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Contemporary Civil-Military Relations in the Sahel

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CONTEMPORARY CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE SAHEL

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Abstract

The paper examines the evolution and the contemporary state of civil-military relations in the francophone Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal). In a first step, the paper traces the emergence of excessive political influence of the armed forces (praetorianism) in the Sahel. Out of these, only Senegal has remained under civilian rule since independence. The other countries have experienced military dictatorship at some point. Over the last thirty years, the Sahel has seen a shift toward more civilian oversight in political affairs. In Chad and Mauritania, however, the armed forces remain the pre-eminent political actor. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, sections of the armed forces refuse to accept civilian rule. The second part examines the various challenges and tasks the armed forces in all six countries have been involved in over the last two decades. Although these challenges differ substantially across the six individual countries, the Sahel as a whole continues to struggle primarily with domestic security threats. The paper concludes with guidelines designed to foster civilian oversight and democratic reform.

Key words: armed forces, civilian-military relations, praetorianism, dictatorships, Sahel, West Africa
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Note to readers

This Note is published as part of the partnership between SWAC/OECD and the Sahel Research Group of the University of Florida. The collaboration aims to: 1) Reinforce ties between research and policies for sustainable development that can help better anticipate changes within the Sahel and West Africa region. 2) Promote West African expertise by reinforcing links with African researchers and research centres through the Sahel Research Group network.

The Sahel and West Africa Club

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Its mission is to promote regional policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people in the Sahel and West Africa.

Its objectives are to: i) Improve the regional governance of food and nutrition security; ii) Improve the understanding of ongoing transformations in the region and their policy implications through regional, spatial and forward-looking analyses.

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Executive summary

Civilian oversight of the national armed forces and the ability of civilians to make decisions without interference from the armed forces are necessary conditions for successful democratization. Against this background, this paper examines the origins and the trajectory of civil-military relations and military interventions in politics across the Sahel. It finds that, overall, the region has seen a shift toward greater civilian oversight. Unsurprisingly, in Senegal civilian oversight remains the norm. In Niger, Mali and more recently also in Burkina Faso, elected civilians have reclaimed the seats of power.

This must not distract from the fact that in all three countries, a visible section of the armed forces remains at odds with democratic principles. The behaviour of sections of the Malian armed forces in the aftermath of the 2012 coup and recent speculations about a failed military coup in Niger in December 2015 illustrate this. It is too early to assess the political progress in Burkina Faso and the extent to which recent events will affect civil-military relations. In Chad and Mauritania, by contrast, the armed forces are firmly entrenched in power and there is little to suggest that this will change soon.

A closer look at the various activities of each country's military over the last two decades reveals several findings. First, there seems to be a correlation between the regime type and the size of the armed forces. Autocratic nations like Chad and Mauritania display a much lower population-to-soldier ratio than the rest of the Sahel. The comparatively high population-to-soldier ratio in Niger is puzzling given the manifold security challenges the country is facing. Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal contribute most to United Nations-led humanitarian missions in Africa, while Chad and Mauritania contribute comparatively little. Mali currently is a target of humanitarian missions and not a contributor.

Across the Sahel, the armed forces are most frequently used to contain domestic security challengers such as ethnic or secessionist militias. Prominent examples are the Tuareg uprisings in Mali and Niger, the various insurgencies in Chad or in the Casamance in Senegal.

An additional and recent security threat is the various jihadi Salafi groups. Mali currently receives the brunt of their activities. Despite porous borders Chad, Mauritania and Niger still suffer comparatively little from jihadi activity. Despite a push for democratic reforms, the armed forces across the region still resort to violence against their civilian populations.

This is particularly true for Mali. Military mutinies are comparatively rare but were a frequent occurrence in Niger in the last 1990s. Chad is the only country where the armed forces are involved in military conflicts with other states.

The donor community should find a balance between helping each country to achieve domestic security and ensuring that the democratic rights of all citizens are respected in that process. There is a risk that the West's geo-strategic interest in the region might empower the semi-autocratic and autocratic incumbents in the region. The ongoing military confrontations with jihadi Salafi groups might shift the power relations between civilian leaders and the armed forces in favour of the latter.

