The nexus between military rule and private military and security companies in the Sahel and its impact on terrorism[1]

Yasmin Arshad[2], Sehrish Qayyum[3]

Abstract:

The tumultuous political landscape in the Sahel, characterised by successive coups by military juntas, has become a fertile ground for terrorists, who exploit the ungoverned spaces created by the gap between states and their people to garner support and expand their influence. Private military and security companies (PMSCs), such as the Africa Corps of the Wagner Group, often sustain these coups by operating beyond legal frameworks, thereby intensifying the already enduring fragility of these states. Not only does this sustain insecurity, but the lack of trust in the state and its security apparatus makes the local population increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups. States such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have a history of military coups and interventions. Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach can evaluate the intricate relationship between military regimes and PMSCs' impact on terrorism by applying a constructivist lens to the case studies. Understanding this nexus is crucial for developing a holistic approach that identifies both the symptoms and root causes of instability and addresses terrorism in the Sahel.

Keywords:

Fragile states; junta; private military and security companies (PMSCs); Sahel; terrorism; Wagner Group.

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[2] Researcher at the PAF Air War College Institute (AWCI) in Karachi, Pakistan; ORCID: 0009-0008-9982-7716; yasmin.arshad95@gmail.com.
[3] Assistant Professor at the PAF Air War College Institute (AWCI) in Karachi, Pakistan; ORCID: 0000-0003-0588-2383; drsehrishqayyum@gmail.com.

Introduction

A confluence of historical, environmental, and political factors shapes the socio-political landscape of the Sahel region, an area with fluctuating borders between the Sahara and Central Africa, profoundly affecting its stability and security. Despite its rich history of being a center for trade and cultural exchange, the political economy of Sahelian countries was the central discourse among global powers after the Second World War. Colonial powers have primarily invested in developing the physical infrastructure of the predominantly agrarian society to facilitate the extraction of natural resources, neglecting human development and poverty alleviation (UNFPA, 2020: 15). Environmental degradation, displacement, and migration due to ongoing hostilities have exacerbated the impact on the political order of the region (UNHCR, 2024). Political instability, marked by numerous coups, civil wars, and ongoing conflicts, has subsequently plagued the Sahel. Increasing state fragility due to weak governance, corruption, and ethnic tensions has created space for the rise of groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Boko Haram, leading to increased violence and insecurity (Dieng, 2022).

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which have experienced significant political turmoil, including coups and military rule, exemplify these complex socio-political dynamics. Despite statistics indicating an improvement in government response to public needs over the last 20 years (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023), a February 2019 study highlighted the vulnerable characteristics of the areas where the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger converge (UNFPA, 2020: 22). Socio-economic dynamics, including high population growth rates, unemployment, climate change shocks, and government failures, have contributed to an increase in violent extremism by extremist groups, as highlighted by the study. In response to these attacks, armed or self-defense groups, such as the Tuareg, Imghad, and Allied Self-Defense Group (GATIA), the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MS), and others with community ties, have emerged (UNFPA, 2020: 22). From 2022 to 2023, fatalities from terrorism in this region rose from 19,412 to 23,322 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Thus, this region has become the epicenter of both intercommunal and terrorist violence, making it difficult to distinguish between the violent actions of different groups. These abuses predominantly occur in rural areas, far from decision-making centers and basic social services, leading to a sense of frustration and helplessness among the local population (UNFPA, 2020: 24).

Furthermore, the involvement of private military and security companies (PMSCs) in the Sahel, with the latest being the Wagner Group, has added a new dimension to the region's conflicts. As changing political dynamics lead to the expulsion of foreign military groups, particularly the French, governments have increasingly turned to PMSCs for support to maintain control and counter insurgent groups (Asadu, 2023a, 2023b).

While PMSCs provide military expertise and direct combat support, their presence has increased tensions with the local populations due to the frequent reports of human

rights abuses by these groups, further alienating them (Parliament, 2021). Scholars are engaged in a heated debate regarding the classification of these companies, specifically whether they should be classified as mercenary groups or private security contractors. This debate underscores the ambiguity within which most of these organisations operate, potentially impacting aspects of accountability. Antipathy and mistrust toward government leadership and the use of PMSCs can have significant implications for terrorism in the Sahel. Terrorist groups capitalise on the resentment of the local population and portray themselves as defenders of foreign interference and corrupt governments. Thus, this narrative can resonate with many, leading to a surge in terrorist recruitment.

Using a constructivist lens on the case studies above, a multidisciplinary approach can look at the complicated relationship between military regimes and the use of PMSCs to fight terrorism. Understanding this nexus is crucial for developing a holistic approach that identifies both the symptoms and root causes of instability and addresses terrorism in the Sahel.

