

## Europeanisation, border violence, counterinsurgency: expanded geographies and reconnected histories across the Sahelo-Sahara and the Mediterranean

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In the southern Mauritanian border town of Rosso, two young men from Mali recounted to me scattered and violent trajectories of mobility. Spanning two macro-regions and encompassing a range of lethal governmental interventions, their stories lie at a structural intersection between European Union (EU) migration control efforts in the Mediterranean and an international counterinsurgency campaign in the Sahel. Soro,<sup>1</sup> from the central Malian region of Mopti, first left his home in 2006 for Libya. From there he eventually made his way to Algeria, before attempting to cross the Mediterranean from the port city of Oran. He was intercepted by the Algerian coast guard and abandoned by security forces in Algeria's southern desert borderlands, where he made an arduous crossing on foot into Niger. He then made his way back to Libya, from where he hoped to reach Italy, before instead reluctantly participating in an IOM 'voluntary return' programme. His companion in Rosso, Ali Bakar, was from the Malian region of Timbuktu. His trajectory also commenced in Libya, where he worked with his brother in a Turkish-owned factory. Following the collapse of the Libyan state after the 2011 NATO intervention, his brother made the Mediterranean crossing to Italy before settling in Malta. Ali Bakar fled in the opposite direction, eventually settling in Mauritania in 2017. This remained a preferable option to returning home to Timbuktu where, in his words, 'everything had been ruined' since the war with the jihadists broke out in 2012. Soro, too, spoke of ongoing 'problems with the jihadists' in his home region of Mopti, which has been equally drenched in insecurity since becoming the hotspot of an international counterinsurgency campaign in 2015 (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba, 2022).

While varying in degrees of European causal responsibility, each of these experiences of direct violence bear an asymmetry reminiscent of the colonial era, which saw a process of pacification and liberalisation within the

European metropole alongside mass violence in the colonies (Lal, 2005: 221). Insofar as they follow from the removal of barriers to free movement in Europe and the process of European integration more generally, EU migration control policies in the Mediterranean and military intervention and stabilisation missions in the Sahel together uphold this colonial asymmetry.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, instructive distinctions to be drawn between past and present. Having been born of a moment in which the formal colonial order was dying amidst strident hopes and efforts to keep it alive (Hansen and Jonsson, 2014), the EU is today instead charged with upholding its remnants, which nonetheless continue to hold powerful material weight and ideological sway. Indeed, once Eurocentric conceits are absorbed, as Samir Amin (1988: 107) once observed, ‘it becomes impossible to contemplate any other future for the world than its progressive Europeanisation’.

At the same time, it is becoming ever clearer that the progressive Europeanisation of the world is a material and cultural impossibility. What happens when these two facts – the hegemony of European teleology and the impossibility of its concrete realisation – come into conflict? Put differently, if, as Fanon (2004: 58) has it, ‘Europe is literally the creation of the Third World’, what happens when this exploitative and entrenched link begins to become undone? In this chapter, I conceptualise the mass violence, death and instability that mark both the Mediterranean and the Sahelo-Sahara regions as manifestations of a collapse in European hegemony over what has historically been a colonial backyard and postcolonial sphere of geopolitical influence. While bearing all the morbid symptoms by which Antonio Gramsci once famously characterised such periods of interregnum, this juncture creates openings to view what is typically obscured in times of unchallenged hegemony.

In this chapter, I attempt to grasp two elements of this opening. The first concerns an expanded geography of the Sahelo-Sahara and the Mediterranean, and the second, a reconnected history of these two regions. The former means working against a tendency, rife within EU policy documents and beyond, to reproduce a colonial geography that treats the Mediterranean and the Sahelo-Sahara as distinct and discretely bounded entities.<sup>3</sup> It does so by contextualising Ali Bakar’s and Soro’s experiences of violence within these two zones, tracing experiential and spatial connections between them, and showing each to be framed by European military and security interventions. The second element reconnects some of the histories that Ida Danewid (2017) has argued to be disconnected by white liberal interventions in the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> This work of reconnection here involves relaying the precolonial co-constitution of these two regions, and the gradual shift toward asymmetry generated by the emergence of a new world-systemic centre in the Atlantic at the turn of the fifteenth century.

