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The Arab Spring, the rise of terrorism in the Sahel and the evolution of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region

A case study of Mali and neighbouring countries and how peace and counterterrorism operations adjusted to the rise of terrorism in the region

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Abstract

The Arab Spring led to the overthrow of multiple authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa and to the flow of arms and fighters from Libya to Western African countries, triggering the crisis in the Sahel and altering the security landscape of the region. The Sahel, a quite stable region, became vulnerable to the rise of terrorism due to political instability, internal conflicts dynamics and power vacuum which led to ungoverned spaces to be seen as safe havens to terrorist groups. The international community, fearing the spread of terrorism, initiated multiple operations in the region such as an UN mission in Mali – MINUSMA – and the French-led intervention in the G5 – operation Barkhane. After 9/11, a change in perception took place and terrorism now came to be seen as a transnational threat to world peace and stability, leading to the inclusion of a new role during peacekeeping operations – stabilisation – achievable by the use of military power. This study, based on secondary data research, aims to understand the transformation of peace and counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region.

The study notes that the view of Sahelian states as fragile and weak and due to that the perfect target for transnational terrorism justifies the West interventions in the region. However, even under a development-security nexus, all interventions were carried out with only one purpose – fight against terrorism – as the global war on terror was seen as required to reinstate security in the Sahel. In this sense, MINUSMA can be seen as a laboratory test, also because it was working side by side with French troops which were under a counterterrorism mandate, which goes completely out of UN's character. This mission created a dangerous precedent as it goes beyond the normal understanding of peacekeeping missions.

This thesis argues that the change of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region happened due to the perception of terrorism as a transnational threat and of the Sahel region as a safe haven for the proliferation of terrorism. Moreover, all interventions had Western interests in mind and not even one was focused on addressing the underlying causes of the conflicts such as political instability, climate change and food insecurity which enlarged the humanitarian challenges in the Sahel.

Keywords: terrorism, Arab Spring, Sahel, failed states, ungoverned spaces, peace and counterterrorism operations, war on terror, development-security nexus

List of abbreviations

AFISMA – African-led International Support Mission to Mali

AQIM – Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb

AU – African Union

ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States

EU – European Union

EUCAP – European Union Capacity Building Mission

EUTM – European Union Training Mission

G5SJF – G5 Sahel Joint Force

HIPPO – High-level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations

IS – Islamic State

ISGS – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

MINUSMA – United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MNLA – *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad*

MUJAO – *Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OCHA – UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN – United Nations

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

US – United States of America

VNSA – violent non-state actors

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1. Introduction

From the Sahara Desert in the north to the tropical savannas in the south, Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Red Sea in the East, the 5000-kilometre belt that constitutes the vast region of the Sahel is home to over 150 million people from ten different countries, a land of both opportunities and challenges. Full of human and natural resources which are essential for the rapid population growth, this region faces environmental, political and security challenges which have been affecting peace and stability (Africa Renewal, n.d.).

Historically, this region acted as a "buffer zone", separating the "white" Africa – Maghreb – from the "black" sub-Saharan Africa and being ethnically divided between Tuareg, Arabs and Black Africans. Known as a space of movement and home for nomadic people, countries of this region have little control over their territories as borders are porous and not well defined (Cristiani, 2014, p. 1). After decolonization, African countries found themselves with new borders that didn't respect traditional tribal areas nor the nomadic way of life of part of the population which generated conflicts and crises due to changes of power, military coups and dictatorial regimes (Godó, 2021, p. 56). Thus, in the early 90s, Africa became the main theatre of UN operations (Tardy, 2020, p. 540).

Besides that, the 9/11 events turned the Sahel into a hotspot for major threats such as: smuggling, human trafficking, terrorism, latent ethnic conflicts and the presence of rebel groups (Cristiani, 2014, p. 1). Millions of people have been displaced due to conflicts, poverty, climate change, food insecurity and political instability which creates unprecedented humanitarian challenges to the world's most neglected region (Dieng, 2021, p. 774). Administrative failures, historical socio-political and economic adversities as well as natural catastrophes set up the right environment for the rise of ungoverned territories in the region (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 273).

Moreover, the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings and protests in the Middle East and North Africa, led to the overthrow of several authoritarian regimes. While this brought hope for democracy and freedom, it also led to political instability and uncertainty in the region. As the uprisings spread to other countries, the power vacuum left by the ousted regimes allowed extremist groups to rise and take advantage of the situation. The flow of arms and ammunition from Libya, where the regime was overthrown in 2011, to neighbouring countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, fuelled the rise of terrorism and

uncertainty in the region (Blackmore, 2019). Likewise, the fragility of the Sahel region and the intensification of the mistrust of local communities in governments and democratic state institutions increased the success of extremist groups in recruiting individuals by exploiting their frustrations and poor living conditions (Godó, 2021, pp. 57-60).

Despites being the "corridor of conflict", it seems that this region receives little attention from international humanitarian organisations as the international community only focus on the region when it comes to counterterrorism matters (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 272). Thus, the region is in need of solid and effective leadership and requires inclusive and participatory dialogues between the local communities and the government to solve conflicts and uphold the peace building processes (Dieng, 2021, p. 778).

1.1. Aim and research questions

As a reaction to the growth of terrorism, the UN automatically increased their work in the area to re-establish security, promote effective governance and support the rule of law, however UN missions in this region faced several challenges. Also, as a former colonial power, France wanted to defend its political and economic interests in the region. In this sense, some external interventions were put into practice such as MINUSMA, operation Barkhane and G5SJF which operate in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger as the hotspots of the conflicts in the area are located between their borders.

Non-state conflicts and the rise of terrorism are usually connected to the lack of control by the state which indicates a loss of the state's monopoly of violence. This research investigates how the rise of terrorism after the Arab Spring influenced peace and counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region (limited to the purpose of this thesis to the countries – Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger).

To this end, this thesis will address the following research question:

1. How has the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring altered the landscape of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region?

This thesis will also address the following sub questions:

2. What are the interests of France and other Western countries in the region?
3. What is the future of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region?

In order to analyse the influence of the Arab Spring in the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region, both conflict theory and ungoverned spaces theory will be used. This last theory is usually connected with the concept of failed states which will also be scrutinised. Moreover, to answer these questions, this thesis will address the role of the UN and AU as well as the humanitarian consequences of the instability in the region.

