

The Sahel between Fragility and Jihadism: A Governance Issue

A podcast with Morten Bøås^a and Francesco Strazzari^b

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Many observers describe the Sahel as an 'ungoverned space', to highlight a gap in the Sahelian states' capacity to deliver services and control territory. In this Special Issue, you argue that what happens on the ground is rather the emergence of a new, hybrid political order; what does this exactly consist of?

Morten Bøås (MB): There is no such thing as an ungoverned space, because this is an ideal model that simply doesn't exist in reality. If the Sahel was an ungoverned space, we would live in a Hobbesian world. And as Hobbes himself showed, people cannot live and exist for a long time with repeated interactions in a Hobbesian world: it's simply not possible. If you look at the Sahel, it's certainly not that kind of world: it is a world of long distance trade; it's a world of organized crime, organized insurgencies that have additional authority. There is new authority. There is a lot of authority. The problem is that nobody has come out on top of this. We think that looking at the Sahel as an ungoverned space is blatantly wrong, creates flawed analyses and is also bad for policy because it leads to policies that simply do not reflect what the Sahel actually is, and what we believe it is: a dense conglomeration of attempts to rule this area. So instead of looking at the absence of something, we need to look at that

density of various attempts to govern specific spaces, but also to govern specific routes and, if not control territory per se, to gain a grip on various segments of the population. And I'm certain that Francesco would like to add to this.

Francesco Strazzari (FS): I believe that we have observed the topicality of the Sahel over the past ten years: our issue, in fact, spans in terms of observation between the implosion of Mali as a result of dramatic events – as they are recalled by the people there – after the end of the Gadhafi regime in Libya (so we are in 2011-12) to the second coup d'état that took place over the 2020 summer in Bamako. We try to observe events over an arc of time during which the way we discuss about the Sahel has been changing, evolving, often taking for granted the fact that the Sahel can be demarcated as a space that is either characterized by total absence of control, territorial control, or punctuated just by violence, which has been increasing. We are talking about an increase of some 40 per cent every year in terms of progression of armed conflicts. That representation is part of the problem – it is part of the problem, because, as Morten was saying, we need to understand the way in which political order is produced, the way in which the Sahel is a social space: an area of rarefied dwellings and human settlement, but under conditions that are changing quite rapidly due to technological advances. Just think about air conditioning or transports, private motorization, that dictate the terms of all the access routiere, thus the idea of the arid expanses South of the Sahara as a space de circulation, and not only as an empty space. So all those characterizations are part of the way we imagine the region, which comes to be associated with the idea that this is the reality. But regions and regional security are way more than just a line in the sand: they are the production of a space through lines of solidarity, segmentation and political projects. Now, what is characterizing the Sahel in the last ten years is precisely, as Morten was saying, the overlapping of claims to produce an order, also as an attempt to produce a response to challenges that have been emerging, the most radical of which is probably the rise of jihadism in different forms and shapes, which is very able to adopt and sponsor existing grievances to advance its own political agenda.

One of the reasons why the Sahel has featured prominently in the global agenda recently is the concern about the spread of jihadism in the area; the articles in the Special Issue highlight that this is not just a matter of violence and security, but also of governance – can you tell us why?

FS: The first thing that we can observe is that jihadism is rooted, very strongly rooted in areas where governance indicators are very poor, by all means. We can refer to formalized indicators, but we can also pay attention, more in line with our methodology, to what you observe by conducting ethnographic work on the ground, that is, the deterioration of social and political practices associated with incumbent authorities, typically attempting to govern from a distance through a line of proxy authorities, mostly traditional authorities. They are characterized and typically identified by the challengers, and especially jihadists, as corrupted and as exponents of a new colonial form of crusade that the West is conducting, in this region usually considered as led by France. This disconnect between the local and central authorities varies across the region and is not constant across Niger, Mali, Burkina and so on. But what is constant is the fact that there exists a number of problems linked to social expectations, to drivers that tend to converge around the fact that state authorities and their presence locally is identified as abusive of fundamental rights. This is a common aspect: if you go to interview former jihadi combatants, most of them won't cite religious indoctrination as the first driver, as the trigger for going to the bush – la brousse, as they call it – but rather a response, a collective response typical of certain villages to the intensification of violence. All of that goes through a window of opportunity that has been created by changing ideational and material conditions: the availability of a jihadist populist discourse that espouses the cause typically of those who have much to gain in joining them in terms of breaking, for example, societal segmentation between different groups; the existence of forms of racism locally; the existence of form of repression and exploitation on the part of elites. Jihadists typically try to find the vectors of propagation through, for example, sponsoring notables and traders who have an interest in destabilizing the existing authorities in a given area. The process goes through a kaleidoscope of rather fluid aligning, misaligning and dis-aligning in terms of who fights with whom and against whom: you see questions of resources, who gets access to scarce resources – water, land – as well as questions having to do with getting and intercepting aid and assistance, including humanitarian forms, and other questions related to positioning vis-a-vis authorities. What is interesting in the way things have been progressing is the fact that the big galaxy of jihadism globally has been present in forms that have been evolving. We tried to trace a bit that story in the Special Issue. For example, the type of political violence does not, at least initially, conform with what we observe in other areas of the world that are permeated by jihadist violence, like the Middle East, the Levant. We do see the local dynamics prevailing in terms of intercommunity fighting, in terms of who is recruited. And only through and across time we see, for example, the

