



Changing Patterns of violence in the Western Sahel.



MA DISSERTATION IN POLITICAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates how changing patterns of violence in Mali and Burkina Faso have resulted in the formation of alternative government systems by jihadist groups and community militias. By analysing the interactions between these non-state actors, state institutions, and foreign intermediaries, the study highlights the significant impacts of socioeconomic problems, corruption, ethnic and religious tensions, and climate change, which have given rise to space where power and control of the state is contested.

In Mali, violence erupted in 2012 with an insurgent movement that was exacerbated by subsequent coups and political crises, eroding state authority and supporting the growth of multiple armed groups most notably via jihadist insurgency. Violence in Burkina Faso began to grow in 2015, and it was exacerbated with the 2022 coup, which altered the dynamics of domestic and foreign alliances, including the Russian Wagner Group's involvement. Both countries are currently governed by the military, although in both cases the military has struggled to calm violence. The frequency of attacks increasing drastically between 2015 and 2024.

Therefore, the dynamics of violence in both countries are examined in relation to the restructuring of local and state interactions and the emergence of new forms of governance. This involves drawing on theories such as Mary Kaldor's "new wars," who emphasises the relationship between identity politics and armed conflict. Through a comparative examination, the study reveals parallels as well as differences in the ways that violence has impacted state formation and impacted Sahelian populations in Mali and Burkina Faso.

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Introduction.

Changing Patterns of Violence in Mali and Burkina Faso.



Liptako-Gourma region: Epicentre of Violence in Burkina Faso and Mali

In June 2024 Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate, claimed responsibility for a devastating attack on Burkina Faso's military killing 107 men in the Mansila region (Al Jazeera 2024 *Al-Qaeda affiliate claims responsibility for June attack in Burkina Faso*). Similarly in Mali 40 people were killed in an attack on Djiguibombo village in central Mali on the 1st of July 2024. The village is in the Mopti region, a hotspot for violence perpetrated by al-Qaeda linked groups as well as local community militias such as the Dogon. (Al Jazeera News 2024).

The Liptako-Gourma region encompassing parts of Mali and Burkina Faso, has become a focal point of intense violence impacting local communities. This dissertation aims to explore how different forms of violence ranging from terrorist attacks and torture to abductions, theft, and extortion are reshaping governance and state dynamics in these countries. Recent surges in violence include both state forces such as the military and

foreign troops, and non-state actors like local militias and religious insurgent groups. Each group operates with distinct motivations, from addressing local grievances and restoring cultural and religious norms to exploiting the region's instability for their own gain.

The violence in the Sahel is driven by a complex interplay of factors: competition for resources, ethnic and religious identities, widespread corruption, and the legacy of French neocolonial policies that exert monetary and resource influence. These drivers intersect to create an environment of chronic instability and conflict. This dissertation will closely examine how these patterns of violence affect governance structures, influence state formation and dissolution, and ultimately impact local communities in the Sahel. By analysing these dynamics, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current crisis and its implications for regional stability and development.

The recurring coups in Mali and Burkina Faso have significantly eroded state authority, contributing to a broader pattern of governance instability in the Sahel region (Ngima 2023). These coups have not only created power vacuums but have also fuelled a cycle of violence and instability that undermines the legitimacy of government institutions.

In the Sahel the erosion of state authority has far-reaching consequences for governance and regional stability. The persistent violence driven by both insurgent groups and intercommunal conflicts, exacerbates the sense of lawlessness and insecurity. This instability weakens governmental control and undermines the ability of the state to provide basic services and maintain public order. As a result, citizens may increasingly view the state as ineffective or irrelevant, leading to a further delegitimization of the government.

Objectives of the Study

The dissertation seeks to achieve three primary objectives. The first objective is to explain how violence has increasingly become politicized as a strategic instrument to address social, environmental, and economic challenges in the Sahel region. This involves analysing how violence has shifted from being a mere consequence of conflict to a deliberate instrument for achieving political and economic goals. The second objective builds upon this by exploring the role of ethnic and religious tensions, alongside neo-colonial policies, in the emergence of violent groups and hybrid forms of governance. These factors contribute to the rise of alternative governance structures that seek to

address both security threats and socio-economic challenges, further eroding the legitimacy of formal state institutions. The final objective examines the broader implications of this violence on state formation and dissolution, focusing on the diminishing capacity of state institutions in Mali and Burkina Faso and its impact on the wider Sahel region. This includes understanding the growing importance of informal institutions as state authority wanes. As noted by Patrick Chabal and Jean -Pascal Daloz, “the expanding informalization of political violence indicates that many players employ violence for political, economic, and social gain through the instrumental exploitation of disorder” (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 79). The criminalization of the states of Mali and Burkina Faso has significant implications for regional stability, underscoring the need to examine the emergence and impact of insurgent groups and militias on the entire Sahel region.

Research Questions

The Research questions will therefore be set up as follows:

1. In what way has the politicization of violence in West Africa evolved?
2. What influence has Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism exerted on Ethnoreligious groups in the Sahel region?
3. To what extent has violence contributed to the emergence of Informal governance mechanisms in Burkina Faso and Mali?
4. How have Informal Institutions of governance affected the state and local communities in Burkina Faso and Mali?

Research Methods

This dissertation employs a qualitative research methodology as it covers the explanatory and descriptive elements of the research process (Baxter and Jack 2008: 554). Given the complexity of the Sahelian crises the qualitative research method was selected as it encompasses an in-depth interrogation of the historical, social, economic and political factors that have shaped the Sahel region. However, this would be redundant without selecting the appropriate methodology and theoretical frameworks used to conduct a meaningful investigation that would seek to establish the gaps in the study of

seek to identify how different agents both local and international function in a contested environment.

The comparative case study is a technique used to systematically analyse the similarities and differences across cases (Ragin 1987: 288). The erosion of governance in Mali and Burkina Faso has created a fertile ground for conflict and violence. Weak state institutions, exemplified by the failure to decentralize power effectively reform the security sector, or establish a just legal system, have left vast swathes of territory ungoverned. The emergence of military rule has further exacerbated the situation as these military regimes are unable to solve the problems of poor governance rather their oppressive regimes further isolate local communities.

Corruption, endemic in both countries, has diverted public resources away from essential services and fuelled social discontent. These conditions have empowered non-state actors, including armed groups and criminal networks, to fill the power vacuum, exploit local populations, and destabilize entire regions. For instance, the lack of accountability for human rights abuses in Mali has emboldened extremist groups, while the mismanagement of land and water resources in Burkina Faso has exacerbated ethnic tensions.

Emergence of coups and their impact on local governance

The starting point for this analysis is to would be to better understand the emergence and surge of coups in both Mali and Burkina Faso. These coups have been largely driven by government failures to effectively address critical security and economic challenges, coupled with rising insurgent attacks and communal conflicts in regions where state presence is minimal. The resulting instability has created a fertile ground for the emergence and expansion of non-state armed groups, which increasingly act as alternative governance structures. This dynamic has exacerbated existing tensions and further undermined state-building efforts, as these groups often challenge state authority and provide their own forms of governance in areas where the formal state is either absent or ineffective.

In March 2012 the first coup in Mali occurred, with the military overthrowing the democratically elected government of Amadou Toumani Toure. This coup was a result of

the army's dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion (Cascais 2022). Mali experienced two more coups in 2020 and 2021. The first one on August 18, 2020, removed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita from power and was orchestrated by Colonel Assimi Goïta. The ousted president was criticized for neglecting the worsening security situation amidst increasing insurgent attacks and widespread corruption among Malian state officials (Arab Center Washington 2023). Colonel Bah Ndaw, former defense minister, took over government on September 25, 2020. However, he immediately battled with the military over differences with the cabinet change. Colonel Assimi Goïta led another coup to depose President Ndaw and reshuffle the cabinet. The Constitutional Court appointed Goïta as head of the transitional government. (Arab Center Washington 2023).

Burkina Faso has also experienced a series of coups after Mali. Two coups occurred in 2022. The first one in January ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré due to his perceived failure to address the escalating jihadist insurgency attacks. Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was made president however, his government also struggled to contain the escalating insurgent violence leading to a second coup in September 2022 where Captain Ibrahim Traoré became president. (France 24 News 2022).

The recurrent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso have significantly undermined state authority and exacerbated existing security challenges. The 2012 coup in Mali, triggered by the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion, initiated a cycle of instability that spilled into Burkina Faso. Subsequent coups in both countries, driven by factors such as corruption, economic mismanagement, and the inability to counter insurgencies, have further weakened state institutions this as a result has led to an emergence of key State and non-state actors.

The Sahel is characterized by its permeable boundaries, fluid identities, and diverse political and economic structures (Villalón 2022:16). With around 150 million inhabitants, this area encompasses a wide range of ethnicities, including the Fulani, Tuareg, Hausa, Kanuri, Songhai, Bambara, Zarma, Mossi, Dogon, and Arab societies (Dieng 2022:765). Each community contributes unique cultural, linguistic, and economic practices, such as

pastoral nomadism, farming, and commerce, which enhance the diverse cultural heritage of the region. However, such ethnic divisions have been exploited by both state and non-state actors to mobilize support, justify violence and control territory local conflict have arisen due to resource competition and access to land in areas such as Liptako Gourma region (Lyammouri 2020:4). The increasing influence of climate change has led to a decrease in precipitation, resulting in extended droughts that have triggered conflicts among different groups competing for water and grazing areas. Agriculture is the Sahel's largest economic sector, accounting for a third of its total GDP and makes up 75 percent of its employment (Monnier and Maiga, 2022). Climate change has particularly affected pastoralist communities, whose traditional livelihoods are increasingly threatened. As herders encroach upon farmland in search of grazing land, tensions with farmers have escalated, often along ethnic and religious lines. The Fulani, a predominantly nomadic ethnic group, have been involved in numerous conflicts with sedentary agricultural communities, such as the Dogon in Mali and the Mossi in Burkina Faso.

These dynamics are further complicated by the involvement of state security forces and external actors, including France and Russia's Wagner Group, that are seeking to maintain economic and political influence within the region. The French military presence in Mali and Burkina Faso was initially welcomed with strategical military operation taking place to quell the Insurgent violence, "France has had troops in West Africa's Sahel region since 2013 when it helped drive Islamic extremists from power in northern Mali" (Mednick, 2023).

However there has been increased criticism from local people and military juntas, who claim France's military presence has brought little results as Islamist violence continues to escalate. The military juntas of Burkina Faso and Mali have voiced the need to terminate diplomatic ties with France and in November 2022 the removal of French troops began in the region. These regimes turned to Russia and the private military group Wagner, where they received both diplomatic and military support. Through the Wagner Group, Moscow has provided the country with a four-hundred-strong contingent of mercenaries to combat jihadist groups (Stronski 2023). Wagner's support, however, has raised worries about the group's operations. The payment for these military operations has come in the form of mining concessions given by the local regimes as compensation

for their services rendered, "Wagner was operating in a well-established tradition: "There is a standard Russian *modus operandi*, which is that you cover the operational costs with parallel business activity in Africa primarily through mining concessions." (Inwood and Tacchi 2024).

Wagner's exploitation of the region's mineral wealth has exacerbated instability in Mali and Burkina Faso. For instance, in Mali, Wagner's involvement in gold mining has fuelled conflict between armed groups like the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and pro-government militias (Parens 2022:5). These groups are vying for control of lucrative mining sites. Moreover, the group's close ties to the Malian junta, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, have allowed it to operate with impunity, undermining the rule of law and contributing to corruption.

Burkina Faso, on the other hand, has shown a more cautious approach to Wagner. While the country faces similar security challenges the government has opted for a more official relationship with Russia, deploying the "African Corps". The first group was deployed in January 2024 and were set to assist the Burkina Faso government in providing security to vulnerable communities (Abdul, 2024)

The involvement of Russian forces, both through the Wagner Group and the official military, has exacerbated instability in Mali and Burkina Faso. By exploiting ethnic divisions, undermining governance, and fuelling extremism, these actors have contributed to a deteriorating security situation in the region. Their presence has also intensified geopolitical competition, creating a complex and volatile environment.

It is important to take note of when this violence emerged, and it can be traced back to 2012. In 2012 a civil war broke out led by Tuareg fighters a majority ethnic group in the Kidal region of northeastern Mali. These fighters had returned from neighbouring Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and took over key towns that include Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal (Ravnskilde 2013: 9). The reason for this rebellion was linked to the marginalisation of the Bamako government providing limited economic opportunities and service delivery in northeastern Mali (BBC news 2012). By taking over this region a power vacuum was created and Islamic militant groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

(AQIM) exploited the lack of state presence and was able to take control of the region through violent attacks on civil authorities and communities. (Ravnkilde 2013:11).

The Tuareg rebellion in Mali marked a pivotal turning point for the Sahel region and particularly Burkina Faso. The conflict in Mali resulted in a substantial displacement of refugees who sought refuge across porous borders, primarily into neighbouring Burkina Faso. This influx, while driven by humanitarian needs inadvertently facilitated the infiltration of extremist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) into Burkina Faso. Historically known for its relative stability, Burkina Faso began experiencing a sharp escalation in violent attacks targeting both government entities and civilians from 2015 onwards because of the deteriorating governance structures in the state. This trend was underscored by the kidnapping of Romanian national Iulian Ghergut in 2015 by the Al Mourabitoun group later becoming the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Berger 2023:8). This was followed by the subsequent attack on the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou in 2016, resulting in the deaths of over 30 individuals from 18 countries (Onuoha 2016: 4).

These incidences present an illustration as to how violence and shifting patterns within the Sahel region has emerged. These patterns of violence have not only been aimed at officials of the state, but civilians have actively been targeted all to compete for power and influence within Mali and Burkina Faso. The Sahel region has experienced a dramatic surge in terrorism over the past decade, transforming it into the global epicentre of violence. Terrorism-related deaths in the region have skyrocketed by a staggering 2,860% over the past 10 years, with a corresponding 1,266% increase in incidents (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, over 12,000 people, most of whom were civilians, were killed in 2023. At least 3 million people are internally displaced in the region, including more than 2.1 million in Burkina Faso alone (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024).

The underlying factors driving this crisis are complex and interconnected and include climate change, governance challenges, poverty, and regional instability. The shifting patterns of violence in the region highlights the importance of understanding why governments have been unable to resolve growing grievances amongst several

communities. Weak governance, characterized by corruption and instability, has created power contests exploited by armed groups. The abundance of natural resources, particularly gold, has fuelled conflict as various factions compete for control. Additionally, the porous borders and the region's susceptibility to climate change have exacerbated the crisis, leading to increased competition for resources, displacement, and the spread of extremist ideologies. The table below looks at the specific drivers of violence with Burkina Faso and Mali.

Drivers of Violence in the Sahel

	Colonial Legacies	Jihadism	Poor Governance	Ethnic Tensions	Environment Scarcity	Corruption
Mali	X	X	X	X		X
Burkina Faso	X		X		X	X

Case Selection

Mali and Burkina Faso share a history marked by colonial legacies and post-independence struggles that have significantly shaped their contemporary political landscapes. Both nations were part of French West Africa and gained independence in the early 1960s, inheriting weak administrative structures and economies heavily reliant on primary exports. This historical context has led to similar challenges in state-building and governance (Bøås, 2019)

Mali, with its vast arid northern regions, has experienced persistent instability driven by ethnic and religious tensions. The country’s reliance on commodities like cotton and gold has intensified regional disparities and contributed to recurring insurgencies, particularly among Tuareg and Islamist groups. Political instability, exemplified by frequent coups, further destabilizes the country and exacerbates violence (Freedom House, 2023).

Burkina Faso presents a different but complementary case. Although it also grapples with economic challenges and ethnic tensions, its recent history includes notable incidents such as the 2015 and 2021 coups, which have highlighted the impact of political instability on state effectiveness. Burkina Faso's violence is often driven by competition over resources and ethnic conflicts between groups like the Mossi and Fulani, with extremist groups exploiting these local grievances (International Crisis Group, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Similarities of Mali and Burkina Faso

The challenges currently faced in Burkina Faso and Mali can be attributed to key historical processes of colonialism and post-colonial structural reforms introduced by the World Bank, the extraction of natural resources by foreign allies and local elites, which hindered the state's ability to foster economic growth and development. This has had an adverse effect on the overall development in both Mali and Burkina Faso with by end of 2020 it was reported by the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization that close to 15.5 million people were food insecure with this number steadily increasing. (DLewis, 2021)

The presence of French has also led to the deterioration of the local community's confidence in them and local government to quell the rise Jihadist insurgent attacks. These issues have a dual impact on the Sahelian nations. Firstly, local elites often manipulated their authority to undermine already fragile institutions for personal benefit, severely weakening governmental capacity and redirecting vital resources away from the local population. Secondly, the exploitation of resources intensified due to the expanding interests of French foreign policy in the region, leading to increased military involvement as a strategic focus in the area. As a result, various actors emerged in response to this.

Examining the complicity and accountability of the French in the region is important for two main reasons. Firstly, by critically engaging in the literature surrounding French forces provides a post-colonial analysis of their reasons and interest within the region. This has a direct impact on the social, political and economic institutions within the Sahel and its effect on its structural capacity of governance and democracy. Secondly the French discourse notably the concept of *Francafrique* refers to the complex system of political, economic, and military relationships between France and its former colonies in Africa,

characterized by neo-colonialism, paternalism, and corruption. (Avila and Quinn 2023:51). A critique of the French presence and their activities have rather fuelled and created anti neo colonialist sentiment and this has been channelled through the growing discontents of government elites manipulating their power to further neo colonial policies of the French.

Situated in the core of the Sahelian belt, the Liptako-Gourma area encompasses the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, establishing a significant economic zone characterized by substantial agropastoral and mining prospects, as well as a considerable youthful population. (International Organization for Migration, 2021). This region serves as a focal point for analysis due to the prevalence of conflicts, primarily attributed to competition over land by local communities that engage in diverse agricultural, pastoral, mining, and fishing activities. The exacerbation of these challenges by climate change is notable, as it adversely affects activities such as livestock herding and rainfed agriculture, while presenting risks to livelihoods and food security through elevated temperatures and prolonged periods of droughts.

Both countries have a diverse ethnic group that have been facing increasing communal tension over resources. The Dogon (pastoralist farmers) and Fulani (nomadic herders) communities have been in conflict over land and access to scarce resources, such as water points, have deteriorated since 2015 in central and northern Mali (Human Rights Watch Report, 2018). Similarly in Burkina Faso the Dogon sedentary farmers are also forming ethnic militias to protect their own resources from competing groups like the Fulani.

The rise of Islamic Insurgents groups in the Sahel has been linked closely to the strengthening of insurgent governance within the region. The emergence of local insurgent groups within Burkina Faso and Mali includes groups under Jama't at Nursat al-Islam (JNIM). Ansar al-Din, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Mourabitoun in Mali operate in Mali and in Burkina Faso it is JNIM encompassing ISIS-GS and Ansarul Islam. They emerged because of their use of exploiting local grievances amongst civilians the lack of state institutions has increasingly disenfranchised through corruption and marginalisation of rural communities. By promising the social services, protection and

justice they have successfully been able to recruit large amounts of local “A growing number of people in the centre are receptive to Islamic law because of a “perceived entanglement of local elites with a corrupt federal state” and an assumption that radical Islamist forces can “purify the region from all the sins allegedly brought by democracy” (International Crisis Group 2015: 13).

These similarities indicate shared characteristics of a declining state, increasing ethnic strife, and environmental shifts which have magnified the vulnerabilities of communities. The connection made highlights the evolution of violence in response to distinct challenges encountered by these communities. Nevertheless, it would be ineffective to solely emphasize the similarities. This is since the study is based on a comparative methodology aimed at comprehending the origins of violence in the region. The differences raised therefore seek to emphasise how emerging violent patterns cannot be viewed in a singular lens but rather it serves to illustrate the need to understand how violence can shift governance institutions.

Differences

The differences between Burkina Faso and Mali highlight how unique combinations of economic, ethnic, political, and environmental factors shape the patterns of violence in each country. Burkina Faso’s violence is driven by local grievances, ethnic tensions, and economic vulnerabilities primarily in rural areas, while Mali’s conflicts are more deeply rooted in ethnic and religious tensions, compounded by severe political instability and environmental challenges.

In Burkina Faso, violence frequently arises from disputes over land utilization and resources, exacerbated by the impacts of climate change and economic inequalities. Specifically, conflicts between herders and farmers regarding grazing territories have intensified, resulting in significant displacement and humanitarian emergencies. The escalation of violence in the Burkina Faso context is deeply rooted in ethnic identities and the challenge of state marginalization of ethnic groups. Groups that include Koglwéogo stand in by performing functions of the state that typically include, “the Koglwéogo have been involved in procedures for settlement of land disputes and harming and stigmatising the Fulani community” (Tisseron 2021:15).

In contrast, Mali's violence stems largely from extremist groups like Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS). This growing instability in Mali began with the 2012 Tuareg secessionist movement in Northern Mali, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) (Kim and Kim 2024: 198). The MNLA, predominantly Tuareg fighters, sought independence due to perceived marginalization by the central government in Bamako. Their rebellion created a power vacuum in the north, which was exploited by Islamist extremist groups. This escalation of insurgent violence not only deepened the conflict but also triggered a military coup in Bamako in 2012 precipitating a prolonged crisis affecting Mali and a spill over into the broader Sahel region.

In comparing Burkina Faso and Mali, their economic contexts reveal how differing vulnerabilities shape patterns of violence and instability. Burkina Faso's economy is predominantly agrarian, with high poverty rates concentrated in rural areas and limited diversification beyond traditional crops like millet and sorghum. This localized economic strain has contributed to unrest in the region, where extremist groups such as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) exploit economic vulnerabilities related to land and resource access to fuel local conflicts (International Crisis Group, 2021).

In contrast, Mali's economy relies heavily on commodities like cotton and gold, making it sensitive to global market fluctuations. Economic instability, particularly from volatile gold prices and falling cotton prices, has intensified regional disparities and contributed to the rise of insurgent groups. For instance, declining cotton prices have exacerbated economic hardship, further inflaming tensions in the north of the country where competition over resources is fierce (World Bank, 2023).

The cases of Mali and Burkina Faso offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of violence and state instability in the Sahel. Both countries, despite their shared colonial histories and similar post-independence challenges, present unique contexts that illuminate how communities respond to deteriorating stability and its broader implications for statehood. By evaluating these two countries the study aims to shed light on the complex interactions between state failure and governance, the effect it has on local communities and evolving patterns of violence.

To facilitate this analysis, the table below identifies key drivers of violence including colonial legacies, jihadism, ethnic tensions, and poor governance. These drivers of violence allow the establishment of the primary variables that assess the impact of violence within the state by shedding light on the groups involved in carrying out the violence and what they seek to achieve.

These variables include the types of actors involved in violence, their motivations and grievances, and the specific activities they engage in. Setting up these variables is very important as it clarifies the scope of analysis, enables comparative analysis between Mali and Burkina Faso identifies patterns and trends in violence and enhances understanding of the implications for governance and local communities. By examining how these drivers manifest differently in each country, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how violence shapes governance and affects local communities in the Sahel.

Chapter Organization

The dissertation will be structured as follows. The initial chapter establishes the methodologies employed to ensure a comprehensive approach to understanding the changing patterns of violence in the Sahel region and its impact on state formation and dissolution. By identifying the key drivers of violence in the region, the section therefore establishes how the variables within our two case studies can be measured. The three central variables that will be utilised for a comparative analysis include the types of actors involved in violence, their motivations and grievances, and the specific activities they engage in. This demonstrates how violence instigated by different non-state actors that have organised through Ethnic and religious identities has progressed over the years. Additionally, the first chapter also justifies a comparative analysis by identifying our case studies, Mali and Burkina Faso.

