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## **EVALUATING POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND MILITARY COUPS IN MALI (2010-2023)**

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**Abstract:** The Sahel region has faced persistent political instability and numerous military coups, with Mali being a prime example from 2012 to 2023. The collapse of Libya in 2011 had a profound impact on Mali's conflict dynamics, leading to an influx of arms and experienced fighters that worsened existing tensions and insurgencies. This period was marked by recurrent coups, reflecting deep governance issues and escalating ethno-religious tensions. The involvement of external actors, including international interventions, has been crucial yet contentious, underscoring Mali's reliance on foreign military support. Therefore, this paper examined the complex nature of political instability in Mali, focusing on the interactions between regional conflicts, governance problems, and international interventions, and assessing the broader implications for peace and security in the Sahel. Anchored on the Spillover Theory and employing a qualitative research design with content analysis, the findings revealed that the Libyan civil war significantly escalated the Malian conflict by facilitating the spread of arms and fighters. Recurrent coups in Mali have highlighted governance failures and heightened ethno-religious tensions, complicating stability efforts. While external interventions are necessary, they also emphasized Mali's dependency on foreign support, calling for more sustainable approaches. The broader implications for the Sahel include increased regional instability, the spread of extremist groups, and socio-economic challenges. Therefore, the paper recommended among others, strengthening regional cooperation and local governance capacities, emphasizing inclusive political processes and sustainable development strategies to build resilience and promote long-term stability in the Sahel.

**Keywords:** Political instability, coups d'etat, civil war, conflict, ethno-religious tensions, peace, governance

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### **Introduction**

Politics, a multifaceted domain, is central to societal organisation and governance. It encompasses the activities, actions, and policies through which individuals and groups make decisions that affect a community or a nation at large. In essence, politics is about power: who holds it, how it is distributed, and the mechanisms through which it is exercised and contested (Heywood, 2013). This includes the negotiation and conflict among individuals or groups with differing interests, beliefs, and aspirations. Politics is manifested in the governance structures of states, the policies of governments, the campaigns of political parties, and the advocacy of interest groups.

The discourse on politics as an intrinsic aspect of human societies is enriched by examining its inevitability due to the diversity of opinions and the collective decision-making required to navigate these differences. As articulated by Leftwich (2015), politics transcends formal governmental structures, delving into informal practices that significantly influence the allocation of public power and societal organization. This broad perspective offered by scholars like Schumpeter (2010) highlights the multidimensional nature of politics, encompassing fields like political philosophy, comparative politics, international relations, and public administration. Each of these domains provides crucial insights into the mechanisms through which societies address conflict, distribute resources, and strive toward communal objectives, underscoring the pervasive and essential nature of politics in shaping human coexistence.

Parallel to the broad scope of politics is the concept of revolution, which denotes a pivotal and typically swift alteration in political authority or structural frameworks, occurring over a brief span. Revolution embodies more than just political upheavals; it signifies a profound systemic transformation, often spurred by a confluence of ideological, economic, social, and political dynamics. This transformative process is fundamentally about collective agency aimed at instigating change, driven by various motivations such as combating oppression, rectifying inequality, alleviating economic distress, or pursuing ideological aspirations. The historical impact of revolutions is exemplified by events like the French Revolution of 1789, highlighted by Skocpol (1979), which not only reshaped European history but also engendered significant societal, governmental, and rights-based reforms. While revolutions typically entail significant turmoil, they also bear the potential for consequential positive shifts, fostering the creation of novel political frameworks, addressing injustices, and reformulating cultural and societal standards.

Political instability is a concept that refers to the propensity for change, often unpredictable and rapid, in a country's political leadership, organization, or policies. This instability can arise from various sources, such as conflicts, government turnovers, economic crises, or social upheavals, and it often leads to uncertainty and unpredictability in governance and policy-making. Characterized by a lack of continuity in political leadership and decision-making processes, political instability can manifest in forms such as frequent government changes, coups, widespread protests, or even civil unrest. It is a critical factor that can significantly impact a nation's development, affecting economic growth, social cohesion, and the overall well-being of its citizens. Political instability tends to erode trust in institutions, undermine the rule of law, and can lead to economic decline due to the uncertain investment climate it creates (Alesina, *et al.*, 1996). In extreme cases, it can lead to state failure, where governments are unable to perform basic functions. The consequences of political instability are far-reaching, impacting not just the political sphere but also the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of society.

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The Sahel region, a semi-arid belt of land in Africa, stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, encompassing parts of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea. Characterized by its transitional ecosystem between the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannas to the south, the Sahel faces unique environmental and socioeconomic challenges. This region is particularly known for its vulnerability to climate change, experiencing severe droughts, desertification, and food insecurity (Brottem & Turner, 2019). Moreover, the Sahel is also a focal point of geopolitical interest due to issues of political instability, conflict, and migration.

Coups, a term frequently associated with the sudden and forceful seizure of government power, typically refer to an illegal or unconstitutional overthrow of a government, often orchestrated by a small group within the state apparatus or the military. The concept of a coup encompasses a wide range of actions, including both violent and non-violent means, aimed at unseating existing power structures. Historically, coups have been a common method of political change, especially in nations where democratic institutions are weak or absent (Powell & Thyne, 2011). The motives behind coups can vary, ranging from ideological shifts, desire for power, correction of government mismanagement, or response to a perceived threat to national stability. Coups often occur in the backdrop of political unrest, economic instability, or societal strife, reflecting deeper issues within a country's governance and socio-political fabric. The impact of coups on a nation's political and social landscape can be profound and long-lasting. While some coups have been justified as necessary for removing tyrannical regimes or correcting political misdirection, they typically have significant implications for a country's governance and international relations.

