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REPORT

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Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel

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THE ISSUE

- **The governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are ill-equipped to confront the worsening security crisis in the region.** Their approach to these challenges has been insufficient at best and counterproductive at worst.
 - **In contrast to its counterparts in Burkina Faso and Niger, Mali's political class is doing the bare minimum to respond to the conflict.** Though the government faces some domestic pressure to address insecurity, it may believe there is an unacceptable political cost to doing more.
 - **The international community should work to reshape Mali's domestic political calculus to promote a more robust response.** It should continue its security partnerships, especially with Burkina Faso and Niger, to address capacity shortfalls and reduce incidents of human rights violations.
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INTRODUCTION

The international community has become seized with the spiraling crisis in the Sahel. In September 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that “we are losing ground in the face of violence.”¹ There has been a rapid expansion of extremist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger,² from 180 incidents in 2017 to approximately 800 violent events in the first 10 months of 2019.³ There has also been a sharp increase in displaced persons. In Burkina Faso, for example, the United Nations reports that 486,000 people have been displaced in 2019, compared to just 80,000 in all of 2018. The deteriorating situation in the Sahel and its implications for regional security, migration, criminality, and corruption have spurred foreign partners—including the United States, European capitals, Gulf states, and some West African governments—to throw soldiers, diplomats, and development experts at the problem.

A missing part of the global response, however, has been a focus on domestic politics in the Sahel. In Mali, the epicenter of the violence, there are considerable domestic political barriers to supporting international engagement to re-establish security in troubled areas. As one U.S. scholar explained in June 2019, “the real problem in Mali is the separation of the political class that [is] ruling in Mali and the rest of the country . . . the politicians in Mali are not effectively responding to this crisis unfolding across the whole country.”⁴ In addition, the political opposition and civil society in Mali have failed to

adequately pressure the government to address the violence. While domestic activists have mounted some protests in recent months, the government of Mali sees political costs—not benefits—to shifting resources and expanding government services in the troubled north and central regions.

In Burkina Faso and Niger, however, there is comparatively more urgency, domestic political pressure, and government willingness to address the violence. Both governments have at times adopted heavy-handed security measures, although Niger has combined security operations with development and service provision.

UNRESPONSIVE AND RECKLESS POLICIES

The region's approach to the crisis has been insufficient at best and counterproductive at worst. The government of Mali is doing the bare minimum, demonstrating little willingness to invest in the violence-wracked north and central regions of the country—both in terms of counter-insurgency operations and community programming. In addition, many Malians are disillusioned with their government and no longer view a security response as part of the “preserve of their [national] leaders,” according to two U.S. academics.⁵ Government officials have consequently ignored international pressure to allocate more resources to address the underlying economic and political drivers of the crisis. In late 2018, a Malian senior official privately insisted that it was politically impractical to divert current development and education programs to more vulnerable regions.⁶ The ruling party's political base—and 90 percent of the population—lives in the south, and tends to blame the country's instability on the perceived restiveness of the northerners.⁷ The Carter Center, the independent observer of Mali's Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, noted in its most recent report that high-ranking officials in key ministries are often absent from crucial meetings and reject any responsibility for the agreement's implementation, instead placing responsibility solely on the Ministry of Social Cohesion.⁸

Moreover, the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have occasionally turned a blind eye to ethnic militias and security service abuses, enabling extremists to expand operations and recruit new fighters. While all three countries possess limited capacity to counter the extremist threat, there are important distinctions as to why and how each government has executed its respective military response to the widening insecurity.

- Malian officials, who face the ire of the opposition and soldiers' wives following military casualties, have backed the formation of ethnic militias in its conflict zones. This measure has been especially deadly in the central region, fueling tit-for-tat violence between the nomadic Fulani cattle herders and the sedentary Dogon farmers and hunters.⁹ In March 2019, a Dogon self-defense force, known as Dan Nan Ambassagou, killed more than 160 Fulani herders in the town of Ogossagou. The government subsequently claimed it disbanded the militia, but it has failed to enforce this edict because it lacks the intention and capacity to do so.
- Burkina Faso has had to turn to the less capable police and gendarmes to respond to the mounting extremist threat, having disbanded the elite Presidential Security Regiment (RSP) in 2015, which represented some 10 percent of the total military. These security forces have allegedly conducted summary executions and en masse detentions. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, the vast majority of victims of security force abuses in the cases documented were ethnic Fulani. This abuse, the report continued, is encouraging members of the Fulani community to join extremist groups.¹⁰ The government has also backed the community militias, known as koglweogos, which appear to have targeted Fulanis out of an assumption that all Fulanis support terrorist groups.

