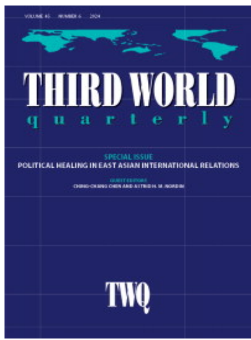

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Alessio Iocchi & Edoardo Baldaro

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Informality and insecurity in the Sahel: unravelling the hybrid political orders of Northern Mali and Northern Niger

Alessio Iocchi[a] and Edoardo Baldaro[b,1]

[a]Department of Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean, University of Naples "L'Orientale", Naples, Italy; [b]Department of Political Sciences and International Relations, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

ABSTRACT

Since the Sahelian crisis broke out in 2012, Northern Mali and Northern Niger have been identified as the two potential epicentres of violence in the region. Nevertheless, while sharing very similar structural conditions and constraints, during the last decade these two subregions have scored very differently in terms of stability and armed conflict along the centre-periphery divide. Aiming to understand the divergent security patterns in Northern Mali and Northern Niger, this work highlights the importance of informal institutions as politically – and spatially contingent networks whose mechanisms for regulating authority and power are key for the appreciation of state capacity and political ordering, and essential for understanding statehood in the Sahel. We stress the importance of hybrid political orders and informality for the definition of political settlements which result in (a) the cooptation of political/economic competitors and the stabilisation of viable governance arrangements; or (b) an open contestation of authority and value-extraction that paves the way for destabilising dynamics. The diverging pattern exhibited by the two cases demonstrates that hybrid networks that straddle political and informal institutions are crucial in determining either the stabilisation or destabilisation of political settlements.

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Introduction

On 14 November 2023 a column of the Malian army supported by 'Russian instructors' entered Kidal, the northernmost city of Mali, which was previously controlled by a coalition of northern rebels. Aside from its symbolic value, the 'conquest' of Kidal is unlikely to mark the end of hostilities in Northern Mali. Indeed, the fragmented and conflictual political landscape characterising Northern Mali (Bencherif and Campana 2017) suggests that rather than marking the end of the crisis in the region, this episode only opens a new phase in it. Meanwhile, a few hundred kilometres away, in neighbouring Niger, things appear different. In Niamey too, soldiers seized power in July 2023, accusing the ousted president Bazoum of failing to guarantee security. Nevertheless, except Rhissa ag Boula, Tuareg leader and

CONTACT Edoardo Baldaro edoardo.baldaro@unipa.it
[1]Current affiliation: Department of Cultural and Environmental Heritage, Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy.
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former Special Advisor to the Presidency, who in August 2023 created the *Conseil de la Résistance pour la République* in support of president Bazoum, at the time of writing (December 2023) the situation remains calm in Northern Niger, with no major signals of shifting security equilibria in Agadez and its surroundings.

These very different political and conflict circumstances remain a puzzle for international observers and practitioners. When the collapse of Qadhafi's Libya and outbreak of a jihadist-driven insurgency transformed the Sahel into one of the most conflict-prone regions in Africa, Northern Mali and Northern Niger were quickly identified as the two potential epicentres of conflict in the area (Laurent 2013). This concern was built on the assumption that, as the two areas share very similar structural conditions and constraints, mostly connected to the 'fragility' of local states, faced with a common situation of crisis, violence and insecurity would spread similarly in both places (Lloyd 2016). Nevertheless, while Northern Mali – and successively the whole country – entered a cycle of violence, Northern Niger has maintained relative stability when compared to its neighbour, and also to other parts of Niger.

The decade-long crisis in the Sahel has taught us that political stability or a reduced level of armed violence cannot be assumed as lasting or taken for granted in any area of the region. At the same time, the diverging patterns of conflict in Northern Mali and Northern Niger suggest that structural factors alone do not explain variations in the uses and levels of violence in two very similar – and interconnected – geopolitical and socioeconomical settings. In this article, we shift attention towards the effective mechanisms of governance applied in the two areas, with the aim of understanding what can limit – or favour – violence in similar contextual conditions. Accordingly, we argue here that political stability and viable socioeconomic arrangements do not depend on the strength of the state – or lack thereof – but rather on the dialectical process of adaptation, negotiation, and struggle between formal and informal actors, authorities, and institutions. In this sense, while Northern Mali is characterised by violent competition among informal actors, favoured by a strategy of fragmentation pursued by the state, Northern Niger is defined by (relative) stability due to the central government's cooptation practices. To show this, we operationalise these alternative practices of governance by identifying three principal dimensions of sociopolitical and economic regulation, namely: (1) the management and employment of violence; (2) the projection of authority over national territory; and (3) the regulation and management of trafficking.

Northern Mali and Northern Niger are located at the extreme peripheries of their respective states. Positioned on the edge of the Sahara, in these areas, livelihood and social organisation historically rely on mobility and transnational exchanges and connections (McDougall and Scheele 2012). During the last two decades, these elements have been affected by the insertion of this portion of Africa into transnational networks of drug and human trafficking (Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen 2017). Moreover, since they are both parts of 'weak' states that have always struggled to project their authority and deliver services across their national territory, in both areas, rebellions against central governments have characterised and shaped centre-periphery dynamics since independence (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017). As a consequence of two parallel and interconnected 'Tuareg rebellions'[1] that took place in the early 1990s, both countries have also undertaken a process of institutional reform, designed to reorganise and redistribute administrative and budgetary power across the territory, including the most peripheral regions (Mohamadou 2018). Lastly, in the course of the 2000s, the consolidation of Islamist ideologies and the diffusion of jihadi groups in the area fostered

the progressive insertion of local and nationalist struggles – in particular in Northern Mali – within the broader 'Global Jihad' framework (Harmon 2016).[2]