Chapter Two

The literature review will test the theoretical framework noted above to analyse violence and state instability in Mali and Burkina Faso. By applying Douglas North's theory on institutions, the review will assess how failures in both formal and informal institutions contribute to governance challenges and conflict. Clionadh Raleigh's focus on how power dynamics will elucidate the roles of various state and non-state actors in shaping conflict

patterns, while Mary Kaldor's "new wars" concept will help explore the influence of identity politics, globalization, and humanitarian interventions. Thomas Homer-Dixon's theories on scarcity and conflict will be used to evaluate how resource competition and environmental stress exacerbate state fragility. This allows to identify gaps in existing literature. The theoretical framework will set up the necessary theories that will be used as a lens to closely examine violence in the Sahel and its evolution in response to socio-economic threats. Douglas North's theory on institutions will provide insights into how formal rules, informal norms, and enforcement mechanisms shape governance and conflict. Complementing this, Clionadh Raleigh's focus on power dynamics will highlight the role of various actors beyond the state, while Mary Kaldor's concept of "new wars" will explore the impact of identity politics and globalization on contemporary conflicts. Additionally, Thomas Homer-Dixon's theories on scarcity and conflict will address how resource competition exacerbates state fragility. This combined approach will offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors driving violence and instability in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Chapter Three

The review will examine the historical context by means of the diverse processes that were implemented during different periods of history. By looking at how colonial and neo-colonial practices have historically affected nations, especially French influence, and analysing how ethnic and religious divisions are mobilized in each nation. This comprehensive strategy will offer a nuanced knowledge of the ways in which these variables interact to influence governance and violence, paving the way for a thorough individual investigation of the ways in which these dynamics appear in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Chapter Four and Five

The Fourth and Fifth chapters of this dissertation present empirical analyses of the contemporary actors and changing patterns of violence. These chapters aim to investigate the diverse actors participating in violence, which include both state and non-state entities, along with the motivations guiding their behaviours. By examining the specific forms of violent activities in each country, the analysis seeks to contextualize

violence within the broader political landscape. Highlighting its role as a political process influenced by competition for power and resources. This empirical research will utilize the previously identified variables that include the types of actors, their motivations, grievances, and the nature of the violence they engage in revealing the intricacies of how violence is carried out and its impact on governance. Through comparing the similarities and differences in violence between Mali and Burkina Faso, the chapters will confirm and enhance the theoretical insights established earlier, offering a deeper comprehension of the intricate dynamics shaping state instability and conflict in the Sahel.

Chapter Six

Chapter Five concludes the analysis by emphasising the role of violence in state formation and dissolution, as discussed in the preceding chapters. It highlights how violence becomes a strategic tool used to win over local populations, establish security, and provide resources to marginalized groups. In regions where the state is weak or absent, violence is employed by various actors to compete for power and establish alternative forms of governance. This violence is not merely a manifestation of criminality or ethnic-religious conflict but serves to create and sustain alternative governance structures through the provision of security and resources. Consequently, the presence of disorder and violence can lead to the emergence of new forms of political authority and governance.

Chapter Two Literature Review: Theorising Violence in the Sahel

Introduction

Understanding the complex dynamics of violence is imperative for comprehending its origins and impacts across different contexts. This literature review aims to explore scholarly perspectives on violence, focusing specifically on its drivers within the Sahel region. By looking at how the patterns of violence in Mali and Burkina Faso are changing and how that affects local communities and governance. The chapter aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how violence affects the political and social environment in the Sahel by analysing these processes.

To achieve this, the chapter will test theories from Clionadh Raleigh, Mary Kaldor, and Thomas Homer-Dixon against existing literature and empirical evidence from the two cases. Raleigh's theory on power contests will be employed to explore power dynamics that go beyond traditional state-centric views, focusing on how various actors, including local militias and extremist groups, negotiate and contest power. Kaldor's framework will help analyse how identity politics, globalization, and humanitarian interventions intersect with contemporary conflicts, impacting governance and community relations. Homer-Dixon's emphasis on resource scarcity and state fragility will be used to examine the root causes of conflict, particularly how environmental and resource-related pressures contribute to instability.

After reviewing the theoretical framework, the second section of the literature review will focus on conceptualizing violence in the Sahel. This section will explore key factors contributing to violence, with a particular emphasis on poor governance, religious and ethnic conflicts, and climate change. By critically examining existing literature, the review aims to identify the limitations of current analyses and demonstrate how the theoretical framework addresses these gaps. The central objective of this review is to understand how evolving patterns of violence influence state formation and disintegration in the Sahel, and to assess the implications for both local communities and the broader regional stability forming the argument of this dissertation.

Theoretical Framework

To construct a robust theoretical framework, this dissertation will examine the core components of Clionadh Raleigh's power contests, Mary Kaldor's new wars, and Thomas Homer-Dixon's scarcity, conflict, and violence theories. Raleigh's emphasis on power dynamics beyond state-centric perspectives and the agency of actors will be integrated with Kaldor's exploration of identity politics, globalization, and humanitarian intervention. Furthermore, Homer-Dixon's focus on resource scarcity and state fragility will be incorporated to examine the root causes of conflict. These theoretical lenses will be interwoven to create a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay of factors contributing to violence in the Sahel and the alternative forms of governance that is being created.

The characterization of Burkina Faso and Mali as ungoverned states, often is based on the absence of effective state control, oversimplifies the complex dynamics at play. Scholar Andrew Taylor notes this by characterising ungoverned spaces as “A place where the state or central government is unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern, or influence the local population” (Taylor 2016:6). While regions outside of these countries' capital cities have experienced limited state presence, labelling them as entirely ungoverned obscures the intricate power struggles between various actors. For instance, in Mali, the northern region has been a focal point of competition between the state, Tuareg rebel groups, and jihadist organizations (Toros 2019:3). Rather than a power vacuum, this region illustrates a complex power contest where control shifts over time. This has been argued by Clionadh Raleigh noting “violence between state and non-state actors across the boundaries and territories that are differentially governed, but this is not a function of power vacuums, but power contests” (Raleigh and Dowd 2013: 8). Raleigh further argues that these different actors create alternative forms of governance through the provision of security and other needs of local communities (Raleigh and Dowd 2013:12). Thus, emphasising the agency of non-state actors including armed groups and traditional leaders, in shaping governance and security. By focusing on these power dynamics and the underlying drivers of conflict, including resource competition and

identity-based grievances, a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the region's challenges emerges. Raleigh's emphasis on power dynamics beyond state-centric perspectives and the agency of actors will be integrated with Kaldor's exploration of identity politics, globalization, and humanitarian intervention.

Using Kaldor's New War theory, I argue that modern conflicts are distinct from wars before the era of globalization. According to Kaldor, these "new wars" are about identity politics and self-determination "in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars" (Kaldor 2013: 28). The growth in such identity politics is due "to the vacuum created by the absence of forward-looking projects and the failure of other sources of political legitimacy such as the state" (Kaldor 2013: 28). The characteristics of the New War theory emphasises two main characteristics that can be illustrated in the case of the Sahel. The theory proposes conflict is characterised by the failures of the state resulting in the emergence of non-state actors competing for natural resources and power over regions. (Kaldor 2013:29). These non-state actors include private militias, and organisations frequently structured based on a particular identity. Conflict is centred around ethnicity and religion rather than political beliefs. Kaldor's "new wars" framework provides a valuable lens through which to examine the emergence of alternative governance structures in Burkina Faso and Mali. This is exemplified by the rise of the region has witnessed the rise of both jihadist and self-defence militias which have established a degree of control over certain territories. These groups often impose their own rules and regulations, creating parallel governance structures that compete with the state, "Groups like the Katiba Macina and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara developed mobile courts to provide local justice where they could not establish a permanent presence. Some groups have gathered zakat (Islamic tax) from local people (Rupesinghe and Hibergh Naghizadeh, 2021).

This notion therefore looks at the next theoretical approach applied to understanding the complexities of the Sahel by examining state institutions and the emergence of alternative forms of governance. According to Douglas North institutions influence human interaction by defining and restricting the set of choices faced by individuals". These institutions can be defined as formal, and Informal and they will set up rules of how communities interact with each other (North 1990:23). Formal institutions are used to describe "the objective

rules and incentives arising from government regulation of individual and organisational actions" (Bruton et al 2010:23). These institutions are created by the state administration and consist of a legislature that is influenced by the state constitution and run by several state administrators. Formal institutions are frequently thought of as establishing legitimacy inside a state and fostering democratic values. However, State institutions in West Africa have been severely weakened because of "The post-colonial state's capacity to deliver and satisfy communal interest is limited by its dependency on the west, a rigid or fragile authority structure which prevents them from responding to, and meeting, the needs of various constituents" (Miall 1999: 74). North's institutional theory complements Kaldor's new wars framework by providing a deeper understanding of the underlying institutional structures that shape conflict and governance in the Sahel.

While Kaldor emphasizes the evolving nature of warfare and identity politics, Douglas North offers a valuable framework for analysing the institutional context within which these conflicts occur. North's theory emphasizes that both formal and informal institutions are crucial in shaping economic performance and governance through a set of rules and norms. According to North, "Institutions are the rules of the game of a society, or more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. In consequence, they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic" (North 1990:3). He further argues that the institutional framework consists of three key elements. Formal rules are written regulations and laws established by governments or organizations, including legal systems and policies. Informal norms refer to unwritten rules and cultural practices, such as societal customs and values, that influence behaviour. Enforcement mechanisms are the processes that ensure these rules and norms are applied consistently, involving the implementation of laws and sanctions to uphold compliance (North 1990:6). Together, these elements form the institutional framework that shapes human interaction and governance. However, if rules and norms cannot be effectively enforced, institutions become ineffective. Informal norms then begin to compete with formal norms, resulting in "the complex interaction between the State as a designer of formal rules and society as being bounded by its informal constraints" (North 1990:6).

Applying this theory to Mali and Burkina Faso illustrates how colonial legacies, economic vulnerabilities, and recent political upheavals particularly the wave of military coups has exacerbated institutional decay in both countries. The cases also show how informal rules are shaping the patterns of violence within the region. As formal institutions weaken in Mali and Burkina Faso, informal institutions are increasingly competed with state authority, leading to heightened violence and instability. In Mali, the rise of jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and local militias illustrates how the absence of effective state control has allowed informal power structures to dominate and resort to violence (International Crisis Group 2021). Similarly, in Burkina Faso, extremist groups such as Ansar ul Islam exploit the weak state presence to expand their influence (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023). The deterioration of the patrimonial state has undermined the government's monopoly on power, significantly impacting its ability to provide security and maintain control. As state institutions falter and struggle to assert authority in increasingly volatile regions, groups like Ansar ul Islam capitalize on these vulnerabilities to strengthen their presence, recruit local support, and establish control over territories. This exploitation of state weakness allows such extremist groups to flourish, deepening the insecurity and instability within Burkina Faso.

The arbitrary borders imposed by colonial powers have had a lasting impact on the institutional development of Mali and Burkina Faso. The border between these countries, established in 1919 from the Upper Senegal and Niger colony, did not consider the ethnic and linguistic groups living in the region. This created artificial divisions that have led to ongoing tensions and challenges in governance. For example, in Mali, the division of ethnic groups across borders has complicated resource management and service provision, contributing to regional inequalities and conflicts, "Ségou and Mopti regions in central Mali witnessed the deadliest events due to interethnic and intercommunity tensions in recent months and years. Clashes between Dogon and Fulani communities have resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians and the displacement of more than 50,000 people as of June 2019" (Tangara 2019:8). Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the legacy of colonial borders has led to fragmented ethnic groups and resource allocation issues, affecting state cohesion and stability.

The third approach that will be used examines the phenomenon of violence and the politicization of identities in response to resource scarcity and marginalization. Thomas Homer-Dixon defines environmental scarcity as the depletion of renewable resources like cropland, forests, river water, and fish stocks due to factors such as population growth, overconsumption, and unequal distribution (Homer-Dixon 1998:13). The main arguments in this context resonate with the ongoing situation in the Sahel region, where prolonged droughts, triggered by climate change, have intensified competition for limited agricultural land and water resources. An International Rescue Committee study highlights the growing frequency of climate-related shocks in the Central Sahel, where agriculture and herding employs 78% of the population. Temperatures in the region are rising at a rate 1.5 times that of the global average, with forecasts indicating a 2-4.3°C increase by 2080. (International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2023).

Homer-Dixon's argument holds significant importance in the analysis of this dissertation, as it does not solely concentrate on the discourse of environmental scarcity but also delves into the political implications it imposes on local communities. Ezenwa Olumba further reinforces Homer-Dixon's argument by emphasising that the issue at hand transcends the environmental aspect and encompasses the complexities of managing individuals, resources, and the environment. The concept of ethnic cohesion, the presence of "advantageous opportunities," and the mobilization of resources are believed to heighten the probability of conflict (Olumba 2024:184). By making use of this theoretical approach, it allows a better analysis of the two cases by understanding how violent conflict linked with population growth and environmental scarcity in the context of political history and structural forms of violence. It also helps avoid overlooking the effects of colonialism and economic globalisation by looking at the implication it has on Ethnic and Religious communities and their relationship with the state.

Theorising Violence in the Sahel

Violence in the Sahel is a multifaceted issue influenced by socioeconomic inequities, political instability, ethnic tensions, environmental scarcity, and foreign interventions. The theories reviewed aim to elucidate how these diverse factors are reshaping violence in

the region. By engaging with existing literature, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive analysis, highlighting how competing perspectives inform our understanding of state formation and disintegration. The review examines various literatures on African statehood and violence, aiming to identify gaps and enhance our understanding.

Violence

Violence in the Sahel refers to a complex set of conflicts marked by inter-ethnic tensions, struggle for scarce resources, and the actions of armed groups such as Islamist militants and criminal networks. It is fuelled by poor governance, historical grievances, economic disparities, and environmental stressors like climate change and desertification. These processes contribute to regional instability and humanitarian disasters (International Crisis Group, 2021). However, it is crucial to recognize the connection between violence and statehood. Violence has been directly related with power.

According to Bruno Charbonneau, violence serves a twofold purpose: as a disruptive act and as a weapon for manipulating narratives of geography and identity. He believes that violence serves as a political process, impacting the agency of people affected (Charbonneau, 2013:111). This emphasizes the critical perspective that violence in the Sahel is not only an expression of conflict but is actively used to question mainstream narratives surrounding the marginalization, insecurity, and exploitation of Sahelian people.

Poor governance and fragile states.

Literature on African states frequently employ terms such as "ungoverned states," "fragile states," and "weak states" to describe the complexities surrounding government actions that contribute to ongoing conflicts in the Sahel. Countries like Mali and Burkina Faso are often labelled as ungoverned spaces, that fails to capture the intricate dynamics of state formation and dissolution in the region. To fully understand the roots of violence in the Sahel, it is crucial to establish an appropriate conceptualization of the state that considers these complexities, and the unique challenges faced by these nations.

The traditional function of a state is to ensure the safety and protection of its citizens. Max Weber defines a state as having "a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber 1968:56). According to Weber, this monopoly is crucial for the state's legitimacy; any challenge to this monopoly is seen as a sign of a failed state. However, this Eurocentric perspective does not fully capture the complexities in regions like the Sahel, where state presence is often inconsistent and fragmented. Kaldor's theory of "new wars" offers a more nuanced understanding by emphasising the fragmentation of authority and the increasing role of non-state actors. In the Sahel, traditional leaders and local authorities frequently fill the governance gaps left by the state. These actors often play effective roles in providing security and managing local affairs, demonstrating that authority and legitimacy can emerge from sources other than the state's monopoly on violence. Kaldor's framework thus helps to reveal how governance and legitimacy in such contexts are shaped not only by the state but also by a variety of local and non-state actors, offering a more comprehensive understanding of statehood in places like Burkina Faso and Mali.

Catherine Boone further supports this perspective by identifying four characteristics of governments in West Africa "non-incorporated, indirectly present and non-extractive, indirectly present and extractive, and directly present and extractive" (Boone 2003: 28). Boone's classification of government characteristics provides valuable insight into the governance dynamics of the Sahel, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. For instance, in areas deemed non-incorporated such as parts of northern Mali, the state has little to no presence, allowing local militias and traditional leaders to fill the governance vacuum. In indirectly present and non-extractive regions, local communities often rely on traditional authorities to manage security and local affairs without state interference. Conversely, in some areas categorized as indirectly present and extractive, such as certain districts in Burkina Faso, the state exerts influence while extracting resources, leading to tensions among local populations. Finally, in regions characterized as directly present and extractive, such as urban centres in Mali, the state's strong presence is often coupled with resource extraction, which can foster resentment when adequate services are not provided. Kaldor's theory enriches this by providing a perspective through which to examine how these categories evolve in the setting of contemporary conflicts. For

example, Boone's categories reflect the varying state capacities in different locations, while Kaldor's theory helps explain why and how non-state actors frequently step in to fill governance gaps in areas with weak or extractive state presence.

These varying degrees of state authority illustrate the complexities of governance in the Sahel and highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of local dynamics to address ongoing conflicts and instability in the region. These categories illustrate the diverse ways states operate, often leading to the emergence of local governance structures that fill gaps left by weak state presence. Additionally, Mehler describes African state institutions as rooted in multiple power sources and holders, interconnected through a web of productive relationships, hierarchies, and alliances. This network is crucial in determining the depth and extent of power across state boundaries (Mehler 2004: 542). It is therefore important to look at the role of institutions within the state.

The Role of State Institutions

Institutions are best described as "a set of rules and procedures (both formal and informal) that structure social interactions by constraining and enabling actors' behaviour" (Helmke and Levitsky 2004:727). This definition underscores the importance of both formal and informal rules in shaping how individuals and groups interact within a society.

Helmke and Levitsky's approach is especially relevant to understanding the dynamics in Burkina Faso and Mali, where formal state institutions frequently coexist with informal governance organizations. Their theory demonstrates how informal institutions can complement, compete, or even undermine official organizations. In the Sahel, local governance organizations such as community leaders and militias frequently emerge to fill the state's inadequacies. Local militias and community leaders work independently to address security and governance challenges in places where the state's influence is restricted. Similarly, the Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) in Burkina Faso serves as a "justicier," resolving perceived injustices and grievances where the state and local elites are seen as unresponsive. These informal institutions adapt to local needs and conditions, demonstrating Helmke and Levitsky's argument that they often arise in response to deficiencies in formal institutions.

North's perspective on institutions adds another layer to this understanding. He argues that "institutions are the rules of the game of a society, or more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction" (North 1990:3). According to North, institutions consist of three key elements: formal rules, which include written regulations and laws established by governments or organizations; informal norms, which encompass unwritten rules and cultural practices that influence behaviour; and enforcement mechanisms, which are processes ensuring that these rules and norms are applied consistently through laws and sanctions (North 1990:6).

Integrating Helmke and Levitsky's and North's theories provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the situation in Burkina Faso and Mali. While formal institutions in these countries may be weak or inconsistent, informal institutions have evolved to address these gaps, creating a complex interplay between different types of rules and enforcement mechanisms. This interaction illustrates how the formal and informal elements of institutions collectively shape governance and social order in contexts where traditional state structures are challenged or fragmented.

Applying Helmke and Levitsky's theory of institutions to the situation in Burkina Faso highlights how informal networks and organizations, such as the Koglwéogo militia, interact with and impact formal state institutions. According to Helmke and Levitsky, informal institutions can either complement or challenge formal institutions depending on their roles and the context in which they operate. In Burkina Faso, the Koglwéogo militia's organizational structure, which includes officials, advisers, and spokespersons, closely mirrors that of the state, illustrating how informal institutions can adopt the characteristics of formal structures to assert their influence (Haavik et al 2022:333).

This dynamic underscores how informal institutions often emerge as alternatives to formal institutions when the latter are perceived as inadequate or ineffective. The Koglwéogo militia, by providing security and protection where the state falls short, demonstrates how non-state actors can step in to fulfil roles traditionally occupied by formal state institutions. This mirrors Helmke and Levitsky's view that informal institutions arise to address gaps and deficiencies in formal governance. However, these informal institutions can also

challenge and compete with state authority, highlighting a complex interplay where they both support and undermine formal structures.

In the broader African context, the rise of informal institutions, including patronage networks, clientelism, and corruption, often results from state failure and underdevelopment. These informal networks fill the void left by weak or absent state mechanisms, further complicating the governance landscape and illustrating the intricate relationship between formal and informal institutions in regions experiencing instability and conflict.

Sara Berry argues “colonial administrators did evolve an elaborate set of principles and institutions for formalising the conception and practice of indirect rule in fact they not only failed to preserve stable systems of traditional social order but promoted instability in local structures of authority” (Berry 1992:292). This is noteworthy because it asserts that the idea of traditional chief and governments still take up the same structure of colonial legacies than a continuation of the precolonial context. This continuity therefore places local communities collectively acting against these traditional forms of governance to establish governance that seeks to serve their needs. This is important because it indicates how the colonial state created structures that failed to adequately provide for local communities. Instead, networks of corruption and patronage were created and maintained by colonial governments and traditional elites at the detriment of local communities. Several West African countries attained independence by the 1960s. However, several of these states inherited poor institutions.

African leaders, however, faced significant challenges within these newly independent governments. Their task was to bring about social and economic development within cultures that were highly heterogeneous in terms of ethnicities and religions. This meant that multiple different ethnic groups frequently agitated for their own right to self-rule against central government’s authority.

Neopatrimonialism, characterized by practices like political corruption, patron-client networks, presidentialism, and regime hybridity, deeply influences both formal and informal institutions in Mali and Burkina Faso. Formally, it undermines governmental structures and legal systems through corruption and centralized power. Informally, it co-

opts traditional leaders and local elites, integrating them into patronage networks that operate alongside or even within official governance frameworks. This dual influence creates a complex governance environment where formal and informal institutions interact and often overlap, shaping political dynamics and governance outcomes in these countries. Political corruption, patron-client networks, presidentialism, and regime hybridity are all aspects of neopatrimonialism (Van de Walle 1994:459). Governments tend to ensure their legitimacy and permanence through personal networks, based on family, clan, tribe, ethnic group or social class, increasing favouritism, inequality and resentment between different social groups. These activities often involve the collaboration of politicians with powerful elites, often referred to as "Big Men." These individuals benefit from public resources, leading to the formation of complex patron-client networks. Bayart has described these networks as a "rhizomorphic form of the state," a sprawling and adaptable system of connections that permeates society (Bayart 1999:210). As these networks grow, local communities and regions can become increasingly marginalized. The weakening of the state can create opportunities for disorder and criminalization, contributing to the breakdown of governance and control.

States and Disorder as a political tool in Africa

Scholars Chabal and Daloz claim in their key work "Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument" speaks specifically to how disorder permits various parties to use chaos and violence to gain political influence and power, a process known as the Political Instrumentalization of disorder. Political instrumentalization of disorder is "the process in which political actors in Africa seek to maximise their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty, and sometimes even chaos that characterises most African politics" (Chabal and Daloz 1999:15). Their argument focuses upon the ways in which the formation of African states has been characterized by conflict and violence as individuals interact with the state to construct distinct political processes. Slavery, resource extraction, extraversion, and colonialism have all played a role in the contemporary African state's development.