1.2. Relevance for humanitarian action

The perception of terrorism changed with the 9/11 attacks creating a view of terrorism as an international security threat, challenging international peace and stability as it doesn't acknowledge borders, nationalities or religions. Thus, the rise of terrorism in the Sahel led to a change in peace and counterterrorism operations because those were being conducted under the sphere of the war on terror leading to a different approach by the international community towards the conflicts in the Sahel.

This new approach, security centric, led to the disregard of underlying causes of internal conflict dynamics such as political instability, weak institutions, climate change and food insecurity which by not being addressed triggered the increase of humanitarian challenges in the region.

1.3. Methodology and limitations

This research will have Mali as the main case study but will also focus on the impact of peace and counterterrorism operations in the neighbouring countries. Through secondary analysis of qualitative data, the case study will enable an investigation about how the rise of terrorism led to a change of operations' method. Multiple sources were used to understand the concepts applied during this thesis, including academic articles, NGOs and institutes reports and UN official web pages. Ungoverned spaces and terrorism will be used as conceptual frameworks to understand the shift to an international counterterrorism approach towards the Sahel.

This study of the practical impact of the rise of terrorism in peace and counterterrorism operations in the Sahel is based on secondary data research and therefore may present some limitations. The non restriction of the Sahel region to the G5 countries (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso) would be preferable for a more understandable assessment, but due time and length constraints, this research is limited to a main case study – Mali – and neighbouring countries – Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso.

No primary data has been collected due to time restriction and access/contact with people involved in peace and counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. In this sense, the aim of this research is to point out, through secondary data analysis, that the interest of the West in the Sahel region is due to the fear of the expansion of terrorism and not to prove the impact or the proliferation of the conflicts due to West interventions in the region, neither the lack of national/international governments' efforts to deal with the underlying causes of the conflicts.

Furthermore, the analysis is subject to temporal limitations as multiple operations in the Sahel are still ongoing. However, this should not impact the purpose of this thesis as the main focus is the beginning of the operations which goes back to the aftermath of the Arab Spring, around ten years ago.

1.4. Thesis outline

The thesis will start by analysing the concepts of terrorism, failed states and ungoverned spaces and their connection to each other, followed by a section related to the Arab Spring and the implications for the Sahel region. The section after will do an overview of the peace and counterterrorism operations in Africa, followed by a section where the case of Mali will be analysed. This section also includes an analysis of the external interventions in Mali and neighbouring countries as well as the impact of the interventions in the region. To finalise this section the humanitarian situation in the Sahel will be reviewed. Finally, a discussion will be held, regarding the main question and proving the point of this thesis by including the analysis of the Sahelian states as failed states, the Western interest in the region, the change of the UN's role, 9/11 as the beginning of the new approach regarding terrorism and finalising with the future of operations in the Sahel. The last section will

work as a conclusory note to the work, showing the attempt to validate the main argument that the change of operations in the Sahel was shaped by the view of terrorism as a transnational threat and the region of the Sahel as safe havens for the proliferation of terrorist groups.

2. Terrorism, failed states and ungoverned spaces

Failed states, ungoverned spaces and even terrorism are elusive concepts as there is no consensus regarding their definitions. Nevertheless, the following section will present some definitions and try to demonstrate the link between the three notions.

2.1. Defining terrorism

Over the years, numerous definitions of terrorism have emerged. Despite this, there remains a lack of agreement among the United Nations' member states on what constitutes terrorism. This disagreement is due to states' national interests, which often lead them to avoid identifying certain behaviours as terrorist acts, especially those related to political violence. Additionally, some states view an universal definition of terrorism as limiting their sovereign power to define it according to their own logic. Moreover, the UN's institutional context presents difficulties in establishing a definition, even tough discussions within the UN suggest that terrorism is seen as "one of the most dangerous challenges to humanity" and as "the evil that needs to be eradicated, a scourge, one of the most atrocious forms that violence could assume" (Hershinger, 2013, p. 190).

Prior to 9/11, the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism of 1999 provided a definition of terrorism in Article 2.1.b. This article defined terrorism as an act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian. This act is considered terrorism when its purpose, whether by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population or to compel a government or international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act. Therefore, it is clear that the intent of the act plays a crucial role in determining whether it is terrorism or not (UN Treaty Collection, 1999). The variety of opinions regarding the definition of terrorism has a significant impact on the international community's ability to address terrorism. This impact is seen in the justification of national measures on a case-by-case basis, as well as the development of specific national projects, such as the war on terror, which can be interpreted as hegemonic by nature (Hershinger, 2013, p. 184).

The events of 9/11 created an immediate demand for counterterrorism measures, leaving no time to define terrorism, resulting in a normative black hole. This call to action may have allowed states to define terrorism and interpret UNSC-authorised measures on their own, potentially leading to unintended human rights violations (Scheinin and Vermeulen, 2010, p. 22). Due to 9/11, counterterrorism has become an accepted justification of actions against opposition, activists, minorities or interventions in third countries (Sasnal, 2021). In places such as Africa, Asia and in the Middle East, counterterrorism operations have been conducted in the context of active armed conflicts (ICRC, 2019, p. 58). These events led to a change of mentality and to the link between failed states and global threats (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2014) as problems present in ungoverned spaces may spill out to surrounding areas (Lloyd, 2016, p. 139). However, concepts such as ungoverned spaces "oversimplifies the links between state weakness and transnational terrorism" (Stigall, 2016, p. 50). Thus, what is the connection between terrorism, failed states and ungoverned spaces?

2.2. Defining ungoverned spaces

Lloyd defines ungoverned spaces as areas where the government exercises little or no control over the region and its people and where state's authority is being challenged by one or more groups (2016, p. 137). The America's department of defence for policy defines ungoverned spaces as a "place where the state or central government is unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern, or influence the local population, and where a provincial, local, tribal, or autonomous government does not fully or effectively govern, due to inadequate governance capacity, insufficient political will, gaps in legitimacy, the presence of conflict, or restrictive norms of behaviour" (Lamb, 2007, p. 6).

