The sour grapes of French interventionism in the Sahel

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In the autumn of 2019, major diplomatic tensions between France, on the one hand, and Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, on the other hand, were publicly aired. They came to a head when French President Hopes of a durable peace were short-lived Emmanuel Macron literally summoned the heads of state of the five Sahelian countries to attend a summit in Pau, south-western France, in January 2020. At the summit, the French president asked his Sahelian counterparts to 'clarify' their position concerning the French military intervention carried out in the region since 2013 to fight jihadist movements. 'All options, including a withdrawal of the 4,500 men strong force, are on the table,' the Elysée Palace added.[1]

This sour episode is not just another hiccup in the troubled relations between France and its former colonies, where it remains highly influential.[2] Diplomatic divergence between France and its African interlocutors is generally dealt with behind closed doors. Going public about it in so spectacular a manner is unusual; but the decision to do so was carefully calculated by the French authorities.[3] Tensions had been building gradually before erupting openly, reflecting the frustration provoked by six years of a French-led international military mobilization unable to stop the deterioration of the regional security situation. In 2019, in the five countries where

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[*] This article is part of a special section of the July 2020 issue of *International Affairs* on 'Disentangling the intervention traffic jam in the Sahel', guest-edited by Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen.

[1] 'Niger: au moins 71 militaires tués à Inates, Emmanuel Macron reporte le sommet de Pau', *Jeune Afrique*, 12 Dec 2019, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/868722/politique/emmanuel-macron-reporte-le-sommet-de-pau-apres-une-attaque-meurtriere-contre-larmee-nigerienne/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 9 May 2020.)

[2] Denis M. Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners', *International Affairs* 95: 2, March 2019, pp. 405–22.

[3] 'Being accused of neo-colonialism is a lesser evil compared to the clarifications we expect': author interview with French diplomat, Dec. 2019, Brussels.

France intervenes, there were more fatalities caused by war,[4] and jihadist groups had a wider geographical reach,[5] than in 2013. It is significant that these tensions have crystallized around specific events and decisions, indicating a widening gulf between France's strategic and operational choices, on the one hand, and vocal parts of public opinion and political elites in the Sahelian countries where France has deployed its troops, on the other.

This article traces the origins of that gulf and, in line with the general framework common to the contributions to this special section, considers it as a constitutive effect of French interventionism in the Sahel. Specifically, I shall argue that while France makes its security-driven agenda pretty clear, its operational moves, produced by bureaucratic thinking, are questioned by Sahelian publics who have a different perception of security priorities and sovereignty. In addition, being the de facto military guarantor of the security of Sahelian regimes, France frames their domestic political conversations through the 'red lines' it imposes on actors. This externally induced distortion of domestic political landscapes eventually confronts the Sahelian authorities with a dilemma. Pleasing their foreign patrons might cost them the support of that section of public opinion most attached to national sovereignty, and expose them to nationalist entrepreneurs. Counterterrorism is commonly seen as contributing to the erosion of civil liberties. When it is carried out by external powers, as in the cases reviewed here, it also changes the nature of the relationship between the incumbents and their domestic constituencies.

The present article builds on pre-existing works on French and other foreign interventionism in Africa in several ways. French interventionism in the Sahel has recently been analysed by Bruno

[4] This view holds true whether one considers communal violence fuelled by warring parties or fatalities (mostly among the military) directly attributed to the jihadists. See 'The Sahel in flames', *New Humanitarian*, 31 May 2019, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/in-depth/sahel-flames-Burkina-Faso-Mali-Niger-militancy-conflict.

[5] Yvan Guichaoua and Héni Nsaibia, 'Comment le djihad armé se diffuse au Sahel', *The Conversation*, 24 Feb. 2019, https://theconversation.com/comment-le-djihad-arme-se-diffuse-au-sahel-112244.

Charbonneau, Roland Marchal and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos.[6] All of these works acknowledge the limitations of French interventionism in Africa, citing a range of reasons. I concur with Marchal's view that France has adopted a pragmatic, security-driven approach without neo-imperial motives. Pérouse de Montclos similarly emphasizes the French security agenda; yet I do not fully share either his understanding of the nature of the French response, or his portrayal of the Sahelian states as, mostly, beneficiaries of security rents. First, I argue that the French intervention goes beyond a strictly military approach. The French authorities are promoting an integrated, multilevel response to the Sahelian crisis—a response whose design and implementation, I further argue, follows a problematic depoliticized, bureaucratic logic. Second, the article considers the strategic choices that Sahelian states have to make under the heavy pressure exerted by their foreign backers. Playing their backers' game might earn them foreign support, yet could also cost them domestic support. On a comparative level, the article echoes the findings of scholars who have analysed non-French foreign interventionism in Africa, though further, more systematic comparisons should be conducted. For instance, Albrecht and Jackson point to the questionable 'ownership' of British-induced security reforms in Sierra Leone,[7] while Schmidt stresses the complexities of wars waged against 'terror' on the continent, as opposed to wars framed as part of the responsibility to protect.[8]

The article builds on several dozen interviews carried out since 2012 with key figures in the crisis in the Sahel, including state and non-state military actors, diplomats, civil servants and civil society representatives, whom I have met in Paris, Brussels, Bamako, Niamey and

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[6] Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the new imperialism: security policy in sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Ashgate, 2008); Roland Marchal, 'Military (mis)adventures in Mali', *African Affairs* 112: 448, 2013, pp. 486–97; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *La Guerre perdue de la France au Mali* (Paris: Lattès, 2020).

[7] Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson, *Securing Sierra Leone 1997–2013: defence, diplomacy and development in action* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

[8] Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign interventions in Africa after the Cold War* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2018); Louise Wiuff Moe, 'Counter-insurgency in the Somali territories: the "grey zone" between peace and pacification', *International Affairs* 94: 2, March 2018, pp. 319–42.

Ndjamena.[9] Specific aspects of this article were covered by rounds of interviews in Bamako and Paris (with repeated visits to the ministry of the armed forces and ministry of foreign affairs) in October and November 2019. I have also reviewed the official documents produced by the French authorities, including the systematic reports on the military intervention published by the ad hoc committees of the National Assembly and the Senate. Crucially, the present research also draws on a few available direct (in the form of memoirs) or indirect (through pieces of journalism) testimonies of French soldiers deployed in the Sahel. These testimonies offer a telling glimpse of the world-views prevailing among soldiers operating on the tactical level. I also occasionally reflect on my own involvement, as an 'expert', in multiple policy-oriented meetings since 2012.

