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Pedro Sánchez Herráez

**The 21st century... and the Sahel
is heading towards the Middle
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The 21st century... and the Sahel is heading towards the Middle Ages?

Abstract:

The fall of the Western Roman Empire opened a period of history known as the Middle Ages, in which, although not everything was shadows during the thousand years that it covers, the loss of the (relative) monopoly of violence of the previous stage allowed the emergence of a multitude of actors capable of exercising it; and since each one had its own purpose, its own reasons and interests to use it, the result was an era of permanent conflict. On the other hand, the loss of that unique space and its atomization, both physical and conceptual, also led to territorial fragmentation, and to the consequent appearance of a multiplicity of fiefdoms where the "lord" exercised an absolute right over the population of the same, given the difficulty of its inhabitants to be able to guarantee their safety and their own subsistence in another way.

A brief analogy on these aspects made between the Middle Ages and that key space for Africa -and for Europe- such as the Sahel, in this complex 21st century, together with a final reflection on the lessons of history and geopolitics, make up this document.

Keywords:

Monopoly of violence, fiefdom, security, Sahel, Middle Ages, self-defense, conflict

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Siglo XXI... ¿y el Sahel yendo hacia la Edad Media?

Resumen:

La caída del Imperio Romano de occidente abrió un período de la historia conocido como la Edad Media, en la cual, si bien no todo fueron sombras durante los mil años que abarca, la pérdida del (relativo) monopolio de la violencia de la etapa anterior permitió la emergencia de multitud de actores capaces de ejercerla; y dado que cada uno tenía su propio fin, sus propias razones e intereses para emplearla, el resultado fue una era de conflictividad permanente.

Por otra parte, la pérdida de ese espacio único y su atomización, tanto física como conceptual, condujo también a la fragmentación territorial, y a la consiguiente aparición de una multiplicidad de feudos donde el “señor” ejercía un derecho absoluto sobre la población del mismo, ante la dificultad de sus habitantes para poder garantizar de otra manera su seguridad y su propia subsistencia.

Una sucinta analogía sobre estos aspectos realizada entre el medievo y ese espacio clave para África -y para Europa- como es el Sahel, en este complejo siglo XXI, junto con una reflexión final relativa a las lecciones de la historia y la geopolítica, conforman el presente documento.

Palabras clave:

Monopolio de la violencia, feudo, seguridad, Sahel, Edad Media, autodefensa, conflicto

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The Middle Ages? That was a long time ago...

Depending on the events used as the start and end points, the time span normally referred to as the Middle Ages can cover a period of almost a thousand years¹, from the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD) to the 14th century, when different milestones are taken depending on the historian: either the discovery of America by Spain in 1492 or the fall of Byzantium in 1453, the latter date also coinciding with the end of the 100 Years' War² and the printing of the Gutenberg Bible³. Whatever the case, these events show how the opening up of new spaces and the broadening of horizons on a global scale are produced; how the revival of nations (as in the case of Spain) or the emergence of this feeling in France and England - with the associated gradual attempt to generate political, economic, social and security structures common to the whole nation - and the spread of information and knowledge on an unprecedented scale... take us from the isolation and obscurantism of the Middle Ages, through to the opening up to the world and the "Renaissance", and to the entry into a new and brighter era for humanity.

Although these thousand years are often identified as an entirely dark time in history, and while on the whole the negatives far outweigh the positives (though there are different interpretations of this⁴), considering the broad physical and temporal space encompassed by the concept of "Middle Ages" - and not forgetting a certain ethnocentric nuance, since the term Middle Ages is essentially identified only with Europe - there were obviously also milestones and moments when the foundations were laid for a significant advance in economic and social development. In the so-called "12th century Renaissance", the established socio-economic order began to be questioned due to both the intellectual revitalisation - one of the most obvious examples of which was the foundation of universities - and the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the increase in power and wealth

¹ A simple but useful analysis can be found in *The Middle Ages, Captivating History*, 2019.

