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Recalibrating International Peace and Security Efforts in the Sahel

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Foreword

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WILLIAM C. FREEMAN
Brigadier General, USAF
Commandant, Air War College

Biography

Group Captain Mohammed Bello Umar is a Nigerian Air Force attack helicopter pilot assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Group Captain Umar was commissioned to the rank of Pilot Officer after his officer cadet training at the Nigerian Defense Academy, Kaduna, in 2002. Group Captain Umar has attended several flying courses and is an instructor pilot. He had participated in several internal security operations across Nigeria and engaged in regional counterterrorism operations under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram. He has served at the Wing, Group, and Headquarters levels of the Nigerian Armed Forces. He holds a bachelor's degree in Electrical Electronics Engineering and a master's degree in Military Studies. Group Captain Umar had also commanded several units in the past, and prior to his present assignment, he commanded the 405 Helicopter Combat Training Group, Enugu, Nigeria.

Abstract

In 2012, northern Mali seceded from the rest of the country under the leadership of Tuareg secessionist and Islamist groups. The conflict has since mutated from a secessionist rebellion to include violent extremism and ethnic violence spilling into the Central Sahelian states of Niger and Burkina Faso. International and regional efforts have failed to halt the growing insecurity and humanitarian crises across the Sahel region. International interventions risk causing further damage by focusing only on counterterrorism and poorly thought-out development initiatives that focus on states' collapse and contagion instead of addressing the more profound governance challenges. Even though security approaches will stabilize the Sahel in the short term, a coordinated strategy promoting human security, an expanded peace process that will reduce violence, and a political dialogue on a state role for Islam that contests sacred space with violent extremists will help stabilize the Central Sahel and stop it from devolving into further violence.

Introduction

The Sahel is a region in crisis because of many issues, ranging from violent extremism, communal tensions, weak institutions, and increasing population displacement. The crisis in this region is further exacerbated by climate change. The international community faces serious challenges in helping to stabilize the region because of these issues, and more.

In 2012, Malian Tuareg groups that previously served as private armies in Gaddafi's Libya returned to Mali, triggering a rebellion that led to a military overthrow of the Malian government at Bamako, the capital.[1] An international consensus to intervene arose when the Malian government could not halt the insurrection. At the request of the Malian state, France, assisted by the Chadian troops from the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), intervened under Operation Serval, recapturing areas under insurgent control.[2] French Operation Serval was rehatted to Operation Barkhane while AFISMA morphed into the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).[3] Although the international military intervention succeeded in ejecting the insurgents from significant towns and urban areas, its control never extended to the rural areas.[4]

The violence that began in Mali has since 2016 spread across the region, with the Sahel becoming a hub for transnational violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and conduits for drugs and human and weapon trafficking, further destabilizing the region. Countries in the region have seen varying degrees of regional and external intervention to help address the deteriorating security situation. However, despite the multitude of responses, security in the Sahel has worsened with armed violence spilling into the central region of Mali and neighboring countries like Burkina Faso and Niger.[5] This violence has led to the displacement of 2.7 million persons across the region, with at least 13.4 million in dire need of humanitarian assistance.[6]

The present rise in violence attributed to the expansion of VEOs, countermobilization of self-defense groups and ensuing intercommunal violence pushes Sahelian states to the brink of collapse. Three extremist groups account for most of these attacks, and these are the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), which is Al-Qaeda's associate in Mali, *Force de libération du Macina* (FLM) with ties to JNIM, and the Islamic Group for the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[7] International interventions risk causing further damage by focusing only on counterterrorism and poorly thought-out development initiatives that focus on states' collapse and contagion instead of addressing the more profound governance challenges. Accordingly, even though security approaches will stabilize the Sahel in the short term, to ensure sustainable stabilization of the region, this paper argues that a

coordinated strategy promoting human security, an expanded peace process to deescalate violence, and political dialog on a state role for Islam that delegitimizes Jihadist appeal will stabilize the Central Sahel.

This paper will offer a broad overview of the current conflict environment in the Sahel, paying attention to the region's intersecting and overlapping security issues. It will explore the role of regional and international actors and will interrogate how their participation and interest impacts stabilization in the Sahel. For example, the European Union is concerned with migration from the Sahel to Europe; the US is interested in fighting terrorist groups; France defends its overall strategic and economic interests in the region. The subsequent section will examine some challenges and gaps concerning the existing international framework. This section will explore how the lack of a strategic vision among actors, the militarization of stabilization, and the Sahelian states' fragile nature impact international efforts. Finally, suggestions on alternative policy responses that deemphasize military responses will be made for both regional and international actors.

The Sahel extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea and incorporates parts of Senegal, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Somalia. Considering the expanse of the Sahel, this paper will focus on the central Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania. Figure 1 shows the disposition of the VEOs in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, while Table 1 outlines the key actors in the conflict.
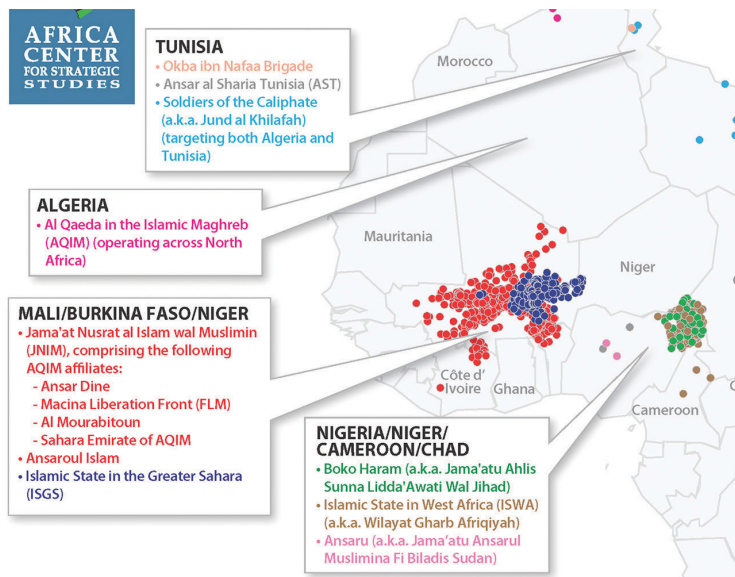
Figure 1. Map Showing VEOs in the Central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger)[8]