Military interventions in the Sahel

The relationship between the armed forces and the government is a crucial indicator of the quality of democracy and the degree of political stability in a country. Civilian oversight of the national armed forces and the ability of civilians to make decisions without interference from the armed forces are necessary conditions for successful democratisation (Croissant et al., 2010; Kohn, 1997). Military coups – the capturing of power by a section of the armed forces – indicate that the elected civilians were unable to resolve a pertinent crisis. In Africa, civil-military relations have been dominated by the armed forces until fairly recently (Decalo, 1990; Kposowa and Jenkins, 1993). This is particularly true for the francophone Sahel, where the armed forces often claimed power and established military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s. Only in Senegal did civilian rule prove to be the norm.

The first part of the paper traces the origins and the evolution of strong political influence of armed forces (praetorianism) across the region. The discussion contrasts the historical trajectories of civil-military relations in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger with the particularities of Senegal. The analysis rests on two conceptual assumptions. First, civil-military relations exist on a continuum ranging from military dictatorship without any civilian input to complete civilian oversight. In any country the relationship between the armed forces and the civilian elites will be somewhere between these two extremes. Civil-military relations are not stagnant but evolve over time (Kohn, 1997; Croissant et al., 2010). Second, the armed forces are never a coherent or unitary actor. In countries where the armed forces are involved in political decision-making, its leadership is likely to be divided over the question of what the future role of the armed forces should be (Singh, 2014; Geddes, 1999; Thyne and Powell, 2016).

The within-country and across-region analysis finds that the Sahel has moved toward more civilian oversight. This positive development is an outcome of attempts at political liberalisation in Sahelian countries since the early 1990s. In Senegal, civilian oversight has remained the norm. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the armed forces are no longer in power but remain influential political actors. In each of these three countries, a visible section of the armed forces still does not accept civilian rule. In Mauritania and Chad, those aspiring to political office need the support of the armed forces, which have remained pre-eminent political actors.

Map 1

Countries covered by the study

The origins of praetorian politics

With the notable exception of Senegal, francophone Sahelian countries are paradigmatic examples of praetorian states (Perlmutter, 1969). The civilian-led one-party states that emerged after the end of French colonialism in 1960 gave way to military dictatorships.

Although the immediate reasons behind the military interventions of the 1960s and 1970s differ from country to country, the Sahel region was beset by several conditions that are conducive to military coups. In all countries autocratic civilian leadership was unable to live up to the economic and political promises that had brought them to power prior to independence. A particularly illustrative example was Burkina Faso's first president, Maurice Yaméogo, whose ostentatious lifestyle soon brought him at loggerheads with the Catholic Church and Burkina Faso's vibrant trade unions (Englebert, 1996; Phelan, 2016).

The autocratic nature of many post-independent rulers and their bureaucratic auxiliaries increased the lack of trust in civilian rule. Hamani Diori, the first president of Niger, owed his rise to power to France's electoral rigging in his favour during the last election prior to independence. Thus, Diori never enjoyed much legitimacy to begin with (van Walraven, 2009; Jouve, 1978). Chad's first president, Ngarte Tombalbaye, pursued economic policies in favour of the Christian south and to the disadvantage of the Muslim-dominated north. Regional riots starting in the eastern part of the country in 1965 heralded a period in which the central government heavily relied on the security services to ensure a modicum of stability (Buijtenhuijs, 1987; Nolutshungu, 1996).

Several Sahelian governments did not engage with the leadership of their armed forces in a constructive and mutually-reassuring way. A prominent example is Mauritania's first president Moktar Ould Daddah, who committed the Mauritanian armed forces to an ill-planned military campaign in Western Sahara. The failure of civilian elites to consult with the armed forces led to the alienation of most if not all high-ranking officers (Hodges, 1978; Daddah, 2003). The Malian armed forces experienced a similar treatment. President Modibo Keita built up alternative security forces which took crucial resources away from the armed forces (Hazard, 1969).

The unique case of Senegal confirms that the manner in which post-colonial civilian elites treated the armed forces was important for the future

development of civil-military relations (see also Huntington, 1991). Léopold Senghor developed fruitful relations between the civilian government and the armed forces and sought regular consultations with the chief of the armed forces, General Jean Alfred Diallo. Their close relationship ushered in regular exchanges between civilian and military elites. The leadership of the Senegalese armed forces thus was widely regarded as part of the political elite (Diop and Paye, 1998). The Senghor administration further integrated the armed forces into the developmental efforts of the state, an initiative known as *Armée-Nation*.