² Long, bloody, harsh conflict that spread across Europe between 1317 and 1453, pitting France and England against each other, and which would end up forging French and English national identities VALDEÓN BARUQUE, July, The 100-year war between France and England, National Geographic, 14 September 2021. Available at https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/guerra-cien-anos-entre-francia-e-inglaterra_14691 NOTE: All web links in this paper are active as of 27 April 2022.

³ In this regard BBC, Gutenberg Bible: 4 surprising facts about the book that marked a before and after in history, 22 December 2021. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-50832104>

⁴ For example, the work of the historian Jacques Le Goff, who defends the thesis that not everything was gloomy and dark during the Middle Ages. To this effect, EL PAÍS, Jacques Le Goff, La luz sobre la Edad Media, 5 April 2014. Available at https://elpais.com/cultura/2014/04/05/actualidad/1396733962_705934.html

of the cities... although the arrival from China of a pandemic, the Black Death, the most devastating world epidemic (up to that time) suffered by humanity, generated serious consequences on a global scale and meant a serious setback⁵ in many of the advances that were taking shape at that time.

What is certain is that the Middle Ages witnessed a dramatic change in the structure of power. The fall of the Roman Empire, the political structure that had been the nucleus of economic, social and military "order" for centuries, and which generated a kind of "globalisation" - essentially on a European and Mediterranean scale - meant the fracture of this single space, generating a multitude of new subspaces and environments, bringing about reduced opportunities for mobility and exchanges, coupled with a preponderance towards self-sufficiency that contrasted with the interconnected Roman world, and last but not least, leading to the loss of the monopoly of violence and the appearance of multiple actors with the capacity to exercise it. The social contract therefore disappeared, as did the concept of citizenship, and each human grouping tried to survive as best it could in this complex, violent, fractured and always disputed environment.

It is generally accepted that over time, and in a feedback spiral, this combination of factors and circumstances unfolded in almost a thousand years of mainly a feudal mode of production, the loss of the concept of citizenship and the rise of serfdom, the contemplation of the birth of the estates, the disappearance of the centralised structures and the dispersal of the centres of power, and the predominance of the theocentric cultures -Christian and Islamic in their respective areas- over the so-called "classical culture"⁶.

However, and this is what generally underlies the collective memory, all this happened a long time ago, in times gone by and remote from now, when issues like extreme violence

⁵ To this effect, SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, *Pandemias y ciudades: Towards an urban-centric world order?*, Analysis Paper 14/2020, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 6 May 2020, p. 4-8. Available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA14_2020PEDSAN_urbacentrico.pdf

⁶ From a certain point of view, the work of the English historian and essayist Perry Anderson is very significant for understanding this period, its most significant parameters and its evolution.

and the fragmentation of the socio-economic reality into fiefdoms - a space in which someone exercises absolute dominion⁷- were the order of the day.

... Times of extreme violence?

The armed conflicts of the Middle Ages were long, devastating and brutal. The multiplicity of actors capable of violence - from the armies of sovereigns and feudal lords, to mercenaries, contractors, warlords, and town and village militias, not to mention the armies of religious hierarchs - generated a whole host of purposes, such a vast array of reasons for conflicts of this magnitude that it was rare to be able to speak of the existence of peace.

An example of this multiplicity of actors⁸ can be seen in one of the great (and decisive) battles of the Middle Ages, the battle of Navas de Tolosa in 1212, in the lands of present-day Jaén. In this battle, which took place during the Reconquest of Spain, military forces from several - not all - of the kingdoms that made up the nation at the time took part (there were military troops from Castile, Navarre and Aragon). Furthermore, bishops from different dioceses took part, Military Orders - groups of soldier monks, the elite troops of the time - formed part of the contingent, urban council militias from Castilian towns and cities were deployed and, until some time before the battle, and given that it had been proclaimed a Crusade by Pope Innocent III, several thousand knights and various troops from different regions of Europe could also be found; troops who, due to disagreements with the actions of King Alfonso VIII in sparing the lives and preventing the sacking of several Muslim garrisons that surrendered, marched back to their fiefdoms.