Islamic State and Daesh pushing through their own strategic or tactical forms of indoctrination – the use of violence, suicide bombers and so on. That is not something that we see at the beginning of the decade. We talk about the end of an exception for the Sahel, Daesh and al-Qaida or their own local affiliates, which are to be distinguished, because when we talk about al-Qaida we are talking about a galaxy with a lot of variety inside, but still there is a very strong al-Qaida umbrella organization in Mali. And we can see and we can observe how it has been endowing itself with a long term trajectory that has been able to co-opt a number of local issues. The very fact that it has been constituted as an umbrella organization is an important element in being able to become a credible interlocutor, even in terms of negotiations with the incumbent authorities. The same cannot be said, of course, for the Islamic State that tries to find its space by attacking al-Qaida as too much prone to compromise.

MB: If I may just add on a little bit, and it sort of relates to more or less to where Francesco ended: these groups, if you look at them over time from when they first arrived in this area, because the jihadi movement there started as some sort of export from the leftovers of the Algerian civil war, and I'm not going to go through that long story, but the fact is that when they started arriving here, they were much weaker than they are today. Put it this way, when the jihadi projects were in a very embryonic state, they started developing this strategy of trying to appropriate local grievances, local cleavages, appropriate local conflicts in order to further their own local integration. How were they able to do this? It was not necessarily due to how smart they were and how strong they were, but rather that they could piggyback on extremely weak, bad and corrupted governance by the state. You don't need to treat people very good, to be very systematic in how you try to, if not govern, at least get a grip on population if your opponent is seen as dysfunctional, illegitimate, and basically totally corrupt – then it doesn't take that much. This is what they realized and some of them have become smarter than others in how they do this. Maybe the group that has taken this the furthest is the group, which goes under the name Katiba Macina, which operates around this local Fulani preacher called Ahmadou Kouffa in central Mali. Central Mali was in many ways an enabling environment for this type of group. They have managed to organize, for example, this kind of mobile courts; people tend to see them as harsh and brutal, but they are also courts that deliver something opposite to the local state-organized courts, which are seen as not delivering anything but corruption. So it's not necessarily the strength of the jihadists, but the weakness of the state, that has made this possible. What we are faced with here is basically a competition between a state project, a modern state project that by way too many people is seen as not

delivering at all, that has lost almost all its legitimacy, on the one hand; and a very haphazard and at times very violent form of governance by jihadi groups, but still a form of governance that at times is seen as at least delivering something, on the other. Together with two colleagues, one from Senegal, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and one from Niger, Laouali Mahamane, we have this article in the Special Issue about the situation in Tillabéri. And you see from the interview material that this article is built on, you see it very clearly that it's not that people necessarily are so much in support of the local jihadi project, which in this case is the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. It's just that it's seen as slightly better, slightly more predictable than the other forces that they are faced with: basically a combination of the Nigerien security forces and a number of non-Fulani militias that also operate in this area in some sort of collaboration with the Malian and the Nigerien state and also with Operation Barkhane. So people are saying: hey, we are caught between a rock and a hard place. The state-allied forces are tougher to deal with than the hard place, which is the jihadi groups that are here: this is the real situation local people are faced with. This, of course, means that one really needs to rethink international approaches to this region because the current approach, if you look at it from 2013 when the international community returned to this area, has it worked? The blunt answer is "no", they cannot be seen as working at all because the situation has not improved from 2013 – it has gotten worse.

The Sahel is also a space where a sheer number of interventions by external state as well as non-state actors has taken place in recent years. In light of the hybrid political order that is taking shape on the ground, how should an external actor like the European Union revise its policy and action towards the Sahel?