Within the wider framework of the Sahelian crisis, Northern Mali and Northern Niger have been treated and (critically) analysed as 'ungoverned spaces' (Raleigh and Dowd 2013), 'areas of limited statehood' (Baldaro 2018), and 'hybrid political orders' (Raineri and Strazzari 2022). On the one hand, the 'ungoverned spaces' (Rabasa et al. 2007) and 'areas of limited statehood' (Risse 2011) frameworks assume the absence of state authority and ruling capacity in the areas in question. Moreover, they both tend to replicate a binary distinction between state and non-state institutions and practices of governance, something that eventually reiterates a normative vision of the state as the exclusive guarantor of peace and stability at the domestic level. On the other hand, the concept of hybrid political orders introduces the idea that functioning political orders can emerge from the combination of customary forms of governance with state institutions and ruling practices (Boege et al. 2008). A wide analytical category that identifies all situations where traditional, informal, and state institutions and forms of authority stemming from different societal sources interact and define original systems of governance (Boege et al. 2008), the 'hybrid political orders' framework nonetheless tends to overlook the determinants of stability and the absence/presence of conflict in a given context (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2016).

Following such literature, this article explores the conditions under which hybrid political orders can result in (relatively) stable governance arrangements, or on the opposite, and spiralling violence. It does so through a comparative analysis of the hybrid political orders created in Northern Mali and Northern Niger, investigating how, given similar structural constraints, informal actors and practices can interact differently with formal (state) actors and arrangements, eventually resulting in different dynamics of governance, trade regulation, and conflict management. It thus seeks to show the potential variations in political orders by highlighting their constitutive informal and formal governance practices. Moreover, it aims to reveal the significance of these informal practices for the sustenance of politics.

Methodologically, the analysis is drawn from empirical evidence collected during several periods of fieldwork the authors have conducted in Mali (Bamako) and Niger (Niamey and Agadez) since 2015, during which semi-structured interviews and focus groups have been organised with a wide range of actors, [3] including: security and defence forces; investigative journalists and activists; civil society organisations; public officials; customary authorities; members or former members of cross-border transport networks; former armed actors. Sources have been anonymised, to protect our contacts and networks, while data and information have been triangulated to bypass excessive reliance on single sources. To include in our analysis traditional authorities, power brokers and other non-state figures who co-participate in the process of hybrid political ordering, we have adopted the (wide) definition of informal institutions proposed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004, 727), who see them as 'socially shared rules […] created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels'.

The article is structured as follows: the first part introduces the main features of the debate surrounding informality and hybrid political orders in connection to the mechanisms of political regulation, insisting on the need to develop a dialectical analysis of formal and informal institutions and their relations. It then discusses how the limited presence of the state in Northern Mali and Northern Niger has historically been produced and performed, by focusing on the state-building processes of the two countries. The final two sections

explore the divergences between the two regions by examining how political ordering and regulatory settlements have been built, performed, and transformed in both cases. We conclude with a comparative discussion of the two cases.

How informal authorities and hybrid political orders relate to security

In this article, we argue that in hybrid political orders, semblances of stability or insecurity are directly connected to the underlying relationship between formal and informal institutions, which, in turn, is mediated or moderated by the role of power brokers – actors who, in this scenario, function as nodes of power (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 322–333). As such, this relationship can vary depending on the way state institutions and informal authorities (epitomized by these power brokers) interact and decide to deal with each other, finally influencing the formation of specific forms of regulatory authorities.

Bypassing the conceptual essentialism proposed by new institutional economics models (North 1991), this argument is built primarily on structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to power and mechanisms of agency, which have shed light on the nuances of informal institutions and the emergence of public authority (Meagher 2007; Lund 2007). In particular, we look at the strand of literature that has discussed under which conditions hybrid political orders can produce political stability and limit conflicts by furthering local ownership (Boege et al. 2008; Glawion 2023).

By focusing on patron-client relations, informal trading networks, and illicit economies, literature on neo-patrimonialism has offered notable examples of how clientelistic arrangements and regime-survival strategies may result in lasting stability and peace (Blundo and De Sardan 2001; Bach and Gazibo 2013). While we agree that informal power-making practices based on social networks, community values, corruption and coping strategies cannot be disassociated from the institutional structure of the Western state model (Bøås and Jennings 2005), we tend to see individual patrimonial networks as not necessarily being opportunistic or ephemeral. Studying extralegal economies, various studies have explored under which conditions informal (economic) institutions play a role in levels of violence and stability and, thereby, contribute to the forms and practices of the African state (Reno 2000; Meagher 2014). These contributions have shown how informal institutions can play a crucial role in ensuring a significant degree of predictability and stability in relations between state and non-state authorities (Iocchi 2022). Accordingly, informality, here defined as 'an activity, performed by an individual or a group of individuals […] that eventually bypasses the state or the overarching entity regulating the life of that group or society' (Polese 2023, 324), should not be seen as an element inevitably causing violence and state failure. The viability of a specific hybrid political order depends mainly on how formal and informal institutions and actors build and perform their interactions. This analytical stance has various advantages. Firstly, it allows us to nuance the definition of power brokers: we present here the trajectory of actors that, based on similar circumstances and opportunities, decide either to reinforce the authority of the state or openly oppose it (Bøås 2012). These actors are 'violent entrepreneurs' (Bøås and Strazzari 2020) who not only mediate between parties, distribute resources and offer protection but have a political subjectivity and agenda that can be in opposition to that of statutory institutions, though it may also overlap or converge. These dual patterns will be explored in the empirical sections below.