The theory of ungoverned spaces states that countries with large uninhabited areas are more susceptive to violence due to the inability of the state to control the whole region (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 278). According to Bøås, ungoverned spaces are "a geographical area characterised by an absence of state control and state sovereignty: a lawless zone, a no-man's land" (2019, p.8). Then, how are ungoverned spaces created? Geography plays an important role for the creation of these spaces as desert areas lightly

populated are the perfect place for armed groups that contest the central government to take over. These groups are motivated by internal divisions, economic stagnation and by the perception of the state as weak. The creation of ungoverned spaces may lead to regime replacement, fragmentation of the state or even anarchy (Lloyd, 2016, pp. 137-138). Weak economies and political instability create the best conditions for the emergence of ungoverned spaces (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 277). Besides that, ungoverned spaces can be seen as the legacy of colonialism as it led to the formation of three different geographies: "the administrative territory of a country, determined by its borders; the one reflecting pre-existing sociocultural groups, which transcends the boundaries of one country; and another reflecting the actual presence of the State, which tended to be concentrated in a few urban centres" (UN, 2023).

Ungoverned spaces are dangerous, thus, how to deal with them? The creation of a security cooperation program is the only way to address this problem and deny access to terrorist groups (Stigall, 2016, p. 48). Moreover, a military approach should be complemented by active development policies to ensure an effective provision of public services within the territory (UN, 2023).

2.3. Defining and measuring failed states

Ungoverned spaces are also linked to the concept of failed states as the lack of government's ability to provide basic services as well as internal political conflicts and tensions between local communities provide easy access to recruits (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 274). Feeling isolated and marginalised by the government during difficult times, people become vulnerable to radicalization and rapidly start supporting armed groups and terrorist organisations (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 284). Terrorists or warlords take the role of the state as service providers when the state fails to guarantee law and order which makes the political system lose its legitimacy (Debiel, 2002, pp. 7-8). The absence of a state able to provide for their population creates the ground for the rise of terrorism and emergence of violent non-state actors (VNSA) such as rebel groups, militias, criminal networks, and terrorist organisations (UN, 2023).

Thus, how to measure the fragility of a state? The fragile state index is based on a conflict assessment framework which includes cohesion, economic, political and social indicators

and measures the condition of a state annually (Fragile State Index, 2023). "The Index is unique because it is based on a platform of content analysis (using algorithms to analyse tens of millions of qualitative data points) that is then triangulated with quantitative data and qualitative research inputs" (IFAD, 2018). But to be fair, no country wants to be labelled a fragile state, especially when the label is not supported by clear data. That is why this index, based on solid data, is so important. It helps to understand and respond to issues of social, economic, and political fragility and can also help understand the underlying causes and identify the needs of specific groups or communities (IFAD, 2018).

2.4. The link between ungoverned spaces, failed states and terrorism

When ungoverned spaces are seen as a consequence of a failed state, the concept is intrinsically linked to counterterrorism, stabilisation, reconstruction and peace building (Taylor, 2016, p. 1). The inability to provide for the citizens leads to destabilisation which the conflict theory links to the creation of a failed state. According to this theory, "state failure is the pivotal issue for explaining intra-state conflicts (Debiel, 2002, p. 5). Then, does that mean that weak states can be seen as a root for terrorism?

The historical roots of the structural crisis faced by African and Middle Eastern nation-states can be traced back to the colonial era, but the post-independence period deepened them due to the inability of the elites in power to establish effective and legitimate nation states. This failure led to the creation of sub-identities based on ethnic, religious, and tribal affiliations, which posed a significant challenge to the state. A weak or collapsed state loses its monopoly of the legitimate use of force, becoming incapable of exercising control over its territory and providing security, protection and other basic needs to its people. History shows that failed and weak states provide the best environment for the establishment of violent non-state actors (VNSA) which became the authority in certain regions (Ali, 2020, p.78). Moreover, the emergence of new types of armed conflicts conducted in the name of religious or ethnic identities have increased the challenges to politics as guerrillas, warlords and terrorists don't respect borders or any type of peace accord (Holtz, 2002, p. XVI).

9/11 has been seen as the beginning of a new wave of terrorism with Al-Qaeda and Daesh as the main terrorists' groups in the international arena. This new form of terrorism knows no borders or bounds which makes it impossible to separate internal and external security. As pointed out by Debiel, organisations linked to Al-Qaeda were created in countries where the state doesn't have the complete monopoly of the use of force (2002, pp. 193-196). Another turning point was the fall of Gaddafi's regime which disseminated terrorists and insurgents' groups throughout the Sahel region (Fabra, 2022, p. 21). The fall of Gaddafi's regime as part of the Arab Spring movement and the rise of terrorism in the Sahel will be the topic of the next section.

3. Arab Spring and the implications for the Sahel region

For centuries, nomadic people known as Tuareg moved freely in the Sahel and North of Africa, living mostly in northern Mali, Niger, Algeria and Mauritania. Most of them ended up in Libya as its leader, Gaddafi, was seen as the "saviour of the poor and suppressed" (Ronen, 2013, p. 546).

Then, what triggered the Arab Spring? Demographic development which led to economic breakups, unemployment and extreme poverty, corruption and lack of leadership as well as access to social media where people found the opportunity to question political norms and values were the factors that led the discontentment to be transferred from the virtual world to the real one in forms of mass protests against the authoritarian regimes (Beck and Hüser, 2012, pp. 6-7). In the end of 2010, Tunisia faced anti-government protests which rapidly spread and gave rise to the Arab Spring – a series of protests, uprisings and turmoil that spread to most Arabic-speaking countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Social media was the tool used to help pro-democratic protests gain momentum and eventually ended up collapsing the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen (Blackmore, 2019). Thus, the Arab Spring was "an event of global historical significance and a process of political change in the Middle East" and beyond (Beck and Hüser, 2012, p. 4).

The regime in Libya was defeated by Libyan rebels and Western forces. To note that without NATO's intervention the revolution would probably not have been a success as the military capabilities of the oppositions were too weak compared to the forces of the regime (Beck and Hüser, 2012, p. 14). In the fall of 2011, with the end of Gaddafi's era, pro-Gaddafi Tuareg fighters left Libya and returned to their home countries carrying arms and high-tech weapons (Ronen, 2013, p. 554) which triggered the crisis in the Sahel (Ritter, 2014, p. 105). However, Western African countries were not prepared for a mass return movement of people which impacted the countries economically, socially, environmentally and politically (Okechukwu and Aruah, 2021, p.34). Not being able to provide for themselves and their family, some felt the pressure to join rebel groups such as the Tuaregs, Boko Haram or Al-Qaeda (Okechukwu and Aruah, 2021, p.37). The aftermath of the Arab Spring, aggravated by the global economic crisis created new challenges for the countries in the Sahel and altered the security landscape of the region

(Ritter, 2014, p. 103). This region was relatively stable before the uprisings which shows the significant impact that the Arab Spring had on the rise of the insurgent activity which also shaped the Western African foreign policy (Schumacher and Schraeder, 2019, p. 685).

