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## Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel: A Hybrid Political Order in the Making

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### ABSTRACT

Once a region that rarely featured in debates about global security, the Sahel has become increasingly topical as it confronts the international community with intertwined challenges related to climate variability, poverty, food insecurity, population displacement, transnational crime, contested statehood and jihadist insurgencies. This Special Issue discerns the contours of political orders in the making. After situating the Sahel region in time and space, we focus on the trajectory of regional security dynamics over the past decade, which are marked by two military coups in Mali (2012 and 2020). In addressing state fragility and societal resilience in the context of increasing external intervention and growing international rivalry, we seek to consider broader and deeper transformations that can be neither ignored nor patched up through the framework of the 'war on terror' projected onto 'ungoverned spaces'. Focusing especially on the mobilisation of material and immaterial resources, we apply political economy lenses in combination with a historical sociological approach to shed light on how extra-legal governance plays a crucial role in the deformation, transformation and reformation of political orders.

### KEYWORDS

Sahel; state fragility; hybrid political orders; jihadist insurgencies; extra-legal governance

Once a remote region whose name hardly featured in any debate on world politics, the broad Sahara-Sahel region has become increasingly topical in the past two decades. The Sahel can be seen as a region in crisis as it confronts policymakers with a whole range of serious challenges – fragile institutions, poverty, food insecurity, population displacement, transnational crime and jihadist insurgency, among others – which appear to be exacerbated by the effects of climate change. Today, the question of state stability in the region is more prominent on the international agenda than it has ever been, and the magnitude of external assistance and intervention is unprecedented. While these dynamics are very evident in Mali, increased international attention and the adoption of military and security approaches to crisis prevention and political instability are also present elsewhere across the region.

In recent years, a vertical and horizontal escalation of violent dynamics (kidnappings, ambushes, complex terror attacks, massacres and open battles) has captured the attention of analysts and policymakers. While much of today's debate is centred on the rise of violent extremism (jihadism) and the endless reconfiguration of armed groups straddling

local conflicts, regional alliances and global terror constellations (such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh), the propagation of variants of ‘radical Islam’ only helps illuminate some of the factors behind the upheaval that led to the implosion of Libya and Mali in 2011 and 2012. Arguably, the trajectory of the violent Salafist insurgency stemming from Algeria’s aborted democratic transition in the early 1990s, which the United States (US) put on its radar with the deployment of trans-Saharan counterterror initiatives in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, is only part of a much more complex story that calls into question governance dynamics and the sustainability of social, economic and political processes in Sahelian states.

By rejecting geographical determinism, we subscribe to the idea that regions are defined and constituted by more than geographic markers and state borders: while the ecological characteristics of the Sahara desert undeniably play an important role for human livelihood, where the Sahel (literally, the desert’s borderland) ends is far from self-evident. Our argument is that the Sahel as a region cannot be demarcated, as it is a social space: it expands and shrinks in line with political, social and economic trajectories that are impacted by ecological changes. This is not the case only because economic and communication flows are rapidly changing, with ‘Sahara towns’ mushrooming in the inhospitable region (Pliez 2011), or because local actors identify themselves ethnocentrically as ‘the heart of the region’. Regions are incessantly built by material and symbolic practice, that is, by acts of administration, classification and intervention that reflect the interplay between local and external realities and priorities (Whitehouse and Strazzari 2015).

Much could be said about how the territories that fall into the ‘Sahel problem’ category today have historically acquired their distinctive character in interaction with world economies and politics, beginning with the rise and fall of pre-colonial polities and the exportation of modern state institutions well into the 20th century, along with the manipulation of local hierarchies for the very basic purpose of territorial control (Giri 1994). The severe droughts of the 1970s could be recalled too, given their role in catalysing international aid. In more recent decades, what has become increasingly conspicuous, especially in the remotest, historically marginal, recurrently unruly state border areas, is the reinvigoration of an economy based not only on smuggling and illicit trade, but also on widespread banditry and armed protection. A plethora of armed groups, whose contours typically match ethnic and social stratification lines that characterise highly segmented societies, have emerged: the interplay of these groups, including their positioning *vis-à-vis* state authorities and their local emissaries, follows a logic of opportunity, competition for status, territorial control and resources. It is in this social space, where state institutions have always been distant and often proven inefficient in building and maintaining governance that delivers public goods to local populations, while new material and ideological resources (for example, humanitarian aid from the Gulf, rigorist religious education) have become available, that jihadist insurgencies are carving out a space for themselves, beginning with a settling of accounts with traditional religious and civilian authorities, and proposing a different social contract.

