security and stability, to continue receiving foreign aid and foreign direct investment. However, few of these countries ever fully implemented the necessary political reforms. Thus, it became more palatable for the rise of the military-led governments, who did promise a weary population that they would effectively combat antagonist forces in the Sahel, even if it violated Global North norms of human rights and democracy, as well as, as discussed in the following section, disrupt these nations' relationship with European countries and the United States.

Impact on Foreign Affairs

The failure of Operation Barkhane and other international missions to pacify the Sahel raises questions about the relationship between Africa and the Global North, particularly Europe. While the United States is impacted by the rise of coup governments, such as the loss of the Airbase 201 military base in Niger , the Sahel's instability, and new military-led governments, these factors significantly impact the relationship between those nations and Europe. France's influence in the Sahel, especially in West Africa, continued after colonisation, and despite historical periods of worsening ties, the current situation is somewhat different. French President Emmanuel Macron does not have the same political capital to spend on, especially ineffective, missions in the Sahel. France's military withdrawal from the region is also a bit of a political embarrassment for President Macron, France and the Global North, which relied on French forces to defeat Islamic terrorist groups. Niger , Mali , Burkina Faso , Guinea and Chad all hosted French soldiers but were all relatively ineffective in strategically defeating the multiple antagonistic forces. This led to a rise of anti-French sentiment, with French forces and foreign officials having to withdraw from many of the post-coup governments. In particular, the withdrawal of French forces from Niger signalled a significant shift in the foreign relations between France and regional states.

The failed outsourcing of security and the rise of coups in response introduce new questions about African relations with the Global North. Specifically, what are the future relations between Europe and the United States with African governments after the failures of the international community to defeat Islamic extremist actors. Additionally, more non-traditional actors are attempting to exert influence in Africa. These nations, such as China, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey, to name a few, do not have the same historically fraught relationship with African nations as their European counterparts. Despite many efforts to differentiate themselves from the Global North, this does not mean they are united or that they are not competing with each other. The Sudanese Civil War (2023-present) is marked by an international divide between Gulf nations, with the Sudanese Armed Forces under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan receiving support from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and fighting against the Rapid Support Forces under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also referred to as Hemedti), who the United Arab Emirates supports. Thus, African nations cannot easily replace the Global North with other powers and expect a more balanced or less intrusive foreign policy. Additionally, African nations continue to receive foreign aid from the Global North and are thus likely to follow donors' wishes as a condition for continued assistance. Re-thinking African relations with the Global North, grounded in agency and state interests, rather than existing international structures, should also be extended to how African nations perceive their own domestic politics.

Re-thinking African Politics

The end of Operation Barkhane did not come from a decisive strategic victory over Islamic extremist actors, but instead from the fact that most of the impacted African nations requested the removal of the ineffective foreign soldiers. Nations such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which had experienced coup d'états, requested the end of Operation Barkhane, labelling it a failure. Within these nations, the military-led governments' frustrations with France's failures led many to turn to the former Russian private militia group, the Wagner Group, or Turkey to address their security concerns. Many decided to take a firmer stance on insecurity, prompting human rights groups to accuse the military-led government of violating democratic norms and human rights.

However, the aftermath of the coups illustrated a growing frustration within many African societies with the failures of the Global North. These concerns included frustration not only with the failed operation but also with the relationship between Africa and the Global North , as discussed in the previous point, as well as the relationship between citizens and their governments. The political leaders and governments that welcomed Operation Barkhane and were eventually overthrown experienced a disconnect with their citizens. The praise they received from the Global North could not overcome the fractured social contract that affects not just nations in the Sahel but also other parts of Africa. There is an expectation within the social contract that citizens are willing to give up some aspects of their self-interests to the government in return for social services and security. However, these regimes increasingly became unable to, or unwilling to, fulfil citizens' demands. It appeared that the interests of the Global North, promoting Western political norms and financial business contracts, outweighed the desires and needs of local populations. The growing frustration could only be fully understood soon after the coups when large swaths of the population greeted the new military-led governments. However, Bouba Jalloh questions whether the goodwill towards the new governments is sustainable.

The new military leaders' relative popularity is not confined to the Sahel. On social media, in African news media, and in other sources of political engagement, attention increased to the new leaders who proposed not just military leadership but a new approach to political engagement. The message from these new military leaders is that the Global North's support for past regimes benefited only a small minority of those in power, not the country as a whole. In particular, their grievances focused on the insecurity brought about by past governments, which seemed more concerned with appealing to Global North interests, norms and concerns than with combating extremist forces. However, the underlying thread of all the coups is a pushback against the Global North, which seems at times more interested in maintaining a neo-colonial status quo than in advancing African security and development. The push against the Global North illustrated not only a disconnect from its norms, such as the prioritisation of Western norms of human rights and democracy over security and stability, but also a path forward for other African nations. The social element of the coups sparked debates over whether the new military-led leaders are promoting a new anti-neocolonial norm in Africa. However, it is too soon to categorise the military government's new popularity in Africa as akin to that of the immediate post-colonial period.