The era of European hegemony which followed transformed the Mediterranean into a centre–periphery boundary of this new world system (Amin, 1988), while the Sahelo-Sahara region was degenerated into its extreme periphery (Idrissa, 2021).

In light of this expanded geography and reconnected history, contemporary border violence in the Mediterranean and political violence in the Sahel each appear to be not only ‘a late consequence of Europe’s violent encounter with the Global South’ (Danewid, 2017: 1679); they are also a symptom of the breakdown in Europe’s exclusive dominance over the Global South. In other words, they are the brutal manifestation of a distinction drawn by Achille Mbembe (2021) between ‘primitive Eurocentrism’ and ‘late Eurocentrism’: ‘where primitive Eurocentrism sought to establish European conquest and domination of the world, the late Eurocentrism of the twenty-first century seeks to justify the battering down of Europe on itself, its withdrawal from the world’.

Of course, in situating contemporary dynamics in the Sahel and Mediterranean within a *longue durée* characterised by European conquest and dominance, there is a risk of overstating ‘foreign interveners’ allegedly ‘exceptional’ power to shape political dynamics at will’ (Raineri, 2021: 17). This risk is all the more pronounced at a juncture arguably defined by a decline in influence of such historic hegemons. But for this very reason, it is necessary to dissect the historic genesis of this flailing power projection, for it is within such moments that cracks and continuities become more apparent. From this vantage point, the contemporary juncture appears not as an outright continuation of this trajectory of European supremacy, but rather a manifestation of its secular decline.

Before proceeding, a word on terminology is in order, and in particular on how ‘violence’ is understood. While I primarily discuss violence of a direct and physical nature here, I do not deny the realities of structural and epistemic violence (Galtung, 1969; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004), nor that border regimes in general contribute to these indirect forms of violence (cf. Davies, Isakjee and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2022). Less still do I want to imply that the following discussion is somehow removed from these multi-layered structures of violence. For academic representation itself entails violence. This is arguably all the more the case when life experience is not only represented academically, but reproduced in multiple academic fora. On this point, elsewhere I discuss different elements of Ali Bakar’s and Soro’s life experience in Rosso (Ould Moctar, 2022). For this reason, a sense of doubt underpins the following discussion, as it involves not just the violence of academic representation, but also risks that of reproduction. But there may be a productive aspect to this dilemma: doubt ‘allows the chapter authors to contribute to this collection without flattening our positionalities

and fixing the regions we speak from' (see Introduction to this volume). It is in this spirit that I hope to mobilise my own doubt about harnessing the violence of academic repetition to this chapter. Whether or not it succeeds is for readers to judge.

### **An expanded geography of violence**

Of the many recent moments of spatial connection between the Mediterranean and the Sahelo-Sahara, the 2011 uprisings in North Africa stand out for their strikingly centrifugal effects. As many critical migration scholars have observed (Tazzioli, 2014; Hess and Kasperek, 2017), the 2011 uprising in Tunisia involved a social movement in both senses of the phrase: a revolutionary movement aimed at upending the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and a physical northward movement of people toward Europe. The latter was no less revolutionary than the former, but its end result was less decisive. Indeed, while the challenge to the EU border regime in the Mediterranean continued to mount post-2011, culminating in the mass arrivals during the 'summer of migration' of 2015, the years since have seen a move toward a broader and deeper externalisation of migration management responsibilities outside the EU (Gabrielli, 2016). This can be seen in the 2015 launch of the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa, and in deepening cooperation between Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard) and the Libyan Coast Guard from 2017 (Stierl, 2019). This shift toward externalisation was further consolidated over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, consigning untold numbers to death, containment and abandonment in the Mediterranean (Stierl and Dadusc, 2021).