Although during the Middle Ages there were "great pitched battles" between warring groups - groups that rarely exceeded a few tens of thousands in number - the usual fighting strategies tended towards the avoidance of direct confrontation, towards plundering, pillaging and devastating the opponent's countryside and spaces in an attempt to achieve their exhaustion, the consequence of which was long and bloody campaigns where the distinction between "combatants" and the "civilian population" was

⁷ One of the meanings of the term fiefdom is "political, social, sporting, etc. sphere in which someone exercises absolute dominion". Real Academia Española, Diccionario de la Lengua Española, Edición del Tricentenario, updated 2021. Available at <https://dle.rae.es/feudo?m=form>
A simple but very effective outline can be found in La batalla de las Navas de Tolosa, grandesbatallas.es Available at <http://www.grandesbatallas.es/batalla%20de%20las%20navas%20de%20tolosa.html>.

not only not firmly rooted in the law of war, but simply did not exist all, and where the direct elimination of the opponent's population was sometimes a common mode of battle.

Likewise, it should not be forgotten that the search for nothing more than economic benefit, either by participating as a soldier for hire - a mercenary - or for the benefit of the lord, or by acting simply as a bandit or looter meant that in many cases armed conflict became an activity with a powerful economic component, a question of simple personal interest⁹, making raids and looting an end in themselves, a way of life for certain human groups.

So in the medieval era the concept of violence was understood in a completely different way than it is today, not only because it was a world where the right of the lord prevailed, not only because disputes were settled by the "sword and knife", but because it was very difficult to differentiate between civil war, foreign war and private war. Everything was violence, disorder and lack of freedom and rights.

Human life had little value, religious radicalism advocated the elimination of heretics, the godless, atheists and infidels and, to a large extent, the extreme violence exercised by a multitude of actors resembled what would be called "Hobbesian chaos", the "everyone against everyone". And in the face of this fragmentation of the tools that must provide security, vis-à-vis the need for protection and survival, human nuclei gather as best they can in small groups and spaces.

... Times of fiefdoms?

The decomposition of the Roman Empire and the scarce survival and progressively diminishing political structures that could unite spaces and ambitions (and including the Visigothic Kingdom, the Carolingian Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, among others) meant a lack of centralised power¹⁰ that gradually gave the subordinate structures greater representativeness and presence. This was so to such an extent that the very concept of "State" as a central unifying element was lost and not only the remote central imperial authority was replaced, but also the authority of the different parts into which this former

⁹ CONTAMINE Philippe, War in the Middle Ages, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1984, p. 163.

¹⁰ "The rise of the medieval West took place in a world without a state, characterised by a radical dilution of central authority" BASCHET, Jérôme (2009). Feudal civilisation: Europa del año mil a la colonización de América, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 2009, p. 134.

political unit was increasingly subdividing. The new monarchs also saw how the territory was likewise being gradually subdivided - while maintaining some or no links with the king - into different "fiefdoms", which were acquiring both judicial and administrative autonomy.

The non-existence or inability of the state to be present and provide solutions to inhabitants' problems - from the basic need for security to other services - therefore generated a process of "feudalisation" of society that stemmed particularly from the need for self-defence and self-subsistence. In turn, this led to the fiefdoms gradually becoming increasingly closed and independent political, social and economic entities¹¹, a process which, contrarily, did not prevent conflicts between them - and within them - as each attempted to acquire more power, land and serfs.

Regarding security and the need for defence, what was sought in addition to certain self-defence capabilities, local groups trying to protect their lives and property, was the protection of a "lord". The capacity of this figure to exercise a certain degree of violence - and to provide a minimum of security if a relationship of vassalage or servitude was accepted - meant that they became the absolute master of lives and property in their fiefdom, completing their security force with levies or militias to defend towns and villages under a system of self-subsistence essentially based on the land, on agriculture and livestock, given that the cities did not become significant centres of production until the end of the Middle Ages¹², and especially from the Renaissance onwards.