Akin to the rise of the 'new African leaders' in the 1990s or the 2011 Arab Spring , the early 2020 coups serve as a warning to African political elites. The balancing act between appeasing the Global North to continue receiving foreign aid, security agreements, foreign direct investment, and other benefits, and maintaining domestic support is even more critical. The Sahel's coups, along with its new generation of younger leaders, are widely seen by Africans, especially the youth, as a unifying force that promotes African pride.

The rest of Africa's leaders need to be aware of this groundswell of support and navigate to prevent experiencing a coup themselves. This might lead to an internal examination and the removal of military leaders, but it does not address the underlying issues found in the Sahel. Rather, African decision-makers should try to illustrate at least the lessons learned from the Sahel's coups by reorienting their attention towards addressing their population's grievances.

Nevertheless, the coups d'état in the Sahel indicate African frustration not only with the Global North's influence but also with the ineffectiveness of efforts to provide security and stability. The successes of Burkina Faso's Ibrahim Traoré, Niger's Abdourahamane Tchiani and Guinean Mamady Doumbouya, to name a few, not only showcase a new generation of African leaders but also an anti-Global North and pro-Afric-centric view of engagement between decision-makers and their populations.

Conclusion

One only needs to view the Sahel's size to understand its impact on Africa. The multiple nations that occupy this transition from desert to lush green hold significant security challenges. Throughout the region are numerous Islamic extremist groups such as the Boko Haram, Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State. Operation Barkhane, primarily operated by French forces but not exclusively, aimed to disrupt and defeat these antagonistic forces. However, by November 2022, little strategic progress had been made, and many Sahel nations demanded the removal of these forces. Despite France's military advantage over the irregular rebel and terrorist forces, it largely failed to secure security and stability.

France's military failure to stop Islamic extremist groups resulted in a change of the political status quo in many Sahel nations. Beginning with the 2020 Malian coup d'état and spreading to Niger, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Sudan, military-led governments seized power from civilian governments that the Global North had often praised as strategic African partners. The past government's failures centred on their inability to adequately foster security and stability for those residing in the Sahel. Increased attacks raised questions not only about the role of outsourcing security responsibilities to the Global North but also about how governments perceive and engage with their populations. Fundamentally, the social contract between decision-makers and their citizens began to deteriorate, if not collapse, with the failures to promote security.

The security failures in the Sahel offer essential lessons for African nations, particularly for decision-makers. African leaders must re-engage their militaries to provide security and stability for their citizens, even if the means to achieve this might contradict Global North norms. African militaries must be the primary actors responsible for providing security, rather than external actors or armies enforcing the interests of special interest groups. The Global North's desire to promote its norms stems from its belief that the foundations of human rights, democracy, and civil rights lead to social, political, and economic development. However, the lack of security fractures this foundation, with many African civilians more interested in establishing basic security that society can then build upon. The failed outsourcing of security to the Global North, as seen during Operation Barkhane, leads citizens to question not only the competency of the French forces but also that of their own governments. Additionally, the new military governments have become a symbol of African unity and agency.

The lessons for African decision-makers focus on developing their own capabilities to provide security and stability, while also demonstrating to citizens that their concerns are at least being heard. This will necessitate a re-evaluation of how African nations interact with the Global North. While this report does not suggest reducing or ending relations, it does instead suggest a greater level of equal partnership. To effectively reach this level of international engagement, African leaders must remain steadfast in promoting their state's interests and agency. For some African leaders, these policy suggestions may disrupt their short-term grip on power but can ultimately lead to long-term stability and national development.

Recommendations:

1. African policymakers should prioritise strengthening internal state security by developing capable, domestically controlled military forces to counter threats to national stability, while adhering to strict safeguards for individual, political and human rights. To ensure sustainable security outcomes, African governments should adopt policies that reduce reliance on external military assistance from Global North actors and instead invest in indigenous operational art, strategic planning, and tactical proficiency tailored to domestic security challenges.

2. African nations should re-evaluate the existing diplomatic frameworks with the Global North. While this does not suggest removing or downgrading diplomatic relations, it indicates that a holistic review of those relations is necessary to inform reform of global governance from a perspective that takes into account African needs and interests. This includes framing foreign policy decisions in the nation's best interests rather than those of foreign powers (nations) or entities. Akin to political and economic, as well as military, relations between African and Global North nations should continue, but as a partnership focused on military exchanges, training, and equipment purchases.

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