Chabal and Daloz have argued that African governments have failed to achieve legitimacy within society, allowing other civil actors to challenge state hegemony, claiming

that "the state has been captured by civil society" (Chabal and Daloz 1999:26). This also departs from the Weberian framework of the state's monopoly on violence and emphasizes the role of civil society and its interaction with the state in resisting the state's political authority. The structural implication, however, is the integration of violence into political spheres allowing states and non-state actors to use violence to foster the growth of intricate webs of loyalty and patrimony among elites, as well as violent repercussions against actors or groups who opposed the state's legitimacy. For Chabal and Daloz, the struggle for legitimacy among African governments directly relates to the situations in Burkina Faso and Mali. In both countries, ineffective governance and weakened patronage networks have allowed civil society actors and non-state groups to challenge state authority. For example, in Mali, local militias have gained power in response to the government's inability to provide security, leading to a contested political landscape. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, community leaders and informal networks have emerged to fill governance gaps, often undermining the state's legitimacy. This competition for power not only perpetuates violence but also complicates citizens' relationships with both the state and non-state actors.

Traditional African societies prioritize community over the individual, leading to local governance influenced by ethnic and religious associations. As alternative forms of government emerge to provide security and governance, these factors shape how violence is organised and evolves, creating alliances based on ethnic, religious, and social ties. Individuals often seek to align themselves with those who are perceived as more powerful than the state. Chabal and Daloz note, "In the absence of an institutionally autonomous and reasonably impartial state providing protection to the country's population, it is important to retain relations with those in power." (Chabal and Daloz 1999:28). Therefore, it is essential to explore how both formal and informal institutions develop in Africa, and this analysis will be conducted using an appropriate framework

Ethnic Tension

Applying Mary Kaldor's theory of "new wars" to the role of ethnicity in the Sahel region provides valuable insights into how ethnic identities and cleavages shape conflict dynamics. Kaldor's theory focuses on the changing nature of contemporary warfare,

where traditional state-centric conflicts are increasingly replaced by wars that involve a mix of state and non-state actors, driven by identity politics and humanitarian concerns. In the context of the Sahel, Kaldor's theory helps to elucidate how ethnic identities are pivotal in shaping the nature of conflicts. According to Kaldor, new wars are characterized by their reliance on ethnic, religious, and ideological identities as primary drivers of violence. In the Sahel, ethnic cleavages significantly influence the patterns of violence, mobilization, and alliances. For instance, ethnic groups often engage in conflicts over resources and political representation, leading to violence that is deeply rooted in historical grievances and competition over scarce resources.

Kaldor's framework also highlights how the involvement of non-state actors, who frequently leverage ethnic identities to gain support and legitimacy, transforms the conflict landscape. Non-state actors such as armed groups and militias often exploit ethnic divisions to mobilize support, establish control, and undermine state authority. These actors use ethnic identities to construct narratives of injustice and exclusion, thereby exacerbating tensions and perpetuating violence.

Moreover, Kaldor's emphasis on the intersection of identity politics and warfare is evident in how ethnic diversity within non-state actors influences conflict dynamics. The internal organization of these groups often mirrors ethnic divides, which impacts their strategies and interactions with other actors. The regional dimensions of ethnic conflict, driven by cross-border ethnic ties and historical relationships, further complicate the security landscape, reinforcing the persistence and intensity of violence in the Sahel.

Crawford Young describes ethnicity as "a deeply rooted phenomenon marked by a sense of belonging and identification with a particular group, often associated with language, religion, and territorial origins." (Young 2004:324). However, understanding and conceptualising ethnicity is not an easy task, and it needs to move away from the notion that is static and unchanging. Various scholars have proposed ways of understanding ethnicity and its implication it has on how violence evolves and changes in relation to the political and socio-economic characteristics of a state.

Scholar Porto argues that ethnicity is often viewed as a "primordial or inherited group characteristic, "sometimes perceived as biologically based, while also serving as "an

instrument" used by individuals or elites to achieve material ends (Porto 2002: 7). Echoing this, Sisk emphasizes that ethnicity is socially constructed and manipulated by power-seeking elites within historically determined economic and social contexts (Sisk 1996: 12). This duality allows ethnicity to be a political tool, with identities that can "wax and wane" based on the capacity of political entrepreneurs to mobilize groups (Sisk 1996: 12).

While Crawford Young's theory provides a foundation for understanding ethnicity as a deeply rooted phenomenon, Sisk and Porto's perspectives offer valuable insights into its dynamic and instrumental nature. Sisk's social constructionist approach emphasizes the fluidity of ethnic identities, while Porto's instrumental perspective highlights their potential for manipulation. Together, these theories help fill the gap in Young's theory by recognizing the agency of individuals and groups in shaping their ethnic identities and by emphasizing the importance of understanding these identities within specific historical and social contexts.

In the Sahel, these dynamics are crucial, as ethnic identities have become highly contested due to colonial legacies that fostered division through arbitrary borders and the othering of groups. While ethnic affiliations themselves are not inherently violent, the historical context has led to significant competition and tension among groups. Traditional governance structures managed these disputes, but colonial interventions disrupted these mechanisms, contributing to the rise of ethnic violence in the region.

The French colonial policy in the Sahel combined assimilation and divide-and-rule strategies, tailored to their interests. The assimilation policy aimed to integrate local populations into the French nation and culture, promoting the adoption of the French language, higher education, and the abandonment of indigenous cultural practices (Soro 2021: 17). They further employed a policy of divide and rule; Peter Schaefer argues that this strategy involved supporting individuals willing to cooperate with colonial authorities, creating divisions among local communities to prevent alliances that could challenge colonial rule, and fostering distrust among local rulers (Schaefer 2004: 187). In Burkina Faso, this policy is exemplified by the French favouritism toward the Mossi ethnic group, placing them in various administrative roles and integrating them into the colonial

governance structure (Porto, 2002). This included positions as local chiefs and intermediaries, granting them authority over other ethnic groups. The lasting impact of this policy in the post-colonial state is evident as the Mossi's entrenched positions within the administration often led to disproportionate representation in governance, further alienating other groups and contributing to ongoing tensions (Porto, 2002).

Relating back to one of the strategies of divide and rule was that the colonial project focused on preferential treatment of groups and the marginalisation of Tuareg people in northern Mali, traditionally nomadic pastoralists, have frequently clashed with the central government over fundamental issues of resource access and political representation. These conflicts have manifested in several significant rebellions: in the early 1960s shortly after Mali's independence, from 1990 to 1995, and notably in 2012 (Ba 2014:7).

These uprisings are rooted in longstanding grievances over perceived economic and political marginalization by the predominantly southern-based government in Bamako. (Ba 2014:9). The Tuareg have historically demanded greater autonomy or independence, arguing that they have been neglected in terms of development projects, infrastructure, and representation in government. These rebellions have involved armed conflict and have been fuelled by competition over control of land, water resources, and grazing areas, exacerbated by climatic changes and demographic pressures. Therefore, the violence being employed is not aimed at addressing state deficiencies but rather seeks to leverage shared identity to collectively create a new state where their grievances can be addressed by representatives who share a common identity.

From an environmental standpoint, ethnicity often intensifies competition among various groups for critical natural resources like water and arable land, crucial for both pastoralism and agriculture, sustaining numerous livelihoods. For instance, in Mali's Office du Niger region, predominantly inhabited by Bambara farmers, conflicts frequently erupt over access to irrigation water. The Bambara heavily rely on irrigated farming, particularly for rice, leading to clashes with pastoralist communities such as the Fulani over water allocations from the Niger River and its tributaries (Saulnier, 2015). This scenario vividly illustrates how ethnic groups contend for limited resources, exacerbated by prolonged droughts that diminish water reserves. Furthermore, the deterioration of state services

exacerbates this crisis, with inadequate infrastructure and governance contributing to the marginalization and stigmatization of different ethnic groups. These factors deepen historical grievances and reinforce societal divisions, perpetuating a cycle where competition over scarce resources heightens ethnic tensions.

Ethnic tension in the Sahel can arise from several intersecting factors. Ethnicity often serves as a tool for achieving material ends, leading to competition over scarce resources like land and water, which exacerbates conflicts between groups. Additionally, elites may manipulate ethnic identities to rally support and consolidate power, fostering divisions and animosity among communities. Viewing ethnicity as a primordial characteristic can reinforce social fragmentation, resulting in a lack of cohesion and mutual distrust. Historical grievances and long-standing rivalries can resurface when groups feel marginalized or threatened, while the militarization of ethnic identities often leads to the formation of armed factions, perpetuating cycles of violence. Together, these dynamics create a complex environment where ethnic tensions can escalate into broader conflicts in the Sahel region.

Religious Tension and Insurgency

Islam spread to the Sahel region of West Africa over centuries through trade networks, scholarly exchanges, and cultural diffusion. Beginning in the eighth century, Muslim merchants and scholars travelled through the Sahara Desert along trade routes, introducing Islamic teachings to Sahelian kingdoms like Ghana, Mali, and Songhai (Niane, 1984). This gradual process of adoption integrated Islam with local customs, leading to the development of distinctive West African Islamic traditions (Levtzion & Pouwels 2000:549).

Jihad is often depicted as a struggle against perceived internal impurities within the state, closely linked to the pursuit of religious purification (Hansen 2019:10). However, this interpretation falls short in the Sahel, where the complexities of jihadist violence are far more nuanced. This reductionist view fails to address crucial factors underlying the emergence and proliferation of jihadism in the region. Scholar Amy Niang offers a more comprehensive analysis by arguing that the roots of violence are not solely Islamism, ethnicity, or cultural differences. Instead, they lie in the disintegration of essential

structures of livelihood and security (Niang 2014:135). This breakdown creates fertile ground for jihadist groups to exploit, offering protection and stability in volatile environments often created by their own actions (Niang 2014:136).

Niang offers a more nuanced perspective on how religious identity may both strengthen and undermine current loyalties and governance institutions. This method improves our understanding of jihadist groups by addressing the oversimplifications in Kaldor's analysis. While Kaldor stresses contemporary wars as conflicts between state and non-state actors, her paradigm simplifies these conflicts to a binary of "ethno-nationalism versus civilized values," ignoring the role of religion (Kaldor 1999: 58). Niang's research fills this gap by demonstrating that Islamist violence in the Sahel is motivated not only by ideology or ethnic divisions, but also by groups that take advantage of the state's vulnerabilities through a combination of opportunism and political strategy. Her research focuses on the complex interaction between religious identity and jihadist mobilisation processes, allowing for a more complete understanding.

Climate Change and Environmental Scarcity

Climate change and resource scarcity have increasingly become pivotal factors driving violence in the Sahel region, intensifying pre-existing socio-economic challenges and geopolitical tensions in Burkina Faso. Homer-Dixon's theoretical framework linking environmental pressures to various forms of conflict, particularly armed struggles over natural resources and environmental degradation, has provided significant insights into understanding these dynamics.

Climate change and resource scarcity have become central to understanding the dynamics of violence in the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso. Homer-Dixon's framework, which links environmental pressures to conflict, offers valuable insights but must be applied with attention to the specific characteristics and nuances of each case.

In Burkina Faso, the interplay between climate change and conflict is evident in several ways. The region has faced increasing desertification, which exacerbates competition for arable land and water resources (McCullough et al, 2019). This environmental stress has intensified existing socio-economic and political grievances, contributing to the rise of local and regional conflicts. For instance, the degradation of the Sahelian environment

has severely impacted agricultural productivity, leading to heightened competition over scarce resources. This, in turn, has fuelled tensions between different ethnic and socio-economic groups, further destabilizing the region

The rise of jihadist groups in Burkina Faso can also be linked to these environmental pressures. The scarcity of resources has created opportunities for militant groups to exploit local grievances, gain support, and establish control. Groups like Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have capitalized on the environmental and economic hardships faced by local communities. They provide alternative sources of support and security, thus further embedding themselves within these communities.

Homer-Dixon argues that environmental stresses, including climate change-induced droughts and desertification, lead to resource scarcity, intensifying conflicts over water, land, and grazing areas (Homer-Dixon, 1998:15). In the Sahel region, where 77% of the population depends on climate-sensitive livelihoods like agriculture and pastoralism, rising temperatures are expected to reduce crop yields (McCullough et al 2019:12). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the absence of critical support systems such as crop insurance, irrigation infrastructure, financing options, and effective natural resource governance.

The Lake Chad Basin exemplifies these environmental stresses vividly. Since the 1960s, the lake has shrunk by 90% of its volume due to decreased average annual rainfall and significant reductions in water inflows from the Chari River and the Komadugu -Yobe River (De Lossy Crisis Group 2019:2). These changes have profoundly affected local communities dependent on the lake for water, agriculture, and fishing, illustrating the severe impacts of climate change on natural resources in the Sahel.

Tor Benjaminsen's perspective offers a critical alternative to Homer-Dixon's thesis on environmental stressors and conflict in the Sahel. Benjaminsen argues that while climate change and resource scarcity exacerbate existing challenges, they are not the primary drivers of conflict (Benjaminsen, 2016). Instead, he emphasizes that socio-economic and political factors, rooted in historical grievances and power dynamics, play a more significant role in shaping conflict dynamics. Benjaminsen contends that while droughts

and floods can escalate tensions over land and resources, these tensions are often driven by longstanding disputes over access and ownership, influenced by political decisions and historical inequalities rather than purely environmental factors (Benjaminsen 2016). This perspective challenges the narrative that attributes conflict solely to climate change impacts, urging a more nuanced understanding that considers broader socio-political contexts.

Weak governance and pervasive corruption in the Sahel undermine state institutions' ability to manage natural resources and provide essential services, intensifying competition over scarce resources. Pastoral land scarcity compels herders, predominantly Fulani, to encroach upon protected areas like national parks and classified forests (Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba 2019:22). Security and forestry officials tasked with enforcing regulations are often accused of disproportionately targeting pastoralists, imposing fines and engaging in violent abuses (Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba 2019:22). This perceived bias exacerbates ethnic tensions between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers, who are perceived to receive preferential treatment. Consequently, marginalized pastoral communities increasingly feel neglected, pushing some to join jihadist groups that exploit their grievances. Simultaneously, local militias form to assert control over grazing and farming lands through violent means, exacerbating conflicts and destabilizing the region.

Socio-economic disparities exacerbated by rapid population growth and limited job opportunities are significant factors contributing to social tensions and instability in the Sahel region. As the population continues to grow rapidly, there is increasing pressure on already scarce resources such as land, water, and pasture, which in turn exacerbates food insecurity (*The Sahel: Land of opportunities Africa renewal* 2023). Traditional agricultural and pastoral practices struggle to keep pace with the demand generated by population growth. Compounding this issue, the Sahel region has a notably youthful population, with 64.5% of people under the age of 25 (*The Sahel: Land of opportunities | Africa renewal* 2023).

The lack of employment opportunities for young people, combined with heightened competition over resources, often pushes many into criminal activities or joining violent

groups as a means of survival. Boukhars and Pilgram note that some herders, for instance, may perceive banditry as a form of resistance against a system they feel has marginalized and impoverished nomadic pastoralists (Boukhars and Pilgram 2023:9). These dynamic underscores how socio-economic pressures, coupled with demographic trends empirically contribute to the proliferation of violence and insecurity in the Sahel, as disenfranchised youth seek alternative means of livelihood and expression.

The Sahel region presents a complex intersection of environmental, socio-economic, and political factors that collectively contribute to escalating violence and instability. Climate change and resource scarcity exacerbate existing challenges, particularly affecting livelihoods dependent on agriculture and pastoralism. Homer-Dixon's framework highlights how environmental stresses intensify conflicts over natural resources, while Benjaminsen offers a critical perspective emphasising the role of historical grievances and political dynamics in shaping conflict. Marginalized groups, such as pastoralists, face exclusion and discrimination, further fuelling ethnic tensions and driving some into the arms of jihadist groups or local militias. Weak governance and corruption undermine state institutions' ability to manage resources and provide essential services, exacerbating competition and fostering insecurity. Rapid population growth compounds these pressures, intensifying the demand for already limited resources and pushing marginalized youth toward criminality or armed groups.

Conclusion

The literature review has served to establish the essential empirical foundation for our two case studies and has provided a critical lens through which to evaluate the evolution of violence and its key drivers within the region. By engaging with various perspectives presented in the literature, it has laid the groundwork for a critical analysis in the subsequent chapters. These chapters explore how different actors both state and non-state perpetuate violence and illustrate how its shifting patterns underscore state dissolution and the emergence of alternative forms of governance. By looking at how violence has emerged and evolved it allows a better understanding into the complex challenges faced in Sahel with a particular focus of how communities are engaging in ways of addressing their grievances.

Chapter three: Introducing the History and Politics of the Sahel

The Sahel region has seen an increase in violent conflicts and in 2023 the number of people killed by acts of political violence doubled in Burkina Faso, placing highest after Nigeria in West Africa. Across central Sahel, conflict fatalities from political violence increased by a staggering 38%, and civilian deaths by over 18% from 2017 to 2023. Mali and Burkina Faso, most affected by the crisis (Conflict Watchlist 2024 | The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-long Conflict - ACLED.)

Colonial policies in Mali and Burkina Faso

Colonization is defined as a policy or practice involving the socio-political and economic domination of one nation by another (Nwanosike et al., 2011:45). The French approach to colonization often centred around the "civilizing mission" (*mission civilisatrice*) (Barnhart, 2016:389). This ideology justified European expansion by portraying it as a mission to modernize and govern societies deemed primitive, asserting European superiority, and legally justifying territorial claims over newly discovered lands. In Africa, colonial powers imposed artificial borders, exploited abundant natural resources such as oil and gold, and subjected the continent to the dictates of the global market under highly unequal terms, effectively subjugating its people (Barnhart, 2016:390). Barnhart's argument notes that empire is the ultimate stage of capitalism and great power capitalist competition led to the exportation of local capital to the underdeveloped regions of the world in the form of imperialism and colonialism.

The French conquest of West Africa and the entrenchment of French governance and rule. The establishment of the French West African government in 1895 formalised French colonialism (Trnovec 2020:292). The colonial administration was extremely decentralised, with all major decisions being made in Dakar the capital. Each colony was led by a lieutenant governor and these colonies were further subdivided into smaller districts led by a French administrator known as a commandant de cercle (Trnovec 2020:293). The commandant relied on the loyalty of the local leaders of these regions, and with their help he was able to enforce government laws and collect local taxes. The creation of these networks where local traditional leaders would engage in transactional agreement where the French could maintain their influence over the region by having

support of local traditional leaders. These policies were geared at maintaining an ensuring domination and control of the region, “Between coloniser and colonized there is room only for forced labour, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses” (Césaire 2000:42). This not only had severe psychological effects on the colonial subject but also shaped historiographical use of violence and domination within the region.

The colonies economic strategy was centred on maximising resource extraction. As the Sahel region has large reserves of gold, diamonds, iron ore and zinc that was utilised by France in its own development of industries, a result of the competition with British colonial governments that were attempting to maximise the amounts of resource extraction and spread of Western values. This had detrimental effects on the socio-economic growth of the area because of capital expansion and resource extraction. The style of economic activity conducted by the French was predominantly through taxation and the collection of tax from various members of society this included the taxation of the export of resources such as gold saw that the money made from gold exports would end up in France without any of it being reinvested into the country. This was due to Article 33 in the Financial Act of 13 April 1900 (Ball 1978:276). The Act stipulated that all colonies were to be responsible for covering expenses in her territories. This was done to make French colonies self-supporting by taxing farmers, merchants as well as setting high import and export tariffs. Along with this, unfair trade practices were also involved, since French colonies were forced to import goods from France at a high price, while they were required to export their products to France at a lower cost (Hrituleac 2011: 36). The imposition of exploitative economic system that levied heavy taxes on local communities, thus preventing any local economic growth. The French colonies invested in roads and railroads, but primarily to make it easier for natural resources to be moved so they could be exchanged. Similarly, colonial leaders invested significantly in the pastoral economy; this was due to the shift in a greater demand for land and labour. Farmers and pastoralists faced increasing and unequal competition over grazing rights and access to water sources and this increased tensions between farmers and pastoralists. As the colonial

state strongly believed that by investing in sedentary communities as they were perceived as being more governable as opposed to the Nomadic pastoralists (Niang 2014:235).

Politically, colonial attitudes toward Islam can be best described as non-interference (Clark 1999:158). As the French were primarily interested in developing their economic capacity in the region, they would not intervene in religious matters if the secular state were supported. To guarantee this, French and Muslim religious authorities frequently collaborated with one another to protect their respective interests. The colonial state recognised that they benefited from the public support of religious leaders, and religious leaders recognised that they could accept the secular state if they were able to continue carrying out their religious activities, which included organising pilgrimages, local schools, and recruiting new followers (Clark 1999:158). This cooperation between the state and religious leaders endured throughout the colonial period, however, was often met with criticism by more conservative Islamic leaders and communities.

Communities in West Africa faced a wide range of socioeconomic and political difficulties because of the way the colonial states were organised. First, during the colonial era, arbitrary borders were drawn without considering the various ethnic groups “conquest and the establishment of the colonial administration divided the Western Sahel into the borders that with only minor changes represent its transnational division” (Trnovec 2020:292). Under French administration, the emphasis on creating a centralized state structure aimed to assimilate diverse regional and ethnic groups into a unified social system. (Clapham, 1985: 21). This administrative model, mirroring that of the French state, utilized French as the dominant language for commerce and governance, thereby fostering cultural and linguistic homogenization while consolidating colonial authority. Similarly local forms of governance appointed during French colonial rule in the Sahel were not selected from existing indigenous authorities. Instead, the French administration created a new elite class by educating ambitious but compliant locals in French language and culture. (McNamara 1989: 28). This educational strategy aimed to cultivate a cadre of leaders who aligned with French interests and could effectively administer colonial policies at the local level. By imparting French education, the colonial authorities sought to assimilate these individuals into the colonial administrative framework, ensuring loyalty and compliance with French nationalist policies.

However, these policies also marginalized local identities and exacerbated ethnic tensions by suppressing indigenous languages and traditions. As a result, contemporary ethnic conflicts in the Sahel often reflect deep-seated historical grievances and power struggles rooted in colonial-era policies of assimilation and centralization. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing current challenges related to governance, identity, conflict and state building.

It is important to understand the impact the colonisation had on the region. Mbembe characterises colonialism as the act of "seizing possession of defining and establishing dominion over a geographical territory in order to forge novel social and spatial relationships; the articulation of new spatial relations culminated in the establishment of boundaries and hierarchies, zones, and enclaves, thereby undermining pre-existing property arrangements; the differential categorization of individuals and resource extraction" (Mbembe 2019:7). This conceptual framework is particularly emblematic of the Sahel, as it elucidates the way the colonial experience in the Sahel engendered significant political, social, and economic institutions that have exacerbated the region's destabilization. The subsequent inquiry will focus on the phenomenon of neocolonialism and the contemporary state of French influence in West Africa.

Post-Colonial Policies in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Post Colonial Sahelian states grappled with governance challenges and economic disparities, prompting disenfranchised populations to turn to Islamist movements seeking perceived justice and social welfare (Skinner, 2016:307). During the Cold War, global superpowers competed for hegemony, supporting client states and movements as proxies in regional conflicts. In Mali, this geopolitical competition shaped military and political structures, with backing from France and later the United States influencing security policies and defense capabilities (Zenn and Maitre 2017:49)

In the early 1960's after gaining their independence both Mali and Burkina Faso inherited weak administrative structures and economies reliant on primary exports, making them susceptible to external shocks. Mali's heavy reliance on cotton as a cash crop made its economy highly sensitive to global market fluctuations. When cotton prices fell Mali faced severe economic instability. The inefficiency in managing cotton production and the

limited diversification of crops led to significant economic and social disparities. For instance, during periods of low cotton prices, Mali's institutions struggled to stabilize the market and support local farmers, resulting in widespread poverty and social unrest (Oxfam Briefing Paper Pricing Farmers out of Cotton: The costs of World Bank reforms in Mali 2007).