The trends we have outlined above are present to a greater or lesser degree all across the Sahel zone – from Mauritania in the west to Sudan in the east, but perhaps most vividly in the core countries that the authors in this Special Issue investigate. Thus, for practical purposes, the research that we present in this Special Issue on fragility,

insurgency and governance in the Sahel concerns dynamics that unfold in the broad region that stretches across the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Chad, all countries whose territories are to some extent included in the Sahel ecosystem. All the articles presented in this Special Issue are based on detailed ongoing fieldwork in the region,<sup>1</sup> and we, as guest editors, are particularly pleased that several of them are the result of research collaboration across Global North-Global South divisions. This is yet another testimony to our collaboration with great colleagues in the countries that this Special Issue is concerned with.

## Questioning orders and borders

As a result of the sweeping changes that have taken place, there is some foundation to the claim that this vast and diverse area has become an arc of crisis. In it, we find states that are clustered at the bottom of the world's fragility indexes: Burkina Faso occupies the 182nd place on the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), while Mali and Niger rank 184th and 189th, respectively (see UNDP 2020). However, as poor and fragile as these states may be, it is a fact that they are still considered worth fighting over. Why? Our simple answer (upon which the articles in this Special Issue are premised) is that sovereign power remains – even in a poor, fragile and fragmented state – an important resource: a resource for which people will not only take huge risks in order to access it, but also be willing to put their lives on the line to defend it.

Thus, we prefer to understand Sahelian states through the prism of material and immaterial resources: they may not behave like states in a Weberian sense, but they do perform certain functions of a state-like character, along with different types of patrimonial and 'Big Man' politics. Therefore, they have a remarkable hybrid character: while they may control capital cities and surrounding areas, in interior provinces and particularly in the most peripheral areas, the state tends to be one among several actors who compete for the role of effective, legitimate and, ultimately, sovereign authority that people abide by. Institutional weaknesses apart, state authorities have (and typically display) enough sovereignty to continue to interact with the international system and remain by far the preferred recipient of donor assistance.

The clustering of fragility on a regional scale also implies that political turmoil in one country has clear implications for instability beyond its borders. Growing permeability and the transnational dynamics that fuel the Sahel crisis have challenged consolidated policy and cognitive frameworks, making the division between expertise on North Africa and on Sub-Saharan Africa increasingly obsolete. This regional crisis is often represented in terms of thriving banditry and terrorism that threaten local communities and jeopardise stability and development. Although it is clear that the Sahel's topicality today is largely due to its being swept by a strong, complex jihadist insurgency, what is actually at stake today is nothing less than political order(ing), with modes of governance and societal sustainability very much part of the problem.

Thus, in setting forth to gather together contributions for the present Special Issue, we thought that the time is ripe for an attempt to discern – through the dust of violent conflict, contestation and defiance – the contours of political orders in the making. We seek to

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<sup>1</sup>Fieldwork was conducted between 2018 and 2020 in Mali and Niger.

reconsider ongoing challenges to regional and local security as dynamics of broader and deeper transformation that can neither be ignored nor simply patched up by ‘eradicating terror’. While the trajectory of this transformation still remains to be deciphered, once political economy or historical sociological lenses are adopted, it comes as no surprise that extra-legal governance plays an important role in the deformation, transformation and reformation of political orders: this explains our choice to give pre-eminence to an analysis of ongoing dynamics in light of the mobilisation of material and immaterial resources.

One can probably claim that since the suspension of the Paris-Dakar rally in 2008, the Sahara-Sahel region, once depicted as an exotic tourist paradise, has gained the reputation of *territoire interdit*; a no-go zone, or – to put it in current mainstream security language – an ‘ungoverned space’: a safe haven hosting forces that are intent on spreading chaos, a security problem resulting from “converging corruption, crime, and terrorism threats” (Luna 2017) that may have a truly global impact. The fact that the region is swept by a jihadist insurgency is unquestionable:<sup>2</sup> as the United Nations (UN) Special Representative of the Secretary-General (and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel), Mohamed Ibn Chambas, pointed out to the UN Security Council in January 2020, “In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, casualties from terrorist attacks have increased fivefold since 2016 with over 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 as compared to an estimated 770 deaths in 2016” (UNOWAS 2020).

As of 2020, with large portions of its northern territory reportedly cut off, and major attacks in its capital, Ouagadougou, it is sometimes speculated that Burkina Faso will be the third ‘black swan’, that is, the next state at risk of collapse (Raineri 2020, this Special Issue). For its part, Mali, which can be seen as the epicentre of the crisis of domestic politics, remains unpredictable and extremely volatile (as the 18 August 2020 military coup against Ibrahim Boubacar Keita’s presidency vividly illustrates), while Niger, so far represented by international diplomats as ‘secured’, is hit by major insurgency offensives (Bøås *et al.* 2020, this Special Issue). Chad seems to have been militarily effective in containing Daesh-aligned insurgents in the Lake Chad area (Iocchi 2020, this Special Issue), but jihadist cells are active in neighbouring Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast, and all of northern Nigeria is now affected by the dynamics of armed conflict. Massacres in the order of dozens of casualties perpetrated by jihadist insurgents, systematic war crimes by counterterror forces or by so-called self-defence militias have become the norm in international headlines (Venturi and Toure 2020, this Special Issue), while cases of collective deaths of suspected jihadists reported in Chad and Burkina Faso represent a new worrisome development in Sahelian states’ war on terror (Amnesty International 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020; ACLED 2020). After the elimination of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)’s historical leader, the Algerian Adbelmalek Droukdel in northern Mali in June 2020, three main jihadist leaders seem to hold the stage in the Central Sahel: the Tuareg ‘Qaest’ leader Iyad ag Ghali, his *Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin*’s ally Amadou Kouffa,<sup>3</sup> and their rival, the leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui.

