

Book Review: Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013 by Stephen A. Harmon

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Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region offers an excellent and accessible introduction to anyone interested in this complex and constantly changing part of the world, writes Jillian Terry.

Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013. Stephen A. Harmon. Ashgate. 2014.

Find this book: 

In the preface of *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region*, author Stephen Harmon recounts how he first learned of the military coup overthrowing Mali's second democratically elected president, Amadou Toumani Touré, in March of 2012. Spotting a newspaper headline being read by a nearby passenger on the Paris metro, Harmon hurriedly buys a copy of his own and learns of the coup that would set in motion a period of intense unrest in Mali, instantly shifting the country from periphery to centre in discussions of terror and insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel region and setting the stage for the field research he would undertake in the coming months.

Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region underscores the importance of examining historical, political, and social contexts surrounding these news-making shifts and asks us to consider how a force such as Islam can impact security in simultaneously tempering and aggravating ways. Exploring these interconnections in the Sahara-Sahel region with a systematic book-length research project has timely benefits, as we continue to witness the extreme violence perpetrated by the Islamist Boko Haram movement in Nigeria, where 10,000 people have been killed in the last year alone. Just this week, Nigerian electoral officials have postponed the national election slated for this month due to the threat of insecurity from Boko Haram insurgents, calling our attention to the potentially disastrous impacts of Islamic militant movements on the tenuous project of Nigerian democracy and the resulting need for a deeper understanding of the region's political history.

For the purposes of this book, Harmon delineates the Sahara-Sahel meta-region as those countries in North and West Africa which have been most affected by problems of terrorism and insurgency, including Algeria, Mali, and Nigeria most prominently. The region has long been seen as a lawless expanse plagued by human trafficking and contraband smuggling, but Harmon calls our attention to the region's shared experiences in trans-Saharan trade, Islamic heritage (in both its radical and moderate forms), and similar paths of colonial rule and decolonization in helping to explain why the region has suffered from such social, economic, and infrastructural dysfunction in recent years. While the US and its Western allies have developed security initiatives aimed at counterterrorism, the securing of borders, and interruption of contraband flows, Harmon's key argument is that "the ultimate failure to achieve these objectives led directly to the Mali War of 2012-2013 and to the subsequent Franco-African military intervention of January 2013" (xix).

The first half of the volume focuses on tracing the historical and political background of the Sahara-Sahel region, beginning with a regional discussion in Chapter 1 before moving on to country-specific case studies of Algeria, Mali, and Nigeria in Chapters 2-4. Here, Harmon demonstrates a wealth of knowledge and nuance in the region while doing the difficult but necessary work of examining how seemingly disparate events such as the Algerian civil war, the Malian pro-democracy coup of 1991, and the development of radical Islamic movements in Nigeria have combined to result in a dangerous zone of terrorism and insurgency in Sahara-Sahel.

Throughout the remainder of the book, the continued significance of these occurrences is brought into sharp focus in the contemporary era. In Chapter 5, Harmon examines some recent attempts by the United States and its allies in the post-9/11 period to develop and implement securitization initiatives in the Sahara-Sahel zone. He rightly suggests that these programs completely failed to achieve their stated objectives for a variety of reasons including widespread corruption, an ill-fated partnership between the US and Algeria, and an overzealous commitment to militarized solutions for what are largely political, economic, and social problems (140-1).



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This indictment of the various US-led securitization initiatives in North and West Africa since 9/11 is a useful critique that links the academic research undertaken by Harmon and other scholars working in regional IR to the policymaking world of counterterrorism and global security. By pinpointing *why* these initiatives have failed to improve conditions for Africans living in the Sahara-Sahel zone, Harmon demonstrates the need for an approach to security that focuses on a non-military solution and recognizes the intricate interconnections at work in the region, from corruption of state officials to the prevalence of organized criminal networks and activities. Further, this chapter reiterates the problems with continued reliance on a military approach by the Obama administration, highlighting how the underlying issues of corruption and poverty in the region continue to be ignored by the United States and its allies (139).

The price that has been paid by Malians for these failed initiatives becomes painfully apparent in Chapter 7 of the book, where Harmon investigates the Mali War of 2012-2013, detailing how terrorism and insurgency took hold in northern regions of the country before the violent overthrow of Mali's democracy in March of 2012 and resulting occupation that followed. It is here that *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region* makes its most valuable contribution, by incorporating the voices and experiences of Malians who lived through this tumultuous time in their nation's history. Harmon does an excellent job of seamlessly integrating the oral interviews he conducted with (mainly Malian) individuals during his field research trip at the height of the Islamist insurgency in 2012.

These testimonies highlight the fear and resentment felt by displaced Malians during the Islamist occupation of the north, such as the refugee who told Harmon: "I want peace in the north. I want the Islamists expelled. They are false Islamists. Amputations and drug trafficking are not part of Islam. These are things God does not like" (195). Another respondent, interviewed towards the end of the occupation, suggested that "most Malians were not willing to forgive [the secular-nationalist group] MNLA, whom they blamed for starting the whole rebellion in the first place" (204), identifying a strand of lasting resentment among Malians not only for the Islamist occupation but for the uprising and rebellion that began in early 2012.

By emphasizing the voices of Malian civilians, militants, and public officials throughout his analysis of the Mali War,

Harmon reminds us that the regional problems and dysfunctions discussed in earlier chapters of this book have very real and tangible impacts on the everyday lives of Africans in Algeria, Mali, Nigeria, and neighbouring countries. *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region* offers an excellent and accessible introduction to anyone interested in this complex and constantly changing part of the world, and is an insightful analysis of how recent events in Mali may offer valuable lessons for how to better approach the search for peace and security in Africa, particularly as Boko Haram maintains a violent presence in Nigeria.

Jillian Terry is in the final stages of completing her PhD in International Relations at the LSE, where her research explores the relationship between feminist ethics and post-9/11 war. In her thesis, she develops a framework based on care, empathy, and experience to examine the morality and ethics of contemporary warfare practices such as the use of drones, private military security companies, and counterinsurgency operations. In addition to her role as a PhD candidate, Jillian also currently acts as a class teacher for LSE undergraduates in International Political Theory and LSE100. Recently, Jillian has published her research in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and has contributed a chapter to the forthcoming volume *Gender and Private Security in Global Politics*, edited by Maya Eichler (OUP, 2015).

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