New Twists and Turns in the Sahel Security Conundrum: Rural Jihadist Insurgencies, Military Coups, Urban Patriotism and the Turn towards Russia

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Entering its 12th year, the Sahel crisis is not only continuing unabated, but almost every year a new dimension is added to an already poisonous cocktail of poverty, fragility and conflict. The conflict may be about to have a reach beyond Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as the jihadist insurgencies try to gain a foothold in Atlantic states like Benin, Ghana and Togo. France and the United Nations have basically been thrown out of the Sahel, the European Union has been sidelined, most European countries do not know what to do while they still try to revise previous Sahel strategies, and Russia has moved in. In rural areas jihadist insurgencies are still standing strong and the new military governments that promised to handle the security predicament much better than their democratically elected predecessors have not made much of a difference. However, they still seem to be riding on a wave of youthful patriotism in key areas; a situation that also lends itself to Russia's involvement and increased influence. These are all ingredients in the Sahel security conundrum that make the region an ongoing enigma.

What this means becomes clear when we contrast two different perceptions about Mali. One being a recent World Bank (2022) analysis, and the other the public perceptions of the Goita regime, as captured by the Afrobarometer (2023) and the Mali-Métre (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2024). The World Bank presents the situation in Mali as bleak, and expresses concerns about sluggish economic growth and extreme poverty, which continues to increase due to high inflation. It describes the social contract as "fraying" because the State is unable to protect its citizens and deliver even the most basic services. This stands in contrast to how most Malians seem to view their country and their lives. Survey data from the Afrobarometer (2023) indicates that the population is much more satisfied with the unelected Goita regime that unconstitutionally came to power in August 2020 than with the previous democratically-elected government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK). Data from the Mali-Métre (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2024) shows that Goita has an approval rating of 85%, which is remarkably high and would be the envy of any political leader in a country under democratic rule.

This is not easy to explain, but we also see similar trends in Burkina Faso and Niger. At least in major cities and areas in and around the capital there is popular support for the military regimes, the anti-French position they have taken and the subsequent turn to Moscow for military support. Urban youth, who have become extremely disenfranchised with a decade of international interventions led by France, the UN and the EU, which only led to more conflict and despair, are currently pinning their aspirations for a better life on military strongmen and their new allies in Moscow. The question is, therefore, how long what we could call the "Russian moment" might last. It is worth remembering that when the current Sahel crisis started there was also a "French moment." Back in 2013, people were waving French flags, although it did not last; now there are Russian flags on the street, but for how long? Can Russia really deliver where France, the UN and Europe failed? Most likely not, and this will have consequences for how Europe should think and act in the current situation.

The Jihadist Insurgency and Local Population – Most People Are Not Radicalized

The conflict with the jihadist insurgencies, represented by the Group for the Support of Islam and

Muslims (JNIM) nominally aligned with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) and with some ties (mainly virtual) to what is left of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East, is serious and deadly. Objectively speaking, the security situation has worsened for most people in Mali and Burkina Faso. The insurgents are controlling more and more territory and, even where they may not have established a clear rule, they have considerable social control over rural populations. However, while they are still in a strong position, they have not made any real attempts at capturing larger cities or carrying out operations in the capitals. They either do not consider themselves strong enough yet militarily to do this or, alternatively, they do not see that such attempts would serve their interests.

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It is highly likely that they could capture and hold regional cities like Menaka and Mopti in Mali, but this could also expose one of their main limitations. They have become very good at what they are currently doing, namely carrying out asymmetrical warfare implemented through highly mobile hit-and-run tactics, but their governing capacities remain low. Yes, the jihadist insurgents are attempting to govern the rural populations that fall under their control or influence, but this is rudimentary and haphazard, mostly a type of governance that "comes and goes" (see Bøås, 2025). It is one thing to order people to dress in certain ways, to give orders that limit women's mobility or occasionally pass judgements in local land disputes; governing cities, even smaller ones like those mentioned above, is something completely different. What we must keep in mind is that the type of mobile asymmetrical warfare that these groups have come to master does not fit very well with an attempt to build administrative capacity for the purpose of civilian governance. This is still their weakness. They can fight and survive against a stronger enemy, as was the case when the French forces of Operation Barkhane were still around, and they can continue to do considerable damage to the national armies of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, but they cannot take over the State as the Taliban did in Afghanistan. They are very far from having this kind of administrative governance capacity.

In addition, we also need to acknowledge that even if most of the young men that they recruit come from rural communities, this does not mean that a lot of the rural population has been radicalized. This is far from being the case. Most people, in fact, have not been. The support for the jihadist insurgencies is more circumstantial than wholehearted. There is no doubt that radicalized leaders and cadres exist, but this is not necessarily the case for most of those involved. On the contrary, research shows (see Bøås et al, 2021) that radicalization and mobilization in the world of violent extremism are firmly connected to the social worlds of these young recruits. The journey into extremism is not necessarily dislodged from their ordinary lives, but a pathway to provide an alternative social order to improve their life opportunities. It is, therefore, the situationality that causes people to turn to jihadism in the Sahel that we need to understand. This is well illustrated by data from the study referenced above. In this study, respondents were asked if they knew somebody who had joined one of the jihadist insurgencies inspired by extremist Salafi interpretations in the Sahel, and if they said "yes," they were asked why they thought this person had joined such a group.

