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# COMPETITION FOR NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE SAHEL



A REPORT BY

THE NATO STRATEGIC DIRECTION SOUTH HUB

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the intricacies of how foreign actors engage in the extraction of natural resources is necessary for the development of a comprehensive approach to understanding how resources in the Sahel are being exploited and the ripple effect this has on security across the region. Against this background, this project has identified the main drivers of instability in natural resource extraction in the Sahel by specific actors.

In recent years, many actors from across the globe have begun to increase their interest in this region. Some foreign actors such as Russia (RUS) are playing a “long game” to increase their influence in the region, using methods which might at times be considered unethical by other actors. One of the key factors, raised by stakeholders during the workshop the NSD-S held in Senegal, was the sense of mistrust in historically colonial states in the Sahel, the existence of which RUS is able to take advantage of.

The control of natural resources and providing aid to develop infrastructure will have long term consequences in the Sahel. In many parts of the area, governments are unwilling or incapable of stopping predatory methods of resource extraction. Due to the vast amounts of ungoverned spaces, and unregulated resource extraction certain actors are able to take advantage.

In some areas, bad governance and unequal access to the extraction of natural resources has led to the exacerbation of the local populations’ frustrations, often considered highly relevant in recent years regarding the expansion of Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), including Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs). The resulting has negative effects on stability, illegal extraction of natural resources, smuggling and the illicit arms trade in the region.

Better understanding of these elements would undoubtedly provide great assistance in predicting the patterns of engagement foreign powers are likely to follow in the extraction of natural resources. If left unchanged, the likelihood is that the stability and security of this region will continue to deteriorate and the dependency on these foreign powers will increase.

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## INTRODUCTION

With over 20 countries possessing abundant oil and mineral deposits, Africa, including the Sahel region,<sup>1</sup> is home to more resource-rich states than any other region in the world. However, living conditions for most citizens in the Sahel are poor, a fact which is directly related to the inequitable distribution of resource revenues.

Natural resource wealth is also strongly associated with undemocratic, illegitimate governance. Roughly 70 percent of the world's resource-rich states are categorized as autocracies. This pattern is not a coincidence. The steady flow of natural resource revenues funds the patronage and security structures these governments rely on to remain in power without popular support. Almost without exception, the Sahel's resource-rich states exhibit high levels of public sector corruption. Moreover, states heavily reliant on the revenues from the export of oil and minerals, face a greater risk of civil conflict than their resource-poor counterparts.

These patterns need not be the norm. With their technical expertise and financial resources, international actors could be a vital component in the resource management equation in the Sahel by helping a country get its resources to the market and recovering a higher return for the public than would otherwise be the case.

Yet, too often such collaborations are not at all beneficial. Unscrupulous actors eager to turn a quick profit have found resource-rich governments to be attractive targets. The minerals found in the Sahel are needed for external consumption.<sup>2</sup> Some of these external actors' readiness to engage in illegal, morally questionable or otherwise exploitative business transactions results in a comparative advantage relative to more reputable players. These actors thrive in environments where governments are financially desperate or diplomatically isolated, oversight institutions are weak and civil society is stifled. Such predatory corporations are not merely bystanders conducting business as usual in an unsavoury environment. They often proactively empower unaccountable leaders and frequently benefit directly from conflict and political crises. The potential return for these investors is enormous, compared to the marginal downside of a deal that falls through. With the right connections and willingness to operate amid relative chaos, these companies can make a fortune from resource-rich, fragile states.

This report examines the challenges the Sahel region faces and the role of RUS and NSAGs/VEOs, and how they engage in the Sahel for natural resources. It will also include a case study of CHAD.<sup>3</sup> Research for this project was carried out using extensive open source material, interviews and surveys carried out across the Sahel,

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<sup>1</sup> We have used the UN definition of the Sahel as encompassing these countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal  
<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/sahel>

<sup>2</sup> Many of the most sought after natural resources are used in technologies such as cell phones. External actors' want for these resources will become more pronounced in the coming years.