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<sup>2</sup>For a mapping of the evolution of violence across North and West Africa, with a focus on Mali, Lake Chad and Libya, see OECD/SWAC (2020).

<sup>3</sup>In a famous video dated 2 March 2017, Mali’s jihadist leaders from *Ansar Dine* (Defenders of the Faith), the *Katiba Macina* (The Macina Battalion), *Al-Mourabitoun* (The Sentinels) and AQIM announced their union into the umbrella organisation *Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM, Group to Support Islam and Muslims). A few days later, AQIM Emir Droukdel approved the convergence, and the Al-Qaeda core accepted their oath of allegiance.

Beginning with the ‘Bin Laden of the desert’, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, several jihadist leaders are reported to have fallen under the fire of special forces and airstrikes over the past ten years. While jihadist formations fight one another (Baldaro and Diall 2020, this Special Issue), nonetheless, jihadist offensives continue unabated, and the metrics of insurgency, as well as its improved tactics, cause major concern among counterinsurgency experts and military attachés deployed in the region’s capital cities (Berlingozzi and Stoddard 2020, this Special Issue). As elsewhere in the world, Al-Qaeda continues to advance its negotiation option to public authorities, demanding the departure of all foreign troops. Meanwhile, in states that exhibit the highest indexes of poverty and inequality, defence and security budgets have skyrocketed during the past decade: they absorb ever-larger portions of state budget, and have often come to do so through murky expenditure channels (that is, massive embezzlement, or *détournement de fonds* – see Bagayoko 2020), the existence of which is regularly glossed over in donor state capitals (Bøås 2018). Foreign countries are fully committed to a stabilisation agenda that is focused on strengthening state capacity, beginning with the security sector (Marsh *et al.* 2020). European states’ foreign policies, in particular, appear to be captured by the imperative to contain migration – which remains an important economic resource for the region – and are therefore vulnerable to Sahelian states’ willingness to act in this direction, which is no key priority for local political elites. As a result, national leaders have now converted their dependence on development aid into dependence on military aid.

States in the Sahel are in desperate need of international assistance, but it is difficult to get traditional donor assistance to work effectively. Institutional and administrative response capacity is low, and this means that there is only so much external aid that these countries can effectively absorb. Nonetheless, as Sahelian countries are in severe need of assistance, one might think that donors have considerable influence: yet, this is not necessarily the case – and this is the other dimension of the fragility dilemma. For example, in Mali, most donors quickly become frustrated with government leaders, who are often strongly criticised by members of the donor community for incompetence, mismanagement and tolerating corruption. However, this does not necessarily lead to anything beyond vocally expressed criticism, as the donors do not see any alternative to the regime in power. What this effectively means is that being defined as a fragile state can be a bargaining asset when dealing with international donors if they do not see any clear and credible alternative to those in power (Bøås 2019).

International and transnational factors are indeed decisive, and this is the case not so much because of ‘weak sovereignties’ and porous borders allowing for the undocumented circulation of people, money and commodities, but also because investing in this region is relatively cheap. Dynamics of direct multilateral and bilateral intervention and assistance are preponderant. Both criminalisation and the capacity to enforce it often come from external actors who are willing to condone controversial domestic aspects as long as their priorities top the domestic agenda and implementation is followed through (Osland and Erstad 2020, this Special Issue).

Much has been written about the ‘new scramble for Africa’ by old and new, real or aspiring great powers (see, for example, Carmody 2016). While the Sahel region could be seen as a client state system under formation, where the hegemonic role of the former colonial power is increasingly contested, one has to observe that competition does not necessarily entail exclusive alignment. Instead, a plurality of rent-seeking opportunities are available for local politicians and entrepreneurs, and this means that different ministries and agencies often interact with different foreign agencies and diplomacies.