Secondly, for a long time, a clear-cut separation between formal and informal institutions has supported the idea that informal activities could not attain high levels of complexity, as they lack effective norms-enforcement mechanisms and are mostly conducted from personalised relationships (La Porta and Shleifer 2014). However, this understanding has been enriched by a more insightful and micro-situated strand of research on hybrid forms of governance that stresses how multiple dynamics of authority regulation between the two are actually in place (Meagher 2014). The notion of 'regulatory authority' has thus been crucial for the understanding of the dialectic between state and non-state actors, and how these are valued (Roitman 2005), pointing directly to political brokers as nodes of power and authority for the reciprocal assimilation of elites -- as in Bayart's concept of 'rhizome state' (Bayart 1993). Building on these insights, we adopt here a definition of regulatory authority that is at once relational and processual. A regulatory authority is relational because it is based on a blurred and overlapping distinction between formality and informality, individual and supra-individual elements: formal and informal actors and institutions exist only about one another, and through their interactions, they always produce some form of hybrid regulation and political settlements. Secondly, regulatory authority is never fixed but is constantly redefined by the negotiations, competitions, and power struggles between the set of different actors involved, who in turn are situated in a fluid and changeable institutional setting.

In the cases of Northern Mali and Northern Niger, we will see how informal authorities have operated in tandem and opposition to central state institutions according to circumstances, driving different state responses. Relying on such a framework, for the two cases we define the mechanisms of coordination, cooptation, or conflict, and the distribution of power characterising the relations between formal (the state) and informal (customary leaders, power brokers, economic entrepreneurs) authorities.

Unsettled state-building in Mali and Niger: affinities and divergences

Following independence in the 1960s, in Mali and Niger two alternative approaches for dealing with their respective 'Northern questions' were devised. When defining the institutional architecture of the new Malian state, Modibo Keita's socialist government (1960–68) refused to recognise any formal role for customary authorities – not only from the North. Simultaneously, the regime implemented a policy of administrative centralisation and cultural homogenisation which furthered the Tuaregs' grievances and refusal to be integrated within this institutional system (Baldaro and Raineri 2020). Consequently, no mechanisms of (formal or informal) cooptation or conflict-settlement between central authorities and the Tuareg community were created, and the relations between Bamako and its North rapidly evolved towards violence, as demonstrated by the first Tuareg rebellion in 1963 (Lecocq 2010). In Niger, the country's first president, Hamani Diori (1960–1974), opted to reproduce patron–client relations with the Tuareg and other semi-nomadic communities, borrowing directly from the colonial handbook. On the one hand, by giving an ancillary – albeit state-paid – administrative role to customary authorities, Diori aimed to turn these actors into social pillars of the regime. On the other hand, by appointing the *amenokal*[4] Mouddour Zakara to the newly created post of Minister for the Saharan and Nomad Affairs, Diori's regime created the conditions for a peaceful system of cooptation of the Tuareg community, based

on clientelistic arrangements and (formal and informal) mechanisms of political redistribution (Mohamadou 2018).

If the political arrangements of newly independent Mali and Niger show divergencies, affinities emerge when we focus on the economic management of their respective Northern territories. Since the 1960s both Niger and Mali have implemented questionable development policies in the agro-pastoral sector, which, worsened by droughts and famines, after the early 1970s resulted in the enhanced role of the international community in the definition of resource allocation and modes of production (Gazibo 2005).

As a consequence of the dire economic crisis, the scarcity of intra-regional formal trade, and the emergence of subsidy regimes and vibrant markets in Algeria and Libya, as well as high tariffs and import restrictions in the two oil-rich states, a huge smuggling economy has developed. In general, informal regimes of circulation granted some income to Mali and Niger's Saharan territories, as an alternative to poor state infrastructural and political investments. Moreover, starting from the mid 1970s and 1980s, Niger and Mali introduced structural adjustment programs under the patronage of international financial institutions (Gervais 1995). These reforms paved the way for important changes in the commodity and labour markets. Reforms shrank state-owned enterprises, increased the mechanisation of agricultural production, and liberalised the markets for products and land, leading to an imbalance between small-holder farming and export-driven large agricultural production which severely affected rural households, worsening the effects of climatic variability. Simultaneously, the gradual fall of military-led or authoritarian regimes in the early 1990s was coupled with the challenge of repeated armed rebellions carried out by mostly Tuareg minorities protesting the decaying economic situation while claiming greater autonomy and a more equitable redistribution of resources (Lecocq 2010).

In the course of these armed insurgencies, various peace deals have been established to settle claims from North-based groups while simultaneously preserving central governments from potentially disruptive centrifugal tendencies (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017). Unfulfilled promises of equitable access to resources and state integration, accompanied by the looming fear of disarmament and the enlargement of economic opportunities in the informal economy, have pushed the Saharan regions of Mali and Niger to transform into hubs for the circulation of diverse commodities, from fuel and cigarettes to labourers, whether licit or illicit (Brachet 2009). From these partially shared initial conditions, during the last two decades, these two regions have experienced very different developments. From 2012 Northern Mali entered a spiral of violence that is nowhere close to being settled, while Northern Niger has until recently shown a certain capacity to navigate and (more or less) control potentially destabilising dynamics.

Northern Mali: fragmentation and contestation

The emergence of Mali's hybrid political order can be retraced through analyses of its main political and violent events about the three dimensions mentioned above: how violence is managed; how authority is projected; and how economic interests and traffics are regulated.

When popular rallies and a military uprising overthrew Moussa Traoré's authoritarian regime (1968–1992) in Bamako in 1992, in the North a Tuareg rebellion had been underway since June 1990. Authorities in Bamako tried to cope with the uprising by exploiting the (clan, ethnic, and personal) divisions characterising the rebel front. In 1992 two of the leaders

of the rebellion, Iyad ag Ghali and El Hadj Ag Gamou, agreed to sign the National Pact to put an end to the rebellion, receiving in exchange appointments to state and/or military positions (Harmon 2016).[5] Although the National Pact was based on a mixture of formal provisions – DDR programs for the rebels and development policies and institutional reforms to be implemented in the North – and informal cooptation of the leaders of the rebellion, its ratification did not bring an end to hostilities.