The aftermath of the 2011 uprisings also rippled southward, laying a foundation for the Sahelian counterinsurgency campaign in which Ali Bakar's and Soro's lives are equally caught up. As revolutionary fervour spread from Tunisia to Libya, dynamics took a violent turn, in the form of armed resistance from below and a NATO-led military intervention from above. Together, these resulted in the toppling of authoritarian pillar of stability Muamar Al-Qadhafi in October 2011. Three months later, galvanised by an influx of weapons and combatants, a long-term Tuareg insurgency in northern Mali relaunched its independence struggle. Having been primarily orchestrated through a tactical and at times uneasy alliance between the secular *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA movement) and local jihadist outfit *Ansar Ad-Din*, the insurgency shifted in the ideological direction of the latter as it expanded southward to take the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu (Thurston, 2020: 127).<sup>5</sup> All of this compounded a simmering sense of disillusionment within the Malian armed forces, which

found expression in a military coup in March 2012. Just under a year later, with the jihadist insurgency advancing south and political disarray reigning in the capital of Bamako, Mali's beleaguered interim head of government called on France under Francois Hollande to intervene.

What began as Operation Serval in January 2013 was a geographically and tactically restricted intervention aimed at stemming the southward jihadist advance, an objective that was achieved in a matter of months. This was, however, but the forerunner to a much more ambitious counterinsurgency campaign. Rebranded in 2014 as Operation Barkhane, the operational aim evolved from stemming and dispersing a southward advance to the much more elusive goal of quashing jihadist activity across the Sahel. As such, it became more firmly anchored within the ideological hubris and self-perpetuating mechanisms of the US Global War on Terror (cf. Keen, 2006). Increasing its troop deployment to 4,000, Barkhane spread its operational wings outward from its initial Malian locations of Timbuktu, Gao and Bamako to Njamena (Chad), Ougadougou (Burkina Faso) and Niamey (Niger), with a view to extending counter-terrorist operations across this Sahelo-Saharan space.

The counterinsurgency effort acquired further international dimensions in 2013 with the deployment of the UN stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and with the 2014 launch of the G5 Sahel, a regional security cooperation framework consisting of Mali, Mauritania, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso. Intended to endow Sahelian states with greater ownership over the regional securitisation drive, the G5 Sahel has nonetheless continued to reflect EU security interests and priorities (Venturi, 2017; Lopez-Lucia, 2020). These interests were given direct expression in 2020, when the EU deployed a military mission to Mali dubbed the Takuba Taskforce. Under French command, it accompanied Malian armed forces in counterinsurgency operations until it was discontinued in June 2022, along with the winding down of Operation Barkhane, for reasons that will be detailed shortly.

Collectively, these diverse interventions amount to what Bruno Charbonneau (2021) has termed a regime of counterinsurgency governance in the Sahel. While the roots of this regime of counterinsurgency governance are many, they include the southward ripple effects of the 2011 uprisings, which also spurred the movements across the Mediterranean that permanently reconfigured EU external border policy from 2015 onward.

If there is indeed an expanded geography connecting the Mediterranean and the Sahelo-Sahara regions, one of its core features is thus a fusion between the wars on migration and on violent extremism. Given its flexible and informal nature, the EUTF has been key to this structural crossover. Indeed, the inclusion of stabilisation within the EUTF's mandate expands its sphere of concern to include projects concerning territorial integrity and

the control of illicit flows in general (Raineri and Strazzari, 2019: 550). One such project is the Rapid Action Groups – Surveillance and Intervention in the Sahel (GAR-SI), which are flexible and mobile security units trained for the purpose of addressing cross-border security issues such as trafficking and terrorism (Delegation de l'union europeenne en Mauritanie, 2016). Another example is an EUTF-financed support programme for the G5 Sahel, operated by the French technical cooperation operator Civipol<sup>6</sup> and staffed by European security experts based in the G5 Sahel permanent secretariat in Nouakchott.<sup>7</sup> Speaking of a database being piloted within G5 Sahel member states, a member of this support programme gave succinct expression to the structural overlap embodied in the EUTF: the idea is 'a database that details everything: immigration, human trafficking, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, terrorism. Everything'.<sup>8</sup> At origin an emergency initiative to tackle the perceived root causes of 'irregular migration' to Europe, the EU Trust Fund and, by extension, the EU border regime have thus merged with the regime of counterinsurgency governance in the Sahel.