The first section below provides some background to the French intervention of 2013 in Mali, and its transformation into a longer-term, less 'kinetic' deployment. It also details the sequence of events revealing tensions between France and the five Sahelian countries where French troops have been deployed since 2013. The following section investigates how the French officials conceive of their intervention by reviewing French policy choices, their bureaucratic logic and their ambiguities. The next section focuses on the Malian political landscape in the context of counterterrorism and the de facto security tutorial role played by foreign interveners. A final section concludes.

Mounting diplomatic tensions between France and its counterterrorism 'partners'

The French intervention in Mali was launched in January 2013, roughly one year after a rebellion spearheaded by Tuareg separatist militants (under the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad: MNLA by its French acronym) and jihadists affiliated to Al-Qaeda was initiated in northern Mali. In 2012, the Malian army had offered little resistance against the insurgents. A massacre of its soldiers in January 2012 in the northern locality of Aguelhoc

[9] I have been working on the politics of insurgency in the Sahel since 2007, through various research projects and policy-oriented jobs. Each of these projects has offered me the opportunity to meet insurgents and civil society representatives as well as local and international policy-makers via one-to-one meetings, focus groups, public forums etc. A thick body of testimonies has resulted from these researches, from which for the purposes of this article I have extracted those elements specifically concerning the French intervention.

provoked unrest in the ranks of the military in the capital, Bamako, prompting junior officers to instigate a coup; by this means the incumbent president, Amadou Toumani Touré, was ousted in March 2012. The coup was fatal to the army chain of command, and in its immediate aftermath Mali's three northern provinces (Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal), representing two-thirds of Mali's territory, fell into the hands of the insurgents.

After coexisting relatively peacefully from March to May 2012, the separatists and the jihadists then disagreed on what type of rule to exert. Clashes ensued, from which the jihadists emerged as winners. Separatists either sought refuge outside Mali or joined the jihadists as individuals. Shari'a law was then imposed over the northern populations by a jihadist coalition, until the French intervened militarily in a swiftly deployed operation entitled Serval.

Operation Serval was launched after convoys of armed jihadists were spotted on their way south. The French authorities put forward the controversial claim that an offensive against the capital Bamako was in preparation.[10] Mali's interim authorities—which had replaced the junta that had carried out the coup—sent a formal request to Paris seeking military assistance from the French government. France had contingency plans ready and was quick to activate its special forces based in neighbouring Burkina Faso. The jihadists were stopped in the city of Konna, central Mali, in a matter of days. More troops from both France and Côte d'Ivoire were subsequently deployed. Mali's northern cities were recaptured within weeks, offering French President François Hollande what he called the 'most important day of [his] political life' among the enthusiastic population of newly liberated Timbuktu, in February 2013. Mali's territorial integrity was then considered restored. However, the situation of Kidal remained unclear. The French intervention had enabled separatists to regain control in their northern stronghold,

[10] See Jean-Christophe Notin, *La Guerre de la France au Mali* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014). This claim is based on intercepted conversations among jihadists which have never been publicly disclosed. Whether Bamako was the final destination of the jihadists is still disputed, largely because taking control of Bamako would have required resources that the jihadists did not have. The airport of Sevare in central Mali could reasonably be considered the actual target of the jihadist convoy, as their control of it would have made a foreign intervention significantly more complicated.

creating a zone in effect beyond the reach of the Malian authorities and planting the seeds of future domestic discord, as described below.

Several other significant developments occurred in the international effort to stabilize Mali. First, a multidimensional peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) was approved by the UN Security Council in April 2013. The most salient features of its mandate included the facilitation of a peace process between the central authorities and the separatists, as well as support for state capacity. It took two more years to reach a peace agreement, which was eventually signed in May 2015, under the auspices of Algeria. The Algiers Accord, from which the jihadists were excluded, put an end to separatist claims; among other measures, it provided for the reform of the territorial administration and the renewal of security governance through the integration of former rebels in a revamped army. Second, presidential elections were organized in August 2013, in order to obtain for the post-Serval Malian authorities the legitimacy which the interim government, still under the junta's influence, lacked. These resulted in the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, a familiar figure of Malian politics whose party, like Hollande's, belongs to the Socialist International. Third, a large-scale EU programme, the European Union Training Mission, was designed to help rebuild the Malian army. Fourth, in 2014 the highly kinetic and Mali-focused Operation Serval mutated into a regional force codenamed 'Barkhane', charged specifically with counterterrorism activity in five Sahelian countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. In Mali, Barkhane operates in parallel with MINUSMA, which has no mandate for conducting counterterrorism operations. However, the two forces do pool some resources.[11] Fifth, the five countries covered by Barkhane joined forces to form a regional security body, the 'G5 Sahel', with the overarching aim of providing security and development for their populations. Concretely, the most significant effort of the G5 Sahel to date has consisted of setting up a joint force in charge of securing mutual borders, in cooperation with Barkhane.[12]

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[11] 'Letter dated 19 October 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council' (New York: United Nations Security Council, 25 Oct. 2018), https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2018/945.

[12] Nicolas Desgrais, *Cinq ans après une radioscopie du G5 Sahel* (Paris: Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel, Fondation nationale pour la recherche stratégique, 2019).

Despite the myriad of initiatives taken by national and international agencies, hopes of a durable peace were short-lived. The jihadists did not disappear. They did suffer major blows at the hands of French forces, but managed to reconfigure their internal organization and redeploy in rural areas,[13] first in Mali, then in neighbouring countries, notably Burkina Faso and Niger. They opened new fronts, causing massive destabilization of fragile communal relationships in rural areas and leading to the uncontrolled proliferation of militias.[14] Frequent attacks against army barracks helped the jihadists regain their lost military capabilities and grow even stronger than they had been in 2012. Their techniques of warfare evolved. Suicide-bombing operations, first carried out immediately after Serval was launched, became frequent. The use of improvised explosive devices was gradually perfected and made systematic. And the geographical reach of jihadist militancy expanded. The year 2019 was the deadliest since 2012. Horrific killings of civilians were perpetrated by several parties in the conflict, including state-sponsored militias.[15] Local forces suffered huge losses in a series of attacks, demonstrating their persistent vulnerability.[16]

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[13] International Crisis Group, *Forced out of towns in the Sahel, Africa's jihadists go rural* (Brussels, 11 Jan. 2017), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural.

[14] Yvan Guichaoua and Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, 'Central Mali gripped by a dangerous brew of jihad, revolt and self-defence', *The Conversation*, 13 Nov. 2016, https://theconversation.com/central-mali-gripped-by-a-dangerous-brew-of-jihad-revolt-and-self-defence-67668; Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, 'Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 46: 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 1–20.