The first dimension is clearly visible in the strategy pursued by the government thereafter to manage and (selectively) employ violence. As the attempt to stop the rebellion in 1991–92 had limited success, the Bamako government inaugurated the so-called 'militiarisation phase' of its counterinsurgency (Baldaro 2018), supporting the creation of an ethnic-based militia – the Ganda Koy – thought to act as an *hors-la-loi* proxy of the central state in the North. This choice determined the way Bamako would try to deal with its Northern question in subsequent decades. Furthering ethnic conflicts was part of a wider attempt to fragment and disrupt Northern societies and regulatory systems to better control them. This objective was supposed to be obtained through the cooptation of cooperative local authorities, the manipulation of Northern political order and hierarchies, and resorting to violence when needed.[6] In other words, the 1991–96 rebellions already displayed how the relationship between formal and informal institutions in Northern Mali has developed since. On the one hand, by mixing cooptation and violence, the new democratic regime in Bamako tried to fragment Northern sociopolitical arrangements to disrupt their autonomy and capacity to organise. On the other hand, informal authorities started to become 'trapped' in a dynamic of competition, which would henceforth characterise the local system of governance.

The implementation of the National Pact (1992) offers a further example not only of the strategy of manipulation and fragmentation pursued by Bamako, but also of the government's efforts to project its authority over a (troubled) territory, thus linking our first dimension of analysis to the second. The peace agreement and its 1996 follow-up envisaged a series of institutional and economic reforms aiming at decentralising administrative power and favouring economic development in the North. With the support of international donors, in the early 2000s authorities in Bamako started to implement various projects. First, between 2000 and 2005 two new development-focused institutional bodies were created, the ANICT (*Agence Nationale d'Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales*) and the ADNM (*Agence du Développement du Nord Mali*). Mohamed ag Erlaf and Mohamed ag Mahmoud, both Tuaregs of mid-level caste, with strong personal links to institutional personalities in Bamako, were appointed as the heads of the two organisations, with the formal mandate of furthering the development and public services in the North.[7] As official figures have demonstrated, the two agencies never fulfilled their mandate, rather working as tools of patronage politics aiming to intercept 'segments of northern elites' (Bergamaschi 2014, 355). Second, during the same period the regime in Bamako also approved a huge administrative and institutional reform. New regions, districts, and communes were created, and elections were organised to select mayors, governors, and members of parliament (MP) representing specific constituencies (Seely 2001). These newly created institutional figures rapidly became a fundamental site of struggle and contestation. Indeed, while on various occasions the government supported low-caste candidates against traditional leaders running for the post – another way to manipulate Northern societies by disrupting their hierarchical organisation – these same elections were also turned by political power brokers and criminal entrepreneurs of recent fortune into opportunities to sanction their rise to power (Bergamaschi 2014; Baldaro 2018).

Other than illustrating the state-sponsored redistribution of political power that was taking place in the North during the 2000s, figures such as Deity ag Sidimou – MP of Tessalit – Baba Ould Cheick – mayor of Tarkint – or Abderamane Ould Meydou – colonel and then general of the Malian army – aptly capture how these changes where inextricably connected to another element that was reshaping political order and regulatory settlement in the area, namely illegal (and especially drug) trafficking.[8]

Ultimately, this third dimension (regulation of trafficking) appears to have been a game-changer in the definition of Mali's hybrid political order. According to the OECD & CSAO (2014), in 2011 the smuggling between Northern Mali and Algeria of consumer goods alone generated gains of around €2.4 million per week. Although contentious, these activities were still regulated through a code of conduct elaborated during previous decades and supported by most customary leaders and other local authorities.[9] Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, circulation routes were progressively employed for the trafficking of illicit products – drugs especially (UNODC 2013) – marking the introduction of the region into a global supply chain of criminalised products. Aside from generating unprecedented wealth – the drug trade alone is suspected to have produced a turnover of several billion dollars during the 2000s (Lacher 2012) – drug trafficking favoured the emergence of a new class of criminal entrepreneurs who started redefining trade and, more generally, social rules in the area. More specifically, by blurring the lines between *al-frud* – socially accepted smuggling – and *haram* – previously socially illegitimate – economic exchanges, they delegitimised earlier business codes and created new economic opportunities, offering a formidable means of social ascension for lower class (and low-caste) youngsters (Harmon 2016). The authority and political legitimacy of a new generation of power brokers were forged and sanctioned at the intersection between drug trafficking and state support, and the simultaneous contestation of former political and economic regulatory practices.[10]

The consequences of these dynamics of fragmentation and political disordering dramatically materialised on the occasion of a new Tuareg insurgency in 2006. Denouncing the lack of implementation of the National Pact, various Tuareg leaders – Iyad ag Ghali among them – took up arms against Bamako in May 2006. A new peace agreement was proposed by the state and accepted by ag Ghali as early as July, but other insurgents such as Ibrahim ag Bahanga refused to endorse the pact, relaunching the fight until February 2009. The rebellion showed how the fragmentation of political order and social linkages had finally limited the capacity and/or the will of power brokers to project stability in the North. While old clients of the regime had partially lost their legitimacy and capacity to rule and pacify local communities, state-sponsored brokers of recent fortune were mostly pursuing agendas that prioritised the protection and control of drug trafficking (Raineri and Strazzari 2022).

