

Tribal Dynamics in the Sahel

By Rida Lyammouri

Summary

This paper suggests that tribal dynamics of power structure are key in reestablishing peace and development in the region. The Sahel region's security challenges are directly influenced by tribalism and ethnic dynamics. In recent decades mistreatment, favoritism, and corruption allowed criminality and multidimensional conflicts to flourish. This is evident in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, and Chad. Lightly governed and poorly secured regions in these countries became more strategic than ever to national, regional, and international actors due to the rise of militancy, criminal activities, and intercommunity violence. Beyond key cities and towns, these actors struggled and continue to look for the magic formula that will bring sustainable peace.

INTRODUCTION

Tribal dynamics¹ and relationship between the state and ethnic groups remain vital and important in the Sahel today despite the rise of modern states since independence years in the 1960s. While an important number of the population in the region adjusted to the modern world and settled in the cities, majority of communities remain dependent on their nomadic and/or semi nomadic lifestyles. States in the region struggled to adapt their policies to address challenges these communities face living in remote areas. Besides the

capitals and limited number of small towns, majority of the areas of Sahelian states remain underdeveloped and lack basic services and infrastructure. In recent years however, more attention has been given to rural and border communities, but unfortunately for the wrong reasons.

Insecurity and instability in the Sahel today brought back the importance of tribal and ethnic dynamics. These dynamics have been and continue to be exploited by all actors involved in today's conflicts, including central governments, criminal networks and separatists in recent decades, and by militant groups more recently. Alliances, rivalries, and competition over political and economic power, and over natural resources have long contributed to the disruption of social cohesion. Tribal

1. For the purpose of this policy brief tribal and ethnic dynamics refer to building alliances or become rivals for political, economic, and/or territorial control and influence.

dynamics are evident in every conflict-affected area in the Sahel, including northern and central Mali, northern and eastern Niger, around Lake Chad, southwest Libya, and northern and eastern Burkina Faso.

The focus of this policy brief sheds light on the importance of tribal dynamics in the Sahel today. It's based on author's personal observations while conducting fieldwork, researching and studying the region in the past eight years, in addition to consulting scholarly papers and books. To provide a bigger picture, examples provided in this brief touch ongoing conflicts in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, southwest Libya, Lake Chad, and northern Chad. The selection of these geographical areas was made based on the current security and humanitarian situations. These countries have seen increasing proliferation of violent extremist organizations (VEOs), inter-community and ethnic tensions that fuel ongoing conflicts in the region and to which states struggle to adequately manage.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Geographical, demographic and historical circumstances, as well as the physical appearance differences defined the current interactive nature of the Sahel. There are people living in parts of the region where centers and networks have been established for centuries. On the other hand, it was until late 1950s and early 1960s when more modern nation-states started to emerge. For centuries, key urban centers in the Sahel region thrived and once were home to “legendary kingdoms and empires,” as history professor Barbara Cooper described it². However, droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, political instability, and deteriorating security situations made cities like Gao and Timbuktu in Mali, and Agadez in Niger, more so of military zones and Army bases.

View of Gao streets, northern Mali



Source : Rida Lyammouri

Furthermore, communities once living unified; tolerating and supporting each other, are now engaged in the deadliest violence, notably in northern and central Mali, the Tillabéri region of Niger, northern and eastern Burkina Faso, northern and eastern Chad, and southwest Libya. While community tensions and rebellions against central governments have existed for centuries and decades respectively, they were poorly managed by their respective states. Subsequently violent extremist organizations emerged to exploit these existing tensions and grievances to establish themselves in the region, notably rural areas where state presence is almost absent. As a result, state institutions rely on murky relationships with different ethnic and tribal leaders to maintain certain degrees of control. Furthermore, the commonality between the nomadic lifestyles of tribes and the concept of Islam that existed in the region have both deconstructed the state borders and created the bounding structure for collective resistance to states that they considered as an extension of colonialism.