<sup>3</sup> Though there are many actors across the Sahel engaging in natural resource extraction, because of the brevity of the report, not all can be investigated.

an in-country case study in Chad<sup>4</sup> and a four-day workshop with stakeholders held in Dakar.<sup>5</sup>

## RUSSIA (RUS) AND THE COMPETITION FOR NATURAL RESOURCES



After a decades-long absence, RUS is once again appearing on the African continent. The Kremlin's return to Africa, which has generated considerable media, governmental and civil society attention, draws on a variety of tools and capabilities. Worrying patterns of increased RUS activity are stirring concerns of a new wave of

great-power competition in Africa.<sup>6</sup> It remains unclear, however, whether RUS's investments in Africa over the past decade are paying off in terms of creating a real power base in Africa, let alone putting it on a footing that will expand its influence in years to come. RUS is free from a complicated colonial history, a significant factor for engaging with RUS instead of other state actors.

RUS's strategy toward Africa and the Sahel specifically is generally guided by its broader goals in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. With its economy struggling, RUS lacks deep pockets compared to other foreign actors in the region. RUS investor interest in Africa is quite narrow, focusing primarily on natural-resource extraction and energy opportunities that often are already being explored or exploited by other players. The Sahel is seen by many as the logical next step for RUS to try to exert influence.

Opportunism is a hallmark of RUS's current foreign policy, and its behaviour in the Sahel is hardly an exception. In 2019, leaders from across Africa gathered in Sochi, RUS, for the initial RUS-Africa Summit. In recent years, RUS has been seen making giant strides and inroads in the Sahel, an example being in Mali. RUS has clear economic motives for involvement in this state, as it has a shortage of some minerals such as manganese, bauxite and chromium, all of which are important for industry. It also has experience in the energy sector and it can offer support. In Mali's case, Moscow's probable involvement in Goïta's coup might well preclude any hope of fair elections in the coming years and binds the current government to RUS.<sup>7</sup> RUS will be happy to take advantage of the situation in Mali, and Moscow's track record in countries such as Syria and Belarus has made it clear that the Kremlin is not likely to push for democracy abroad. RUS nuclear energy giant Rosatom, which directly competes with its French counterpart, Avenda, for contracts in the Sahel, will most likely benefit from favourable relations with Mali's new political authorities. Nordgold,

<sup>4</sup> September 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The workshop was held in Dakar from October 11-14, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642283/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)642283\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642283/EPRS_BRI(2019)642283_EN.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Many academic and international observers have linked President Assimi Goïta's successful coup in the summer of 2020 to immense Russian support.



a RUS gold company, has already significantly invested in the Sahel and has the potential to expand its extraction initiatives there, most notably regarding Mali's gold reserves. Western reluctance to increase its commitment to security in the militancy-plagued Sahel creates opportunities for RUS. As part of its broader diplomatic offensive in Africa, Moscow has already been working to upgrade its military relationship with the traditionally French-aligned states of the Sahel, former French colonies. For RUS, a greater security role in the Sahel could mean supplying military equipment and services, such as the deployment of private military forces or training by the RUS military proper, in exchange for minerals extracted locally.<sup>8</sup> Currently Moscow can offer local governments supplementary capabilities in the form of arms, training and direct military support.



Source: Rob Lee on Twitter: "More photos purportedly of Russian PMC contractors and an Ural-4320 truck in CAR from the summer of 2018." <https://t.co/6ZWWCLQ8ia> <https://t.co/eBF0v4uZhY> /"

Through the use of private military contractors such as the Wagner Group, RUS has the potential to control and influence the extraction of vast natural resources in the Sahel. Abundant gold ores, as mentioned, are found in Mali and Burkina Faso, while Niger is rich in uranium. Many reserves are yet to be exploited. In most cases, extraction sites fall under the control of insurgents, as local governments lack the capabilities to secure them.<sup>9</sup> As for now, French companies are the main foreign stakeholders in local mining projects. However, it is highly likely that RUS's military support will be conditioned by a share of the countries' natural resources and increase RUS's influence. The Wagner group, which has been linked closely to the RUS government, provides significant security for mining and

other natural resource operations in the Sahel and surrounding regions. Though RUS companies themselves may have a small footprint in mining, by offering security and mercenaries in the region, they are creating influence in regional policies for the long-term.<sup>10</sup> To be clear, it is the destabilizing elements of RUS's actions that are most concerning, especially those that are undermining established norms of accountable governance and the upholding of the rule of law. RUS is a consistent supporter of autocratic governments, opaque natural resource contracts, and arms shipments to already unstable regions in Africa (and growing in the Sahel). This has perpetuated the rule of repressive leaders, who have fostered institutional corruption, societal disparities, long-running conflict and record levels of refugees and population displacement in this region. Given its emerging markets, natural resource wealth, strategic location and growing importance, the way RUS operates in the Sahel is a concern