Table 1

The origins and trajectories of praetorianism in the Sahel, 1960-90

First coup	Failed coups between 1960 and 1989	Post-coup trajectory including subsequent military coups
Burkina Faso		
3 January 1966	-	Major General Aboubakar Sangoulé Lamizana remains in power until 25 November 1980. Colonel Saye Zerbo overthrows Lamizana on 25 November 1980. Major Dr Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo overthrows Zerbo on 8 November 1982. Captain Thomas Sankara overthrows Ouédraogo on 4 August 1984. Captain Blaise Compaoré overthrows Sankara on 15 October 1987. Compaoré remains in power until 31 October 2014.
Mali		
19 November 1968	15 February 1972	Coup leader Moussa Traoré remains in power until 1991.
Niger		
15 April 1974	15 March 1976 5 October 1983	Coup leader Seyni Kountché remains in power until his death on 10 November 1987. Kountché's successor, General Ali Saïbou, remains in power until 16 April 1993.
Chad		
13 April 1975	1 April 1977 1 April 1989	Colonel Félix Malloum remains in power until 23 March 1979. Shortly thereafter, the Chadian civil war breaks out. Hissène Habré conquers Chad in 1982 and remains in power until 1990.
Mauritania		
10 July 1978	6 February 1982	Colonel Mustafa Ould Salek remains in power until 3 June 1979. Lieutenant Colonel Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Louly overthrows Salek on 3 June 1979. Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah overthrows Louly on 4 January 1980. Chief of Staff Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya overthrows Haidallah on 4 December 1983; remains in power until 3 August 2005.

Source: Author's compilation based on academic literature. The data on coup attempts is from Powell (2018). Where the dataset did not correspond with the country-specific literature, preference was given to the literature.

All Sahel countries suffered from poor economic output and the lack of previous democratic experience. Table 1 summarises the various coups and counter-coups that occurred across the Sahel between independence from France in 1960 and the end of the Cold War in 1990. The Table follows a chronological order starting with the first military coup in Burkina Faso in 1966. The table lists the number of failed coups. The last row provides a short summary of the political trajectory of the various juntas that governed the Sahel through the decades.

The table demonstrates the full extent to which the various national armed forces shaped domestic politics across the region until the end of the Cold War in 1990. In Mali and Niger, junta leaders managed to remain in power for a substantial period, whereas in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania junta leaders faced challenges to their rule from within the armed forces. This indicates that Traoré and Kountché were able to unite the armed forces behind them. Attempts to overthrow these two generals proved unsuccessful.

Senegal and Chad are both outliers. As stated earlier, Senegal managed to remain under civilian rule throughout its history. In Chad, the outbreak of the civil war in the late 1970s led to the disintegration of the armed forces. Although Hissène Habré was able to consolidate his rule and to ensure some degree of stability, the Chadian armed forces resembled an array of rebel forces and cannot be seen as a national army in the conventional sense (Buijtenhuijs, 1987; Nolutshungu, 1996).

Political liberalisation and the armed forces in the contemporary period

In the early 1990s, sub-Saharan Africa experienced a wave of political liberalisation (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997) which eroded the legitimacy of non-democratic rulers and especially those rulers who had come to power during a military coup (Lindberg and Clark, 2008; Elischer, 2017).

The extent to which democratically-elected civilians managed to restore civilian supremacy in politics differed significantly across the Sahel. Unsurprisingly, civilian supremacy remained in place in Senegal where the armed forces had never intervened in politics before. In Niger and Mali, civilians were able to improve civilian supremacy between independence and the end of the Cold War. In both countries a robust civil society and civilian politicians were at the forefront of political change (Elischer, 2013; Wing, 2010; Robinson, 1994).

In Niger, the armed forces voluntarily withdrew from power after the trade unions of the public sector had managed to paralyse the streets of Niamey in 1990 and 1991 calling for democratic change. Niger certainly stands out as the country with the highest number of successful military coups in the region. In 1996, 1999 and 2010 the armed forces overthrew the government. While the 1996 coup led to the restoration of military rule, the 1999 and 2010 coups ushered in democratic multi-party elections. Yet, democratic civilian rule cannot be taken for granted as rumours about an alleged coup attempt against President Issoufou in December 2015 illustrate.