[15] Massacres of civilians that occurred in 2019 include Koulongo (Mali, Jan., 39 civilians killed), Ogossagou (Mali, March, 160 dead), Sobane Da (Mali, June, 35 civilians killed), and Boungou (Burkina Faso, Nov., at least 40 civilians killed).

[16] The most significant attacks against local forces in 2019 include Dioura (Mali, March, 23 soldiers killed), Boulkessi (Mali, Sept. , at least 38 soldiers killed), Indelimane (Mali, Nov., at least 49 soldiers killed), Tabankort (Mali, Nov., at least 30 soldiers killed) and Inates (Niger, Dec., at least 70 soldiers killed).

This grim security situation forms the backdrop to the heated diplomatic exchanges of December 2019 between France and the Sahelian countries. The immediate impetus for the French demand that the African leaders come to Pau seems to date back to mid-November and a series of micro-events, widely circulated on social media, that caused mounting annoyance among French diplomats.[17] On 15 November, the very popular Malian singer Salif Keita posted a video on Facebook asking President IBK (Ibrahim Boubacar Keita) to stop complying with the will of 'little Macron', adding that France was using jihadists as mercenaries to advance its interests.[18] There was no official Malian condemnation of Salif Keita's allegations. A few days later, the President of Chad, Idriss Déby, one of the prestigious guests at the Paris Peace Forum (a diplomatic hallmark of Macron's presidency), complained in the weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique* that Sahelian countries had been abandoned by the international community, whose promises of support had proved empty.[19] This was bitterly resented in Paris, not only because Déby's claims were largely untrue but also because France had used Barkhane's assets earlier in the year to bomb Chadian rebels who had no relations whatsoever with terrorist organizations, thus annihilating a threat to Déby's regime.[20]

The allegations made by Salif Keita and Idriss Déby coincided with the circulation of a torrent of fake news, reaching a wide audience.[21] One of these 'reports' concerned the presence of French

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[17] This paragraph is based on interviews conducted at the ministry of foreign affairs and the ministry of armed forces in Paris, Dec. 2019.

[18] 'Salif Keita à IBK: "arrête de te soumettre à ce petit Macron"', BBC News Afrique, 15 Nov. 2019, https://www.bbc.com/afrique/50303152.

[19] 'Idriss Déby Itno: "Parfois la longévité au pouvoir est une bonne chose"', *Jeune Afrique*, 18 Nov. 2019, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/857371/politique/idriss-deby-itno-parfois-la-longevite-au-pouvoir-est-une-bonne-chose/.

[20] 'L'armée française bombarde une colonne de rebelles pour éviter la déstabilisation du Tchad', *Le Monde*, 6 Feb. 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/02/06/l-armee-francaise-bombarde-une-colonne-de-rebelles-pour-eviter-la-destabilisation-du-tchad_5420228_3212.html.

[21] WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook are the main platforms through which this fake news is disseminated. As an indication of its impact, the Facebook page Gao-Infos, which features prominently among the propagators, has more than 200,000 followers.

soldiers at the Boulkessi camp days before it was attacked in September 2019. The French soldiers, it was alleged, were establishing a list of targets to be hit by jihadists. In the same period, pictures of motorbikes unloaded from a plane by French soldiers at Bamako's airport were widely disseminated, accompanied by an accusation that they were about to be delivered to jihadists. These motorbikes were in fact part of a French assistance programme to Malian forces.[22] Immediately after the attack on Indelimane in November, a Malian officer claimed that French fighter jets had intervened too late, deliberately hinting that the 'true' reasons for the French military presence in the Sahel were being concealed.[23] And after the attack on Inates the following month, reports were shared that the camp had been shelled and the Nigerien soldiers killed by French aircraft.

The origins of these allegations on social media are not always clear, yet one can still identify who benefits politically from them. Anti-French messages have translated into protests, which in turn generated multiple videos of anti-French actions, including the repeated burning of flags. One of these protests happened in Kati, Mali's biggest garrison town and the 'heartbeat' of the national army. In the footage showing the crowd cheering as a French flag is set on fire, soldiers are seen filming with enthusiasm. To the chagrin of French diplomats, this flood of accusations against the French presence was not rebutted with any great energy by the Sahelian authorities. Worse, some Sahelian officials even jumped on the bandwagon and actively participated in challenging the French military presence. In June 2019, Burkina Faso's minister of defence had insinuated that France perhaps did not have the agenda it claimed in the Sahel;[24] similar suggestions were made in the same month by a Malian MP from the ruling party, Moussa

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[22] Les Observateurs, 'L'armée française a-t-elle livré des motos à des terroristes au Mali? Attention intox', *France 24*, 4 Dec. 2019, https://observers.france24.com/fr/20191204-intox-motos-livrees-armee-francaise-terroristes-mali-aeroport-bamako.

[23] Simon Petite, 'Les désillusions d'une combattante malienne', *Le Temps*, 6 Nov. 2019, https://www.letemps.ch/monde/desillusions-dune-combattante-malienne-0.

[24] Simon Allison, 'I question France's motives, says Burkina Faso's defence minister', *Mail and Guardian*, 4 June 2019, https://mg.co.za/article/2019-06-04-00-i-question-frances-motives-says-burkina-fasos-defence-minister.

Diarra.[25] The anti-French front is loosely structured but cannot be said to be exclusively represented by the anti-imperialist 'usual suspects', embodied in Mali by the political party SADI—African Solidarity for Democracy and Independence—and those sympathizing with the junta that carried out the 2012 coup. It also involves parts of the political spectrum close to the holders of power as well as, crucially, followers of the highly influential Imam Dicko, whose capacity to mobilize in Mali is unique.[26]

To the French authorities, the summons to the Pau meeting stemmed directly from these multiple incidents and had two main objectives: to step up France's military effort to avoid more disasters, and to obtain unambiguous and explicit support from Sahelian leaders for the continuation of French military operations.[27] The threat of troop withdrawal made by President Macron may not have been credible,[28] yet it demonstrated a genuine and significant fatigue among French diplomats and the French military, which was only too apparent from the

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[25] The same MP called for protests to demand the withdrawal of French forces in early Jan. 2020. See 'L'appel de l'Honorable Moussa Diarra pour la manifestation du 10 janvier 2020 visant le départ de l'armée française du Mali', *Malivox*, 8 Jan. 2020, http://bamada.net/lappel-de-lhonorable-moussa-diarra-pour-la-manifestation-du-10-janvier-2020-visant-le-depart-de-larmee-francaise-du-mali.