Theoretical framework

Constructivism offers a valuable framework for analysing how states engage with PMSCs. Constructivism posits that human interactions and shared perceptions shape the social world, including political structures and military practices.[4] From this perspective, social norms, identities, and prevailing views of appropriate state behavior influence a state's decision to use PMSCs, not just functional or rational considerations (Hopf, 1994). Constructivists contend that states might choose to avoid employing PMSCs, even if it appears strategically or economically beneficial, because it conflicts with their identity and norms regarding the military's role. This issue is a point of debate between radical and social constructivism (Wendt, 1999).

One study highlighted a social constructivist argument through a case study on Denmark, which, despite facing security challenges, chose not to employ PMSCs because doing so would have conflicted with its national identity and values regarding the military as a public institution (Kaldor, 2012). While social constructivism focuses on how these socially constructed understandings influence state decisions about PMSCs, radical constructivists emphasise the deeper role of these social constructs in shaping such decisions (Ruggie, 1998). Additionally, constructivism sheds light on how the rise of PMSCs has contributed to reshaping social perceptions of the military and security. The growing prevalence of PMSCs has challenged traditional views of the military as a state-controlled public institution, fuelling the 'privatization of security' (Miller, 2012). Overall, constructivism is a useful way to think about how social, normative, and

[4]Neoclassical geopolitics, likewise, underscores the significance of agents' perceptions in influencing the behaviour of states (Morgado, 2023).

identity-based factors affect states' policies and choices about hiring private security and military companies, going beyond just practical or material factors (Werner, 2011).

Under military rule, there is a deep intertwining of the state's identity with the military's identity, reflecting the constructivist concept of shared identity. This identity often emphasises security, order, and control. PMSCs, which provide security services, align with and reinforce these aspects of the state's identity (Wendt, 1999). The military and PMSCs share a common understanding of their societal roles, which facilitates their collaboration. Military regimes typically establish and promote norms that prioritize security and stability over other considerations, like civil liberties or democratic governance. PMSCs operate within these norms, offering services that support the regime's objectives. From a constructivist perspective, the military regime's security-focused discourse normalizes the presence of PMSCs (Avant, 2005).

Shared beliefs and narratives construct the legitimacy of PMSCs under military rule. Military regimes may depict PMSCs as crucial partners in maintaining order and defending the state against internal and external threats. This narrative helps legitimise the use of PMSCs in the eyes of the public and other state actors (Krahmann, 2010). The perception that PMSCs are effective and necessary for security is a socially constructed idea, which military regimes can shape by highlighting successful operations carried out by PMSCs, thereby reinforcing their role and justifying their continued use (Krahmann, 2010).

Both military regimes and PMSCs undergo socialization processes that bring their behaviors and objectives into alignment. Military personnel and PMSC operatives often share similar training, values, and operational doctrines, fostering a cohesive security apparatus where both entities understand and support each other's roles (Joachim & Schneiker, 2020). The relationship between military regimes and PMSCs is mutually constitutive: military regimes rely on PMSCs to expand their control and security capabilities, while PMSCs gain opportunities and legitimacy through their association with the military. This interdependence reinforces the roles and identities of both actors within the security landscape, supporting both radical and social constructivism (Kruck, 2020).

Constructivism underscores the influence of dominant discourses on shaping political realities, with a focus on security and stability under military rule. PMSCs are integrated into this discourse as crucial players in achieving these goals. The language and narratives employed by the military regime promote the involvement of PMSCs, framing them as essential. Their social and discursive interactions shape the power dynamics between military regimes and PMSCs; PMSCs gain influence by aligning with the regime's discourse, while the regime strengthens its power by utilising the specialised capabilities of PMSCs. This dynamic interaction further solidifies the relationship between the two (Leander & Wæver, 2022).

Constructivism highlights the social construction and reinforcement of the legitimacy and perceived necessity of PMSCs through mutual socialization, dominant discourses, and interdependent power dynamics (Spearin, 2017). This perspective highlights the significance of ideas, beliefs, and social structures in understanding the intricate relationship between military regimes and private security providers in the Sahel region (Leander & Wæver, 2022).

The African Convention on Mercenarism was designed to curb the spread of dubious enterprises and foster regional collaboration. While the goal was commendable, the action plan was too broad, leaving room for ambiguity. The pursuit of regional consensus overshadowed key contentious issues like rules of engagement and the criminal liability of security personnel in death cases.