In many cases, coups lead to periods of instability, as they disrupt established political orders and can lead to counter-coups, civil unrest, or even civil war (Belkin & Schofer, 2003). Furthermore, the international community often views coups as a violation of democratic principles, leading to political isolation, economic sanctions, and challenges in diplomatic relations. However, the response to coups can vary significantly depending on the geopolitical interests involved and the international context. In recent years, the international community's stance on coups has become more complex, reflecting the evolving nature of global politics and the varied circumstances under which coups occur.

The Malian coups have been significant events in the political history of Mali, a country in West Africa, reflecting a tumultuous journey towards stable governance. Mali has experienced several coups since its independence from France in 1960, with the most notable ones occurring in 1968, 1991, 2012, 2020 and 2021. These coups have been driven by various factors, including dissatisfaction with governance, military dissatisfaction, economic woes, and internal security challenges. The 1968 coup, led by Moussa Traoré, overthrew President Modibo Keita and led to nearly 23 years of military rule. The 1991 coup was a response to Traoré's authoritarian regime and resulted in the establishment of a democratic government. However, the 2012 coup, led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, plunged the country into a period of political instability amidst a rebellion in the north, significantly disrupting the democratic process. This instability was further compounded by the 2020 coup, which ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita amidst widespread protests over corruption and mismanagement. The pattern of military intervention in Mali's politics highlights the country's struggle with establishing sustainable democratic governance and addressing its socio-economic and security challenges. The Malian coups underscore the complex interplay of military, political, and societal factors in the country's ongoing quest for stable and effective governance (Wing, 2013).

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The 2011 Libyan revolution, marking the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi, unleashed significant repercussions across its borders, particularly affecting the Sahel region's political stability, with notable implications for Mali. This exploration delves into the interconnection between the upheaval in Libya and the ensuing coups in Mali, underscoring the critical nature of this linkage in understanding the broader regional instability and security dilemmas. As a segment of the Arab Spring, the Libyan turmoil facilitated a surge in arms dissemination and the repatriation of battle hardened mercenaries to Mali, amplifying the capabilities of regional insurgent factions (Lacher, 2012). Such developments intensified the pre-existing ethnic and political fissures within Mali, culminating in the 2012 coup that precipitated broader regional destabilization (Bøås, 2015).

Beyond the immediate ramifications for security, the Malian coup has profound implications for the Sahel's overarching political and societal frameworks. The chain reaction of coups in Mali underscores the inherent fragility of state institutions and governance within the area, aggravating prevalent issues like corruption, governance deficiencies, and economic stagnation (Lebovich, 2013). These exacerbated challenges have propelled the Sahel into becoming a nexus for transnational terrorism and organized criminal enterprises. The recurring political upheavals in Mali exemplify the intricate interplay between external and internal dynamics within the Sahel, illustrating how external disturbances engender significant internal repercussions that imperil the stability and security across the region.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The 2011 Libyan revolution, a pivotal event in the Arab Spring, marked the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, setting off a chain reaction of consequences across North Africa and the Sahel region. The fall of Gaddafi not only destabilized Libya but also had significant spillover effects into neighboring countries, particularly Mali. The Libyan revolution contributed to the proliferation of arms and the return of Tuareg mercenaries to Mali, which, in turn, aggravated existing tensions within the country. This influx of arms and fighters acted as a catalyst, exacerbating Mali's internal conflicts and leading to the 2012 coup, a significant event in the country's recent political history.

The escalation of conflict in Mali following the Libyan revolution underscores the complexity of the region's political and ethnic landscape. The return of Tuareg fighters, battle-hardened and equipped with sophisticated arms acquired during the Libyan conflict, significantly intensified the existing Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali. This resurgence was not solely a consequence of increased military capability; it was also a manifestation of deep-seated frustrations stemming from the Tuareg community's persistent political and economic marginalization by Mali's central government.

The Malian military, struggling with internal dissatisfactions and inadequacies, found itself overwhelmed and unable to quell the rebellion effectively. This military incapacity, combined with the broader institutional weaknesses, precipitated the 2012 military coup. Far from stabilizing the situation, the coup exacerbated Mali's political turmoil, highlighting the intricate challenges of governance and ethnic relations in the country. The coup's intent, while ostensibly to address the government's shortcomings in managing the Tuareg insurgency, only plunged Mali into further political disarray, illustrating the intricate web of regional impacts and internal vulnerabilities that characterize the Sahel's geopolitical landscape.

The 2012 coup in Mali marked a pivotal moment that severely disrupted the country's journey towards democracy and catalyzed a cascade of security crises across the Sahel region. In the wake of the political upheaval, a power vacuum emerged, swiftly exploited by a mosaic of insurgent groups, including burgeoning Islamist factions, who

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consolidated their foothold in Northern Mali. This development rapidly morphed into a multifaceted conflict, featuring a diverse array of armed groups each driven by distinct agendas, from seeking regional autonomy to the more ominous aim of establishing an Islamist state.

The entrenchment of these groups not only threatened Mali's sovereignty but also sparked a broader regional alarm over the escalating spread of extremism. The rapid descent of Mali, once hailed as a beacon of democratic progress in West Africa, into a hotbed of conflict and instability, poses bewildering questions: How did a country on a path to democratic stability so quickly become a nexus of conflict and extremism? What could have been done to prevent the descent into chaos? This dramatic shift in Mali's fortunes underscores the volatile nature of the region's security landscape, where internal political strife can have far-reaching and unpredictable consequences.

The situation in Mali post-2012 highlights the broader challenges faced by the Sahel region. The region, characterized by weak governance, economic underdevelopment, and porous borders, has become a breeding ground for terrorism and transnational criminal networks. The Malian crisis exemplified how local grievances and regional dynamics can intertwine, creating a volatile mix that can quickly spiral out of control. The international community's response, including a French-led military intervention and the establishment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), underscores the global significance of the crisis.