Figure 2: Key Nonstate and State Actors in the Sahel Conflict[9]

Overview of the Conflict Environment in the Sahel

For several years, countries in the Sahel have been dealing with continual political and humanitarian upheavals. Sahelian states lack a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and a functional social contract with their citizens. The inability of Sahelian states to deliver essential services such as security, education, and health care have resulted in a widening gap in state-society relations. Additionally, chronic political instability, evident in frequent unconstitutional government changes, adds to the instability in the region.[10] With violent extremism, ethnic separatists, communal militias, and criminal actors added to the Sahelian conflict ecosystem, the region's security crises have exceeded the capacity of Sahelian states to govern, exacerbating existing humanitarian and governance challenges.

Violent extremist groups in Western Sahel have not always targeted the state, but the 2011 collapse of Libya provided the political opportunity. Libya had hitherto provided economic aid and employed large numbers of the unemployed Sahelian populace in its oil industry and military.[11] The 2011 ouster of Muammar Gaddafi resulted in the proliferation of stockpiled weapons in the Sahel region. Marginalized Malian Tuareg groups bolstered with weaponry obtained from Gaddafi's armory went into coalition with prominent al-Qaeda affiliated groups present in the region to target the Malian state. These groups include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO). The rebel-Islamist insurgency rapidly conquered two-thirds of Mali's territory.[12] AQIM and its two affiliates, perceiving an opportunity, displaced the Tuareg-led *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) to assert control over most northern territories. The 2013 French-led intervention neutralized and dispersed the rebels from major urban centers. Subsequent political negotiations with disunited and disparate Tuareg rebel groups yielded the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord.[13] However, progress on implementation has been slow.

Starting in 2016, the primarily localized separatist rebellion in Northern Mali morphed and escalated into ethnic and extremist violence spilling over large swathes of the Sahel (Figure 3). The spread of these violent groups to the rural areas that lack a compelling state presence has increased school closures, created a climate of fear and an absence of essential services, and impacted humanitarian activities.[14] The present-day Sahelian security environment is thus characterized by the rise of a rural insurgency in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Despite decapitating French airstrikes against VEOs' leadership, the terrorists have expanded their areas of operation, increased recruitment, and conducted intricate attacks on local and UN military outposts, forcing the further retreat of the state.[15] In addition, the groups also target civilian officials, traditional leaders, and individuals accused of colluding with the state or any international actor like France.

Consequently, the vacuum left by the state has allowed violent extremist groups to appropriate existing grievances and ethnic cleavages to embed themselves. Most Sahelians rely on agriculture and livestock for a livelihood. However, climate change and demographic pressures have increased land and water rights competition between the cattle-rearing Peuls and agrarian communities, as shown in Figure 3. Customary mediation mechanisms handled these agropastoral disputes in the past; however, the failure of government legal systems perceived as remote and corrupt provided limited opportunities for dispute resolution.[16] Therefore, extremist groups manipulate existing resentment to recruit from the nomadic Peul by offering firepower, mediation,

and access to resources. The association between the Peul and the terrorists has resulted in the stigmatization of Peul civilians, making them targets of state repression and systemic retribution.[17]

2005		
Mali	1
Niger	9
Burkina Faso	0

2013		
Mali	243
Niger	17
Burkina Faso	12

2013		
Mali	243
Niger	17
Burkina Faso	12

2013		
Mali	1,039
Niger	423
Burkina Faso	668
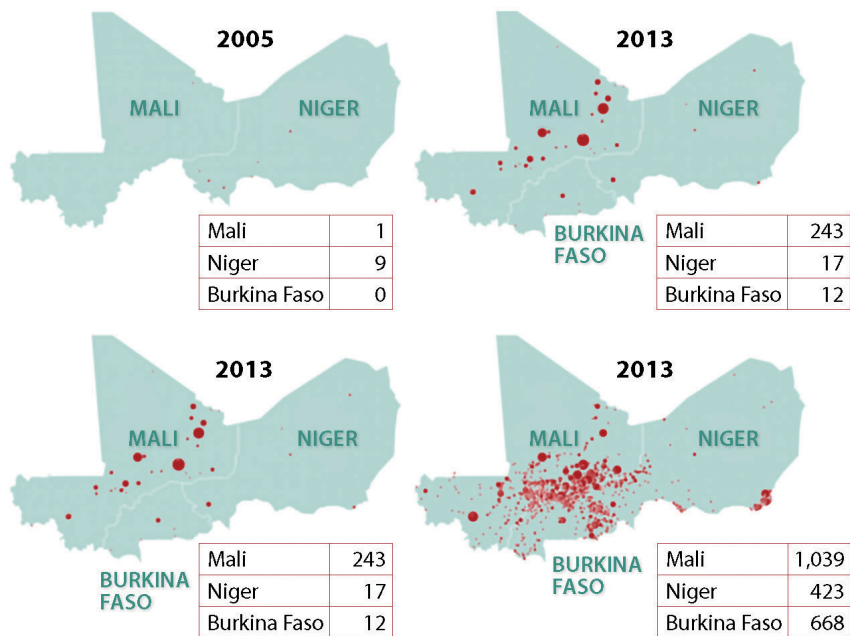
Figure 3. Violent Events in the Sahel 2005–2020[18]