As Ali Bakar's and Soro's experiences suggest, however, this merger has generated little improvement in the security situation across the region, not least in Soro's home region of Mopti. After becoming the locus of the international counterinsurgency campaign in 2015, Mopti saw a sharp spike in jihadist activity and intercommunal violence (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba, 2022: 18). This is in part because French counterinsurgency doctrine relies upon a reductive and blinkered understanding of what drives recruitment to jihadist groups, which are, as Nathaniel Powell (2022) has argued, best understood as rural insurgencies against state forces who often bear the largest share of responsibility for civilian deaths. To this ignorance must be added a strong dose of arrogance, as was made clear in French President Emmanuel Macron's summoning of Sahelian heads of state to a summit in Pau in January 2020. Disconcerted by a marked increase in visible anti-French sentiment across the region, he urged them to demonstrate their commitment to the goals of the counterinsurgency campaign (Yvan, 2020: 901). They duly obeyed, and Sahelian security forces subsequently embarked upon a spate of extrajudicial killings, leading to another spike in civilian fatalities in the region in 2020, further inflaming the grievances that drive recruitment to jihadist groups (Nsaibia, 2020). Extremist violence in the Sahel is, in other words, coproduced by the regime of counterinsurgency governance that is formally aimed at stemming it.

Meanwhile, in the years since the 2015 'summer of migration' and the subsequent deepening of the externalisation drive, the trajectory of the border regime in the Mediterranean has taken an equally macabre turn. As successful arrivals dropped from over 1 million in 2015 to just under 400,000 one year later (UNHCR, 2022), the death toll climbed in the opposite

direction, from 4,055 drowned in the Mediterranean in 2015 to 5,136 in 2016 (IOM, 2022). Even when these numbers came back down in 2017 and 2018, however, the proportion of deaths out of total arrivals continued to mount (Kouvelakis, 2018: 19), from one death for every 42 arrivals in the first six months of 2017 to one death for every eighteen arrivals in the first six months of 2018 (Guardian, 2018). In recent years, the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands has come to epitomise this tendency, with the Alarm Phone Network (2021) estimating the death rate on this route to be as high as one for every twelve arrivals on the Canary Islands in 2021. Moreover, as deaths at sea have dropped in absolute numbers, the volume of torture, enslavement and deaths in EU-supported Libyan detention centres has risen commensurately (cf. Heyden, 2022).

The fusion between the wars on migration and on terrorism within this expanded geography is thus characterised by a vicious feedback loop between military and security interventions, on the one hand, and the suffering and death of the displaced and dispossessed on the other.<sup>9</sup> Having experienced first-hand the interceptions, detentions and abandonment that pepper the EU's Mediterranean border, as well as the extremist violence that is coproduced by the regime of counterinsurgency governance in the Sahel, Ali Bakar and Soro are together testament to this expanded geography of violence. The preceding contextualisation of their life experiences will have hopefully provided grounds for viewing each of these regions in terms of a differentiated but contiguous geographic whole, marked by non-linear trajectories of violence and suffering that are reproduced by militarised interventions nominally aimed at alleviating them.