Despite concerted international interventions, the quagmire of instability in Mali stubbornly persisted. The crux of the issue lay in the inadequate resolution of the conflict's underlying causes - a trifecta of governance maladies, deep-rooted ethnic divisions, and stark economic inequities. This failure not only perpetuated cycles of violence and political turmoil but also left the country mired in a state of chronic instability. Adding layers of complexity, the Malian landscape became a battleground for a myriad of conflicting forces: local militias with varying allegiances, foreign jihadists with transnational agendas, and regional powers seeking strategic footholds. Each of these actors, driven by their distinct ambitions, further muddled the situation, leading to an intricate and bewildering power play. This convolution of interests and influences underscored a distressing reality: Mali, entangled in its internal discord and external pressures, was caught in a vortex of conflict, far from the grasp of straightforward solutions. The persistence of this turmoil despite global attention and aid prompts a perplexing question: What more is needed to disentangle Mali from this web of conflict and steer it towards a path of sustainable peace and stability?

As the crisis in Mali continued, it raised critical questions about the effectiveness of current approaches to conflict resolution in the region. Can external military interventions provide lasting solutions to deeply rooted political and social conflicts? How can the international community effectively support the Sahel region in addressing its multifaceted challenges? It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken to examine the influence of the Libyan revolution on the political instability in the Sahel region, specifically focusing on the Malian coups, 2012-2022. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between regional events and internal dynamics within Mali, offering insights into the complex nature of conflict and instability in the Sahel. Sequel to the above, the following research questions were stated to guide this study:

- i. how did the Libyan civil contribute to the escalation of the Malian conflict and political instability in Mali?
- ii. how did the Malian coups reflect the underlying governance malady and ethno-religious tensions?
- iii. what was the role of external actors in the political instability in Mali and the Sahel region?



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iv. what are the implications of the Malian coups and ongoing instability for the future of peace and security in the Sahel region?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted Spillover Theory in analyzing the impact of the political instability in the Sahel region, particularly through the lens of the Malian coups. Spillover Theory, a concept primarily associated with the field of international relations and regional integration, has its roots in the works of Ernst B. Haas, a founder of neofunctionalism, particularly his seminal work "The Uniting of Europe" (1958). This theory posits that integration in one sector or area inevitably leads to integration in other sectors, driven by a process of 'spillover.' In the context of regional conflicts and political instability, Spillover Theory can be adapted to understand how instability or conflicts in one country can 'spillover' into neighboring regions, affecting their political, social, and economic landscapes. The theory is particularly relevant in analyzing the impact of the Libyan revolution on the Sahel region, as it provides a framework to understand how the political upheaval and subsequent power vacuum in Libya had broader regional implications, contributing to the instability in Mali and other Sahel countries.

Ernst B. Haas, in his work "The Uniting of Europe," laid the foundations of what would become known as Spillover Theory (Haas, 1958). He argued that integration in one area leads to pressure for integration in other areas, a process driven by the needs and demands created by initial integration steps. While Haas focused on economic and political integration in the European context, the theory's core principles can be applied to the spread of conflict and instability. The idea that events in one domain can create pressures and dynamics that overflow into other domains is central to understanding the regional impact of the Libyan revolution in both Mali and Sahel region.

The Libyan revolution of 2011, resulting in the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi, led to profound regional consequences, particularly exemplifying the concept of 'negative spillover' as it pertains to the Sahel region and specifically Mali. The power vacuum created in Libya had immediate and far-reaching effects, notably the uncontrolled proliferation of arms and the dispersion of militant groups across its borders into the Sahel. This development significantly exacerbated existing tensions and conflicts within Mali, contributing to a marked increase in both violence and political instability. As highlighted by Jones (2013), the influx of arms and fighters, many of whom were mercenaries previously employed by Gaddafi, intensified the already volatile situation in Mali. These elements, equipped with advanced weaponry and combat experience, found their way into various militant groups, thereby altering the military balance within the region. This sudden escalation in armed capability among non-state actors not only fueled existing insurgencies but also encouraged the formation of new armed factions, further destabilizing the region. The situation was compounded by the Malian government's inability to effectively manage and control its territory, particularly in the north, where the state's presence has historically been weak. This governance vacuum provided a fertile ground for these armed groups to operate and expand their influence.

Additionally, the influx of arms contributed to an increase in criminal activities, including drug trafficking and human smuggling, further undermining regional stability. The Malian coups, which can be seen as a direct consequence of these developments, were not only about power struggles within the state but also reflected broader regional dynamics set in motion by the Libyan revolution. The situation in Mali thus became a stark illustration of how instability in one nation can have profound and destabilizing effects on its neighbors, challenging the existing political order and creating a complex security dilemma for the entire Sahel region.

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One of the most direct spillover effects from Libya was the influx of arms and militants into the Sahel region. The collapse of the Gaddafi regime led to a loss of control over vast arsenals, which were then smuggled across the porous borders into neighboring countries, including Mali. This sudden availability of weapons strengthened various militant groups in Mali, altering the balance of power and intensifying the conflict (Shaw & Mangan, 2014). The spillover of armed groups, some of whom were mercenaries returning from Libya, further contributed to the destabilization of Mali, as these groups often joined existing rebellions or started new ones, leveraging their newfound military capabilities.

The spillover from Libya had significant implications for governance and ethnic tensions in Mali. The influx of weapons and fighters intensified existing conflicts, particularly between various ethnic groups and the Malian government. This exacerbated governance challenges, as the Malian government struggled to exert control over vast and increasingly militarized territories. The situation was further complicated by the involvement of various ethnic militias and extremist groups, who capitalized on the weakened state authority and increased availability of arms (Lecocq & Schrijver, 2017).

The long-term implications of the spillover from the Libyan revolution into the Sahel are profound. The destabilization of Mali has had ripple effects throughout the region, contributing to a broader regional security crisis in the Sahel. This includes the spread of extremism, increased human trafficking, and the displacement of populations. The situation has drawn international attention and intervention, but the complex interplay of local and regional dynamics continues to pose significant challenges for stability and peace in the Sahel (Bøås & Torheim, 2013).