To further delegitimize the state, extremist groups provide public services in areas under their control. These areas outside the control of the state lack order, and local communities strive to survive the violence and anarchy. Services provided by VEOs include justice through Sharia courts, citizen security, and administration in local markets. For instance, groups like the FLM protect stigmatized groups like the Peuls by facilitating seasonal migration of livestock through the coordination of transhumance routes and rights of passage in Central Mali.[19] The mix of targeted intimidation and provision of security and governance as they seek legitimacy has led communities to align with such groups. The partnership causes Sahelian security forces and their local proxies to disproportionately target such communities for their perceived association with terrorist groups, thus creating a dilemma of either collaborating with the state or facing retribution by local terrorist groups.[20]
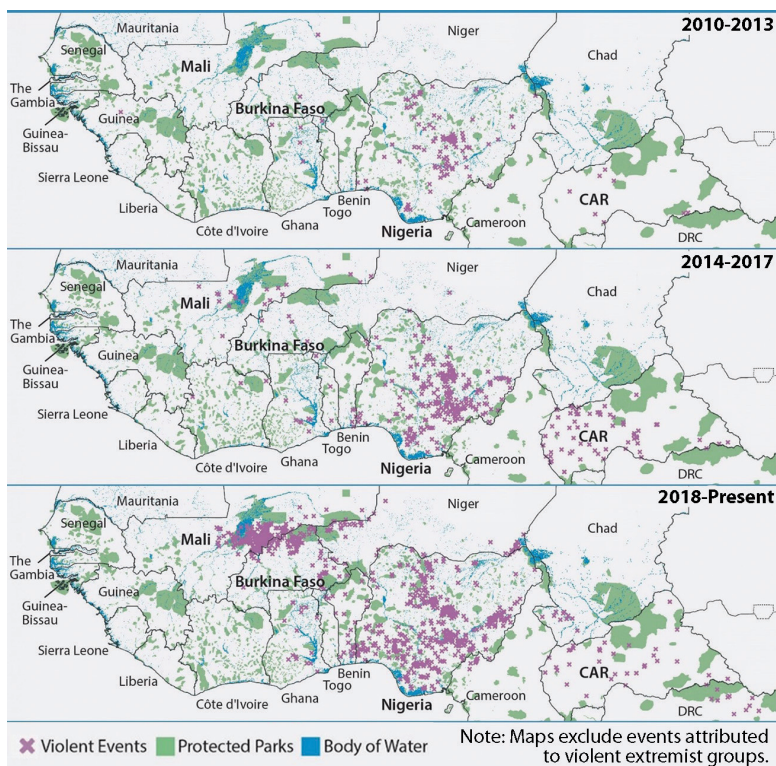
Figure 4. Farmer and Herder Clashes in Central and West Africa.[21]

This violent extremist groups' manipulation of these communal tensions has also given rise to self-proclaimed defense groups among the local agrarian ethnicities, like Dogon in Mali's Mopti region, Mossi and Gourmantché in Burkina Faso, and the Hausa in Niger.[22] These communities have taken security into their own hands because of the inability of their central governments to provide protection. The formation of these local self-defense groups has triggered a cycle of violent retaliation along ethnic lines. A case in point is the killing of 192 civilians in the Ogossogou Peul and Ogossogou Dogon villages in two major attacks in 2019 and 2020, respectively.[23] The enhanced capability for organized violence by extremist groups, self-defense militias, and the Peul has escalated intercommunal conflicts with killings and atrocities committed along ethnic lines.

State actors such as the military and other security forces have also been accused of heavy-handed responses. MINUSMA has reported allegations of severe human rights violations committed during operations in the Central Region by Malian defense forces.[24] In Burkina Faso, over seven hundred alleged militants are incarcerated without trial.[25] In addition, these operations

severely affect local economies because of restrictions on motorcycle travel, strict curfews, and closure of markets.[26] The human rights violations by state agents increase resentment, which feeds into existing violence. Therefore, discontent created by the state results in its rejection and poor reputation.

State security forces in the Sahel have also been known to employ local militias as proxies, arguing that they augment state capacity, understand the local terrain better, and respond quickly to emerging threats. For instance, in Burkina Faso, the Koglweogo and Dozo vigilantes are authorized to conduct security operations to make up for state capacity deficits in rural areas. However, it has been observed that most militias kill without authority which tends to escalate communal tensions. Moreover, they hide under the guise of counterterrorism to settle scores as the security forces themselves are often unable to distinguish between civilians.[27] The extensive use of poorly supervised state militias to combat insurgency has helped feed the violence and intercommunal tensions.

Another side effect of increased violence in the Sahel is de-democratization. The incessant violence has increased citizens' frustration with their governments and weakened their support for international intervention. The resentment against the state and other actors is being tapped into by Sahelian defense forces resulting in coups and democratic reversals, with the latest one in Burkina Faso.[28] However, such military coups obscure existing socioeconomic conditions, which are the deep drivers of insecurity in the Sahel. The long-term implication of these takeovers is thus increased state repression and human rights abuses, especially against stigmatized groups like the Peul and Tuareg in an ever-worsening conflict.

Current Regional and International Framework in the Sahel

The Sahel security complex is characterized by multilateral actors such as the UN, EU, the Joint Force of the Group of Five (G5 Sahel), and bilateral partners such as the US and France, all providing different levels of intervention (Table 2).[29] The interest of the US is to combat terrorism in support of international security. On the other hand, the EU and France's Counterterrorism Operation Barkhane is primarily motivated by concerns about irregular migration and terrorism, which have immediate consequences for European states.[30] Therefore, while France, the US, and the G5 Sahel focus on military stabilization, the EU focuses on capacity building.

European Union Aid

The EU initiatives in the region include the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali in 2013 and the EU Capacity Building Missions in the Sahel (EUCAP) in Mali

(from 2015) and Niger (from 2012). The EUTM provides training and capacity building to the Malian Security and Defense Forces. On the other hand, EUCAP provides training and advice to internal security forces like the gendarmerie, *Garde National* and police in Mali. An EU Trust Fund was also established in 2015 to address causes of destabilization, forced displacement, and irregular migration.[31]

EU interventions are criticized for focusing on security and border management; the EU has prioritized capacity building to combat terrorism with little interest in professionalizing the Sahelian security architecture. The short term focus and low-risk approaches to Security Sector Reform (SSR) result in conflict between the proposed objectives and the population's needs.[32] A side effect is the rise of human rights violations and impunity. Consequently, without fleshing out the political components of the SSR, such as enhancing discipline, supervision, and reinforcing military judicial systems, capacity building by these agencies will yield no meaningful reform.