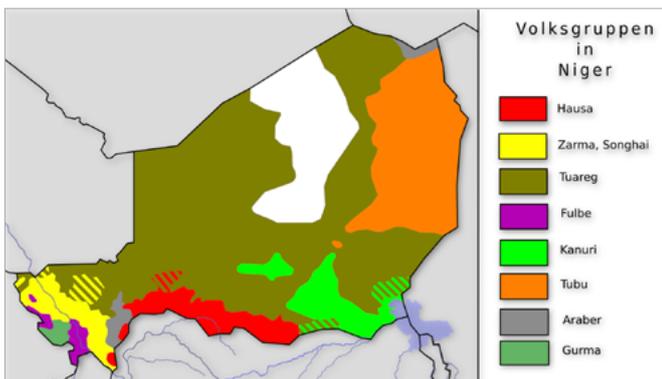
CONCEPT OF TRIBALISM IN THE SAHEL

The existence of a strong sense of shared ethnic traits and possible common cultural behaviors amongst a population or a group of individuals are the pillars of the tribal concept³. With the exception of Tuareg societies following the ancient matrilineal descent, tribal ties could be explained by existing common belief in a common male ancestor. In parts of Africa, including Sahel countries, this could be only confirmed in most cases through oral traditions. However, there remains a necessity to define a social group, its region of influence, its mutual interests, and its contribution and expectation in a country or a region. Despite transformation of societies in the Sahel region and emergence of modern nation-states, the legacy of the tribal concept has persevered.

2. Barbara Cooper, “The Sahel in West African History,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History, September 2018.

3. Carola Lentz, Tribalism and Ethnicity in Africa: A Review of Four Decades of Anglophone Research,” 1995.

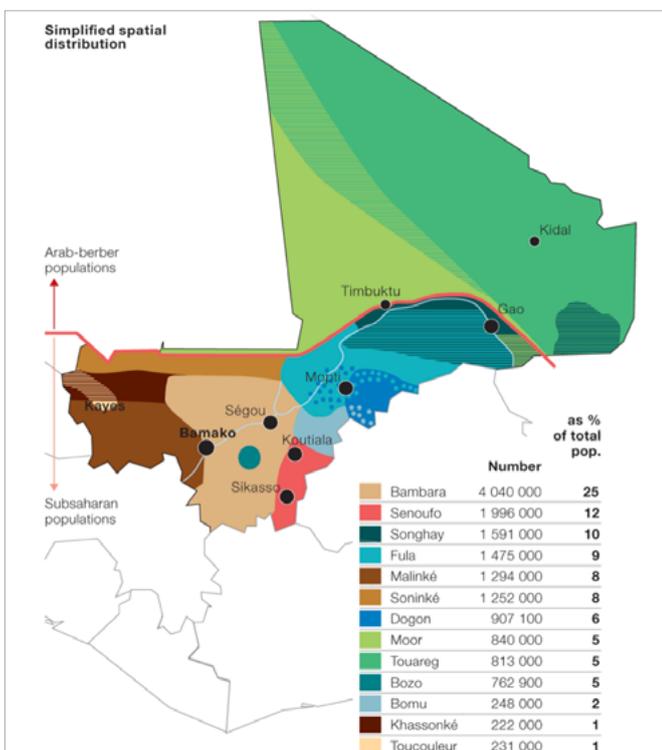
Different ethnic groups in Niger



Source: Reddit.com

political instability. This becomes even more crucial when states align or recruit from one tribe to counter the rise of another tribe considered hostile to central government. In the case of insurgency, the worse case scenario for the government is to face the rise of unified groups. This explains state attempts playing with division tactics to weaken at least one group and align with another, often in exchange for political, military appointments, and/or economic interests. While this might lead to short-term gain, it often results in major breakdowns in a country's unity and solidarity. Furthermore, the creation of rival, if not enemy, tribes most likely trigger never-ending and challenging cycles of inter-tribal disharmony and/or armed conflict.

Ethnic groups in Mali



Source: The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Despite complicated relationships between the state and tribes in the Sahel context, certain conclusions could be drawn. Tribes might form an armed group and become hostile to central government due to one or multiple dissatisfactions, and thus position themselves to directly compete against the state for territorial control, and then make their demands. Tribes might also decide to make arrangements and cooperate with the state. States in the Sahel still fall back on tribalism when the regime in power struggles to resolve ongoing conflict, despite taking the stance of a modern-nation. To be fair, and I think most Sahel observers might agree that tribalism influence was on the decline in certain Sahel states before it became crucial again for political and security reasons in recent years. A perfect example is the creation of ethnic based armed groups and militias in Mali following the 2012 insurgency. The following examples, however, highlight some of the current key tribal and ethnic dynamics in other parts of the Sahel region contributing to ongoing instability.

APPARENT TRIBAL AND ETHNIC DYNAMICS IN THE SAHEL

Tribal and ethnic dynamics is playing a role in every violent conflict in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, and Chad. Dynamics differ from one conflict to another, however; building alliances and becoming rivals are common trends difficult to ignore. These examples are simply consolidated analysis of a rather complex and challenging topic of tribalism and its influence on violence in the Sahel.