To crown it all, the Spillover Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics at play in the Sahel region following the Libyan revolution. It provides insights into how the destabilization of one country can have far-reaching effects on its neighbors, contributing to regional instability and conflict.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study is anchored on a qualitative research design. This is necessary because it enables the researcher to effectively examine the complexities of the Libyan revolution's impact on regional instability in the Sahel, with a particular focus on Mali. The qualitative approach is instrumental in this context as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of the nuanced relationship between the Libyan revolution and the resurgence of coups in Mali. By utilizing this design, the researcher can comprehensively gather and analyze relevant literature and qualitative data. This method allows for a thorough examination of the intricate dynamics at play, including the political, social, and economic factors that contributed to the changing landscape of stability in the Sahel region post Libya revolution. The qualitative approach, therefore, provides the necessary depth and context to understand the multifaceted consequences of the Libyan revolution, particularly in its role in shaping the political scenario in Mali.

Data for this study were gotten from the secondary sources such as textbooks, journals materials, government publications, African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), BBC, CNN and Aljazeera documentaries, Wall Street Journals, Institute for the Study of Wars (ISW), and other relevant academic materials.

The collected data in this study underwent a rigorous content analysis process. This analytical method was pivotal in ensuring an objective examination of the secondary data, particularly focusing on the intricate relationship between the Libyan revolution and the subsequent instability in the Sahel region, alongside the resurgence of

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coups in Mali. By employing content analysis, the paper was able to meticulously dissect and interpret the data, effectively eliminating any potential bias.

### **Discussion**

#### **Impact of the Libyan Civil War on the Dynamics of the Conflict in Mali,**

The Libyan civil war, which began in 2011, had profound and far-reaching effects on neighboring regions, including Mali. The conflict in Libya destabilized the broader Sahel region by creating a security vacuum and enabling the proliferation of arms and militant groups. This escalation of violence and political instability in Mali can be attributed to several key factors directly linked to the aftermath of the Libyan civil war.

**Migration of Militant Groups:** The fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011 had a profound impact on the security dynamics of the Sahel region, particularly in Mali. The dispersal of wellarmed Libyan fighters, including many Tuareg who had served in Gaddafi's military, significantly altered the balance of power in northern Mali. These fighters, equipped with advanced weaponry and combat experience, returned to Mali and quickly became a formidable force. Their arrival coincided with existing discontent among the Tuareg population, which had long-standing grievances against the Malian government over marginalization and lack of development. According to Lecocq *et al.* (2013), the influx of these experienced combatants significantly bolstered the capabilities of the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which declared independence for northern Mali. This migration of militant groups created a security crisis that the Malian government was ill-prepared to manage, thus contributing to the escalation of the conflict. The MNLA's initial successes on the battlefield were largely attributed to the strategic and tactical expertise of these returnees, who had been seasoned in the conflicts of Libya (Lecocq *et al.*, 2013; Marchal, 2012).

The return of the Tuareg fighters from Libya not only strengthened the MNLA but also facilitated the rise of other militant groups in the region. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its splinter factions, such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), capitalized on the instability. These groups quickly established control over parts of northern Mali, exploiting the chaos created by the MNLA's rebellion. The enhanced firepower and military acumen of the returnees were crucial in AQIM's ability to seize and hold territory, including key cities like Timbuktu and Gao. The Malian army, under-equipped and demoralized, struggled to respond effectively to this multifaceted insurgency. Keenan (2013) argues that the combined force of the MNLA and jihadist groups overwhelmed the Malian military, leading to a rapid collapse of state authority in the north. This situation was exacerbated by the Malian government's internal weaknesses, including political infighting and corruption, which hindered a cohesive and effective response (Keenan, 2013; Lacher, 2012).

Furthermore, the displacement of militant groups from Libya to Mali had broader implications for regional security. The Sahel region, already fraught with porous borders and limited state presence, became a hotspot for trafficking and illicit activities. The well-armed returnees not only participated in the conflict but also engaged in smuggling arms, drugs, and humans, further destabilizing the region. As Lacher (2012) notes, the proliferation of these activities undermined efforts to establish security and development in the Sahel. The international community, recognizing the escalating threat, intervened militarily in 2013 through French-led Operation Serval, aiming to reclaim northern Mali from militant control. While the intervention succeeded in dislodging many insurgents, it also highlighted the deep-seated issues that facilitated the conflict, including the legacies of the Libyan civil war and the chronic instability in Mali. This chain of events underscores the complex interplay between regional conflicts and the unintended consequences of regime change (Lacher, 2012; Marchal, 2012).



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**Influx of Weapons:** The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 triggered a massive and uncontrolled spread of Gaddafi's extensive armories throughout the Sahel region. This proliferation of weapons played a pivotal role in escalating the conflict in Mali. As insurgent groups in Mali acquired sophisticated arms from the Libyan arsenals, their ability to conduct more effective and sustained attacks against Malian government forces increased dramatically. For instance, the MNLA and Islamist groups like AQIM and MUJAO, which were previously limited in their capabilities, suddenly found themselves in possession of advanced weaponry, including anti-aircraft missiles and heavy machine guns. Lacher (2012) notes that these weapons significantly enhanced the operational capacity of these groups, allowing them to challenge the Malian military more aggressively and to hold territories for extended periods. The increased firepower facilitated the seizure of major northern cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, further destabilizing the region and undermining the central government's authority (Lacher, 2012; Small Arms Survey, 2013).

The influx of Libyan weapons into Mali did not merely amplify the violence but also contributed to a pervasive environment of lawlessness and insecurity. The advanced arms found their way into the hands of various militant factions, criminal gangs, and even local self-defense groups. This widespread availability of weapons led to an increase in armed robberies, kidnappings, and intercommunal violence. According to Florquin and Pézard (2015), the unchecked flow of arms from Libya facilitated a thriving black market in northern Mali, where weapons could be easily acquired by anyone willing to pay. This proliferation of arms undermined efforts by the Malian government and international actors to restore order and stability in the region. It created a vicious cycle of violence, as well-armed militant groups could resist disarmament efforts and continued to exert control over large swathes of territory (Florquin & Pézard, 2015; Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015).