Table 1. Major Regional and International Interventions in the Sahel[33]

	Personnel	Start Date	Mandate	Main Tasks	Founding Countries
MINUSMA	15,610	2013–	UN (Ch. VII)	Stabilization and transitions	UN
G5 Sahel	5,000	2017–	UN/AU-endorsed	Coordination of security response	Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Mauritana, Chad
Barkhane (formerly Serval)	5,100	2014–	UN-endorsed	Anti-insurgent operation	France
EUTM Mali	745	2013–	EU	Military training	EU
EUCAP Mali	140	2015–	EU	Military capacity building	EU
EUCAP Niger	200	2012–	EU	Civilian capacity building	EU
Alliance for the Sahel	500	2017–	EU	Coordination of development assistance	Germany, France, EU, African Dev. Bank, World Bank, UNDP
Takuba	n/a	2020/21–	G5 Sahel, Mali	Special forces operations	Mali, Niger, EU
Int'l Coalition for the Sahel	n/a	2020–	EU (Pau)	Coordination of response	G5 Sahel, France, UN, EU, AU, OIF*
P3S**	n/a	2019–	France, Germany	Identify security needs	France, Germany

MINUSMA, though positively perceived in Northern Mali, is considered absent and irrelevant in other parts of the country. MINUSMA's primary task is to support the implementation of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. The mission's second priority is "to facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive politically led Malian strategy to protect civilians,

reduce communal violence, and re-establish state authority, state presence, and basic social services in Central Mali."[34] MINUSMA's mandated tasks support the Malian government, which hinders a people-centric approach as the agenda is set by the Malian state and not the ordinary citizen.

The mission is also considered one of the most dangerous UN peacekeeping operations, with 268 deaths caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).[35] MINUSMA's reaction to these threats has led to bunkerization in "super camps" and apportioning substantial resources to convoy protection. The insecure environment had made physically connecting with communities hazardous, consequently creating community outreach gaps. In addition to these gaps, one-third of the region in Central Mali is unreachable for six to seven months each year due to floods. The persistent insecurity and constraints on mobility limit MINUSMA's ability to engage with communities effectively.[36]

MINUSMA's credibility is also adversely impacted by its partnership with the Malian government's national and international counterterrorism efforts. The mission provides operational and logistics support for the Malian defense forces, G5 Sahel, and the French Operation Barkhane, which it colocates with in some areas. The legitimacy and credibility of MINUSMA are dependent on its ability to maintain the momentum of the political process while stabilizing the security situation. MINUSMA's legitimacy and credibility rest on its ability to stabilize the security situation and preserve the momentum of the political process.[37] The mandate of MINUSMA is therefore endangered as it becomes increasingly intertwined with national and international counterterrorism efforts.

French Counterterrorism Efforts

A prominent actor in the Sahel is the French, who conduct kinetic or counterterrorism operations beyond the remit or capabilities of MINUSMA. Operations conducted by France include Operation Serval (2012–2014), Operation Barkhane (2014 to present), and the French-led European Task Force Takuba (2020 to present), with over 700 soldiers contributed from 25 European countries. Task Force Takuba operates in the Liptako, a tri-border area, alongside Burkina Faso, Niger, and Malian troops.[38] Although Operation Barkhane was initially successful, the mission's insistence on targeting only VEOs blinded it to the threats faced by civilians, and its refusal to realign its strategy with the evolving security situation resulted in the loss of popular support among the Sahelian population.

France is also accused of impeding the sovereign choices of Sahelian states. While there is an increasing call for dialog with VEOs within the Sahel, regional governments are constrained in their ability to seek a political solution

through dialog with the insurgents due to French disapproval. The French operational alliance against VEOs with the Tuareg-led MNLA also undermined its legitimacy. The MNLA was considered the primary initiator of the 2012 insurrection that resulted in the collapse of the Malian State. As a result, the Malian government publicly opposes France's affiliation with the secessionist MNLA and regards the organization as terrorists, like their former VEO allies. For many Malians, the French relationship with the MNLA and support for the Malian state were incompatible.[39]

It was against this background and an increasing French domestic opposition to a protracted and costly mission that Paris decided to unilaterally draw down the mission by January 2022. The announcement led the Malian junta to accuse the French of abandonment prompting it to engage the services of Wagner, a private Russian security firm with ties to the Kremlin. The employment of Wagner resulted in EU sanctions against the coup's leaders, with France suspending most of its financial support to Mali. The Malian junta also suspended the French Ambassador after the French Foreign Minister accused it of being illegitimate and out of control. This catastrophic break in the relationship resulted in a declaration by President Macron to withdraw French troops in Mali with a pivot to neighboring Niger and other West African littoral countries.[40]

The drawdown of Operation Barkhane will undermine MINUSMA's mandate, which had hitherto relied on the French for military operations beyond the mission's capabilities. Paris's retreat will create a security vacuum and could also be viewed as a victory for regional terrorist groups. VEOs will exploit the gap created by the withdrawal to destabilize the entire West Africa region and even threaten Europe. It will also alter the geopolitical balance by allowing other strategic competitors such as Russia and China access to the region.

G5 Sahel

A regional initiative, the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel), was launched by Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger in 2018 to conduct counterterrorism. France and the EU heavily support the G5 Sahel, which is perceived as constituting part of France's exit strategy from the Sahel. The G5 Sahel currently relies on logistics support provided by French and MINUSMA. The engagement of regional militaries in fighting terrorism and the pursuit of VEOs across common borders are generally viewed as positive. However, there are concerns about whether the G5 Sahel can succeed by mainly focusing on military force to combat terrorism. Besides, irregular funding by donors has made it difficult to operationalize the force.[41] The G5 Sahel is, how-

ever, an initiative of its members' States with significant local buy-in and could provide a more sustainable way of tackling insecurity in the region.