In the Sahel today for instance, relationships between different tribes and world-view are shaped based on the social group people belong to. To understand ongoing conflicts in the Sahel, it is important to not undermine and apprehend the ability of different tribes to mobilize its members for purposes of violence. When tribes decide to engage in violence, it doesn't necessarily mean that they do so in order to protect their people and for their survival, but it also demonstrates their ability to engage in offensive actions against rival groups. This is common in countries with persistent environmental threats and

Ségou and Mopti regions in central Mali witnessed the deadliest events due to interethnic and intercommunity tensions in recent months and years. Clashes between Dogon and Fulani communities have resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians and the displacement of more than 50,000 people as of June 2019⁴. The humanitarian and security consequences are impossible to ignore, and are alarming and challenging. These challenges will not be addressed and sustainable peace will not be achieved without making these communities trust each other again. This has proven to be almost impossible despite repeated agreements signed to cease hostilities. These communities engaged and continue to engage in violence under the pretext of protecting their respective communities. The state still have almost no presence in the area, and no role to achieve peace, ongoing talks to cease hostilities are taking place between the ethnic based militias and militant groups⁵.

Livestock market in Ménaka, Mali



Source : Rida Lyammouri

Ménaka region in Mali and Tillabéri region in Niger did not escape ethnic based violence in recent years as well. The area saw the rise of ethnic based militia under the pretext to combat “terrorism,” which received a warm welcome from national and international communities. Militias also relied on the appealing narrative of protecting their respective communities against armed banditry carried

by rival ethnic group.⁶ Simultaneously and relying on ethnic and tribal affiliations, lack of legitimate and fair solutions to the conflict, opposing ethnic and tribal groups looked elsewhere for protection and support. For instance, while Doussahaq Tuareg and Imghad Tuareg align themselves with militias fighting terrorism, some Fulani communities aligned themselves with militant groups operating on both sides of the borders of Mali and Niger. Both tactics relying on ethnic and tribal dynamics contributed to the rise rather than decline of violence in Ménaka region in Mali and Tillabéri region in Niger. The murky relationship between different actors in the area is making peacebuilding efforts and finding the perfect social cohesion formula extremely challenging, not only for the Malian and Nigerien governments but also for the international community.

Burkina Faso regions bordering Mali and Niger emerged as the latest to suffer from division and ethnic-based violence. The rise of militancy in Burkina Faso is followed by increased acts of revenge conducted by self-defense militias under the pretext of protecting their community as well.⁷ At the same time, security forces reported to have carried acts of abuse and atrocities against presumed members or supporters of militant groups.⁸ These acts were based on ethnic affiliations rather than equal and fair investigations. This growing mistrust between communities and instability in the country only served militant groups. Pitting one group against another based on ethnic affiliation supports narratives and helps with the recruitment by extremist groups.

Peace and social cohesion prove to be difficult in southwest and southeastern Libya, northeastern Niger, and northern Chad, thanks to complex and unpredictable tribal and ethnic dynamics. The area has major economic significance to all parties involved. This is not limited to control over

4. International Migration Organization (IOM), “Mopti: Over 50,000 people displaced amid inter-communal violence,” 14 June 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mopti-over-50000-people-displaced-amid-inter-communal-violence>

5. Morgane Le Cam, “Au Centre du Mali, des Négociations Fragiles et Controversées,” 21 August 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/08/21/au-centre-du-mali-des-negociations-fragiles-et-controversees_5501281_3212.html

6. International Crisis Group (ICG), “Frontière Niger-Mali: Mettre l’Outil Militaire au Service d’une Approche Politique,” 12 June 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/afrique/west-afrique/mali/261-frontiere-niger-mali-mettre-loutil-militaire-au-service-dune-approche-politique>; See also Human Rights Watch, “Mali Conflict and Aftermath: Compendium of Human Rights Watch Reporting, 2012-2017,” Visited August 2019, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/malicompendium0217.pdf

7. Romane Da Cunha and Tanguy Quidelleur, “Self-Defense Movements in Burkina Faso: Diffusion and Structuration of Koglweogo Groups,” 15 November 2018, <https://www.noria-research.com/self-defence-movements-in-burkina-faso-diffusion-and-structuration-of-koglweogo-groups/>

8. Human Rights Watch, “We Found Their Bodies Later That Day,” 22 March 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/22/we-found-their-bodies-later-day/atrocities-armed-islamists-and-security-forces>

oil fields but also control over licit and illicit trafficking. Sometimes ethnic groups inhabiting the area, including Arabs, Tuareg, and Tebu, share controlled territories relying on gentlemen agreements to share the generated wealth. This is however not always the case and they often engage in violent clashes.⁹ This violence is often driven by political manipulation exercised by central government, or whoever is in power in the case of Libya. The fear of losing control of this space; located far from the capitals, central governments of countries like Chad,¹⁰ Niger, and Libya rely on building an alliance with one or multiple ethnic groups against those opposed to the governments' agendas to maintain certain degrees of influence. While sometimes these tribal and ethnic dynamics are limited to national instability inside one country's borders, it does have direct and inevitable impact on neighboring countries. This is true and visible in southwest Libya, northern Chad, and northeastern Niger.