The primary issue lies in defining the scope of activity between military rule and private security companies. Military coalitions stationed in the Sahel, such as MINUSMA, AFRICOM, and G5, operate with a high level of secrecy, rarely discussing their use of private enterprises (Reno, 2020). The silence is only broken by tragedies, such as the October 4, 2017, ambush in Niger that resulted in the deaths of nine military personnel, including four members of the US Special Forces (Department of Defense, DoD, 2018). The Pentagon never disclosed the identity and employer of a civilian intelligence officer among the victims. A civilian Bell 214 helicopter from another private firm, stationed in Niger, was required for the evacuation of the wounded. Additionally, a commercial enterprise may have been employed in the Sahel to assist U.S. forces with freight, passenger, and medical evacuation operations (Leander, 2020). This reality on the ground illustrates that private enterprises can be involved before, during, and after counterterrorism operations.

Focusing on Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali reinforces the argument for constructivism: when military rule fails to adequately address the areas of operation and responsibility overlap (Bagayoko, 2021), it significantly increases the demand for private security agencies (Ba, 2019). The constructivist view, especially when viewed through the lenses of radical and social constructivism, emphasizes the influence of ancillary units on power management (Krahmann, 2018).

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research method with an exploratory approach, focusing on the Sahel region and the role of the military in conjunction with PMSCs (King et al., 2016). The research is desk-based, relying on major reports from security departments, government white papers, international security indices, and news reports as primary sources. We use secondary research data, including academic articles and journals on related topics, to delve deeper into the subjective and intersubjective aspects of military rule. The theoretical framework is developed through the juxtaposition of

social and radical constructivist perspectives (Charbonneau, 2020). A thematic literature review on the security status of the Sahel region, specifically Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, supports the constructivist argument.

We use a case study method to analyse the research data and examine the role of military rule in the Sahel, exploring the reasons for the demand for private agencies and their effectiveness (Berndtsson, 2019). The study's thematic overview reveals that Sahelian countries are fully responsible for choosing which corporations can operate within their borders. This gatekeeping role is crucial and is likely to become increasingly significant in the future (Francis, 2019). However, while the ground reality might differ, further research could either support or challenge the perception of the need for PMSCs alongside military rule in the Sahel region.

Historical context of military rule in the Sahel

Throughout its history, the Sahel has seen numerous coups and governance failures. This region has experienced numerous instances of military interventions replacing civilian governments. External powers have also played a role in the dynamic of military rule in the Sahel, reflected by the disparate reactions based on various geopolitical interests, such as those stemming from the proxy wars between the United States (US) and Soviet Union during the Cold War, the pervasive effects of which have carried forward to this day. Colonial rule, primarily by France, imposed arbitrary borders and administrative systems that often disregarded ethnic and cultural differences and put into power various unrepresentative elites (UNFPA, 2020: 22). After gaining independence from France, five of the six Sahelian countries endured prolonged periods of military rule. In the 1960s and 1970s, the armed forces in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania established military dictatorships. In contrast, Chad's military was unable to prevent the country's fragmentation, which eventually led to their own disintegration. Senegal was the only country where civilian rulers maintained control (Villalón, 2021).

Many Sahelian states remain underdeveloped, with power often concentrated in the hands of narrow elites disconnected from the broader population (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023). In the last four years, the Sahel has witnessed at least five successful military coups, including in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023). The commonalities in all the coups were the accusations of corruption and the deterioration of security, with the army bearing the standard of change in governance (Devermont, 2019). Additionally, the state structures were characterized by fragile yet democratically elected governments, with the armed forces providing the necessary security. This 'militarization of politics' highlights the dependency of the civilian governments on the armed forces of their states to validate their governance (Wilén, 2021). In the more recent coups of 2020-2023, young and populist leaders have emerged, standing in stark contrast to their predecessors. These leaders understand the needs of the predominantly young population in the Sahel countries, where weak

power structures, low levels of education, and slow economic growth have hindered youth advancement, leaving them vulnerable to terrorist recruitment (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023).

Since the 2014 uprising against President Blaise Compaoré, who had been in power for 27 years, instability in Burkina Faso has been on the rise. Since 2016, extremist groups have consistently targeted military forces and civilians (Dieng, 2022). These groups have established a strong presence in Burkina Faso and neighboring states like Mali. Additionally, conflicts have arisen between these groups due to ideological differences stemming from their support for either Al Qaeda or ISIS (Dieng, 2022). The development of resistance units in a region under threat from terrorists and other illegal factions is a result of the fragile existence of state organizations far from the capital city and the people's lack of trust in them (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1-7).