While the EU's multilateral oversight is crucial to this expanded geography of violence, there are important delegations of responsibility at bilateral level. Spain, for its part, has acted as pioneer of externalised migration governance on the West Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes, which served as an early laboratory for many of the strategies of externalisation implemented post-2015 (Carrera, 2007; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2014). France, in contrast, has spearheaded the counterinsurgency operation intended to neutralise jihadist activity in the Sahel, and as such has presided over the upsurge in civilian displacement and fatalities detailed above. Framing these maritime and terrestrial operations is the EU, whose backing takes both indirect and direct form: the former through funding and capacity building, and the latter through Frontex, in the case of migration control efforts, and the Takuba Taskforce, in the case of the counterinsurgency campaign in Mali.

Incidentally, this spatial division of labour between Spain and France mirrors a colonial-era agreement that carved up the northwest African coastline. According to this 1902 agreement, Spain obtained access to the

marine resources off the Sahara's Atlantic coast, while France would gain control of the Saharan interior and the iron ore minerals that had been discovered by French researchers in 1935 (Antil, 2004). Forged in the era of formal colonialism, this spatial dispersal of labour lingers on today, in the form of a Spanish war against migration at sea and a French one against violent extremism inland. As financial and technical benefactor to each of these endeavours, the EU sits astride this colonially endowed spatial division of interests and responsibilities. There is, in other words, a long history to Europe's contemporary entanglement in the expanded geography of violence that has been detailed here. In the following section, I trace the historic origins of this European dominance of these two regions, to provide an explanatory frame for the unprecedented levels of violence presently engulfing them. From this *longue-durée* perspective, this death and violence is the expression of a breakdown in historically rooted European hegemony across this expanded geography.

### **Reconnected histories in the Mediterranean and the Sahelo-Sahara**

In his monumental history of the Mediterranean in the late sixteenth century, Fernand Braudel (1992) described the Sahara as the 'second face of the Mediterranean', an observation that has since acquired something of a seminal status. As he and many other scholars have since shown (Horden, 2012; Scheele and McDougall, 2012; Kea, 2014), the histories of each of these regions indeed engulf and enfold one another, in a manner not unlike the ritual advance and retreat of waves and dunes that are so fundamental to the basic ecological rhythm of each zone. This macro-regional co-constitution is observable within diffuse geographic imaginaries of the Sahara and the Mediterranean, such as those of medieval Arab geographers for whom a neat conceptual symmetry could be discerned between the two zones. This was observable in the nature of the spatial expanse to be navigated – sea on the one hand, desert on the other; the means of transport by which this was achieved – ships at sea, camels on land; or the docking and rest points that served them – wells and oases on the one hand, port cities and islands, on the other (Horden, 2012: 30).

While necessarily reductive, these conceptual parallels have the advantage of retrieving the Sahara from the peripheral frontier zone status to which diffuse elements of European thought have long relegated it (McDougall, 2007a; Scheele and McDougall, 2012). Indeed, the Sahara has throughout much of modern history been a central conduit within the world economy (Austen, 2010). Having roughly spanned the fifth century BCE to the nineteenth century, the trans-Saharan caravan trade forged relations of trade and



exchange not just laterally from the Nile Valley to the Sahelian oasis towns of Oulata and Timbuktu but also upward through the Sahara to North Africa's Mediterranean port cities. For this reason, economic exchange in the Mediterranean and beyond it appears irrevocably shaped by desert centres far removed from the coasts of North Africa, be this in the export of Saharan agricultural surpluses to Mediterranean emporia, or in the form of gold originating in the Gao Kingdom, in modern-day Mali, to be minted as coinage in Carthage and Alexandria (Kea, 2014: 429). This Saharan conditioning of the Mediterranean holds for its people well as its goods. Indeed, for Braudel, the movements of nomadic pastoralists from arid Saharan plains to Mediterranean coastal cities such as Oran during the dry season was one of the organic regional rhythms that earned the Sahara its status as second face of the Mediterranean (Braudel, 1992: 129).