And although trade on a reduced scale did not entirely cease, the different fiefdoms and communities that emerged were largely self-sufficient, providing the head of the fiefdom, the feudal lord, with the possibility of generating certain military capabilities¹³, while at the same time, and in the absence of the possibility of protection from the outside beyond specific alliances with other communities or fiefdoms, imperatively providing self-defence capabilities. The need to protect crops and herds as almost the only way of life brought about a quasi-anchored population, dependent on both themselves and on the "shelter

¹¹ DE LA TORRE VELOZ, Virginia and GÓMEZ VOGUEL, Lourdes, Breves notas sobre la organización social durante el feudalismo, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, 1996, p. 16-20. Available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48393433.pdf>

¹² Economy and Trade, Encyclopedia.com, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/economy-and-trade>

¹³ LÓPEZ RASH, Juan Cruz, El monopolio de la violencia en el feudalismo como problema historiográfico, Universidad Nacional de la Plata, Anuario Facultad Ciencias Humanas, Year X, Volume 10, nº 1, December 2012, p. 5. Available at http://www.biblioteca.unlpam.edu.ar/pubpdf/anuario_fch/v10n1a01rasch.pdf

of their lord" for survival, in a world where there were few viable alternatives aside from theft and plunder.

it was the Middle Ages, a remote era... Today, in the third millennium and in a global world, these circumstances are surely unreplicable...

...or not? Sahel, 21st century!

Sahel¹⁴, meaning shore, is a 400 kilometre-wide and 5,000 kilometre-long strip of land, which runs transversally across Africa from west to east, forming the southern boundary - the "shore" - between the Sahara desert and the savannah. It is a vast area that accommodates more than a dozen countries and whose bioclimatic characteristic is an annual rainfall of between 200 and 600 litres per square metre.

The harshness of life in this region, regulated by rain and drought, generates an economy which, for more than two thirds of its participants, is still based directly on the use of natural resources, water and fertile land, making agriculture, livestock, fishing and hunting the way of life for the majority of the Sahelian population. The harshness of the environment and the mutability of the climate - aggravated further in the present era of climate change - drives a constant struggle for resources that is most often settled through conflicts and armed disputes, since the stakes are nothing less than survival. If we add to this the fact that each ethnic group - the main sign of identity in the Sahel - is mostly associated with a certain economic activity, the struggles for resources become ethnic struggles, secular in many cases, that can reach an uncommon level of violence and are long-lasting. By way of example, there have been centuries-long disputes not only between cattle breeders and hunters, but also between the Peul and Dogon ethnic groups, all conspiring to enormously complicate the stability of the region as a whole and the potential resolution of disputes. And then there is the fact that the population is doubling every 20 years, causing competition for scarce resources - and thus inter-ethnic strife - to grow exponentially.

¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the region, see SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Sahel: "Tormenta perfecta y de amplitud creciente?", in Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2021, p. 229-252. Available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_21.pdf

But there is also another economic activity, one that has always offered greater opportunities for wealth: trade. This wide Sahelian strip is one of the key areas of interconnection in Africa, linking Sub-Saharan Africa with the Maghreb, and from there with Europe, and especially its western flank, via millenary routes. This opening up to other spaces and the flow of goods - illicit or not - has not only been the main basis of wealth in the Sahel but was also the element which, during the Middle Ages, allowed the development of Sahelian empires¹⁵ from Ghana to Songhai, among others; empires that emerged from territorial control and the monopoly of violence, and which gradually fell, fracturing this space into a multitude of subspaces and environments, due to the weakness of their structures and decreasing territorial presence, the centrifugal tendencies of the peripheries and the inability to provide the territory and populations with security... and normally at the hands of new groups capable of gradually securing the territory and exercising a greater degree of organised violence, creating a new cycle.

The 20th century and colonisation led to the emergence of the Sahelian countries, structures that continue to survive today but since their birth, in most cases in the 1960s, have always been weak, low-income states with little presence, establishment and degree of development, both territorially and in the provision of services to the population. And so with the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, which led to the disintegration of this Maghreb country, these interconnection routes to and from the Sahel became a scenario of instability, of the movement of weapons looted from the immense Libyan powder kegs, of armed groups attempting to create a Tuareg state in northern Mali, and of terrorist groups who set about increasing their efforts to destroy existing structures and create a new caliphate governed by Sharia, Islamic law... and all this in parallel to the exponential increase in the capacities of the powerful organised crime groups¹⁶ based in the region - also armed - adding to the situation of chaos generated in Mali and growing in force in the region as a whole. It was only the Bamako government's call for help and the international military assistance provided through Operation Serval (led by France)