Due to these traumatic events, the region has become characterised by weak governments, porous borders and vast ungoverned spaces being the paradise for jihadists, militias and tribal forces (Perito, 2015, p. 2). Even though Sahelian countries are very poor and heavily dependent on external help for sustenance, states have been on "glowing fire" since the Arab Spring which increased the rate of refugee overflow and the risk of spill-over effects to other parts of the continent and beyond (Okechukwu and Aruah, 2021, p. 40). Thus, the impact of Libyan chaos and belligerence in the Sahel is clear, the escalation of the Malian chaos threatens to drag down other states across Africa (Ronen, 2013, p. 555).

Besides criminal networks, radical Islamic nets such as AQIM, Boko Haram and ISGS have thrived in the region (Larivé, 2014). These radical groups are dispersed in ungoverned areas and don't respect national borders. Their aim is to replace the existing international order with the establishment of a global caliphate that is based on a radical interpretation of the sharia law (Perito, 2015, p. 3). To note that ungoverned spaces provide a safe haven for these groups to contest governments' authority (Lloyd, 2016, pp. 137-138) as they occupy the political vacuums by using populations' discontent towards the respective government (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 276).

Thus, what led to the emergence and expansion of violent non-state actors (VNSA) in the post-Arab Spring? The fragmentation of nation states and governmental weaknesses, shown by the lack of ability to impose control over its territory and secure its borders, creates a political and security vacuum which allows VNSA to take over (Ali, 2020, p. 69). But why do the local population support VNSA? State weakness can lead the population to see VNSA as an effective alternative source of assistance, protection and dispute resolution, politically and economically (Raineri and Strazzari, 2017, p. 1).

As mentioned before, since 2012 that the Sahel region has been under armed conflicts, insurgencies, coups d'état, jihadists groups and the failure of international military intervention (Charbonneau, 2022, p. 98). Two parallel and connected destabilisation processes were caused by the events of 2011: the chaos in Libya and the crisis in Mali (Aynaou, 2015, p. 3). The latest will be discussed in the following sections.

4. Africa and peace and counterterrorism operations

Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda operations during the 1990s led to a change of conduct of operations by the UN and NATO (Perito, 2015, p. 2). In those operations, UN peacekeepers failed to protect civilians which damaged UN's credibility and since 2002 UN peace operations have been authorised to use force to protect civilians (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1279). Since then, missions have been adopting a more robust posture and "have been deployed in places where there is active conflict and no peace to keep" (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1281).

History has changed and so has the role of the UN peacekeeping operation in Africa. The world's second-largest continent is no longer only a beneficiary of UN peace operations, but AU and sub-regional organisations have become an essential part of the worldwide peace and security framework. In fact, 50% of UN peacekeepers come from African countries. The UN and AU work closely together, meaning that before deploying a new peace operation in Africa, the UN is expected to consult with the AU and other relevant regional organisations (Coning, 2019, pp. 213-214). The relationship evolved from a donor-recipient to a functioning strategic partnership as AU is now part of a collective global peace and security architecture (Coning, 2019, p.223).

4.1.The new role of the UN

Over the past decade, a third role was included in peace operations – stabilisation. More than supporting peace or assisting in the implementation of peace agreements and ceasefires, UN peacekeepers now have the authority to use military power to stabilise a country. In opposition to traditional peacekeeping, the UN is now working in active conflict zones, trying to restore peace and security, which shows a change of character, or at least, an attempt of change. In the case of Mali, the UN's mandate also authorises the French troops to use military power and intervene in case peacekeepers are under imminent threat (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1282).

The UN stabilisation mission in Mali marked the beginning of a new era which makes MINUSMA a laboratory test (Karlsrud, 2019b, p. 153) as it was authorised to "complete

multidimensional operations in security, political, economic, social and cultural dimensions" (Ritter, 2014, p. 109). What led to the change in the UN's role? Is the UN ready for this new role? Is the UN able to operate in areas threatened by transnational terrorists' groups linked to Al-Qaeda and IS? (Perito, 2015, p. 3).

According to Coning, the UN is "good at implementing peace agreements and consolidating peace processes" but enforcement or counterterrorism actions are completely out of character (2019, p. 224). Moreover, the HIPPO report mentioned that the UN doesn't have the resources, capabilities or training to engage in a military counterterrorism operation (Fabra, 2022, p. 41). As the UN will continue to work closely with regional organisations that have a counterterrorism mandate, it should be aware of the "security, reputational, and legitimacy risks it will be facing in parallel deployments" (Karlsrud, 2019b, pp. 163-164).

AU may be the answer as it has demonstrated how able it is to undertake stabilisation and counterterrorism operations, lacking the capacity to implement peace agreements. In this sense, AU and UN have mutually reinforcing capabilities which straighten their strategic partnership (Coning, 2019, p. 224).

5. Case study

The end of the 20th century was marked by numerous intra-state wars characterised by massive use of violence against civilians, humanitarian disasters and recurring violations to ceasefire and peace agreements which created the sensation of fragile peace in many countries around the world. (Debiel, 2002, p. 1).

Most African countries after independence followed a similar trajectory characterised by the emergence of single party authoritarian regimes which, in turn, led to military coups and economic stagnation (Lloyd, 2016, p. 134). According to Taylor, the decolonization process and the UN system reinforced states as the product of Westphalia sovereignty and the absolute norms of international law (2016, p. 7) and it is according to this benchmark that countries are measured to determine how fragile they are (Stepputat, Andersen and Møller, 2007, p. 8). To note that, the Westphalia system grants each state exclusive sovereignty over its territory and has the restricted authority to engage in warfare (Taylor, 2016, p. 7).

5.1.The case of Mali

Post colonial Mali was dealing with a state building process, the government had to rule a vast territory that encompassed desert regions inhabited by Tuareg and Arab communities which posed a significant challenge to national unity (Chauzal and van Damme, 2015, p. 41). The country, as many others in the region, was facing substantial governance issues linked to weak state institutions, extreme poverty, fragile economy and insecurity. Issues aggravated by food insecurity, climate change and the spread of armed groups which included expert combatants returned from Libya with high tech weapons (Charbonneau, 2017, p. 418). A division between north and south was also notorious not only when it comes to ethics but also in terms of economy and security. The north faced insecurity and lack of infrastructures and thus, people started aspiring for economic development and political representation which led to the creation of MNLA and the beginning of the conflict. Despite their differences and their fight for hegemony in the region, all groups represented by MNLA shared a common political goal: achieving independence for Azawad (Chauzal and van Damme, 2015, p. 10).