These trans-Saharan processes that were so constitutive of the Mediterranean were also expressions of structures and relations that are *intra*-Saharan in character, with economic exploitation, labour relations and social structures each having an intensely local character (McDougall, 2012b). Indeed, by the nineteenth century, the vast geographic area spanning from Southern Morocco to Timbuktu and Niger had become an integrated and contiguous trading bloc in which goods and people circulated (McDougall, 2012a). This precolonial history of intra-Saharan social formation is, furthermore, deeply dynamic. While colonial ethnographers tended to assume stasis to be the rule underlying social identity, rank and structures, the reality was more fluid, with social formations being repeatedly transformed and upended by emigration, marriage alliances and revolutionary struggle (Curtin, 1971; Cleaveland, 2002). In other words, the Sahara and its peoples have historically not only conditioned social processes and structures on the Mediterranean; they have also been autonomously and dynamically generative of their own internal economic, ecological and social relations.

With the gradual rise of European supremacy from the late fifteenth century, the long-distance co-constitution between the Mediterranean and the Sahara would remain unbroken, but its dynamics shifted in a decidedly more asymmetric direction. A comprehensive overview of this shift is of course beyond the scope of this chapter. But in broad and therefore reductive terms, the emergence of the Atlantic as a new centre of exchange within a nascent world capitalist system undergirded this newfound asymmetry (Amin and Girvan, 1973). Given the socially destructive nature of the primary export commodity that was channelled through this new world-systemic centre, this shift represented a gradual but qualitative break with the nature of exchange that prevailed between the Mediterranean and the Sahara in previous epochs. For many of the Sahara's inhabitants, this took the form of

a loss of autonomy over the management of local ecological resources and political structures relative to preceding eras (McDougall, 2012b: 87). Of course, intra- and trans-Saharan trade persisted, as did Saharan autonomy in the face of a new European economic and military presence on the coasts of West Africa (McDougall, 2007b). But in net terms, the gradual diminishment of trans-Saharan commerce and exchange in favour of coastal exports shifted the balance of the world system decisively towards an era of unprecedented European dominance.

The dawn of this epoch was of course materially characterised by mass enslavement and exploitation, but it acquired an important symbolic dimension which cloaked this violent material base. As Samir Amin (1988) has shown, the exploitative and violent foundations of the world capitalist system came to be masked and justified by an intellectual project that fabricated a European civilisation which was purported to have emerged seamlessly from Greek and Roman Antiquity. The Mediterranean is vital to the erasures and omissions entailed in this intellectual project:

The new European culture reconstructs itself around a myth that creates an opposition between an alleged European geographical continuity and the world to the south of the Mediterranean, which forms the new centre/periphery boundary. The whole of Eurocentrism lies in this mythic construct. (Amin, 1988: 11)

Having been a centre of gravity for trade and exchange in its own right, the Mediterranean would thus henceforth act as a new centre–periphery boundary following a reorientation of the embryonic world capitalist system toward the Atlantic.

While now forming the economic boundary between the centre and periphery of this world system, the Mediterranean also acts as the ideological screen onto which this system projects its own imagined past. In other words, the Eurocentric intellectual project took what was a novel spatial split between the worlds north and south of the Mediterranean, and falsely projected it backwards into history (Amin, 1988: 93). This backward projection has since been taken up and disseminated by a slew of actors with diverse and even contradictory stakes in the modern capitalist system:

from the works of apologists for the French colonial conquest to the speeches of Mussolini to the textbooks still in use throughout Europe, this North-South cleavage is presented as permanent, self-evident and inscribed in geography (and therefore – by implicit false deduction – in history). (Amin, 1988: 93)

If a sharp delineation runs through Amin's work between the material and the ideational – between base and superstructure – the Mediterranean border is the site in which the two coalesce. It is at the same time the mediating

zone between the economic core and the periphery and the source of the myth that justifies the very existence of this spatial bifurcation.