Although originally seen as legitimate, these self-defense groups have also been involved in several deadly ethnic and communal conflicts, bringing their activities under scrutiny for alleged human rights violations (Dieng, 2022). Due to the deteriorating security situation and increasing frustrations within the security services regarding the government's inadequate response to the escalating rate of terrorism, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba led a coup in January 2022, detaining then-President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and seizing power. However, Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew him in a subsequent coup in September 2022, citing his failure to fulfill his pledge to enhance security (Arslan, 2023). Currently, Traoré enjoys public support due to his anti-colonialist views and populist speeches (Arslan, 2023).

The downfall of Amadou Toumani Touré's government in 2012 has left Mali mired in constant disagreement (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2016). Captain Amadou Sonogo led the coup, accusing the Touré government of failing to manage the ongoing insurgencies and failing to equip the army (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1–7). After the overthrow of the government, insurgents and extremists took control of the regional capitals, negatively impacting the security situation (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). This situation bears similarities to the Tuareg Rebellions that occurred in the 1960s, 1990s, and 2007 in the North, where the Tuareg people rebelled against the central government due to their mistrust of those in power (Ba, 2014).

Despite various peace agreements over the years, nothing has suppressed the disagreements, including in these communities, due to a lack of trust. Other ethnic groups have also engaged in armed violence in post-colonial Mali. Thus, the past decade has witnessed constant battles between the Malian army and armed groups in the North, as well as between these groups and those classified as terrorist groups (Dieng, 2022).

International forces, including French troops, the US military, and the 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali' (MINUSMA), have been involved in these conflicts (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023). In 2020, public discontent over corruption, mismanagement of public funds, and failure to contain

terrorism caused Malian soldiers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta to force the then civilian president Boubacar Keïta to resign and then handed over power to the new civilian government (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1-7). However, tensions persisted between the military and the new civilian government, with Goïta eventually leading another coup in 2021 against President Bah N'daw and his government and forcing them to resign. This time, Goïta announced and signed a decree in 2022 officially prolonging military rule for at least two years (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Since gaining independence in 1958 from French colonial rule, Niger has experienced four incidences of military rule. A military unit attempted to seize the presidential palace in Niamey in March 2021, just days before President Bazoum took office (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023). Although he survived this coup attempt and another one a year later, the coup of 2023 ultimately removed him (Asadu, 2023b). The coups in Niger, which demonstrated the extent of power struggles among various corridors of power, were characterized by an underlying ethnic sensitivity, as President Bazoum belonged to an ethnic minority, unlike his rivals. These recurring coups and attempted coups highlight the lack of stability required to combat terrorism and violent extremism, particularly in the Tillaberi and Diffa regions (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1–7).

Additionally, Niger shares boundaries with Burkina Faso and Mali and thus has handled severe instability and security concerns due to military conflicts involving state forces, armed groups, and extremist factions over the past decade. Internal violence and spillover effects from neighboring conflicts have further exacerbated Niger's security challenges (Dieng, 2022).

Year	Coup leader	Affected president
Burkina Faso		
2022	Captain Ibrahim Traoré	Lt. Col. Paul Henri Damiba
2022	Lt. Col. Paul Henri Damiba	Roch Kaboré
1987	Blaise Compaoré	Thomas Sankara
1983	Thomas Sankara	Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo
1982	Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo	Saye Zerbo
1980	Saye Zerbo	Sangoulé Lamizana
1966	Sangoulé Lamizana	Máurice Yaméogo
Mali		
2021	Assimi Goïta	Bah N'Daw
2020	Assimi Goïta	Ibrahim Keïta
2012	Amadou Sonogo	Amadou Toumani Touré
1991	Amadou Toumani Touré	Moussa Traoré
1968	Moussa Traoré	Modibo Keita

Niger		
2023	Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani	Hamani Diori
2010	Salou Djibo	Mahamane Ousmane
1999	Daouda Malam Wanke	Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara
1996	Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara	Mamadou Tandja
1974	Seyni Kountché	Mohamed Bazoum

Figure 1: Successful military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, 1960–2023 (Aubyn, et al., 2022: 1-7).

The emergence of terrorist groups in the Sahel

The instability in the Sahel has facilitated the rise of several terrorist groups. These groups have engaged in various terrorist activities to coerce and pressurise Sahelian populations and government decision-makers. Weak state institutions around interstate borders have allowed these groups to thrive in peripheral and border towns, targeting people across multiple countries by exploiting low security along borders to move freely between neighbouring countries (Dieng, 2022).

Despite several international military efforts to counter these groups, such as MINUSMA, the French Operation Burkhane, and the G-5 Sahel Force, the Sahel region has become a hub for some of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups. The most active groups in the region, Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), are vying for dominance, leading to a sharp increase in attacks in northern and central Mali, western Niger, and northern and eastern Burkina Faso. These groups have taken advantage of local ethnic divisions, while self-defence groups, vigilantes, and community-based militias have become increasingly involved in counterterrorism efforts. This has led to cycles of localized intercommunal violence, marked by retaliatory killings between terrorist groups and communal self-defense forces (Raleigh et al., 2020).