Nigerien president Mahamadou Issoufou, who has a record of reconciling rival ethnic groups and appointing Tuareg politicians to senior government positions, is overwhelmed by the insecurity engulfing his country from Nigeria, Libya, and Mali. His government has periodically worked with Malian armed groups, including the Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), in Tillabery and Tahoua in western Niger. The International Crisis Group and a panelist at CSIS's Sahel Summit in September 2019 separately noted this has "further aggravated intercommunal tensions" and has been "disastrous for civilian protection."^{11,12}

MALIAN INACTION SHAPED BY POLITICS AND PROFIT

Mali's underwhelming response is the product of the narrow political interests of the elite, who generally discount the plight of fellow citizens in the north and central regions. Mali's political class, while ethnically diverse, is "more connected to the realities of cities outside Mali" than in the rest of the country, according to academics.¹³ The politics in Bamako and the southern part of the country are paramount and supersede the troubling

developments in northern and central regions. Not only has the government faced little sustained pressure to address insecurity, but it may believe there is an unacceptable political cost to doing more, particularly because it believes the violence does not pose an existential threat to stability in the country's south.

According to the UN Panel of Experts, Mali's southern-based political elite have portrayed the peace process as "a reward to minority communities from the north" that, according to the political class, threaten the country's territorial integrity.

In May 2019, a ruling party legislature published an open letter stating: "Mali is left to the whims of a minority of its population that instead of serving their homeland, rather undermine its social cohesion and its foundations."¹⁴ A few Malian activists have applied limited pressure on Mali's political class to address the unrest.

- Malian opposition leader Soumaila Cisse and populist youth activist Mohammed Youssouf Bathily (known as Ras Bath) have criticized what they view as inadequate support to the military. During his campaign for the 2018 presidential election, Cisse called for political dialogue and anti-poverty activities in the north as well as efforts to counter interethnic massacres.¹⁵ And in November 2019, Cisse argued that the government had betrayed the army, while Ras Bath pointed to government corruption as the root of recent military defeats.¹⁶ But thus far, Malian opposition and civil society have been inconsistently engaged, failing to apply sufficient pressure to influence change in the government's agenda.
- Prominent imam Mahmoud Dicko, who recently launched his own political movement,¹⁷ has also been vocal about Mali's escalating violence.^{18,19} However, this pressure comes in episodic surges, such as protests in response to specific events. Most recently, soldiers' wives have demonstrated in the streets, accusing the government and high-level officers of not supporting the military—a troubling echo of events that precipitated the military coup in 2012.^{20,21}

Moreover, Mali's political and business classes may have an incentive to prolong the conflict because they benefit from international financial flows into the country. Several panelists at CSIS's Sahel Summit in September 2019 stressed that a war economy is in full bloom in Bamako. Academics Andrew Lebovich and Susanna Wing noted that "new construction" and "massive houses" have sprouted up in the capital, presumably because

elites have gained access to UN contracts and profit handsomely from selling services to foreign diplomats, development workers, and security professionals.

Several panelists at CSIS's Sahel Summit in September 2019 stressed that a war economy is in full bloom in Bamako.

DOMESTIC PRESSURE IN BURKINA FASO AND NIGER

Presidents of Burkina Faso and Niger, in contrast to their counterpart in Mali, face persistent pressure and protests from domestic political opposition and civil society to respond to the security crises in their countries. These Sahelian leaders have shown more urgency in addressing the extremist threat in part because political opponents have made it a top issue.

