



## Book Review

# Le Sahel : Tribus, Jihad et Trafics, Beatriz Mesa

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**Beatriz Mesa**, *Le Sahel : Tribus, Jihad et Trafics* [The Sahel: Tribes, Jihad, and Trafficking]<sup>1</sup>

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Neither a religious conflict nor a secessionist struggle. In Mali, ideology serves as a unifying force but is not the root cause of the armed groups' uprising, which is primarily driven by profit.<sup>2</sup>

(Mesa, 2024, p. 243)

Beatriz Mesa is a leading expert on security issues in the Sahel, with a particular focus on the Liptako-Gourma region, encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. She is a Professor at the College of Social Sciences at the International University of Rabat, a former Associate Professor at Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, and a member of both LASPAD Senegal and the Center for Global Studies (CGS). Additionally, she has an extensive career in journalism, with over two decades of experience reporting from conflict zones.

Mesa's scholarly contributions include *Les groupes armés du Sahel, conflits et économie criminelle au Nord du Mali* (The Armed Groups of the Sahel: Conflicts and Criminal Economy in Northern Mali) by Los Libros de Catarata in 2022 and *L'échec de l'Occident en Afrique* (The Failure of the West in Africa) by Almuzara in 2024.

This review examines her latest work, *Le Sahel : Tribus, Jihad et Trafics* (2024), published by La Croisée des Chemins, which represents the culmination of twenty years of research. Drawing on extensive empirical data, the author argues that a comprehensive understanding of security challenges and armed violence in the Sahel necessitates an in-depth engagement with local societies. Mesa consistently critiques the disconnect between external actors and local realities, advocating for a more context-sensitive approach—what she terms “a connection with the local.” She contends that foreign security interventions fail to investigate the social foundations and root causes of conflicts, instead adopting a narrow counterterrorism paradigm that frames “jihadism” as the universal enemy since the September 11, 2001 attacks. This discourse has been further reinforced by high-profile incidents such as the 2003 abduction of 32 European tourists in southern Algeria/northern Mali by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).

Adopting a critical perspective, Mesa offers a reinterpretation of armed violence in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, foregrounding the role of tribal rivalries and the criminal economy. To explore these dynamics, this study will examine the secessionist aspirations of northern Mali, the phenomenon

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of jihadist violence, the legacy of Algeria's civil war, and the impact of illicit economic activities on territorial control.

## Rebellion, Jihad, and the dynamics of armed conflict

Since gaining independence in 1960, Mali has experienced multiple episodes of political instability, particularly through successive Tuareg rebellions originating in the northern region (1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012). At the outset, Beatriz Mesa highlights the sociocultural composition of northern Mali (Azawad), which is home to both “white” communities (Arabs and Tuaregs) and “black” communities (Peuls and Songhai). The term *Tuareg* derives from the Arabic *targui*, which, due to its religious connotation, translates as “the forsaken of God.” Some scholars argue that the term has a geographical rather than religious origin, stemming from *targa*, meaning “valley”—an Amazigh term appropriated by Arabs to describe the Fezzan region in southern Libya, an area rich in water sources. The Moors, comprising Arab and Arabized populations, traversed the region either as nomads or settled communities along the Niger Valley. Historically, these groups engaged in camel and livestock herding, necessitating constant movement in search of sustainable grazing land. Meanwhile, the Peuls and Songhai, originating from what was known as *useful Mali* (formerly French Sudan), gradually migrated and settled in the Azawad region along the Niger Valley. These populations historically moved freely across the region without the administrative and territorial boundaries later imposed by colonial rule.

Mesa underscores the significance of classifying armed groups into *legitimate armed groups* (LAGs) and *non-legitimate armed groups* (NLGs). However, she stresses that each faction ultimately serves the interests of its respective tribal leadership. For instance, *Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad* (MAA, Sector 1), composed of the Lamhar Arabs of Gao and led by Secretary General Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed (an Arab from Tilemsi), is known for its involvement in various illicit activities in northern Mali. Among the NLGs, a key example is *Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM), led by Amadou Kouffa. Witnessing the legitimacy acquired through violent struggle by Tuareg armed groups, Kouffa adopted jihadist rhetoric as a mobilizing strategy to instigate a revolution within the Peul community. By doing so, he successfully recruited disenfranchised Peul youth, disillusioned by the privileges enjoyed by their elites and the neglect of central governance structures.

According to Mesa, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion was unprecedented in that it marked the first genuine attempt by the irredentist Tuareg population to achieve full independence. She argues that international mediation, conducted from a top-down perspective, further facilitated the emergence of a *de facto* state in northern Mali by legitimizing armed actors involved in the insurrection. However, this legitimacy remains contentious, given the interconnections between separatist rebel groups, such as *Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA), and jihadist factions.

These jihadist groups include the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC), which later rebranded as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007 following its allegiance to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. The GSPC emerged from Algeria's *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), whose members, having been driven out by the Algerian military during the black decade (1991–2002), sought refuge in southern Algeria and northern Mali. Over time, the FIS evolved into the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA), then the GSPC, and ultimately AQIM. Additionally, the collapse of Libya in 2011 played a significant role in exacerbating the Malian rebellion, as Tuaregs who had migrated to Libya during the droughts of the 1970s—many of whom had joined Gaddafi's military forces—returned to Mali armed with heavy weaponry, reigniting hostilities against the Malian state.