US Security Policy in the Sahel

The US provides security assistance and police support, and developmental aid to Sahel countries through the State Department-led Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) program. The TSCTP is a joint interagency effort by the Department of State, Department of Defense, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Over the last decade, Niger has been the largest beneficiary of US counterterrorism training and equipment in the Sahel, while human rights and other policy concerns have inhibited military aid to Mali.[42] The State Department has also halted most assistance to Burkina Faso because of the January 2022 military takeover.[43]

In addition to State Department-administered security assistance for African security forces, US counterterrorism support is also provided to Sahelian states under many statutory authorities and intersecting programs. An example is the Department of Defense (DOD) "global train and equip" authority. The DOD also engages African counterparts in exercises, naval cooperation, threat reduction, other military-to-military collaboration, and civil-military engagement in regions where US troops are deployed. The DOD also supports foreign forces by employing US special operations forces to combat terrorism under 10 USC §127(e). This assistance led the United States to intervene more directly in the Sahel, as depicted through its cooperation with and support for French and Nigerien forces. Other efforts by the DOD in the Sahel include the provision of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance, and logistics support to the French counterterrorism efforts provided on a non-reimbursable basis.[44]

As the primary development arm of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership, USAID partners with the State Department and the DOD to bring a whole-of-government approach (WGA) to counter VEOs in the Sahel. Through targeted interventions, USAID attempts to decrease the vulnerability of Sahelian communities to violent extremism and radicalization. USAID programs successfully reached young people in populated centers like Bamako, Mopti, Gao, and Niamey. However, insecurity in Northern Mali has limited the ability of USAID staff to monitor program implementation.[45] USAID interventions may therefore not coincide with localities where such interventions are required because of security concerns.

The TSCTP should provide a holistic effort toward insecurity in the Sahel, but the initiative is mainly military-focused and inundated with inadequate

monitoring, evaluation, and implementation. A 2008 US Government Accountability Office report noted that the State Department lacked a "comprehensive strategy for the TSCTP" and needed collaboration with partners to develop "clear goals, objectives, and milestones, including output and outcome indicators." It also stresses identifying resources necessary to accomplish the program's objectives.[46] An unclassified audit of TSCTP activities in September 2020 noted insufficient oversight of contracts and activities by the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, casting aspersions on the program's effectiveness.[47]

US aid in the Sahel is currently allocated under many statutory authorities and overlapping programs. Rather than expending meager resources into fragmented efforts that lack supervision and contribute little to the Sahel's stability, the US should rethink its strategy and appropriate a single aid program. A single aid program will provide a coherent vision and effective aid utilization. Moreover, it will also permit investments in long-term projects that can improve a country's development rating.

Challenges and Limitations of Present International Engagement in the Sahel

The Central Sahel is a beneficiary of bilateral and multilateral initiatives to counter VEOs, calm separatist agitations, control irregular migration, and assist ineffective Sahelian states on the verge of collapse. The multiplicity of actors and interests causes significant challenges for the peace effort in the Sahel. Some of the limitations and challenges undermining present international responses include lack of a coherent vision among partners, militarized peacekeeping, a non-comprehensive peace accord, and weak state structures.

Lack of Coherent Vision Among Partners

A crowded peacekeeping field with multiple actors having different objectives results in incoherent partnerships and strategies for the region. Notwithstanding commitments to "integrated" approaches to security and development, interventions are driven by donor political priorities. Even when a nexus of security and development exists, as alleged by partners, they are not extended to conflict areas because of insecurity. While the UN is guided by efforts to find a political solution to the conflict, the mandate of Operation Barkhane, Task Force Takuba, G5 Sahel Joint Force, EUTM, and EUCAP remains focused on security border management and counterterrorism. So, developmental aid fails to address socio-economic vulnerabilities where they matter.[48]

Relations between Operation Barkhane and the UN are also limited to co-ordination with MINUSMA's military component to compare current threats and delineate areas of responsibility to avoid fratricide. For instance, despite deteriorating security in Mali's central region, Operation Barkhane maintained its mandate is to combat terrorism and not intercommunal conflicts.[49] The categorization of nonstate actors cause locals to question why foreign forces fight one type of violent actor while allowing others to attack communities. The diverging motivations of various partners result in conflicting narratives and no coordinated strategy crucial for tackling the root causes of regional instability in the Sahel.

Militarization of Stabilization Efforts

A second closely related effect is the militarization of peacekeeping efforts with a narrow focus on counterterrorism. Such alignments are evident in the international prioritization of SSR characterized by increased military partnerships. With consent by host governments guiding such interventions, support of host states to defeat designated enemies contributes to human rights violations because of heavy-handed state reaction. This practice not only muffles other peacekeeping responses related to the provision of human security and development but has contributed more to extending Sahelian states' coercive efforts and militarization of international interventions.[50]

For instance, the EU's efforts to curtail migration symbolize a broader trend among foreign partners in the Sahel and contribute to the securitization of economic and political challenges. The EU's focus on only security and without regard for local dynamics adds to the deterioration of local economic life. Securitizing migration will continue to disrupt migration patterns and businesses in the Sahara-Sahel that rely on the flow of people and goods. These attempts risk escalating insecurity by indirectly fostering organized crime, other illegal activity, and humanitarian disasters.