Burkinabe president Christian Roch Kaboré has faced demonstrations led by the opposition and trade unions that have criticized his handling of the crisis.^{22,23} In response, he has reshuffled his cabinet, appointed a new chief of general staff, and invited the opposition to participate in an albeit-lagging national dialogue to discuss political and security issues.^{24,25,26} Despite these changes, in August 2019 the main opposition party, Union for Progress and Change (UPC), called for the government to step down because it is “currently crossing its arms” and has failed to counter the extremist threat.²⁷

While Niger's opposition is not as loud on security issues as Burkina Faso, Nigerien president Mamadou Issoufou has come under some fire for the opaque process that has expanded foreign military presence in Niger.^{28,29} In July 2018, President Issoufou clarified Niger's partnerships with U.S. and European security advisers, saying foreign troops should limit themselves to providing training, equipment, and intelligence. Since September 2019, he has voiced his doubts about the viability of implementing the 2015 Algiers Accord in Mali.^{30,31}

SETTING THE STAGE FOR FURTHER EXTREMIST GAINS

Mali's lack of political will and the broader region's counterproductive security responses to the conflict are ceding the advantage to extremist groups. Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal

Muslimeen (JNIM), a coalition of extremist factions, and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) have exploited government mistakes, increased their footprint, and stoked communal tensions to execute coordinated attacks. JNIM and ISGS now operate across the central Sahel and have conducted attacks in littoral West Africa, including a kidnapping operation in northern Benin in June 2019 and the storming of the resort town of Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire in March 2016.^{32,33} In early November 2019, ISGS killed more than 40 Malian soldiers at a military base near the border with Niger.³⁴

- JNIM has rapidly expanded its reach by provoking feuds between rival communal groups and then offering to protect the victims, a service that several of the governments have been unwilling or unable to provide.³⁵ At the same time, the extremists have established themselves in communities across the region—not just ethnic Fulani villages, but within the Dozo, Mossi, and Bambara areas—providing amenities, cracking down on corruption, and adjudicating cases that languished in the Malian courts for decades. At the CSIS Sahel Summit in September, HRW's West Africa Director Corinne Dufka said the extremists are filling a vacuum, presenting themselves as providers of “key governance services.”
- JNIM has benefited from the region's heavy-handed and often abusive security responses, recruiting civilians who say they are “hostages to both sides.” In Burkina Faso, Dufka says the government's counterinsurgency tactics, which have included summary execution of suspects, is “shoring up the ranks” of the extremists.³⁶

Policy Positions of Key Leaders on the Crisis

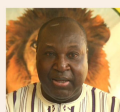
Burkina Faso



ROCH KABORÉ
President of Burkina Faso (Since 2015)

Kaboré regards countering terrorism as a national priority and is committed to implementing economic development initiatives in affected areas.¹

"I call on Burkinabe people from within the country and outside to unite and mobilize regardless of religion, ethnicity, political opinion, in the fight against terrorism."²

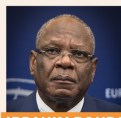


ZÉPHIRIN DIABRÉ
Opposition Leader,
Union for Progress and Change (UPC)
(Since 2010)

Diabré was at the forefront of protests against then-president Blaise Compaore, and has continued to mobilize supporters who chant "no to insecurity, terrorism, to corruption, to unemployment" at rallies.³

"We are surrounded by terrorist dangers at the borders. This situation requires us to take exceptional measures for effective security."⁴

Mali



IBRAHIM BOUBACAR KEÏTA
President of Mali (Since 2013)

Keïta regularly prioritizes counterterrorism operations in his rhetoric, and has repeatedly expressed frustration due to a perceived lack of financial and strategic support from donor countries.⁵

"How fast [the peace process] is going to go depends on our financial means... Even though there have been a number of donor conferences, there is a gap in what was promised and what we have received."⁶



MAHMOUD DICKO
Former President, Islamic High Council (HCI)
(From 2008-2019)

Dicko says poor governance is at the root of terrorism in Mali and the region. When he was HCI president, Dicko negotiated with extremists to secure the release of 160 Malian soldiers.⁷

"The problem of our country, it's a problem of governance."⁸
"[France should] end its interference in our country."⁹



SOUMAILA CISSÉ
Member of National Assembly
Opposition Leader, Union for Republic and Democracy (URD)
(Since 2013)

Cissé has called for more support to the military, and has focused on his election loss in 2018, refusing to recognize Keita's win.