<sup>8</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/06/what-is-wagner-group-russia-mercenaries-military-contractor/>

<sup>9</sup> This topic is covered in more detail in Chapter 3: VEOs, NSAGs and the competition for Natural Resources.

<sup>10</sup> <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-wagner-undermines-transition-mali/>

## SWOT ANALYSIS: RUS INVOLVEMENT IN NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE SAHEL

### STRENGTHS

RUS asserts much of its influence in the African continent through the Wagner group. This allows them to have greater freedom of movement and the ability to work outside the normal constraints asserted on a State, to include in some cases the ability to work with tribes that control resources and would prove more favourable to RUS influence. RUS's most common mode of operations in Africa is to provide security to mining sites, which allows them to sell the narrative that they are working with the country and its people, without having to commit large amounts of resources and funding. RUS is operating a low cost operation with high political influence. In the aftermath of the Chadian president's death, RUS stepped in with a significant economic offer. This needs to be watched, as they might be evolving their strategy in the region from what it has been in the last five years. Another strength is that it was not a colonial country in the region and does not approach the Sahel with that complicated history.

### WEAKNESSES

The low cost foreign policy under which RUS operates often means it is unable to take full advantage of opportunities in undermining the west. Since the end of the cold war, RUS has not held the same level of political influence across the continent. Although it is working on this, its current level of influence is fragile compared to others, such as France.

### OPPORTUNITIES

By demonstrating itself to be a partner in the region, as opposed to trying to control them, RUS has worked an impressive information operations campaign in recent times. It has marketed itself as a friend, intent on assisting countries in the region to harvest their own natural resources. It will continue to use this narrative: to promote itself as a friend of Africa, while the west is a leach on African resources. Due to the security situation in parts of the Sahel, western companies are reluctant to commit, creating new opportunities for RUS to provide security to the resource sites. RUS's slow game puts it in prime position to highlight or embellish any mistake the west makes. In the long-term, with the resources available, it has the opportunity to become a major player across the Sahel, picking up licenses that western companies currently hold for extraction. Because they are more flexible, they can operate in situations that the west cannot.

### THREATS

The biggest threat from RUS, through its involvement in the natural resources sector, comes in the form of the political field. Actions being carried out by RUS companies such as the Wagner group in neighbouring African countries have made governments and populations in the Sahel suspicious of RUS motivations. Its involvement in the natural resources arena currently will not cause huge financial gains due to its low financial investment. However, this low tech approach allows RUS to be in a country legitimately, to start to build on personal relationships and open the political dialogue. In much of the Sahel, RUS is viewed as a positive partner. With the growing



momentum in support of RUS activities, this could cause increasing anti-western/NATO sentiment. With the support of the African nations, RUS would hold a lot of power in future votes at the UN.

## VEO AND NSAG INVOLVEMENT IN NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE SAHEL

VEOs and NSAGs are often grouped under the umbrella of terrorists for ease. However it is important to understand the differences between the groups that are in play in the Sahel. As with the concept of 'terrorism', there is no universally agreed definition of terms for VEOs and NSAGs. Somewhat confusingly, the terms are often used interchangeably.<sup>11</sup> The diversity of what may constitute 'violent extremism' has, to some extent, been formed by the actions of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram, which use messages of hate and violence as well as religious, cultural and social intolerance.<sup>12</sup> NSAGs are generally defined as armed organizations operating outside the control of the state and willing and able to use force to achieve their objectives, though they may not have extremist goals.

Much of the focus of this chapter is on VEOs and NSAGs and the role they play in the extraction of natural resources, due to their significance in the Sahel.

