

# Interrogating the Commoditization of Force in the Sahel Region: A Case Study of Mali

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Intra-state conflicts are on the rise in many parts of Africa where armed non-state actors strive to take over political power from legitimate authority. In an attempt to overcome such armed confrontations and restore peace, weak nations would seek external assistance and sometimes make secret deals with private military companies that specialize in intelligence gathering, training of fighters, and supply of state-of-the-art weaponry. Using Mali as a case study, this desk study relies on secondary data available online and in print. It attempts to address the question as to how the French-led multinational forces in the Sahel region of Africa has become an endless conflict since 2013. In the light of the Game Theory, the study has found that the commoditization of force that transforms well-equipped fighters into profit-making contractors is instrumental to the trending nature of war against Islamism. The military takeover in Mali translates the determination of the commander-in-chief to occupy the driver' seat but no one knows when the fighting will end, given that both multinational forces and insurgents are rational players in the game. The paper recommends a strict adherence to the Geneva anti-mercenary legislation to curtail the influence of private military companies in conflict zones.

*Keywords:* Jihadism, contractors, Mali, takeover, commoditization, France.

## Introduction

The ascendancy of armed groups operating in the Sahel region has been closely associated with the fall of Muammar Kaddafi in 2011. Many ex-Libyan mercenaries pitched their tents in Northern Mali and formed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). Together with a Tuareg group called Ansar Dine, they took up weapons against the Malian government and declared the independence of Azawad in Northern Mali. Dissatisfied with the way President Amani Toumani Toure handled the crisis, Captain Amadou Sanogo led the military coup but under their watch, the security situation deteriorated: by April 2012, the country lost control of its three main cities of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. However, the MNLA which was a more secular group had to fight Ansar Dine and a splinter group, known as Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) before losing entire Northern Mali to the Islamists by July 2012 [1].

Since then, various bodies have offered to stop the progression of Islamism in the entire Sahel region. These include the French-led Operations Serval and Barkhane forces, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) of four countries (Chad, Cameroon, Niger,

and Nigeria) which has been fighting against Boko Haram\* in the Lake Chad basin since 2012; the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA); the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania); the deployment of US troops and European forces whose exact number have remained a mystery to date. Despite the presence of such a conglomerate of combat troops on the ground, alongside the Malian armed forces (FAMA), the security situation in the region has continued to wane. Military personnel have been ambushed and killed by armed groups; villages have been wiped out, trailing behind a great deal of civilian casualties coupled with untold hardship among millions of displaced persons.

Local grievances such as corruption, lack of motivation, poor training, and logistics may explain the low performance of FAMA in fighting unconventional wars but such claims have raised the question of why the intervention of foreign troops in the Sahel could not defeat the enemy on the battlefield and restore peace in the region. The paper which relies on secondary data (literature review) adopts a case study method in an attempt to address the question as to why the coalition of multinational troops described above alongside FAMA tend to exacerbate the armed conflict rather than defeat the enemy in a record time. Mali is deemed appropriate because of its location within the conflict zone (Sahel Region) and the military takeover that is determined to overturn the table of the game.

In the light of the Game Theory, the study argues that the commoditization of force in which fighters (mercenaries) are bought and sold to the highest bidder has transformed an armed conflict into a prolonged market for force whose *raison d'être* is the maximization of profits in the hands of contractors. Organized around four sections, the paper opens with a conceptual clarification of keywords and proceeds with a review of literature on the rise of armed non-state actors and the commoditization of force. The third section provides the study with a theoretical framework that explicates this new trend. Finally, the paper makes sense of the change of power in Mali as a strategy for the military government to occupy the driver seat and directly control the market of force.

## Conceptual clarification

*Terrorism* is as old as humanity itself and there is no consensus in the literature regarding its definition [2]. However, the paper aligns with the Global Terrorism Database which defines terrorism as “acts of violence by non-state actors, perpetrated against civilian populations, intended to cause fear, to achieve a political objective” [3]. This definition captures the September 11, 2001 attack in which more than 3,000 innocent people lost their lives when a group of *Islamists* hijacked US planes that hit the prestigious Twin Towers in New York and destroyed a section of the Pentagon in Washington DC. In the aftermath of this tragic event, terrorists and Islamists became birds of a feather when it was ruled out that Al-Qaeda\* and their affiliates around the world identified with *Islamism* construed as an extremist version of Islam which bases political power solely on the Sharia Law [4].