¹⁵ WALTHER, Olivier J. y RETAILLÉ, Denis, Mapping the Sahelian space, Oxford handbook of the african Sahel, 1 May 2017. Available at https://www.academia.edu/38826580/Mapping_the_Sahelian_Space

¹⁶ This presence of different armed groups in the Sahel can be consulted in ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, Carlos, El Sahel. To this effect, VVAA, "El Sahel y G5: desafíos y oportunidades", Strategy Paper 202, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Madrid, -102. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_202_El_sahel_y_g5_desafios_y_oportunidades.pdf

and MINUSMA (sponsored by the United Nations) in 2013 that prevented Mali's definitive fall into the hands of terrorists, secessionists and organised crime groups.

The spiral of violence and disorder, of the destructuring of Mali - and gradually of the entire region - is nonetheless gathering speed; and a new pandemic, this time in the 21st century, COVID-19, has only made things worse¹⁷, in most cases breaking the weak existing social contract, while the presence and action of centralised structures are disappearing, power centres are becoming increasingly disperse and, in the areas controlled by the jihadists, the theocentric cultures are being imposed, alongside an almost total annihilation of the concept of citizenship.

Today, in this convulsive 21st century plunged into geopolitical reconfiguration and with very powerful forces at play, where no tools of violence can be ruled out to achieve the desired ends - just look at the war between Russia and Ukraine, seemingly unthinkable only a few years ago - the state continues to be a key player in the international order.

And the exercise of authority over a territory in relation to the (legitimate) use of violence constitutes one of the perhaps most definitive and unanimous characteristics - together with the possession of its own territory - of what a state is; essential elements among the parameters usually pinpointed in political science to be considered a state (population, territory, power and international recognition). In the Weberian conception of the term, the state refers to a human community that successfully exercises legitimate physical violence within a territory; in other words, the state is the holder of the legitimate monopoly of violence, the one who has the tools, ways and means needed to exercise it, thus avoiding the creation of Hobbesian chaos, the "everyone against everyone"; and consequently, through this control, the one able to achieve the desired end, security and social stability. Arising from this agreement between the state and its subjects, its citizens, is the social contract by which an authority, rules and laws that must be obeyed are recognised, and wherein the state is the guarantor of this agreed balance between rights and duties.

¹⁷ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, El Sahel en tiempos de pandemia: ¿Aún peor?, Analysis paper 24/2020, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 15 July 2020. Available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA24_2020PEDSAN_pandemiaSahel.pdf

Certainly, the typologies that the state can adopt are variable, and even certain aspects of the degree of centralisation of violence - a key aspect for the genesis and viability of the state - are questioned in certain areas¹⁸, leading to the consideration that in certain circumstances and spaces the "state" is no more than a kind of idea to which a part of society and the agents of the state themselves aspire, but which has not managed to be implemented in its functional and structural aspect and can be substituted by certain agreements between population groups, armed actors and elites at different levels - local, regional or even national. The debate, at least the academic one, is certainly impending.

But whatever the case, in the 21st century, far removed from remote medieval times, and faced with these - and other - questions that are full realities in certain parts of the planet, including the Sahel... can (extreme) violence and the "feudalisation" of the territory manage to be avoided?

Times of extreme violence!

Conflict in the Sahel has been long, devastating and brutal due to the existence of such a wide range of actors capable of violence - including (weak) national armies, local self-defence militias, ethnic defence groups, powerful terrorist groups, extremely powerful organised crime groups, armed separatist groups, military forces under international mandate, mercenaries - and in most cases with completely sectarian and divergent aims, making it very difficult to even think about peace.