In early 2012, the fourth[1] rebellion of the Tuareg took place which created instability in the north, led to a military coup carried out by the Malian army due to the weak governmental response and leaving a vacuum of power in the capital. MNLA, backed by some Islamic militant groups (Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO) took this opportunity to expand their control over Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu (main cities in the north) and declare the independence of Azawad (CFR, 2022).

5.2. External interventions in Mali and neighbouring countries

In the beginning of 2013, as Islamist groups began pushing towards the centre of the country, the transitional government sought external assistance. The UNSC established AFISMA which had a one-year mandate to prevent the escalation of the conflict, restore peace and security in Mali and put an end to the humanitarian crisis (Ritter, 2014, p. 108). Meanwhile, France, backed by Malian troops, ECOWAS mission forces and other Western nations, launched Operation Serval (Francis, 2013, p. 3).

Serval successfully ended the Tuareg rebellion, restored the government's control over major cities in the north, and dispersed the Islamist rebels in less than three weeks which allowed the establishment of an interim government and an international peacekeeping force (Francis, 2013, p. 3).

The collapse of Gaddafi's regime due to NATO's intervention, the deterioration of political and military situation in northern Mali and the operation led by France and the international community to liberate the north of Mali from the terrorists created a new geopolitical situation in the Sahel-Sahara region (Aynaou, 2015, p.1).

While the French operation aimed to restore order, territorial integrity, and democratic legitimacy, MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission authorised by the UNSC a couple of months later as replacement to AFISMA, intended to achieve a peace deal, protect civilians and rebuild the governments' security forces (Klobucista and Bussemaker, 2020).

Operation Serval seemed to be a success as Malian political and governance were re-established in the northern towns (Davis, 2018), however the conflict ended up escalating

[1] Past Tuareg rebellions happened in 1963, 1991 and 2006

and becoming more complex as multiple armed groups such as AQIM and ISGS, ethnic militias and criminal gangs that were operating within and beyond Mali's borders, started launching attacks against UN peacekeepers, French forces as well as civilians (Lebovich, 2019). The fear of Mali falling into a failed state controlled by Islamic extremists led to its perception as a threat to international peace and security (Francis, 2013, p. 9). Can Mali be considered a failed state? To the northern population the state was unable to provide basic services, so it failed in the sense that it was incapable of playing his role. The overall feelings were of injustice, marginalisation and exclusion (Goldwyn et al., 2019, p. 2) which make room for other groups to emerge and act as alternatives to the state (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 278). Sahel states failed in their duties as providers of basic services to the population which led to the creation of ungoverned spaces which are perfect for training and rise of religious extremism (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 279).

Serval was strongly supported by local populations who viewed French participation in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel very positively (Godó, 2021, p. 66). In 2014, Barkhane, a counterterrorist operation which also included regional security governance cooperation, replaced Serval. This operation covered several countries in the Sahel (Charbonneau, 2017, p. 415) and its authorisation was based on the idea that the global war on terror was required to reinstate the state of Mali.

Right from the beginning, the government demanded an UN peace enforcement mission to recapture the northern territory and combat the terrorists without acknowledging the difference between jihadist and Tuareg rebels (Charbonneau, 2017, p. 421). What was the real role of the UN in this country? Impose, facilitate, keep or build peace? What was its mandate? The mandate aimed to stabilise Mali by all means including the use of force (Karlsrud, 2019a, p. 40). Under chapter 7, this mission didn't require consent from all the parties and could include strategic use of military force. As a stabilisation mission, MINUSMA was created to seek to legitimise the government which shows no neutrality (Marín, 2017, p. 11). MINUSMA was given the role to stabilise the country while working in parallel with an ongoing counterterrorism operation which puts MINUSMA in a "terrorist-fighting situation without an anti-terrorist mandate or adequate training, equipment, logistics or intelligence to deal with such situation" (Karlsrud, 2019b, p. 158).

It is important to emphasise that neither of these operations represented traditional peacekeeping operations as Barkhane was responsible for managing violence and creating

the political space for MINUSMA to support conflict resolution efforts (Charbonneau, 2017, p. 426). In fact, Barkhane was subordinate and complementary to MINUSMA (Godó, 2021, p. 67). In other words, in this instance, UN mandates had authorised the use of force against groups denominated terrorists which created a dangerous precedent as this goes beyond the normal understanding of peace operations and UN accountability (Reeve and Pelter, 2014).

5.3. Impact in the region

The strategic profile of the Sahel region has changed significantly due to the civil war in Libya, the destabilisation of Mali and the French-led intervention in the country (Cristiani, 2014, p. 3). Mali was not the only country affected by the events in Libya, in fact, Mauritania, Niger and even Chad also faced the consequences and surprising developments of the crisis (Aynaou, 2015, p. 4). How did it impact the region? The French intervention led to the dispersion of militant groups throughout the region which disrupted the flow of drugs, weapons and migrant trafficking, causing the dismantling of networks and forcing traffickers to look for new routes. Thus, neighbouring countries such as Niger have become a battleground and transit point for criminals and regional jihadists, aggravating the already unstable situation of the country (Cristiani, 2014, p. 4). Where is the hotspot in the region? Liptako-Gourma triangle, the border region between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has been the epicentre of conflict and violent extremist due to the vacuum created by the withdrawal of national troops from the region which was filled by militias (Nyadera and Massaoud, 2019, p. 277).

Meanwhile, what were the governmental approaches to these problems? Government officials have been ignoring international pressure by humanitarian organisations to address the underlying causes of the crisis and occasionally ignore abuses from ethnic militias and security services which enable the expansion of extremist operations and the recruitment of new combatants (Devermont, 2019, p. 2). The governments of Burkina Faso and Niger, opposite to Mali, have been pressured by domestic political opposition and civil society to deal with the security crisis in the country/region. In this sense, these leaders have shown more urgency in addressing the extremist threat (Devermont, 2019, p. 3), however, the distrust of the population has led to the proliferation of self-defence

groups in areas threatened by extremist groups (Dieng, 2021, p. 765). Due to violence, leaders of the Western African countries made national security their primary foreign policy goal ignoring socioeconomic development, human right reforms and democratisation (Schumacher and Schraeder, 2019, p. 698). Also, as border control units focus on jihadist groups threats, illegal activities such as human, arms and drug trafficking have been left aside (Godó, 2021, p. 57).