In contrast, Burkina Faso's agricultural sector while also reliant on cotton, had a more crop diversity including millet, sorghum, and maize. This diversification provides protection against the volatility of global cotton markets. (Borgen Project, 2018). However, the country still faced challenges related to managing its agricultural sector and maintaining economic stability. The presence of a more varied agricultural portfolio allowed Burkina Faso's institutions to better handle economic fluctuations though they were not immune to the broader impacts of economic mismanagement and structural reforms.

The structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions in the 1980s and 1990's exacerbated the institutional weaknesses in both countries. These programs typically involved reducing government spending, privatizing state enterprises, and cutting subsidies, which led to decreased social spending and weakened public institutions. In Mali, SAPs resulted in severe reductions in social services, contributing to increased poverty and unemployment, "through the containment of the wage bill and lower-than-expected interest payments on external debt. At the same time, spending on basic education and primary health services, reached only 25 percent of total outlays" (Mali: 1996 Article IV Consultation Staff Report. IMF). The resulting economic hardship strained Mali's already fragile inherited institutions, making it difficult for the government to address the needs of its citizens and maintain stability (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008).

Burkina Faso also experienced significant adverse effects from Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), particularly in terms of reduced investment in public services and increased economic hardship. One notable impact was on the education sector. Under SAPs, there was a strategic shift in the management and funding of education. The government moved from a centrally managed national education system to a more decentralized model. Local governments were tasked with developing and managing

basic education, which included responsibilities such as purchasing land for schools, constructing primary schools and overseeing their operation (Oxfam Structural Adjustment Policies in Burkina Faso, 2007).

This decentralization intended to reduce government expenditure and enhance local control had significant downsides. The shift placed a considerable burden on local governments that often lacked the financial resources and administrative capacity to effectively manage educational services. Consequently, there was a marked decline in the quality and accessibility of education. Many local communities struggled to fund the construction and maintenance of schools leading to inadequate educational infrastructure in rural areas.

The privatization of educational services also meant that the burden of costs increasingly fell on families, limiting access to education for many children from low-income households. This situation was exacerbated by the broader economic difficulties resulting from SAPs, including reduced economic opportunities and increased poverty. As a result, many children were forced to abandon their studies and seek employment to support their families, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Oxfam Structural Adjustment Policies in Burkina Faso, 2007).

The Impacts of Francafrique

The implementation of the Francafrique system in former French colonies has had a significant impact on how these states have formed. The word *Francafrique*, coined by Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1955, acquired prominence after François-Xavier Verschave's investigation revealed corrupt behaviours by covert networks of French and African political, economic, and military actors (Bovcon 2013: 7). France tried to protect its interests in the Sahel because of the abundance of natural resources such as gold, which had a negative impact on world development.

Ander Gunder Frank argues that states within the Global South have been severely underdeveloped through practices of dependency notably colonial dependency and post-colonial financial dependency. This is since several colonial states were integrated into *Communauté Financière Africaine* (CFA) monetary union (Tchatchouang, 2015). This

monetary union was founded on France supporting their former colonies' currencies and incorporating them into a global economic bloc of financial support.

However, this approach did not lead to development but rather served as a catalyst for perpetuating underdevelopment and creating path dependency favouring France. Samir Amin describes money as an "effective instrument for organizing the transfer of value from the underdeveloped periphery of the world system to its advanced centre" (Amin, 1974: 397). This perspective highlights how colonial economic policies facilitated the extraction of wealth and resources from the Sahel and other colonized regions, redirecting them to benefit the industrialized economies of the colonizing powers. This economic exploitation entrenched dependency relationships and hindered the development of independent economic structures in post-colonial states contributing to ongoing challenges of economic inequality and uneven development in the Sahel region and beyond.

This is demonstrated by examining the fiscal policies of CFA member states, which are subject to administrative control by France and must deposit at least 50% of their foreign reserves with the French Treasury. France able to dictate the economic the fate of its former colonies, such rigorous control creates economic dependence.

The principle *Françafrique* also has its origins in the principal proliferation of French culture and assimilation. The emphasis of French education and culture in the post-colonial state ensure civilians within the Sahel that were French educated were given official positions within the government and were viewed as more manageable. The long-term result of this selection criterion conditioned the pool of potential ministers from an area based on education, was regional political inequality.

During the transition to independence, the French administrative apparatus in the Sahel underwent minimal transformation. As argued by Delavignette, "the machinery changed hands but not the parts." (Delavignette 1970:276). Post-colonial states inherited an administrative structure that had been designed to serve colonial interests, with little alteration to its core functions or personnel. The educated elite groomed by the French colonial system retained control over key administrative positions, consolidating their

authority and marginalizing other societal groups. This continuity of administrative power perpetuated the influence of a "modernized" elite aligned with French values and interests, excluding indigenous leaders and other segments of society from meaningful participation in governance and decision-making processes. In both Mali and Burkina Faso, the legacy of unchanged administrative structures contributed to governance challenges, socio-political tensions, and developmental disparities in the Sahel region following independence.

The final factor that is linked to understanding the pervasiveness of the French is its increasing military campaigns within the Sahel. The expansion of foreign military operations in the global counterterrorism movement of the early 2000s was made possible by France's system of official and informal postcolonial relations with former colonies, which began with intelligence operations against Mokhtar Belmokhtar and other Al Qaeda-affiliated individuals in 2002 (Jesse 2019: 105). However, the increasing military campaigns have been met with controversy with as local communities often perceive the French interests being a foreign policy that is geared at protecting their own economic and political interests, La Francafrique creates ideal conditions for extremism to proliferate in the region through the support of illegitimate, corrupt and weak leaders (Powell 2022: 21). Operation Barkhane launched in 2014, aimed to combat terrorism in the Sahel, but its effectiveness has been questioned as ongoing violence and instability persist. Despite military efforts, the operation has struggled to significantly reduce the impact of terrorism leading to accusations of double-dealing including claims that France may have supplied arms to Islamic fighters. This situation has inflamed tensions and raised concerns about France's long-term intentions, with some viewing the instability as a justification for its continued military presence. Attacks on both military and civilian targets have increased, highlighting the operation's limited success in achieving lasting peace and security in the region.

It is essential to examine the role of the French in the proliferation of violence within the Sahel, noting that neo-colonial practices have further exacerbated tensions, leading communities to resist French influence. Countries like Mali and Burkina Faso are seen as symbols of a continent striving for independence (Powell 2022: 22). Thus, the growing "anti-French" sentiment can be understood as a form of anti-colonial resistance. Despite

relinquishing nominal control over its former colonies, France continues to exert considerable influence over the 23 nations that make up la Françafrique. This influence is not only economic, through mechanisms like the CFA franc, but also political and military, as France has been known to depose heads of state and intervene when its interests are threatened (Powell 2022:25). While French politicians advocate for democracy in Africa, they often suppress voices that challenge their policies. Colonial and neo-colonial legacies have profoundly shaped the inability of Sahelian states to effectively quell violence, as the enduring power dynamics hinder genuine sovereignty and stability in the region

Spread of Jihadism

The jihadist insurgency in the Sahel has developed through various historical, social, and political changes that have shaped its present form. Its origins can be traced back to the early 2000s when the Sahel region began facing increasing instability and the rise of Islamist groups.

In the early 2000s, the growth of jihadist groups in the Sahel was influenced by the broader regional instability. This is seen through the fall of Libya in 2011, following the ousting of President Muammar Gaddafi, had a profound destabilizing effect on the Sahel region, leading to an influx of weapons and fighters into neighbouring countries like Mali. This situation reached a crucial turning point in 2012 with the intensification of the Tuareg conflict. The Tuaregs had previously rebelled in the 1990s and early 2000s against perceived marginalization and external interference (Zenn and Maitre 2017: 51). In northern Mali, the Tuareg separatist group MNLA was quickly joined by Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This alliance resulted in the swift takeover of northern Mali, establishing a jihadist stronghold characterized by the imposition of strict Sharia law and the creation of an Islamic state in the region.

By 2013, French forces intervened in Operation Serval to drive the jihadists out of northern Mali. However, the conflict persisted. Jihadist forces retreated to rural and remote areas, allowing them to regroup and adapt. This period saw the emergence of new jihadist factions, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), formed in

2017 from a merger of various Islamist groups such as AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and Katiba Macina.

The rising violence in Mali and Burkina Faso has created a complex situation where both local and foreign military forces are engaged in efforts to combat the insurgency. However, these operations often result in civilian casualties, further alienating local communities. The presence of French forces in Mali and Burkina Faso has been controversial due to allegations of human rights violations and civilian deaths. For example, in 2021 French air forces mistakenly targeted a wedding in Bounti village Mali, believing it to be a terrorist gathering resulting in at least 19 civilian deaths as confirmed by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (King, How France failed Mali: The end of Operation Barkhane 2024). Reports indicate that these forces have conducted military operations in remote and rural areas against jihadist groups, but criticism has arisen over the unintended harm to civilians caught in the crossfire. This situation has fuelled growing discontent among local communities, who increasingly question the effectiveness of both the French military presence and their own governments' ability to provide adequate protection.

By the mid-2010s, Burkina Faso began experiencing a surge in jihadist attacks, with groups like JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) becoming more active. This instability was exacerbated by porous borders.

These challenges are often attributed to the development of the modern secular state. In Burkina Faso and Mali, jihadist groups have increasingly framed their actions within Islamic governance frameworks, presenting Sharia law as a solution to societal issues and promising justice and security (Zenn & Maitre 2017:45). This shift challenges the perception of Islamic reformists as solely associated with terrorism, as these groups seek to establish governance systems that appeal to local populations disillusioned with state institutions (Rupesinghe et al 2021:5). This is exemplified by the presence of Katiba Macina, Ansaroul Islam, and ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) operating in regions of Mali and Burkina Faso without establishing overt, long-term territorial control.

Due to the limited state presence in rural areas, jihadist movements have been able to establish their authority gradually through preaching, intimidation, kidnappings, and

coercion. In northern Burkina Faso, Ansarul Islam, reportedly linked to GSIM (Group for Support of Islam and Muslims), has perpetrated violence against civilians perceived as opposing their movement (ICG 2017: 11). This violence includes targeted attacks and intimidation aimed at suppressing dissent and exerting control over local populations. According to Aced data, in 2023, insurgents in Mali were responsible for over 1,600 extrajudicial killings of civilians, with the number of reported civilian fatalities already surpassing the previous year's total by 17% (Nsaibia, Fact sheet: Attacks on civilian's spike in Mali as security deteriorates across the Sahel 2023). As efforts continue to stabilize the region and reduce the influence of jihadist organizations, communities are increasingly seeking alternative sources of security amid the ongoing conflict.

The coups in Mali and Burkina Faso indeed have had profound implications for state institutions and governance. The military takeovers in both countries have severely disrupted democratic processes and intensified political instability. In Mali, the 2021 and 2022 coups led to the establishment of military regimes that have faced significant challenges in stabilizing the country. These regimes have struggled with governance issues, which include addressing corruption and managing violence both of which have been longstanding issues in Mali.

The weakening of institutional capacity in Mali has resulted in a cycle of governance failures. As the military regimes grapple with these challenges, their inability to effectively address the root causes of instability has exacerbated social and economic problems. In Burkina Faso, the political instability has had a similar effect on state institutions. The recent coups have also contributed to a decline in governance quality, making it difficult for the new leaders to implement effective policies and reforms. This instability has compounded existing issues such as corruption and violence, creating a challenging environment for both the government and the population.

Chapter Four: Changing Patterns of Violence in Mali

Introduction

In Mali, emerging patterns of violence reveal a complex interplay of deep-seated social divisions, historical grievances, and competing actors vying for control within the region. This multifaceted conflict is driven by various groups, including ethnic militias, jihadist factions, and government forces, each with their own motivations and grievances rooted in marginalization, economic exclusion, and historical injustices. The presence of international actors further complicates the political landscape, often leading to mixed outcomes. These dynamics challenge traditional notions of the state as a singular, unitary entity, highlighting instead a fragmented and contested political environment. By critically analysing the motivations of these actors and their implications for state formation, this analysis underscores the argument that the state should be understood as a network of relationships built around competing legitimate narratives rather than a monolithic structure.

The chapter will be structured as follows; it begins with a brief historical analysis that sets the analysis by outlining the key conditions leading to the deterioration of the Malian state. This background will provide context for understanding the current situation. Next, the chapter will offer an overview of the various actors perpetuating violence in the region, including a detailed examination of their grievances and motivations behind their violent actions. This will be followed by the implications that use of violence has on both the state and local communities. It will highlight how violence has led to emergence of alternative forms of governance. Highlighting that the state cannot be viewed as a static entity but as a space where power is continually contested by Insurgents, local community militias and foreign intermediaries. These patterns of conflict emerge and are driven by diverse local perceptions of statehood and governance, give rise to various patterns of violence.

Historical Background

Mali is a West African country situated in the Sahel region and has endured a complex history marked by periods of both prosperity and decline. The pre-colonial era witnessed the rise of powerful empires, centred around cities like Timbuktu and Jenne (Stewart 2013:11). These urban centres thrived on the lucrative trans-Saharan trade, accumulating

wealth and knowledge. Mali emerged as a regional power, exerting significant cultural and economic influence. However the 19th-century European colonial scramble for Africa disrupted this trajectory.

Mali was incorporated into French West Africa as French Sudan in 1890, marking the beginning of a prolonged period of colonial domination and exploitation. (Stewart 2013:13). French Sudan was a West African federation comprised of Senegal, French Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Niger, Mauritania, and Benin. The French defined the region's limits and territory. Because of the region's fragmentation, many ethnic groups including the Tuaregs were in competition with one another, making it challenging for the French to establish control (Stewart 2013:11).

After gaining independence in 1960 President Modibo Keita implemented pro-socialist policies aimed at spurring development in Mali. These policies however did not favour local Tuareg groups, who had enjoyed a privileged position under the French colonial administration. According to Lecoq and Klute the Tuareg felt increasingly marginalized by the new government, which prioritized modernization efforts that were often geared towards local ethnic groups like the Mande in southern Mali (Lecoq & Klute 2013:425). This marginalization led to a small-scale rebellion in 1963, sparked by Keita's policies intended to sedentarize and educate the nomadic Tuareg (Lecoq 2004:89). Although the rebellion was swiftly suppressed, the state's heavy-handed approach toward the suppression of the 1963 Tuareg rebellion not only undermined the legitimacy of the Malian government but also fostered a legacy of distrust among Tuareg communities. This dissatisfaction contributed to the 1968 coup d'état led by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, who established Mali's first military regime. Traoré's attempts at economic reforms to rejuvenate the country largely failed, leading to persistent underdevelopment and economic stagnation. According to Whitehouse these failures were due to a combination of neo patrimonial politics, elite exploitation of aid, and the fiscal austerity enforced by IMF structural adjustment programs (Whitehouse, 2017). The situation was further aggravated by prolonged droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, which adversely affected the cotton market and compelled many Tuareg communities to migrate to neighbouring countries like Libya in search of better opportunities.

By the 1990s, public discontent had intensified, culminating in protests in Mali's capital, Bamako, against pervasive corruption and a deteriorating economic situation. At the same time, large groups of Tuareg men, who had received military training in Libya, returned to Mali and led a rebellion against the Malian army. These groups, initially engaging in activities that included freeing Tuareg prisoners and attacking Malian forces. However, their efforts triggered a military response resulting in a substantial number of civilian casualties with 441 government soldiers and 28 Tuareg militants were. (Lecoq 2010).

This violence further drove many Tuareg to join the rebel factions. In 1991, the Tuareg groups that had been mobilizing against the Malian government formally organized themselves into the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA) (Lecoq & Klute 2013:426). This formal organization marked a significant escalation in their efforts to seek greater autonomy and address longstanding grievances related to marginalization and neglect by the Malian state.

As the Tuareg rebellion intensified, it contributed to the downfall of Moussa Traoré's regime. The escalating discontent and ongoing conflict highlighted the government's inability to address both the rebellion and broader national issues. This unrest culminated in Mali's second military coup, which took place in 1991 and was led by Amadou Toumani Touré. The coup resulted in the ousting of Traoré and ushered in a transitional government that would eventually pave the way for democratic reforms (International Crisis Group, 2012; Lecoq & Klute, 2013)

Under the leadership of Amadou Toumani Touré, Mali conducted its first democratic presidential election since the end of the colonial era in 1992. This pivotal election ended thirty years of one-party rule and ushered in a multiparty political system, accompanied by the adoption of a new constitution. President Alpha Oumar Konaré, who emerged from this democratic transition, implemented a range of significant reforms. Notably, Konaré's administration introduced decentralization policies aimed at transferring decision-making power to local constituencies encouraging greater civic participation and granting more autonomy to marginalized Tuareg communities (Seely 2001:505).

In addition to decentralization, Konaré's reforms included the legalisation of private newspapers and radio stations and the delegation of some state powers to newly elected local officials. The period from 1992 to 2002 saw notable improvements, with observers recognizing Mali as having achieved "a thriving multiparty democracy with competitive elections, a free press, better protection of civil liberties and political rights, less corruption, and stronger governance" (Radelet 2010:10). Education also saw significant progress, with public primary school enrolment increasing from 28% of school-age children in 1991 to 62% in 2000 (Zobel 2013).

However, by 2003 the strain on government's ability to set out all the initial aims was beginning to become difficult to achieve. Mali's decline into instability can be traced through a series of specific failures and events. Despite initial democratic reforms and decentralization efforts aimed at improving governance and addressing regional disparities, the implementation of these policies was marred by significant flaws. Corruption severely undermined the effectiveness of the Malian government, with substantial portions of international aid and development funds misappropriated. For instance, between 2005 and 2017, over €1.13 billion was irregularly spent by state and government bodies, a figure representing approximately 44% of the development assistance received by Mali during this period (Le Cam 2019). This financial mismanagement, which included both embezzlement and inefficient financial oversight, critically undermined the intended benefits of aid and reforms.

These enduring problems led to a significant shift in how local actors exploited grievances and frustrations among the population. Mali's dominant southern elites, who had historically focused on the needs of their immediate constituencies in the south, directed state resources toward their own client networks, further entrenching regional disparities (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). By 2012, the ongoing neglect and corruption had precipitated the fourth Tuareg uprising since Mali's independence. This crisis began when Tuareg separatists, initially supported by Islamist rebels, overran much of northern Mali (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015).

On March 22, 2012, amidst mounting dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion and broader grievances such as poor housing and inadequate

benefits, a group of Malian army officers led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo staged a coup d'état, deposing the democratically elected President Amadou Toumani Touré and suspending the constitution ([Whitehouse, 2017]). The coup further destabilized the country and emboldened separatist factions. Taking advantage of the chaos, the separatist groups captured three major cities Tombouctou, Kidal, and Gao and on April 6, 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared the independence of Northern Mali, naming the territory Azawad (BBC News 2012). However, the coalition between Tuareg separatists and Islamist groups soon fractured. This fragmentation allowed jihadist groups to expand rapidly into central Mali, resulting in the Malian government losing control of two-thirds of the country (Shiple 2017).

The French intervention in early 2013, while initially successful in restoring government control and driving Islamist militants out of major northern cities did however have significant and complex long-term implications for Mali. Although Operation Serval helped stabilize the country temporarily and facilitated the return to political processes, including the election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, it failed to address underlying issues such as governance, corruption, and regional grievances. As a result, the security situation remained volatile, with insurgent groups adapting and continuing their activities, leading to ongoing violence and instability (BBC News, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2013). The persistent corruption and ineffective governance further exacerbated regional disparities and dissatisfaction, contributing to periodic flare-ups of violence and renewed conflicts. Humanitarian conditions also worsened, with continued displacement and disruptions in essential services (Whitehouse, 2017). The situation was further complicated by political instability, including the coup in May 2021, which intensified the crisis and led to international sanctions (BBC News 2021). Thus, the French intervention, while critical in the short term, did not resolve the root causes of Mali's instability, leaving the country with enduring challenges.

Key actors of violence in Mali

Islamic insurgent groups

As noted earlier the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel became rooted in Islamic ideology through a complex interplay of historical, social, and political factors. Jihad is often construed as a struggle against perceived internal impurities within the state, intimately tied to the pursuit of purification (Hansen 2019:10). The rise of insurgent groups within the Sahel can be traced back to Tuareg groups in Mali who have been fighting for their independence since 1960. A series of rebel movements have taken place and in a response to the exclusionary policies of the Malian state.

The growing presence of Jihadi groups in rural regions of Mali has been perceived as a respite among local communities, as the groups provide an alternative to the Malian government's shortcomings. As Niezen notes, "drought in the Sahel made villages dependent on each other for mutual aid, but at the same time bonds of reciprocity through kinship and religious community were a strong alternative focus of solidarity" (Niezen 1990:421). This is significant because local community members have grown increasingly disillusioned with the patronage networks that have historically linked Bamako's political elite with regional power brokers. As a result, rural areas like Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu have suffered from chronic underdevelopment. This sense of marginalization has been exploited by Islamist groups, which argue that support for a secular democratic state has exacerbated local hardships. To address these grievances, some communities predominantly Northern ethnic groups as shown in the map below have expressed a desire to return to traditional Islamic leadership as a potential solution.

In Mali, five primary jihadist groups have established significant influence: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), the Signed-in-Blood Battalion, and the Islamic Movement for Azawad (IMA).

AQIM, the oldest group, was initially founded as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998 in Algeria and rebranded as AQIM in 2006 after affiliating with al-Qaeda (BBC News 2009). Ansar Dine was created in 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a former Tuareg diplomat (BBC News 2012). MUJAO also emerged in 2011 as a splinter group

from AQIM, focusing on the Sahel region (International Crisis Group 2013). The Signed-in-Blood Battalion was formed in 2012 from AQIM's ranks and is known for its radical actions (Al Jazeera 2013). The IMA, established in 2011, represents a coalition of Tuareg and Islamist factions aiming to create an Islamic state in Azawad (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). These groups have gained traction by exploiting local grievances and capitalizing on regions where state authority is weak or non-existent, establishing their own governance structures and thereby solidifying their control (International Crisis Group 2013). The violence employed by these groups reflects a complex agenda that extends beyond mere religious ideology. Their actions, including public executions and destruction of cultural heritage, illustrate a strategic effort to both undermine the Malian state and assert their dominance. The evolving patterns of violence, characterized by increased frequency and destructiveness, have significantly destabilized the region. These dynamics have also pushed local communities to affiliate with these groups, as they often assume key functions of the state, providing protection and security in areas that have long been neglected by the government. The impact on state formation and local community dynamics, including the ways in which these groups have filled the governance vacuum, will be explored in detail in the following discussion.

