

The Power of Geography

Reading Guide for Chapter 7, The Sahel

“...one of the most troubled, poor, and environmentally damaged places on the planet.”
–Tim Marshall



The first pages of the chapter provide an overview of the geographic, political, social, and environmental issues confronting this region of Africa.

“Sahel” – An Arabic term for “shore,” or “coast.”

The transformative impact of the camel on the Sahel region for trade and movement.

Trade routes across the Sahel -- in **ivory, gold, slaves, and salt** – enriched empires and kingdoms from the eighth to nineteenth centuries. Trade routes also brought **Islam** to the Sahel region in the eighth century, not long after the birth of Islam.

In the 1400s European traders changed the Sahel. A new market for slaves, access for Europeans to African gold (hence, the “Gold Coast”).

The Berlin Conferences of 1884-85 – European powers carved up Africa along arbitrary lines.

The French controlled much of the Sahel – and their influence there is still evident today....

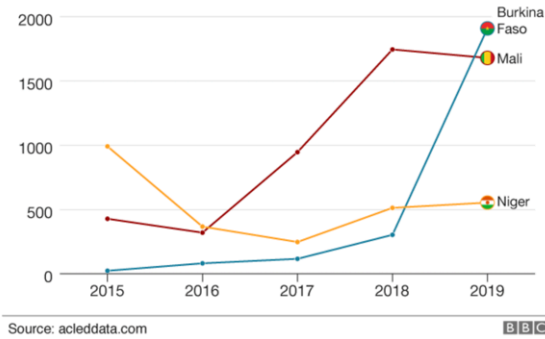
The **Voulet-Chanoine Expedition** of 1898-99.

The British, Italians, and Spanish also established control over parts of the Sahel. “Spheres of influence” became de facto borders, and those arbitrary borders are sources of conflict today.

An explanation of the various conflicts roiling **Mali**.

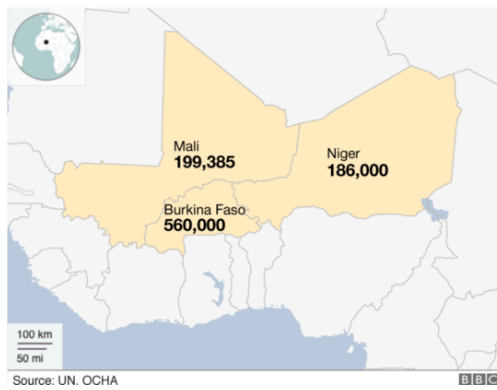
Casualties from 2015 to 2019

Number of deaths from armed violence in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger



Number of displaced persons

Total of people internally displaced in 2019 due to violence



The nomadic Tuareg people of the drier north and the more prosperous and agriculturally oriented south. A Tuareg independence movement to create the independent state of **Azawad**. The Tuareg are supported lately by international terror groups like **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**. Mali struggles to resist these Islamist fighting forces that want to establish a strict form of **sharia law**.

France intervened to stop **jihadi** forces. **Operation Serval** routed the jihadist forces, which then reorganized into a terrorist group called **Al-Mourabitoun** led by **Mokhtar Belmokhtar**. The French responded with a more extensive **Operation Barkhane** involving the **G5 Sahel** countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to prevent jihadist groups from expanding into other West African states.

French President Emmanuel Macron sought international support to oppose jihadists like Boko Haram and ISIS. He received mixed support. But the French know they cannot leave the region for violent Islamists to overrun.