What is missing in the global response? External actors have been focusing only on terrorism, when domestic politics is also something to deal with too (Devermont, 2019, p. 1). Operations such as Barkhane are not the solution as it is necessary more than a military response to solve the ongoing crisis (Godó, 2021, p. 54). According to Klein and Oporia-Ekwaro, external interventions are usually connected to self-interest (2002, p. 212). But what is the real interest of France in the region?

France plays an active role in the fight against terrorism by working with the G5 Sahel countries in Operation Barkhane, Takuba Task Force and the G5SJF. France also has a role in the capacity-building of local armed forces by being part of the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel coalition and by establishing state relation with the assistance of the EU – peacekeeping mission of the UN, the MINUSMA, and the two ongoing civilian capacity-building missions initiated by the EU: EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Niger (Godó, 2021, p. 65). France played an important role in the establishment of all operations, meaning MINUSMA led by the UN, EU Training Mission and EUCAP Sahel Mali, Barkhane led by France itself and G5 Sahel Force. France also contributed with manpower to the UN, EU and G5 Sahel operations (Tardy, 2020, p. 548).

Sub-Saharan Africa is French primary zone of intervention as a result of French colonial ties and interests in the area (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019, p. 902). More than historical reasons, political and economic motives were also in mind when France initiated Operation Serval. Being Niger a big energy supplier in the form of uranium, the escalation of the Malian conflict was in no interest to France as it could jeopardise the access to this significant resource (Ritter, 2014, p. 107).

What about the US? This region is perceived as geopolitically vulnerable because of its low population density and porous borders which led the US to see it as the new front for the global war on terror. Thus, the Sahel interests cover security and economic concerns for the US (Cristiani, 2014, p. 9).

The French military's presence in the Sahel is viewed as vital in the global fight against terrorism. Together with the US, France has emerged as a key actor in Sub-Saharan Africa's counterterrorism and security matters (Godó, 2021, p. 61).

5.4. Humanitarian situation in the Sahel

Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa use the region of the Sahel as a transit point to northern littoral countries and to Europe. The extreme violence in the region is increasing the displacement and migration's rate which is putting northern countries and Europe under huge pressure (CFR, 2023).

As an active conflict zone, the Sahel was and still is in an unstable security situation. Recent data from ECHO shows that there are around 25 million people in need of assistance in the region – limited to the purpose of this thesis to Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad (2023). The Sahel is facing a fast-growing crisis with unprecedented levels of armed violence and insecurity. Displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, food insecurity, no access to basic services (with most of the facilities closed as a result of insecurity), human rights abuses, sexual violence and child recruitment marks the humanitarian situation in the region. Sahelian countries are in desperate need of international assistance as they are too poor and weak to deal with this on their own (Bøås, 2019, p.13).

More than due to conflict and chronic violence, the Sahel humanitarian crisis was caused by a combination of "weak statehood and stalled development" which led to displacement and mass migration (Bøås, 2019, p.7). Moreover, land rights are also known as a driver of the conflicts in the region as population growth and climate change (droughts and floods) have been reducing the availability of land for agriculture which created great competition for land and disrupted economic and trade activities (Bøås, 2019, p.15). To deal with this explosive mix of challenges, numerous humanitarian organisations have been requiring access to the region. However, both governmental and international humanitarian organisations have been the subject of attacks which make it impossible to run operations in the region and makes MINUSMA the most dangerous mission worldwide (Ferraro, 2021, p. 871).

The numbers of refugees and internally displaced people are creating regional security threat and escalating the need for humanitarian aid (Francis, 2013, p. 10) that can't be fulfil due to the withdrawal of NGOs working in the area as a result of worsening security situation (Marín, 2017, p. 7).

6. Discussion

6.1. Sahelian states as failed states

As mentioned before, the connection between the Arab Spring and the rise of terrorism in the Sahel is evident as the end of the authoritarian regime in Libya led to the spread of terrorist groups into the Sahel region. How did that happen?

To understand the spread of terrorists' groups in the Sahel, it is important to come back to the concepts of failed states and ungoverned spaces. Sahelian states are conceived by many as weak or unable to rule properly as they are incapable of providing basic services for their citizens (Charbonneau, 2022, p. 100). According to the fragile state index, which measure fragility in terms of risk and vulnerability, out of 179 countries, where the first one is the one considered the biggest failure, Mali is ranked in 14th place, Niger in 20th, Chad in 9th, Burkina Faso in 29th and Mauritania in 36th (2022). As mentioned by Bøås, all Sahelian states suffer from "varying degrees of fragility and weak state capacity" which make them incapable of respond properly to livelihood challenges and turned most of the region into an ungoverned space, a target to transnational terrorism (2019, pp. 6-8).

The concept of ungoverned spaces links "poorly governed areas" with "violence, terrorism and the intensification of local conflicts" (Charbonneau, 2022, p. 100). But one can say that the use of this concept oversimplifies the connection between failed states and global threats such as terrorism. In fact, 9/11 led to a demand for counterterrorism actions, actions justified by the view of terrorism as a transnational threat (Charbonneau, 2022, p. 98). As mentioned in the first section of this thesis, even though there is no universal definition of terrorism, this phenomenon is generally understood as "the evil that needs to be eradicated" (Herchinger, 2013, p. 190) which justifies any action against the so-called terrorist groups. In recent decades, a growing number of experts connected the rise of terrorism in the Sahel to weak governance (CFR, 2023) which implies that weak or failed states are safe havens for the proliferation of terrorism.

6.2. Western interest in the Sahel

Why did the West suddenly focus on the Sahel region? The Sahel was a quite stable region before the uprisings but in the aftermath of the Arab Spring terrorist groups have filled the vacuum in many Sahel regions and used the deep resentment of the populations towards central governments, challenging the political structures of the region (Touré, 2021, p. 4) and because the West, in turn, sees failed states as a threat to international peace and security, the region became the new front of the war on terror. The international community is afraid of the "two most powerful franchises of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State worldwide" which operate in the Sahel (Berlingozzi and Baldaro, 2021).