This precarious and contested institutional assemblage is key to understanding the current condition of persisting instability and violence in Northern Mali, and even more to appreciating the trajectory of one of the lead protagonists of the conflict, Iyad ag Ghali. Military leader of the Tuareg Ifoghas –ruling clan of the Malian Tuareg – during the 1990–96 insurrections, for a period Iyad ag Ghali was one of the most important power brokers coopted by the regime, as well as an autonomous actor within a changing security landscape. He was appointed special counsellor of president Alpha Oumar Konaré in the late 1990s and designated consul to Saudi Arabia in 2007–10, acting as an insubordinate, but still reliable guarantor of a precarious 'pact of stability' between Bamako and the North. Simultaneously, first as negotiator involved in the liberation of Western hostages kidnapped by the

then-developing local branch of al-Qaeda in 2003–05, and subsequently during his stay in Jeddah, ag Ghali accumulated economic resources and transnational connections that would be formidable in terms of political legitimacy and fighting capacities.[11] As the 2006–09 rebellion showed, ag Ghali was a contested figure within the Tuareg community, mostly because of his connections with the government in Bamako. For this same reason, ag Ghali failed to win leadership of the new rebellion that started in 2012, though this time he managed to activate his recently built network of jihadist fighters to establish his group, Ansar Dine. Today Iyad ag Ghali is the leader of JNIM (*Jamāʿat nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn*), the coalition of all the groups linked to al-Qaeda fighting in the Sahel, and is one of the decisive figures of the last decade of conflict in Mali.

The trajectory of Iyad ag Ghali demonstrates how the system of power fragmentation and patronage politics pursued by Bamako failed to project stability in the North. While an unsettled regulatory system favoured violent competition for the rents generated by drug trafficking, the manipulative and neopatrimonial approach pursued by the regime indirectly weakened local clients and failed to identify alternative local agents. The arrival of new armed actors connected to the jihadist galaxy, while important per se, was especially impactful because it offered violent entrepreneurs such as ag Ghali the opportunity to reverse a political and institutional arrangement that was no longer serving their interests. At the same time, Malian institutions have proven unable to change their approach. As recognised by the UN Panel of Experts on Mali (UN Security Council 2020), after 2012 Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK)'s regime (2013–2020) approached the crisis in the North by trying to manipulate Northern groups and political-military coalitions, to fragment and weaken them. This choice, coupled with the enduring impact of drug trafficking on economic regulation, reiterated and amplified the dysfunctions that had emerged over the two previous decades. More recent evolutions – a new military regime in Bamako, and recent clashes in the North between the Malian army and Tuareg rebel groups – seem to suggest that these contradictions are finally generating a new phase of violent contention and institutional transformation.

Northern Niger: cooptation and stability?

As with Mali, analysing major political and armed events in Niger starting from the First Tuareg revolt (1990–95) will reveal how the country's hybrid political order eventually emerged in relation to three principal dimensions: how violence is managed; how authority is projected; and how economic interests and traffics are regulated.

In 1990, while protests and strikes in Niamey forced the authoritarian regime to embrace multi-party politics, the encirclement of Tuareg protesters in the North resulted in the Tchin-Tabaraden Massacre (April 1990) and the official launch of a Tuareg armed revolt. Confronting the rebellion with a heavy-handed military response, the government pursued a strategy of fragmentation of the rebel front, isolating hardliners and negotiating with moderates. The Ouagadougou Accords in January 1995 marked the end of most of the fighting. Though signed by the two main rebel front leaders, Rhissa ag Boula and Mano Dayak, the Accords were heavily criticised by the latter, who resented how slowly they were applied. However, Dayak's sudden death in an aeroplane crash in December 1995 marked the end of the rebellion. The Accords envisaged a process of gradual decentralisation of powers, ensuring a nominal regional autonomy for the North, the cooptation of prominent rebel leaders in state positions,[12] and the formalisation of a DDR process. Though pursued

under the tutelage of external actors (France, Algeria, Burkina Faso), the Accords were based on Indigenous forms of conflict-resolution and on the enhanced role of informal institutions in driving the demobilisation of combatants and their integration into the state apparatus. The first dimension is already visible here, as the state's decisions on how to manage (and avoid) violence vis-à-vis the guerrillas would influence future state-building practices in Niger.

The *Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix* (HACP) was established by the government in 1994 for such purposes. A key actor in the Ouagadougou Accords (1995), along with the additional Algiers (1997) and N'Djamena [1998] Accords, the HACP has since been the most prominent channel for enhancing local ownership, providing a significant degree of predictability in the interaction between Niamey and the North, with a focus on conflict-prevention and stability. Moreover, the HACP succeeded in demobilising and reintegrating more than 3,000 former combatants in the Agadez Region into different sectors of the public administration,[13] in an effort to break – or at least reshape – the segmented loyalties of the rebels and place them within the state's frame. Simply put, the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s can be read as a textbook example of how the interaction between formal and informal institutions in Northern Niger would develop. Through skilful use of cooptation and menace, the military rulers in Niamey (Baré Mainassara and Tandja, between 1996 and 2010) reproduced the patron--client relationship that had worked for much of Niger's postcolonial history, redistributing assets and wealth to powerful traditional and upper-caste authorities in exchange for loyalty. The state dealt with the issue of how to project authority across the territory (the second dimension in our analytical grill) by simply outsourcing it. At the same time, Northern groups' hunger for 'juicy positions' ('*postes juteux*')[14] within the state emboldened many of them to ask it for more.

Niamey's strategy of conflict-management, pacification and cooptation in the North, to a certain degree, efficiently de-escalated contentions and prevented further episodes of revolt. It could not, however, overturn on its own the macro-economic outlook of the region, which was bleak. Instability, from the mid-1980s, had a dramatic effect on the tourist industry, which struggled throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, agricultural and pastoral development had to cope with the acute effects of climate variability. Farming and herding had become more labour-intensive and were far less rewarding than before, and therefore were increasingly abandoned by local communities in favour of more financially enriching activities, above all cross-border trafficking and smuggling. In the logic of the Saharan space, trafficking is synonymous with trade. As the informal realm of cross-border trade grew to become a significant arena of opportunity and rapid enrichment, rebel front members quickly established themselves as wealthy traders and power brokers. Many second-line *chefs de front* had successfully employed the resources; expertise and loyalty gained during the 1990s rebellion to enrich themselves through cross-border trafficking, and thus emerge as unavoidable pillars of the regional economy. What is more, the definition of cross-border trafficking as a crucial economic activity marked these power brokers' emergence as the final yet most influential dimension in our analysis of Niger's hybrid political order.