*Jihadists* take the idea that God has no partners, which means that by taking God's role and making laws, any secular ruler is an idolater, and he must therefore be killed [5].

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\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

Also known as *Islamists*, Jihadists claim to carry out a holy fight (jihad) for the establishment of the Caliphate where the Sharia law would be strictly practiced in public and private life alike [6]. To achieve their goal of reclaiming the land of Islam, they resort to maximum terror against infidels, including secular Muslims, Sufis, Shi'a, and other believers. As a borderless movement of radical Islamists, Jihadism threatens to undermine the sovereignty of states everywhere.

*Mercenaries* are foreign fighters that are ready to die for profit whereas soldiers that fight under a national flag are among the citizens who are ready to pay the highest price in the defense of their fatherland at home and abroad. Even though, from the Latin words, both soldiers (*solidus*) and mercenaries (*merces*) are paid fighters, the only difference between them borders on loyalty. In this study, both mercenaries and jihadists make up the category of armed non-state actors (ANAs) that are determined to rob the state of its monopoly of violence. In this context, *the commoditization of force* is understood as the ability to purchase from private military companies, combat services such as foreign fighters, intelligence and weaponry in cash or in kind. Put differently, combat forces can be sold in a private market for force and deployed in a conflict zone to fight either alongside regular armies or against them according to the economic principle of supply and demand. Before going any further, it is important to glance at post-independent Africa and apportion a certain degree of responsibility to the local actors as potential buyers of force.

## Literature review

Protracted wars are reminiscent of religious conflicts which were commonplace in the Middle Ages. Even though the 1648 Westphalia Peace Treaty did not prevent interstate wars thereafter, it established an international system in which states became the only legitimate players that knew how to fight and end wars, using conventional weapons, peace treaties and diplomatic channels. In the logic of state making at the start of the Second World War, American and British leaders drew up the Atlantic Charter in 1941 to support the right of all peoples to choose their government. While Prime Minister W. Churchill had in mind only the rights of conquered nations of Europe, President Roosevelt believed that the post-war objective of self-determination ought to extend to all colonized peoples, including Africans [7]. The reluctance in recognizing the right of Africans to self-rule as citizens of independent states was apparent in the UN Resolution 1514 of December 14, 1960 whereby eighty-nine countries voted yes, none against but all major colonial powers including France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Netherland, and Belgium abstained [8].

Focussing on the French Africa under General De Gaulle in the late 1950s, the survival of post-independent Francophone states required the continuous involvement of the French officials in political, economic, militarily or technical matters. This paternalistic policy was strengthened in the context of the Cold War so much that over many decades, France was able to exercise a virtual empire in Africa [9]. Even though the decolonization of Africa became a *fait accompli* thereafter, its pay-off was quickly discounted by the mounting mistrust between Washington and Moscow so much so that political maturation was delayed until further notice [10]. From Western Sahara, Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, and Eritrea, little or no attention was given to proxy and when the Iron Curtain eventually came down in 1989, a strong wind of change shook the foundations of dictatorial regimes in East Europe and beyond.

Just as the independence struggle spread across the African continent with unprecedented speed in the 1960s and forced the colonial authorities to hand over power to the natives with little or no preparation, what happened in the 1990s was another contagion of freedom from misrule which took most African leaders by surprise. Incumbents that dared to embrace the wind of change submitted to the power of the ballot. Others opted for the gun battle in an attempt to postpone indefinitely the rule of law while creating a climate conducive to “the resurgence of old expectations and social movements of long-standing, able to assert themselves once more as soon as international organizations had moderated their support for authoritarian regimes” [11].

In his famous article published in 1989, *The end of History and the Last Man*, renowned American scholar Francis Fukuyama predicted that, with the end of the Cold War, international conflicts would yield to cooperation, liberal democracy, and peace among nations. To illustrate this new development, and for the first time in the history of the United Nations, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council unanimously supported the deployment of multinational forces in the Gulf War that lasted six weeks in the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq [12]. However, contrary to Fukuyama’s prognostic, the euphoria of military cooperation was short-lived: the fall of the Berlin Wall that might have buried the Cold War brought back hot wars. One of the characteristics of the wars of the 1990s was the tacit support given to rebel groups by neighbouring states whether in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo, to name but a few. Put differently, the end of the Cold War ushered in the beginning of the end of the Westphalian Order characterized by the gradual erosion of state sovereignty and the rise of armed non-state actors (ANA) capable of waging unending wars [13; 14].