Jihadist activity

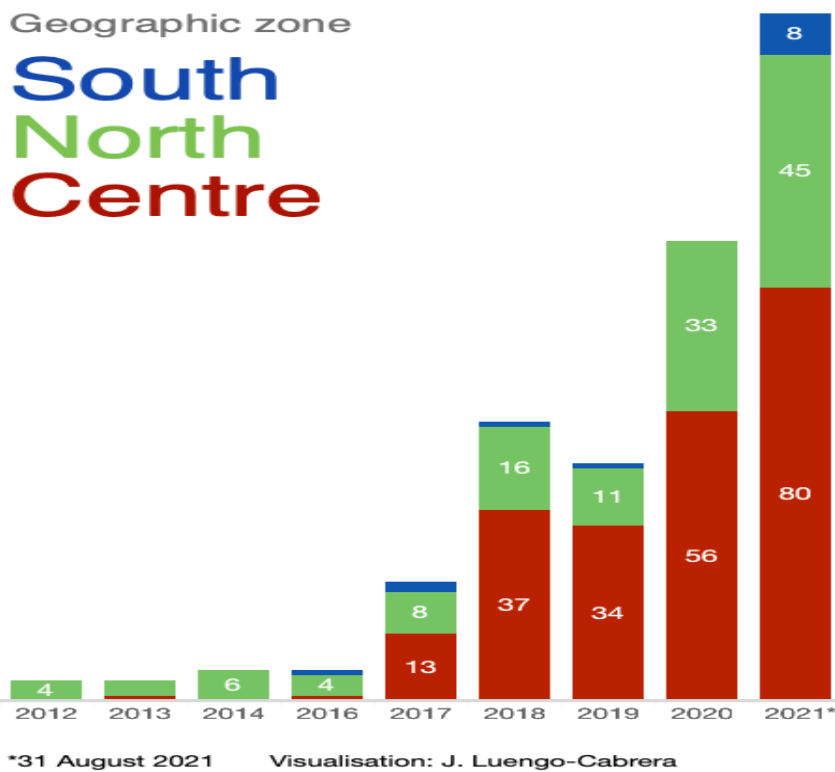
The jihadists operating in northern Mali claim to adhere to specific Islamic principles of governance based on jihadi doctrine, as promoted by Al Qaeda (AQ), at least officially. But they also presented their intended form of governance as the image of authentic Islamic reformism anchored in local Saharan tradition.

The oldest established insurgent group in Mali, AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), first became notably active in the early 2000s. Initially, AQIM gained prominence by targeting local tourists and kidnapping them for ransom, leveraging the high-value hostages to fund their operations. Their involvement in drug trafficking also provided a substantial source of income facilitating their continued expansion and operational capacity. AQIM maintained a focus on attacking military and state officials, as well as civilians to destabilize the region and assert their dominance.

The group's activities escalated significantly following the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. A stark example of this escalation was the attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako on November 20, 2015. AQIM militants, working with local allies, stormed the hotel taking dozens of guests and staff hostage. The attack which resulted in the deaths of 20 people, including foreigners underscored AQIM's increased capability for complex and high-profile operations (BBC News, 2015). This incident marked a significant escalation in the frequency and severity of AQIM's attacks, reflecting their strategic shift towards more bold and violent actions aimed at undermining Mali's stability and drawing international attention (Al Jazeera, 2015).

Outside of attacks on civilians and government officials, kidnappings have become a favoured tactic for insurgent groups in Mali. Between 2017 and 2021, the number of recorded kidnappings surged from 22 to 184 (Global Initiative, 2022). This trend continued into the first half of 2023, with more than 180 kidnappings reported in both Mali and Burkina Faso by insurgent groups. Kidnappings have become a crucial source of funding for these groups, enabling their expansion and operations. In 2010 France paid US\$ 17 million for the release of four French citizens abducted in Mali (Reuters 2010). AQIM also reportedly received US\$ 19.4 million in July 2012 for the release of two Spanish nationals and one Italian (Zurich 2013). These ransoms have been used to finance their activities and expansion within Mali.

However, by 2015 the targeting of tourists and foreign nationals declined due to a significant reduction in their numbers in the country. Consequently, groups like AQIM and Katiba Macina shifted their focus towards local communities. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 97% of civilians abducted since 2012 have been locals. This shift is reflected in the increasing trend of abductions, particularly in Mali's Northern and Southern regions. The accompanying graph illustrates the sharp rise in abductions from 2017 to 2021, highlighting the growing impact of this form of violence on local populations (ACLED, 2023).



Source: ALCLED 2021

With a significant rise in the number of kidnappings from 4 in 2012 in Northern Mali to 80 by 2021 in the centre of Mali. Local kidnappings were carried out to punish anyone perceived as the enemy because of their leadership position and ability to influence the community, or because they represent the national authorities that armed groups are aiming to eliminate. (Rupesinghe et al, 2021). These include administrative authorities (mayors and local law enforcement) as well as traditional authority (religious leaders and village chiefs). The purpose of targeting these groups is clear, to weaken central authorities even further.

Groups like Katiba Macina have also publicly executed Malian officials and people that have opposed their rule in attempts to establish governance that is informed by Sharia law. Katiba Macina, led by Amadou Kouffa, is a prominent Islamic group aiming to restore the former Dina a Fulani empire, once a dominant force in the region. Katiba Macina was founded in Iso known as the Macina Liberation Front, was founded in 2015. It emerged

as a splinter group of Ansar Dine, led by Amadou Kouffa, and primarily operates in the central regions of Mali. The group focuses on the implementation of strict Sharia law and has been involved in various violent insurgent activities in the central and northern parts of Mali (International Crisis Group 2015). In the Delta, Katiba Macina has organized the implementation of sharia through the establishment of shoura councils, committees, and provision of justice in the form of organized trials based on sharia law, which to some extent has forged local acceptance of jihadist dominance in the areas they control (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022: 10)

Rural communities have been severely underdeveloped due to lack of government services, rural people complained about rent seeking, behaviour of local administrators and courts for several decades (Benjaminsen and Babi, 2009). As a result, several rural communities were often marginalised and dispossessed of natural resources and the Fulani ethnic group was particularly affected. As the Fulani are predominantly pastoralists, they are dependent on moving from one region to another in search of grazingland and water for their livestock, however they are often met with resistance from traditional farming societies. Jihadist groups can often co-opt Fulani pastoralists into their groups through the promise of protecting their identities, religion and ethnicity through a communal struggle.

Kouffa's rhetoric centres on a "social revolution" to dismantle the corrupt and inequitable regime, aligning with widespread local grievances (Benjaminsen and Boubacar 2019:11). By promising a return to traditional Islamic governance and emphasising a shared identity, Kouffa has successfully mobilized significant support. His narrative resonates with a population disillusioned with the state's inability to address their concerns, creating a fertile ground for the group's expansion.

Implications of the activities of communities and statehood

The presence of Katiba Macina has been met with mixed reactions, as they often apply both corrective and forceful mechanisms in establishing their dominance within the region. They have, however, successfully implemented a combination of coercive methods of governance" (Rupesinghe et al 2021:10). The group set up local courts that were aimed at resolving disputes. However, people often were intimidated using force

and violence against opposition to group, “Katiba Macina resolved local disputes often through the harsh implication of Sharia-Law, although many civilians see it as being fairer minded or at least more efficient than state judges” (Benjaminsen and Boubacar 2019:13). This highlights the group's approach to conflict resolution and governance, which, while harsh, some local communities see it as a more just and successful alternative to the formal state system. Similarly, Katiba Macina showed a desire to work with local groups to develop mutually beneficial solutions. They promoted peace agreements on land usage and access by relaxing legal restrictions and lowering taxes. This approach exemplified a reformist application of traditional Islamic values, demonstrating how returning to these norms could provide state services.

One way to understand this alternative form of governance that aims to establish a traditional type of Islamic administration that benefits its adherents is through the lens of jihadism. However, some scholars contend that the earlier claim that jihadism and its spread are also related to the economic goals of civilians who want to use or control local resources by engaging in already-established corruption channels and patterns (Strazzari, 2015).

As noted, earlier mechanisms of fear and intimidation are common tools used by jihadist groups to gain access to official state institutions and force them to engage in illegal operations for their own financial gain. As noted by Rikke Haugegaard, “given that legal networks overlap and because businessmen, politicians, military officers, police, and local leaders are all actively involved in the smuggling of firearms, cocaine, cigarettes, and human persons, local insurgents capitalise on legal networks to enhance their criminal activities” (Haugegaard 2018:63).

The interplay between violence and resource exploitation in the Sahel highlights how jihadist groups profit from ongoing conflict and instability. Many young insurgents, often coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, are driven by the opportunity for personal gain through activities such as theft, raids, and illegal taxation. Evidence indicates a significant collaboration between Islamist networks like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and drug traffickers, further increasing the flow of funds available for weapons and

sustaining the jihadist insurgency (Transnational Organised Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment 2013).

This dynamic reveals how jihadist groups aim to destabilize existing governments and replace them with their own systems. To embed jihadist ideologies within communities, these groups must navigate and exploit local conditions that both obstruct and facilitate their institutionalization. The result is an intensification of inter-communal hostilities and the proliferation of competing militias. As jihadist governance structures gain ground, they contribute to the reconfiguration of ethnic and religious identities, further complicating the conflict landscape. Thus, the negotiation of violence in Mali becomes a process through which complex social identities are continuously constructed and deconstructed, reflecting the broader struggle for control and influence in the region.

Inter-Communal Militias

The ongoing crisis in Mali that has emerged in the past decade has given rise to non-state actors resorting to violence, especially in areas where government control is lacking. Self-defence groups and militias have emerged, particularly in regions marked by a lack of effective state administration, exacerbating existing socio-economic challenges and climate-related issues. This discussion focuses on the proliferation of community militias and pro-government militias, recognising the need to understand how civilians navigate threats from both non-state actors and the government. This exploration encompasses both internal and external aspects of violence, shedding light on the evolving dynamics.

In May 2016 clashes between the Bambara and Fulani ethnic groups resulted in over forty casualties (International Crisis Group 2016:11). Similarly, in the following year in the village of Segou 21 Fulani community members were killed by a Bambara self-defence militia in response to the murder of a Bambara shopkeeper (Human rights Watch 2017:3). These incidents, while significant, provide only as a snapshot of recurrent ethnic conflicts. A deeper investigation into the root causes and consequences of such clashes is essential. By scrutinising the drivers, there is an opportunity to formulate strategies that go beyond immediate security concerns and address the core socio-economic and environmental issues.

In regions outside of the capital Bamako the presence of the state is limited, creating a vacuum that becomes ripe for various actors to pursue their interests. Areas such as Mopti and Segou have experienced the repercussions of this leading to the growth of community militias. This surge is particularly pronounced among diverse ethnic groups, including the Fulani, Bambara, Dogon, Songhai, and Tuareg. The historical roles of the Tuareg and Fulani as nomadic pastoralists is juxtaposed with the predominantly agricultural practices of the Dogon and Bambara and have historically defined their interactions. However, the compounding effects of climate change and resource scarcity have existing intensified conflicts (Thurston 2020:157).

Katiba Macina is a diverse group not only identifying as an insurgent group but also operating as a hybrid form of a community militia. However, the groups narrative often shifts by recruiting local members not based on religious radicalisation but through ethnic cleavages. Thurston emphasises this by stressing the following. "While portraying itself as a Jihadist group the discourse and the actions of Katiba Macina oscillate between a Jihadist and Fulani identity this overlap is described as a hybrid of an insurgent group and a self-defence militia" (Thurston 2020:158).

Similarly, Fulani youth are often driven to the idea of safeguarding and providing for their communities. Historically Fulani groups were disenfranchised by a colonial administration that favoured Dogon groups by granting them greater access to land and other resources; "under colonial and post-colonial state law, livestock keepers are disadvantaged vis-à-vis farmers because customary rights to land are recognised but pasture rights or territorial rights are not" (Nijenhuis 2009:77).

Secondly the dimension of poor governance, characterized by the absence of the state, compounds pre-existing issues, fostering an environment where alternative forms of governance become imperative for civilians. Boas argues that a conflict zone is not defined solely by the absence of governance but rather by the coexistence of competing modalities of governance, encompassing both informal and formal structures (Boas, 2015). In the context of limited state administration, matters of justice, security, and governance decision-making often rests upon community members, thereby engendering

a vacuum that facilitates the emergence of community militias. These militias, in turn, assume roles and responsibilities traditionally attributed to the central government.

Corruption and patrimonialism within public administrations and local elites incentivises communities to devise alternative mechanisms for generating public funds through cattle rustling, ransoming and enforcing local taxes. This, in effect, lends additional legitimacy to the activities of militias. The absence of transparent and accountable governance practices encourages communities to seek alternative avenues for addressing their needs, inadvertently providing a semblance of justification for the actions and existence of militias within these contested spaces. The interplay of inadequate state presence and corrupt governance thus contributes significantly to the proliferation and legitimacy of community militias in conflict-affected regions.

The flexibility and local knowledge of the territories by civilians is also strongly associated with the emergence of militias. This is because the Malian state views this as an opportunity to involve communities in providing their own protection. As Boisvert's posits, "pro-government militias have been employed by multiple African governments to support collapsing armies and achieve tactical objectives that conventional armies may be unable to accomplish" (Boisvert 2015:275).

Dan Na Ambassagou

Da Na Ambassagou is a group of Dogon traditional hunters and was formed in 2016 after a well-respected Dogon leader Théodoré Somboro was killed by Jihadists (Diablo 2017:303). The group aimed to protect local communities from Jihadist attacks within the "Dogon County." Many young men often drop out of school to join the group where they spend large periods of time patrolling the Bandiagara escarpment. By pushing a narrative of the securitisation of the region Dana Ambassagou has been able to gain support, funding, and recruits within the region. They have successfully liberated many villages that had fallen under Jihadist influence and have gained notable popularity in the effort to control the spread of Jihadist influence. With no funding and limited support local communities often come together to provide intel funding and food to the hunters and they get weapons from the killed Jihadist fighters. Thus, making their resourcefulness with limited supplies key to understanding their need to protect their lands.

Benjaminsen and Boubabcar have argued that attacks have become ethnically motivated with innocent Fulani civilians being targeted and killed a noteworthy incident occurred where 160 civilians were killed in the village of Ogossagu in March 2019 (Benjaminsen and Ba 2021:11). The rise in attacks on civilians often blurs the lines between the group protecting communities from Jihadist and utilising violence to intimidate and attack innocent civilians.

Benjaminsen also argues that the Dogon have been known to intimidate their own community members that refuse to give them support or join the cause. By forcing communities to pay taxes and taking resources from them many community members feel isolate and unsafe (Benjaminsen and Ba 2021:23). This has also been further exacerbated by the Malian government, who briefly supported the group but quickly advocated for its dissolution considering the attacks on innocent civilians that include kidnapping, ransoming and robbery. The presence of Dana Ambassagou has been key to understanding the operations of community militias. While their inception is premised on alternative modalities of governance the violence that is being perpetuated shifts from protection of local communities to a more exploitative form of control that seeks to ensure political and socioeconomic influence within the region.

Fulani Self- Defence Groups

As the increased violence between the Fulani and the Dogon and the state rises local Fulani villages have been co-opted to join self-defence groups for their own protection. Ba Kanore argues that the inception of these militias is “rooted in the socio-political context that claim to protect and provide justice to Fulani communities” (Ba Konaré 2018:45). Due to their historical marginalisation because of land tenure laws, the imposition of Sharia Law by jihadists, and stigmatisation by other local communities, Fulani civilians are left without support and are compelled to devise their own defence mechanisms. However, given the narrative of how Fulani ethnic and religious identities are intricately linked, it becomes difficult to distinguish between Fulani militias and Fulani Jihadists. "Fulani self-defence groups have sought support from powerful jihadist groups, JNIM and in rare cases ISGS, in their quest for protection, resources, and weapons, further challenging their distinction from jihadist groups." (Ba-Konaré 2018:7). Rather, a

vicious cycle of deadly inter-communal violence has ensued, underpinned by a logic of retaliation and revenge, with groups such as Dana Ambassagou feeling that their attacks are legitimate, has resulted in increased tensions and violent conflicts. Numerous massive massacres have taken place on all sides, with entire villages being looted and set on fire. (Human Rights Watch 2021).

Implications of the Militias on Communities and Statehood

The emergence of groups like Dan Na Ambassagou and Fulani self-defence militias in Mali has had profound implications for local communities and statehood. Dan Na Ambassagou was initially formed to protect Dogon communities from jihadist groups after the killing of a prominent leader. (In Central Mali, Civilian Populations Are Caught Between Terrorism and Counterterrorism Fact-finding Mission Report, 2018). This group has garnered support by framing their activities as essential for regional security and self-defence. They have successfully reclaimed villages from jihadist control and relied on local communities for resources and intelligence. However, their activities have become increasingly controversial. Reports of ethnically motivated attacks on Fulani civilians, such as the 2019 massacre in Ogossagu that saw 160 people being killed by the group Dan Na Ambassagou have blurred the lines between defending communities and perpetrating violence (Ross 2019). Their actions have led to further ethnic tensions and fear within local populations, eroding the initial protective image they cultivated.

Similarly, Fulani self-defence groups have emerged as a response to historical grievances, land disputes, and the imposition of Sharia Law by jihadists. These groups, driven by the need for protection and justice, have sometimes aligned with jihadist factions like JNIM and ISGS, complicating their distinction from extremist groups. The involvement of Fulani militias in violent reprisals and the broader cycle of inter-communal violence has intensified conflict in the region. Massive attacks and massacres have resulted in severe disruption to communities, with villages being looted and burned.

Going back to Kaldor's "New Wars" theory provides an important basis for comprehending the complex nature of the Fulani self-defence organisations' position. Her theory emphasises how contemporary wars frequently blur the lines between state and non-state actors, as well as soldiers and civilians. The Fulani groups' alliance with jihadist

factions such as JNIM and ISGS shows this blurring, as their identity as self-defence forces becomes inextricably linked with extremist elements. Additionally, Kaldor's concept of fragmentation in contemporary wars is obvious in the regional nature of the Fulani conflicts which are motivated by historical marginalisation and land claims.

The presence and activities of these militias highlight the challenges of local and state governance in the Sahel. While these groups originally formed to address security, gaps left by weak state presence their actions have frequently undermined the state's efforts to maintain order and have exacerbated ethnic and sectarian violence. The interplay between these militias and the state reveals how informal power structures can both challenge and complement formal governance, leading to complex and often destabilizing dynamics within affected communities.

French intervention and Wagner

The notion of French intervention has been marred with challenges and controversy and has been tied to the increasing destabilisation of the region. Justification for French intervention is closely linked to their need to ensure the post-colonial ties are looked after and maintained, "French governments approach to maintaining special relations with Africa combines an array of "official" policy instruments with a complex range of un-official family like and covert ties" (Chafer 2018: 48). The argument that France puts forward is there is influence within the region is a legitimate action that seeks to ensure fundamentals of democracy and peace are upheld. However local sentiment from state and non-state actors such as Islamic insurgents, military juntas and community militias all posit that the presence of the French has only exacerbated the crises within the region.

French forces were first deployed in Mali in 2013 (Jesse 2019:104), and their military operations have been fraught with controversy and growing anti-French sentiment. This is because, first, African elites who have collaborated with France may exploit French military aid to bolster their status or achieve specific political and economic goals. Jean-François Bayart defines "extraversion" methods as "whereby sovereignty in Africa is exercised through the creation and management of dependence" (Bayart 2000:289), and they are linked to French economic interests in the region. France maintains and owns

two huge uranium mines in Niger, and the danger of total collapse within the Malian state would have adverse consequences because the conflict would flow over into neighboring Niger, jeopardizing their mining interests.

In response to growing insecurity and the proliferation of jihadist groups in Mali, French military operations such as Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane were launched with two main objectives. The first was to support the establishment of a civilian government to maintain a semblance of democratic governance amid rising instability. The second objective aimed to counter and prevent terrorist activities, driven by France's interest in protecting its economic and political stakes in the region. However, these interventions inadvertently exacerbated security issues and fueled local discontent. Prior to French intervention, the dissatisfaction with the Malian government's ability to effectively combat jihadist insurgencies had already led to a series of military coups. By 2017, French military presence had become a catalyst for local protests demanding their expulsion and advocating for stronger Russian involvement in the region (Elischer 2022:14). The dissatisfaction with the French-led operations and the broader electoral discontent led to a coup in 2020, spearheaded by Colonel Goita, which marked a significant shift in the political landscape and the end of French military authority. Subsequent coups in 2021 further intensified the instability, culminating in the evacuation of French forces and a reconfiguration of the regional security dynamics (Lanfranch and Bruijne 2019:40).

The failure of French troops to limit the activities of Jihadist insurgents was only further exacerbated by claims that the French military were supporting local Jihadists to ensure that the disorder in the region was maintained, thus giving them a legitimate reason for being within Mali. "In October 2021, Choguel Maïga claimed in an interview with a Russian media station that the French had been training terrorist groups with the intention to divide Mali" (Tounkara 2021). The coups, however, resulted in a breakdown in relations with its Western partners, allowing Russia to establish itself into the region.

Wagner a private paramilitary group, operates in the region and provides both protection and support. This has been a result of Russians positioning themselves against the Neo-Colonial policies associated with Western powers such as France. "Russia has

experienced humiliation by the West thereby linking Russia's foreign policy predicament to the continent's historical experiences of economic exploitation and other forms of Western colonialism" (Elischer 2022: 24). This rhetoric has allowed Russian forces, notably Wagner, to solidify their position in the region as a key collaborator with local governments in the endeavor to reduce Jihadist violence in Mali.

However, the presence of these forces must be extensively examined to understand the motivations behind their support. Russia, like France, has a significant interest in resource acquisition and extraction. According to Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, the Wagner group is a private organization that is regularly utilized to advance Russia's foreign policy while also pursuing their own political goals (Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Rademeyer, 2023). Stanyard et al emphasize the organization's three main activities include mercenary work, illicit and grey market economic transactions, and political influence (Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Rademeyer, 2023). All of these include meddling with government policy through military action, resource extraction, and politically motivated election monitoring. These efforts are taken to help weak governments while furthering their own economic goals. However, there is considerable evidence that their actions are producing additional instability in the state in which they operate, and as a result, their presence has sparked controversy. Due to the group's legal ambiguity, many of its actions go unchecked. They routinely incite political turmoil, violate humanitarian law, and deliver weapons to several African countries. In 2021, the first Wagner soldiers arrived in Mali, stationed in Bamako and other northern provinces. Wagner's soldiers have conducted joint operations with the Malian government. Although the goal of their deployment was to enlist local forces in the battle against Islamic extremism, reports of civilian casualties have come to characterize their actions. On March 27, 2022, Wagner troops with the Malian army besieged Moura, a town in the Mopti area, as part of a counterterrorism operation, resulting in the largest single civilian attack in the history of Mali's continuing conflict. Three hundred members of the community in Moura were apprehended and killed by Wagner (Doxsee & Thompson, *Massacres, executions, and falsified graves: The Wagner Group's mounting humanitarian cost in Mali* 2022). In addition to committing crimes against humanity, Wagner Group anticipates

substantial compensation for its military services. The Malian government allocated approximately \$10 million for Wagner's assistance however, economic difficulties have hindered these payments. In exchange for their military operations Wagner has been granted mining rights in Mali, providing access to valuable resources such as silver, manganese, diamonds, and lithium (Chirico, Barthelemy, and Kone 2013).

Wagner's role in Burkina Faso reflects a different strategic alignment. The current military junta, which came to power following the ousting of Captain Dimba, views Wagner as a crucial partner in countering insurgency activities. Unlike Mali, where Wagner's interests are heavily tied to economic gains from resource extraction, Burkina Faso's engagement with Wagner is driven by immediate security concerns and a shift towards strengthening political and economic ties with Russia. The junta facing anti-French protests and instability, has employed Wagner to quell unrest and fortify relations with Russia. While Wagner's presence in Mali is primarily motivated by resource exploitation, in Burkina Faso, it represents a strategic pivot to alleviate state pressures and address the ongoing insurgency. Despite this, President Ibrahim Traore has not publicly detailed his connections with Wagner but maintains that any assistance that aids in suppressing Islamic insurgency is welcome (Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Rademeyer 2023).