The example of the cooptation of the 1990s rebellion's leaders pushed trafficking entrepreneurs to capitalise on their newly acquired wealth and influence, and turn into 'governing entrepreneurs'. Their ambition, however, was perceived by Niamey as a threat, given the volume and type of items smuggled (especially weapons) and the state responded with

considerable violence. A new revolt was launched in 2007 by a heterogenous group of Tuareg, such as Aghaly Alambo, Goumour Bidika and Amoumoune Kalakoua. Emerging as 'violent entrepreneurs' with a clear political subjectivity in the transformed landscape of Northern Niger, this category of individuals sought to acquire greater autonomy and seized the opportunity to do so when President Tandja [1999–2010] finally sent troops to disarm and arrest what he called 'bandits' and 'criminals'. The struggle was short-lived. Former Tuareg *chefs de front* who transitioned into high-level politicians like ag Boula or Anacko,[15] as well as customary authorities in the North, sided with the government and mediated between this second wave of rebels and Niamey. Thanks to the mediation of power brokers, like rich and influential cross-border trafficker-entrepreneur Cherif Ould Abidine, who worked with Bidika and Kalakoua in smuggling various types of goods in and out of Niger,[16] the rebels halted their operations in exchange for impunity in conducting their businesses (Raineri and Strazzari 2022).

This moment signalled the indispensable centrality of power brokers (front leaders or traffickers) as necessary intermediate bodies between the state and its northern periphery. The emergence of front leaders as regulatory authorities was evident in the course of the 1990–95 revolt, when they mobilised their social and financial capital, while simultaneously articulating a clear political claim, eventually obtaining formal recognition and public legitimation, expressed through the HACP and the decentralised Regional Councils. Similarly, during the negotiations to end the 2007–9 rebellion, the state decided to condone the traffickers' profitable business – but in a different way. The state established its patronage over those activities, extracting rents, and bringing the armed power of former rebels, brokers and traffickers under its tutelage. With the eclipse of Tandja's military-styled regime, and the rise of the dialogue-friendly PNSD-Tarayya party, the arena where such arrangements could take place became party politics. Regional party sections of the Tarayya in the North were turned into sites for discussion and negotiation about the needs of Niamey's government and those of Northern power brokers. Businessmen like Cherif Ould Abidine emerged as formidable allies of the PNDS party in the North. Since he was elected MP for Agadez and became president of the Agadez section of Tarayya, as head of the 3STV transport company Abidine used his vehicles in trans-national trading of licit and illicit goods (cigarettes, fuel, fake drugs and Libya-bound migrants), and mobilised his wealth to finance electoral campaigns for Tarayya in Agadez.[17] Such 'deals' strengthened Niamey's patronage politics in the North, while also spreading the influence of brokers from the North deep into Niamey's power circles.

The regulatory authority of former rebels, power brokers and traffickers provided stability, assured the state outreach in peripheral areas, and set up a veritable informal institution, tasked with providing some forms of governance. In sum, armed entrepreneurs had successfully transitioned into 'governing entrepreneurs'. While fraud networks became an element of the regional economy that was indirectly integrated into state mechanisms, trafficking had significantly expanded in the Agadez Region, turning it into a hub for both the trading of various (legal and illegal) items and the booming industry of transport for West African migrants into North Africa. The volume of this traffic has come under scrutiny since the 2011 fall of Qadhafi in Libya and the 2015 European migration crisis, encouraging increased state oversight over trafficked goods and the formal halting of transport businesses for migrants. Once again, party meetings were used as sites in which to negotiate new deals

between formal and informal institutions, both of which were aware of the need to keep the trafficking going.

The exploitation of gold sites in the region (Djado and Tchibarakaten) partially relieved the struggling regional economy, absorbing labour from local Tuareg communities, and beyond (Pellerin 2017). Gold sites received substantial investment from brokers associated with the 2007–9 rebellion. Among them, Saley Ibrahim, known as Saley Boss, of the kel Ewey of Timia, has arguably been the most successful. Saley gained considerable wealth from the Tchibarakaten site, delivering sought-after services in an otherwise hard-to-reach and inhospitable area, drawing in his support key state and party representatives, which in turn have deployed a Nigerien Army garrison and set up a sort of 'management committee'[18] (Raineri 2020, 108). Saley Boss's wealth proved crucial for the operability of important economic services, such as the gas site adjacent to Agadez,[19] and for absorbing potentially troublesome manpower formerly employed in smuggling or trafficking. Dropping what had been the more profitable migrant transport business, criminalised under Law 36/2015,[20] (armed) brokers like Bashir Netou, 'Mahamma' or Abdou Salam successfully transitioned to investment in the booming informal gold sector, more profitable for them and for the state.[21]