What has helped keep Nigerien soldiers in the barracks is the mobilisation capacity of Nigerien civil society. This was evident in the aftermath of the January 1996 coup by General Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara. The armed forces rigged the post-coup elections in July 1996 in favour of Maïnassara (Decoudras and Gazibo, 1997). Recurring waves of street protest by the trade unions of the public sector, the opposition parties and other civil society groups soon led to the rise of an anti-Maïnassara faction inside the armed forces (Idrissa,

2008). Since the military interregnum between 1996 and 1999, the armed forces have refrained from trying to stay in power permanently (Baudais and Chauzal, 2011).

In Mali, the military facilitated the democratic transition process. After weeks of street protest against the Traoré government, the armed forces overthrew the government in March 1991. Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré governed the country for an interim period until the general elections in February and April 1992. For the following two decades, many viewed Mali as a prime example of a successful African democratiser (Boas and Torheim, 2013; Wing, 2013). Yet, on 21 March 2012 the Malian armed forces returned to power after the civilian government had failed to stem the rise of the joint Tuareg-jihadi uprising in the North (Lebovich, 2013; Thurston and Lebovich, 2013). Amadou Haya Sanogo led the coup and installed an interim civilian-led government with Dioncounda Traoré as interim president and Cheikh Modibo Diarra as interim prime minister. In 2013, the interim government allowed for elections, which ushered in the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, a civilian politician who served as prime minister between 1994 and 2000. The handover of power must not distract from the fact that a visible section of the armed forces advocated prolonged military rule (Whitehouse, 2012).

In Burkina Faso, the armed forces survived the push for democratic reforms. Instead, they entered the early 1990s as the main pillar of General Blaise Compaoré's regime. Following the introduction of multi-party democracy, Compaoré reinvented himself as a civilian politician at the helm of the *Front Populaire*. The democratic opposition decided to boycott the December 1991 elections, which handed Compaoré the presidency (Boudon, 1997). Yet throughout his tenure, Compaoré faced considerable protest from the streets and from military officers. This was especially true of non-officers, who identified with the poor living conditions of the population (Eizenga, 2015b; Harsch, 2009).

In 2003, 2007, and 2011 several high-profile mutinies took place. Each time the military called for an end to corruption and more transparency in the defense sector thereby echoing the demands of civil society. By dismissing some of the high-ranking military officers, Compaoré undermined his support within the higher ranks (Dwyer, 2017). In 2014, Compaoré's attempt to circumvent the presidential term limit led to a popular insurrection. Following discussions between protest leaders and the leadership of the armed forces, the military declared itself to be in charge of the country. Eventually this paved the way for a civilian-led transition government in which Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida served as prime minister.

In the run-up to the 2015 elections, Compaoré's former presidential guard, the *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* (RSP) attempted to derail the transition process after the interim government had decided to dissolve the unit. Coup leader General Gilbert Diendré, a long-term ally of Compaoré justified the coup by pointing to the political exclusion of pro-Compaoré and pro-RSP elites. Among the armed forces, the coup leaders had no support. Less than one week later the armed forces under the leadership of General Pingrenoma successfully moved against the coup plotters and returned power to the transitional government (Eizenga, 2016; 2015a). The elections of November 2015 were the first elections since the overthrow of Compaoré. It is too early to judge the ability of the Kaboré administration to come to terms with the country's praetorian past. It seems fair to say that compared to Senegal, Niger and Mali, however, the military remains a comparatively influential actor.

Mauritania and Chad are countries in which the armed forces continue to dominate the political system. In stark contrast to most other African countries, the Mauritanian armed forces retained their hold on power without any noteworthy popular protest (Foster, 2011; Hill, 2017). Mauritania's support for Iraq during the Gulf War of 1991 left it isolated from its Arab allies and Arab funding. In April 1991, after days of negotiations with the French foreign minister about urgently needed budgetary support, the embattled regime announced that it would implement political reforms. Thus, Mauritania's attempt to liberalise was largely driven by donor pressure.