[26] Imam Mahmoud Dicko is one of the fiercest opponents of the foreign presence in Mali, not just as a defender of Malian sovereignty but as a critique of moral depravity introduced in Malian society by western cultural hegemony. See Andrew Lebovich, *Sacred struggles: how Islam shapes politics in Mali* (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 Nov. 2019), https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/secular_stagnation_malis_relationship_religion.

[27] The meeting's agenda also included some unfulfilled past commitments, such as the overdue security reform included in the Algiers peace agreement. See 'Jean-Yves le Drian: au Sahel, "Il faut lever les malentendus et se remobiliser"', *Le Monde*, 11 Dec. 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/12/11/jean-yves-le-drian-au-sahel-il-faut-lever-les-malentendus-et-se-remobiliser_6022466_3212.html.

[28] The presence of thousands of French citizens in the Sahel suffices to explain why a full retreat is impossible.

interviews I have conducted.[29] For the first time in six years, the question of the acceptance of France's military presence in the Sahel was being publicly and dramatically raised in binary terms.

The remainder of this article seeks to understand the origins of the gulf between France and some sections of Sahelian publics and political elites. I do so by contrasting the visions prevailing among French decision-makers and bureaucrats in charge of operations in the Sahel and the pervasive discourses about the French military presence commonly heard in the Sahel itself, accessed through local media outlets, social media and interviews with political and civil society leaders.

The (self-sustaining) bureaucratic logic of the French intervention

There is no shortage of alternative narratives about the French agenda and the reasons behind the military intervention in the Sahel. However, close examination of the history of French Sahelian politics since the mid-2000s leaves little doubt about the overwhelming dominance of the security-oriented drive of French actions in the region, accompanied by a perception among officials that France, as a power wielding global influence, has a 'responsibility' for political developments unfolding in the Sahel.[30]

The actual forms of France's actions, and its view of which Sahelian partners are deemed 'reliable', vary, as do the contours of the security threats France seeks to tackle. But the overarching logic has remained fairly stable over time. The wholesale intervention triggered in

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[29] In Dec. 2018, at a closed meeting involving high-level French decision-makers, researchers and humanitarians, I heard an official lamenting that France and the entire international community were in fact being 'led by the nose' by Sahelian leaders, in a statement ironically (but involuntarily) turning upside down the classic dependency narrative. This was a troubling remark in a context where rumours circulating among Sahelian public opinion attribute great powers to France. This sentiment of helplessness among French officials was noticed by another participant, who concluded sarcastically that the meeting's main goal was in fact to reassure French officials.

[30] *Rapport d'information sur l'évolution du dispositif militaire français en Afrique et sur le suivi des opérations en cours* (Paris: Assemblée nationale, 2014); Benedikt Erforth, *Contemporary French security policy in Africa: on ideas and wars* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

2013 in Mali is the product of the sequence of events detailed above, and partly contingent upon it. But—crucially—it also stems from a gradual securitization of the Sahelian space initiated years before as kidnappings of westerners by increasingly daring jihadist armed groups became more frequent, and as signs of the criminalization of the Malian state grew stronger, eventually raising the perceived level of risk of regional destabilization.

The contribution of this section and the next is twofold. First, I stress the unambiguous security-driven agenda that France is pursuing. Second, I claim that the fulfilment of this agenda is conceived of for the most part as a bureaucratic process, able to adapt to new circumstances yet depoliticized and blind to the conflicting aspirations to sovereignty manifested in the Sahelian political arena.

The budgetary demands and political dividends of the intervention

Before further unpacking the French security agenda in the Sahel, it is worth making a short detour to set out what it is not, or at least not primarily. A critical claim, pervasive among opponents of the French presence in the Sahel, focuses on the alleged French appetite for Sahelian mineral riches. This conjecture has its roots in the Marxist historiography of colonialism and is indeed worth considering, in the light of the French maintenance of its grip on the extractive industries immediately after the independence of its African colonies in the early 1960s. However, when scrutinized, the validity of this claim appears inversely proportional to its ubiquity on social media.[31] While Sahelian countries are indeed rich in natural resources (including gold and oil, among others), France today has little stake in their extractive sectors. Uranium is a notable exception, with a long history as a central element in economic and

[31] The pillage of Sahelian mineral riches by France is a recurring trope of Sahelian social media, often based on dubious evidence. A recent illustration includes a viral video of French commercial intermediaries inspecting crates full of gold allegedly coming from Kidal. While many question marks about the video remain, the footage certainly did not come from Mali. See The Observers, 'The truth behind the viral video showing gold bars "looted in Mali"', *France 24*, 9 Nov. 2019, https://observers.france24.com/en/20190911-gold-bars-looted-mali-stolen-viral-video.

political relations between France and Niger;[32] yet its profitability is declining, and the French operator Orano (formerly AREVA) is about to cease its exploitation in most of its Nigerien sites.[33] In any case, it does not take 4,500 men spread over five countries to secure a fairly small geographical area, situated north of Agadez, which Orano itself could easily protect through its local security associates.[34]

Operation Barkhane represents a substantial drain on the French national budget, with an annual cost amounting to €800 million.[35] French forces are stretched thin under heavy budgetary constraints.[36] However, a more accurate estimate of the material costs and benefits of the French operation for the French economy as a whole should probably take into account some profits that French companies, notably in the security sector, derive from contracts obtained through their participation in the Sahelian political economy of war and peace. Information seems too diffuse to enable a rigorously established balance to be confidently put forward. But it is worth noting

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[32] Yvan Guichaoua, 'Elites' survival and natural resources exploitation in Nigeria and Niger', in Rosemary Thorp, Stefano Battistelli, Yvan Guichaoua, José Carlos Orihuela and Maritza Paredes, *The developmental challenges of mining and oil: lessons from Africa and Latin America* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 131–67.

[33] Maimouna Dia, 'Orano-Niger: "choc et désolation" après l'annonce de la fermeture de la société Cominak par le groupe français', *La Tribune Afrique*, 29 Oct. 2019, https://afrique.latribune.fr/finances/commodities/2019-10-29/orano-niger-choc-et-desolation-apres-l-annonce-de-la-fermeture-de-la-societe-cominak-par-le-groupe-francais-831809.html.

[34] The management of Orano (still called AREVA at the time) was not even in the loop when France launched Operation Serval in January 2013: see Notin, *La Guerre de la France au Mali*.

[35] Author interview with French diplomat, Jan. 2020, Brussels.