Governance is a paradigm providing a lens through which the key elements for stability in the Sahel region can be viewed. Without good governance, there can be no security, no democracy, no human rights protection or any sustainable development. Without good governance many other issues, for example the empowerment of women, will remain elusive. Governance refers to the way in which power is distributed and shared, and how policies are prioritised, formulated and implemented. The term 'governance' is considered to be more all-encompassing in scope than 'government' as it also involves the role of state and non-state actors (the private sector, civil society organisations and transnational networks, NSAG and VEO controlled areas).

The Sahel is a region characterised by ease of movement between states. These "open" borders have always been problematic for centralized political authority. Governments of the Sahelian countries act and react in a context which includes other actors, both non-governmental (international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local civil society organisations and traditional hierarchies and authorities) and intergovernmental (regional and international organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies, development policy partners and so forth). Interventions aiming at reducing risks linked to migration and instability – a method commonly referred to by academics as "securitisation" – have demonstrated distorted impacts on local governance concerning mobility, demography and the effects of climate change.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ed: Lorenzo Bosi, Charles Demetriou and Stefan Malthaner *Dynamics of Political Violence: A process-oriented perspective on Radicalization and the Escalation of Political Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2014).

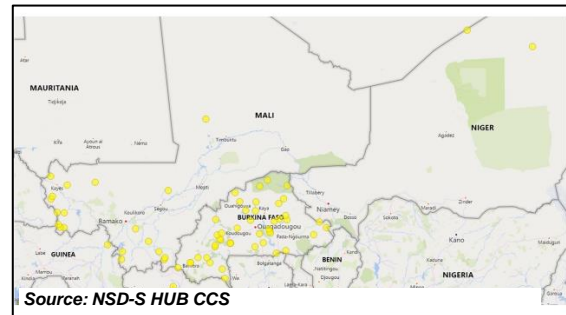
<sup>12</sup>Cooke, Jennifer, Johnson, Caleb, Sanderson Thomas "Militancy and the Arc of Instability: Violent Extremism in the Sahel" Centre for Strategic and International Studies, September 2016.

<sup>13</sup>Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel. The Road to Non governmentality* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015).

The model of governance which characterizes the Sahel is based on the personalisation of politics and a strong connection with traditional powers. Although this solution has historically granted a degree of stability, in the past 5 years it seems to be showing signs of strain. To comprehend the complex political dynamics which shape the Sahel area and its responses to local militias, NSAGs and VEOs, all the factors listed above need to be fully understood and taken into account.

Groups linked to Al Qaeda and Daesh are expanding in Africa and exploiting gold mines across the region. As many of the reports demonstrate; besides attacking industrial operations, VEOs are taking over the informal gold trade in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. These governments at times are struggling to mount an effective response.

Gold has long been a perfect commodity for insurgents. It retains its value, it is widely accepted as a substitution for currency in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia and, once refined, can easily be smelted and smuggled.



Informal mines are widespread in Sahel, and are hard for the government to clamp down on. One example is Burkina Faso. Government researchers visited more than 1,000 sites to carry out basic checks, and found that 800 were active. They discovered others not seen in the satellite imagery and looked in-depth at 64 more.<sup>14</sup> However, there were many they could not reach. Large parts of the north and east are out of control of the capital, prompting it to declare states of emergency in 14 of the country's 45 provinces. Burkina Faso's push to locate its small-scale mines found that just 25 had valid permits countrywide.

Informal mines in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger produce some 50 tonnes of gold, worth \$2 billion a year, according to estimates by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Of this, small-scale miners in Burkina Faso produce around 15-20 tonnes of gold a year, worth between \$720 million and \$960 million, according to government and OECD estimates.

Reports have shown that VEOs use the mines as both a hideout and a treasure trove of funds with which to recruit new members and buy arms and detonators to stage the attacks that extend their power, it has also been highlighted that dozens of robberies and kidnappings have been reported that target mining.