Beyond this novel spatial boundary lies the West African Sahel, whose colonial peripheralisation equally holds material and symbolic dimensions. While the under-development of the region long preceded the nineteenth century (cf. Rodney, 1972), it reached its zenith at this time with the inland colonisation of West Africa (Amin, 1995). This was expressed in the Sahelian interior's new politico-economic status as a strategic but economically lean wedge between the settler colonies of North Africa and the coastal export hubs of West Africa. As with the newfound centre-periphery boundary role of the Mediterranean, this material role had its Eurocentric ideological counterpart. 'In the world that the West created', Rahmane Idrissa (2021: 10) observes in a discussion of the historic roots of the Sahel's contemporary crisis, 'the Sahel is an extreme periphery, one whose very name is meant to reify it into a remote, stultifying land where only dire things happen' (cf. Bonnacase and Brachet, 2013). While the shift to formal political independence did little to alter the material and symbolic peripheralisation of the Sahelo-Saharan interior, the actors charged with managing and mitigating its social consequences traded a colonial garb for an international developmental one (Mann, 2015; Idrissa, 2021: 18).

This is why, while the region today remains a hub of trade and exchange, these flows are often governed at an international level as illicit objects of security intervention. Accordingly, they become the target of the EU-funded projects detailed in the previous section, which are aimed at documenting these flows so that they may be safely contained within the Sahelian periphery (cf. Duffield, 2010). This is the implied logic underpinning such EUTF-funded initiatives as the West Africa Police Information System and the G5 Sahel Security Cooperation Platform (cf. Gorman and Chauzal, 2018; Frowd, 2021; Stambøl, 2021). In imposing gradated categories of risk and danger upon the Sahel, information platforms of this kind aid in cordoning off vast portions of the region, thereby reproducing the spatial segregation associated with Sahelian peripherality (Andersson, 2019).

For people like Ali Bakar and Soro who inhabit these risk categories, the consequence of subverting them by attempting to cross the Mediterranean can all too often be violence and death. But in the history being recounted here, these macabre outcomes force a question upon us: what does it mean when a site of such symbolic importance to the myth of European civilisational superiority as the Mediterranean is today the deadliest border-zone in the world? In light of Amin's critique of the Eurocentric intellectual project, a triple convergence can be discerned at the EU's southern border, namely between the world system's historic birth, its Eurocentric narrative of civilisational superiority and the unprecedented degree of death and suffering

that has materialised in this zone today. Far from its original role as the moral source of European world-systemic dominance, the Mediterranean centre–periphery boundary is today a site where this Eurocentric narrative has been utterly detached from its material reality.

If the civilisational conceits of the world system’s Eurocentric superstructure are thus coming apart in the Mediterranean, events in the Sahelian periphery offer some tentative insight into the form this growing rupture may take. In recent years, a wave of social mobilisations, military coups and unprecedented shifts in geopolitical alliances have swept the West African Sahel. While social mobilisations in West Africa have long been driven by liberalism’s failed promises to the region (Sylla, 2014), this most recent bout of revolt and unrest has for the first time been accompanied by a concrete decline in Western hegemony (cf. Niang, 2022). In August 2020, after months of popular protests, Malian President Ibrahim Keita was ousted in a military coup. Shortly afterward, it was announced that Operation Barkhane would be gradually wound down, with the EU’s Takuba Taskforce soon following suit (Euractiv, 2022). Nine months later, in May 2021, yet another coup in Mali quashed hopes that these were just blips in the otherwise smooth proceedings of the regime of counterinsurgency governance. Such delusions were definitively shattered with Mali’s withdrawal from the G5 Sahel a year later. Meanwhile, a coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022 was preceded by months of popular protest against the French counterinsurgency and the inability of domestic forces to quell insecurity. Much like in Mali, this was followed by another military coup just eight months later.

In each of these contexts, anti-French and pro-Russian sentiments have proliferated, with protests against symbols of French authority being accompanied by official moves to minimise France’s military, diplomatic and media presence in the region. At the same time, ever more explicit overtures are being made to Russia, which in the region’s imaginary fulfils a collective desire for a degree of yet-to-be realised autonomy from the former coloniser (see Manatouma, this volume, for how this plays out in Chad). Whether any of this translates to a move out of peripherality, or a mere shift in its form and orientation, these developments nonetheless amount to substantial shift in the colonially endowed world-systemic order of things.