What happened in the Malian town of Moura¹⁹ at the end of March 2022 - easily verified by a quick glance at the daily press - when a unit of the Malian army, together with what appear to be mercenaries from the Russian company Wagner, systematically murdered more than 300 people, suffices as an example of this extreme exercise of violence; and while jihadist terrorist forces were apparently eliminated in the fighting that took place, the subsequent and indiscriminate "purge" summarily turned into a massacre of such proportions that it is even being investigated as a war crime. And this not to mention the

¹⁸ SUAZA ESTRADA, Edwin Jader and MARTÍNEZ MÁRQUEZ, Wilmar, Tipologías y patologías de Estado. Otra lectura frente a la formación y prácticas de lo estatal, Estudios Políticos nº 48, January/June 2016, p.52-72. Available at [http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0121-51672016000100004#:~:text=El%20Estado%20es%20una%20organizaci%C3%B3n,\(Weber%2C%201968%2C%20pp](http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0121-51672016000100004#:~:text=El%20Estado%20es%20una%20organizaci%C3%B3n,(Weber%2C%201968%2C%20pp)

¹⁹ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, Mali: massacre by Army, foreign soldiers, 5 April 2022. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>

ongoing fighting²⁰ between local self-defence groups and the different ethnic groups as part of the constant dispute over resources.

Although at times there are direct clashes between different actors, this is not normally the objective. While the security forces and the “rival’s” armed groups are regularly and rapidly attacked, it is above all civilians, along with their means of production, wells and water points²¹, that receive these actions...for the purpose of making the population's livelihood unviable.

Moreover, criminal activities using violence provide significant economic returns; for example, the "kidnapping economy"²² is an important source of financing not only for the captors, but for the entire network of informants and collaborators involved, a situation that needs to be properly contextualised as it is carried out in areas with a low standard of living, low per capita income, high youth unemployment and a general lack of security, including areas outside government control. All this means that the flow of money resulting from this illicit activity, as well as the feeling of being "on the side of the strong", often becomes significant and attractive for a part of the population, people who are usually absolutely destitute of almost everything.

In a new exercise in the complexity of survival in an environment of de-monopolised violence, there is the exploitation of gold²³, a precious metal that is the main export value for many countries in the region (92% in the case of Mali, 72% for Burkina Faso, 54% in Niger, etc.). It is exploited as much by a handful of large foreign companies as by hundreds of thousands of people in an artisanal manner - in most cases outside the law - and by organised crime networks and jihadist groups that use it as a source of financing. Disputes over this coveted metal have led government forces to take action in some regions against artisanal miners, who have asked jihadist groups to provide them with security, although on other occasions it is the self-defence groups either from the

²⁰ SWI, Twenty-four people killed by gunmen in central Nigeria, 13 April 2022. Available at <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/afp/veinticuatro-personas-asesinadas-por-hombres-armados-en-el-centro-de-nigeria/47515424?msckid=64599702c5f711ec919931457d61a86f>

²¹ EUROPA PRESS, Seven people are killed in a new attack in northern Burkina Faso, 15 March 2022. Available at <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-mueren-siete-personas-nuevo-ataque-norte-burkina-faso-20220315090550.html>

²² SB MORGEN, The economics of the kidnap industry in Nigeria, May 2020. Available at https://www.sbmintel.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/202005_Nigeria-Kidnap.pdf

²³ GARCÍA-Luengo, Jesús, Fiebre extractiva del oro en África occidental, Esglobal, 14 October 2021. Available at <https://www.esglobal.org/fiebre-extractiva-del-oro-en-africa-occidental/>

communities where the precious metal is extracted or more "professionalised" groups that have this role. Meanwhile, in other areas the collection of "taxes" by organised crime groups or the demand for "zakat", a kind of religious tax, by the jihadists to allow mining activity to be carried out, can be detected.

Consequently, the balance of violence, deaths and disputes is tremendously high, not only because of changes in the balance of power of the different armed groups, but because of the action of this growing number of new self-defence groups. While they initially contributed to providing a degree of security, in the short term what has ended up happening, given that the methods employed by these groups do not usually respect human rights, is that they have contributed to aggravating the problem rather than being part of the solution, in addition to exacerbating the powerful inter-ethnic tensions present in large parts of the region as a whole. Moreover, given their relative weakness vis-à-vis other actors, they are susceptible to being instrumentalised by certain elites or actors with greater power, be it economic or military.