FS: The European Union for the first time opened its strategy on the Sahel to external comments – there has been an open forum in the last month for the first time, as far as I know – in terms of contributions that might come to the formulation of priorities; this idea of an open process is certainly most welcome. We don't know how effective that process would be. In fact, we are talking about the European Union, but much of what happens in the Sahel is led by national governments that coordinate in some form of multilateral fora, with a number of significant defections and or differentiations. We talk about the hybrid space also because the dynamics of intervention are far from convergent in the Sahel. Just to mention one, we see the different lines that are ideologically driven that guide an intervention of, for example, Gulf states vis-a-vis Turkey and, to some extent, Qatar, that propels Turkey's interests. We see China going a certain way. We see Russia with its own distinct agenda. We see the US very much

concerned with counter-terrorism, but over the past few years, having a rather fuzzy and elusive strategy. So we really talk about a multiplicity of actors just to limit ourselves to the formal ones, because then you have private interests and so on. But importantly, there has been an attempt to scale down to a regional level strategies of conflict management, of improving governance and taking into consideration dynamics of climate change and social emergency. All of that has been done. There is a plethora of special envoys for the Sahel on the part of several governments, from Canada to the European Union. Yet, what seems to us rather puzzling is the fact that, for all the critiques that have been advanced and put forward to a strategy which tends to militarize and to a large extent considers the Sahel again as an empty space to be filled with state-strengthening measures, the guidelines do not change. There is a certain reiteration of simplified answers that is basically to identify those political leaders who are able to deliver for one reason or another, who stand on their own dynamics. And those dynamics are typically dynamics of social clientelism, dynamics that bypass, if not obscure, the notion of democratic governance. And if we believe that democratic governance has to do with legitimacy and with forms of accountability, well, we cannot really say that we saw dynamics of downward and upward accountability growing. We see political leaders who have been very much keen on not missing the chance to capture the form of rent, which is international security assistance, which came to become a significant, preponderant portion of state budgets. And we see states that remain pretty weak and unstable. The coup d'état in Mali is just one example, but also the elections that are upcoming in the other states in the central Sahel raise a number of questions; not to mention, and I would like to conclude with a note on what happens in states that are pretty much on the fringes of the area, what we observe in Chad, for instance, which has been for a long time praised for being militarily extremely effective, but which ranks at the bottom of any indicator of democratic governance. If that is the indication that comes out of a decade, that is, that military effectiveness is the way to run the region, well, there are a number of problems given the fact that we are talking, by all means, of one of, if not the poorest region in the world in terms of all indicators that we can look at.

MB: If I may add just a few thoughts on this matter – if you look at what has happened here, since 2013, an enormous amount of programs and projects has been rolled out, in an environment that consists of some of the weakest and most fragile states in the world. What does this mean? It means that the recipient administrative capacity here is extremely low. And yet donors, if we call them that way – the European Union, the US, Norway, Italy and so on and so forth – still seem to insist on this idea that what works elsewhere in the world where they are giving donor assistance will also work

here. They seem unable to acknowledge in their programming and in their policies that you need to have another way of assisting these states. I believe that states like Mali, Niger and Burkina do need external assistance. I mean, the sheer challenge that they are faced with here, and I'm not only talking about the jihadi rebels, but also the livelihood challenges, the challenge of making these states more resilient to the climate change effects that are already starting to appear and will become much more visible in the next sort of ten, twenty years, how to deal with enormously high population growth – all of these things are huge challenges. But there is really no way that these states in their present configuration can deal with them on their own. So they need external assistance, in my view, but they need another kind of external assistance that really acknowledges this fragility dilemma, a dilemma that comes in two configurations. These countries most urgently need international assistance, including military assistance, because there is also a need to have a military approach to the rebels – it just needs to be on the ground and much better than the one that is offered today, and it needs to come together with a political project on how to engage these groups. Of course, there is a hard core leadership there, which is probably both ideological and theologically quite convinced of their own jihadi project. Most of the people who fight for them, however, understand very little of the theology behind this project. And there are other reasons that have pushed them into this. What you need is a combination of a military approach and an idea about how you can negotiate a solution throughout these aspects of it – this is completely missing. Secondly, you need to acknowledge that what you need to work on here is finding ways of helping to build state capacity in order to deal with all the various programs that we are pushing onto this area. And maybe we are pushing on way too much into an area that really cannot absorb very much. Absorption capacity is currently very low and that needs to be acknowledged. Finally, and I'll end with this, one needs to acknowledge that looking at the Sahel and the relationship between the EU and the Sahel at face value, you would think that these states are so weak, these regimes so desperately need assistance that the EU can more or less call the shots and basically order these regimes to do whatever we would like them to do because they need our money, in the end. That is not necessarily how this works on the ground, because, as Francesco alluded to, there is a perverse logic of clientelism going on here, as we also desperately need them, because this is seen not only as a security threat for what is happening to people on the ground. We tend to see this also as a security threat to international security, to European security, to global security. So we need clients on the ground there. And as long as these clients at least deliver something that we think is useful, they can more or less do as they like, as long as they stay in power. And this is quite interesting to see when you take into consideration the

relatively lacklustre European response to the August 2020 coup in Mali. Well, basically, I think that we were quite happy to see Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) go. We didn't protest very much. I think that most European stakeholders with any knowledge or closeness to the Mali situation were thinking, OK, these military dudes, can they make it any worse than IBK did? And most are probably thinking no, not very likely – which means that the only principled resistance against this didn't come from Europe and the US, the so-called normative superpowers in the world. It came from the coastal states. And that is something that really tells you something