Following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington DC, one would have expected the United States to engage in a self-defense war against the likes of Egypt and Saudi Arabia where most terrorists originated and for having failed to arrest and prosecute them. Chomsky asks the lead question differently: “Once the identity of the terrorists is known, should the American government launch a military attack on the country or countries where the terrorists are based, or should the American government seek to extradite them to stand trial?” [15, p.199]. But the opposite was the case because the said states were strong American allies in the Middle East and it took ten years before the leader of Al Qaeda\*, Osama bin Laden was found in his compound in the neighboring country, Pakistan and killed on May 2, 2011.

By invading Iraq two years later on the false claim of ridding the world of weapons of mass destruction, the United States developed a template to be followed thereafter: poor nations are the battlefields of the global war on terror fought with no end in sight. It is worth noting however that the Russian Federation, being one of the great powers, has banned any terrorist organisation on its territory [16]. Arguably, the rapid deployment of heavily armed combat troops into Afghanistan to fight a small group of Jihadists was not only bye-bye to the sacrosanct sovereignty of states (particularly the weak ones) but also the recognition of armed non-state actors in the international system. Such a veiled recognition of ANAs internationally has signalled the revival of unending wars that are “increasingly fought by militias, paramilitaries, warlord armies, criminal gangs, private

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\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

security firms, and tribal groupings so that the Westphalian state's monopoly of violence is increasingly challenged from both outside and inside" [12].

Even though intrastate armed conflicts (civil wars) no longer make headlines, armed non-state actors (ANAs) operating behind the veil of multinational forces have joined the private market for force and they are capable of waging endless wars against sovereign states in many parts of the world while at the same time making huge profits. Empirical studies reveal the commoditization of force by exposing the involvement, in many zones of conflict, of Private Military and Intelligence Companies (PMICs) such as Academi (ex Blackwater), AEGIS, G4S, Triple Canopy, Wagner Group, and many more. They specialize in the business of recruitment and training of fighters, supply of military hardware and intelligence into conflict zones, protection of critical infrastructures for financial gain [17; 18].

However, aware of the danger of involving foreign fighters in violent conflicts at home and abroad, the Geneva Protocols I and II enacted an anti-mercenary regulation on July 3, 1977 which entered into force on 20 October 2001, titled *The UN International Convention against Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries* and the Organization of African Unity Convention on Mercenaries [19]. Sooner, this legal instrument has been forgotten probably because it failed to meet the interests of great powers that are top producers of weapons of war such as United States of America, France, China, Russia, Great Britain, India and Israel, among others. Instead, the anti-mercenary regulation has rather created a clandestine market for the force that is now located in any zone of conflict around the world [20]. It did not take long before the black market of mercenaries was taken up by registered private military companies and legalized, making it difficult to identify a mercenary when it comes to the supply and demand for military services.

As far as the commoditization of force is concerned, the boundary between the black market and regulated business of registered Private Military and Intelligence Companies (PMICs) remains blurred. According to McFate,

Those in the industry, their clients, and some outside experts spurn the "M" word owing to the associated stigma and give these private-sector fighters new labels: private military contractors, private security companies, private military companies, private security/military companies, private military firms, private service providers, operational contractors, and contingency contractors [13, p. 6].

While some private fighters are recruited underground and behind the veil of secrecy, others sell their services in the open market as contractors and experts in the art of waging wars. As McKenna and Johnson contend, "Modern-day mercenaries are stationed throughout the world fighting conflicts for governments that are reluctant to use their own troops or where foreign troops are unable or unwilling to go" [21]. PMICs commoditize the force in such a way that only a few clients who can honor the bills will enjoy their professional services. Citing Nigeria as an example, the government hired a company called Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP) to support its combat operations against Boko Haram\* in 2013 [19]. But after a successful rescue of good number of Chibok girls, more than 1,000 other school children have been kidnapped the same way, calling for more rescued operations [22]. The longer the war the better for all contractors and no one is expected to act irrationally. The next section pro-

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\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

vides the study with a theoretical framework that is intended to throw some light on the private market for profit in which ANAs interact rationally.

## Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the theoretical framework of Game Theory in an attempt to address the central question as to how contemporary fighters get entangled in the quagmire of endless wars. Originally developed by mathematician John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern in 1944 to solve problems in economics, the Game Theory has been tested in different disciplines that are concerned with social interactions [23]. It is most popularized in the *Prisoner's dilemma* in which two criminals are kept in separate cells, and furnished with the possibility of freedom should they choose to cooperate or remain behind bars longer than required if non-cooperation takes place.