Non-Comprehensive Peace Accord

The assumption that the Algiers Accord provides a cornerstone for future peace in the Sahel is antiquated due to its narrow scope and limited stakeholder buy-in. The peace deal was created by allowing some of Northern Mali's armed groups while excluding others based on perceptions of the Malian government and its international partners. The designation of the insurgent groups either as insurrectionists with a political cause or extremist organizations is a result of decisions taken by the Malian state and its partners to decide who participates or not in the peace dialog. Exclusion of the non-

recognized groups means they have no legitimate or state-sanctioned means of redressing grievances through dialog as they remain disqualified from such formal conflict resolution channels.[51]

The boundaries between these many actors are unclear: membership can be fluid and overlapping, and alliances of convenience arise and disintegrate based on interests, personalities, and the more significant political climate. As a result, combatants move from one group to another as the need arises.[52] The Algiers plan also failed to accommodate ensuing intercommunal grievances and new armed factions which emerged after 2015. There is no shortcut to resolving ongoing conflicts without involving all stakeholders in an expanded peace process. Consequently, Mali and international supporters can engage with VEOs or other armed groups by accepting them as legitimate interlocutors.

Weak Structure of Sahelian States

One of the significant constraints of any international intervention is the weak structure of Sahelian states; this means that such countries cannot impose their political will over their territory nor provide necessary political goods like security. According to Englebert and Lyammouri, this structural weakness is not attributable to poor governance and corruption but a "broad mismatch between the ambitions of sovereign territorial states, the overwhelming scope of challenges in vast underpopulated countries with minimal infrastructure, and the extremely limited resources at their disposal."[53] To maintain control over their territories, Sahelian states adopt neopatrimonial strategies with a penchant for corruption, clientelism, favoritism, or sectionalism.[54] For instance, President Compaoré governed Burkina Faso for almost three decades, dominating the countryside via a network of personal ties that enabled him to eliminate threats to his government. His actions prevented any form of institutional development or policy outreach.[55]

In most areas under insurgent control, the broken social contract between citizens and their particular states, local struggles for resources or power were already affecting relationships between communities, making them vulnerable to manipulation by VEOs.[56] Therefore, there are varying levels of state legitimacy across each country. Hence, international attempts to bolster the local capacity of Sahelian states without considering existing power brokers or grievances are not sustainable.

A Way Forward to Stabilize the Sahel

Although the Sahel crisis was initially incited by actions of a Tuareg rebellion and their Jihadist proxies, it has now escalated to involve different groups

with diverse aims in a neighborhood of limited and dysfunctional states. While international actors have long recognized weak states and institutions as the bane of the deteriorating security situation, strategies by international actors have primarily focused on counterterrorism and migration control.

The international militarization of peacekeeping in the Sahel has given rise to some adverse effects on stabilization: First, prioritization of military operations is detrimental to humanitarian activities; second, local initiatives for peace and dialog become marginalized, shrinking available humanitarian space; third, the military presence of international forces is perceived as support for the government and this undermines the international forces' legitimacy and reasons for intervention; lastly, as different actors pursue their interests through counterterrorism, they antagonize affected populations making them susceptible to radicalization.[57] Accordingly, as the conflict in the Sahel approaches a decade, the international actors must invigorate their existing strategy to resolve the region's entangled political, economic, and security crises. A restructured international approach that will prioritize human security, a more comprehensive peace process, and a representative role for Islam in government will contest legitimacy with Jihadists and prevent the region from devolving into more violence.

A Coherent and Coordinated Sahelian Strategy Prioritizing Human Security

The overwhelming presence of parallel forces and actors hampers humanitarian activities and coordination, especially in contested areas. Since the initial international intervention in 2013, the number of parallel forces in the Sahel has expanded to include the G5 Sahel force and the Takuba Task Force. In addition to these forces, parallel operators take on civilian functions traditionally performed by the UN, an example being the EU capacity-building missions.

An increase in these parallel actors has resulted in unintentional fragmentation, with missions coexisting rather than cooperating. Hence, this means that different security outfits and combatant groups with distinct aims interact informally rather than formally. In some Malian regions, as many as ten distinct combatant groupings may exist, including nonstate armed groups. The multitude of these parallel actors has resulted in fragmentation of the humanitarian space and a cumbersome command and control structure.[58]

Therefore, humanitarian actors working in the Sahel must intricately navigate these conflicting and competing interests. Aid organizations must thus strike a balance between remaining independent or assisting populations that are often isolated and controlled by one or more armed entities. At the very least, humanitarians must navigate a maze of complex and sometimes time--

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consuming procedures to deconflict humanitarian operations with military troops in the field to safeguard their employees and associates from danger. Frequently, they must do so while forming delicate alliances with international actors to secure access to communities, logistical help, and physical protection to reach isolated places.[59]

Additionally, establishing community trust takes time and effort, and humanitarian organizations experience setbacks due to actions by security forces. Impediments experienced include a lack of warning about and deconfliction with imminent military operations; state forces-directed abuse at vulnerable populations and internally displaced persons; violation of areas designated for humanitarian activities; and the military's use of humanitarian projects to gain community acceptance. The preceding actions have made it more difficult for aid groups to be viewed as impartial actors, undermining their ability to operate safely.[60]

A more coherent and joint strategy is crucial for the successful stabilization of the Sahel. UN peace operations and other parallel actors will be driven by competing strategies without such a unified vision for the region. The conflicting strategies could lead to poor oversight of humanitarian activities, hampering the international effort. The lack of a shared strategic vision would also undermine coordination at the operational level. While most donors subscribe to a division of labor based on expertise to stabilize the region, international actors have failed to adopt an integrated approach that addresses human security and development in the Sahel. A single international architecture that funnels developmental aid in tight coordination with the UN will help enhance human security.