The destabilizing impact of the influx of Libyan weapons extended beyond Mali, affecting the broader Sahel region. Neighboring countries like Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso also experienced increased instability and violence as weapons flowed across porous borders. These arms enabled local insurgent groups and criminal networks to escalate their activities, contributing to regional insecurity. The Malian government's inability to stem the flow of weapons and reassert control over its northern regions highlighted the broader challenges of state fragility and governance in the Sahel. To address these issues, international interventions, such as the French-led Operation Serval in 2013, aimed to dismantle insurgent strongholds and restore stability. However, the deep rooted problems of arms proliferation and weak state structures persisted, necessitating continued international support and comprehensive strategies to address the underlying causes of conflict (Lacher, 2012; Marchal, 2012). This situation underscores the far-reaching consequences of state collapse and the critical need for coordinated regional and international efforts to combat arms trafficking and enhance security in the Sahel.

**Rise of Tuareg Separatism:** The Tuareg, a nomadic ethnic group dispersed across the Sahel, have historically sought greater autonomy and recognition of their cultural and political rights. This long-standing quest for self-determination was exacerbated by the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya following Gaddafi's fall. These fighters brought back not only military experience but also sophisticated weaponry, which significantly bolstered their capacity to challenge the Malian state. According to Klute (2013), the Tuareg's renewed secessionist aspirations were heavily influenced by their enhanced military capabilities and the grievances that had festered over decades of perceived marginalization by the Malian government. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) capitalized on this newfound strength, declaring the independence of northern Mali in 2012. This declaration of independence by the MNLA was a direct manifestation of the

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Tuareg's long-held aspirations, now empowered by the arms and expertise acquired from Libya. The initial military successes of the MNLA against Malian forces underscored the critical role of the returning fighters in altering the balance of power in the region (Klute, 2013; Lecocq *et al.*, 2013).

The Tuareg rebellion in 2012 had profound implications for Mali's territorial integrity and political stability. The MNLA's actions fragmented the country, effectively splitting it into government controlled and rebel-controlled areas. This division not only destabilized Mali but also had broader implications for regional security. The power vacuum created by the rebellion facilitated the rise of Islamist groups such as AQIM and MUJAO, who initially allied with the Tuareg but later sought to impose their own agendas. As Boas and Torheim (2013) explain, the fragmentation of Mali's territory allowed these extremist groups to establish strongholds, complicating efforts to restore national unity and governance. The international community, particularly France, intervened militarily through Operation Serval to reclaim northern Mali from these insurgent groups. However, the underlying issues of Tuareg discontent and aspirations for autonomy remained unresolved. This situation highlights the deep-rooted nature of the Tuareg's grievances and the significant challenges they pose to the Malian state's efforts to achieve lasting peace and stability (Boas & Torheim, 2013; Lecocq *et al.*, 2013). The cyclical nature of Tuareg rebellions underscores the need for comprehensive political solutions that address the root causes of their demands for autonomy.

**International Interventions:** The escalation of the Malian conflict, particularly the rapid advance of insurgent groups in northern Mali, necessitated international intervention to prevent the collapse of the Malian state. France, with its Operation Serval in January 2013, played a pivotal role in this intervention. The operation aimed to recapture key northern territories from a coalition of Tuareg rebels and Islamist militants, including AQIM and MUJAO, who had seized control following the 2012 rebellion. Charbonneau (2014) asserts that Operation Serval was crucial in driving insurgents out of major urban centers such as Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, thereby restoring some semblance of state authority in these regions. The success of this intervention, however, also highlighted Mali's dependency on external military support for maintaining its territorial integrity and security. Without the French intervention, it is likely that the Malian government would have been unable to reclaim these territories, underscoring the severe limitations of Mali's military capabilities in the face of well-armed and organized insurgent groups (Charbonneau, 2014; Wing, 2013).

In addition to French military efforts, the United Nations established the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013 to support long-term stabilization and peace-building efforts. MINUSMA's mandate included protecting civilians, supporting the reestablishment of state authority, and facilitating humanitarian assistance. Despite these efforts, the intervention highlighted the broader geopolitical consequences of the Libyan civil war, particularly how the collapse of a state can reverberate across borders and necessitate international responses. The Libyan conflict had unleashed a flow of weapons and fighters into Mali, significantly altering the security landscape and complicating stabilization efforts. As Lebovich (2013) notes, the international community's involvement in Mali was not just about stabilizing a single nation but also about addressing a regional security threat that had implications for broader international security. The enduring impacts of the Libyan conflict thus became evident, as MINUSMA and other international actors grappled with the intertwined challenges of counterterrorism, state-building, and regional stability (Lebovich, 2013; Charbonneau, 2014). This situation underscored the fragility of Mali's political situation and the complex nature of the crises stemming from state collapse and regional instability.

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The Libyan civil war significantly contributed to the escalation of the Malian conflict and the political instability in Mali through the migration of militant groups, the proliferation of weapons, the rise of Tuareg separatism, and subsequent international interventions. These interconnected dynamics underscore the complex regional repercussions of state collapse and conflict, illustrating how instability in one country can reverberate across borders, exacerbating existing tensions and creating new challenges for regional security and governance.

### **Impact of Recurrence Coups on Governance Malady and Ethno-Religious Tensions in Mali**

Mali has experienced a series of military coups over the past few decades, reflecting deep-seated issues within its political and governance structures. These coups have not only disrupted the continuity of governance but have also exacerbated existing ethno-religious tensions. The frequent military interventions in politics undermine democratic institutions and erode public trust in civilian leadership. This analysis examines how the recurrence of coups has contributed to governance maladies and intensified ethno-religious tensions in Mali, highlighting the interplay between political instability and social divisions.