The oversimplified connection between failed states, ungoverned spaces and terrorism gives the impression that failed states automatically produce terrorism, as areas with no control by the government – no man's land – are more susceptible to violence (Bøås, 2019, p. 8). Considering that Mali and other Sahelian countries are indeed weak states and that most of the Sahara Desert region is not really governed by their designated governments, terrorist groups take advantage of the situation and take over control. Thus, are ungoverned spaces the reason for the rise of terrorism in the Sahel? To a certain extent this might be the case, however, the real question is: are ungoverned spaces the reason why the landscape of peace and counterterrorism operations changed in the Sahel? And what to do with the allegedly ungoverned spaces in the global south?

After 9/11, the perception of failed states as a direct threat to the global West led this to be the main subject in the international policy agenda. Mainly due to the view of the equation of failed states as "breeding grounds or safe havens" for international terrorism, even though the empirical evidence is completely limited (Stepputat, Andersen and Møller, 2007, p. 15). In this sense, all the international attention to previously forgotten states is centred not in the local conflicts dynamics but framed by the global war on terror (Andersen, 2007, p. 23).

6.3. The role of the UN

As mentioned previously, it is not in the character of the UN to implement peace enforcement or counterterrorism operations, neither to be associated with those kinds of actions, however counterterrorism turns out to be part of peacekeepers' role in Mali, which put away its position of impartiality (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1285). What led to this change of role? Why is it notable the presence of counterterrorism elements within MINUSMA? Mainly because stabilisation can be turned in counterterrorism when the threat is terrorism (Charbonneau, 2021, p. 1814) and because some believe that the stabilisation of the countries can only be achieved by counterterrorism measures, inserted in the global war on terror (Charbonneau, 2017, p. 427).

Operations have been changing, now they focus on the protection of civilians, they are becoming more robust and starting to implement stabilisation as the goal of the mission (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1283). The new wave of terrorism led to a new wave of peacekeeping operations which included stabilisation and a degree of counterterrorism (Fabra, 2022, p. 24). Peacekeepers are now working in places with active conflict and where basically there is "no peace to keep" (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1281). It seems that MINUSMA already crossed the line into counterterrorism mode (Fabra, 2022, p. 24) which is increasing the militarisation of peace operations (Fabra, 2022, p. 39), even though UN is not able to take this role and it is definitely not part of its character. As mentioned previously, MINUSMA is in the fight against terrorism even without an anti-terrorism mandate (Karlsrud, 2019b, p. 158) which creates a dangerous precedent as the UN is starting to be seen as not impartial. Moreover, the "alliance" with counterterrorism operations such as Operation Barkhane emphasises even more the connection of the UN with this kind of operations.

The current international interest in failed states and ungoverned spaces reflects, in theory, a combination of humanitarian, development and security matters (Andersen, 2007, p. 27). However, the main focus is and will always be the securitization of the region (Stepputat, Andersen and Møller, 2007, p. 13). The security intervention in the Sahel has been justified by the rise of transnational terrorism in the so-called ungoverned lands. Even though the international approach was under the security-development nexus, the focus on security was way more visible through the militarization and securitization of the region (Berlingozzi and Baldaro, 2021). The securitization is part of the so-called

global war on terror which focuses on stopping migration and fighting insurgencies instead of approaching the underlying causes of the conflict which could lead to the end of the spread of terrorism groups (Bøås, 2019, p. 45). All in all, NATO's intervention in Libya, together with Sahel operations are part of a bigger counterterrorism effort called "war on terror" (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019, p. 904).

In this sense, Mali turned out to be the new epicentre of the fight against terrorism, but why? One can say that it is due to the proximity of the region to Europe and the West and the fear of the expansion of terrorism across continents. But the question maintains: How has the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring altered the landscape of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region?

6.4. 9/11 as the beginning and not Arab Spring

Would the Western approach to the Sahel have been different if the 9/11 attacks had not happened? The only thing that we can say for sure is that the connection between failed states, ungoverned spaces and terrorism only began to be made in earnest after that moment. This wave of terrorism generated a new trend of peace and counterterrorism operations as Western countries were terrified about ungoverned spaces turning into a safe haven for terrorist groups that would attack the West in the future. In this sense, the nexus security-development has been used as an illustrative rhetoric as the collaboration between counterterrorism and development sectors is very limited. As we can see from the study case of the Sahel and more specifically in Mali, the international interventions focus only on the fight against terrorism and stabilisation of a country without taking into consideration the real issues.

As pointed out by Edgerly, terrorism is not the main root of violence in the region, but the crisis of the Westphalian state is. Thus, terrorism is only a symptom of a larger issue which is the failure of state consolidation. Therefore, the solutions implemented by the international community largely failed because those were not addressing the real problem (2023). However, as seen throughout this thesis, the West, in recent decades, has placed so much emphasis on combating terrorism that it has virtually ignored many of the real underpinning reasons which underpin the emergence of terrorism.

Furthermore, G5 countries are the heart of the Sahel as they are located in a strategic area with very rich subsoils in gas, gold, oil and uranium and the most threatened by the jihadists (Touré, 2021, pp. 1-2) which can also justify the interest of the West, especially the interest of France in trying to stabilise the region and controlling terrorism.

6.5.Future of operations in the Sahel

As the number of extremist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger is increasing, the situation in the Sahel has gotten worse which has implications for regional security, migration, criminality and corruption (Devermont, 2019, p. 1).

In the Sahel, French operations has been successful in neutralising main elements from AQIM and ISGS, but the overall mission didn't make a huge difference as the weak states have been undermining the operations, so a military response is not the answer to the eradication of Jihadism (Godó, 2021, p. 75). Moreover, France proved not be able to stop the "deterioration of the regional security situation" as the number of deaths caused by the conflict and the geographical reach of jihadist groups is way higher than in the beginning of the conflict (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 895).

In 2021, France acknowledged the "relative ineffectiveness of the intervention as well as its fragile local legitimacy". Besides that, the operation was a financial burden for the French citizens who were not convinced that terrorism in the Sahel can be a threat to France (Tull, 2021, pp. 2-3). Also, due to French operations the number of casualties increased and because of their partnerships with France, "the national armies of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are now known for being more deadly than jihadist armed groups" (Charbonneau, 2021, p. 1820) as more civilians were killed during their counterterrorism operations than by terrorist groups themselves which led to anti-French protests and to the withdrawal of French troops from Mali (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 900).

What happened after the French withdrawal from Mali? The vacuum led by the French resulted in a more freedom of movement by the terrorist groups which exposed Malian troops, EUTM, MINUSMA and civilian organisations to a significant risk of attacks (Tull, 2021, p. 4) as neither the UN peacekeepers nor the Malian state can supply the security umbrella that the French military could (Charbonneau, 2022, p. 98).