Niger faces complex security challenges, including insurgencies by IS Sahel, JNIM, and Boko Haram in its western and southern regions. Organised banditry and militancy, primarily by IS near its southern border, further complicate the situation. The country's shared borders with Chad and Libya exacerbate these issues, facilitating smuggling and trafficking, which in turn attracts additional armed groups. These dynamics are spilling over into other Sahel states, such as Mali (ACLED, 2023). In Mali, the transition back to civilian rule in 2013 did not enhance security as hoped. Terrorist groups persisted in their violent activities. The 2015 Algiers Peace Reconciliation Agreement, which aimed to settle disputes between the Malian government and northern rebel groups, did not include terrorist factions, which then expanded their operations.

By late 2015, these groups had spread to central Mali and allied with the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), causing further spillover of terrorist activities to Burkina Faso

and Niger. Ansarul Islam initiated attacks in Burkina Faso, transforming the Western Sahel into the epicenter of terrorist activity in Africa by 2017, with Mali being the most affected (ACLED, 2023).

Role of PMSCs in contemporary conflicts

Scholars hail the concept of mercenaries participating in conflicts as the 'second oldest trade' (Olsen, 2022). Scholars apply the term 'mercenary' to various figures throughout history, each with their own unique motivations for participating in a conflict and offering a variety of services (Olsen, 2022). Various political entities fragmented sovereignty during the Middle Ages in Europe. These actors often waged wars through mercenaries and claimed overlapping authority over people and territories, with rulers rarely holding absolute power. However, as states emerged as the dominant international actors, they outlawed non-state armed groups such as mercenaries to prevent challenges to their authority (Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). The monopoly on force was a cornerstone of the modern state system (McFate, 2004: 7).

With the advent of globalization and the emergence of new and hybrid transnational security threats, such as proxy wars and terrorism, the idea of regular warfare merged with the gray zone. The private military industry surged, particularly after the Cold War (Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, DCAF, 2024). The states are no longer the only actors in international affairs; they now compete with multinational corporations, international organizations like the United Nations, and NGOs. The Middle Ages resemble this multicentered world where various state and non-state actors share authority. Some scholars have termed this trend toward a non-state-centric, multipolar world order, characterized by overlapping authorities and allegiances, as neomedievalism (McFate, 2004: 7). Thus, some scholars suggest that PMSCs have expanded and formalized the social constructs and roles of mercenaries.

The moniker of 'mercenary' is 'a political judgement that carries with it normative assumptions about a hierarchy of 'rightful' combatants' and that therefore those who were not rightful combatants were described as 'mercenary' (Olsen, 2022). However, it is important to first differentiate between PMSCs and mercenaries as per international law. Officially, PMSCs are private enterprises that offer military or security services to states or other organisations.

According to Article 47 of Additional Protocol I (AP I) to the Geneva Conventions, a mercenary is:

> "…any person who is 1) specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict, 2) takes a direct part in hostilities, 3) is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain, 4) neither a national of

a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict, 5) is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, 6) has not been sent by a state that is not party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces (International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC, n.d.)."

The classification of PMSC personnel as mercenaries under AP I is uncommon. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) does not forbid the use of PMSCs or mercenaries during armed conflicts, but two separate conventions do (RULAC Geneva Academy, 2021). The 1977 Organisation of African Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa (Organisation of African Unity. OAU, n.d.) and the 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries (General Assembly resolution 44/34, 1989).

These legally binding conventions do not only criminalise the employment of mercenaries but also their participation in armed conflicts. However, only 35 countries have ratified the convention, and none of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, particularly the US, Russia, and UK, have become members due to their use of PMSCs (Klaassen, 2023). Some have suggested that the contestation over the too-limited definition of mercenary could be the cause (Riordan, 1989). Of the three Sahel countries discussed in this paper, only Mali has ratified the convention (UN Treaty Collections, 2001).

International law identifies PMSCs as commercial entities that provide a range of military and security services, irrespective of their self-description as a PMC, MC, or any other variation of the term.

These services typically include armed protection of individuals and property, such as convoys and buildings; the maintenance and operation of weapon systems; detention of prisoners; and the training and advising of local military and security personnel (ICRC, 2013). States use the Montreux Document, a non-binding international instrument, to guide their use of these companies (ICRC, 2013). Additionally, the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoCa) outlines the obligations of PMSCs (Montreux Document Forum, n.d.). Typically PMSCs are not parties to a conflict. However, their personnel may be considered civilians directly participating in hostilities if their actions meet the criteria for direct participation as per Article 51(3) of AP I and Article 13(3) of Additional Protocol II.

