The Sahel: Challenges and opportunities Published online by Cambridge University Press: 13 May 2022 Adama Dieng Article Metrics Save PDF Share Cite Rights & Permissions [Opens in a new window] Abstract An abstract is not available for this content.Coupled with weak institutions that have not been able to protect them from armed groups and "terrorist" groups, gross human rights violations by national,Footnote31 regional, foreign and international armed forces will make Sahelians less likely to support counterterrorism operations. Effects of regional violence on the civilian population In addition to the usual consequences of armed conflicts that disrupt the lives of civilians, Sahelians have also faced harsher effects, with civilians becoming direct targets of attacks by various parties to the different armed conflicts taking place in the region. Various reports have shown that armed groups, community self-defence groups and security forces have directly targeted civilians.Footnote32 In the first six months of 2020 alone, in the Central Sahel region which includes Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, there were over 4660 casualties due to armed conflicts and violence.Footnote33 Between February 2021 and February 2022, nearly 2000 civilians were killed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.Footnote34 These attacks were based on ethnic and religious identity and perceived support to community defence groups. In addition to direct targeting of civilians, civilian objects such as farms, crops and food reserves have been destroyed, adding to the already existing food instability in the region.Footnote35 Decades-long armed conflicts in the Sahel have also limited the accessibility of essential services and humanitarian assistance to the victims and those most vulnerable. The International Committee of the Red Cross has estimated that around 1.5 million Sahelians live in areas that are "virtually impossible to access humanitarian aid and essential services".Footnote36 Protracted armed conflicts in the Sahel also lead to prolonged disruption of education due to the lack of access.There have also been clashes between armed groups and other groups designated as "terrorist" groups in the region. These conflicts were marred with international involvement of the French forces, the US military and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). By the end of 2021, there were over 350,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 50,000 Malian refugees.Footnote8 Niger, with shared borders with both Burkina Faso and Mali, has faced the catastrophic consequences of armed clashes among State forces, armed groups and extremist groups over the last decade. Armed violence within the country and the spillover effects from the conflicts in neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali on one side and Libya on the other side have contributed to the instability and increasing security concerns in Niger. In the first half of 2021 alone, over 540 conflict-related civilian casualties were reported in Niger.Footnote9 The armed conflict has had a devastating impact on children in Niger: of the 3.8 million people in need of humanitarian aid in Niger, 2.1 million are children and 1.6 million children suffer from malnutrition.Footnote10 More than eighty children between the ages of 15 and 17 years living in towns on the Niger-Burkina Faso border have reportedly been recruited as child soldiers.Footnote11 Over sixty children were killed in conflict-related violence in Niger in 2021 alone.Footnote12 Chad has also witnessed its fair share of violence and intercommunal tensions. The situation in this Sahelian country involves a complex, but devastating, political history. Armed conflicts and situations of violence due to politics, elections in particular, and land use between indigenous and non-indigenous people because of resettlement have been recorded in the past few decades.Footnote13 In the Lac Province of Chad,

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which is in the Lake Chad Basin, the insecurity due to armed conflicts has had catastrophic humanitarian consequences. In 2021 alone, over 60% of the population of the province (more than 406,500 people) were internally displaced due to prevailing armed conflicts in the province.Footnote14 In the same year over 1.8 million Chadians were affected by severe food insecurity. In addition, the spillover conflicts from other non-Sahelian neighbouring countries such as Libya and Central Africa Republic, and "terrorist" groups in other parts of the Sahel have also led to civilian casualties and displacement.Footnote15 Chad has been at the centre of violent operations of extremist groups, causing hundreds of civilian causalities, including in the capital N'djamena.Additionally, communal violence is prevalent in Burkina Faso, "which threaten[s] to destroy all hope of cohabitation between the communities".Footnote5 Moreover, the weak presence of State institutions outside the capital of Ouagadougou and the distrust the population has in them has led to the proliferation of many self-defence groups in areas threatened by extremist armed groups and other criminal groups. These groups have themselves been parties to several deadly ethnic or communal conflicts. Although considered legitimate at their formation, many have questioned their activities in respect of which it has been argued they violate the human rightsFootnote6 of the people in the region. Neighbouring Mali has been in a continuous armed conflict since 2012. With various peace agreements between the parties to the armed conflict failing to reach a decisive end to the conflict, it is estimated from May 2020 to June 2021, over 2000 people have been killed in the ongoing armed clashes in Mali.Footnote7 The underlying causes of the conflict go back decades and are highly intricate. The lack of trust among various ethnic groups, horizontal inequalities among the people, and environmental concerns, added to the concentration of power in the hands of the few, are among the issues that have been festering for decades and continue to play out until this day. The post-colonial Mali of the 1960s saw rebellions and uprisings from the ethnic groups in the North against the government in Bamako. Economic disparities and other inequalities in the North have led to Northerners distrusting the Central government and supporting the communal defence groups and armed groups in their regions. This led to what has been known as the "Tuareg Rebellions" with stiff resistance from the government.Terrorism The instability in the Sahel region has helped to pave the way for the emergence of some "terrorist" groups in the region. In their efforts to coerce the Sahelian people and government decision-makers for ransom or political concessions, these groups have employed various terrorist activities, including launching deadly attacks against civilians and military targets alike, attacking public and private property, kidnapping individuals, and more.Footnote18 Weak State institutions around the inter-State borders have enabled such groups to flourish in the peripheries and border towns, targeting people in multiple countries at once. Such groups also take advantage of the low security along the borders between the Sahelian States, freely moving between neighbouring countries. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger saw over 4000 casualties of terrorist attacks in 2019;Footnote19 these attacks led, in turn, to the displacement of over half a million people.Footnote20 The growing presence of "terrorist" groups in the Sahel has also intensified organized crime and criminal networks that have served as routes for lucrative criminal activities such as drugs, arms trade, human trafficking and the kidnapping of persons for ransom.In the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 had become an additional complicating factor, which had restricted humanitarian access in the region while armed conflict and violence have increased.Footnote3

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Armed conflict in the Sahel Ongoing clashes between armed forces and armed groups in the Sahel have forced millions of civilians to flee their homes in various countries within the Sahel region.Footnote4 Many of those who flee are farmers who can no longer till their land, thereby exacerbating an already existing food instability.The ongoing hostilities and food insecurity, fuelled by both armed conflicts and climate change, have also led to displacement and large-scale migration of Sahelians both within the .borders of the States and throughout the region as a whole

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