A player in the game can be an individual, a group of people, a corporation, or a nation. They are deemed rational actors when they anticipate each other's movements in such a way that the decision of one party is dependent upon the other party's decision also [19]. Being rational players, they would desist from pursuing a zero-sum game. Instead, each will maximize their chance of regaining total or partial freedom by imagining the best strategy of the other player and at the same minimize their individual losses. As Hayes points out, the best strategy for both of them is confession but "neither is aware of the other's strategy and without certainty that one will not confess, both will likely confess and receive a five-year prison sentence" [24].

The game does not state in advance what a player's goal should be but it shows how the player can best achieve whatever goal they have in mind based on two available strategies, namely cooperation, and competition. It is expected that both players would make optimal decisions that may reflect similar, opposed, or mixed interests, producing four possible outcomes: (1) strict dominant advantage by one player, (2) a weakly dominant outcome, (3) equivalent outcome in which none of the players benefit or lose against the other, and (4) intransitive or unexpected outcome. Petersohn applies the Game Theory in relation to the anti-mercenary legislation whereby an unintended consequence of strategic interactions of states (actors) explains the prevalence of the market for force since 2013. The scholar underscores the development of a stable situation in which no actor has an incentive to change from their chosen strategy. The fact that no player benefits or loses against the other is known as the Nash Equilibrium: "both actors find a mutual best response from which they cannot improve unilaterally, and they decide to repeat this interaction" [19, p. 113].

This study expands the scope of interaction to know how the game is played out in a real social situation of armed conflict that implicates ANAS (contractors and Jihadists) going on in the Sahel region. Despite the presence of security agents on the ground, Jihadist fighters appear to be heavily armed, disciplined, and very committed. They enter the villages and towns in a great number, launch coordinated attacks and disappear from the radar of multinational forces. From time to time, they ambush loyal forces and cater away arms and ammunition. They also resort to kidnapping a category of people (foreigners, school children and government officials) and secretly negotiate their release in exchange for heavy ransoms in cash and kind. But such punctual actions do not justify their capacity to sustain the fight in the long run. Granted that contractors are driven by the principle of supply and

demand, both intervening troops and jihadists need each other to prolong the armed conflict in order to not only remain relevant but also maximize their respective payoffs. It can therefore be deduced that the Jihadist fighters have joined the lucrative market for force in which each participant makes rational moves that take into account the actions of others.

Just as multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations operating in conflict zones are linked to Private Military and Intelligence Companies for their corporate security, so it is for the Jihadists ravaging the Sahel region. They too link up with contractors and subcontractors around the world so much that no one is interested in knowing the identity of fighters, the source of their funding, and weaponry. McFate puts it bluntly that “US outsourcing of security has normalized the market for force, inspiring warlords and other conflict entrepreneurs to start their own private military companies” [13, p.20]. As mercenaries and clients seek each other out, negotiate prices, and wage war for private gains, they flood the market with soldiers of fortune (mercenaries). This prompts other buyers to do the same in self-defense and eventually, the entire region is swamped in an endless war.

From an insider account, it is gathered that some PMICs work only for Jihadists, offering standard services (military trainers, arms dealers, or elite warriors). For instance, Malhama Tactical which is based in Uzbekistan works mainly in Syria for the Nusra Front\*, an Al Qaeda\*-affiliated terrorist group, and the Turkistan Islamic Party\*, the Syrian branch of a Uighur extremist group\* based in China — [13, p.3]. Maintaining some degree of instability will ensure the longevity of contracts but private companies have to make sure that their individual reputations are not damaged by poor performance [25]. It is not surprising to note that conflict-torn countries are in the habit of renegotiating military contracts with different partners. At this juncture, propaganda media help to bury the already dead truth while scapegoating local authority for whatever wrong. How does the Game Theory explain the protracted nature of armed conflict in the Sahel region, particularly in Mali?

### Case study: Mali

The Sahel is a semi-arid region that covers many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. It is best known as one of the poorest and most environmentally degraded zones in the world even though it is engorged with abundant strategic natural resources [26; 27]. In particular, Mali is home to four UNESCO World heritage sites, including Timbuktu City which is known as the intellectual and spiritual capital of Islam in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Mosque of Djenne as well as the 17-meter pyramidal Tomb of Askia in Gao among others [28].