To understand better the type of challenge for governance in the Sahel region, one must consider not only UN and Western-led efforts, but also the pervasive presence of investments and aid from China, Turkey, the Gulf countries and Russia. While the latter is currently particularly assertive in the defence and security sector, the US stands out for its lack of a clear Africa strategy. Needless to say, as elsewhere on the African continent, well beyond the spread of jihadist movements, the question of political Islam appears to be particularly sensitive, especially if analysed in terms of divisions inside the Sunni world (the sharp competition between Turkey-Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the other, with Morocco's Maliki school often portrayed as a third way). Generally speaking, with variations from case to case, we observe a consolidated trend whereby governments seek to keep/bring the religious factor under control.

### Governance in focus

Mainstream security thinking about the Sahel rests on the idea that resources are mobilised to prevent loss of control, where the latter is essentially understood in terms of gaps in state capacity to deliver services and territorial disconnect/absence – that is, the widening of those ‘ungoverned spaces’ where rebel governance sets in. The standard narrative has long been one whereby the immense Sahara space and the semi-arid regions along its borders are such that little or no authority can be exercised without factoring in high costs (see Klute 2020, this Special Issue).

Having become home to terrorists, bandits and criminals (Rabasa *et al.* 2007), these remote regions often see the soldering of organised crime and terrorism, a mutant form of threat for the legitimate authorities and local communities. The articles that we present are based on the idea that jihadists are not aliens from another planet, but that, on the contrary, they are perceived by national governments and international stakeholders as an existential threat inasmuch as they prove capable of representing (and governing) local interests and grievances. Part and parcel of the problem is the emergence, consolidation and deterioration in recalcitrant and rebellious peripheries – whose added economic and political value is historically considered marginal by elites in capital cities who see themselves as entitled to run the country – of cheap forms of remote or proxy governance alternating repressive measures with mechanisms of co-optation and social clientelism. Free elections and free markets have first nurtured, then hollowed out expectations, destabilising existing social hierarchies in socio-political systems that have proven to be particularly vulnerable to external shocks. While the response model to the rise of religious radicalism is one predicating more effective border controls and curbing mobility (restrictive measures adopted to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have been experienced by religious communities as the culmination of arbitrary impositions), we observe that in many states and subregions, local power cannot be contended, and is nothing more than a clique that has negotiated its position as a pillar of the incumbent party, when it has not been directly appointed by it.

This relatively resilient configuration often rests on traditional chiefs and local clerics,<sup>4</sup> who are therefore easily exposed as the watchdogs of the corrupt central *pouvoir* that discriminates and survives only thanks to foreign backing. Unsurprisingly, there is little or

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<sup>4</sup>On local governance amidst the interplay between central government, traditional authorities and armed groups, see Molenaar *et al.* (2019). On local governance in central Mali see also Bodian *et al.* (2020).

no space for debating political programs, even where big billboards exhort the population to turn out for elections. Other times, the holding of elections is represented as too costly in the absence of more external aid (for example, Chad) or impossible for security reasons. The fact that little comparative political science research exists on Sahelian political systems can be seen as an indication of how discredited they have become. The key aspect, which our investigation has shown to be systematically swept under the carpet in the public debate, is who funds political parties and how, in a competitive arena where democratic standards have been deteriorating, and the political opposition is often in prison, hostage to armed groups or in exile.

Coupled with deterministic readings of the impact of climate change, which tend to neglect adaptability and resilience (Benjaminsen and Hiernaux 2019; McCullough *et al.* 2019; ICG 2020), several widespread analyses of the region's problems and challenges neglect the existence of deeper contention for political ordering, and therefore (re-) produce the illusion of socially engineered solutions, bypassing the question of existing leadership, legitimising ideas and political systems. A vivid illustration of this mode of analysis can be found in how policy challenges for the Sahel are discussed in *Nature* (Graves *et al.* 2019).

We argue that representations and responses that constitute the prevalent security approach to the region, while capturing some important aspects of the problem, are flawed and misleading, as they overlook the mode in which local, national and international governance is exercised. The articles that we present here rest on the idea that the 'spectralisation of the outlaw', that is, of the youth who decides to 'enter *Boko Haram*' and goes into the bush, that we observe in the public debate on the Sahel is problematic: we seek to clear any spectral aura surrounding the 'radical antagonists' to the existing political order in the Sahel. By doing away with any exceptionality, we seek to bring them back to historically grounded political analysis.

First and perhaps foremost, we do not start out from the idea that they are agents of the disorder that *empty* spaces produce. Instead, we hypothesise that they are a product of the *saturation* of governance practices, and that they settle in spaces whose structural, peripheral characteristics (social segmentation, demography, inequality, geographic remoteness) have been altered by a number of phenomena linked to globalisation. We take stock of the permissive conditions that allow for different hegemonic agendas, rules of the game and ordering principles to clash and connive with one another. In other words, while certainly not claiming neutrality about the values at stake, for analytical purposes we adopt a form of heuristic agnosticism: our research does not start out from an understanding of 'modernity threatened' by criminal subjects with obscurantist designs, but rather by asking whether, as the transnational circulation of commodities, people and ideas has intensified, but evident structural limits still persist, different, competing forms of modernity have emerged based on different perceptions of legitimacy, justice, integrity, reform and effectiveness. If so, the mechanisms of armed protection and extraction that destabilise the existing regional order do not stem from a power vacuum, but rather from power practices that stand in the way of building the capacity to deliver public goods: power practices that are increasingly perceived as oppressive and that are challenged by the availability of competing political agendas.