Implications

The involvement of French and Russian forces in the Sahel has profound implications for both statehood and local communities, deeply affecting the region's political and social landscape. French intervention, initiated in Mali in 2013 with Operations Serval and Barkhane, aimed to stabilize the region and protect French economic interests, including uranium mines in Niger. However, these interventions have been fraught with controversy. French forces were criticized for exacerbating instability and igniting anti-French sentiment, leading to local protests and a push for Russian involvement (Elischer 2022:14). The French approach has been rooted in maintaining colonial ties and managing dependence, has often been perceived as self-serving, thereby fuelling discontent among local populations and non-state actors (Chafer 2018:48). This discontent has contributed to a series of coups and political shifts in Mali, culminating in

the 2020 and 2021 coups that saw the end of French military presence and the rise of Russian influence (Lanfranch and Bruijne 2019:40).

The arrival of the Wagner Group a private Russian paramilitary organization, has further complicated the situation in West Africa and aligns with Bayart's concept of the "state of extraversion" (Bayart 2000:289). Initially deployed in Mali in 2021, Wagner's operations, marked by severe human rights abuses including the massacre of 300 civilians in Moura in March 2022 (Doxsee & Thompson, 2022). Illustrates how the group leverages external influence to reinforce its strategic and economic objectives. Wagner's presence in Mali is intricately tied to resource extraction and geopolitical manoeuvring, reflecting Bayart's idea of using external resources to bolster internal power structures. In Burkina Faso, Wagner's involvement is framed as a response to counterinsurgency amid anti-French protests and political instability (Chirico, Barthelemy, and Kone 2013; Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer 2023). Demonstrating how the group's external engagement is strategically utilized to navigate and influence domestic political dynamics. This shift from Western to Russian influence underscores how Wagner's activities are a manifestation of extraversion, where external actors exploit regional conflicts to consolidate their power and extend their influence.

These external interventions have significant implications for local communities and statehood. In Mali, French and Wagner operations have deepened local grievances, leading to cycles of violence and instability. The perception of foreign forces as either protectors or exploiters influences local alliances and conflicts. In Burkina Faso, Wagner's engagement reflects a strategic pivot towards addressing immediate security concerns while navigating shifting international allegiances. Both contexts highlight the complex interplay between foreign military interventions, local governance, and community dynamics, where external actors significantly impact the efficacy of state responses to insurgency and shape the trajectory of regional stability.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored how the production of violence in Mali provides opportunities for various actors to achieve their objectives, significantly shaping the engagement between citizens and both formal and informal institutions. The absence of a strong central state in Mali has enabled diverse groups to impose their own interpretations of power and governance. This is due to its state structures being highly influenced by religious tensions and a series of rebellions that have increasingly weakened the state with competing narratives surrounding access to resources such as land and political influence. This has been exacerbated by the politicization of identities, leading to a dynamic where individual goals are heavily influenced by the functioning and objectives of these groups. The result is a fragmented monopoly over security and power, which in turn perpetuates cycles of violence and instability.

In contrast, the next chapter will shift focus to Burkina Faso, using Mali as a comparative case. It will analyse how patterns of violence have similarly spread and impacted civilians in Burkina Faso, highlighting both the parallels and differences in the experiences of local communities. Specifically, this chapter will examine the failure of state institutions in Burkina Faso, a country that initially had a stronger state apparatus and has not experienced the same level of religious and ethnic conflict that has profoundly shaped Mali's crisis. This comparative analysis aims to deepen our understanding of the region's complex dynamics and the varying impacts of violence on state and community structures.

Chapter Five: Patterns of violence in Burkina Faso

Introduction

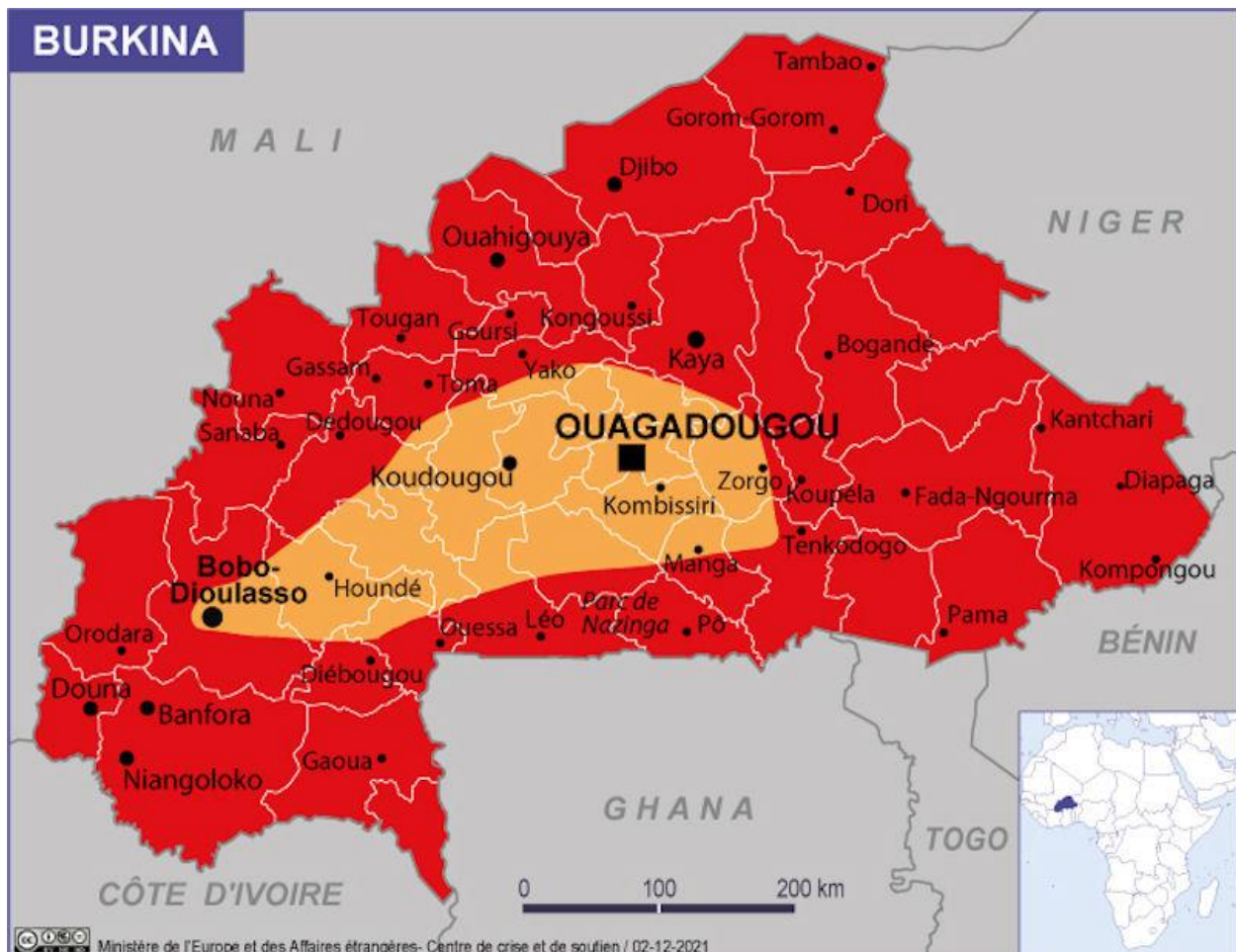
Examining the patterns of violence in Mali in the preceding chapter provided a better lens for understanding the impact institutional and structural weaknesses have had on regional violence shifts. The examples provided strengthened the fundamental premise that violence in this context is not only a destructive reaction but also a constructive tool aimed at gaining self-determination, security, and resources. The lack of official institutions, combined with the growth of illegal and informal institutions has allowed for the spread of violence throughout the region, and Burkina Faso, the subject of this chapter, has seen a rapid increase in the development of several types of violence. In Burkina Faso, the emerging patterns of violence differ significantly from those in Mali, primarily driven by insurgent groups rather than entrenched ethnic conflicts. Burkina Faso's recent conflict, characterized by attacks from jihadist groups like Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), reflects a struggle for ideological and territorial control rather than deep-seated ethnic rivalries. This contrasts with Mali, where historical ethnic tensions and separatist movements have long fuelled violence. In Burkina Faso, while resource conflicts over gold concessions are increasingly significant, they are not as deeply rooted or impactful as in Mali. The Wagner Group has not been reported in Burkina Faso, unlike in Mali where their involvement has exacerbated conflict dynamics and resource control issues. Thus, Burkina Faso's instability is primarily influenced by jihadist insurgency and emerging resource competition, leading to different challenges for state formation and governance compared to Mali's more complex interplay of ethnic, insurgent, and resource-driven conflicts.

The selection of Burkina Faso was deliberately done to see how different historical and institutional approaches placed Burkina Faso in a position of relative stability in comparison to her neighbouring countries. Unlike Mali, which has seen ethnic conflict and political instability since the 1960s, through the AQIM, al-Qaeda, and MNLA groups being able to operate freely. The increased tensions of inter-communal or interethnic violence, as well as the fact that Mali is currently facing the threat of separatists, with the Tuareg ethnic minority in the north attempting to obtain political independence.

Until 2014, Burkina Faso had never experienced significant tensions or an increase in sustained and organized Jihadist movements and inter-ethnic that had "gained a reputation for relative peace and stability" and displayed "remarkable success in avoiding extremist violence and protracted armed conflict" (Loada and Romaniuk 2014:2). Local conflicts were limited in nature because of state sanctioned community groups as well as greater civil political representation.

While Mali's protracted instability and failed state dynamics have led to a complex mix of ethnic, insurgent, and resource-driven violence, Burkina Faso's instability is a more recent phenomenon, driven largely by jihadist insurgencies rather than long-standing ethnic conflicts. Ethnic tensions in Burkina Faso have historically not been politicized but increasing climate change has triggered new conflicts and politicized ethnicity, setting local communities against each other. This spillover effect has revealed vulnerabilities in relatively stable states like Burkina Faso, as insurgent groups exploit weak state institutions to gain control over local resources and communities. Additionally, there is a markedly stronger correlation between the failure of the "big man" state model and insecurity in Burkina Faso compared to Mali. While Mali's corruption and governance issues are significant, Burkina Faso illustrates how rising corruption and entrenched patronage networks can severely weaken a state, making it susceptible to regional shocks such as the spillover of violence from Mali. Thus, although Burkina Faso's crisis can be analysed with similar variables to those used for Mali, it is crucial to highlight how even relatively stable states can become vulnerable to violence spillover, leading to the rise of non-state actors who capitalize on institutional weaknesses. This chapter will follow a structure akin to the previous chapter on Mali, starting with a historical background to provide context for the violence this will be followed by looking at the evolving patterns of violence and actors involved and concluding with an examination of the implications for state formation and local communities drawing both similarities and differences from the Mali case.

Historical Background



Source: *Global Security.org 2021*

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country in West Africa situated between the Sahel and Sudan belts, inherited a colonial legacy that profoundly shaped post-independence governance. Burkina Faso is characterised by ethnic and religious diversity. There are over 20.3 million people that currently live in Burkina Faso with over 20 distinct ethnic groups (Leroux 2024:5). The largest ethnic group being the Mossi that makes up 53.7% of the population. The Fulani also make up 6.8% of the population with them carrying out grazing patterns along the Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger border. There is also a small group of Tuareg communities who make up 1.9% reside along the northern border of

Burkina Faso and Mali but have not rebelled against the state unlike in Mali (Eizenga 2015:64).

In Burkina Faso, the acceptance of diverse religions among major ethnic groups has fostered an environment where no political party has found it advantageous to exploit religious loyalty for political gain. The heterogeneous spread of religious beliefs across different cultures has prevented any single religious group from being associated with a specific ethnic, tribal, or national identity. This diffusion of religious affiliations has made group divisions weaker and prevented religion from becoming a divisive identity marker. Consequently, the lack of combined identities such as religious-ethnic groups or political factions based solely on religious affiliation has reduced the likelihood of forming groups with completely opposing identities, thereby mitigating the potential for violence driven by politically exploited identity differences. This contrasts sharply with Mali, where religious and ethnic identities are more closely intertwined and politicized, leading to significant tensions and conflicts.

Douglas North's theories on institutions provide a useful framework for analysing the impact of Burkina Faso's colonial legacy on its state authority and legitimacy. According to North, institutions can be defined as the formal and informal rules governing social interactions play a crucial role in shaping economic and political outcomes (North 1990).

In the case of Burkina Faso, the French colonial administration's reliance on indirect rule through traditional chiefdoms effectively established a set of institutions that both facilitated and constrained state authority. This approach can be understood through North's concept of institutional persistence where existing institutions tend to persist and influence future developments long after their initial creation (North 1990). The colonial reliance on traditional chiefs meant that these chiefdoms became embedded in the local governance structures, creating a legacy of decentralized authority.

As North argues, institutions shape the incentives and constraints faced by individuals and groups. In Burkina Faso, the legacy of weak state presence and fragmented administration can be seen as a direct outcome of the colonial institutional framework. The limited reach of the state in rural areas meant that the post-colonial government

inherited a system where local governance was fragmented and decentralized, reflecting the institutions established during the colonial period.

This fragmented administrative structure has led to ongoing governance and development challenges, as the state struggles to extend its authority and provide services effectively in regions where traditional institutions still hold sway. According to North, the persistence of these colonial-era institutions can create a path dependency that makes reform difficult (North, 1990). The challenge for contemporary Burkina Faso lies in navigating these entrenched institutions and developing new governance structures that can address the needs of its diverse population while overcoming the legacy of colonial indirect rule.

Burkina Faso gained independence from France in 1960, has experienced a series of political instabilities, marked by seven coups between 1966 and 2022. The country's political history reveals a pronounced interplay between military and civilian rule, with the military playing a central role in state-building and development. Maurice Yaméogo, the first president, was overthrown in 1966 following trade union protests against restrictions on workers' rights (Engels 2022:318). A military coup in 1967 installed Captain Sangoulé Lamizana, and a 1970 referendum established the Second Republic. However, subsequent strikes led to Lamizana's removal and another referendum in 1976, creating the brief Third Republic (Engels 2022:319). In 1980 a teachers' strike precipitated a coup, leading to the formation of the Military Committee for National Recovery (CMRPN) under Saye Zerbo (Engels 2022:319). Zerbo's regime was replaced in 1982 by Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo, who appointed Captain Thomas Sankara as prime minister. (Engels 2022:319)

Military interventions in Burkina Faso have often been a response to civilian government failures, aiming to restore stability during periods of unrest and corruption. These interventions typically sought to address immediate issues and then relinquish power once stability was achieved. This pattern contrasts with Mali, where state-building has been less influenced by military intervention.

Thomas Sankara's Presidency

The significant military involvement in Burkina Faso, particularly under Thomas Sankara's rule from 1983 to 1987, represents a distinctive approach to governance and development compared to Mali. Sankara's tenure was marked by transformative socio-economic policies that spurred considerable progress in the country. His government mobilized citizens to actively participate in national development projects, such as building access roads, housing, hospitals, and schools. This extensive mobilization led to rapid improvements in infrastructure, with ordinary citizens and construction workers contributing to these efforts (Yesufu 2022:96). Literacy rates surged from 13% in 1983 to 73% by 1987, reflecting the success of educational reforms (Yesufu 2022:96). Sankara also implemented radical land reforms, redistributing land from the aristocracy to the poor to boost agricultural production, and initiated large-scale projects like the Sourou Valley dam, which irrigated 8,000 hectares for sugar cane cultivation (Yesufu 2022:98). These reforms brought significant development and some of these policies remain influential today. However, Sankara's political reforms, including the removal of traditional leaders and substantial cuts to perceived wasteful government spending, faced resistance from high-ranking officials, including Blaise Compaoré, who eventually opposed his progressive policies.

On October 15th, 1987, Thomas Sankara was assassinated in a dramatic coup d'état orchestrated by his close associate, Blaise Compaoré. Sankara had been a charismatic leader who championed anti-imperialist policies and radical reforms aimed at transforming Burkina Faso's socio-economic landscape. His tenure was marked by ambitious projects in education, health, and infrastructure, but also by growing tension within the military and political ranks (Kambou 2019).

The coup was meticulously planned by Compaoré, who had been Sankara's friend and ally before turning against him. Compaoré's dissatisfaction with Sankara's increasingly autocratic style and radical policies, combined with his own ambitions, played a crucial role in the conspiracy. On the day of the coup, a group of about twelve officers, loyal to Compaoré, executed the plan to seize control of the government. The assassination took place at a meeting in the Presidential Palace where Sankara was killed by gunfire from the coup plotters. The details of the assassination were later revealed through various

accounts, including testimonies from surviving witnesses and leaked documents (Yesufu, 2022).

Compaoré, along with other high-ranking officials who were part of the coup, swiftly moved to consolidate power. After the assassination, Compaoré declared himself president and took steps to legitimize his new government. He arrested and detained many of Sankara's supporters and made efforts to eliminate any remaining resistance. The coup was subsequently legitimized through a series of manipulative political manoeuvres, including the suppression of dissent and the control of the media (Harsch, 2017).

Compaoré's rule lasted for 27 years, characterized by relative stability and some economic progress but also by increasing authoritarianism and corruption. His long tenure was eventually ended by popular protests in 2014, driven by widespread frustration over attempts to extend his presidency and general dissatisfaction with his government (Goehring, 2015).

Blaise Compaore Presidency

The regime of Compaoré was characterized by a tight relationship between military and political elites. The army, led by Compaoré and his companions, was the main instrument of coercion and repression against real and perceived opponents, but also a state agency that was deliberately weakened by divisions and patronage.

Compaoré maintained power for over three decades by constructing a semi-authoritarian regime supported by three key institutions: the military, his political party, and traditional chiefdoms (International Crisis Group 2013:11). His regime was characterized by a strategic use of pressure and force to consolidate control, effectively reinforcing his "Big Man" status through extensive patronage networks. His regime was anchored in three main pillars: his political party, the *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP)*; his military unit, the *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP)*; and the support from traditional chiefdoms, bolstered by patronage of influential rural leaders (Hubert, 2022:95). This multifaceted approach allowed Compaoré to secure his rule leveraging both institutional power and local influence to maintain a tight grip on the country.

Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP)

The *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* (RSP) was a pivotal institution in Blaise Compaoré's regime, epitomizing the deep entanglement of military and political elites in Burkina Faso. As Harsch argues, Compaoré's origins in the military and his dependence on armed forces were central to his political strategy (Harsch 2017:128). The RSP, an elite paramilitary unit tasked with the president's personal protection, played a crucial role beyond security (Haavik et al 2022:6). Its functions included suppressing political dissent and stopping any opposition, underscoring the patron-client relationships prevalent within the security forces.

The RSP's involvement in stopping uprisings is well-documented. For instance, during the 2011 Burkinabé uprising, the RSP was actively deployed to disperse protesters challenging Compaoré's policies, often with significant use of force (International Crisis Group, 2011). Additionally, the RSP's role in the assassination of journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998 exemplifies its function as a tool of political repression, aimed at silencing critics and preserving regime stability (Hilger 2010:252).

This dual role of the RSP both as a protector of the president and as a suppressor of opposition illustrates how Compaoré's regime leveraged military power to consolidate control and manage political threats. Such practices reflect a broader pattern of authoritarian governance where the intertwining of military and political spheres is used to sustain autocratic rule (Harsch, 2017:129).

The Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP)

The second pivotal component of Blaise Compaoré's regime was his political party, the *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (CDP), which worked in tandem with the military. Established on February 5, 1996, the CDP resulted from the merger of several smaller parties within Burkina Faso. This consolidation aimed to fortify Compaoré's monopoly on power by integrating various political networks and ensuring minimal challenges to his authority (Harsch, 2017).

Through the creation of intricate patron-client networks, Compaoré effectively co-opted local officials, who were brought into the fold under the pretext of implementing a national

decentralization policy. Harsch argues that the “CDP was a powerful tool in exporting and implementing concentric networks of authority distribution into fringe areas offering state resources to leaders who formed local anchorage for connecting peripheral rhizomes” (Harsch 2017:118). This strategy meant that the decentralization policy, while aimed at increasing political representation, entrenched clientelism by securing local support through state resources and favours. Consequently, the control of these networks was heavily dependent on Compaoré's ability to influence the state apparatus and its interactions with the public.

This strategy ties into Compaoré's final unit of control, which involved local chiefs who played a crucial role in securing votes and support from regions outside of the capital, Ouagadougou. Local chiefs were instrumental in mobilizing local populations to vote for Compaoré's regime. In exchange, these chiefs received rewards such as financial incentives and business contracts. For instance, local chief Oumaro Kanazoe from the Nord region exemplifies this dynamic. He actively encouraged his community to support Compaoré in local elections, subsequently benefiting from government contracts for public infrastructure projects (Haavik et al 2022:9).

Kanazoe is representative of many local chiefs who leveraged their positions within these patronage networks to secure tangible rewards, reinforcing their own power while simultaneously bolstering Compaoré's control over rural areas. Haavik further argues that “through local chiefs, a web of alliances could work to both neutralize threats to Compaoré's authority as well as defuse underlying community-based tensions” (Haavik et al 2022:9). This approach of integrating local communities into the political framework contrasts sharply with the experience of Mali, where peripheral communities have often faced significant marginalisation by the state.

Despite the extensive use of patronage networks, Compaoré's control over Burkina Faso faced significant challenges, as evidenced by a series of mutinies within the military. These incidents occurred in 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011 highlighting the weaknesses of Compaoré's patronage system and the government's difficulties in maintaining control (Haavik et al, 2022). For instance, in 2011 unrest among officers in the Régiment de

Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP) stemmed from grievances over unpaid allowances and inadequate housing (Haavik et al., 2022).

The situation deteriorated further when a student protester was killed in police custody in 2011, exacerbating public discontent. This discontent spread to the regular army, which eventually staged a mutiny against Compaoré's government. The escalating challenges culminated in widespread public pressure. On October 21, 2014, Compaoré's proposal to amend the constitution to allow him to seek re-election in 2015 sparked massive riots, strikes, and demonstrations across the country. Faced with immense pressure from civil society and the military, Compaoré resigned on October 31, 2014, ending his 27-year presidency and paving the way for an interim government (Engels, 2015).

After the general elections on November 29, 2015, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected President of Burkina Faso, inheriting a state deeply influenced by Compaoré's neo-patrimonial system. This system, marked by extensive patronage networks, helped Compaoré maintain control but resulted in significant fragmentation and instability once he left office.

To understand the complexities of the Burkinabé state post-Compaoré applying Bayart's concept of the "rhizomatic state" is important to understanding these complex networks. According to Bayart, a rhizomatic state is characterized by dispersed networks of power and authority, resembling a rhizome in its structure" (Bayart 1993:261). This system is less about a single, centralized node of power and more about a web of interconnected nodes and relationships that influence governance and political dynamics.

Under Compaoré, Burkina Faso's political landscape functioned as a rhizomatic state, with power not centralized but spread across various patronage networks and informal structures. When Compaoré was ousted, the state's rhizomatic nature meant that power was not easily reconstituted under a single authority. Instead, the political vacuum created a situation where multiple often competing, power centres emerged each drawing from the established networks of influence.