Within a short period, the government drafted a new constitution lacking any outside input. The draft constitution was put to a referendum on 12 July 1991, which left little to no time for a meaningful public debate. Subsequently, General Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya and his allies formed the *Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social* (PRDS) which allowed the incumbent regime to reinvent itself in civilian clothes. Taya used the armed forces to intimidate and harass political opponents. Given the firm grip of Taya over the armed forces and the omnipresence of the armed forces inside the administration, the 1992, 1997 and 2003 elections were foregone conclusions. In all elections the military intervened in order to sway the outcome in favour of the incumbent (N'Diaye, 2006, 2001; Girod and Walters, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the military removed Taya in a palace coup on 3 August 2005. Although the armed forces announced their intention to allow for genuine free and fair elections and to return to the barracks permanently, their main intention was to protect the political and economic interests of several senior officers who had been part of Taya's inner circle (Zisenwine, 2011; N'Diaye, 2006).

The period between the coup on 3 August 2005 and the coup on 6 August 2008 is frequently hailed as Mauritania's democratic interlude. However, during the run-up to the March 2007 presidential election, parts of the armed forces tried to intervene in the electoral process. Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, a leading member of the junta, advocated early on for continued military rule stating that a democratic contest was not feasible in Mauritania. At the time, he lacked support from other senior officers including Colonel Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who had thrown their support behind Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, the presidential candidate of the *Coalition des Forces de Changements*. Vall's strategy was to delay the transition indefinitely; Aziz wanted to remain in power through civilian proxies. After his election, Abdallahi appointed many members of the junta into high-ranking administrative positions. After only 15 months, the Aziz faction that had helped Abdallahi claim power, overthrew Abdallahi after he failed to keep up with the demands of the armed forces (Hochman, 2009; Foster, 2011).

Aziz contested the elections on the ticket of the newly found *Union pour la République* and won the widely criticised electoral contest by a wide margin. Since then, Aziz has remained in power thereby re-establishing the dominant role of the armed forces in politics. It is unclear whether Aziz will respect Mauritania's two-term limit or decide to contest the 2019 elections. If he decides to leave power, he would be the first Mauritanian president to do so voluntarily. His successor is most likely to come from or have the support of the Mauritanian armed forces and there is no indication that the Mauritanian armed forces will lose its pre-eminent position in politics.

In Chad, the armed forces hold a similarly powerful position within the political system. After ousting Habré on the battlefield, Idriss Déby launched the *Mouvement Patriotique du Salut* (MPS), which united several dissident movements with military troops who had fought alongside him. He delayed the first multi-party elections in 1996. Déby and the MPS used their privileged position to rig the election in their favour (May and Massey, 2010; Miles, 1995).¹ By the mid to late 1990s, Chad had become the most militarised country in Africa (Hansen, 2013). Déby's remaining political opponents boycotted the 2001 elections. The exploration of oil after the completion of the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline in 2003 significantly increased the possibilities for patronage. It also enabled the government to purchase military hardware and to increase the size of the armed forces (Marchal, 2016).

Simultaneously the president began to fill crucial positions in the security apparatus with members of his extended family. Feeling confident about its ability to co-opt or repress opponents, the government abolished the two-term presidential term limit in 2005. This, however, triggered new rebellion in

¹ Chad's electoral commission operates under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior, which has enabled incumbent control over the electoral process.

2006 and in 2008. The rebellion of 2008 was particularly dramatic for the administration: on 2 February 2008, three different rebel groups entered N'Djamena. As in previous periods, France and Libya came to Déby's rescue (Handy, 2008). Since then, however, Idriss Déby has been able to consolidate his grip on power thanks to the armed forces. Chadian participation in the war against terror further helped provide Déby with support from the donor community (Thurston, 2017).

Table 2 below illustrates the changing nature of civil-military relations in the Sahel following the liberation attempts of the early 1990s. The order of the countries corresponds to the degree of civilian supremacy in contemporary politics. Senegal is located on one end of the spectrum, as civilian supremacy remained the norm throughout history. Mauritania and Chad are located on the other end of the spectrum, as the armed forces remain pre-eminent political players in their respective political systems.