The latter include agendas put forward by what we call 'violent entrepreneurs': non-state armed actors possessing some kind of political agenda implemented together with

different types of income-generating activities. Violent entrepreneurs' attempt to rule by force and violence, but they also distribute resources, provide some level of order and offer protection for (at least parts of) the population in the areas they control, or attempt to control. As these violent entrepreneurs not only operate, but also have a stronger rooting, in local communities in peripheral areas of the Sahel than international community actors and their national allies, understanding how local communities attempt to negotiate and navigate the new social landscape that this confronts them with becomes crucial.

In such a context, questions such as lawfulness/unlawfulness, inclusion/marginalisation, confrontation/co-optation with respect to power should be read in light of the trajectory of those forces that Antonio Gramsci called 'historic blocs': there cannot be any understanding of crime and criminalisation that ignores how the outlaw or insurgent is a product of social, economic and political evolutions of polities and their *gouvernementalité*,<sup>5</sup> and how the latter in the Sahelian context appears permeable to external influence. Following Jean-François Bayart *et al.* (1997), we suggest that in order to understand multi-scalar governance in the Sahel one has to look at decades-long trends: we find it more useful to consider the necessity of hybridised strategies of government resulting from overlapping local historical paths and modern phenomena such as neoliberal transformations, democratisation and globalisation (for example, the privatisation of public services and the increasing leverage of the illicit over the licit), than to refer to more common notions such as 'failed states' that tend to measure substantive gaps vis-à-vis imported, ideal-types of states.

Against this background, discussing today's challenges in the Sahel in terms of 'insecure spaces' (Shaw and Mahadevan 2018) infested by narco-terrorists and institutionalised state corruption that has morphed into state capture by criminal groups, is simplistic and problematic because it paves the way for apolitical analyses that overlook "the livelihood-sustaining and security-providing aspects of alternative forms of non-state governance" (Cockayne and Lupel 2009, 10). Depending on a number of circumstances, which include strategic choices by government officials, activities beyond the law that are carried out in this space can be protected and sponsored by public authorities, their proxies, other local militias or even jihadists, in a dense network where counter-terror strategists too have to be selective in picking their battles and their allies.

Heavily sanctioned *de jure*, illicit activities are often considered socially legitimate and *de facto* selectively allowed: the fact that they are criminalised means that they are able to generate large money flows. A flow of cash that lubricates the clientelist machinery in a highly segmented and economically marginal social context feeds social mobility and shapes expectations: in other words, it affects political legitimacy, builds new forms of political influence and protection (that is, stability) until a new contender appears. Inasmuch as governments have kept distant from their impervious and inhospitable borderlands, negotiations among contenders can take place at times cordially albeit in the shadow of arms.<sup>6</sup> A problem arises when the new contender, no matter what part it has in

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<sup>5</sup>Jean-François Bayart (1993, 325) uses the Foucauldian concept of *gouvernementalité* to investigate the power relations in Sub-Saharan Africa as a complex reticulation and a mode of governing that "surrounded the whole set of institutions and powers that operated as of the advent of modern times in Africa", but at the same time failed to incorporate the totality of the political discourse.

<sup>6</sup>On arms flows in the Sahel, see Koné (2020).

a relations system, develops and pursues an agenda that envisions a different type of political order, not only locally, but also globally.

### **Insurgents' order?**

To come to terms with how insurgencies come about, how they seek different types of relationships with local populations and why people chose to join them, we must acknowledge that many current insurgencies no longer fit into established analytical categories. This is certainly the case of the insurgents in the Sahel.

In his examination of the diversity of armed insurgencies in Africa at the end of the 20th century, Christopher Clapham (1998, 6-7) distinguished between four broad groups of armed insurgencies:

- (1) liberation insurgencies, such as the anti-colonial nationalist movements (e.g., Mau Mau in Kenya);
- (2) separatist insurgencies (e.g., the Eritrean People's Liberation Front);
- (3) reform insurgencies (e.g., Museveni's National Resistance Army in Uganda);
- (4) warlord insurgencies (e.g., Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia and Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone).