Control over gold extraction in the North is concentrated in the hands of people associated with the Tuareg rebellions – mostly armed actors and traffickers who participated in the rebellion of 2007–9. The 'gold rush' in the Sahara allowed *cadets sociaux* to take a shortcut that brought them close to the power circles of the Agadez Regional Council – dominated by leaders of the 1990–95 rebellion – and even to Niamey's Tarayya circles. We thus see how the trajectory of 'violent entrepreneurs' increasingly converged and overlapped with that of statutory authorities, producing a hybrid order that resulted in an enduring stability that benefitted both parties. Beginning in 2016, powerful brokers like Saley, Kalakoua, as well as Sidi Mahiya or Mahmoud Bashir – all of whom emerged from the Tuareg revolts – started to finance the Taghlamt-n-Aler (*Caravane de Paix*). Composed of the most important cadres and *chefs de front* of the 2007–9 rebellion from Iferouane, this platform, a sort of avatar of the HACP, which provided the model, plays an essential role in keeping the provisional stability that makes informal institutions especially needed. As further proof of how private and public interests have intertwined in the North, straddling formal and informal economies, and fostering a hybrid governance order, the Caravane appears as a vehicle for 'missions' and 'operations' privately sponsored by wealthy Caravane members, which often consist of armed escorts of cargo on different sides of Niger's frontiers.[22] The July 2023 coup by Abdourrahmane Tchiani, former head of the Presidential Guard, drew support from the Army, and has undermined Tarayya's power structure. Though it is too early to assess what consequences the military coup will have in the Northern Region, it will likely entail considerable re-regulation of power and economic networks on the Niamey-Agadez axis, between the state and local informal institutions. Among the few to publicly take a stance against the coup leaders, Ag Boula's movement only represents a segment of informal institutions in Agadez, as many power brokers have an interest in keeping relations close with the now Army-controlled state institutions. On the other hand, the clashes in Northern Mali between Bamako and Tuareg rebel groups might re-activate Tuareg trans-border solidarity against military-rulers, attract like-minded Nigerien Tuareg to the fight, and broaden the confrontation. In the end, the 'deal' between the region's power brokers and Niamey has entrenched state and business relations in the same gears, and it will be interesting to observe how long the 'pact' will last before one side or the other causes a crisis.

Discussion and conclusion

Comparing the different political and security patterns of Northern Mali and Niger allows us to fix two general points for discussion. First, structural factors such as similar historical trajectories, common geographical and ecological features, but also state institutional 'fragility', cannot be considered alone as explaining variables determining specific political and security outcomes. Second, analyses should be built upon a definition of hybrid political orders, which is at once relational and processual. Formal (state) and informal (power brokers, regulatory authorities) institutions are two categories that can only work (and exist) in a dialectical and dependent relationship. The way state institutions cooperate with, integrate, or struggle with informal institutions, and the capacity of the latter to assure norm-enforcement and predictability, mutually influence each other, and together they determine the sustainability of a specific political and economic system. As Mali and Niger remind us, these elements can make all the difference between war and peace in comparable political settings.

Given these premises, some central elements are critical to understanding the diverging trajectories of Northern Mali and Northern Niger. First, in terms of management and employment of violence, both states have pursued a strategy of selection, cooptation and integration of the rebellion's most influential brokers within the state apparatus. However, while Niger decided to set up an ad hoc intermediate body (the HACP) that, through laborious work, was able to gain the trust of rebel groups, Mali always considered the weakening of potential violent challengers its best option. Before and after the 1996 ceasefire, Mali's central government supported ethnic militias like the Ganda Koy to which it outsourced armed work, consequently sabotaging the trust-building process. Moreover, Bamako relied on a top-down decentralisation reform aimed at creating 'local ownership', which eventually became an arena for competition and power struggles. Niamey instead steered a decentralisation reform aimed at integrating Northern leaders into a co-dependency relation, which eventually brought the state 'closer' to Agadez.

These events lead us to problematise how the projection of central authority in the Northern peripheries has been pursued by both states – our second point. Both states timidly met the demands from the rebel front for greater autonomy and empowerment of local elites and brokers. In Niger, Regional Councils and local elected positions were dominated by the most important rebel leaders, which used their positions to increase authority, influence (and wealth). In Mali, on the other hand, post-conflict reforms mostly aimed at segmenting the former rebel front and weakening the authority of power brokers, limiting access to Bamako's institutions to only a faction of them. However, in both Niger and Mali, the new administrative settlements were far from satisfying, as compliance mechanisms by both factions were slow to work, while the 'neo-patrimonial pact' benefitted only a tiny portion of Tuareg societies. Tellingly, the 2006–7 rebellions occurred simultaneously in both countries, and the context of the booming trafficking and cross-border trade economy. In Niger, the conflict ended with a reinforcement of patronage politics, especially with regard to the trafficking business, bringing Niamey and Tuareg elites closer and forging a pact for stability in the North based on the condoning of smuggling and profit-sharing, while in Mali the new generation of criminal and political entrepreneurs informally endorsed by Bamako showed its limited capacity to act as political stabilisers. Consequently, Niamey was able to outsource its authority in exchange for a (not so symbolic) rent in the billion-dollar trans-Saharan smuggling economy, something that did not happen in Mali. The terms for

the regulation of trafficking represent the third pillar of our analysis, and this is closely related to the other two. The strategy pursued by both Mali and Niger to reduce conflict and keep their relationships with their Northern peripheries in balance was to condone cross-border trade and trafficking and revert to extracting value from such activities. In Niger, this doused the flames of revolt; in the 2010–2023 window, x the Tarayya party regime made efforts to integrate the illicit economy within state mechanisms in exchange for a mutually beneficial political stability in the North that yielded tangible results – socially, politically and economically. In Mali, on the other hand, before and after 2012, the wealth generated by trafficking primarily reinforced a multilevel system of predation and corruption that lacked viable mechanisms of redistribution, which finally led to the collapse of any equilibrium.

In conclusion, we can observe that Niger created a set of mechanisms, institutions and intermediate bodies to select, co-opt, and integrate traditional leaders and power brokers from the North. Mali, meanwhile, fought these same elements. When the democratising wave of the 1990s and the explosion of trans-border trafficking in the 2000s changed the rules of the game in both countries, Niger was better prepared to deal with these changes. In particular, Niger's statehood morphed from a broad-based élite class dependent on the state's redistributive neopatrimonial practice into a decentralised network of economic-political allies, straddling the state, the party and informal groups – mixing 'informality and predation' (as in Chad, see Iocchi 2019). The Malian system, meanwhile, has not been able to find a sustainable and shared synthesis between the multiple centres of power and authority that emerged over time, also because of a contradictory policy of fragmentation, cooptation and manipulation applied by the state across the whole country and at all levels of government. The major political crises that have rocked Mali in the last thirty years – 1991–92, 2012, 2020–21 – have all been characterised by the failure of the neo-patrimonial élite in power to change its practices and include other key actors – power brokers, political opponents, and violent/criminal entrepreneurs – within their system of power. The result has been ever-worsening instability. Moreover, in Niger, through the selective employment of cooptation and threats, thriving cross-country informal trade has been preserved, forms of protection and oversight provided, and the rents generated by the former have been closely surveilled so as not to displace the power balance from the state sphere located, symbolically and materially, in the capital city of Niamey. Again, this did not happen in Bamako, whose grip on trafficking in the North has steadily reduced, with the result that today such economic activities constitute an autonomous issue within the multiple conflicts that are currently shaping Mali's destiny.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Notes on contributors