**Governance Malady:** The recurrence of military coups in Mali has profoundly undermined the country's governance structures, leading to persistent instability and weakened institutions. Each coup interrupts the democratic process, creating a power vacuum that breeds fragmentation and competing claims to legitimacy. The 2012 coup, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, exemplifies this disruptive impact. Sanogo's coup toppled President Amadou Toumani Touré's government, leaving a void that insurgent groups swiftly exploited. According to Whitehouse (2012), this governance void allowed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Islamist militants to seize control of northern Mali, complicating efforts to restore state authority. The insurgents capitalized on the chaos, establishing their rule over vast territories and implementing their own governance structures. The coup's immediate aftermath saw the fragmentation of authority, with various factions vying for control, undermining the central government's ability to govern effectively. This scenario highlights how coups create environments of lawlessness and insecurity, where non-state actors can flourish, further destabilizing the nation (Whitehouse, 2012; Wing, 2013).

The governance malady in Mali is further exacerbated by rampant corruption and inefficient public administration, which are intensified by the instability caused by coups. Military leaders, often inexperienced in governance, tend to prioritize consolidating their power rather than addressing the root causes of instability. This focus on power consolidation often leads to the neglect of critical sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education, essential for sustainable development. For example, following the 2012 coup, there was a noticeable decline in public services and infrastructure maintenance, exacerbating the country's development challenges. As Charbonneau (2014) points out, the cyclical nature of coups results in political instability that makes it difficult for Mali to attract long-term investment and development aid. The international community's typical response to coups involves imposing sanctions and reducing aid, which further strains Mali's governance capacities. This reduction in external support hampers efforts to improve governance and development, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment and instability. The focus on maintaining power at the expense of addressing governance issues means that corruption and poor administration continue unchecked, further eroding public trust in government institutions (Charbonneau, 2014; Ba, 2014).

The international community's response to Mali's recurring coups has often been limited to short term interventions, which fail to address the underlying governance issues. Sanctions and reduced aid, while intended to pressure military leaders to restore democratic governance, often have the unintended consequence of

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exacerbating Mali's economic and social problems. For instance, the international community's reaction to the 2012 coup included suspension of aid and diplomatic pressure, which strained the already fragile Malian economy. According to Ba (2014), these measures, while necessary, also contributed to a deepening crisis by reducing the resources available for governance and development. The cyclical nature of coups, coupled with international responses, creates a challenging environment for sustained development. The lack of long-term investment due to political instability further hampers efforts to build robust governance structures. This cycle of instability and weak governance fosters an environment where corruption can thrive, and public services remain inadequate, undermining efforts to achieve sustainable development. The persistent governance malady in Mali highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that go beyond immediate responses to coups, focusing instead on building resilient institutions and addressing the root causes of instability (Ba, 2014; Wing, 2013).

**Ethno-Religious Tensions:** The recurrence of military coups in Mali has significantly intensified ethno-religious tensions, especially in the diverse and often divided northern regions. Each political upheaval disrupts the delicate balance of power among Mali's various ethnic and religious groups, leading to increased competition and conflict. The Tuareg, a nomadic ethnic group spread across the Sahel, have long felt marginalized by the central government and have used periods of political instability to push for greater autonomy or independence. This dynamic was starkly evident during the 2012 rebellion when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared the independence of Azawad, leveraging the chaos following the coup. The power vacuum created by the coup allowed not only the MNLA but also Islamist groups to assert control over the region. According to Lecocq *et al.* (2013), these groups imposed harsh versions of Sharia law, exacerbating tensions with the predominantly secular southern population. The MNLA's actions were driven by historical grievances and the desire for self-determination, but their alliance with Islamist militants created a complex conflict landscape that deepened ethno-religious divides (Lecocq *et al.*, 2013; Boas & Torheim, 2013).

The situation was further complicated by the actions of Islamist militants such as AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa). These groups capitalized on the instability created by the coup to expand their influence and impose their ideological agendas. The 2012 coup provided these extremists with the opportunity to operate with impunity, targeting local populations and enforcing strict interpretations of Sharia law. This included the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Timbuktu, a direct affront to the Sufi traditions that are prevalent among Malian Muslims. Morgan (2012) notes that these actions led to a humanitarian crisis, with thousands of people fleeing the north to escape persecution. The conflict thus became not only a struggle for political control but also a battleground for competing religious ideologies, further polarizing Malian society. The imposition of extremist ideologies disrupted the traditional religious practices of the local communities, leading to widespread fear and displacement (Morgan, 2012; Wing, 2013).

The recurrence of coups has also exacerbated existing tensions between different ethnic groups in Mali. The Fulani, another significant ethnic group in Mali, have found themselves caught between the conflicting agendas of the central government, Tuareg separatists, and Islamist militants. The instability and violence have often led to retaliatory attacks and communal violence, further deepening ethnic divides. According to Boas and Torheim (2013), the Fulani have been particularly vulnerable to recruitment by both Islamist groups and local militias, driven by a combination of coercion and the promise of protection or economic gain. This has created a cycle of violence that is difficult to break, as each act of violence begets further retaliation. The international community's efforts to mediate and restore stability have often been hampered by these deep-seated ethno-religious tensions,

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which are rooted in historical grievances and exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. Addressing these tensions requires not only military intervention but also comprehensive political solutions that take into account the diverse needs and aspirations of Mali's various ethnic and religious communities (Boas & Torheim, 2013; Lecocq *et al.*, 2013).

To crown it all, the recurrence of coups in Mali has had a profound impact on governance and ethno-religious tensions. These coups disrupt the political process, weaken governance structures, and exacerbate existing social divisions. The interplay between political instability and social tensions highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of instability and promote inclusive governance. Without addressing these fundamental issues, Mali is likely to continue experiencing cycles of coups and conflict, undermining its prospects for long-term stability and development.