Furthermore, governments and donors could adopt the Mauritanian strategy for community engagement in remote areas to protect civilians. The Mauritanian government consolidated sparse and dispersed rural populations in isolated rural locations into larger settlements to enhance security and public service delivery. The concentration of the population has allowed ease of administration, defense, provision of education, and other political goods. The consolidation of dispersed populations from rural areas into larger settlements by Sahelian states and donors will mitigate the vulnerability of isolated at-risk communities.[61]

Expanded Peace Process Involving Non-Signatories of 2015 Algiers Accord

The present deployment of international and state security actors in the Sahel can be summarized into three concentric circles: the inner circle consists of the capital cities and surrounding areas which are usually dominated

by foreign troops; the middle ring includes the interior provinces, which are left to national forces; and finally, the outer circle consists of rural areas abandoned to indigenous self-defense groups.[62] Governance is usually contested or abdicated in the interior provinces and peripheral areas, and therefore, the state is one of several actors vying for legitimacy and sovereignty. The clustering of these contested and abdicated territories, especially in border areas, implies that instability in any Sahelian state will spill over into neighboring territories. Figure 5 depicts Mali's territories that are under hegemonic or total VEO control, contested, or are free.

Military operations have thus far provided tactical successes, but they have failed to secure contested or abdicated territories. The conflict between state and international actors is at an impasse, with neither side appearing capable of victory. A failure to strategically reorient existing strategy will not address the VEO threat nor stabilize a region in crisis. Addressing the causes of crises in the Sahel will require a comprehensive overhaul and significant changes to the current approach to security and development. Nevertheless, even a new and ambitious strategy could take years to produce benefits. Therefore, the regional and international security efforts must prioritize civilian protection by arresting the spiraling human toll of ongoing violence.

There is limited opportunity to deescalate the violence, provide necessary humanitarian assistance, or resolve grievances in the Central Sahel states without talking to nonstate armed entities. Furthermore, any strategy aiming to deescalate violence and expand humanitarian space will require talks at all levels that involve non-signatories of the 2015 Peace Accord because no sustainable peace can exist without their participation in the dialog. International partners need to support selective dialog to help unravel the conflicting interests and partnerships that have allowed insecurity to thrive. There is the risk that dialog could undermine the position of international partners and bestow legitimacy on the extremist groups. However, based on the last eight years' results, peace cannot be achieved through only military means. Mauritania has pursued robust military operations and dialog with VEOs, and despite escalating violence in the Sahel, the country has had no terrorist attack on its soil since 2011.[63]
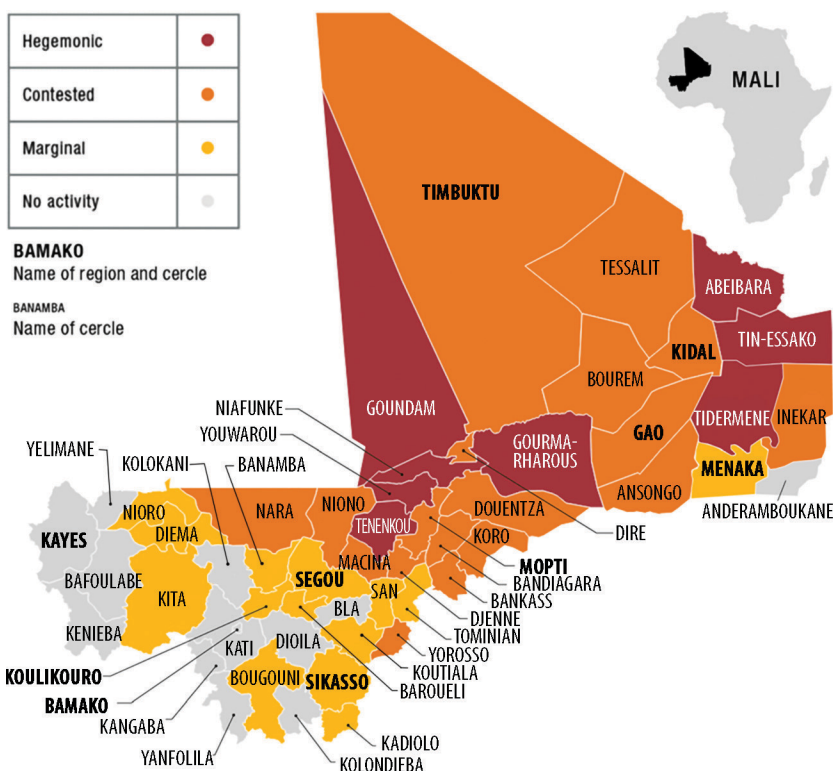
Figure 5. Map Showing VEOs Activity in Mali[64]

While military interventions remain critical, they should be subservient to political dialog. Military operations could coerce, deter, compel, or influence VEOs and support development aid. Moreover, if counterterrorism aims to protect civilians and avoid additional violence, all paths for restoring peace must be considered, including negotiations with extremists. Consequently, expanding the Algiers agreement to include stakeholders excluded from the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord is needed to restore peace in the Sahel.

A Political Role for Islam in the Sahelian States

Violent nonstate actors in the Sahel capitalize on the region's trans-Islamic heritage that predates the existing nation-states to legitimize their narratives and provide a cover for local conflicts. Islam's message of equality before God regardless of ethnicity and race resonates with groups or ethnicities that have grievances against the state or other actors. Accordingly, nonstate violent

groups use Islamic narratives as a resource to mobilize and support their strategies, while for the recruited, it provides a channel for expressing grievances. A case in point is Iyad ag Ghali, the current leader of the JNIM, who also played an important role in previous Tuareg uprisings for independence from Mali. Conversely, the Puel ethnic group leverages these groups to provide dependable solutions for land and water rights conflict, protection against state-supported extortion, and attack by other ethnicities.[65] Material instead of religious agendas drives the local alliances with VEOs. While this may be propaganda, this symbiotic relationship allows both parties to achieve their aspirations.

A broader discussion and debate on the role of Islam in other Sahelian states as obtainable in Mauritania will unhinge VEOs' narratives and enable reconciliation of religious belief and republican values. The affinity between the state and Islam varies among Sahelian states, with Mali having higher political mobilization around Islam and Niger having more official control over the religion. Over 90 percent of Malians and Nigeriens and 50 percent of Burkinabe are Muslims. Between 25 percent (Burkina) and 70 percent (Niger) of Sahelian inhabitants desire that their country be controlled by religious law.[66] Currently, by combining Sharia and traditional rule, VEOs have established an alternative system of governance that administers justice and provides vital services. It remains evident that several extremist factions are now exercising quasi-sovereign power over the territories they govern. Some indigenous population segments perceive services offered by these groups as more just and equitable than rules previously implemented by the state.[67] Therefore, interventions aimed at establishing state presence and contrasting terrorist activities must entail discussions on the political role of Islam in the Sahel.

