Violence in the West African Sahel is not about Terrorism

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Narratives and discussions concerning violence in the Sahelian region of Sub-Saharan West Africa (SSWA) have historically, post September 11th 2001, centered around the idea that internationally backed Islamic Jihadi extremism is the lens through which this region wide conflict should be viewed. Although the conflict is fairly complex, with international extremist groups and their backing factoring heavily into the correlates of the conflict, the incorrect lensing is still being utilized to inform analysis and policy discussions and decisions. The roots of the violence in the Sahel is not about terrorism or Jihadi focused violence, but one of a crisis of the Westphalian state. By making a mild shift in analytical focus, the Sahelian conflagration will become clearer with conflict transformation methodologies presenting themselves that are rooted in success, versus counter terror initiatives that have largely met with lack-luster results. As a discussion, this article walks through the argumentation of the Westphalian experiment in SSWA and how that informs the current conflict through the lens of relationality within international relations analysis. Finally, methodologies and potential policy proposals are suggested through which to better conduct analysis in this region.

Regional Contexts

As mentioned, the expansive violent conflict in SSWA is not one of violent extremism as this is just a symptom of the larger issue. It is in fact an issue of state consolidation. This idea of consolidation is traditionally understood to be a state obtaining the monopoly on the use of force within its internationally recognized borders so as to ensure sovereignty, both territorial and juridical, of the state. Below this surface level idea of control being the driver of state consolidation are matters of creation of a unified state identity, a unified citizenry which will work to forward the goals of the state, and even perhaps a national identity which should be viewed as linked to, but distinct from an identity based on the state (such as citizenship).

In order to better understand what a lack of state consolidation looks like within this region in real-time, a brief presentation of the problem set is required. The majority of violence is caused by violent extremist organizations such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and many others; however, there are numerous other groups that are stoking violent conflict. In the countries that are most affected, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, there are Touareg groups using violence as an means of political dispute. There are ethnic self-defense groups such as the Kolweogo in Burkina Faso and the Dan Na Ambassagou (a Dogon group) in Mali. Moreover, one cannot forget the state militaries and policy apparatus as actors which often instigate the violence. Within this framework, there are also ethnic disputes between largely nomadic Fulani/Fulbe tribes with many of the sedentary farmer groups. Rural banditry is also becoming one of the larger, non-political conflicts in the region. Foreign actors such as France, Russia, China, European Union coalitions, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Countries all have a hand in the conflict as outside supporters or parties within the conflagration. This backing comes in many forms, but largely in support for Sahelian state governments via policies on counter terrorism as in the case of the United States, foreign military contractors as other options for Western military assistance as with Russia and Wagner Group in Mali, foreign military interventions in the case of some EU countries such as Fance, Britain, and Germany, and financial support to governments regardless their human rights records in the case of China. Finally, as correlates of the this vast multi-dimensional conflict there have been tens of thousands of internally displaced persons, coups, weakening economies, and further impacts on the fragile climate of

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the Sahel. Within this menagerie of sub-conflicts, what role does or should a State system play, and what power might it have to overcome these antagonisms? This is one of the analytical questions that allows for this Westphalian crisis concept to be tapped into.

The Crisis of the Westphalian State in SSWA

When viewed through this lens of consolidation, the Westphalian state experiment in the region has largely fallen short of international expectations. When this state model was applied to colonies and overseas territorial holdings, extremely diverse societies and cultures were forced to 'become one' within the attempted consolidation of the State identity. For obvious reasons this was, and still is, a recipe for conflict. Consolidation was further expected during the 1960's within the region, as most states were granted their independence from France and Great Britain. Indeed, states within the region tried, with many succeeding, an initial consolidation based on the fervor of casting off colonial masters, but for many it did not last long. For purposes of brevity, this article moves forward with the contestation that the region of SSWA, specifically the Sahel, is far too diverse socially, far too steeped in traditions of self-rule such as the Touregs in Mali, with far too many enduring and current internal antagonisms such as the ones mentioned above to allow for the State to effectively function as it is required to by international norms. To be sure, this is not an article arguing for the disillusionment of the State in SSWA, but there are many internal contradictions and power fluctuations that must be overcome if the state experiment is to be continued in the region.

Many of the States in SSWA did not have the time nor the societal level power restructuring characterizing other states in the international system. This is evident through a simple analysis of the antecedents of being a consolidated, legitimate state recognized by international bodies like the United Nations via the 1933 UN convention on the rights and duties of states. Few of the Sahelian States tick all of the boxes above. This lack of power restructuring is not one of passing significance, as it is the largest driver of violence within the region.