Kaboré's presidency thus faced the challenge of navigating this complex rhizomatic network where power and influence were fragmented and fluid, making governance and state-building particularly challenging. He needed to address not only the overt political

instability but also the underlying, diffuse structures of power that had persisted and evolved from Compaoré's era.

As Boas and Dunn point out that such a system can become a source of perpetual crisis due to its lack of formal institutional structures, which fosters deeper fragmentation and instability (Boas and Dunn, 2017). The transition resulted in a power vacuum, with various actors contesting state authority, further destabilizing the country. The dismantling of the *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* (RSP) under Kaboré's administration severely compromised security. This weakening allowed jihadist groups from Mali to extend their influence into Burkina Faso. The first major jihadist attack occurred on January 15, 2016, when Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) launched a dual assault on the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino restaurant in Ouagadougou, killing 30 people (France 24, 2022). The increase in jihadist violence was stark, with the number of attacks rising from 23 in 2015 to 2,354 in 2021 (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) 2022). The emergence of home-grown jihadist groups, such as Ansarul Islam, capitalized on local ethnic divisions and socio-economic frustrations, such as inadequate rural infrastructure and limited employment opportunities. The Kaboré government attempted to address the issue with a decree in 2016, which sought to regulate community-based militias by establishing legal boundaries and oversight. However, this decree often exacerbated local tensions as some militias operated with impunity, targeting communities like the Fulani. The proliferation of these armed groups further weakened the state's control and contributed to the country's ongoing instability.

By 2021, Burkina Faso had become the epicentre of violence in the Sahel region, with attacks on civilians, local churches, and state institutions becoming alarmingly frequent. The country experienced a record year of conflict in 2021 surpassing Mali as the centre of terrorism in the Sahel. The most devastating attack occurred on June 4, 2021, when Al-Qaeda affiliates killed over 135 civilians in a brutal assault over two nights (International Christian Concern, 2022). The worsening security situation led to a military coup on January 24, 2022, where Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, leader of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR), removed President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Despite Damiba's promises to enhance security, the crisis escalated under his rule. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data

Project (ACLED), attacks by armed groups surged by 23 percent in the five months following Damiba's takeover. On September 30, 2022, Damiba was himself overthrown by Captain Ibrahim Traoré and fellow officers, who criticized his failure to curb insurgent violence. Burkina Faso remains under military rule and faces significant challenges in regaining control of approximately 60% of its territory, which has been seized by local militias and jihadist groups (ACLED 2022).

The examination of Burkina Faso's political history reveals significant contrasts with Mali, offering a distinct framework for understanding the patterns of violence in the Sahel. Unlike Mali, where the state has historically struggled to maintain a monopoly on violence amid persistent rebellions and ethnic tensions, Burkina Faso was characterized by relatively low levels of religious and ethnic discord, with diverse groups coexisting peacefully. Under Blaise Compaoré, the Burkinabé state effectively maintained control through a sophisticated system of patronage. This system not only ensured loyalty and support across rural areas but also provided strong security measures. However, the collapse of Compaoré's regime created a power vacuum that allowed jihadist violence from Mali to surge into Burkina Faso. This influx exploited religious, ethnic, and socio-economic cleavages, rapidly transforming the country into a hotspot for jihadist activity. Despite its previously stable ethnic and religious landscape, Burkina Faso quickly became the epicentre of violence in the Sahel. This shift underscores how the dynamics of violence in Burkina Faso have evolved differently from Mali, where the state's long-standing stability has shaped the nature of conflicts. The end of Compaoré's regime signified the shift of power away from the state and towards Jihadist groups and local community militias. The next section of this chapter will delve into how these shifting patterns of violence have manifested in Burkina Faso, examining their implications for local communities and the broader regional stability.

Jihadist Activities

The political history of Burkina Faso presents a notable contrast to that of Mali, providing a unique context for analysing the evolving patterns of violence in the Sahel. Rahame Idrissa argues that Burkina Faso stands out in the Sahel region because no politicization and the ideology of Islam had taken root in the public sphere (Idrissa 2017:32).

Historically, Burkina Faso experienced relatively low levels of religious and ethnic tensions, with diverse groups coexisting peacefully. The state, under Blaise Compaoré, maintained effective control through a robust system of patronage that secured loyalty in rural areas and provided strong security measures. In contrast, Mali has long struggled with maintaining state control amid persistent rebellions and complex ethnic tensions. The collapse of Compaoré's regime created a vacuum that jihadist groups from Mali rapidly exploited, leveraging existing religious, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions to destabilize Burkina Faso. Despite its previously stable environment, Burkina Faso quickly became the epicentre of violence in the Sahel.

Scholars such as Elischer argue that the proliferation of jihadism in the Sahel, particularly since 2012, has been significantly influenced by the spillover of jihadist violence from neighbouring Mali (Elischer, 2019). Elischer also highlights that the political regime changes, particularly the removal of Blaise Compaoré, who had previously engaged in mediation with insurgents, left a gap in security and conflict resolution efforts (Elischer, 2019). As a result, the jihadist threat in Burkina Faso can be seen more because of the country's internal issues rather than the initial cause of political instability (International Crisis Group, 2020). The ensuing political instability in Burkina Faso has exacerbated security threats, exemplified by the bombing of the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino Café on January 16, 2016, which killed over thirty people (Barrow et al, 2021). The militant group al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for this attack. Following this incident, various terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, Ansarul Islam, and Jama'a Nusrat ul Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM), have increased their activities within Burkina Faso. This investigation will focus specifically on Ansaroul Islam and JNIM due to their high frequency of attacks and extensive recruitment efforts within local communities.

Ansaroul Islam

The group Ansaroul Islam is a domestic group who operates in the Soum province that borders Mali and Burkina Faso. The current leader Jafar Dicko took over from his brother who had initially created the group (Afriyie, 2019). The group's emergence was based on the teachings of Malam Ibrahim Dicko who denounced the social inequalities. In gaining support from local people Dicko argued that the social inequality that had been created

by the state were contrary to Islamic laws and needed to be rectified by local community members joining and supporting the group.

Ansaroul Islam's operations are primarily concentrated in Burkina Faso's Northern Soum Province, where their attacks have targeted Burkina Faso's security forces, including both police and military personnel, as well as French anti-terrorist bases. According to Nsaibia, et al while the group initially focused on these security targets, recent years have seen a marked increase in attacks on civilians (Nsaibia et al 2018). A particularly devastating instance occurred on the night of June 4-5, 2021, in Solhan, located in the Sebba commune of Yagha Province. During this attack, armed fighters, believed to be from Ansaroul Islam, assaulted a position held by the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP) and conducted a house-to-house raid, resulting in the deaths of at least 132 individuals, including 20 children (Amnesty International, 2023:31). This escalation in targeting civilians is seen as a deliberate strategy to intimidate and deter local communities from supporting or joining local militias. The violence has also been accompanied by a rise in kidnappings and abductions. On January 12, 2023, near the besieged village of Liki in Soum Province, Ansaroul Islam members abducted 66 women, girls, and newborns while they were gathering firewood and wild fruits (Communiqué Administratif de Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Région du Sahel, 2023). These abductions are part of a broader strategy to gather intelligence on local militias and the military, exert pressure on communities, and use the captives to convey messages or ultimatums to local officials or communities. Such tactics are designed not only to intimidate but also to destabilize the region by creating fear and disrupting local support for the state promoted militias and its allies (Amnesty International 2023:35).

Ansaroul Islam has employed measures to exert control over besieged communities by restricting their access to essential resources and livelihoods. The group has prohibited residents in besieged areas from farming their fields and accessing pasturelands for livestock grazing. In addition, Ansaroul Islam has targeted supply convoys attempting to reach these besieged towns and villages, further exacerbating the residents' difficulties. For example, in August 2021, a trader convoy, which was escorted by the military and attempting to supply the besieged town of Arbinda, was ambushed by alleged members of Ansaroul Islam near Boukouma, between Arbinda and Gorgadji. The convoy,

consisting of 80 vehicles with traders and civilians, was attacked, resulting in the deaths of at least 80 individuals, including 65 civilians and 15 military personnel (Amnesty International, 2023). These attacks on supply convoys and restrictions on farming have significantly worsened food security and disrupted livelihoods, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. The severe limitations imposed on access to food and essential resources have forced many residents to flee their besieged communities, leading to large-scale displacement. This mass movement of displaced individuals has placed additional pressure on regions not under siege, which now face challenges related to accommodating the influx of refugees and providing for their needs.

The activities of Ansaroul Islam have created a significant disconnect between local communities and state provisions, leading to the successful isolation of these communities. By severing access to state resources and security, Ansaroul Islam has been able to exert substantial control over the affected areas. The group primarily targets civilians and civilian infrastructure, engaging in a range of violent activities including kidnappings, assaults, and assassinations of local leaders such as elders, mayors, and other prominent figures across the Sahel region. Their operations have extended to the destruction of essential infrastructure, with administrative buildings, homes, and schools being deliberately set on fire by Ansaroul Islam militants (Nsaiba et al, 2018). These actions have had profound effects on both local communities and the state of Burkina Faso. The destruction of civilian infrastructure not only disrupts daily life but also impedes access to essential services and governance, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and contributing to the overall instability in the region. The widespread fear and displacement caused by these tactics have further strained the relationship between the state and its citizens, undermining efforts to maintain control and address the ongoing crisis.

Implications on the state and local communities

Ansaroul Islam is predominantly composed of recruits from the Fulani and Rimaibé ethnic groups, with Rimaibé members being the majority. Despite this, the group is not ethnically exclusive and includes individuals from diverse communities such as the Mossi, Bellah (Black Tamasheq), Dogons, and Songhai. The founder of Ansaroul Islam, Dicko,

effectively challenged the entrenched hegemony of the traditional aristocracy, which was represented by customary chiefs, through his sermons that emphasized equality and brotherhood. Dicko questioned the established social hierarchies that divided nobles, clerics, and serfs, particularly within Soum's majority ethnic group, the Fulani. By addressing the frustrations and aspirations of rural communities, Ansaroul Islam has managed to attract a substantial following. Unlike jihadist groups in Mali, such as Jama'a Nusrat ul Islam wa al-Muslim (JNIM), which leverage religious and ethnic identity to gain support, Ansaroul Islam promotes inclusivity. The group emphasizes a restructuring of social inequalities and marginalization, thus broadening its appeal. This approach has facilitated the acceptance of their Islamic practices and teachings among a wider audience, with the previously marginalized classes in Burkina Faso increasingly adopting and embracing extremist Islamic ideologies (Estelle 2019:10).

Ordinary citizens in Burkina Faso who are deprived of fundamental services and basic necessities often turn to the teachings of Ansaroul Islam as a potential remedy for the stark disparities between themselves and the privileged few who benefit from state's mismanagement. The high levels of poverty, combined with widespread unemployment and limited opportunities, create an environment in which Ansaroul Islam's recruitment efforts can thrive. The economic situation in Burkina Faso is dire, with an unemployment rate of 43.9% and the country ranked 185 out of 193 on the Human Development Index (Bundesamt, 2024). This economic instability and high unemployment rate contribute to a sense of disenfranchisement among the population. Many young men, facing bleak prospects and limited economic opportunities, find the promises of Ansaroul Islam appealing as it offers an alternative narrative and a sense of purpose. The group's ability to exploit these socio-economic vulnerabilities is a significant factor in its growing support base and its ability to recruit individuals who are disillusioned with the current situation. This has made terrorism a strong option as most youths are invited to join the terrorist groups through monetary offers and other incentive packages. In effect, attractive offers from the terrorist groups capitalize on the economically distressed environment to recruit the youth of the northern and eastern parts of (Loada & Romaniuk, 2014)

However, there is large support for their attempts at restricting the existing social classes. The deep rhizomatic networks created by the state have led to traditional elites often

having access to better resources. These networks have heightened the perception of the state and other foreign stakeholders that are extracting natural resources and keeping the wealth for themselves. Ansaroul have directly attempted to undo these practices by banning certain traditional practices that include taxes that were charged by customary officials to officiate over marriages and other civil matters (Afriyie 2019,12).

It is crucial to acknowledge that not all recruitment by Ansaroul Islam is achieved through voluntary support; coercion and violence play significant roles. The group's presence in Soum is characterized by forceful tactics designed to intimidate and control local communities. Many individuals are compelled to support Ansaroul Islam due to fear rather than genuine ideological alignment. For instance, a witness from a village in Soum described his own experience: "I'd just finished praying when I heard motorcycles, which are forbidden at night, so I knew it was them. I ran to hide but saw them four motorcycles two on each. Two forced their way into my house, overturned the beds looking for me, and when they didn't find me, went to other houses. I heard gunshots and later saw the people they killed, in their homes they were known to support the army" (Human Rights Watch interview with witnesses, Ouagadougou, March 21, 2018). This account illustrates the violent tactics used by Ansaroul Islam to enforce compliance and suppress dissent. Scholar Estelle notes that such campaigns of terror serve multiple purposes: they aim to suppress armed resistance, gather intelligence, and simultaneously coerce the population into accepting a governance model they might otherwise reject (Estelle, 2019). These methods highlight how Ansaroul Islam leverages violence not only to eliminate opposition but also to instil fear and enforce submission among local communities.

The ongoing sieges and conflict in Burkina Faso have severely impacted the right to education, exacerbating an already dire situation. The violence has led to the mass exodus of schoolteachers and administrators, forcing the closure of numerous educational institutions. As of June 2023, approximately 6,100 schools in Burkina Faso were either closed or rendered non-operational, affecting over 1 million students. This crisis has seen a dramatic increase in school closures, with the number doubling from 2,512 in March 2020 to 6,100 by April 2023, within a span of just three years (Amnesty International 2023:47). The significant rise in closures highlights the profound disruption

caused by the armed conflict, as educational infrastructure continues to crumble under the strain of ongoing violence and insecurity.

By 2017, the landscape of jihadist activity in Burkina Faso became increasingly complex as new groups like Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and al-Qaeda intensified their operations. This proliferation led to a significant rise in violent confrontations between these factions as they vied for control over strategic areas. The increased frequency of attacks from 2019 onwards can be attributed to defections and the incorporation of Ansaroul Islam members into JNIM, which resulted in a more fragmented and volatile conflict environment (Beevor 2022:11). The escalation in violence reflects the shifting dynamics within jihadist groups, further complicating the security situation in the region.

Jamaat Nursat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

The jihadist group Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) originated in Mali, emerging from the broader conflict in the Sahel, notably following the establishment of the state of Azawad. JNIM was formally created in March 2017 through the merger of several major al-Qaeda-affiliated armed groups in Mali, including al-Mourabitoun, the Saharan branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and Katiba Macina. The group's expansion into Burkina Faso was facilitated by the deteriorating security situation within the country, which allowed JNIM to establish a foothold and increase its activities. The first recorded attack by JNIM in Burkina Faso occurred in July 2017, with subsequent attacks intensifying over the years, including a particularly deadly incident in Djibo in which forty people were killed.

JNIM's strategic approach differs from other jihadist groups in that it does not prioritize establishing a strict monopoly of force over a specific territory. Instead, JNIM focuses on gaining substantial local support by addressing community grievances and integrating with various local populations, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds (Beevor 2022:14). This strategy includes engaging in illicit activities and upending existing social hierarchies to expand their influence.

JNIM's strategy in Burkina Faso involves severe patterns of violence designed to bolster their control and protect their criminal operations. Unlike in Mali, where jihadist violence

was often driven by ideological and territorial goals, JNIM employs extreme brutality to maintain dominance over local communities and secure their illicit activities. This is exemplified by the attack on the Mansila army base on June 11, 2024, where armed men identified as members of JNIM targeted the military base near the Niger border. The assault resulted in the deaths of around 100 soldiers with many others missing and large quantities of weapons and ammunition were stolen (Lando 2024).

JNIM's strategic use of severe violence to eliminate opposition and suppress local resistance can be examined through the lens of the criminalization of the state, a concept articulated by Chabal and Daloz. According to Chabal and Daloz, the criminalisation of the state involves the transformation of state functions into mechanisms for personal or group gain, marked by corruption, patronage, and violence" (Chabal & Daloz, 1999:45). This framework is applicable to JNIM's actions, as their calculated and ruthless violence serves not only to eliminate threats but also to safeguard their criminal enterprises, demonstrating a sophisticated level of control and corruption akin to that found in criminalized states. JNIM's approach contrasts with other jihadist groups in Mali, reflecting a more strategic and integrated use of violence to protect and advance their interests, thus illustrating the dynamics of state criminalization in a non-state actor context.

In contrast, while jihadist groups in Mali, such as Ansar Dine and AQIM, also engaged in violence, their actions were often driven by ideological goals and territorial control, with a significant focus on establishing and enforcing their interpretation of Sharia law. This ideological drive sometimes led to less focus on criminal enterprises and a lower application of violence as a means of enforcing their vision. JNIM's approach in Burkina Faso is more pragmatic, leveraging severe violence to eliminate threats and protect their criminal networks, thus ensuring their continued dominance and operational security (Beevor 2022:16).

The illicit markets that JNIM participates in can be broken up as follows; the group works with smugglers, artisanal miners and various kidnapping and bandit gangs. JNIM has successfully been able to cooperate with smugglers referred to as *Transporteurs* (Sallazo and Novak, 2020). *Transporteurs* are in the Pendjari (WAP) national park have immense knowledge of the park. JNIM members are provided with information of the location of

State security forces by the *Transporteurs* and this allowed the *Transporteurs* to smuggle freely after JNIM forces have attacked these security forces (Beevor 2022:17). This partnership has allowed JNIM forces to successfully have access to resources and control within certain areas.

JNIM's involvement in artisanal gold mining highlights how the group's governance and financial objectives are mutually reinforcing. In Burkina Faso, where JNIM and ISGS have expanded their control, artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) was estimated to produce about 20 tonnes of gold annually by 2018 (Nsaibia et al 2023:22). Control over these mines has been a significant factor in JNIM's geographic expansion. By offering protection and alternative support in areas where state control is weak, JNIM has been able to exploit local grievances. For instance, in 2021 JNIM took over artisanal mines in the Dida Forest in southwestern Burkina Faso, which had previously been guarded by Dozo hunting associations, JNIM allowed artisanal miners who had previously been excluded from the site to mine there in exchange for periodic contributions from miners, which were reportedly viewed as largely fair (Nsaibia et al 2023:23).

The situation described involving JNIM's control over mining sites and the resulting violence can be linked to Homer-Dixon's concept of "eco-violence," which refers to conflict arising from competition over environmental resources. Homer-Dixon argues that ecological scarcity, or the competition for limited resources, can exacerbate violence and conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Beevor's observation that JNIM's dominance over mining sites enables them to offer more appealing options to miners while consolidating their influence highlights how control over resources can become a powerful tool for both economic gain and political power (Beevor 2022:18). Meanwhile, Raineri's documentation of violent clashes over mining areas, such as the attack on Solhan where over 150 people were killed illustrates the tangible impacts of this competition (Raineri 2020:4). This dynamic reflects Homer-Dixon's theory by demonstrating how resource scarcity and competition can drive eco-violence, leading to increased conflict and insecurity in areas where control over valuable resources is contested.

In Burkina Faso, kidnappings have surged significantly since 2017, with recorded incidents rising from eight in 2017 to 262 in 2021, and slightly decreasing to 222 in 2022.

This increase corresponds with the group's expansion into the country (Nsaiba et al 2023:24). Kidnapping has become a strategic tool for JNIM, used to establish and consolidate control in new areas. The frequency of kidnappings, especially targeting influential local figures, often signals JNIM's attempt to infiltrate and gain influence within a community. For instance, in Soum province, kidnappings constituted over 50% of all incidents in 2018, reflecting the group's efforts to penetrate and assert dominance in the region (Nsaiba et al 2023:24) By 2022, however, the number of kidnappings dropped significantly, suggesting that the group had consolidated its presence and influence in those areas. The group employed this tactic not only to extract ransoms but also to gather intelligence and intimidate key community figures, thereby strengthening their control and influence over local populations.

JNIM employs an approach that hampers development of local economies and disrupts essential services such as food and medicine by targeting crucial infrastructure such as a major transport route. Their tactics include setting up checkpoints and attacking key roads that facilitate the distribution of food and other services. By specifically targeting roads, bridges, markets, and transportation networks. This disruption significantly hampers the state's ability to maintain control and deliver essential services to its citizens. For instance, in Burkina Faso, JNIM has conducted attacks on major routes such as those between Mopti and Bourzanga, as well as the road connecting Arbinda and Gorgadji (Nsaiba et al 2023:26) JNIM's strategy includes not only disrupting crucial supply chains and weakening local economies but also setting up checkpoints along major roads between villages. These checkpoints serve multiple purposes: they allow the group to gather intelligence from travellers, looting vehicles for resources, and further exert control over the areas they occupy. By targeting key infrastructure and controlling movement through these checkpoints, JNIM exacerbates the state's difficulty in providing security and stabilizing the region.

Implications

The development of jihadism in Burkina Faso has taken a distinct path compared to Mali. In Burkina Faso, jihadism emerged primarily due to the state's weakness and the spillover of violence from Mali, rather than due to deep-rooted religious intolerance or

fundamentalism. This scenario provided jihadist groups like JNIM and Ansaroul Islam with an opportunity to expand in an environment previously characterized by relatively low levels of religious and ethnic conflict. Their use of violence in Burkina Faso is strategic and intentional, aimed at controlling and maintaining power only when necessary. These groups use violence as a tool to enforce control and suppress opposition, including state security forces and local militias. Unlike in Mali, where jihadists often engage with and seek support from local communities, in Burkina Faso, violence is employed not just to exert power but to sever local communities from state support. The approach is not only to dominate but also to dismantle local infrastructure and sever ties between communities and the state. This has resulted in an extremely devastating impact, as the frequency and brutality of attacks are used to reinforce their control and maintain a lucrative illicit economy, contrasting sharply with the more community-integrated approach observed in Mali.

Community Militia's: The role of Koglwéogo and Dozo militias.

Community-based armed organizations, or militias, can be categorized as a subtype of non-state groups, distinguished by their interaction with the state, the host community, and their methods of exerting power. In Burkina Faso, a notable contrast with Mali is evident: while in Mali community militias have often emerged from political motives, many groups in Burkina Faso are primarily focused on establishing functional security frameworks rather than pursuing political objectives.

The Voluntary Defence Groups (VDPs) in Burkina Faso, established in early 2020, were designed to tackle the rising jihadist threat by formalizing and expanding existing self-defence organizations such as the Koglwéogo and Dozo. Despite President Roch Kaboré's emphasis on the VDPs being an inclusive force for all regions, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds (Schmauder and Willeme, 2021), the VDPs have become increasingly ethnically polarized. The substantial integration of Koglwéogo and Dozo members has led to perceptions that the VDPs are largely a Mossi force, reinforcing Mossi dominance in the region. This skewed composition is further amplified by the fact that both the Koglwéogo and Dozo are primarily composed of farming communities, which

has made the VDPs more representative of these agrarian groups, affecting their effectiveness and legitimacy across diverse Burkinabé communities.

The VDPs' primary functions include conducting local patrols, setting up checkpoints, and responding to insurgent attacks. They also engage in intelligence gathering, collaborating with the national military to share information and coordinate defensive measures, and assist in protecting villages and rural areas as the first line of defense against jihadist incursions. However, their operations have been controversial. Reports indicate that VDPs have sometimes exceeded their mandate, resulting in human rights abuses and conflicts with local populations. Since February 2020, VDPs have been implicated in approximately 40 acts of violence against civilians including extrajudicial killings of Fulani civilians (Haavik, 2022).