### **Roles of External Actors in the Political Instability in Mali and the Sahel region**

The political instability in Mali and the broader Sahel region has been influenced by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Among these, the roles of external actors have been particularly significant in shaping the region's political landscape. These external actors include regional powers, international organizations, and foreign states, each of which has played distinct roles in both exacerbating and attempting to mitigate the instability. This analysis will explore the impacts of foreign military interventions, the influence of international organizations, the involvement of regional powers, and the roles of non-state actors in the political dynamics of Mali and the Sahel.

**Foreign Military Interventions:** Foreign military interventions have been a critical factor in the political instability of Mali and the Sahel. Notably, the French military intervention through Operation Serval in 2013 aimed to counter the advances of Islamist militants in northern Mali. While this intervention succeeded in recapturing key territories from insurgents, it also highlighted Mali's dependency on external military support for its security. Charbonneau (2014) argues that such interventions, while necessary to curb immediate threats, often fail to address underlying political and social issues, leading to a cycle of dependency and instability.

Furthermore, the establishment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013 aimed to provide a longer-term peacekeeping presence. However, the effectiveness of MINUSMA has been questioned due to challenges in mandate execution and the complex security landscape (Boutellis & Zahar, 2017). These interventions underscore the paradox of external military involvement: they are essential for immediate stabilization but can also entrench political fragility by overshadowing local governance capacities.

**Influence of International Organizations:** International organizations have played significant roles in addressing the political instability in Mali and the Sahel. Organizations such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the United Nations (UN) have been actively involved in mediation, peacekeeping, and development efforts. ECOWAS, for instance, was instrumental in negotiating the Bamako Peace Accord in 2015, which aimed to address the root causes of conflict and promote national reconciliation (Thurston, 2017).

However, the implementation of such agreements has been fraught with challenges, including noncompliance by armed groups and insufficient political will from the Malian government. The role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in providing financial assistance and economic reforms has also been pivotal. Yet, as Lebovich (2017) notes, these economic interventions often come with conditions that may not always



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align with the immediate needs of the affected populations, thereby sometimes exacerbating existing tensions. The mixed results of international organizational involvement highlight the complexity of external interventions in fostering sustainable peace and stability.

**Involvement of Regional Powers:** Regional powers, including Algeria, Mauritania, and Nigeria, have had significant impacts on the political dynamics of Mali and the Sahel. Algeria, with its historical influence and strategic interests in the region, has played a dual role of mediator and security actor. Algeria's mediation efforts, particularly in the Algiers Accord of 2015, aimed to bring together various Malian factions for a peace settlement (Bøås & Torheim, 2013).

However, Algeria's own security concerns, primarily related to Islamist militancy, have sometimes led to a securitized approach that prioritizes counter-terrorism over inclusive political solutions. Mauritania and Nigeria have also been involved, both experiencing spillover effects from the instability in Mali, such as refugee flows and cross-border terrorism. These countries have contributed troops to regional security initiatives like the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which seeks to combat terrorism and trafficking (Tobie, 2017). The involvement of regional powers is thus marked by a balance between cooperative security measures and competitive national interests, complicating the path to lasting stability.

**Roles of Non-State Actors:** Non-state actors, including multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and transnational extremist groups, have also played pivotal roles in the Sahel's instability. Multinational corporations involved in resource extraction, such as mining companies, have sometimes exacerbated local grievances by marginalizing local communities and contributing to environmental degradation (Raleigh, 2014). NGOs, while providing essential humanitarian aid and development assistance, often operate in challenging environments where their presence can be seen as intrusive or aligned with foreign interests.

Transnational extremist groups, notably AQIM, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have exploited governance vacuums to establish footholds and propagate violence across the region (Thurston, 2017). These groups have not only destabilized local and national politics but have also drawn international counter-terrorism interventions, further entangling external actors in the region's complex web of instability. The activities of non-state actors highlight the multifaceted nature of external influences, where economic, humanitarian, and security dimensions intertwine to shape the political landscape of Mali and the Sahel.

The roles of external actors in the political instability of Mali and the Sahel region are multifaceted and significant. Foreign military interventions, the influence of international organizations, the involvement of regional powers, and the roles of non-state actors each contribute to the complex dynamics of instability and efforts towards stability. While these external actors often aim to mitigate immediate threats and promote long-term stability, their interventions can also perpetuate dependency, complicate local political processes, and sometimes exacerbate underlying tensions. Addressing the political instability in Mali and the Sahel thus requires a nuanced understanding of these external influences and a coordinated approach that integrates local, regional, and international efforts.

## **Long Term Implications of the Malian coups and ongoing instability for the future of peace and security in the Sahel region**

The Malian coups of 2012 and 2020, coupled with ongoing instability, have had profound implications for the future of peace and security in the Sahel region. These events have not only destabilized Mali but have also contributed to a broader regional crisis, affecting neighboring countries and the overall stability of the Sahel. The

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recurring political turmoil in Mali, characterized by coups and persistent insurgencies, underscores the fragility of state institutions and the challenges of governance in the region. This study also explored the implications of these developments under the sub-themes of regional instability and spillover effects, the proliferation of extremist groups, and the impact on international interventions and peace-building efforts.

**Regional Instability and Spillover Effects:** The instability in Mali has had significant spillover effects on neighboring countries in the Sahel, exacerbating regional instability. The coups and subsequent power vacuums have created opportunities for transnational criminal networks and extremist groups to expand their operations. For instance, Burkina Faso and Niger have experienced increased incursions and attacks by militant groups operating across borders. According to Assanvo *et al.* (2019), the porous borders and weak state presence in these countries have facilitated the movement of arms, fighters, and illicit goods, further destabilizing the region. The instability in Mali has thus contributed to a broader security crisis in the Sahel, complicating efforts by individual states to address their internal security challenges and undermining regional cooperation (Assanvo *et al.*, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2020).