Table 2
Civil-military relations in the Sahel post-1990

Country	Civil-military trajectory	Military coups	Mutinies and failed coups	Civil-military spectrum
Senegal	Civilian supremacy in politics	n/a	n/a	Civilian supremacy
Mali	Civilian supremacy with one short military interregnum during a national security crisis	26 March 1991 22 March 2012	14 July 1991 1 May 2012	Civilian dominance
Niger	Civilian rule interrupted by several coups	27 January 1996 9 April 1999 18 February 2010	15 December 2015	Civilian dominance
Burkina Faso	Military ruler in civilian clothes; unstable military-backed regime	30 October 2014 17 September 2015		Transition to civilian dominance; outcome uncertain
Chad	Former warlord in civilian clothes; initially an unstable, now a seemingly stable military-backed regime	n/a	13 October 1991 27 January 1993 13 March 2006	Military dominance
Mauritania	Military ruler in civilian clothes; stable military-backed regime	3 August 2005 6 August 2008	8 June 2003	Military dominance

Source: Author's compilation based on academic literature and field research. For the number of coups see Powell 2018

Contemporary challenges of the armed forces in the Sahel

The classic task of the armed forces is to protect their national territories from external aggressors. In sub-Saharan Africa, this task is made more difficult because most security threats are domestic (Herbst, 2000). By and large scholars have been skeptical about the capacity of African armies to fulfill their assigned roles (Howe, 2005). However, there is little substantial knowledge on the degree of professionalism and the quality of military equipment (Warner and Thaler, 2016). Any analysis about the capacity of the Sahel militaries needs to acknowledge the size of the respective armed forces vis-à-vis their populations.

Table 3 displays the population-to-soldier ratio for all six countries. The figure includes the most recent data available. Only Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal provide data about their military expenditures. Figure 1 illustrates the spending dynamics in each country over a period of ten years.

Table 3
Population-to-soldier ratio, 2015-16

Country	Size of the armed force	Population	Population-to-soldier
Senegal	18 600	15 411 614	826
Mauritania	15 870	4 301 018	271
Niger	5 500	20 672 987	3 758
Mali	15 800	17 994 837	1 139
Chad	25 000	14 452 543	578
Burkina Faso	11 450	18 646 433	1 629

Source: Author's compilation based on World Bank (2018a) and GlobalFirepower 2018

Figure 1

Military expenditure in Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, 2006-16

Source: Author's compilation based on World Bank 2018b

Mauritania and Chad, where the armed forces continue to remain powerful political forces, display the lowest population-to-soldier ratio. President Aziz and President Déby both served in high-ranking military positions. The former came to power through a military coup, the latter conquered Chad on the battlefield. The historical trajectories of both countries in combination with the population-to-soldier ratio suggest oversized militaries, which were created to consolidate autocratic rule. Further, both presidents use the armed forces to co-opt potential opposition groups in order to maintain political stability (Foster, 2011; Eizenga, 2018).

Senegal and Mali display a medium-sized population-to-soldier ratio. Whereas in Senegal military spending declined from 10% in 2009 to 7% in 2016, in Mali military spending skyrocketed from 10% in 2006 to 22% in 2016. Both dynamics are linked to their domestic security situation. In Senegal the secessionist conflict in the Casamance region came to an end in 2014 (Roche, 2016). Since the outbreak of the jihadi uprising in early 2012, the Malian armed forces have tried to re-establish state authority in northern Mali. Although the major cities of the north are by now under the control of the state, the jihadi insurgency has managed to spread to the central region and the Niger-Mali border (International Crisis Group, 2015).

Burkina Faso and Niger have relatively small armed forces. Since the overthrow of Blaise Compaoré in late October 2014, the share of central government revenue appears to be declining. Although the future political trajectory of Burkina Faso is uncertain, this confirms that autocratic African regimes in the Sahel provide larger funds to the armed forces to ensure their loyalty. The small size of the Nigerien armed forces is surprising given the ongoing confrontations between Boko Haram and the Nigerien armed forces in the province of Diffa (Elischer, 2018). The fact that the Nigerien armed forces have managed to contain the jihadi Salafi threat indicates that they might enjoy a higher degree of cohesion and professionalism than their

Malian counterpart. With the exception of Niger, the population-to-soldier ratio in the Sahel is a function of the interplay between the degree of political influence of the armed forces in politics on the one hand and the presence of immediate security threats on the other.

Humanitarian interventions

Participation in UN-led humanitarian missions has become a major international task for many African armies. The Sahel armed forces are mainly involved in three missions: the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Figure 2 outlines the extent to which the six Sahel nations participate in each mission.