The rise of community militias in Burkina Faso though not a new phenomenon has been notably cooperative with local state forces to tackle crime and insecurity in rural areas since the 1990s (Hagberg 2004:57). This collaboration led to the formalization of these defense units under both the Compaoré regime, and the military junta led by Colonel Ibrahim Traoré. These militias are recognized as national forces, receiving salaries, weapons, and training directly from the state. However, their adherence to state laws and regulations has been called into question due to reports of civilian abuse, raising concerns about whether their use of violence serves personal vendettas rather than contributing to state control over ungoverned spaces. Thus, the relationship between these community militias and the state can be described as a complex blend of pragmatism, tolerance, and leadership (Tisseron 2021:8).

As a result, the state legalized these militias through legal frameworks that established recruitment for volunteers for the defence of the Fatherhood (Tisseron 2021:6). The goal of this legal framework was to equip local communities to combat Jihadist attacks while simultaneously establishing an institutional framework to govern how militias interacted with communities. All of this was done to ensure accountability from these groups, as the state considered that inter-community violence could arise because of discrimination and marginalisation of specific communities. Tisseron further contends that the VDP legal framework poses a severe threat if not carefully regulated by the state (Tisseron 2021:8).

The next section will look at the two major community militias now operating in Burkina Faso, which are the Koglwéogo and traditional Dozo hunters. These two community militias attacked on people who are regarded to be delinquents, which calls into doubt their validity in providing security. By evaluating their activities within the region understanding how violence has ensured a consolidation of power and influence amongst the groups but at the expense of innocent civilians.

Koglwéogo

The Koglwéogo emerged in the early 1990s as an informal security project aimed at dealing with environmental issues such as preserving forests from illegal hunting and logging with the assistance of the government. However, they have become more involved in collaborating with the state to combat the rise of crime and Jihadist activities in Burkina Faso. This, however, has helped them grow power and influence as alternative means of security are favoured and seen as more legitimate in their actions than the state. For local people, the Koglwéogo are seen as legitimate when the state has failed to ensure the safety of the population. (Compaoré, 2017).

The Koglwéogo have played a vital role in local communities, and they are mostly made up of farmers who have collaborated with local rural and traditional leaders. They aspire to build an inclusive kind of governance in rural communities that are usually cut off from state administration in big towns like Ouagadougou. Informed by traditional practices they devised a set of procedures for apprehending and punishing bandits or criminals, thereby restoring some order in these remote locations.

These primary practices include patrolling, arresting, judging, and prosecuting suspected offenders. As a result, Koglwéogo has been praised for their effectiveness in reducing high levels of criminal activity (Da Cunha Dupuy and Snow, 2021). As a result, they have also expanded their presence into other regions in Burkina Faso's north as an alternative to the crippling state troops. Da Cunha and Snow claim that since 2015 the group has expanded across the country amidst amplified insecurity and the withdrawal of state security (Da Cunha Dupuy and Snow, 2021). The organisation has increased its operations to be more administrative, collecting and assessing taxes and delivering services. This however, has led to increased confrontation with the state, as Leclerq and

Matagne examine how the relationship shifts between collaboration, autonomy, and friction (Leclercq and Matagne 2022:125). This was demonstrated when the organisation invaded a courthouse in Kaya to force the authorities to release one of its members (International Crisis organisation, 2020). This episode demonstrated that the group might use aggressive measures against the state if they felt threatened, highlighting Koglwéogo's growing authority over the state. Koglwéogo abuses of people, which include public humiliation, whipping, and intimidation, have put the state in a difficult position of having to contain the group without increasing the risk of violence (Tisseron 2022:127).

The Koglwéogo have also launched attacks on the Fulani ethnic group, who are regarded to be Jihadist supporters. In 2018, unidentified shooters assassinated the Village Yirgou leader and six other people, and in response, the Koglwéogo killed between 200 and 300 Fulani people (Jeune Afrique, 2019). This is just one example of an increase in community violence, as many Fulani citizens seek safety by joining Jihadist groups to shield themselves from these attacks. However, as a result, the frequency and occurrence of violent attacks has drastically grown.

The presence of this group poses a problem, as Schneckener notes three main characteristics that delegitimise the effectiveness of militias: firstly, militias develop beyond their original purpose and are difficult to demobilise; secondly stakeholders such as the state lose control over these groups as they evolve into entities that are stronger than the state; and finally, the enemy of the militia can extend to a much broader group where innocent civilians are caught in the crossfire (Schneckener 2017,812).

These traits parallel the activities and presence of Koglwéogo that I discussed earlier, and they highlight how the use of violence to mitigate insecurity in the region has morphed into another source of insecurity that the state is unable to control. The group's efforts are motivated by their own self-interest. Some Koglwéogo have decided to move on to fight against terrorism, as each Koglwéogo makes their decision according to their means and the interests of their members (Tisseron 2022, 128).

Dozo Hunters

Like the Koglwéogo, the Dozo traditional hunters have become a key security provider in Burkina Faso, and they have frequently clashed with the state and the Koglwéogo in their

attempts to exert regional control. The Dozo have existed much longer in Burkina Faso and are primarily concentrated in the west. The introduction of the Koglwéogo group has threatened the Dozo militias control, which strongly believes that the presence limits the amount of land that can be controlled, resulting infrequent violence between the two groups. Access to resources, as well as ethnic and political divisions, have fuelled communal violence in North and Western Burkina Faso (Tisseron 2022:124).

The structure of the Dozo is more centralised in that the existence was based on their ability to protect and safe keep the natural environment (Ferrarini 2016:81). They were well skilled hunters and farmers that turned in vigilantes where they used, their hunting skills to track down bandits and other criminal groups. Their relationship with the state, however, was not as official as the Koglwéogo, as the state sought to limit their actions by placing them in specific territories. However, this was unsuccessful, as Hagberg writes that the expert hunters took advantage of the state's re-organisation of provincial boundaries to settle rivalries (Hagberg 2004:60).

This meant that the Dozo would operate with impunity in these areas, undermining the legal structures established by the state. As a result of growing violence, community members have been forced to join Jihadist groups to secure security, casting doubt on the efficiency of these militias.

Implications

Community militias, such as the Voluntary Defence Groups (VDPs), Koglwéogo, and the Dozo have been established as a response to escalating insurgent violence. These militias were designed to complement state security forces by providing local defense in areas with limited state presence. For example, the VDPs have been active in regions like the Sahel, where they attempt to fill security gaps left by the overwhelmed national forces (Amnesty International, 2023). However, their effectiveness is mixed. On one hand, they have provided immediate security and local knowledge, but on the other, their actions often blur the line between state-sanctioned security and local vigilantism.

According to reports, militias commit violations like as extortion and wrongful detention, undermining community trust and exacerbating local complaints. VDPs have engaged in abuses, including harassment and illegal detentions. According to Human Rights Watch

research, at least 9 men have been executed, and 18 others have been forced disappeared or slain in three incidents in Séno province since February 2023, worsening the security situation. (Human Rights Watch, Burkina Faso: Unlawful Killings and 'Disappearances' by the Army, 2023). These acts not only undermine the militias' legitimacy, but also reduce local faith in both these organisations and the state, making it harder for state authorities to re-establish control and legitimacy in impacted areas.

The existence of militias has fuelled ethnic and regional tensions. In Burkina Faso, where many ethnic groups engage in paramilitary activity, militia actions have been reported to exacerbate or create new ethnic tensions. According to an ACCORD report Koglwéogo mostly recruits from the Mossi, the region's largest ethnic group. This imbalance has fuelled confrontations between farmers and herders, harming the Fulani herder population. The Koglwéogo, many of whom are sedentary farmers, have settled land conflicts in their advantage and abused their relative position (Haavik 2022:45). According to them, militia mobilisation is typically related with escalating ethnic conflicts, as various groups compete for influence and control over resources and territories.

Concluding Remarks

Burkina Faso is an intriguing subject for studying and analysing growing patterns of violence. Burkina Faso's relative stability was due to the lack of underlying religious and ethnic strife. However, the country's present security issue demonstrates how the restructuring of state institutions has created a vacuum in which other actors have taken on the role of providing security and other services. The concept of several individuals contending for power produces an environment in which violence becomes increasingly alluring as a means of gaining power. Berger observes that people have turned to violence because informal institutions frequently outcompete official institutions, and the use of violence has become a vital tool for ensuring actors achieve their stated goals (Berger 2021: 24). When considering how Jihadist groups and community militias interact, they argue that the absence of state institutions creates a contested environment in which violence is used to legitimize and maintain control over important resources and institutions within the state.

Unlike Mali, Burkina Faso's weak state links to a more critical acknowledgement of the disintegration of the political process has contributed significantly to how violence has evolved, and its application is used to provide security while at the same time it creates more insecurity. The proliferation of violence is therefore not linked to a challenge of Islamic reimagining of the state rather individual vested interests and the culture of patronage has allowed various actors to try and assert their dominance through violent mechanisms and has produced a state where hybrid forms of governance have entrenched the use of violence to a point where it is key to the shaping of political, economic and social structures.

Chapter Five: The Sources of Violence in Mali and Burkina Faso: Theoretical and Regional Implications.

In conclusion, this study examines the evolving trends in violence in the Sahel, highlighting the shifting patterns of violence. The explanation for this rise in violence is the competition among various actors for political dominance in the absence of effective state institutions. In such environments, violence becomes a strategic tool for winning over local populations, establishing security and securing resources for marginalized groups.

The breakdown of state structures has facilitated the emergence of hybrid governance systems where violence is leveraged as a political instrument. This perspective is supported by scholars like Amy Niang and Mary Kaldor, who argue that contemporary conflicts are shaped by identity and self-determination issues, giving rise to what Kaldor describes as "new wars" (Kaldor 1991:263). These wars are not just about territorial control but involve complex layers of political, social, and historical dynamics. The discourse around these conflicts has been manipulated to perpetuate violence and contest power, as illustrated in this study.

At the beginning of this study, the research questions focused on exploring statehood and conflict within the Sahelian context, particularly examining how violence intersects with state fragmentation. The investigation emphasised how various policies shaped by colonial legacies, neo-colonial influences, and local state practices have contributed to the erosion of traditional governance structures.

The study identified key drivers of violence, including poor governance, religious and ethnic mobilization, resource competition, and corruption, which have exacerbated the disintegration of the Malian government and extended the crisis into neighbouring Burkina Faso. By analysing how these historical and contemporary policies have led to the rise of informal governance modes and the proliferation of violent trends, the study revealed that instability within a state can have regional repercussions. This instability does not remain contained but can affect neighbouring countries, making the entire region susceptible to further shocks and challenges to statehood. The analysis highlights the intrinsic link

between state instability and regional insecurity, demonstrating how the disintegration of state mechanisms in one area can amplify crises across the broader region.

Mali and Burkina Faso provide valuable case studies for examining how state deficiencies have led to contested political spaces. Both countries embarked on efforts to establish democratic governments and promote developmental initiatives. By analysing the similarities and differences in the evolution of conflicts in these nations, key intersections emerge, particularly regarding how power and authority are contested and how different groups vie for control.

In both Mali and Burkina Faso, governance has been characterized by the dominance of predatory political elites who have entrenched their power through informal patronage networks that control access to state resources and wealth accumulation (Bergamaschi 2008:221). Bayart's analysis reinforces this view, describing how "big men" maintain and manipulate these patronage systems to consolidate their power and influence (Bayart 1999:228). While such patronage systems can provide temporary stability by suppressing opposition, they are highly susceptible to destabilizing factors such as climate change, persistent drought, high poverty rates, youth unemployment, and escalating ethnic and religious tensions due to resource scarcity. The rapid deterioration of the patronage system in Burkina Faso following the removal of President Compaoré in 2014 serves as an example of this vulnerability.

This context aligns with Chabal and Daloz's concept of "political instrumentalization," which highlights how the interplay of political, social, and economic forces shapes governance in modern Africa (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 143). The reliance on patronage systems to sustain legitimacy often leads to a cycle where the erosion of such legitimacy triggers the use of violence as a means of challenging the existing elites.

Both Mali and Burkina Faso have seen their political patronage networks disrupted by political instability and transitions between civilian and military rule. This dynamic illustrates how shifts in political control can destabilize existing patronage systems, contributing to further conflict and instability.

Although political instability manifests differently in Mali and Burkina Faso, both countries are significantly affected by external factors. In Mali, instability has been exacerbated by

the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya and the government's challenges in countering Islamic threats emanating from neighbouring Sahelian states. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the rise of Islamic insurgent groups can be traced back to the spillover effects from Mali's ongoing conflict. This regional dynamic underscores the critical importance of understanding the cross-border spillover of conflict. The ability of militant groups to move freely between states highlights the vulnerability of the region to violence and instability. It also underscores the urgent need for enhanced monitoring and security measures along national borders to mitigate the risks of such spillovers and to better manage the transnational nature of contemporary conflicts.

The security crisis in the Sahel has profound regional implications affecting even other West African countries with relatively stable political environments. The escalating violence and poverty in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have forced millions of people to flee their homes, leading to severe humanitarian challenges, including widespread food insecurity. In January 2022, the intensification of violence in Burkina Faso resulted in significant casualties, with 160,000 people killed and approximately 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country. Between 2021 and 2022 alone, 50,000 individuals were relocated. This crisis has prompted Burkinabé refugees to seek safety in neighbouring countries, including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Togo (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023).

The regional impact of the Sahelian security issues underscores the interconnectedness of stability in West Africa and the need for comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of conflict, manage displacement, and enhance cross-border cooperation and support.

The variables previously discussed including the types of actors involved in violence, their motivations, grievances, and specific activities were designed to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics driving violence and the strategies employed by different actors. Existing literature often attributes violence primarily to ethnic and religious tensions, a perspective particularly emphasized in Mali. However, this reductionist approach can overlook the more nuanced political motivations at play. As Raileigh and Dowd argue, "violence is largely a product of the geopolitics of groups, communities,

states, and international actors' relationships, rather than simply hinterland size, the politicization of religious and ethnic identities, or environmental considerations" (Raileigh and Dowd 2013:3).

The case of Burkina Faso illustrates that violence is frequently driven not by inherent cultural or religious ideologies but by strategic narratives aimed at mobilizing support from groups with shared collective interests. Unlike Mali, which has a long history of jihadist influence, Burkina Faso has historically maintained a degree of stability. Nevertheless, the recent spread of violence in the region highlights a deeper structural crisis that extends beyond mere governance failures. This crisis is rooted in complex political and social dynamics, suggesting that addressing the underlying issues requires a comprehensive understanding of these broader structural factors rather than focusing solely on ethnic or religious dimensions.

Therefore, it is necessary to position these issues in the perspective of a larger political and economic framework as opposed to viewing them through a limited prism of cultural or religious interpretation. Furthermore, it is vital to exercise caution when oversimplifying violence, limiting it to mere criminality and disorder, because it has become a strong political instrument for competing agents wanting to build influence in the region.

Finally, this creates opportunities for both local communities and violent actors to engage in a transactional relationship in which Jihadist and Militia groups provide security and access in areas where the state has not yet penetrated, in exchange for political and economic influence within the regions in which they operate. As a result, local populations are more likely to support and even join these organizations, which offer an immediate response to eroding state services. Communities in Burkina Faso took security into their own hands as armed banditry and crime surged because of the 2015 government vacuum (Leclercq and Matagne 2020:7). Non-state actors in the Sahel play a crucial role in demonstrating that areas within the region cannot be viewed as entirely ungoverned. Instead, these regions exhibit various forms of governance, even if they do not align with the interests of powerful national or international actors. As Mallet notes, "areas may not be governed in ways that suit powerful interests, but a range of alternatives whether

traditional authorities, communal organizations, or rebel groups creates a system of order" (Mallet 2010:68).

This perspective challenges the notion that the Sahel is merely an example of political crisis in ungoverned spaces. Instead, the presence of diverse non-state actors highlights that governance in the Sahel is complex and multifaceted. While these forms of governance may differ from conventional state structures and may not always serve the interests of dominant powers, they nonetheless establish various systems of order and control within the region.

The emergence of Jihadist groups such as Katiba Macina provide an alternative seemingly more strict social order based off Islamic laws and anti-state propaganda are more important to jihadists as they aim to establish dominance in the territories they govern. The reason for the growing radicalization is that many individuals, especially those who reside in remote locations where government influence is limited, lack opportunity and access to resources and services. Terrorist organizations exploit this circumstance in these regions by posing as an alternative government and providing services that the authorities do not. However, it is important to note that Jihadists brutally persecute those who are suspected of working with the state or of disobeying stringent religious rules by disguising themselves as champions of regional or ethnic interests. This emphasises that several communities are therefore forced to support Jihadist groups as they fear being attacked.

Local militias such as the Koglwéogo that had previously been employed by the state took on more central roles where they filled the hole in local security provision and justice enforcement in western Burkina Faso and central Mali. In return local community members provide food, financial support and weapons to these groups.

The involvement of foreign intermediaries, such as French and, more recently, Russian paramilitary forces, underscores the broader crisis affecting the Sahel region. The historical ties between these countries and France are significant; both Mali and Burkina Faso were once French colonies and continue to maintain strong political links with France. In Mali the failure of local governments to effectively address violence has led to

increased reliance on foreign military support. Following Mali's request for assistance, France launched Operation Barkhane in 2013. Initially, this intervention achieved notable successes. However, over time relations between the Malian government and France became increasingly strained reflecting growing tensions and a shift in the dynamics of the conflict.

The presence of French military personnel in Mali, initially aimed at stabilizing the region, has not entirely resolved the underlying issues. Instead, it has highlighted the complex interplay between local governance failures and external interventions. The subsequent involvement of Russian paramilitary forces further complicates the situation, indicating how the region's instability has attracted various foreign actors, each with its own interests and agendas. This development underscores the multifaceted nature of the crisis, which involves not only local and regional factors but also significant international influences. This was due to France's strong belief that the government had done little to combat the spread of terrorism in the region (Boas 2019: 13). However, the Malian government said that France was unable to honor its promise to help combat the spread of terrorism. This has resulted in widespread protests across Mali, as anti-government sentiment grows in local communities. Their extractive economic practices worsened the conditions for radicalism. The Malian and Burkina Faso governments' appeal signaled a direct response to the necessity to terminate French influence in the region in favor of local military operations backed up by Russian support (Etogho et al 2023:840).

However, the presence of Russian private contractors sparks important questions about their potential to suppress violence. This is because they share essential operational features with their French counterparts. Russia, like France, has a policy toward Africa of acquiring important mining concessions in key mining sectors to acquire uranium and gold. They too, are pushing their technology sectors and hence require a steady supply of resources to ensure that their energy sector grows. As a result, operations are concentrated in important locations where they have resource interests, and their operations are limited to a certain area. Their military intervention is also highly dependent on states ability to pay for their services and will the fore act in a limit capacity only intervening when key interests are threatened.

Russia's recent engagement in Mali and Burkina Faso demonstrates its ability to adapt to instability on the continent (Elischer 2022:25). As a result, like other regional actors, the Wagner mercenaries will only engage in strategic military operations in areas with major resource assets. This raises the question of Russia's position in the region, as well as the implications for overall Sahel security. The similarities in their operations may suggest a change in foreign influence, exacerbating an already severe security problem.

The current sense of optimism they bring to the region may be fleeting, leading to the emergence of another significant actor who not only contributes to the spread of violence by local groups, but also acts as a crucial agent in organizing violence to obtain key resources. The structural problem generated by these foreign actors speaks volumes about the area, with neighboring nations like Chad and Niger increasingly exposed to the spillover of violence.

Concluding Remarks

There are numerous levels of conflict and structural fragility in the Sahel. It is an area where a variety of regional and global economic and political pressures, social and ethnic dynamics, trade, and smuggling networks come together and have done so for decades or centuries. The authorities need to reorganize the interests and dynamics among the non-state actors to counteract violence and extremism (Cooke and Sanderson 2016).

In closing, it is crucial to emphasise that violence in the Sahel is constantly evolving and will only increase as jihadist and militia groups spread throughout the region. The existing literature frequently reduces acts of violence in the Sahel to simple instances of excessive criminality, ignoring the institutional and systemic implications that underpin such activities. Violence, however, cannot be depoliticised since it continues to be an essential feature in African state making and unmaking African states. Depoliticising violence ignores its deeper political framework and undermines efforts to address its root causes the incidents within Burkina Faso and Mali are cases that cannot be viewed in a narrow lens of Inter Ethnic violence and proliferation of Jihadism conflict as this overlooks the critical point that violence has evolved into a political, economic and social tool that has been geared towards addressing the structural deficiencies of the state. The

historicization of the Western Sahel allowed a situation of the root systemic challenges regarding the notion of State hood and state building. Colonial and neo-colonial effects shaped a high complex decentralised state that allowed specific elites often associated or closely affiliated with Western Power to take over already significant weak states in the post-colonial era of the 1960's. This had two effects one it enabled existing policies of exploitation, corruption and repression to remain in entrenching policies that marginalised most communities. The second effect relates closely to the mobilisation of people by appealing to a sense of identification and belonging through Religion and Ethnic lines. Marginalised groups were therefore more encouraged to join rebel groups and local community militias as way Jihadists used political and social demands from Fulani pastoralists and young disenfranchised people, guaranteeing them protection, basic service delivery, and justice, to gain social agreement in occupied territories” (Garbone and Casola 2022:19).

The lessons learned from Mali and Burkina Faso highlight significant institutional weaknesses that require careful examination. Policy makers must identify strategies to lessen violence by instilling a sense of trust and security in local communities, as opposed to using force therefore encouraging and fostering trust of local communities. The only way to address these significant issues is to deal with corruption, resource competition, and the absence of fundamental social and political services. By addressing these fundamental issues and interacting with communities in a nonviolent manner, we might motivate these communities' members to use less force, which could lead to regional peace.

The conditions in Burkina Faso and Mali highlight the wider effects of Sahelian regional instability. Local communities have suffered greatly because of the disintegration of these states and the emergence of alternative systems of government, which have resulted in widespread bloodshed and widespread displacement. The transfer and transportation of firearms as well as other illegal operations are made possible by the permeable borders. With almost 900 people killed in May of this year, Burkina Faso has become the focal point of violence in the Sahel as of 2022. Both the frequency and intensity of violence have dramatically increased (Serwat, 2024).

Niger, due to its geographic location, is particularly vulnerable to these regional dynamics. It faces significant security threats from multiple fronts: JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) and its affiliates threaten Niger's borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, while Boko Haram and its splinter group, ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province), regularly attack the Diffa region near the Nigerian border. (African center for the study and research of terrorism, 2022). This situation exacerbates the overall regional instability, placing additional pressure on Niger and its neighbouring countries.

Thus, there must be a concerted push to investigate alternative perspectives on violence to obtain a more thorough understanding of the crises in the Sahel. This study has attempted to emphasize the need to consider violence as a political instrument as opposed to senseless criminality by utilizing an institutional framework. Violence and its shifting patterns are perceived as a mechanism that might alleviate suffering in local communities while advancing the interests of those who use violence to amass wealth and power. Violence is therefore not illogical rather; it is a calculated strategy meant to both disenfranchise and empower people at the same time.

The occurrence of violence in the Sahel highlights how institutional failure is generated by a long history of foreign and regional actors engaging in various activities of underdevelopment within a region. That resulted in frustrated civilians acting in their own interests. Such an approach allows for a better understanding of the incentives driving both violent actors and the communities in which they operate, emphasising the formation of alternative hybrid forms of governance.

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