A PMSC could only be considered a party to an armed conflict if it independently engages in hostilities, not as a service provider to a client. In such a scenario, it must be determined if the two IHL criteria are satisfied: (a) the violence between the PMSC and the opposing party must reach a certain level of intensity, and (b) the PMSC must be sufficiently organised (DCAF, 2024). The use of these companies in warfare to achieve military objectives is not a new phenomenon, and it has further complicated our

understanding of modern warfare, especially when it comes to PMSCs claiming defensive functions (DCAF, 2024). The integration of these PMSCs has also raised questions about the nature of their operations in the deployed regions, with many inquiring about the legality and accountability of these companies.

The employment of PMSCs has become a lucrative business due to the existing conflicts and differences between various central governments and their people, which are caused by prevalent insurgencies and terrorists. International involvement, including from the US, France, and the UN, in addressing these insecurities has prompted the call for PMSCs to provide a range of services, including information gathering, security protocol, and training local armed forces (Menas, 2019). This allows conventional armed forces to have a limited, ceremonial role and brings PMSCs to the forefront. International law restricts the role of PMSCs for defensive purposes, as previously highlighted. However, legal ambiguities often lead to the misuse of this element. When a government transfers troops from regular units that are accountable for their actions to civilian commercial organisations, allowing PMSCs to play a more front-line role creates room for deniability (Menas, 2019).

The interplay between military rule and PMSCs

The concept of 'ungoverned spaces' in the Sahel has allowed political opportunists to exploit the security sector for personal gain, which has led to a 'security traffic jam' (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2022). This exploitation has led to the creation of initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the militarised agendas of both Sahelian governments and external actors, such as France. It is also difficult to ignore that these Sahelian countries provide economic incentives in the form of unexploited minerals. Poorly equipped Sahelian governments focus on asserting control over territories and populations in these areas with the aid of external actors to prevent the spread of terrorism and possible migration flows to Europe.

However, the colonial past of these countries, in addition to their economic interests in the Sahel, undermines peacebuilding efforts. These factors increase the antipathy of the local populace toward them (Igbinadolor, 2023). Consequently, the Sahel has become a battleground for 'new wars', which have been characterised by non-state actors, ambiguous conflict drivers, and indistinguishable conflict phases (Villalón, 2021). Furthermore, even these international military forces have employed PMSCs for security and logistical support. AFRICOM alone lists at least 21 American companies as military service providers in North Africa and the Sahel (Wilén, 2021).

The traditional role of the armed forces is to protect national territories from external threats. However, this primary aim is difficult to carry out in the Sahel because of domestic security challenges (Elischer, 2019). In fragile democracies such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, societal disunity and weak administrative capabilities hinder the

maintenance of a functioning state. Armed groups maintain a violent status quo, making security forces central to stability efforts. The sizes of the countries' armed forces also affect the need for employment of PMSCs, which scholars say often oversee and enforce colonial-era developments and resource exploitation (Aubyn et al., 2022: 1–7). External partners such as PMSCs provide training, equipment, and information operations support to local armed forces to combat violent non-state actors and reinforce state authority. Despite international and regional military deployments, terrorist activities have continued, reinforcing the role of local security forces as primary tools for stability (Wilén, 2021).

Recent political shifts and coups in the Sahel region have sparked anti-French sentiment, resulting in the region's expulsion or withdrawal from Western-backed economic and military alliances. In order to bridge the gap, the Russian government has allegedly unofficially sanctioned the actions of PMSCs like Wagner, who operate in a legal grey area. Although Wagner operates as a PMSC, many scholars view their government ties and unregulated combat roles as closer to the definition of mercenaries. However, this is not an unusual practice in the PMSC industry, as many PMSCs have complex structures to avoid legal scrutiny (Margolin, 2019). Thus, even with the restructuring of Wagner in Africa, now known as the 'Africa Corps', a lack of formal registration does not prevent organisations like Wagner from classification as PMSCs.

Russian critics allege that Russia has used proxies in North Africa and the Sahel, such as the Wagner Group, to disguise its direct government affiliations as part of its hybrid warfare strategy to compete with the west. Wagner's activities allegedly impact the region's democracies, western influence, economic relations, resource access, and overall security (Reynolds, 2019). The US and France have criticised Russia's PMSCs for increasing violent extremism, failing to address armed threats, committing human rights abuses, and endangering UN peacekeepers and staff. Despite these criticisms, some African leaders see Russian PMSCs as viable security alternatives, especially given anti-French sentiment and perceived shortcomings of Western partners. Prior to Wagner's involvement, non-Russian PMSCs posed a threat by addressing human rights issues and escalating terrorism.