Mesa further examines the power struggles among tribal elites following the self-declaration of the so-called Republic of Azawad. Notably, when Iyad Ag Ghali—belonging to the Ifoghas Tuareg tribe—sought to lead the new insurrection, as he had done in the 1990s, he was rejected by the new generation of MNLA leaders. These younger, more educated elites sought to differentiate themselves

from their predecessors. In response, Ag Ghali embraced Islamist rhetoric and founded *Ansar Dine*, advocating for the establishment of a Tuareg Islamic State governed by *shari'a* (Islamic law).

France's military intervention, first through *Operation Serval* and later through *Barkhane*, was initially requested by Mali's government to restore its sovereignty. However, Mesa critiques the intervention, arguing that France allied itself with the separatists in its efforts to oust jihadist forces. This approach, she contends, ignored the intricate familial and tribal ties among these groups, whose conflicts are less ideological than they are driven by economic interests. Once its immediate objectives were met, France subsequently blocked the Malian army from reclaiming control over northern territories for years—a key factor in the 2020 coup d'état.

Mesa (2024) asserts that “the equation of tribe, power, and economic and territorial control is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of violence in northern Mali” (p. 66).<sup>3</sup> In other words, isolating jihadism as the sole threat to peace and security in the region is an oversimplification. Without accounting for the role of tribal power struggles and territorial control—driven in large part by criminal economies—any sustainable peace process remains unattainable. Furthermore, she argues that jihadism, much like other ideological frameworks, is instrumentalized by tribal factions as a means of legitimizing their broader strategic objectives.

## Organised crime

This work examines the infiltration of organised crime in West Africa and its expansion into the Sahel, with a particular focus on northern Mali. It analyses how criminal networks have absorbed both ideologically driven non-state armed actors and state actors. Furthermore, Beatriz Mesa explores the impact of the criminal economy in a country like Mali, which faces profound political, economic, and social challenges.

The author argues that the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall led to market liberalisation, repositioning Africa as a focal point of global interest. However, for drug traffickers—primarily involved in cocaine smuggling and operating from Cuba, Colombia, and Peru—the intensification of enforcement by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) disrupted traditional supply routes from South America to the United States and Canada.

Mesa (2024) underscores that “organised crime in northern Mali did not emerge from within” (p. 116).<sup>4</sup> In other words, long-standing tribal communities, traditionally engaged in transhumance, seized the lucrative opportunities presented by Latin American cartels to facilitate drug trafficking from South America to Europe via the Sahara Desert. The author further reveals that Algerian jihadists did not unilaterally decide to establish themselves in the Malian desert; rather, they required the approval of tribal leaders who exercised authority over the region. These included the Berabiche Arabs of Timbuktu in the west and the Tuareg communities of Kidal in the east. For instance, Iyad Ag Ghali was in contact with Abderrazak El Parà, one of the earliest Algerian jihadists to arrive in northern Mali. El Parà sought to transform the Taoudenni region, northeast of Timbuktu, into a trafficking hub, allowing him to integrate into the lucrative global network of organised crime. Ultimately, he opted for the mountainous region of Tigarga, in Kidal, in north-eastern Mali, as “Taoudenni was deemed too flat and exposed to sustain illicit trafficking operations by jihadist katibas” (Mesa, 2024, p. 87).<sup>5</sup> The intensification of the criminal economy in Mali has also exacerbated intercommunal conflicts, particularly among the Tuareg, Arab, and Songhai communities. Beyond drug trafficking (cocaine, hashish), the illicit economy extends to arms smuggling, human trafficking, and fuel contraband. Additionally, the discovery of new mineral deposits, particularly small-scale gold mining, has attracted significant attention.

## Concluding remarks

Mesa rejects the notion that jihadist ideology is the sole driver of the atrocities committed by non-state armed groups in the Sahel, particularly in Mali. Instead, these movements are shaped primarily by the interests of their respective tribal factions, each striving to control as much territory as possible to secure economic benefits—an economy that encompasses not only traditional transhumance but also the trade in illicit goods.

A decade has passed since the Malian crisis, yet jihadism has not been contained; rather, it has advanced towards the Gulf of Guinea states. While the book focuses primarily on the Malian experience, with references to Burkina Faso and Niger, it is imperative, in our view, not to overlook other Sahelian countries, particularly those surrounding Lake Chad, where Boko Haram has wreaked havoc—an example in which the ideological dimension cannot be disregarded.

The author critically assesses the failures of international interventions, notably those led by France (Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane) and the United Nations through the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Her perception survey, conducted among more than 500 citizens, revealed that the UN mission was widely regarded as “weak, ineffective, and unsatisfactory.” Ultimately, the new Malian authorities have demanded the immediate withdrawal of Barkhane and MINUSMA, paving the way for the entry of a new actor: the Russian paramilitary organisation Wagner.

## Notes

1. All translations from French to English are the author's.
2. « *Ni conflit religieux, ni conflit sécessionniste. Au Mali, l'idéologie fédère mais n'est pas la cause du soulèvement de groupes armés mus par l'appât du gain.* »
3. « *L'équation tribu, pouvoir et contrôle économique et territorial est fondamentale pour comprendre la dynamique de la violence dans le nord du Mali.* »
4. « *Le crime organisé dans le Nord du Mali n'est pas né de l'intérieur.* »
5. « *Taoudenni était trop plat et visible pour le trafic illicite pour que l'une des katibas jihadistes en profite encore aujourd'hui.* »