The majority of recent insurgencies do not fit easily into any of the categories above: the only one that is still referred to frequently is the fourth, warlord insurgencies, and even that has lost most of its acclaimed analytical value (see Bøås and Dunn 2017). Thus, while Clapham's taxonomy still remains one of the best attempts to study insurgencies comparatively, the external and internal environments of contemporary insurgencies have changed significantly. It has been argued that for insurgent groups, the objective of armed conflict is not the defeat of the enemy in battle, but the continuation of fighting for profit (Keen 2000). While it is important to acknowledge the complex ways in which insurgencies have been exploiting opportunities provided to them by transformations in the global economy, explanations primarily focusing on the economic agendas of armed actors are highly problematic. Such a focus may help explain how some conflicts are sustained, but it rarely tells us much about why conflicts start in the first place. It would be a mistake, for example, to assume that the current conflict in the Sahel is only a by-product of the collusion of the forces of transnational crime with regional/international jihadists in the guise of a crime-terror nexus (see Bøås 2015; Strazzari 2014). The way in which more or less licit trade historically underlies phenomena of state-making and unmaking in the Sahara-Sahel region is much more complex (Strazzari and Zanoletti 2019).

While there is no doubt that illicit goods are transported across the Sahel (Frowd 2020), there is also a wide spectrum of projects of political and social resistance at play in the same area – some peaceful, others armed. Some of these projects have a rather secular origin, while others are anchored to religious inspirations; some are also involved in the transport and protection of illicit goods, which the lenses of micropolitical economy help decipher (Raineri and Strazzari 2015). Some of the people involved in this business are mainly profit seekers; others mainly aim to fund resistance projects. However, many are also involved to some extent in both smuggling operations and resistance projects as a coping strategy (Bøås 2015). Nor does an exclusive focus on illicit goods or natural

resource extraction explain why these incentives would have come to play such an important part in recent wars: in other words, the economic agenda research assumes that there is a profit motive on the part of the belligerents without exploring why or to what extent political-military actors become profit-seeking, market-based actors. To understand this transformation, we need to consider political, cultural and historical factors and avoid economic reductionism. This is precisely where we believe that this Special Issue has much to offer; its emphasis on the need to always contextualise conflict and conflict economies helps us approach existing power configurations and insurgencies as systems of relations: a broad spectrum of relational agents that dynamically attempt to navigate an evolving field – a field that is at the same time constantly changing and deeply entrenched in the politics of the people and place that spans decades and sometimes centuries.

To understand insurgencies and the insurgents in the Global South, we need a nuanced understanding of what war and violence are all about in this context. The conflicts are most often deeply embedded in the history of the people and place, not only in colonial history and the transformation to independent states, but, we dare say, in the totality of their history. Recent and distant pasts relate in direct – albeit sometimes rather unexpected – ways to ongoing processes of social change. For example, many of the events and relationships that characterise Sahel's recent history, including politics and political violence, are intimately entangled in people's perceptions of their social and ethnic identities, often referring to some almost mythical glorious past, the reverberation of whose narrative stands as a call to invert the course of decay foreshadowed by the gloomy present. These identity perceptions are no doubt social constructions, representations that are constantly negotiated, changing over time and often distorted and manipulated, particularly as a part of discourses of domination emanating from those in power in successive colonial and post-colonial regimes (see Atkinson 1994).

Armed struggle is always in a state of flux and fighting in the desert is, from a historical point of view, quintessentially fluid and elusive, hardly centred on the notion of decisive battle (Keegan 2011). As new technologies, strategies and pathways to resistance emerge, existing insurgencies attempt to adapt while new ones emerge. Global and regional forces – be they political, economic or social – impact on the context of the armed struggles in multiple, and often unpredictable, ways. In some cases, local causes of conflicts become interconnected, intertwined and layered to produce a constantly shifting landscape. It is therefore important to acknowledge that armed insurgencies are not only forces of disorder, but equally parts of emerging systems of governance. In fact, what we see today in the cases where armed insurgencies exist over a prolonged period of time, is that a monopolised system of governance has either broken down completely or been weakened to the extent that competing systems have emerged (Bøås and Dunn 2017).

These new systems are characterised by flexibility and adaptability, with actors competing for the role of nodal point between various networks of attempted informal governance. Such networks are characterised by an admixture of collaboration and competition. The territorial articulation of in-group identity, entitlement and social hierarchy in this challenging ecosystem is historically condensed around the idea of right of way (*droit de passage*), which can be contrasted to the idea of 'paper' borders demarcating property (Strazzari 2015). At times violent conflict flares up over who is in control of strategic territorial segments or resources. The fluidity of these networks can

be reflected in the continuing existence – but changing function – of regional and local, highly adaptive ‘Big Men’, whose easily shifting alliances constitute networks of governance that are connected with armed insurgencies.

Regardless of the internal dynamics, new networks of power and rule are constructed that challenge – and replace – existing systems of governance. What we see are complex, often kaleidoscopic political configurations that have shifted away from any aspiration to be monopolising systems of governance and patronage and can best be understood as a multitude of shifting alliances due to competition among networks of patronage. Networks operate on the basis of personal power: “The attainment of big-man status is [...] the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men” (Sahlins 1963, 289). These networks vary in depth, geographical reach and ability to penetrate the state, but all of them are unstable, changing and constantly adaptable. While they rest on some sort of common interests, participants do not necessarily share the same goals or have similar reasons for being involved.