Taking Burkina Faso as an example, around 2,200 possible informal gold mines were identified in a government survey of satellite imagery in 2018. About half of them are within 25 km (16 miles) of places where militants have carried out attacks.<sup>15</sup> The militants' advance has traced a route from the north towards the south and the east of

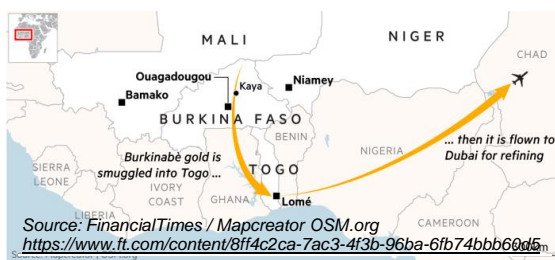
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalisation-violent-extremism.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-gold-africa-islamists-specialreport-idAFKBN1XW11C>

the country, according to the analysis, which mapped their movements and mining areas.<sup>16</sup> VEOs have occupied some of Burkina Faso's most profitable mines.

An accurate account of how much gold is produced or exactly who controls the mines is hard to quantify – many are in places where government forces are absent and VEOs are extremely active – but the sums involved are huge. Though the data is 3 years old, in 2018 the Burkina Faso government visited just 24 sites near where attacks had taken place and estimated they produced a total of 727 kg of gold per year.

When they control an area, VEOs set up a series of camps where, through various means, they encourage miners to dig in violation of government bans. As one individual reported “they fed the camp and bought and sold gold”.<sup>17</sup>



Portions of the goods that are illegally mined are smuggled out of the region, particularly through Togo, to avoid export taxes, according to the government. From there, it is flown to refineries before it is exported to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Switzerland and India, among others.

“Violent extremists have extended their areas of control and have enhanced their ability to generate income through gold – while state actors remain poorly positioned to do anything about it,” said William Linder, a former officer with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He went on to say: “Failure to fix this problem now will only deepen and help spread the Sahel crisis”. Government responses have been at times muted as they have lacked resources to enforce the prevention of illegal mining.

In Mali, the U.N. has reported that rebels tax the gold trade in the northern town of Kidal, and in Niger, government officials say VEOs are demanding a share of gold produced. In 2018, Burkina Faso recorded official exports of only around 300 kg of gold from small-scale mines – around 1.5% to 2% of the country's estimated production – indicating the scale of smuggling.

Security analysts attribute many of the attacks to Al Qaeda's regional affiliate and home-grown groups. In the east, Daesh in the Greater Sahara operates in forests that have long been a haven for bandits, smugglers and poachers.

In Burkina Faso, as elsewhere, insurgent groups are effective at exploiting local grievances to win people over. In a country with annual incomes of just \$660 per capita, according to the World Bank, government efforts to close mines– whether for conservation or to make way for big business – are unpopular.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cwtinstitute.org/copy-of-our-partners>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/news/article/2001352008/how-jihadists-struck-gold-in-africas-sahel>

<sup>18</sup> For more on the exploitation of local grievances please see the Hub report “ Drivers of Radicalization in the Sahel” <https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/drivers-of-religious-radicalisation-and-extremism-in-the-sahel>

“How many people in Burkina Faso can pay the school fees without artisanal mining?” said Moamoudou Rabo, head of a national union of gold miners. “Our economy is gold mining. There is nothing else.”

At one digging site, Ouargaye in the southeast, miners said VEOs arrived just as local police were demanding bribes from miners who lacked ID cards. The nine policemen were armed, said a miner who was there. Even so, the police sped away on motorbikes. “After that,” the miner recalled: “people said the gunmen were the real masters.”<sup>19</sup> Gold mining in the Sahel is largely informal. This has created roles for money launderers, smugglers and criminals. Unlike precious stones such as diamonds, traceability remains challenging. It is not as easy to chemically trace a particular piece of gold to a specific mine. Gold from all over the world gets melted together in refining centres, where most west African gold is shipped (often originating both legally and illegally in Sahel mines) before it heads to jewellers in the west, India and PRC.