"Our soldiers are ill-equipped. We should be fighting for our military to be up to the job."¹⁰



MOHAMED YOUSSEUF BATHILY (RAS BATH)
Activist & Leader,
Collective for the Defense of the Republic (CDR)

Ras Bath, who has his own radio program and citizen's movement, is a loud critic of the president and regularly decries corruption in Malian society.¹¹

"Through our taxes, we pay the police to protect our homes, we pay our representatives to keep an eye on the government and we pay the president to rule for the good of us all."¹²

Niger



MAHAMADOU ISSOUFOU
President of Niger (Since 2011)

Issoufou supports counterterrorism operations led by the G5 Sahel Force with support from France's Operation Barkhane "to meet the heart of the threat." He has been critical of Mali's handling of the crisis and opposes the role of certain Malian rebels in the peace process.¹³

"If we do not take any measures, the situation could continue to deteriorate, the state of Mali could collapse. We must prevent that, we must do everything so that together we can put an end to that threat. If the state of Mali collapses, our states will also be threatened."¹⁴

MAIKOUL ZODI
Civil Society Leader, *Tourmons la Page*

Zodi, who spent more than five months in detention for demonstrating against new financial legislation, has criticized the lack of progress by foreign troops against extremists in Niger.¹⁵

"We don't see the justification for these [foreign] bases, we don't see the results on the ground."¹⁶

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UNDERCUTTING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE

Unless the Malian government shows political will to address the root causes of the conflict, the international community will continue to deploy resources and soldiers to the region with only limited effect. Bamako, in part because it faces limited domestic political pressure and profits from the war economy, prefers to outsource the security response to nonstate actors and foreign partners. In March 2019, then-Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubeye Maiga publicly argued that "the United States should have the same engagement in the Sahel as it does in the Middle East."³⁷ In November 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo announced that the Sahel would be "a preferred initial area of focus" for the global Defeat ISIS coalition outside of the "ISIS core space" of Iraq and Syria.³⁸

The multiple foreign and regional security missions in the Sahel, including the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) in Mali, G-5 Sahel Joint Force, and French Operation Barkhane, have committed some 25,000 personnel to the region.^{39,40,41,42} At a G7 Summit press conference in late August 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron, German chancellor Angela Merkel, and Burkinabe president Kaboré called for the expansion of the G-5 Sahel Joint Force to include other West African countries to bolster the G-5's capacity and manpower.⁴³ France has also announced a new military initiative in Mali that will involve mentoring and accompanying Malian armed forces into combat.⁴⁴