The elevation to Big Man status does not follow one universal path. It varies in time and space and can be based on different combinations of power. However, in an area such as this where authority is always contested, it must include the ability to use force, to generate resources and, not least, to represent authority in and between the state and the informal. The historical example of the Sahel Big Man Ibrahim ag Bahanga illustrates this point. Ag Bahanga embarked on his Big Man career during the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s as a lesser rebel leader and gained control of a *commune* (division of local government) after the rebellion ended. He was involved in trade and smuggling; he led other rebellions, and at the same time, until his death in August 2011, maintained relationships with neighbouring governments, Algeria and Libya, as well as certain segments of the Malian government and administration. Thus, his status as a Big Man was not based only on one of these activities, but on the totality of them. The result was his ability to, if not control, at least influence and maintain different and also partly overlapping networks that in their own right did not have much commonality with regard to long-term objectives and strategy (Bøås 2015).

One can identify a number of Big Men along the Gao-Timbuktu axis today: Hanoune Ould Ali, Mohamed Ould Mataly, Mohamed Rouji, Dina Ould Daya (United Nations Panel of Experts 2019) are basically big traffickers (*gros trafiquants*) (that is, they can generate social and economic resources irrespective of Bamako’s direct patronage, even though they take advantage of it), who have strong influence on the interplay between the army, armed groups and local official/traditional authorities.

Some of these networks and the Big Men involved in them are therefore mainly about criminality (accumulation and coping), whereas others make use of such activities to finance various projects of resistance (secular and religious). This may bring different networks and their Big Men into conflict with each other, but conflict at certain times does not prevent collaboration and collusion at other times, suggesting that a nexus of transnational crime and global terrorism does not exist in a form that makes it possible to depict it as a fixed entity with permanent organisational features. Rather, the logic of these operations and networks is ambiguity and flexibility, and the actors involved are “flexians” who adapt themselves and their resources to the ever-

changing circumstances of the terrain in which they operate (see also Wedel 2009 or Guichaoua 2011).

This does not mean that plasticity knows no limits. Certain relationships and networks are not only more possible than others, but also more persistent. Ethnicity and kinship may matter, but so do the risks involved in certain relationships, no matter how profitable they may be. The important dimension to keep track of is how the tiles of the mosaic move: they compose, decompose and recompose at a level that is above the individual, where what is important are not only (or not so much) the very agents of violence (e.g., *katiba* X or Y), but rather, the nodal points in these networks of governance and violence, and their ability to keep up these networks across space and time (see also Bøås and Dunn 2017).

Thus, if we take recent conflict trends in the Sahel as an indication of the near future, the field is and will continue to be characterised by complicated conflicts in politically difficult terrains. Conflicts where no clear endgames are in sight, and where UN missions or other international interventions will be left to grapple with weak states run by increasingly unpopular national leaders with dubious levels of legitimacy. Such missions and interventions may therefore easily end up fighting or attempting to curb insurgents who are not only hard to beat militarily, but whose agendas also leave little if any room for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Also, such conflicts will very likely take place in areas of the world where local livelihoods are under pressure from a number of external shocks, including increased climatic variability, and where the states in question are rarely seen as being able to offer local populations much support. Often it will be the opposite: the state(s), and therefore those who back them, are locally seen as part of the problem and not the solution.

This ‘messiness’ of things to come is easily observable in a number of areas in which the UN and the international community at large are already engaged with various peace operations, such as Afghanistan, the border areas between Iraq and Syria and the Sahara-Sahel region. Here, international stabilisation efforts often flounder as they fail to comprehend local contexts, political economies and national sentiments. Even if there are certain commonalities that need to be thought through carefully, all the conflict areas in the Sahel come with their own set of unique challenges. Thus, even if underlying cleavages and conflict lines may be relatively permanent, we are also currently faced with a new type of insurgency that does not fit very well with the established conceptual categories. These new insurgents whom we can observe in the Sahel are not fighting solely for national liberation, or separatism, or a revolution in the traditional sense, or simply warlord profit-maximising. However, even if their objectives are none of these, they also contain traces of each and every one of them.