Deposits of the precious metal are abundant in countries across Africa, especially the Sahel region. Like other natural resources, it can be a curse for local populations. A 2020 Financial Times article detailed how billions of dollars’ worth of gold is smuggled from Africa into the United Arab Emirates every year, skirting trade rules and depriving Sahel governments of much-needed tax revenue.<sup>20</sup> Traders in the region confirmed that much of the Sahel’s informally mined gold is indeed smuggled into Togo, and it is taxed at the

country’s lower rate, before being flown off, mostly in hand luggage. A 2021 OECD study put forward that over 20 tonnes of gold is smuggled into Togo from Burkina Faso each year.<sup>21</sup>

National and international public institutions and the private sector can play a key role in promoting initiatives on transparency, accountability and traceability in mining production at a regional level. Some initiatives are already being rolled out and would benefit from greater support from all stakeholders.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gold-africa-islamists-special-report-idUSKBN1XW11F>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/8ff4c2ca-7ac3-4f3b-96ba-6fb74bbb60d5>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/investment-policy/FAQ\\_Sourcing-Gold-from-ASM-Miners.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/investment-policy/FAQ_Sourcing-Gold-from-ASM-Miners.pdf)

## SWOT ANALYSIS: VEO AND NSAG INVOLVEMENT IN NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE SAHEL

### STRENGTHS

Across the Sahel, due to the size of many countries, there remain large spaces which are ungoverned. These ungoverned spaces are ideal for VEOs and NSAGs which have the freedom of movement to come and go as they please, in many areas establishing their own governance without competition from the legitimate ruling body for that country. This ability to move around and govern, at times unchallenged, means they are free to set up and conduct mining operations in many of the outlining areas where natural resources have been identified (mainly gold). Even if they meet resistance from the locals in that area, they are able to use coercive power to get what they want, which differs from the other actors involved.

### WEAKNESSES

As NSAGs and VEOs are not recognized as official state bodies, the selling/trading of the natural resources which are collected by them comes with its own dilemmas. To pass the commodities onwards there is a requirement for smugglers and organized crime to reach the black market. If caught by the state the product would be seized and, even if sold, the NSAG or VEO will not get full market value. Intertribal rivalry can lead to disruption and control of resource extraction.

### OPPORTUNITIES

Given the correct conditions, much of the out-lying lands where natural resources can be found offer opportunities for the NSAGs or VEOs to become the ruling body. Often the local communities are looking for governance, security and jobs, all of which the VEOs and NSAGs can provide through the working and funding of the local mines. Thus support and membership of the group grows, allowing for expansion. As expansion continues they could become a viable opponent to the governing body of that land. In addition, new laws and restrictions imposed by governments often do not align with local populations' culture and sow resentment in those populations.

### THREATS

The potential restrictions being discussed for the gold trade would hamper the ability to sell the resource internationally. ECOWAS is stepping up reform for anti-smuggling legislature, such as the Intergovernmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The growing number of laws tightening and restricting the use of cryptocurrencies in the region is also limiting avenues for payment.



## CHAD CASE STUDY

During our endeavour to understand regional perspectives in the Sahel, Chad was designated as a case study. It was chosen as it has a large selection of natural resources and there are multiple actors in competition for them, thereby representing the necessary qualities identified in our main study to understand insurgency and foreign competition regarding the extraction of natural resources.

The Hub spent 4 days on this fact finding mission, where opportunities to meet and converse with leading individuals in the field of natural resources and individuals from the local communities were presented.

### RUSSIA (RUS) AND CHAD

RUS has had a low profile in Chad until very recently. Though housing one of the biggest embassies in N'Djamena, their footprint has been quite small in regards to natural resource extraction. With the death of Chadian President Idriss Déby in late April 2021, seen as a close ally of Western governments, RUS has started to have a larger interest in Chad. 10 RUS were arrested on June 23 in resource rich northern Chad in a military operational zone. They claimed it was a misunderstanding and that they were tourists. On top of this the RUS government made the largest foreign economic commitment in recent years promising a billion dollars in late June of 2021 to help with economic development between RUS and Chad. This announcement, as of September 2021, has yet to bear any dividends, and it will be interesting to see if it will come to fruition.<sup>23</sup>