The reintroduction of Islam into Sahelian politics does not necessarily imply the establishment of an oppressive theocracy but that Islam could have a more representative, if not legislative, role in government. In parts of the Sahel, Islamic law is already applied in resolving family and property disputes.[68] Expanding the conversation to allow individuals to choose either government, Sharia, or customary courts would have little effect on existing practices. Additionally, acknowledging a role for Islam in Sahelian politics delegitimizes the Jihadist appeal and would lay the groundwork for long-overdue dialog with Islamists.

Conclusion

As the Sahelian conflict approaches its first decade, the international community needs to readjust the military first approach toward stabilization to avert deteriorating humanitarian and security challenges. A new strategy em-

phasizing negotiations between regional states and VEOs, a cohesive effort toward human security, and broad consultations on a representative role for Islam in national affairs will help stabilize the region. Although secessionist Tuareg rebels first incited the Sahelian crisis, it has spread to include competing groups with assorted objectives thriving in an ecosystem of dysfunctional and deficient statehood. The multiplicity of state and nonstate actors in the region's conflict ecosystem has resulted in social, economic, and humanitarian consequences, with communities being the victims of terrorist attacks.

Violent nonstate actors like the JNIM and FLM, even though perceived by the international community as an existential threat, provide reliable channels for resolving local grievances and conflicts in territories where the state cannot maintain a competent and qualified presence. In a situation where no contender can enforce a more extensive political order, it is hard to envision a political solution to the Sahel crises without involving other nonstate actors in state-approved stabilization and conflict management processes.

The regional and international counterterrorism strategy for the Sahel fragments humanitarian space because of its narrow focus on VEOs and migration control. These divisions necessitate a more coordinated and collaborative approach to human security from UN peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and development agencies. The international community needs to unravel its many security activities with overlapping jurisdictions and aims. To carry out their counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, and border security missions, Sahelian and European countries and institutions like the UN, AU, G5 Sahel, and ECOWAS need to create a more collaborative concept of operations.

Islam has a lengthy history in the Sahel, and the current insurgency has heightened the discussion about Islam's place in society and politics. A public debate on Islam's role would be delicate and challenging, but it will help contest sacred space with violent extremist groups and allow possible concessions and conciliation between the government and the groups' leadership. Such dialogs may undermine the secularity of Sahelian states, however, the rejection of Islam as a source of legal or administrative principles for the willing section of the populace undermines the state's legitimacy and instead reinforces violent extremists' narratives.

To this end, it is a challenge to predict a viable strategy to stabilize the Sahel within existing political institutions and authority norms. Additionally, any proposed approach may not quickly halt the spiraling humanitarian catastrophe or restore Sahelian states' capacities. The future of the Sahel must be crafted through the understanding of religious, ethnic, and commercial interconnections woven into the fabric of the region's history. The current interventions need to factor in that history to stabilize the region successfully.

Therefore, a revised and inclusive political pact with citizenry and all segments of society, even though imperfect, might legitimize regional states and prevent the further escalation of the conflict into West Africa and Europe.

Notes

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

1. Van der Lijn, *Assessing the Effectiveness*, 21.
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6. "Sahel Crisis Explained."
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17. Lierl, "Growing State Fragility in the Sahel," 6.
18. International Crisis Group. "A Course Correction."
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25. Englebert and Lyammouri, *Sahel: Moving beyond Military Containment Policy Report*, 8.
26. Pérouse de Montclos, *Rethinking the Response to Jihadist Groups Across the Sahel*, 18.
27. Pérouse de Montclos, 18–9.
28. Maclean, "Five African Countries. Six Coups. Why Now?"
29. Osland and Erstad, "The Fragility Dilemma and Divergent Security Complexes in the Sahel," 23.

30. Osland and Erstad, 20–2.

31. Osland and Erstad, 5.

32. Berger, "Human Rights Abuses: A Threat to Security Sector Reforms in the Sahel."

33. Osland and Erstad, "The Fragility Dilemma."

34. MINUSMA, "Mandate."

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36. Van der Lijn, *Assessing the Effectiveness*, 75–7.

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39. Powell, "Why France Failed in Mali."

40. Klatt, "Mali Is (Again) at a Crossroads."

41. Dieng, "The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The Limits of Military Capacity-Building Efforts," 488–90.

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46. Detti, "US Strategy in the Sahel: Toward a Human Security-Centered Approach."

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51. Ornella, "Proliferation of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: Evidence of State Failure?"

52. Cooke et al., *Militancy and the Arc of Instability: Violent Extremism in the Sahel*, 9.

53. Englebert and Lyammouri, *Sahel*, 16–7.

54. Baldaro, "Violence, Dysfunctional States, and the Rise of Jihadi Governance in the Sahel."

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57. Venturi and Toure, *Out of the Security Deadlock: Challenges and Choices in the Sahel*, 31.

58. Murphy, "Security Fragmentation Hinders Humanitarian Response in the Sahel," 4.

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65. Dağyeli, Ghrawi, and Freitag, Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds, 166–69.

66. Englebert and Lyammouri, *Sahel*, 21.

67. Baldaro, "Violence, Dysfunctional States, and the Rise of Jihadi Governance in the Sahel."

68. "Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM," 9.

Abbreviations

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
DOD	Department of Defense
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EUCAP	EU Capacity Building Missions in the Sahel
EUTM	EU Training Mission
FLM	*Force de libération du Macina*
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISGS	Islamic Group for the Greater Sahara
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
JNIM	*Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin*
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	*Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad*
MUJAO	*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TSCTP	Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VEO	Violent extremist organizations

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