A Conflict Framed Incorrectly

In framing the overarching conflict as stemming from extremist actions, the international community continues to frame the problem through a clichéd anti-terrorism point of view. Locals in the region do indeed recognize Jihadi issues and wish the problem would go away, but there are also indications that they see it as due to local power fluctuations versus a grander narrative of international extremist organizations seeking to establish caliphates in the region. The term 'bandit' is used by locals responding to surveys to identify not only the banditry issue in locations like northwestern Nigeria, but also many of the actors in the conflict termed as terrorist. Viewing the problem from an emic perspective, brings the localization of internationally linked extremist narratives into focus and highlights that the extremism issue is a local political one. The groups mentioned earlier have indeed taken on names of international groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, but the problems they are trying to solve are local. Indeed, these local problems center on the contestation of power outside the capital regions of the Sahelian states. Many of the violent actors have military capabilities that match the state militaries in the region, but their actions is based on swift tactics and does not include a political end state, something which is required to bind an extremist group together. Groups rarely conduct terrorist attacks as ends in-and-of themselves, as they have deeper goals such as changing political structures or working towards egalitarian systems. Furthermore, terrorism is not an ideology in and of itself, something that is also required within most traditional extremist groups. Many of the violent groups in the Sahel see Islam as a political solution and are simply using violent means to achieve that goal. On the other hand, states can clearly use terrorism as a tactic and often do, but they do indeed have political and power maintenance goals in mind. Through this logic, considering terrorism as a sound analytical category or causal argument fails to identify the root drivers of conflict within the region. Further, the solutions external state actors and even the Sahelian states themselves have proposed and executed in order to stem the extremist violence have largely met with failure. As witnessed in daily news and from direct experience, the extremist problem is only spreading in the region and threatening littoral states. The fungibility of counter insurgency or counter terrorism strategies that were identified to work within the Global War on Terror era may not be the solution set that will work in these contexts.

Power Structure Shifts

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As stated above, and in contrast to this idea of terrorism as the root of the conflict, the region is going through a power ordering cycle. This cycle can be identified at a state level through the coups that have recently taken place in Mali and Burkina Faso. Although largely conducted by military officer parties who were aggravated by the lack of success against extremist organizations, there were other motives at play. Burkina Faso was considered a bastion of democracy within the region, but there were internal issues with the government that led many within the country to believe that not all was as it seemed with their elected leaders. Mali's ousted president, Keita, had been in power for decades, and matters were only getting worse regarding the ability for his government meet many of the requirement of state. This is not to say that the region does not want a more democratic solution to its woes, but democracy is not solving the immediate issue as seen by recent coups. Within this larger central government power restructuring cycle, groups that are termed terrorist organizations are also seeking to re-order power structures that states are simply not able to control.

To further highlight the larger cracks in the state consolidation efforts, we can also find sub-state level power re-ordering cycles. Touareg groups in the north of Mali seek to either work with the states or secede. Furthermore, extremist groups branded as international Jihadis seek to gain control of their ethnic group or clan's historical areas of control. An example of this is the group Katiba Macina (Macina Liberation Front) which is a sub-set group of the larger JNIM consortium. One of their main goals is to establish their dominance in what was once the Kingdom of Macina which was a past Fulani/Fulbe empire. By observing the range of operations, activities, and local narratives this is easily recognizable. To counter these types of localized grievances and power issues, internal and external actors have looked towards state violence in the form of military solutions coupled with supported local defense groups as well as the empowerment of sub-state leaders, civil society, and social movements to try and stymie the advance of these extremist organizations, but little has helped.

A New Way of Seeing

Analytical views of this large conflict ecosystem tend to focus on atomistic views, such as those seeing terrorism as distinct from State consolidation, instead of seeking a holistic understanding of the problem set. There is a new wave of IR theories that are set against the backdrop of relationality. Within this paradigm, each individual piece must be analyzed with how it impacts the entirety of all interacting systems, and almost more importantly, the views of the actor being analyzed must be taken into consideration. For the scope of of this article, one must view how extremism is related to the state, how the state relates to the population, how climate changes and other variables are impacting the overall system, and ultimately how the state interacts with the global community. Viewing the problem through this lens of relationality almost entirely changes the viewpoint away from individual acts such as terrorist incidents, and instead focuses on the interactions of all parties. This in turn creates the visualization that the state in the region is indeed weakened to the point of being in crisis, or worse, never having de facto consolidated.