## Conclusion

What the examples above suggest is that the logic of the relationship between criminality, coping and resistance in the Sahel periphery can, to a certain degree, be described as “ships passing in the night”, but only if we remember that certain ‘ships’ pass more frequently than others. Nonetheless, what this leaves us with is a scenario where different competing Big Men vie for the role of nodal points between various networks of extra-legal governance: some mainly profit-driven, others combining income-generating

strategies with social and political objectives (social and religious), yet others simply aiming to get by (and hopefully thrive in the future). As the constellations of these networks change, these acts and behaviours are organised accordingly, although not formally or permanently. It is possible that various strategies of criminality, coping and resistance can be combined without necessarily losing sight of either immediate or long-term objectives. The outcome is a narrative-driven space of co-existence, collusion and conflict in which the conflation of different actors' interests, ideas and actions is highly likely to continue to feed analytical confusion, as well as misguided policy prescriptions (Boås 2015). This makes this region a social landscape in which insurgencies that can find a way to insert themselves between competing systems of governance to install their form of hybrid order will thrive.

Thus, we are left with a new wave of insurgencies that are both deeply local and anchored in global discourses, as branding has become an integral part of their strategy. They are religious fundamentalists, but also pragmatists, extremely capable in appropriating local grievances for their own purposes. As the cases studied in this Special Issue indicate, most of these insurgents operate in environments where local livelihoods are under immense pressure from a combination of increased climatic variability and the inability of the states to address this adequately.

These groups are not necessarily intent on permanent territorial control, as this would entail certain costs, but rather on obtaining a social grip on targeted populations. This means that they do not fit into the stark dichotomy of stationary vs roaming established by Mancur Olson (2000); instead, they occupy an intermediate position: these are insurgencies that operate what we call 'sporadic governance', a type of mobile governance that comes and goes, sporadically offering some governance services. As the jihadi insurgents of the Sahara-Sahel region are not seeking to capture the state or break away from a state, but attack the state's administrative presence (e.g., judges, police, mayors, school teachers) and challenge the very notion of the modern state, there is no or only a very narrow margin for a negotiated settlement. Negotiation, when evoked, as in the case of the Qaedist formations in Mali, is a tactical step to consolidate positions. Finally, as the majority of these insurgencies also seems to be very hard to beat militarily, the UN and the international community in general may be left to deal with conflict situations that become more and more difficult to solve.

The result is wars without frontiers or possible endgames (at least in the short to medium term). International forces and national allies can prevent complete state collapse and offer capital cities partial protection, but they cannot win a decisive military victory over the insurgents. Prominent jihadi leaders can be eliminated, but the trajectory of insurgencies in the Sahel shows that when one leader falls, others emerge, and if one group splinters into dysfunctionality, new ones or re-constellations of old ones step forward.

In May 2020, no celebrations were held for the fifth anniversary of the Algiers accord that announced a roadmap for peace in Mali. Meanwhile, violent clashes multiplied in peripheral areas: jihadist attacks against the armed forces (border with Mauritania), clashes among drug-smuggling armed groups (border with Niger) and clashes involving civilians protesting against new barbed wire fences (along the Algerian border). A couple of months later, while the capital, Bamako, was flooded by mass protests against the presidency, the UN Panel of Experts highlighted the responsibility of top state security officers in the mass killing of civilians. The military coup that followed paved the way for

a domestic transition whose uncertainties speak to neighbouring countries' difficult electoral paths as well.

In a scenario where no contender is able to impose a larger and deeper political order, in which an interdependent system of various degrees of clientelism, sponsorship and semi-autonomous Big Men emerges, it is plausible that we will see more willingness on the part of international community actors, national elites and insurgents to bargain for the 'beauty of imperfect compromises' with a growing role for politico-religious figures. Developments in Mali around the political role of important conservative imams such as Mahmoud Dicko could be a case in point.

The answer to the question of how resilient constitutional democracies are in a region where jihadist propaganda represents a struggle between those who can afford air conditioning and those who can't, is ultimately dependent on how socially and politically inclusive they prove to be while remaining anchored to the protection of fundamental rights. Given that the international system is increasingly characterised by competition and divergent forms of intervention, and less on rules, it is hard to envision political formulas based on national territorial homogeneity in the region. One hypothesis is a return to the ancient pragmatism of the Sahel trade, where alliances and decentralised violence are combined in a form or order that Thomas Hüsken and Georg Klute (2017) call heterarchical – a social order without state structures, but still with enough predictability for some kind of social and economic life with a long-term perspective. Another scenario is one of pervasive (para)militarisation of both 'secured' urban centres and rural peripheries. Several forms of social and territorial contracts can be combined in the hybrid order to come.

The challenge with predicting Sahel scenarios is that the region's future is both completely open and closed at the same time. It is open as the social landscape of the region is moving into uncharted territory, with old forms of state and non-state governance increasingly undermined by violent conflict, and thick uncertainty about hegemony and intervention characterising the current phase of the international system. However, unfortunately, it is also closed: in a region whose economy is based on circulation, the emerging security model based on enforcing demarcations and restricting mobility will be increasingly challenged by the already tangible combination of population growth and climate change effects. If anyone is able to acquire a more hegemonic position, this is what they will be confronted with.

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