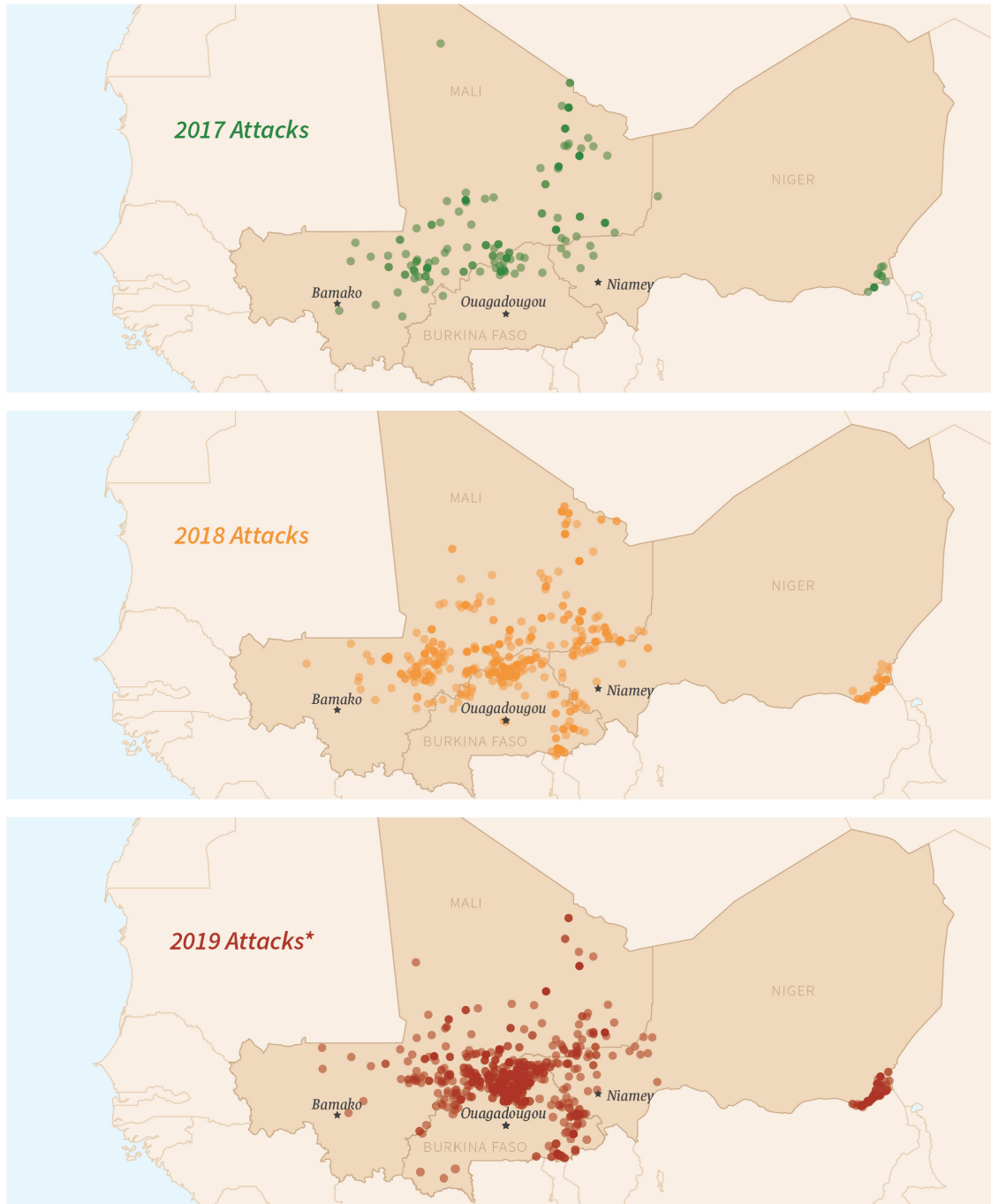
The international community has earmarked billions of dollars in economic and military aid to respond to the crisis. The founding members of the Sahel Alliance—France, Germany, the European Union, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP)—have been joined by Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom in committing to disperse more than \$6 billion in projects through 2022.⁴⁵ In 2017, Saudi Arabia pledged \$100 million, and the United Arab Emirates committed \$30 million to the G-5 Sahel.⁴⁶ In November 2018, the United States nearly doubled its pledge of military assistance to the G-5 Sahel to around \$111 million.⁴⁷ Not all of the pledged military aid has been delivered to date.⁴⁸ UN Secretary-General Guterres has warned that significant funding shortfalls are undermining humanitarian responses.⁴⁹

A SMARTER INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

While the international community has focused global attention and secured financial contributions to the conflict, its engagement has created bandwidth issues for Sahelian interlocutors who are requested to attend recurring regional meetings and host roving diplomats. Several European capitals have appointed envoys to the region, and foreign governments have developed strategies to address the escalating crisis. These regular coordination meetings have value as long as there is a division of labor between partners and a focus on de-confliction. As Heikie Thiele, the director for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Stabilization at the German Foreign Office, noted at the CSIS Sahel Summit: “[Sahel Alliance member states] do coordinate for the same objectives, but coordination should not only be the exchange of excel sheets about activities.”

The international community should consider lessons learned from Somalia, where a shared approach ended the 2011-2012 famine, advanced the political transition, and evicted al-Shabaab from key Somali territory. At the height of the famine, for example, the international community leveraged the engagement of Muslim and Arab countries, which contributed nearly 30 percent of the total assistance. Then-Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron seized on this collaboration, inviting representatives from over 40 governments, multilateral organizations, and Somali authorities to London to commit to addressing Somalia's enduring challenges.⁵⁰ In May 2016, partly as a due-out from the conference, Somalia's main donors to the security sector— Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, European Union, United States, United Kingdom, and United Nations— formed the "S6" to identify shared objectives and develop a common approach.⁵¹ These efforts, while imperfect, showcased how it is possible to lead an inclusive response that delineates specific roles for multiple parties.

Extremist Attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger



* 2019 attacks between Jan. 1 – Oct. 31
Attacks depicted have been carried out by JNIM, ISGS, Ansarul Islam, Coordination of Azawad Movements, Boko Haram, Ansar Dine, and a handful of lesser known extremist groups.



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POLITICS ARE AT THE HEART OF THE SOLUTION

The international community and the region must confront some of the political realities that have undermined efforts to advance peace in Mali in particular and the Sahel in general. While not as easy as dispatching envoys and distributing resources, there are opportunities to influence domestic politics and grow local and regional champions to press for a robust response. Below are four recommendations for reshaping the domestic political calculus and reestablishing a more effective security partnership.