Figure 2

Share of Sahel contributions to UN-led peacekeeping missions, %

Source: Author's compilation based on IPI 2018

Across the region, Senegal is the only country that is involved in all three missions with a visible force. The Nigerien, Chadian and Burkinabe armed forces focus on the conflict in neighboring Mali. Interestingly the Mauritanian armed forces do not participate in the Malian conflict. Its general and other high-ranking personnel disagreed with President Aziz over the question of becoming involved in Mali. According to interviews with Mauritanian analysts and journalists in Nouakchott conducted by the author in February 2014, the officer corps was heavily opposed to any participation while President Aziz initially was in favour of contributing to foreign efforts to rebuild Mali. The focus on Mali also explains why the Malian armed forces currently have no capacity to extend their activities outside their own territory.

Domestic activities

ACLED data enables a comparative and country-specific analysis of the various activities the Sahel armed forces have been involved in over the last twenty years (1997-2018). Table 4 distinguishes between six domestic activities. *Military mutinies* refer to situations in which the armed forces protest low salaries and poor living conditions. They indicate poor treatment by the government. Governments can use the armed forces to *contain riots or protests*. In functioning democracies, the police perform this task. Situations in which governments resort to the armed forces to quell riots and protests indicate either that these riots and protests ran out of control or they point to the autocratic nature of the incumbents. Incidences in which the armed forces display *violence against civilians* are a clear indication of the autocratic nature of the regime and that the armed forces are human rights violators. In sub-Saharan Africa, the armed forces often *fight domestic threats* including secessionist insurgencies or ethnic militias. In recent years, Islamic terrorism has become one of the most serious security threats in the region and it seems reasonable to treat the *fight against jihadi groups* as a separate category. In the Western world, military *conflicts with other countries* are the primary activity of the armed forces and it is worth analysing to what extent African states are engaged in military conflicts with other nations.

Table 4

Domestic activities of the armed forces across the Sahel, January 1997-June 2018

Country	Number of incidents						Total
	Military mutiny	Containment of riots or protests	Violence against civilians	Fighting domestic threats	Fighting jihadi groups	Conflicts with other countries	
Senegal	0	5	6	197	0	0	208
Mauritania	6	3	5	2	15	0	31
Niger	57	3	7	8	7	0	82
Mali	0	20	69	135	202	0	416
Chad	2	0	22	254	23	20	321
Burkina Faso	4	12	17	6	13	0	52
Total	69	33	126	602	260	20	1 110

Source: ACLED 2018

The results presented in Table 4 allow to make several statements about the activities of each country's national army but also about how the activities of each country's army relates to the activities of other Sahelian armies. The total number of incidences provides insight into which national army is the most active one. Accordingly, over the last twenty years, the Malian military has been involved in the largest number of incidences. This is largely due to the jihadi occupation of Mali's northern territory during the first half of 2012 and the consequences of that conflict. The Chadian and the Senegalese armed forces are fairly active; in Chad this is the result of the various domestic confrontations between the central government and various rebel groups, while in Senegal this is a result of the Casamance conflict. The low number of military activities in Niger and Mauritania is remarkable given that many commentators often discuss political events in these two countries in the context of jihadi insurgencies. Mauritania has remained particularly quiet and stable (Elischer, 2018; Ibrahim, 2014).

The majority of military mutinies took place in Niger. This partly explains why Nigerien civil-military relations have been volatile since 1991. Almost all mutinies occurred between the 1996 and 1999 military coups.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, the armed forces are frequently used to quell riots and protests. In Mali – a country which implemented democratic reforms in the early 1990s – the police and the gendarmerie were often unable to cope with domestic unrest. In Burkina Faso – a country which until recently could not be considered democratic – the armed forces served as the stabiliser of the Compaoré regime. Across the region, the armed forces still resort to violence against civilians – the third most frequent activity across the six countries covered in this study. It is surprising to find that the Malian army is particularly guilty of failing to respect the democratic rights of its citizens. A closer analysis of the data reveals that the Malian army deployed violence against civilians in various parts of the country. Most of that violence occurred in the aftermath of the 2012 military coup. It indicates that Mali's democratic spell between 1991 and 2012 did not provide the armed forces with a new human rights mindset. This questions the extent to which democratic norms have had meaningful effects on Malian civil-military relations.