## Conclusion

Across the Sahelo-Sahara and Mediterranean, the long-term arc of European hegemony is waning. The expanded geography of violence that was detailed in the first part of this chapter is one important expression of this decline, but the preceding discussion shows that it gives rise to social revolt and shifts in geopolitical alliances. I conclude with two important qualifiers to this claim.

The first is that a decline in European hegemony across the Mediterranean and the Sahel does not signify European withdrawal from these regions. On the contrary, it could well mean an intensified and more cynically militarised approach to the region.<sup>10</sup> Glimmers of such an approach can be seen in the moves to deploy Frontex risk analysis cells and liaison officers in Senegal and Mauritania (Statewatch, 2022), and in a proposed EU military expansion in the Sahel, framed largely in terms of countering Russian influence in the region (Rettman, 2022). Second, and relatedly, this world-systemic shift carries no intrinsically progressive character. Indeed, notwithstanding the rearrangement in security partners, the Malian state has upheld the tradition of massacring civilians in the name of counter-terror operations, with up to 300 civilians reportedly being killed by armed forces and their Russian partners in Moura, Mopti, at the end of March 2022 (UN News, 2022). Furthermore, for those like Soro and Ali Bakar who continue to flee these atrocities, there is little likelihood of EU external border policy in the Mediterranean autonomously changing tack in the near future.

This juncture does, however, carry opportunities, which may or may not be capitalised upon. When viewed along the timescale detailed in the second half of this chapter, these could result in intra and trans-Saharan trade and exchange taking a less pathologically criminalised and securitised form than at present. In this light, the era of late Eurocentrism may eventually prove James McDougall (2012b: 75) correct in his observation that ‘the “closure” of the desert corridor in the early twentieth century might now look more like a brief parenthesis in a longer, continuous history than like a final and defining death knell’. Meanwhile, the conversion of the Mediterranean into a mass grave may appear in retrospect a bleak curtain call before an era of less lethal and illegalised circulation between both shores of the sea. Beyond such speculations, what is clear is that the ‘understanding of the failure of the teleological narratives of “European” progress’ (see Introduction to this volume), has manifested with potency in the Sahel. As a result, its expanded geography encompasses not just the Mediterranean but also the broader Souths and Easts across which this understanding is shared.

## Notes

- 1 All names of individuals in this piece are pseudonyms. I discuss elements of Ali Bakar and Soro’s experiences in Rosso elsewhere (Ould Moctar, 2022).
- 2 As detailed later, the French counterinsurgency initiative, Operation Barkhane, is operationally distinct from the EU training and capacity building missions in the Sahel (such as EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel and EUCAP Niger). But there have been areas of shared responsibility and direction, as in the EU military mission in Mali, the Takuba Taskforce, which was under French military command.

- 3 The EU Trust Fund for Africa, for instance, divides the African continent into three distinct zones of project implementation: the Sahel and Lake Chad region, the Horn of Africa and North Africa.
- 4 For more on Eurocentrism and disconnected histories, see Gurminder Bhabra, 2007.
- 5 This occurred through the incorporation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa. Having long been embedded in smuggling and militant activities in northern Mali, these regional jihadist insurgencies increasingly side-lined the MNLA as the rebellion moved south.
- 6 For an analysis of the colonial logics of commodified mobility control and state-private partnerships sustained by Civipol, see Stambøl and Jegen, 2022.
- 7 Interview with G5 Sahel support programme staff, Nouakchott, May 2018
- 8 Interview with G5 Sahel support programme staff, Nouakchott, May 2018.
- 9 For further theorisation of feedback loops generated by such war systems, see Keen and Andersson, 2018.
- 10 I am grateful to Nandita Sharma for the suggestion that these developments reflect intensification as much as decline.

## References

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