**Proliferation of Extremist Groups:** The political instability in Mali has provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of extremist groups, which exploit the governance vacuum to establish strongholds and recruit members. Groups such as AQIM, MUJAO, and more recently, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have capitalized on the chaos to entrench their presence in the region. The coups and subsequent governmental instability have weakened the Malian state's capacity to combat these groups effectively. As a result, these extremist organizations have been able to conduct operations with relative impunity, spreading their influence and perpetrating violence across the Sahel. Thurston (2020) argues that the persistence of these groups poses a significant threat to regional stability, as they not only challenge state authority but also exacerbate inter-communal tensions and contribute to widespread human insecurity (Thurston, 2020; Lebovich, 2019).

**Impact on International Interventions and Peace-Building Efforts:** The ongoing instability in Mali has also had profound implications for international interventions and peace-building efforts in the Sahel. The repeated coups and the resultant lack of political continuity have complicated the efforts of international actors such as the United Nations and regional organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS. MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, has faced significant challenges in implementing its mandate due to the volatile security situation and the shifting political landscape. According to Charbonneau (2017), the instability has hampered the effectiveness of international peacekeeping and counterterrorism operations, necessitating a reevaluation of strategies to stabilize the region. The persistent political turmoil in Mali highlights the need for comprehensive approaches that address the root causes of instability, including governance deficits, economic disparities, and social grievances (Charbonneau, 2017; Wing, 2016).

In sum, the implications of the Malian coups and ongoing instability for the future of peace and security in the Sahel are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Regional instability and spillover effects, the proliferation of extremist groups, and the challenges faced by international interventions all underscore the complexity of achieving lasting peace in the region. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated effort that not only focuses on immediate security concerns but also on long-term governance and development strategies. The future of the Sahel's stability depends on the ability of regional and international actors to work together to create resilient and inclusive political systems that can withstand internal and external pressures.

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### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study examined the intricate web of political instability in the Sahel region, with a specific focus on the Malian coups between 2012 and 2022. One of the primary objectives was to analyze the impact of the Libyan civil war on the dynamics of the conflict in Mali. The findings reveal that the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime unleashed a torrent of arms and seasoned fighters into Mali, significantly altering the conflict landscape. These fighters, many of whom were Tuareg, bolstered the capabilities of rebel groups such as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), leading to intensified violence and prolonged instability. The Libyan civil war, therefore, acted as a catalyst that exacerbated the existing tensions and insurgencies in Mali, complicating the efforts to restore peace and stability.

Another critical focus of the study was the impact of recurrent coups on governance and ethnoreligious tensions in Mali. The frequent military takeovers have severely disrupted political continuity, undermined state institutions, and fostered a governance malady characterized by corruption and inefficiency. These coups have also heightened ethno-religious tensions by exacerbating grievances among various ethnic groups, who feel marginalized and disenfranchised by the central government. The power vacuums created by the coups have been exploited by militant groups, further destabilizing the country and making it difficult to implement effective governance and peace-building measures. The cyclical nature of these coups underscores the deeprooted structural challenges that need to be addressed to achieve long-term stability.

The role of external actors in the political instability in Mali and the Sahel region was also a significant area of investigation in the study. International interventions, such as the French-led Operation Serval and the United Nations' MINUSMA, have been pivotal in countering the insurgent groups and reclaiming territories. However, these interventions have also highlighted Mali's dependency on external military support and the challenges of achieving sustainable peace through external means alone. The involvement of external actors, while necessary to address immediate security threats, underscores the need for a more holistic approach that includes building local governance capacities, fostering regional cooperation, and addressing the socioeconomic root causes of instability.

Finally, the study evaluated the long-term implications of the Malian coups and persistent instability for the broader Sahel region. The findings indicate that the instability in Mali has significant spillover effects, contributing to regional insecurity and hindering development efforts across the Sahel. The proliferation of extremist groups, facilitated by the governance vacuum and porous borders, poses a substantial threat to regional stability. Moreover, the socio-economic impacts of the conflict, including displacement, disrupted livelihoods, and hindered access to essential services, exacerbate poverty and inequality. Addressing these long-term implications requires a coordinated effort that goes beyond military interventions, focusing on strengthening state institutions, promoting inclusive political processes, and fostering economic resilience. The future of peace and security in the Sahel hinges on the ability of regional and international actors to work together to address these complex and interlinked challenges.

Based on the identified findings and conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

- i. **Address Arms Proliferation and Smuggling Networks** To mitigate the impact of the Libyan civil war on Mali, it is crucial to strengthen regional cooperation to monitor and control arms trafficking. Enhanced border security and intelligence-sharing among Sahel countries can help curb the flow of weapons that fuel conflicts.

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Establishing joint task forces and international support for disarmament initiatives can significantly reduce the availability of illicit arms and help stabilize the region.

ii. **Promote Inclusive Governance and Political Stability** To address the governance malady and ethno-religious tensions reflected in the Malian coups, it is essential to promote inclusive governance. Implementing political reforms that ensure fair representation of all ethnic and religious groups can help mitigate grievances. Strengthening democratic institutions and processes, coupled with anti-corruption measures, can restore public trust in the government and reduce the likelihood of future coups.

iii. **Enhance Regional and International Collaboration** External actors should prioritize supporting regional frameworks like the G5 Sahel Joint Force to address political instability in Mali and the Sahel. Enhanced international collaboration through financial, logistical, and strategic support for regional initiatives can improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping and counterterrorism efforts. Focus should also be placed on capacity building programs for local security forces to ensure sustainable security solutions.

iv. **Implement Comprehensive Development Strategies** Addressing the long-term implications of Malian coups and ongoing instability requires a focus on comprehensive development strategies that tackle the root causes of conflict. Investing in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities can alleviate poverty and reduce the appeal of extremist groups. Sustainable development programs should prioritize infrastructure development, job creation, and social services to build resilience in local communities and promote lasting peace in the Sahel.

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