Alessio Iocchi is Research Fellow at the Department of Environmental and Cultural Heritage at the University of Milan. He obtained a PhD in African Studies at University of Naples "L'Orientale", where he also teaches African International Relations. He has worked, and still collaborates, with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) researching on governance processes in the Sahel. Since 2014, he has conducted extensive fieldwork in different countries of the Sahel, including Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad, also collaborating with international NGOs as a consultant. His works have been published in specialised journals such as *African Conflict & Peace-Building Review*, *Politique Africaine*, *International Spectato*r, etc. He is the author of *Living through Crisis by Lake Chad. Violence, Labour and Resources* (Routledge).

Edoardo Baldaro is Assistant Professor in Political Science and International Relations at the Department of Political Sciences and International Relations of the University of Palermo (Italy). Before Palermo, he served as FNRS postdoctoral researcher at the REPI Institute of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB, Brussels, Belgium), and as postdoctoral research fellow at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies (Pisa, Italy) and at the University of Naples "L'Orientale". He holds a PhD in Political Science from the Scuola Normale Superiore – Institute of Human and Social Sciences (Pisa and Florence, Italy). His main areas of interest and research include critical security studies, African politics and international relations, international interventions, and security regionalism. His works have been published, among the others, in specialised journals such as *Security Dialogue* and *Territory, Politics, Governance*.

Notes

1. Most of the uprisings that have taken place in Northern Mali and Niger have not been conducted only by Tuareg populations, instead involving other communities and ethnic groups that inhabit the area. Moreover, the various insurgencies have also seen deep divisions within the Tuareg community, or between different sectors and classes of the various groups who compose the complex sociopolitical galaxy of these regions. While underlining the need to maintain a nuanced approach to this issue, here, in line with much of the literature, we will refer to the various armed insurgencies in Mali and Niger as 'Tuareg rebellions'.
2. While we consider the Islamization of Sahelian's public sphere a crucial element shaping political dynamics, its assessment goes beyond the scope of this essay, which is instead focused on the analysis of the mechanisms of hybridization of power networks (mostly) through the mobilization of material resources like armed violence and economic capital.
3. The objective of the research and the way data had been collected, anonymized, and stored, have been clearly explained and exposed to all the participants, who have expressed their informed consent. With the only exception of those participants who felt a written record would present a potential harm to them (e.g. members of cross-border transport networks or members of armed groups) and whose consent was expressed verbally, consent has been given by signing a written form.
4. Leader of a Tuareg confederation.
5. Ag Gamou was one of the leaders of the Tuareg Imghad – a subaltern clan within the Tuareg political structure – who joined the Malian army in 1996. Today he is a general and the leader of the (until recently?) pro-government militia GATIA (*Groupe d'Autodéfense des Touareg Imghad et Alliés*). On ag Ghali, see further.
6. Interviews with two local security experts and researchers, Bamako, January 2023.
7. Ag Erlaf was then member of different governments from 2015 to 2020, as Minister for Decentralization, for Territorial Administration, and for State Reform.

8. Interviews with 1) a former employee of the French ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, June 2015; 2) a local security expert and employee of MINUSMA, Bamako, December 2019.
9. Interviews with: 1) member of the EU delegation in Mali, Bamako, September 2015; 2) employee of the Dutch embassy in Mali, Bamako, October 2015; 3) local security expert and former employee of the Spanish cooperation in Gao, Bamako, December 2019.
10. Interview with a local researcher and scholar, Bamako, January 2023.
11. For a reconstruction of Iyad ag Ghali's career, see Bensimon et al. (2018). Our information was confirmed by various experts and practitioners met in Bamako in December 2019 and January 2023.
12. Ag Boula was appointed Minister of Tourism from 1997 to 2004, was elected member of the Regional Council of Agadez (2011–15) and appointed as Advisor to the Presidency by former president Issoufou in 2011, a position he held until the July 2023 military coup.
13. Interview with researcher and member of the HACP, Agadez, November 2021.
14. Interview with a senior scholar, government consultant and NGO president, Agadez, November 2022.
15. Anacko was a Minister and High Commissioner for the Restoration of Peace in the North and is now the serving President of the Regional Council of Agadez.
16. Interviews with several local political representatives, including two former mayors, Agadez, October-November 2022.
17. Interviews with several local activists, local politicians, council members and journalists, Agadez, October-November 2022.
18. Interviews with artisanal gold miners and entrepreneurs, Agadez, November 2022.
19. *Idem*.
20. Aimed at combating human smuggling in the Sahara, this law reinforced police authority in Niger, framing migration as a security threat in relation to terrorism. Since its introduction the law, far from achieving its goal of halting mobility, has only had the effect of making migration routes increasingly perilous. See Dauchy (2020). The military junta, in a move to captivate Northern socio-economic actors, abolished the contested law in November 2023.
21. Fieldwork notes from interviews with civil society activists, journalists, and former rebels, Agadez, October-November 2022.
22. Fieldwork notes from exchanges with Caravane members, local politicians, and former rebels, Agadez, October-November 2022.

ORCID

Alessio Iocchi http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1298-6706

Edoardo Baldaro http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6381-2397

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