Russian PMSCs have been alleged to adopt violent counter-terrorism approaches while insulating dictators with their 'regime survival package' (Watling et al., 2024). Their presence exacerbates terrorist threats and erodes civil-military norms. Russian diplomacy aims to create demand for Russian security assistance by perpetuating conflict, while resource exploitation and mining concessions often accompany these security partnerships (Parens, 2022). Deals with Russian PMSCs frequently involve resource concessions as payment, facilitating Kremlin weapon sales and further embedding Russian influence in the region through potential client states. African leaders perceive the Wagner Group as a more viable security alternative due to its lack of accompanying moral lectures on human rights and democracy. This goes along with the

impression that western states have not done enough to help them via security cooperation, military sales, or counterterrorism operations (Parens, 2022).

Implications for terrorism

The coup in Mali in 2020 did not significantly improve security, resulting in a minor decline in terrorist attacks in areas under junta control, but the overall threat still persists. Similarly, Burkina Faso experienced an increase in terrorist attacks following the removal of President Blaise Compaoré in 2015, with incidents rising fivefold between 2016 and 2019 due to a security vacuum and the disbanding of the elite presidential corps (Parens, 2022). From 2012 to 2019, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reported 1,463 armed clashes involving 195 armed groups (Raleigh et al., 2020: 1–21). The conflict has expanded both geographically and through alliances, with militants adapting global narratives to local conditions, dynamics, political uncertainties, and grievances to facilitate recruitment and alliance formation. JNIM used a 'pastoralist populism' strategy, integrating local groups into a network appealing to communal groups, while ISGS adopted a 'pillage and reprisal' approach, integrating local groups into a hierarchical system with escalating violence (Raleigh et al., 2020).

'Ethnoculture instrumentalization' has further worsened the situation. Reports indicate that between February 2021 and February 2022, nearly 2,000 civilians lost their lives in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger due to attacks that frequently targeted their ethnic and religious identities and their support for community defense groups (UNFPA, 2020: 31–33). Scholars have proposed that the process that fuels terrorist recruitment, especially among the youth, includes manipulation of religious sentiments and stigmatisation based on ethnicity (UNFPA, 2020). The presence of terrorist groups in the Sahel has also intensified organised crime, including drug trafficking, arms trading, human trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom (Dieng, 2022).

Apart from international efforts, which included France launching Operation Serval in 2013, followed by Operation Barkhane in 2014, deploying 5,000 troops to support Sahelian countries, regional counterterrorism efforts have included the G5 Sahel Joint Force formed in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, and the Multinational Joint Task Force created in 2014–2015 by several Lake Chad Basin countries to combat terrorism. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have also recently signed a mutual defense pact to help each other against armed rebellions and external aggression (Al Jazeera, 2023). However, these operations have faced similar allegations of IHL and IHRL violations as the PMSCs, including targeting civilians, summary executions, torture, rape, and enforced disappearances. Human Rights Watch, the UN, and other organisations have reported over 600 illegal killings by state security forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger since the end of 2019 (Zoubir, 2022).

Additionally, concerns exist about human rights abuses committed by troops, such as France's Barkhane forces in 2021, which exacerbate the situation and lead to the perception of western troop deployment and engagement as a continuation of their colonial past (Zoubir, 2022). The inefficient accountability and oversight of state security forces, coupled with the transition to a democratic framework, further alienates the local population and undermines counterterrorism efforts (Wilén, 2021). Furthermore, although these forces have contributed to enhancing the proficiency of Sahelian armies, they have not resulted in any improvement in governance (Camara & Stigant, 2023). The result has been the weakened legitimacy of the state and support by the youth, the expulsion of these forces by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and the pivot towards Russia and partnership with PMSCs such as the Africa Corps of the Wagner Group, though they too face similar allegations (ADF, 2024).

The impact of Africa Corps' activities has created resentment amongst local communities, especially where the youth have joined terrorist groups. Due to the morally contestable methods and approaches employed by Wagner forces, such as executions of suspects, even local populations that were against terrorist groups felt alienated and became sympathetic towards the terrorist outfits (Giustozzi, 2024). Furthermore, allegations of racism have been made within the military units. Different chains of command and poor coordination have resulted in violent clashes between local forces and members of PMSCs such as Wagner (Giustozzi, 2024). This could potentially exacerbate the already existing complex layer of government alienation, even within the armed forces. The use of PMSCs has also raised concerns about the sustainability of counterterrorism operations. While they can provide combat assistance, holding onto territory captured from armed groups and maintaining security in the long term may prove challenging.

