



Conflict over Resources in the Sahel Region The Case of Mali

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Africa's Sahel region, often referred to as the semi-arid zone, spans from the Sahara Desert in the north to the savannah in the south. It stretches across the continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, encompassing five countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Historically, it has served as a vital trade route connecting the northern and southern regions of the continent, as well as forming a terrestrial link between the Americas and the Atlantic Ocean. This extensive corridor passes through the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Gulf.

This distinctive geographical location has motivated many international powers to launch various initiatives and programs at times, and to intervene directly and indirectly at other times, to protect their strategic interests, which is demonstrated by the multiple activities of the European Union, Russia, China, and the United States of America, in addition to the role of France and the neighboring Arab countries.

However, the Sahel region's significant geopolitical status is not solely due to its geographical location. Rather, it is primarily driven by the diverse and abundant natural resources, including oil, gold, copper, uranium, and natural gas, that have been periodically discovered in the region and which attracted various international powers, separatist movements, terrorist groups, and organized crime entities to vie for control and influence, exploiting the vast expanses of land as well as political changes. All of this has led to growing political turmoil in the region and the proliferation of terrorist factions and organizations. The situation in Mali is a stark example of the ongoing conflict over resources.

Mali: a "Mine of Wealth"

Despite the high levels of poverty in Mali, it is one of the richest African countries in terms of mineral wealth. It ranks third among gold producers in Africa, and its

phosphate reserves are estimated at around 20 million tons, in addition to 600,000 tons of calcium phosphate, 200,000 tons of limestone, 53 million tons of salt, 1.2 billion tons of bauxite, 2 billion tons of iron ore, as well as the raw uranium used in nuclear electricity, which is located in the Kidal region in the north. Mali is also rich in agricultural crops such as cotton, rice, corn, and peanuts due to the abundance of rainfall and the presence of the Niger and Senegal rivers. It is also famous for raising livestock, including cattle, sheep, and goats, which contribute 15% of the national GDP. Livestock are concentrated in the central and northern regions, and Mali ranks second in livestock raising in West Africa.

If Mali's natural resources were effectively utilized, the country could have experienced substantial development and advancement. However, they have instead attracted attention from national political tensions and external interests, rendering Mali susceptible to the influence of dangerous terrorist organizations. These groups exploit ongoing conflicts, social and political instability, organized crime, and various trafficking operations, complicating the government's efforts to extend influence and ensure security across the nation.

The Nature of the Conflict

Mali's geography, ethnic diversity, and the threats to stability in Mali make conflict inevitable. The sparsely populated north is home to nomadic shepherds, including the Songhai, Tuareg, Arab, and Fula peoples. The south is more densely populated and home to the majority of the population, including the Manding, Bambara, Sarakoli, Dogon, and Fula peoples, who are primarily farmers and herders.

The emergence of the Mali crisis can be attributed, in part, to the expansion of Tuareg tribes in the northern region, along with their associated factions and military units. These areas experienced instability and became attractive to various terrorist organizations, which often cooperated or clashed with each other. This dynamic was exacerbated by the return of Tuareg fighters who had participated in extremist activities in Libya, bringing with them their expertise and equipment. Additionally, the presence of weapons from the Libyan army, smuggled into northern Mali, significantly bolstered the combat capabilities of various factions and fronts. Consequently, the central authority in Mali found itself unable to halt the advances of these movements or effectively control the region.

Terrorist Groups

Terrorist groups are also active elements in the Mali crisis, and most of them are active in the northern and central regions that are known for perpetual tension and for being the richest in resources. Among the most important of these organizations are the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Ansar Dine Group, Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb), led by Malian Iyad Ag Ghali, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (the Group for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, and the Al-Murabitun) led by Abu al-Bar al-Sahrawi, succeeding Abu al-Walid. They are spread throughout most of the African Sahel countries and are concentrated in central and northern Mali, where they control vast areas rich in gold and drug trade routes.

Newly discovered mineral wealth in Mali has attracted terrorist groups, who are fighting each other or carrying out attacks to fund their activities. They have exploited ethnic divisions for recruitment and stationing, such as the conflict between the Tuareg and Fula tribes on the Niger border, or the rivalry between Fulani herders and Dogon and Songhai farmers in the central and northern states. They also take advantage of the security vacuum, poverty, and conflict between ethnic groups and the central government to advance their terrorist goals.

Gold and Mining

One of the significant sources of conflict in Mali revolves around mineral wealth, particularly gold. In 2022, industrial gold production witnessed a notable 4% increase, reaching 66.2 tons, up from 63.4 tons in 2021. The Malian Ministry of Mines has affirmed that gold production generates an annual revenue of 400 million Euros, constituting a substantial 75% of the country's exports and 25% of its budget.

With the emergence of extremist groups, the Northern region has become a wide-open space for gold extraction, and it is worth noting that among the most prominent fighters over this treasure are factions linked with «Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam» and others affiliated with Daesh, such as the «Al-Sahrawi Group.» These two organizations are at odds with elements of the local authority that secure wealth areas with other forces on the one hand, and the Russian «Wagner» group, which deploys elements in several Sahel countries and is accused of carrying out mining activities in addition to the basic mission for which the government contracted with it, which is counter-terrorism, on the other. Terrorist organizations are also vying for influence and control over trade routes and natural resources in the border triangle between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

With various stakeholders entering the arena, notably mining companies seeking to strengthen their ties with influential groups controlling the Northern Territory, the actors involved in the crisis have intensified their efforts to exploit resources at an accelerated pace. This has led to the emergence of complex allegiances and affiliations within the state entity.

Pasture Conflict

In the middle of Mali's extensive internal battle over resources, another type emerges that is no less violent or crucial in terms of the country's economy. As a result of climate change, the percentage of agricultural land diminishes, crop yield drops, and confrontations between farmers, herders, and terrorist organisations are on the rise.

The simmering fight over diminishing but indispensable water resources has heightened tensions between various groups. In March 2019, over 160 individuals were killed by Dogon tribes in central Mali, most of them were semi-nomadic herders of the Fulani ethnicity. Furthermore, terrorist organisations such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda are racing to capture as many livestock and agricultural crops as possible in order to secure enough food for their members or to engage in trade. They use any disagreement between farmers and herders to incite and exacerbate ethnic conflicts in order to develop and implement their goals by gaining control and influence over other critical areas.

Conclusion

The geographical environment, the large security vacuum in the centre and north of Mali, political turmoil, the spread of poverty, and complaints about political and economic conditions are all factors that contribute to the growth and recruitment of separatist movements and terrorist groups. They even control entire states and significant border areas by displacing their population in order to promote exploitation of resources and wealth on the one hand, and smuggle minerals and commit numerous unlawful offences on the other. Furthermore, some major interventions by regional and international powers pursuing their economic interests have created multiple loyalties among some factions and within successive central governments, necessitating the recognition that maintaining the security and stability of Mali is an integral part of maintaining the stability of the entire African coast .

Otherwise, wealth can swiftly transform into a curse. Hence, it is imperative to enhance robust and positive cooperation among the international and regional communities.

This cooperation should aim to bring an end to these conflicts, safeguard the nation's resources, facilitate negotiations for sustainable development solutions, and eradicate terrorist organizations. These collective efforts are essential for Mali to transition from a state of turmoil and harness its potential to achieve stability, development, and prosperity.