With the analytical shift in conflict understanding moving from terrorism being the problem to one of a crisis of the core idea of the State, any good argument moves towards methodologies to gain even better understanding, and perhaps identify potential transformation mechanisms. Although ecological models such as relational theory are utilized above, there are others that are appropriate towards gaining a better understanding of the conflict. Lewis Coser's 'functions of social conflict' methodology serves as a poignant way of deciphering why groups may be fighting one other based on the localized grievances and power premise. In addition to that, the ideas behind symbolic interactionism may help to better identify what role the past plays in current conflicts and how the local populations see and interact with the state itself. Systems theory helps to build upon both of these and directs the analyst or reader towards viewing the whole system and where and why conflict arises in the social locations that it does. Finally, stripping away Western notions of conflict and politics via the relationality concept helps to see the conflict from the actors' point of view. Only through this perspective can the crisis of the Westphalian state be clearly identified within the Sahel.

Suggestions for Action

So then what is to be done? So far it is established that one has to view the problem through relational means, understand the tenuous condition of the Westphalian experiment in the region, and look to political alternatives that

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may not be palatable but couold be more effective. If current trends are continued, is a high likelihood that states in the Sahel, specifically Mali and Burkina Faso, will not be able to restart a state consolidation process without large scale external interventions. If such interventions were to occur from an external actor, be it the EU or one of the GCC countries, it is likely that rentier states or even states in the shape of a foreign care-taker government would emerge as the solution to the instability and violent conflict problem. None of these solutions are ideal.

More localized solutions may provide some direction forward. As a matter of fact, Mali's junta is not favorable for international interventions at the moment; however, plans should, and likely do, exist in the case that the junta shifts focus or is itself ousted in this cycle of power shifts. Further, if Western backed counter terrorism efforts are disrupted due to changes in the partner preference by the Junta governments, it is more critical than ever to cultivate other options. To that end, a viable alternative would be national level truth commissions as were utilized in Ghana, Rwanda, and South Africa to great effect. One was even suggested in Chad by the current government to help overcome grievance issues at the sub-state level. Most critically, there occurred a successful state level reconciliation between two disparate Toureg groups in the north of Mali and the government in Bamako.

These councils serve as skillful ways to bring conflicting parties together and can largely be accomplished through mediators instead of troops. One of the less agreeable option for the global community is that whomever the country chooses as their international mediator to start the process may not be who is in favor at the moment. For example, if Mali were to choose this route, they could likely enlist Russia as a mediator much to the West's discontent. Overall, these types of reconciliation events at the national level are meant to show populations of the impacted countries that the government is disposed to look at core grievances and understand why people are turning to violence.

Local governance solutions are also ones that have been suggested, but in the cases of Burkina Faso and Mali, extremist groups have largely co-opted those processes already. When the government in Bamako was in disarray during the coup in 2020, JNIM successfully brokered a cease-fire between members of the Dogon and Fulani communities in Sobane Da. There is a chance that local governments might side with those who are providing for their security and social goods. If the international community is wanting to preserve the state as it is, trust, and even a social contract must be built back.

The second suggestion is a state centric solution, but one that looks away from state level violence and towards a greater emphasis on civil military relations. This conflict transformation methodology can still utilize the machinery of state to conduct the essential tasks of governance and security, but attempts to fill the conflict areas with soft power versus the violent machinery of state. A soft power initiative would largely emphasize militaries and police forces within the Sahelian states working with and helping to secure non-governmental organizations seeking to assist with humanitarian and stability operations. These types of activities have shown to rebuild trust between communities and states that have utilized heavy handed approaches in the past. Military engaging the population in a trust-rebuilding manner is likely the best option to achieve that. .

Finally, there are several stability models and stability focused organizations which might be utilized if other options are non-starters. Within the United States government alone there are organizations such as the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations within the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) who houses the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization (CPS) as well as the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), and various Civil Military assets within the Department of Defense. Legislation such as the Global Fragility Act allows for more funding to be put towards stabilization and shows that there is weight behind the idea of finding non-military solutions to stability concerns. The European Union has ongoing stability projects abroad, not to mention the United Nations' work on peacebuilding. These stability modalities and initiatives can certainly bolster national reconciliation councils' initiatives, but care should be taken.

There is certainly a crisis in the Sahel, but one that is not readily apparent when viewed through the traditional lenses of international relations and geopolitics. The crisis is that of the fundamental nature of the Westphalian state versus that of terrorism or banditry. Violent groups are looking to restructure power just as the states are doing, but this is merely a symptom of the decaying nature of the state in the region. This is not due to any issues with governance modalities such as democracy, but of a consolidation issue where states never truly formed in the fashion that

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Western ones have done. Understanding this sheds a different, if not novel light on the conflict.

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