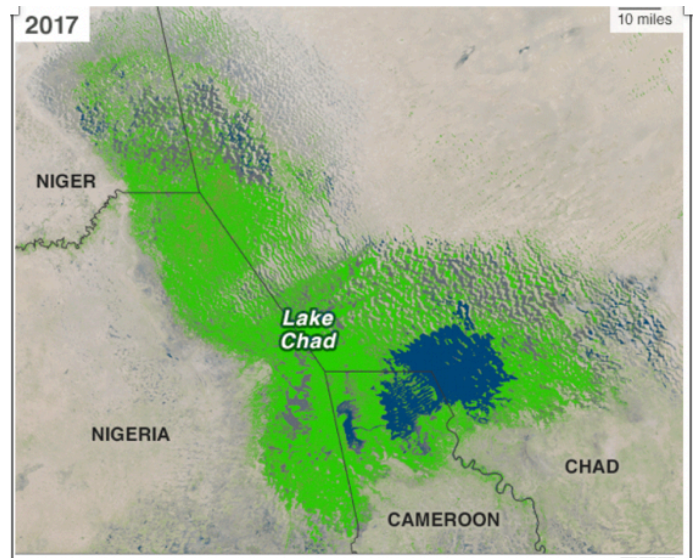
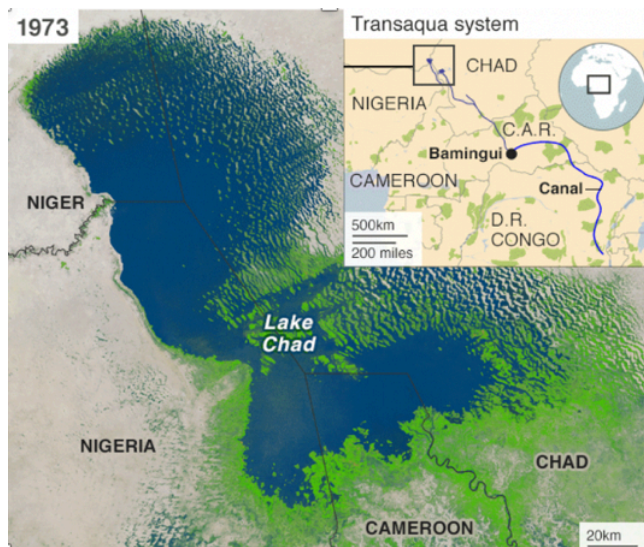
The Sahel Alliance formed in 2017 to funnel \$6.6 billion to develop the region economically.

The Americans are also involved. The USA is pivoting toward Asia to confront the threat of China but it cannot abandon the Sahel entirely.

The **Fulani** people, “a nation without a state.” 23 million people spread across the Sahel. The Fulani once had empires—the **Macina Empire** (1818-1862), which followed strict form of Sunni Islam and had a history of enslaving non-Muslim populations.

The **Macina Liberation Front (MLF)** under **Amadou Koufa** follows an extreme jihadist ideology called **takfiri**. The MLF wants to establish an Islamic Republic in central Mali.

The damaging effects of drought made worse by climate change: Soil erosion, desertification, drought, temperature rise, and famine. Lake Chad has shrunk by 90% in the past 4 decades. 30 million face food insecurity. “80 percent of the land is degraded.”



“**The Great Green Wall**” – tree-planting operation, 5,000 miles long by 10 miles wide.

Africa has the fastest demographic rate of growth in the world. Between 2020 and 2050 the population of Africa is expected to double.

The Sahel – poorest region on earth – is rich in natural resources. Uranium, oil, phosphate, iron ore, copper, and gold. The mines bring jobs and problems.

Example: the city of Arlit in Niger.



Arlit



The open-pit Uranium mine in Arlit.

Gold mines in Burkina Faso -- “a treasure trove for terrorists.”

The Sahel has the potential to hold **rare-earth metals** – 17 metals used in high tech products. China has the corner on the global rare-earth market and wants to keep it. The Americans want access to rare-earth metals and to block the Chinese.

The Chinese are major players in Africa, and both China and Russia seek to challenge the US and the other Western powers where they can. Sahel presents an opportunity to them....European powers know that what happens in the Sahel will affect them at home. When poverty leads masses of people to migrate to Europe, extremist parties and nationalists gain ground in European domestic politics.



In the Sahel, there is no military solution to a conflict. The economic, social, cultural, and political issues need to be addressed. “Whatever the response to the situation, anyone unwilling to tackle the underlying issues driving the conflict is doomed to failure.”