Very few of the responses referred to religion or ideology. Instead, the main reference points were insecurity, lack of employment, education and other economic opportunities, not to mention coercion and repression by government forces. This means that becoming part of an armed movement, often defined by international society as a terrorist organization, may have less to do with an all-consuming devotion to extremist interpretations of religion, than a pragmatic positioning that is context-determined. This has important ramifications not only for how we should think about the conflicts in the Sahel, but also for how one should plan for programmes in the future to bring people back from the world of violent extremism.

Foregrounding individual deradicalization programming may have little effect if their reasons for em-

barking on their journey into extremism mainly stem from material grievances. If many of those that have joined extremist insurgencies did so not out of religious devotion, this is also good reason to believe that what they crave is not a return to a mediaeval state. Instead, they may be searching for a modernity and a state that works for them, and not what they have experienced as a modernity that is not for them and a state that works against them. If this is the case, as this author tends to believe, the current "security first" approach taken by the military rulers of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is not very likely to yield results that are any better than what France and the UN managed. Thus, in all likelihood, we are far from seeing an end to the conflicts in the Sahel.

The New Military Rulers – Sovereignty as Dignity

Mali has been under military rule since August 2020, Burkina Faso since 2022, and the coup in Niger took place during the summer of 2023. In each case the new military rulers have lambasted the failures of international interventions, and those of the former colonial power France in particular, and called for the restoration of national sovereignty and dignity. The sovereignty discourse that seems to be put on repeat every time the main narrators of the regimes take to the stage (for example, Malian Prime Minister Maiga and Foreign Minister Diop) may sound unconvincing to an international audience when laid out in press conferences or on a global podium like the United Nations General Assembly, but then we forget who their target audience is. It is not us or the international community at large, but rather their own populations, and for them sovereignty is not a theoretical question but translates directly as dignity.

This suggests that rising to power, like Goita did for example, off the back of failed international interventions can be a resource – a resource that Goita's regime has utilized to its full potential. Mali, therefore, exemplifies the challenges of "liberal" international state-building and security interventions, like the challenges international interventions have faced in DR Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan, where the international community has failed to address an ever-expanding system of violence.

The Goita regime did not create the public debates about fighting the forces of neocolonialism (e.g. France), MINUSMA's lack of progress and reclaiming sovereignty to restore the dignity of Mali and the Malians, as these predate the August 2020 march to power by the current military rulers. Nonetheless, they have used it cleverly to the extent that they have created a new multiverse of the history of Mali as both ancient and glorified, and a contemporary view of an undignified and weak client of the former colonial power, France. As the regime presents the story, this was the case until Goita arrived on the scene to be the "man of exception" in a "state of exception" (see Bøås, 2025). This narrative has a strong hold on the imagination of young urbanites in Mali, but we also see a similar trend in Ouagadougou and Niamey.

The new military rulers are not winning the war against the jihadist insurgents, but for the time being they are not losing it either. They control the main political castles and important forts (regional cities) and access routes to the most economically important parts of their respective countries, and they remain popular, as Goita's high approval rating testifies to.

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What, therefore, is emerging is something that can best be described as a recreation of the old garrison state model. The ruler controls the "iron throne" in the main garrison (the capital) and some key outposts and access routes to ensure the main fortress can be replenished with resources. Given the fact that the insurgents may lack both the military strength and the administrative capacity to take on larger cities, such a state model can be sustainable for quite some time, as long as the inhabitants of the main garrison either continue to support the

ruler or are too afraid to rebel against them. So, Goita and his counterparts in Ouagadougou and Niamey may be relatively secure in their respective "castles" for the time being, with regime security further enhanced by the coup-proofing that Russia and the Wagner Group provides. The real losers if this situation prevails is the rural population, which for such a regime are simply disposable pawns that have to negotiate their security as best they can between jihadist insurgents, military campaigns by national armies and their new allies, and bands of community-based self-defence militias and bandit groups.

Urban Patriotism – A New Youthful Nationalism

Earlier in this text, while discussing the strength of the jihadist insurgents, we also had to acknowledge that most people are not radicalized. Much the same can be said about the new youthful nationalism that is concentrated in areas in and around the capital and key cities that are not yet overly affected by violent conflict. It is also mainly circumstantial. It is a situational stance against President Macron and French policies, and much less an ideological stance against France and French values, ideas and lifestyles. Indeed, it could be said that this is what they want. This is their aspiration; they also crave for access to a modernity that could work for them. The young urbanites that might be marching to the sound of neo-marxist speeches and slogans during the day, filling streets and squares during protests against France and in support of their new military rulers, are later dancing the night away to the latest club music to have come out of Paris.

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The protests that we have seen in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey are born out of despair and a sentiment of having their youthhood wasted, and not out of a deeply held ideological conviction. Russia, Russian flags and even Putin himself have become a symbol of defiance and resistance not because of what these youth believe that they are or because they have any aspirations of going to Moscow. The Russian flag and Putin have become a symbol to express anger that they know will be recognized and seen, that ensures their visibility and, not least, because they know that this will irritate Macron.