[36] See Justine Brabant and Leïla Minano, *Mauvaise troupe* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2019); Sébastien Tencheni, *Entre mes hommes et mes chefs* (Panazol: Lavauzelle, 2017). These two books give a sense of the way in which these budgetary constraints translate into soldiers' grim conditions of life in the field, both in the Central African Republic (Operation Sangaris) and in the Sahel (Operation Barkhane). See also Alice Pannier and Olivier Schmitt, 'To fight another day: France between the fight against terrorism and future warfare', *International Affairs* 95: 4, July 2019, pp. 897–916.

that exports of French 'Rafale' fighter jets only started after Operations Harmattan (Libya) and Serval (Mali), which undoubtedly contributed to showcasing French military knowhow.[37] In a similar vein, French military companies have clinched multiple contracts with various big clients of the Sahel's security industry, such as MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel, the EU and individual governments.[38] In many of these cases, the French agency in charge of international technical cooperation and provider of 'solutions', Expertise France, serves as an active commercial intermediary.[39]

Another manifestation of the financial conundrum posed by the French intervention is the frantic diplomatic effort made towards 'burden-sharing'. President Macron's presidency in particular

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[37] The aircraft, made by Dassault Aviation, had become an object of mockery in France, after years of production for a single client: the French air force. Dassault started landing export contracts with Egypt, India and Qatar soon after Operations Harmattan (in Libya, 2011) and Serval had proved their efficacy: author interview with Olivier Fourt, French aviation specialist, Jan. 2020, Brussels. See also Sébastien Meurs, 'Dassault Aviation: les exportations de Rafale s'envolent', *Capital*, 1 March 2019, https://www.capital.fr/entreprises-marches/dassault-aviation-les-exportations-de-rafale-senvolent-1329817.

[38] For illustrations, see 'French companies corner MINUSMA security', *Africa Intelligence,* 23 Dec. 2015, https://www.africaintelligence.com/lce/business-circles/2015/12/23/french-companies-corner-minusma-security,108118678-art; 'Mali: L'ONU attribue des contrats aux français Thales et Rezel-Bec', *Jeune Afrique,* 13 March 2014, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/11654/economie/mali-l-onu-attribue-des-contrats-aux-fran-ais-thales-et-razel-bec/; Philippe Chapleau, 'Arquus achemine des Bastion pour le G5 Sahel depuis le port de Montoir', *Blog Lignes de défense,* 18 Dec. 2019, http://lignesdedefense.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2019/12/18/arquus-embarque-des-bastions-pour-le-g5-sahel-dans-le-port-d-20736.html.

[39] Expertise France has become an integral part of the French-led Sahel policy architecture. See Pierre Cochez, 'Les populations du Sahel essaient de s'organiser en l'absence de l'état', *La Croix*, 27 Nov. 2019, https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Afrique/populations-Sahel-essaient-sorganiser-labsence-lEtat-2019-11-27-1201062971?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#!#Echobox=1574839451.

has been characterized by countless initiatives to multiply security partnerships, in Europe and beyond, including in the Gulf countries and China. These initiatives concern variously the G5 Sahel's military component (the joint force), its development programme (the Priority Investment Programme) or Barkhane itself. The 'Takouba Operation' announced in the autumn of 2019 was intended precisely to achieve burden-sharing: it entails putting special forces provided by European partners under Barkhane's command and deploying these forces in units of Sahelian armies as mentors and guides for aerial support.[40]

However, it is important to note that, while the French authorities attach priority to sharing the cost of the intervention, they seem equally attached to retaining political leadership of it. At the UN, France is the penholder on both Mali and MINUSMA.[41] On top of its bilateral military engagement through Barkhane, France plays a central role in most of the multilateral initiatives designed to address the Sahelian crisis—including the G5 Sahel, which relies for its military backbone on Barkhane. The same applies to the civilian component of the intervention, whose flagship is the newly created consortium of donors called the Sahel Alliance.[42]

France enjoys a 'first mover advantage' in regions of the world that still seem to be considered France's backyard by other foreign diplomats, whose connections and expertise in the Sahel are objectively thin compared to those accumulated by the French over more than a century of colonial presence followed by close patronage. Anecdotally yet tellingly, when the French intervention started in 2013, I received multiple invitations from a number of western governments to present my views of the Sahelian crisis, as a scholar who had been researching

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[40] Author interview at French ministry of armed forces, Paris, Nov. 2019.

[41] 'Penholders are permanent members of the UN Security Council who initiate, chair, and take the lead in the process of drafting resolutions on any issues of international significance': Kwasi Tieku, 'Ruling from the shadows: the nature and functions of informal international rules in world politics', *International Studies Review* 21: 2, June 2019, p. 228. France is the de facto penholder for all the crises that may affect Francophone Africa countries.

[42] In practice, the Sahel Alliance rebrands existing development projects initiated by various donors (e.g. France, Germany, the EU, the World Bank) and articulates them around the security/development nexus.

the Sahel since 2007.[43] These approaches brought home to me not only the immense dependence of my interlocutors on intelligence coming from the French, but also their apparent readiness to let the French authorities handle the situation, as if an implicit division of crisis management labour among global powers had allocated the Sahel to the French.[44] While France struggles to sustain its military effort financially, its presence in the Sahel certainly supports its diplomatic pursuit of global grandeur.[45]

War planners

The French secret services were explicitly charged with monitoring and countering threats to French citizens in the Sahel at least as far back as the late 1990s.[46] A decade later, the ministry of defence published a programmatic 'white book' which conceptualized a perceived 'arc of crisis' stretching 'from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean' and delineated the role France and Europe would have to play in this allegedly challenging environment.[47] The intervention in 2013 can be seen as the alignment of the entire French administration with this securitized vision of the Sahel.

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[43] For reasons of confidentiality I cannot provide details here.

[44] This logic is sometimes taken to grotesque extremes. I have attended so-called 'high-level' meetings at which French diplomats had no more clue about the situation in the Sahel than their foreign interlocutors, yet were still lecturing them mistakenly about who was fighting whom in Mali.

[45] See Pernille Rieker, *French foreign policy in a changing world* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

[46] This period corresponds to the relocation of Algerian jihadist cells in the Sahara at the end of Algeria's civil war.

[47] 'The Sahelian strip, from the Atlantic to Somalia, appears to be the geometrical locus of intertwined threats and, consequently, requires specific vigilance and investments in the long run': Direction de l'information légale et administrative, *Livre blanc. Défense et sécurité nationale* (Paris: Direction de l'information légale et administrative 2013), p. 46. Note that in later institutional outputs the 'Sahelian strip' became the 'Saharo-Sahelian strip', a confusing geographical construction articulated around western security preoccupations but at odds with actual social dynamics: see Olivier Walther and Denis Retaillé, *Sahara or Sahel? The fuzzy geography of terrorism in West Africa*, CEPS/INSTEAD working paper, 2010-35 (Luxembourg: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2010).