- Disrupt the war economy. The Malian elite has little appetite for advancing the peace process, in part because the government and rebels may benefit from international-sponsored travel and financial support as well as a thriving illicit economy. At the CSIS Sahel Summit, Lebovich noted that “there is interest in participating in the negotiations, but not always in completing the process.” The international community should review how its engagement is enriching key individuals, employing its policy toolkit—such as the Global Magnitsky Act—to deter corruption and sever bloated business contracts. The United Nations has sanctioned only one Malian official for blocking the peace process, while the rest of the sanctioned individuals have been northern rebels or extremist leaders.⁵² The United Nations should expand its target set for sanctions, focusing on Malian elites involved in corruption and the misuse of peace process allocations.
- Engage the political class. The government of Mali has failed to prioritize the crisis in part because it has not been hard-pressed by domestic political pressure to do so. There is a need to inject more urgency into the political arena. The Malian media and foreign diplomats should reinforce key opposition and civil society figures when they speak out about the country’s security woes and propose constructive solutions to tackle the economic and political roots of the problem. Moreover, the 19 national legislators from the northern regions and 17 from Mopti should step up and demand more engagement to address the violence and displacement affecting their constituents. Unless domestic leaders stress the need to take action, there is unlikely to be a real imperative to do so.
- Elevate other stakeholders. Mali’s political elite tend to downplay the role of youth and other citizens in its decision-making process. There is value in broadening the conversation around insecurity to ratchet up pressure on the government to implement the peace agreement and address underlying grievances. CSIS panelists Doussouba Konate, Wing, and Lebovich identified young Malians, civil servants, and religious leaders as critical interlocutors. Several speakers also raised former High Islamic Council president Mahmoud Dicko as an influential figure. Dicko, who many speculate will run in a future presidential election, led a rally in April 2019 to protest intercommunal violence that drew the largest crowds seen on the city’s streets since the end of the dictatorship in 1991.^{53,54} The international community should affirm efforts by these individuals and groups to hold their elected leaders to account and

provide a platform, when appropriate, to activists and community representatives who call for political and economic engagement.

- Leverage regional voices. While many of Mali's leaders seem nonplussed by the conflict, Sahelian and West African neighbors are seized by the threats posed by Malian insecurity. West African heads of state, including Ivoirian president Alassane Ouattara and Togolese president Faure Gnassingbe, have called for international assistance but have failed to pressure President Keita to do more internally.^{55,56} The region has a strong track record, including most recently in Guinea-Bissau, of compelling counterparts to retract or adjust counterproductive political decisions.⁵⁷ The international community should coordinate public and private messaging with key regional actors and organizations to insist that Mali's leaders start addressing the underlying drivers of the violence in their country.

The international community should continue its security assistance and engagement in the region, especially in Burkina Faso and Niger. Both governments and their political opponents are deeply troubled by the growing extremist threat and are seeking to restore security. However, as noted by Lebovich at the Sahel Summit, the governments of Burkina Faso and Niger are "privileging short-term solutions" even though they are aware of the embedded problems. It is essential to harness their sense of urgency and willingness to tackle what is quickly developing into an existential threat to the region.

- Niger's partners could encourage the government to replicate its innovative and inclusive approach toward its ethnic Tuareg population, applying best practices to vulnerable Fulani populations in Tillabery and Tahoua. Niger almost certainly would welcome more assistance with managing its security challenges, increasing its agility to respond to imminent threats across its border, and honing its political and development engagement to undercut extremist recruitment.
- Burkina Faso's friends could leverage the government's requests for more external assistance to promote more balanced counterterrorism tactics, defend political speech, and direct economic and development resources to its northern region. In addition, there is utility in rebuilding Burkina Faso's weakened and demoralized military to relieve pressure on the police and gendarmes.

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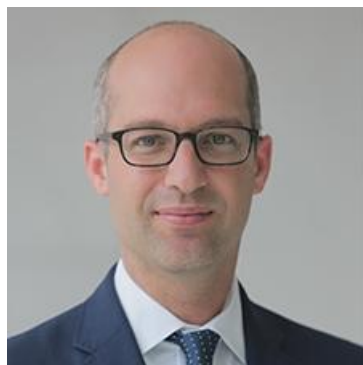
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