According to the UN Human Development Report, this landlocked country with a population of 19 million, is paradoxically one of the poorest nations of the world (184<sup>th</sup> out of 189), scoring very low in terms of the Human Development Index [29]. Contrary to the ugly image of a poverty-ridden and failed state in dire need of international intervention, Mali is endowed with abundant natural resources which are in high demand by multinational corporations. As the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative observes,

Mali has rich deposits of gold, bauxite, manganese, iron ore, limestone, phosphates, and uranium. Oil and gas exploration, which slowed down in 2012, has recommenced, given

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\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

Mali's proven reserves of oil shale. Mineral deposits are primarily located around Kayes, Ansongo, Bafoulamé, Hombori, Tilemsi, and western Mali. Precious stones in Mali include garnets, rare magnetic minerals, pegmatite, corindons, metamorphosing minerals, quartz, and carbonates [29].

It is worth noting that since its political independence in 1960, the country has remained a part of an exclusive French zone of influence, *pré carré*. It has, at the same time, experienced a series of rebellions, a military coup, and a 23-year dictatorship before returning to a democratic system of government in 1992. The current bout of insecurity goes back to the 2012 military coup that ended the long tenure of lieutenant colonel Amadou Toumani Toure in the midst of the Tuareg rebellion. Put together, the availability of natural resources, the presence of foreign fighters including the Jihadists, and the inability of the Armed Forces (FAMA) to take the lead in safeguarding the territorial integrity of Mali make a case study for the commoditization of force in which war contractors pursue profit-making goals more than the end of hostilities.

By way of illustrating the “boots-and-loots” doctrine which characterizes the commoditization of private force, Mali whose military forces were poorly funded, ill-equipped, and demoralized as a result of rampant corruption, sought the military intervention of her former colonial master. Shortly, French heavily-armed troops arrived Bamako and they set their tents in Northern Mali in 2013. Meanwhile at the UN Security Council, France pressed for a resolution that would allow a deployment of multinational forces that specialized in the supply of arms and ammunition as well as trained fighters. Apparently, the Malian armed Forces (FAMA) were kept in the background for a long time, and prevented from reaching certain combat zones while Western troops took the leadership position on the battlefield where they came face to face with the para-military forces but over many years, they were unable to defeat the enemy. In the light of the Game Theory, the killing of fighters on both sides of the fence can be interpreted as a deliberate tit-for-tat strategy in which each participant, in an iterated prisoner's dilemma, follows a course of action consistent with their opponent's previous turn. For example, if provoked, player A subsequently responds with retaliation towards player B and if unprovoked, both cooperate. Eventually the FAMA lost faith not only in the multinational forces but also in the democratically elected authority that initially invited foreign fighters in the country. Three explanatory themes highlight the rationale behind the military takeover, namely a determination to break the French monopoly of security, a strategic repositioning for the control local resources, and geopolitical considerations.

### *Breaking the French monopoly of security*

France has always relied on its military bases across post-independent francophone Africa to secure economic interests in her zone of influence (France-Afrique). At the start of armed conflict in the Sahel region, France was the first European nation to deploy combat troops in Northern Mali. As a permanent member of the Security Council, it supported Resolution 2100 that led to the creation on 25 April 2013 of a United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSMA by its French acronym. The former colonial power is also instrumental in the creation of the G5 Joint Force for the Sahel in 2017. At



the initiative of France in 2020, many other international players made up a European military task force called Takuba to accompany Malian soldiers in the fight against jihadists. All these forces put together have not been able to defeat the enemy on the battlefield over the past nine years [30].

For the military that took power in Bamako in August 2020, France was more a Malian problem than a solution and it should no longer be trusted. Maiga and Adam extended the blame to all the multinational forces mentioned whose interventions in the Sahel were driven by self-interest [31]. On his part, French President E. Macron opened the can of worms when he made it known that Paris was set to draw down the Barkhane forces. Not only had he refused to legitimate the interim government of Assimi Goita, but he also informed the international community about the counterproductive presence of mercenaries in Mali [32]. On 23 December 2021, Canada and 15 other European countries operating in Mali issued similar condemnations [24]. In a war of words, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga openly charged France for carrying out political, media, and diplomatic terrorism against his government [29]. In the finish, Mali decided to break France's monopoly of security by first, expulsing the French Ambassador from Mali within 72 hours, calling for immediate withdrawal of the Barkhane force and getting rid of two major French broadcasts regarded as channels of propaganda in the country [33]. Today, Bamako has widely opened its door to Kremlin with the signing of military contracts between Russian companies and the Malian government to the satisfaction of the latter.