According to a former agent of French secret services (Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure, DGSE), it was hard in the late 1990s to persuade the Quai d'Orsay— the French foreign ministry—of the threats prevailing in the Sahara.[48] By 2012 this was no longer the case, repeated kidnappings of westerners having forced diplomats to become part of a security field formerly reserved to the DGSE and special forces.[49] The integration of various French agencies active in the Sahel around an exclusive security agenda is even deeper in 2020 than it was in 2013. Tellingly, the Sahel team at the Quai d'Orsay now has a military officer among its senior members, and the French Development Agency's geographical units have been revamped, with the creation of a G5 Sahel team covering Barkhane's area of intervention and the chain of command leading up to the Elysée Palace.

While the French intervention in the Sahel is predominantly about fighting what its intelligence services had long identified as security threats, precisely which threats are being fought is not always clearly determined. Amid this ambiguity about the precise nature of these threats, two recurring narratives are particularly salient.

The first and most obvious has to do with jihadism. The French military have an acronym to designate armed jihadists and make them legitimate targets: terrorist armed groups (known by the French acronym GAT). Operationally, this taxonomy translates in regular strikes against the two main jihadist militant entities in the Sahel, affiliated respectively to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims and the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara. However, whether these groups represent a threat to French citizens in France or to those living in the Sahel only, and whether they are part of the same groups that France is fighting in the Levant, are questions still debated among French decision-makers. In 2013, it was not uncommon to hear that intervention was a necessity 'to avoid having an attack in Marseilles'.[50] Today, officials are more prudent, as no operational tie between Sahelian jihadist cells and jihadists arrested in France has ever been conclusively demonstrated. Unspecified claims are still occasionally made, however, about the connections which could be established between the Middle Eastern and Sahelian theatres via Libya. Similarly, subsidiary questions about the

[48] Author interview, Paris, Nov. 2019.

[49] Notin, *La Guerre de la France au Mali.*

[50] Author interview with French official, Brussels, 2013.

linkages between jihadists and narcotics traffickers in the region, or the role Islamic education (in particular its Wahhabi version) may play in fostering 'radicalization', have not yet received clear answers in French programmes of action. It is also worth noting the civilizational turn that the fight against terror can take among certain groups of French soldiers, at different levels of the hierarchy. In this apprehension of the intervention, jihadists are not just putting French lives at risk; they are also threatening French, and European, values. Even though this discourse is not officially endorsed, it is evident from the cultural and intellectual production of sections of the French army.[51] Far-right military experts such as Bernard Lugan, a retired instructor at the elite military academy Saint-Cyr in Coëtquidan, are widely read among the French military, including at the highest level.[52]

The second recurring narrative among officials pertains to the Sahelian 'demographic time bomb'. Chad, Mali and Niger are three of the top five countries in the world in terms of fertility rates. The anxiety associated with the implications of this is clearly reflected in French and European policies toward the Sahel, sometimes manifesting itself as bouts of moral panic, as vividly put forward by Meaney.[53] But here again, the reasons why Sahelian demography is seen

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[51] The memoirs of Lieutenant Tencheni are a perfect inventory of all the tropes of the classic colonial military literature glorifying France's '*mission civilisatrice*' liberating Africans from 'darkness': Sébastien Tencheni, *Entre mes hommes et mes chefs* (Panazol: Lavauzelle, 2017).

[52] Author interview with French military affairs specialist, Oct. 2019, Brussels. Although retired, Bernard Lugan is still very active through his online postings and conferences he gives in military and veterans' circles. See his blog: http://bernardlugan.blogspot.com/p/lafrique-reelle.html.

[53] Thomas Meaney, 'Who's your dance partner?', *London Review of Books* 41: 21, 7 Nov. 2019, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n21/thomas-meaney/who-s-your-dance-partner. The most emblematic manifestation of this of this moral panic is President Macron's colloquial declaration at the G20 summit in Hamburg in 2017: 'When some countries still have seven or eight children per woman, you can pour billions of euros, you won't ever stabilise anything': 'G20: Une phrase de Macron sur la surnatalité en Afrique fait polémique', RFI, 12 July 2017, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170712-une-phrase-macron-surnatalite-afrique-lors-g20-fait-polemique.?

as such a threat follow several lines of thought. High fertility rates are envisioned as precursors for violent mobilization among future cohorts of jobless youths (in line with the contested 'youth bulge' hypothesis). Alternatively, they are waves of migration to Europe in the making, which, according to European liberal governments, are catalysts for the electoral rise of the populist right. Which vision of population growth dominates does not fundamentally affect the French and European policy implications, aptly characterized by Philip Frowd in his study of Niger as 'the blurring of migration into other transnational threats'.[54]

Together, these alternative framings of the 'threat' lead to an intense mobilization of French bureaucratic resources across multiple agencies working very pragmatically towards the achievement of their respective objectives in their institutionally defined fields of expertise: defence (ministry of armed forces), diplomacy (ministry of foreign affairs) and development (French Agency for Development), marketed publicly as the '3Ds'.[55] Walking the corridors of the French administration where Sahelian policies are designed is a somewhat troubling experience. Dozens of civil servants occupy offices which all have on their walls maps of countries located thousands of miles away from Paris, scribbled over with notes and spattered with coloured dots. Policies produced in these corridors are then supposed to be 'owned' or 'appropriated' by Sahelian partners. In the process, each agency retains its organizational culture and history, and coordination among them is not smooth;[56] yet there seems to be a consensus among participants in the French bureaucratic war effort that collaboration between agencies has never been so deep.

The administrative argot often uses the terminology of engineering.[57] Programmes and teams form 'bricks', designed to complement other bricks. Bricks are categorized by sectors of

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[54] Philippe M. Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state: international security intervention in Niger', *Third World Quarterly* 41: 13, 2019, p. 3.

[55] Jean-Marc Châtaigner, 'Sahel et France, enjeux d'une relation particulière', *Hérodote*, no. 172, Jan. 2019, pp. 123–36.

[56] Not even among departments of the same administration.

[57] Unsurprisingly, the military has pushed this rational logic the furthest. Its course of action is formally planned backwards, after establishing a so-called 'desired end state' (*état final recherché* or EFR), whose objective indicators are not publicly disclosed but consist in

intervention (the 3Ds) and time horizons. Typically, civil–military operations (CIMIC) are carried out by the military. They comprise the digging of wells, the renovation of schools, localized vaccination campaigns etc.—all generally performed to 'win hearts and minds'. They have been presented to me as short-term equivalents of infrastructural investments carried out by classic development actors.[58] Interestingly, then, development is seen as some sort of augmented CIMIC, placed on a continuum of actions geared towards the pursuit of security, rather than representing an end in itself.