PMSCs are not required to provide any additional development initiatives to the local population, unlike state-sponsored or UN-coordinated military endeavours. Their role is solely focused on providing hardcore security to support the ruling regimes, not on mediation, education, or development initiatives (Olech, 2024). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that use of PMSCs will help defeat the terrorist outfits and rebels and could also cause losses to the organisation, thus damaging their marketability or affecting the dynamics in the region as security providers to the ruling juntas (Olech, 2024).

Conclusion

The current trend in the Sahel region reflects a geopolitical shift in the reliance of military juntas on Russian PMSCs as opposed to previous western-backed PMSCs and military forces. Despite a change in partners and regimes, however, there has hardly been a decrease in terrorism in the region encompassing Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. One could also assume that the region is simply transitioning from one colonial power to another, given that both share similar economic objectives. This has made the local

population even more belligerent towards the central governments, leading to an increase in sympathy towards terrorist groups. The Sahel is fast emerging as a region of proxy war between the west and Russia at the cost of the locals (Rekšáková, 2021). Furthermore, the region may see the addition of other groups, such as Turkish fighters from the Syrian civil war, to counter the existing Africa Corps (Fernandez, 2024).

From a constructivist lens, to counter the increase in terrorism caused indirectly by the employment of PMSCs, the aspects of alienation and mistrust by the people towards their government that are exploited by terrorists looking to recruit members must be addressed. The success and legitimacy of a government are dependent on the goodwill of the citizens toward their leaders (de Montclos, 2021). For this, socialisation through outreach programs, dialogue, peacebuilding, and other development programs that offer communities non-violent economic opportunities are important to build upon the existing positive signs of economic and social development. The UN Human Development Index has increased since the 1990s in the Sahel by almost 1.9 percent per year (Osman, 2021).

While the Wagner Group presents itself as a friend (Patta & Carter, 2023), it is actually just a business conducting a security transaction to gain access to resources. Additionally, a culture of legal oversight is important to strengthen avenues of accountability for human rights abuses. Those with the political will to do so need to localise and enforce the many existing international legal instruments. The Russian government's direct involvement with Wagner through its restructuring and the emergence of the Africa Corps reduces its plausible deniability when using PMSCs (The Nato Strategic Direction-South Hub, 2024). However, that doesn't mean that exploitable legal grey zones have completely disappeared. Therefore, this culture of impunity needs to be addressed in order to restore people's trust in their state institutions. It is through these steps that recruitment into terrorist groups and antipathy towards the central government will decrease.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

Notes on contributors

Yasmin Arshad currently holds the position of researcher at the PAF Air War College Institute (AWCI) in Karachi, Pakistan. Previously, she served as a Research Fellow at the Sindh Commission on the Status of Women, Government of Sindh, Pakistan. In this role, she was responsible for managing women's rights cases, projects, and law reviews, including initiatives focused on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Peacebuilding

in collaboration with various government departments, law enforcement agencies, and international NGOs such as the United Nations. Before her tenure at the Sindh Commission, she completed her MA in International Studies and Diplomacy from the SOAS University of London, where her research interests revolved around non-traditional security issues and their implications for national security. Additionally, she has contributed to the academic discourse through publication in *Pakistan Horizon*, where she explored the concept of feminist foreign policy. Furthermore, she is an active member of the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, engaging in scholarly and policy dialogues on international affairs and security issues.

Sehrish Qayyum holds the position of Assistant Professor at the Air War College Institute (AWCI) in Karachi. Prior to this, she served as an assistant professor at the Pakistan Navy War College (PNWC) in Lahore. Dr. Qayyum earned her PhD in political science from the Department of Political Science at the University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. Her appointment as an HEC Indigenous PhD Fellow from 2017 to 2020 marked her as the youngest recipient of a PhD in political science in Pakistan. Dr. Qayyum has conducted extensive research on the Pak-Afghan border, focusing particularly on the proposed Coordinated Border Management System and developing the War-Control Theory. The SDPI-CRVE Research Network has awarded her a research grant, and she is a member of the International Studies Association in the US. Dr. Qayyum has presented her research findings at numerous national and international conferences, contributing significantly to the academic discourse on strategic security and warfare tactics. In addition to her academic roles, Dr. Qayyum has enriched her professional experience by working at the United Nations Development Program in Pakistan for four years within the Democratic Governance Unit. Furthermore, she shares her expertise as a visiting faculty member at the Department of Political Science, University of Punjab.

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