### *Strategic repositioning*

In a democracy, military personnel submit to the civilian authority in the discharge of their constitutional duties. Other measures that improve the control of the military by the civilians include legislative oversight, the extension of control into lower levels of military organization, and civilian involvement in the professional education of the officers [34]. According to the doctrine of military professionalism, a voluntary submission to civilian authority is beneficiary to the soldiers in the form of autonomy granted to the military institution regarding budget, training, deployment, promotion, and similar benefits [35]. However, since the start of Western intervention in the Sahel in 2013, the level of professionalism has remained very low given that national armed forces of Francophone countries decry the lack of funding and weaponry to tackle the insecurity threat on their own terms [32].

The grievances of the suffering masses are publicly expressed in incessant street demonstrations in countries endowed with abundant natural resources. According to the greed/grievance theory, the combination of large exports of primary commodities (diamond, oil, timber, coltan, gold...) easily lootable and tradable, a high proportion of unemployed youth, and economic decline drastically increase the risk of armed conflict [36; 37]. The poorly armed and less motivated combat troops (FAMA) have been constantly ambushed and slaughtered alongside civilian populations by paramilitary fighters while mining companies operating in the conflict zones carry on business as usual. Consequently, a military coup is regarded as the shortest route to a regime change in a state that depends on rent from the exploitation of raw materials. It also suggests that military skills are required for the highest office when it comes to the security at the gate.

Consequently, having lost face in the discharge of their duty, a group of Malian colonels felt betrayed by a democratic government that outsourced national sovereignty to

private military companies. In August 2020, Colonel Assimi Goita who served as interim vice president mounted another palace coup and became the new Malian strongman in May 2021. For the majority of street demonstrators that celebrated the military takeover in Bamako, the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita represented corruption, international interference, and inaction in the face of growing insecurity nationwide — [38]. In the context of fighting private wars for profit (commoditization of force), gatekeeping can be interpreted as military's determination to renegotiate new terms of contracts deemed beneficial to the Malian people in general and the FAMA in particular. As the rule of law gives way to the rule of the gun, the new leadership becomes accountable to no one in the collection of revenues from taxes on import and export, the control of entry visas, the issues of licenses that determine who should engage in business activities and many more [39].

Arguably, after many years of poor performance on the battlefields and condemnation at home and abroad, the coup d'état has allowed the military to reposition itself strategically on the battlefield so as to regain its constitutional mandate of securing the territorial integrity of Mali. This new position is meant to unmask the enemy of state and monitor closely the activities of contractors and their local accomplices. As usual, Human Rights Watch and similar NGOs are quick to denounce human rights abuses committed by the regular army without using the same channels to expose the many contractors involved in the self-funded war as if foreign fighters die for the love of people of Mali [40]. Despite the rain of economic sanctions from ECOWAS and donor countries, the new head of state pays lip service to the pressing demands for a short-term transition to a democratically elected government while working for the total independence of Mali with other global players.

### *Geopolitics*

Africa is littered with narratives of the military takeover in the early hours of Independence that implicated great powers. As both East and West blocs sought to strengthen their positions on the geopolitical chessboard, they turned newly independent states into battlegrounds of ideologies by propping up corrupt regimes with financial aid and weapons with which to suppress local dissent. To secure its zone of influence, France in particular guaranteed political and economic stability of 13 Francophone African countries through elite formation, sport and culture, numerous military bases, and the controversial CFA currency that was easily convertible into French francs and is now pegged to Euro under France's guarantee, among other things.

The determination of the Malian government to break the French monopoly of security is not an isolated action. It has rather inspired the military repositioning in the sub-region, particularly in Chad, Guinea Conakry, and Burkina Faso. For instance, under the Constitution of Chad, the speaker of parliament should have replaced the slain president Idris Deby who died in the fight against rebel groups but a military council led by General Mahamat Idriss Deby took power in April 2021 after dissolving the parliament. With the blessing of French President, it was believed that the country needed a military government to face jihadism in the Sahel. In Guinea Conakry, Special Forces Commander Colonel Mamady Doumbouya who led the September 2021 coup, contends that "he acted because of poverty and corruption in the coastal state" [41]. As for Burkina Faso, the January 24 coup led by Lt-colonel Damiba that overthrew President Roch Marc Kaboré was followed by a counter coup that finally brought Captain Ibrahim Traore to power on

September 30, 2022 under the same demand for greater resources in the fight against Islamist militants. They want to get back on the right track and gather all forces to fight for the recovery of the country's sovereignty [32].