'Bricks' follow each other, all aligned to serve a stabilization project implemented by using military means, to be followed chronologically by development efforts.[59] Crucially, any newly designed 'brick' answers a challenge posed by previously laid bricks. This can be termed a maximalist logic, according to which failure leads not to the withdrawal of an initiative but to the design of a new one. Operation Takouba, mentioned above, follows this self-sustaining dynamic: it does not consist only in burden-sharing, but also addresses remaining gaps identified within Sahelian armies, notably their absence of capacity to guide aerial support from the ground when a base or a convoy is attacked. Mentoring, seen in the Sahel as a politically sensitive move intensifying external military tutorship, is primarily seen in Paris as a technical issue, a depoliticized way of enhancing the efficacy of the intervention. In the same vein, reforming Sahelian armies is compared to 'fixing a car while driving it'—another recurring metaphor that

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weakening GATs sufficiently that local armies are able to fight them 'on their own': author interviews at ministry of defence, Paris, Nov. 2019.

[58] A special agency under the aegis of the ministry of foreign affairs is supposed to cover efforts in the the medium term to bridge the two types of interventions.

[59] At a policy-oriented meeting in early 2018 between French researchers, military officers and practitioners all working on the Sahel, on military officer expressed a call to developers in the following terms: 'We clean the space for you, now come up with ideas to make peace sustainable.' Reference was made to the actions French forces were conducting in the Menaka region of Mali, in partnership with local, pro-government militias. This partnership was politically extremely controversial and has provoked local tensions which are still not resolved two years later. In no way it can be argued that military action created local conditions for developers to follow up.

borrows from the engineering lexicon. And the same goes for other intrinsically political choices, such as the making of alliances with non-state armed groups on the ground, seen as instrumental steps in the fight against terror yet deeply resented among public opinion in the Sahel, as we shall see below.

The French authorities have not decided to privilege the exclusive use of force to pursue their security-driven agenda in the Sahel. Quite the contrary: they are trying to integrate responses to what they consider the key dimensions of the crisis into a comprehensive programme of action. The French military are most keen to declare their awareness of the limitations of the strict military component of the intervention, repeatedly asserting that victory can be achieved only with the consent of populations. However, problematically, the fundamentally political process of forming populations' beliefs is a blind spot of the intervention, whose design rests essentially on bureaucratic consequentialist rationales.

Bamako politics: maintaining the illusion of sovereignty

Macron's demand in Pau that Sahelian heads of state 'clarify' their position on security cooperation with France was received coldly. Burkina Faso's President Roch Kabore regretted the tone used by the French president. Idriss Déby of Chad initially said he could not attend the Pau summit, but later relented after the event was postponed from December 2019 to January 2020 owing to the Inates attack. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita of Mali said he would join only if certain (undisclosed) conditions were met. Only Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger reacted more positively, stating in a televised interview that 'more of Barkhane is needed'.[60] The Pau episode had a more explicit effect on public opinion, as it revealed claims by the Malian government that had not previously been voiced with such clarity. Here I will review these claims emanating from Bamako's political scene, which can be considered the epicentre of opposition to the foreign military presence in the Sahel.

Focusing on Bamako's political scene implies that the arguments considered here are echoed only partially in Mali's Sahelian neighbours—or, indeed, elsewhere in Mali. Mali's sovereignty is contested from within by multiple actors, from different regions, some armed, some not. In this article, I concentrate on reactions by Malian nationalists to perceived threats to national

[60] The video of the interview can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwSde-drlSc.

sovereignty posed by France or the 'international community'. Tellingly, some questionable micro-level aspects of the French intervention do not receive much attention among Bamako-based activists. These include some fatal mistakes made by the French in the conduct of their military operations, of which I will mention just a few here. In November 2016, the French killed a young boy, possibly a shepherd, and buried him secretly.[61] in June 2019, three people were killed by a French air strike while driving their truck in the Timbuktu area. More seriously, over period of roughly a year in 2018, and before internal tensions in France put an end to this shady joint venture,[62] French forces worked actively with two pro-government militias at the border between Mali and Niger. These two militias, the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA), faced credible accusations of abuses against Fulani pastoralists.[63] In all of these cases, the victims were ethnic Tuaregs or Fulanis. None of these abuses raised eyebrows in Bamako beyond the networks of the victims' co-ethnics. Bamako's activists did not even mobilize when the army arbitrarily killed northern

[61] The official investigation concluded a year after the incident that the French were responsible for the killing but that no mistake was committed as the ten-year-old boy served as an informant for the jihadists. See 'Enfant tué par Barkhane au Mali: l'enquête française n'a révélé "aucune faute"', RFI, 2 Dec. 2017, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20171201-enfant-tue-barkhane-mali-enquete-francaise-revele-aucune-faute.

[62] Author interview with French diplomat, Paris, Dec. 2019.

[63] See Rémi Carayol, 'A la frontière entre le Niger et le Mali, l'alliance coupable de l'armée française', *Mediapart*, 29 Nov. 2018, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/291118/la-frontiere-entre-le-niger-et-le-mali-l-alliance-coupable-de-l-armee-francaise. The partnership between Barkhane and the militias was considered legitimate by French authorities on three conditions: militias had to commit to fight terrorist groups, show loyalty to the Malian state and comply with international humanitarian law: see Vincent Hugeux, 'Face à Barkhane, un ennemi aux abois', *L'Express*, 20 April 2018, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/face-a-barkhane-un-ennemi-aux-abois_2001343.html. The third condition was clearly not met. In addition, the partnership made manifest Barkhane's bias in protracted communal rivalries. These considerations led to the dissolution of the partnership (author interview with French diplomat, Dec. 2019, Paris).

members of militias loyal to the government.[64] This should not be surprising: anger towards the foreign military presence is arguably not primarily about violations of human rights, but about sovereignty. The well-documented widespread human rights violations by Sahelian armies have received almost no condemnation from those now calling for the withdrawal of French troops.[65] In the same vein, recent protests against the foreign military presence have been concentrated in the southern part of the country (in Bamako, Sikasso or Sevare), where foreign troops are least visible. No mobilization against the French has ever occurred in the northern city of Gao, which hosts the largest French base.