### LOCAL MILITIAS AND INSURGENTS

Discussions with companies and government officials said that the issue of control of resource extraction was problematic around the Lake Chad region and in Northern Chad on the border with Libya. It can be broken down into three different problems. Largely in the north, local communities such as the Tebu are controlling the natural resources. It has been alleged that illegal mining is taking place and then smuggled out of the country. The government, in some instances, is trying to engage with them and find a way to share the profits and resources. However, the armed groups on the border pass between Chad, Niger and Libya have been labelled as rebels and the military is trying to suppress them. This complicates who the government is trying to work with and who they view as insurgents, as the lines are often blurred. The Tebu in Northern Chad also run state-sanctioned gold mines in the Tibesti region. Gold mines provide the Tebu community with significant revenue. Wealth converted into weapons let the Tebu (re-)emerge as a significant player in Chad's balance of power. Porous borders, a Tebu community living on the Libyan side of the border (as well as in Niger) and Libya as a safe haven for Chadian insurgents have all complicated the matter.

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<sup>23</sup> Russia is currently surrounding Chad with proxy forces active to the North in Libya and South in CAR. The use of the Wagner group in CAR, to provide security to the mining operations, is one that could be easily exported to the gold mining regions of Chad.

As mentioned previously, in April 2021 President Idriss Déby was KIA fighting FACT<sup>24</sup> rebels north of N’ Djamena. Further conflicts between Tebu and Zaghawa (the latter the ethnic group of the Déby family) emerged from Idriss Déby’s decision to give gold mines, which were under control of the Tebu, to members of his family. In the aftermath, Chad has halved its international commitment with G-5 Sahel and brought troops home to aid with internal security.<sup>25</sup> This has also made international companies wary of operating in this region, meaning that the natural resources are not being extracted, or that if they are being extracted no realistic government control is being enforced. In the Lake Chad region “smash and grab” mining is taking place both by a percentage of the local population but also by insurgent groups such as Boko Haram. These are not long term operations, but the insurgent groups move into the area quickly, take resources and smuggle them out. Just like in the North, the Chadian response has been limited as these groups cross over borders of Nigeria and Niger quickly, and so far the G5 does not have an effective response to limiting these movements.

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<sup>24</sup> Ref. [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com); Libya-based rebel group that claimed responsibility for Deby’s death, known as Front for Change and Concord (FACT).

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_former-colonial-power-france-feels-loss-after-death-chads-president/6204859.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_former-colonial-power-france-feels-loss-after-death-chads-president/6204859.html)

## CONCLUSIONS

Countries such as RUS will continue to gain significant influence due to the current status in the Sahel. The poor economies of the Sahelian countries, combined with the lack of internally generated industry makes for an absence of alternative options in this region. Many Sahel countries could have an opportunity to develop, modernise and manage their own resources, however, because of unstable governments, corruption and faltering economies, in the mid- to long-term, actors identified will continue to gain influence in the region.

Following in-depth research and significant engagement with local stakeholders, several significant findings came to light.

**RUS's** approach to the Sahel is significantly different to other actors interested in the region. Working with a much smaller budget and physical footprint, they provide support in areas such as security and training. One similarity to other actors is that they, too, have a long-term strategy in which they plan to gain political influence, as they re-engage with Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Due to their perceived use of mercenary forces, many Sahelian community leaders who were consulted expressed concern about how RUS is operating in the region.

**NSAGs and VEOs** will almost certainly remain a constant destabilising force within the Sahel. A significant factor is illegal natural resource extraction, which provides wealth and influence in ungoverned spaces. An example of this is from our Chad case study where Tebu tribesmen, hostile to Chad's government, use illegally operated goldmines in northern Chad to buy small arms from Libya. Newly created organisations such as GIABA (Inter Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa) is beginning to limit the illegal exportation of natural resources from the Sahel.

As this study notes, many programs to support the legalization and formalization of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) are under way in the Sahel. They should be encouraged and harmonized as broadly as possible. The initiatives should be carried out in consultation with miners and should involve national and international private sector players to ensure that they are sustainable and financially profitable. It is also crucial that capacity-building and empowerment initiatives at production sites should be backed up by measures to regulate the financing of operations to extract, purchase and export gold.

Unless monitored and engaged with, natural resources in the Sahel (and Africa as a whole) will be controlled by non-state actors that may not have Africans' best interests at heart.

If left unchanged, the stability and security of this region will continue to deteriorate and the dependency on these foreign powers will likely increase.

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