Crisis around Lake Chad is beyond the emergence of militant groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). For instance, access to water and fertile land have been a source of fragmentation and tensions between Kanuri and Hausa.¹¹ Kanuri communities also accuse Hausa communities of occupying their territories after they migrated from different areas in Niger and Nigeria. Competition over natural resources also led to tensions, sometimes violence, between Buduma farmers and Fulani herders. Not only the state remains absent and failed to provide justice and fair resolutions, but these complex tribal dynamics have proven to be a source of instability and exploitation by spoilers, such as militants groups and criminal networks.¹²

These examples testify to the importance and relevance of tribalism to national and regional stability in the Sahel. Since the years of independence of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Sahelian states struggled to have notable presence and to develop rural areas where most conflicts are taking place today. There is little to no presence of

the state in rural areas, mostly border areas, of the Sahel but that doesn't mean those spaces are ungoverned. Instead, they are governed through strategic alliances with local and original tribes that existed in those areas for centuries. States in the region willingly or unwillingly ceded their territories located far from the capital to be governed by different ethnic based actors. This has worked and brought little attention until recently with the rise of militancy, criminal activities, and intercommunity violence.

In recent decades and years, tribes and communities in rural areas are also exploited to resolve conflicts threatening central government political and economic interests. In order to counter the rise of threatening community, state often aligns itself with one or multiple communities from a different tribe or ethnic group, thus creating a toxic and vulnerable social environment exposed to peace spoilers, such as violent extremist organizations and criminal networks. Militant groups and criminal networks did not create chaos in the Sahel but rather exploited the existing negative sentiments among certain communities in rural areas toward central governments and groups aligned with state's agenda.

Border communities accustomed to free movement were increasingly perceived as the problem and the cause for the rise of militancy and violence. When that's the case, political decisions made by the state are most likely to be different than local communities' own interests and priorities. Examples of this would be: border closure due to security reasons, curfews, and state of emergency with full or limited interdiction of circulation using motorcycles which are used to travel in most conflict affected areas. These decisions made by central governments are driven by fear rather than genuine attempts to have full grasp of local context to provide adequate solutions.

EVOLVING TRIBAL DYNAMICS AND MODERN STATES

Traditional politics of modern nations do intersect with tribalism where the latter might either provide support or resistance, for instance with border closure. In the Sahelian context, the majority of -if not all- tribes and communities living along the borders have family and business ties to other communities living on the other

9. Jalel Harchaoui and Al-Hamzeh al-Shadeedi, "Change, but no Change: Security in Libya's Fezzan," August 2019, Clingendael Institute.

10. Jérôme Tubiana and Marielle Debos, United States Institute of Peace, "Deby's Chad: Political Manipulation at Home, Military Intervention Abroad, Challenging Times Ahead," 12 December 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/12/debys-chad>

11. Agence Française du Développement, "Crise et Développement: La Région du Lac Tchad à L'Épreuve de Boko Haram," 2016.

12. Christian Seighnobos, "La Région du Lac Tchad Sous l'Hypothèque Boko Haram," La Découverte Hérodote, March 2019.

side of the border. While closure of the borders is imperative to the state for political and security reasons, such policy decision create a burden on population and goods mobility. In this situation communities' existence might feel threatened by political agenda and certain ethnic group or tribe could most likely reject participation or respect of the decision. Also long-lasting tensions between the state and affected communities might emerge and become further challenging for the state to get their support and allegiance.

Still, modern-state politics don't appear to face enough pressure from tribal leaders to make more creative policies that will benefit their tribe and rural areas in general. Tribal and ethnic leaders are at fault as well for not holding politicians accountable and following through on local population's demands. In the Sahel, and Africa in general, history of tribes mostly known through the oral tradition are not well documented. This makes it easy in some cases for tribal and ethnic elites to manipulate the history to serve their own interests. However, this appears to be changing and local populations are demanding more results from their respective tribal leaders, compared to the past.

