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Too many security providers in the Sahel region?

Background

Since 2011, the Sahel region has developed from a secondary theatre in international counter-terrorism to a hotspot of military interventions. The Western-led intervention in Libya had a spillover effect in Mali, which led to an insurgency in northern Mali that quickly overwhelmed the Malian security forces. After Serval, the French intervention, rolled back the territorial gains of the militant Islamist groups, the international community and the Malian state have attempted to re-establish a common security governance.

The signing of the Algiers Peace Accord in 2015 held great promises. It included former insurgent groups, primarily among the nationalist Arab and Tuareg groups, organized in the so-called Coordination Movement, pro-government militias organized in the Platform Group, as well as the Malian government. The peace agreement gave purpose to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). MINUSMA was responsible for supporting the implementation of the agreement and providing security, including the protection of civilians.

Nevertheless, a number of militant Islamist groups aligned with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State still stand outside the peace process, and these spoiler groups are largely responsible for the deteriorating security situation since 2015. The French Barkhane counter-terror mission targets the groups, but despite several successful attacks against senior terrorist leaders, violence has spread and intensified in middle and northern Mali, the western parts of Niger, and lately Burkina Faso.

Human security and security assemblage

In the violence-ridden areas, local communities suffer not so much from a lack of security governance, but from the many competing and conflicting attempts to provide security. The Malian government has been less than pro-active in re-establishing state authority to a degree that might have caused the military coup in August 2020. Instead, the government relied on its client networks and used the armed forces for unsystematic repression in the Mopti region. In parallel, Burkina Faso still suffers from the breakdown of security-related personal client networks. They connected militant Islamist groups to Blaise Compaoré, the former president, and the security agencies, and held back the former from taking up arms against the state.

In the place of state governance, many security providers engage with the local communities in surprising ways that outsiders may not guess. Many of the groups associated with insecurity and violence are also providers of security. Criminal groups and militias related to established power brokers offer protection and illicit economic opportunities. Although the militant Islamist groups have assassinated and intimidated thousands of local state representatives, they also offer the population justice through Sharia councils, protect local markets, and provide basic services, such as health clinics. On the other hand, local communities at times lament the (in)actions of international security providers.

The concept of security assemblages might make sense of this dizzying security situation. A recent definition of (in)security assemblage sees it as being a range of different formal and informal actors 'cooperating and competing over their diverse threat framings and appropriate security responses'. Instead of studying the effect of each security provider, the providers should be viewed as a whole to explain the net effects. The most obvious observation is that local populations may prefer one oppressive security provider as long as it is strong enough to limit violence. This may explain the rise of the militant Islamist groups' shadow governance in places in Sahel.

In Mali, a particular problem of the security assemblage is the difference in threat framing among the national political parties, the UN, and France and its allies. Whereas France and its allies regard the militant Islamist groups as terrorists outside the political process, an increasing number of parties and influential religious figures are open to negotiations with key militant Islamists. On the other hand, many political elites in Mali look with suspicion at the signatory parties from the Coordination Movement. The net effects are a less than forthright cooperation, informal acceptance of alternative governance, and a faltering implementation of the Peace Accord.

The prospect of improving the security situation

Presently, there is little hope of improvement in the security situation. In the coming years, the root causes of insecurity and lack of natural resources will only worsen due to climate changes and population growth. The complicated security assemblage is not only the result of a 'traffic jam' of international interventions, but also demonstrates how local actors seek to cope with communal strife and diminishing resources by taking up arms.

Looking at the situation through the concept of security assemblage reveals a key dilemma for regional and international interveners. On the one hand, traditional state-building yields little result in terms of recreating state governance in contested regions. On the other hand, working with alternative, local providers of security runs the risk of undermining the state and creating a permanent hybrid security assemblage. A first step for international interveners is, therefore, to ask the fundamental question of what kind of security assemblage is acceptable in the long term.

Recommended reading:

1. Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde & Katja Lindskov Jacobsen (2020) Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism. *International Affairs* 96(4), 855–874.

2. Philippe M. Frowd & Adam J. Sandor, Adam (2018) Militarism and its limits: Sociological insights on security assemblages in the Sahel. *Security Dialogue*, 49(1-2), 70-82.

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