One further observation should be made to pinpoint more accurately the nature of the contestation against foreign military presence. While most of the criticism is concentrated on France, the MINUSMA deployment (often vulgarly referred to as the self-explanatory 'MINUS*Merde*') is often bundled with France in grievances expressed in demonstrations. In some cases, MINUSMA itself has been exclusively targeted, as in Sevare in October 2019, in an episode during which MINUSMA's warehouses were ransacked.[66] What exactly about MINUSMA attracts reproach is unclear. Sahelian heads of state have repeatedly lamented that

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[64] In a horrendous episode in April 2019, the army beat to death three GATIA combatants accused of robbery and then burned their bodies. GATIA sympathizers protested, but no one else did. See Baba Ahmed, 'Mali: des soldats de l'armée accusés d'avoir assassiné trois personnes dans le Nord', *Jeune Afrique*, 26 April 2019, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/767884/politique/mali-des-soldats-de-larmee-accuses-davoir-execute-des-touaregs-dans-le-nord/.

[65] See *Central Mali: populations caught between terrorism and anti-terrorism* (Paris: International Federation for Human Rights, 20 Nov. 2018), https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/central-mali-populations-caught-between-terrorism-and-anti-terrorism. In Burkina Faso, Human Rights Watch reports that offering evidence of large-scale human rights violations earned their authors abundant death threats on social media.(personal communication with HRW officer, June 2019, Brussels).

[66] 'Mopti: une manifestation dégénère à Sévaré, l'entrepôt de la MINUSMA vandalisé', *Studio Tamani*, 12 Oct. 2019, https://www.studiotamani.org/index.php/themes/societe/21627-mopti-une-manifestation-degenere-a-sevare-l-entrepot-de-la-minusma-vandalise.

the mission's mandate should be transformed so that its comparatively abundant resources could be shared with the underfunded G5 Sahel. But this point does not seem to be particularly salient in protests. The failure to take swift action to protect civilians against the massacres that occurred in central Mali in the course of 2019 could be one explanation. More credibly, anti-MINUSMA protests may result from the unequivocal denunciation by the MINUSMA's Department for Human Rights of the abuses perpetrated by pro-government ethnic militias, which enjoy relative legitimacy among the populations they claim to protect.[67] Hence, the anti-foreigner sentiment is not exclusively anti-French; nor, to reiterate, is it about the threat that foreign forces pose to Malian lives.

With the Malian state facing recurring military disasters and having lost control of most of its territory, some of which has been placed under international neo-trusteeship,[68] other parts of which are under jihadist rule, it is not surprising that the claims made by protesters and opposition groups concentrate on national sovereignty. One of their recurring themes concerns the 'status of Kidal', the former separatists' stronghold. Kidal is in practice ruled by former separatists, and is likely to continue thus until the reform of the army and the integration of ex-rebels materialize. In 2013, as part of Operation Serval, the French forces had pragmatically—and in line with the depoliticized, efficacy-driven logic described above—allowed the rebels to return to Kidal, in the hope of obtaining support in the war against terrorists.[69] This was resented in Bamako as a cardinal sin of the French intervention, since separatists are viewed in an even

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[67] The findings of the investigation conducted by MINUSMA into the Koulongo massacre of 1 Jan. 2016 explicitly point fingers at the Dozo hunters, a militia made up of Bambara and Dogon warriors, which initially enjoyed a close relationship with Malian forces.

[68] James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Neotrusteeship and the problem of weak states', *International Security* 28: 4, Spring 2004, pp. 5–43. It seems pertinent to use this concept both for its heuristic value and also because the international peacebuilding personnel whom one can now encounter in the lobbies of Bamako's hotels were often formerly posted in Afghanistan, at a time when Fearon and Laitin were elaborating their concept.

[69] The French forces did draw combatants from the MNLA to set up a counterterrorist unit, which eventually fell apart after seeing its members killed one by one by the jihadists in targeted assassinations.

worse light than the jihadists, for having triggered the collapse of the Malian state and perpetrated abuses in the immediate aftermath of their early military successes in 2012.

On a more institutional level, the mismatch between the aspirations of Malian society's representatives and French goals, and the incapacity of Paris to place boundaries on Mali's national political conversation, were signalled by two separate events, constituting two official components of the post-conflict, internationally endorsed peace process: namely, the National Conference for Concord in 2017 and the National Inclusive Dialogue in 2019. Both of these large-scale consultation exercises led to the same recommendation: opening a dialogue with Malian jihadists, primarily Iyad Ag Ghaly and Hamadoun Kouffa of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin. In 2017, a visit by the French prime minister immediately after the National Conference coincided with the burial of the recommendation.[70] In 2019, the French Chief of Staff François Lecointre dismissed the recommendation again, calling dialogue with jihadists 'catastrophic'.[71] Dialogue with jihadists is officially demanded by Malian representatives; yet it is considered by Paris to cross a 'red line'.

Post-colonial sovereignty in Mali was never in great shape. In fact, the Malian authorities have a long record of letting international state and non-state actors take responsibility for large sectors of governance while retaining control over the distribution of external funds.[72] Similarly, in the years preceding the 2012 collapse, security governance in the north was not the prerogative of the central authorities. Instead, the Malian state had delegated security to loyal militias led by

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[70] 'Mali: un groupe jihadiste revendique l'attaque fatale à un soldat français', *La Croix*, 7 April 2017, https://www.la-croix.com/France/Mali-groupe-jihadiste-revendique-attaque-fatale-soldat-francais-2017-04-07-1300838078.

[71] 'Mali: existe-t-il des négociations avec les jihadistes', RFI, 3 Dec. 2019, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20191203-mali-existe-negociations-jihadistes.

[72] Catriona Craven-Matthews and Pierre Englebert, 'A Potemkin state in the Sahel? The empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction', *African Security* 11: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 1–31; Gregory Mann, *From empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

northern officers recruiting essentially in personal networks.[73] Therefore, the foreign intervention does not abruptly break a centralized system of rule; rather, it represents the last—unbearable to some—shredding of a sovereignty already in tatters.

Conclusion

This article has tentatively unpacked the anti-French sentiment in the Sahel which became particularly ubiquitous in the Malian public arena in the autumn of 2019. While the French intervention is primarily driven by security concerns, it is designed and delivered through a depoliticized, bureaucratic logic, at odds with the deeply political claims around sovereignty made by protesters in Sahelian capitals. Although this trait *per se* does not make the French intervention drastically different from other counterterrorism interventions in Africa, France's reluctance to promote a dialogue among the belligerents leads to a major distortion in domestic political landscapes, and creates a space for vocal contestation articulated around national sovereignty. This constitutive effect of the intervention places domestic leaders in a tug of war between two audiences, respectively domestic and foreign. To assess how sustainable this situation is in the long run would require additional research. Injunctions to comply with the French agenda may well widen the gap between Sahelian leaders and their domestic constituencies and, in the worst but not improbable case, prop up their authoritarian inclinations.

[73] International Crisis Group, *Avoiding escalation* (Brussels, 2012).