On the whole, what goes on in West Africa and Mali, in particular, reflects France's diminishing influence over her former colonies [42]. As Portuguese lawyer, Fernando Cabrita contends, "France has been clandestinely exercising control over francophone African countries since they formally obtained freedom" [43]. After Paris had decided to drawdown the Barkhane forces stationed in Mali without consulting the latter, Bamako feared a repeat of what may resemble the post-US Afghanistan now under the Taliban\* rule and it turned to Russia for its security and development challenges, just the way the Central African Republic did a few months earlier, gradually and technically pushing France out of its traditional zone of influence [29]. Both Mali and Burkina Faso have renewed their bilateral cooperation with Russia that is committed to help African countries reclaim their respective sovereignties in line with its updated foreign policy document that reads:

The Russian Federation intends to support the future establishment of Africa as a distinctive and influential centre of world development, giving priority to supporting the sovereignty and independence of interested African states, including through security assistance, inter-alia food and energy security, as well as military and military-technical cooperation [44].

By extrapolation, the Malian predicament sheds light on the perennial armed conflicts elsewhere on the continent, particularly in the Great Lakes Region of Africa where the state's monopoly of violence is eroded by war contractors whose covert motivation is an endless war for maximum profit involving illicit exploitation of mineral resources in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [45].

## Conclusion

This paper has interrogated the protracted nature of armed conflict against the backdrop of a booming private market for force which began with the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq two decades ago. Since then, the global war on terror has transformed poor nations into battlefields where boots and loots interface. As a result, private military and intelligence companies have taken the centre stage by providing hired fighters (mercenaries) with training, equipment, and cash. Using Mali as a case study of a protracted armed conflict in the Sahel region, the paper has found out that a country that shares its monopoly of violence with external forces has not only compromised its sovereignty but signed up for the position of a client (customer) in an unregulated market for force in which contractors are kings. Even though contemporary servicemen are in possession of sophisticated weapons of war that are expected to shorten the duration of armed conflicts, the opposite is becoming the rule given that key stakeholders in the private market for force are acting rationally. Not only does their lackadaisical involvement in an armed conflict betray a covert cooperation among them (Nash equilibrium), it also keeps the market flourishing as long as heaven permits. Although the military takeover in Mali has helped the officers in the army to safe face and hold the keys of the gates, it does not in itself take the country out of the whims of the private market for the force.

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\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

It remains to be seen how the new breed of colonel presidents in West Africa will succeed where France-led multinational forces have bitten the bullet. Focussing on the role of private military companies in supplying mercenaries and weapons of war according to the economic principle of supply and demand, this modest study recommends therefore that the 1989 *International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries* should become legally binding with its ratification by major players, including the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

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## Исследование коммерциализации вооруженных сил в регионе Сахель: на примере Мали

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Затяжной конфликт внутри конкретного государства сигнализирует о возрождении естественного состояния, в котором соперничающие силы стремятся перехватить политическую власть у официальной власти. В результате слабые страны легко втягиваются в частный рынок силы, где военные компании специализируются на сборе разведанных, обучении бойцов и поставках самого современного вооружения. Используя Мали в качестве примера, предлагаемое исследование опирается на вторичные данные, доступные онлайн и в печатном виде. В нем предпринята попытка ответить на вопрос о том, каким образом возглавляемые Францией многонациональные силы в африканском регионе Сахель начиная с 2013 года превратились в машину бесконечного вооруженного конфликта. В свете теории игр исследование показало, что коммерциализация силы, которая превращает хорошо экипированных бойцов в приносящих прибыль подрядчиков, играет важную роль в тенденциях войны против исламизма. Хотя военный переворот отражает решимость главнокомандующего занять руководящее кресло, никто не знает, когда конфликт закончится, учитывая, что вооруженные негосударственные субъекты являются рациональными игроками. Авторы исследования рекомендуют строго придерживаться Женевского законодательства о борьбе с наемничеством, чтобы ограничить влияние частных военных компаний в зонах конфликтов.

**Ключевые слова:** джихадизм, подрядчики, Мали, поглощение, коммерциализация, Франция.

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