Further complicating the equation, the presence in Mali of the Russian company Wagner, called in by the coup government in Bamako, has led the European Union to temporarily suspend its mission to train the Malian army, as well as to the withdrawal of the French force "Serval" (more than 400 troops and extensive capabilities) and "Takuba", a special operations force sponsored by the Union. These deployments and withdrawals of forces, invitations and refusals by the government of Mali - the country that constitutes the central axis of the Western Sahel - can only be understood within the framework of the global dispute that not only confronts nations and coalitions from all over the planet, but also needs to be framed within the global struggle for the enormous resources and control of the key geopolitical space that is the Sahel, precisely because of this reality as a node of interconnection.

As stated in a previous paragraph, *"In the medieval era, the concept of violence was therefore understood in a completely different way from today: not only because it was a world where the right of the lord prevailed, not only because disputes were settled by "sword and knife", but because it was very difficult to differentiate between civil war, foreign war and private war. Everything was violence, disorder and lack of freedom and rights"...* it seems, at least in this respect, that the similarities are more obvious than they

might have appeared at first glance.

And can there be even more?

Times of fiefdoms!

As already pointed out, since their very birth Sahelian states have been characterised by being weak and low-income, and even failed on certain occasions. The spiral of violence and actors capable of exercising it have generally fractured the political structures, undermining their very presence and legitimacy and causing them to be replaced by increasingly reduced spaces and structures vis-à-vis growing insecurity and the need to protect crops and livestock, the basic pillars of the economy - and of the survival - of most of the Sahelian population, which is breaking up the territory into different "fiefdoms" that are acquiring autonomy, including in the judicial and administrative areas.

Moreover, given that the Sahel is a space of interconnection, and in line with what has historically been the case, a group's aim is simply to gain territorial control of a space, the control of an area of land ²⁴, allowing them to charge a toll for the flow of all types of resources, both licit and especially illicit, that transit between the north, the Maghreb and Europe, and the south, the Gulf of Guinea.

Consequently, while there are different typologies of existing armed groups, be they are jihadist terrorist groups or "simple" organised crime groups, with potentially distinct aims - in the case of the jihadists, to establish a state governed by Sharia law, and in the second case to simply ensure that the state is not capable of hindering their criminal activities - their methods may have many similarities. And, in addition to the use of extreme violence when necessary, territorial control, possession and domination of a "fiefdom" is another of them.

As pointed out, in this atomisation of space and in the struggle for and in the different fiefdoms, vis-à-vis the lack of state capacity, the populations resort to self-defence, a phenomenon which, while it has historical roots in some Sahelian communities, is nowadays of an intensity and extension that surpasses all existing references²⁵; and

²⁴ To this effect, MESA, Beatriz, Les groupes armés du Sahel. Conflits et économie criminelle au nord du Mali, Halfa Books, 2022.

²⁵ DE LEÓN COBO, Beatriz, El problema de la "etnización" de las milicias de autodefensa en el Sahel, los principales autores de la violencia en Burkina Faso y Mali, Atalayar, 5 October 2020. Available at <https://atalayar.com/content/el-problema-de-la-%E2%80%99Cetnizaci%C3%B3n%E2%80%9D-de-las-milicias-de-autodefensa-en-el-sahel-los-principales>

although initially the government did not frown upon these self-defence militias, given that they themselves were incapable of providing security throughout the territory, these groups have ended up contributing to increased inter-community violence and becoming, in a very complex mosaic, more part of the problem than part of the solution.

The presence of local self-defence groups must be understood as part of the organisational process at local level, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. In the complex and increasingly degraded Sahelian environment, these groups attempt to fill the space left by the absence of the state, not only in terms of security but also in terms of various public services; in fact, the absence of a judiciary and police action to respond to the increasing acts of theft and violence not only displeases the population, but in their eyes legitimises these groups who, in this vacuum, expand their scope of action not only on the ground but also in terms of competencies, including the application of a "justice" understood in a different way and obviously without any procedural guarantees or respect for human rights. Certainly, their physical presence in the villages and in the fields, where they are seen patrolling, generates a sense of security in the villages. However, when effective these groups tend to expand and grow, leading to disputes among themselves and with the populations - for example over the "cost of services rendered" - as well as with other "fiefdoms" and groups, especially if ethnic differences appear. To exacerbate the situation, these local particularities and particularisms are often not one hundred percent extrapolable to national levels, meaning that such "feudal solutions" are not a solution for a nation-building process.