The preponderance of the Chadian and Burkinabe armed forces to resort to violence against civilians is less surprising given the autocratic nature of their incumbents. The Chadian, Malian and Senegalese armed forces have been involved in large-scale campaigns against secessionist groups or ethnic militias. This is in stark contrast to Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania where domestic security threats remained largely absent during the last 20 years.² Five out of the six countries are directly affected by jihadi terrorism. Unsurprisingly, Mali suffers the most from jihadi activities. Jihadi

² ACLED data do not include the first Tuareg rebellion in Niger, which took place in the early 1990s.

organisations such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb and others (Warner, 2017) have also made some inroads into Chad and Niger and less so into Mauritania. In Chad and Niger, the threat continues to be present, whereas Mauritania has not seen any jihadi terrorist activity on its territory since 2012 for reasons that have to do with policy and military choices (Thurston, 2018).

With the exception of Chad, none of the Sahelian armed forces has been involved in a military confrontation with another state (Nolutshungu, 1996; Marchal, 2016). Figure 3 shows the percentage share of each military activity across the region. It demonstrates that the predominant threat for the Sahel remains domestic threats such as ethnic militias and secessionist groups. More than half (54 %) of all activities that Sahelian armies are involved in fall into this category. Confrontations with jihadi Salafi groups account for almost one-quarter (23%) of all activities. This is remarkable given that the threat of jihadi Salafi groups is still relatively new. Violence against civilians is less common (11%), however the third most common category. This shows that the armed forces still are a threat to human rights and frequently serve as agents of authoritarian incumbents. Mutinies, the containment of riots and conflicts with other countries do not constitute major challenges.

Figure 3

Percentage of military incidents across the Sahel, January 1997-June 2018

Source: Author's compilation based on ACLED, Sept 2018

Recommendations

The donor community faces two major tasks in the Sahel: the stabilisation of a precarious security situation and the promotion of democratic institutions. Incumbents might see the two tasks as overlapping but others as mutually exclusive. The donor community should see these two tasks as two sides of the same coin and act based on the following guidelines:

1. The donor community should continue to provide military assistance to the Sahel. This enables the various governments of the region to provide security for their citizens. The jihadi insurgencies fall into the category of “new wars” in which populations are the major target (see also Walther, 2017). However, Western military support should be made conditional on incumbents’ respect for basic human rights norms. Recipients of Western security aid ought to provide evidence about the consequences of military campaigns for ordinary civilians. The use of ethnic militias for the security purposes of the central government, for example, has the potential to worsen inter-communal relations and thus to weaken social cohesion.
2. Over the last three decades, the Sahel has experienced a shift in civil-military relations in favour of civilian oversight. Civilian oversight is a necessary condition for successful democratisation and the ability for elected civilians to govern effectively. Wherever possible Western donors need to support the trend toward civilian rule. Possible steps include but are not limited to the following: human rights training by civilians for military personnel, procedures to ensure accountability when dealing with the wider public and fostering a broader understanding about the manifold security challenges among the population. There further should be regular consultations between representatives of the armed forces and civil society organisations working on human rights issues. National government should act as facilitators of these conversations. Western support for regional responses to jihadi terrorism such as the G5 Sahel security alliance should take these points into consideration.
3. Historically there has been little accountability and transparency in the Sahel. This is particularly true for the military sector. The immediate security threat of jihadi terrorism has the potential to worsen this trend. This could lead to the erosion of civilian oversight in military affairs. Any Western support for Sahelian armed forces should ensure that money is spent in accordance with verifiable criteria and that those criteria are made public.

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Contemporary Civil-Military Relations in the Sahel

The paper examines the evolution and the contemporary state of civil-military relations in the francophone Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal). In a first step, the paper traces the emergence of excessive political influence of the armed forces (praetorianism) in the Sahel. Out of these, only Senegal has remained under civilian rule since independence. The other countries have experienced military dictatorship at some point. Over the last thirty years, the Sahel has seen a shift toward more civilian oversight in political affairs. In Chad and Mauritania, however, the armed forces remain the pre-eminent political actor. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, sections of the armed forces refuse to accept civilian rule. The second part examines the various challenges and tasks the armed forces in all six countries have been involved in over the last two decades. Although these challenges differ substantially across the six individual countries, the Sahel as a whole continues to struggle primarily with domestic security threats. The paper concludes with guidelines designed to foster civilian oversight and democratic reform.

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