In fact, this thesis argues that the security situation was never stable which led to unparalleled violence in Mali and in the neighbouring region, translated in the two military coup d'état which happened in August 2020 and in May 2021, embarrassing international actors working for the stabilisation in Mali (Charbonneau, 2022, p. 98). This wave of military coups is putting into question the security strategies and the entire intervention system that happened in the region during the past ten years (D'Amato and Baldaro, 2022). The international community is also putting into question the use of Mali as an experiment for new types of operations, questioning if the military and security approach was the most favourable for the situation with which Sahelian countries were dealing with (D'Amato and Baldaro, 2022).

However, France's withdrawal from Mali doesn't represent the end of Operation Barkhane as they transferred the base to the neighbour Niger. To be fair, after the failure in Mali, a radical change in strategy is needed if the operation wants to do better (Rojas, 2022). What went wrong? International intervention deepened the multidimensional crisis in the region as it legitimised the claims of terrorists' groups as fighters against the invaders as well as reinforces the dysfunctional governmental system built by local regimes (Berlingozzi and Baldaro, 2021).

What can be expected? A likely future scenario would be a coalition between the Sahelian national armies, AU or G5SSF with the EU-led Takuba Task Force which would lead to a new regional security framework (Charbonneau, 2021, p. 1819). Moreover, as seen by the recent coups, counterterrorism measures are not the solution for the issue of power consolidation, thus, more localised solutions are in need such as national level truth commission or state centric approaches (Edgerly, 2023).

As discussed throughout this section, the rise of terrorism in the Sahel in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is the result of the free movement of arms and fighters from Libya and of the ungoverned spaces in the region created due to the lack of capability of national governments to rule over their own territory leading to terrorist groups to take over. The geopolitical situation of the region completely changed, the vulnerability of the states, considered failed states by the West due to the lack of capability to provide for their citizens and control their borders, led the West to consider the only solution to be to deal with it under the global war on terror approach (Ronen, 2013; Ritter, 2014; Charbonneau, 2022).

The connection between failed states, ungoverned spaces and terrorism started after 9/11 as this new wave of terrorism led to the view of ungoverned spaces as safe havens which justified the new trend of peace and counterterrorism operations. The perception of failed states as safe havens for the proliferation of terrorist groups and terrorism as a transnational threat led to the change of approach from the West towards this region. Even though the interventions were under the development-security nexus, the focus on the securitization by military means was more than clear (Stepputat, Andersen and Møller, 2007; Bøås, 2019; Berlingozzi and Baldaro, 2021; Fabra, 2022).

Linked by colonial ties, France's interests go beyond the securitization of the region when compared with the interests of other Western countries. France wants to maintain the region stable to be able to get access to this strategic location with multiple natural resources (Cristiani, 2014; Ritter, 2014; Pannier and Schmitt, 2019; Touré, 2021). Even the UN used Mali as a laboratory test by including stabilisation as a third role and working side by side with counterterrorism operations. This change of character created a dangerous precedent as the inclusion of militarization in peacekeeping operation cross the line of impartiality and that is why peacekeepers are being under attack, because they are no longer seen as impartial (Reeve and Pelter, 2014; Bellamy and Hunt, 2015; Marín, 2017; Karlsrud 2019b).

Ungoverned spaces as safe havens oversimplify the understanding of the conflict dynamics in the region. The West is too worried about the expansion of terrorism to focus on the main issue: state consolidation. Justified by the rise of terrorism in the so-called ungoverned spaces, the external interventions have been part of a bigger counterterrorism approach: the war on terror, being Mali the new epicentre (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019; Edgerly, 2023).

In this sense, it was the perception of terrorism that led to the change of operations in the region as the main priority of the West became the fight against terrorism. This security-centric approach put aside internal conflict dynamics such as political instability due to the crisis of the Westphalian state and other underlying causes, namely climate change and food insecurity (Charbonneau, 2017; Bøås, 2019; Edgerly, 2023).

10 years later, the security situation in the Sahel is even worse than it was after the Arab Spring. The recurrent coups d'état is showing the ineffectiveness of the intervention as well as its illegitimacy. However, the French withdrawal from Mali created a vacuum

which exposed other operations to a significant risk of attacks as neither the UN nor the national government had the security resources as the French military (Tull, 2021; Charbonneau, 2022).

The future of operations in the Sahel is uncertain but a change in strategy is definitely needed. One can say that the best option would be to go towards a different approach and try to solve the issue of power consolidation instead of focusing on counterterrorism measures. To this sense, localised solutions and the creation of a new security framework can be the answer (Charbonneau, 2021; Rojas, 2022; Edgerly, 2023).

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the evolution of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region of the Sahel after the Arab Spring. The main question of this thesis was: How has the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring altered the landscape of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region? Followed by the sub-questions: What are the interests of France and other Western countries in the region? What is the future of peace and counterterrorism operations in the region?

The perception of terrorism as a threat to international peace and security after 9/11 and the transformation of the geopolitical scenario of the Sahel after the Arab Spring led to a different approach by the West towards this region. They started looking at the Sahelian countries as failed states where most of the areas were ungoverned spaces which made this region a paradise on earth for terrorist groups.

The introduction of a third role in the UN mission in Mali and the alliance with operation Barkhane shows in fact that all actions, all operations led by the West were under the umbrella of the global war on terror. Even though France also had economic interests and colonial ties to the region, and that is the reason why France intervened in the first place, it is evident that the rise of terrorism was the turning point for the creation of a counterterrorism operation and for the focus of the West in the region. Thus, this thesis claims that the main change in peace and counterterrorism operations happened due to the perception of terrorism as a transnational threat and of the Sahel region as a safe haven for the proliferation of terrorism.

Moreover, this thesis can also be seen as a critique of the West in the sense that their interventions/ actions often appear to have their own interests in mind more than the interests of the local communities. It is clear that the rise of terrorism was destabilising the Sahel region but was not the main disruption. Rather, the thesis argues, internal conflict dynamics due to political instability, weak institutions, climate change and food insecurity were the real underlying causes of the conflict which ended up not being addressed.

The recent Malian coups d'état translate the failure of stabilisation of the security situation in the region by the international community which led to the withdrawal of French troops. These events have put into question the whole scenario of interventions and the main focus on terrorism which will probably lead to the creation of a new regional security framework, more localised and more focus on the internal causes of conflict and not only on counterterrorism measures.

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