Moreover, in this process of "feudalisation" of society, and given that self-defence becomes a partial palliative, the population often resorts to the protection of a "lord", either the leader of a jihadist group or of an organised crime group who, in exchange for the "vassalage" of his subjects, provides a certain degree of security, obviously at the cost of any right or freedom. There is even a growing belief²⁶ that a strong president ruling the country with an iron fist would be better able to confront the situation of the growth of violence, which is generating a cascade of coups d'état outside the established legitimacy both in the Sahel and in other areas of West Africa (Chad, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Burkina

²⁶ MCLEAN, Ruth, Seis golpes en cinco países africanos: What's Happening? The New York Times, 1 February 2022. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2022/02/01/espanol/golpes-de-estado-africa-burkina-faso.html>

Faso...), coups d'état in many cases applauded by a population eager, above all, for security... even though, in the current situation, some governments exclusively control "their fiefdom", the capital, the large cities and some areas of the country, such that it has even been said that: "(...) one gets the feeling that in the Sahel-Saharan strip the leaders are entrenched in their capitals, that the countryside is abandoned to the jihadists and that they have given up all sovereign powers of education or health (...)"²⁷.

To this effect, and as a simple sign of the growing fracture and generation of subspaces, the governor of Kaduna in northern Nigeria is threatening to hire foreign mercenaries if the state does not guarantee security, this on the back end of the recent assault, on top of the "usual" deaths and violent action, of an entire train where dozens of passengers were kidnapped²⁸. Attacks on communication infrastructures further isolate each of the areas, disintegrate the territory and contribute to fragmentation, to the loss of a broad and common vision, and to the idea of nation and the need for self-defence, in a very complex and dangerous circle... the very same factors that gradually, and with whatever safeguards one wishes to make, led to the final destruction of the Roman Empire and entry into the Middle Ages.

In order to reflect

It seems that despite the distance in time and space, and with whatever nuances one would obviously like to introduce, the responses of large human groups to similar stimuli tend to be similar, especially if they affect such a basic and primary need as security and the possibility and capacity for survival.

For this reason, and despite all the questioning and theorising one might wish to do, it seems that the loss of the legitimate monopoly of violence and the dismemberment and fragmentation of formerly united spaces can relatively quickly lead to growing insecurity

²⁷ FRANCE24, Burkina Faso: Did France play a role in the overthrow of President Kaboré, 26 January 2022. Available at <https://www.france24.com/es/%C3%A1frica/20220126-burkina-faso-papel-francia-golpe-estado>

²⁸ AGENZIA FIDES, The Christian Confessions of Kaduna: "No to the hypothesis of hiring foreign mercenaries to fight terrorists, 4 April 2022. Available at http://www.fides.org/es/news/71952-AFRICA_NIGERIA_Las_confesiones_cristianas_de_Kaduna_No_a_la_hipotesis_de_contratar_mercenar_ios_extranjeros_para_luchar_contra_los_terroristas

and chaos, to an increase in the degree of violence that parallels a societies' degree of "feudalisation".

In a global world, with very powerful forces at play - from great powers to huge corporations with global influence - it is necessary to have a broad critical mass to be able to be a truly global player and thus maintain the way of life and the rights that have been hard-won over centuries.

This is why separatism, extreme localism, "opportunists" and disruptive elements of different types and conditions are so potentially dangerous; because they can fracture a model which, although it always has room for improved, at least provides a common denominator, while offering in exchange an alternative which, in most cases, is nothing more than an exercise in pure and simple utopianism.

And in the face of this, vis-à-vis a fracture, what may ultimately remain, in a paradigm that seems to be replicated throughout history, is simply a choice between "vassalisation" under a lord with power over life and property, and the generation of "self-defence militias" that often become part of the problem rather than a solution.

Or perhaps history and geopolitics are wrong this time. Maybe.

*Pedro Sánchez Herráez**

COL.ET.INF.DEM

PhD in Peace and International Security

IEEE Analyst