The question is how long this will last. In the case of Mali, it is since August 2020 and there are no signs that it is about to evaporate. Despite profound socioeconomic and security challenges, most Malians still admire Goita (see Fredrich Ebert Stiftung, 2024). For now, the regime's supporters are demonstrating a willingness to endure difficulties. One reason for Goita's popularity (and much the same could be said about his counterparts in Ouagadougou and Niamey) is his perceived success in removing the established political class, whom many blame for the country's woes. From their perspective, Mali's democracy has delivered little that distinguishes it from that of the post-independence regimes of Modibo Ketia and Moussa Traore. The most visible deliverables have been corruption, lack of opportunities and rising inequalities (Whitehouse, 2022). Contrary to this, Goita's image has been projected as that of the popular Sufi leader and imam Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara who has maintained a strictly neutral position to avoid association with the popular view of "politics as dirty" (see Bøås and Cissé, 2022). On social media, support groups portray Goita as a champion of restoring Mali's sovereignty and dignity and, for the time being, this seems to be enough to keep the young urbanites of the streets behind him. But this won't last forever. Nothing does, and the challenge will come when people start to demand more than just a regime that picks fights with external powers, while it continues an internal war against the jihadist insurgents that it is highly unlikely not to win. Sooner or later people will realise that sovereignty does not bring food security or jobs, and that feeling dignified may be good, but it does not necessarily improve your pros-

pects in life or represent an answer to aspirations for a better life.

The Turn towards Russia – How Long Will the Russian Moment Last?

It is Russia's time in the Sahel. Its flags are waved on the streets and people carry pictures in support of President Putin. France has left its former colonies and they have sought a new security alliance with Moscow. Reports from this part of the world, therefore, are most certainly received with pleasure at the Kremlin. However, what Russian stakeholders should also be asking themselves is how long this can last.
The answer is that Russia's moment in the Sahel will inevitably not last. Russia simply cannot replace France and Europe as a development, humanitarian and trading partner. All Russia can do in Africa is to operate in what we could call niche security markets. It can offer weapons and armoury, but not that much and nothing particularly high-tech and modern, since much of Russia's military equipment is being used at a very rapid pace in the war in Ukraine. It can send military advisors and offer military assistance and coup-proofing through the Wagner Group. This can consolidate the situation for a time, but cannot resolve it. Russia will not be able to give these military regimes what they really want, which is a decisive victory against the jihadist insurgents. France could not do this, and neither could the UN nor the EU; and Russia will also fail.
However, if Russia's moment is not to last any longer than necessary, it is crucial that Europe does not fall into the trap that Putin is hoping it will. And that is to treat what is currently taking place in the Sahel as a Cold War 2.0 – a game of geopolitical conflict where two value systems stand against each other: liberal democracy versus authoritarian rule.
This is not a game Europe is well positioned to win now. Ten years of massive failed international interventions have left a huge scar on the public perception of Europe. In 2013 people thought that France had come to fix their problem, but instead the conflict not only continued unabated, but as the security situation further deteriorated, large-scale corruption increased. France and Europe are blamed for this, as we continued to support a political class unable to stop "eating" public resources.
Europe has therefore lost much of the legitimacy it used to have, and regaining the trust of the Sahel populations will take time. So, Europe should seek to stay engaged where it can and bide its time before it can return based on a critical reflection about what went wrong. For European policymakers it may be more convenient to play the game that Putin would prefer it to, where Europe continues to portray Malians and others in the Sahel as fools who have fallen for Russian fake news and a disinformation campaign. Russia would love this as it would cater to its strategies, but it will neither help the Sahel nor Europe.

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Conclusion

The situation in the Sahel was already a dire one, but has now been made further complicated by the fact that the region has become a battleground of rivalry between the West and Russia. The turn to Moscow in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey complicates things, but the situation may not be as bleak as one could easily be led to believe.
In the long run, Russia cannot replace Europe in the Sahel. This means that in all likelihood, Russia's time in the Sahel is not going to last. If this is dealt with maturely by European stakeholders it is not going to last longer than necessary, but a certain degree of patience will be needed. The Sahel needs Europe and Europe needs the Sahel, but when and if the relationship is steadied, it must be based on a new partnership model anchored in an acceptance that a lot went wrong during the period of massive, West-led international interventions.
Secondly, while Europe is right to be concerned about the combined growth of extremist religious views and more secular anti-Western sentiments, it should be acknowledged that most people in the Sahel are not radicalized. They have not fully em-

braced any of these ideologies. It is much more a question of situational postures born out of desperation and despair. The people are craving a state and modernity that is also for them, and that includes rather than excludes. In this regard, Europe should have a comparative advantage over a player like Russia, because if what people want is a state

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and modernity that works for them, then they also crave good and credible governance. Russia cannot offer this; Europe can assist in this endeavour, but only if it gets its priorities right and realizes that the answer to the Sahel crisis does not lie solely in military means (although this is needed), but rather also in finding appealing pragmatic solutions based on good governance and which are context and conflict sensitive.

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