Additionally, the establishment of borders and nation-states in the Sahel presented one of the biggest challenges to the nomadic populations and border communities. After their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, Sahelian state regimes had to address tribal borders, population movement, and relationships between nomadic and sedentary populations. Borders established by colonial powers were more symbolic and barely taken into consideration by populations accustomed to free movement and trade, until recent years.

The security situation in the Sahel region forced national, regional, and foreign powers to pay more attention to rural and border regions but mainly for the wrong reasons. First, state presence was very limited, especially in terms of non-security aspects such as basic public services related to health, education, and economic development. When states decided to increase presence in more remote areas, efforts were mostly security focused and furthermore became an impediment to the mobility of population and animals in the region, rather than a solution. Second, the rise of illicit trade in early 1990s motivated corrupt administrations to build murky and strategic relationships with tribes and their chiefs in exchange for protection and favoritism against other tribes, while generating a cut in revenues. Such approaches and strategies intensified competition and tensions, and weakened relationships between already vulnerable and fragmented communities. Administrations lost credibility among these communities, lost their trust, and perceived them as corrupt and illegitimate. This is especially true among those that matter the most- the local population.

If this showed anything, it demonstrated that governments and their respective leaders failed to understand or take into consideration interactions between nomadic and more settled sedentary groups. While tribal leaders historically relied on their people for influence and power, they [tribal leaders] became increasingly manipulated, somewhat easily, by central governments for political and economic reasons. Affected local populations became increasingly aware of such dynamics with repeated unfulfilled promises. Conflict affected areas remain poorly developed and lack basic services despite previous pledges and agreements made by central governments, and despite large sums of aid money designated to develop those areas.

CONCLUSION

There are multiple factors driving instability in the Sahel, and tribal dynamics is an important one. As I am writing this conclusion, at least two related examples emerged to confirm this. In the last two weeks, violent clashes between two communities over natural resources in eastern Chad resulted in the death of at least 111 civilians.¹³ Subsequently, the Chadian president declared three months of a state of emergency in the area, prohibited mobility using motorcycles, and promised military deployment.¹⁴ These security measures are likely to negatively impact the livelihood of local populations and not to resolve the conflict.

In northern Mali, tensions are mounting between different armed groups competing over political and economic power, and risks of violent clashes are high. These tensions and competitions are driven by long-time existing tribal dynamics, and their respective relationships with the Malian state. Both situations in northern Mali and eastern Chad present real security and political challenges to both states, yet could also provide opportunities. The outcome of both situations will depend on how Chadian and Malian governments handle the conflict that is affecting different tribes/ethnic groups.

To remove existing barriers to development and national unity, Sahelian states must stop perceiving marginalized communities in remote areas as inconvenient. Instead the state should engage in fair treatment of all ethnic groups involved in the conflict. In addition to security measures, the state should provide a fair juridical system and hold those committing crimes accountable and send the right message, rather than giving advantages based on ethnic affiliations. Unfair treatment allowed peace spoilers to flourish and expand, therefore becoming almost impossible today for Sahelian states to reverse negative trends destabilizing the region.

The existence of diverse populations of Arabs, Berbers, Fulani, Songhai, Tuareg, and other ethnic groups became threatened by political decisions made in the capitals and modern states. However, it's not fair to say that modernization is the only main factor driving violence in the Sahel today.

13. Centre for Development Studies and the Prevention of Extremism, "111 Personnes en Moins de 2 Semaines, le CEDPE Condamne la Violence Intercommunautaire," 19 August 2019.

14. Africa News, "Chad Declares State of Emergency in Two Eastern Provinces After Intercommunal Clashes," 18 August 2018, <https://www.africanews.com/2019/08/18/chad-declares-state-of-emergency-in-two-eastern-provinces-after-intercommunal/>

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Mr. Lyammouri is Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South, previously known as OCP Policy Center, focusing on geopolitics and international relations issues. He has more than eight years of experience focusing on the North Africa and Sahel regions. His extensive experience supporting governmental and non-governmental organizations includes the areas of international development, security, countering violent extremism, and counter-terrorism.

Mr. Lyammouri has elaborated more than 200 in-depth research reports that cultivate deeper understanding of regional and domestic challenges. He has also frequently made programming recommendations to address various security, economic, and political challenges related to a specific region or a country in Africa. Mr. Lyammouri has also presented as an expert at various conferences, including at the National Defence University (NDU), the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), in addition to multiple contributions to well-known media outlets such as BBC, NPR, and France24. Mr. Lyammouri holds a Master of Public Policy with an emphasis on National Security from the school of Policy, Government, and International Affairs at George Mason University.

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