



## **Building an Actionable Knowledge Base for Dealing with the Sahel Region and its Particular Challenges**

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### **Summary**

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There is a clear and urgent need of building comprehensive knowledge with view to the broad variety of challenges in the Sahel region that provides full situational awareness with regard to the given complex interdependencies. Particularly the constant changes and the unpredictability of the involved violent actors, groups and organisations require much more careful and specific analysis than in the past. In order to design, develop and implement strategies likely to fundamentally improve the situation, there is a need to understand the full scale of the problems including their origins, trace their development and identify their dynamics. Integrated, comprehensive strategies are needed. Sharing information and knowledge would provide for continuous situation awareness in order to gain a better understanding of the scope, scale and impact of changes on the overall situation. Within this process developing a knowledge base has become a particular relevant approach. Romano Prodi, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for the region, has proposed to establish a „*Sahel Development Research Institute*“ in order to support the bottom up planning process. This could be well a centrepiece of a Knowledge Base Mosaic that looks in a comprehensive fashion at the broad set of challenges given in the Sahel region.

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The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented and is above party politics.

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## ANALYSIS

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### 1. Repercussions

Over the recent years Europe has become increasingly focused on security in the Sahel – a vast strip of land abutting the southern Sahara desert from Mauritania on Africa’s west coast to Eritrea in the east, including some of the world’s poorest countries – particularly as the territory could become a new safe haven for extremist groups linked to al-Qaeda. Obviously, the risks and threats associated with geopolitical change, social and humanitarian challenges in the Sahel have repercussions for security and stability in the entire region and beyond.

For many years countries in the Sahel have been dealing with political and humanitarian crises. This has resulted in weak governance and weak state institutions that have been not capable to effectively deliver basic services such as policing, justice, access to water, affordable health care and education for their citizen. We can see widespread corruption, chronic political instability, and particularly challenging transnational activities, both criminal activities as well as activities of terrorist organizations and other militant groups. This situation has left the Sahelian countries increasingly vulnerable to insecurity.

On top of these challenges comes a disastrous humanitarian situation including a food crisis. According to United Nations estimates, more than 10 million people in the Sahel region will be affected by food insecurity in 2013 including 1.5 million children. The greatest humanitarian need is to be found in the fields of water and food supplies and the provision of accommodation and medical care. Due to the crisis in Mali, the number of displaced persons is currently estimated at about 430,000. More than 170,000 people have fled the conflict in northern Mali heading to the neighbouring countries of Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Algeria. According to estimates, there are now 260,000 internally displaced persons in Mali.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously the role of organized crime requires particular attention. There are very limited sources of income to the people in the region in clear contrast to the opportunities organized crime provides such as enormous profits, considerable military power and remarkable political influence. *“This particularly applies to three undertakings that have expanded significantly since around 2003 smuggling of Moroccan cannabis resin, cocaine smuggling, and kidnapping for ransom. ... Contraband trade in licit goods, which had developed across the region in previous decades, laid the institutional basis for the development of these high-profit developments.”*<sup>2</sup>

This situation adds to the challenges of donors. These have not performed too well in the recent years as they have focused on the military aspects of security and thus provided particularly for training and technical assistance of military forces in scene. They have at the same time underestimated the requirement for a broader, a comprehensive approach to security that would also focus on the obvious origins of organized crime, military power and political influence.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures as of 6 March 2013; updates available at <http://unocha.org/mali/>

<sup>2</sup> Wolfram Lacher. „Organized Crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region“. The Carnegie Papers. Middle East. September 2012. 4.



Exactly this requirement has stated the Secretary General of the United Nations in his report on the situation in the Sahel dated 14 June 2013 “... to bring about long-term change through a comprehensive strategy.”<sup>3</sup> There is a clear and urgent need of building comprehensive knowledge with view to the broad variety of challenges that provides full situational awareness with regard to the given complex interdependencies. In order to design, develop and implement strategies likely to fundamentally improve the situation, there is a need to understand the full scale of the problems including their origins, trace their development and identify their dynamics.

When I reflect upon the altering approaches to security within the four decades of my military career, the comprehensive approach to security has clearly become the most promising in order to build lasting stability. In most circumstances, no single agency, government or organization is able to act successfully without the support of the others. Continuously altering requirements and responsibilities and the need to cooperate closely with a plenitude of controlling authorities, involved organizations and even nations ask for synchronized, integrated solutions. Consequently, decision-making in NATO and the European Union recently has started building on actionable knowledge, derived from a holistic analysis of the challenges to be addressed.

## **2. Spill over from Mali**

The EU's strategic objective, as expressed in its Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, remains the promotion of stability, connecting security, development and governance through the integrated and coordinated use of all relevant EU instruments in order to address the root causes of insecurity, underdevelopment and conflicts at local, national and regional levels. The EU mission in Mali has become a very significant part of this comprehensive approach to restore the state's authority throughout Mali and brings a durable solution to the current crisis.

According to the most recent data made available by the World Bank, 77.1% of Malians lived under the international poverty line in 2006 (earning less than \$2 per day). It is among the world's poorest 25 countries.<sup>4</sup> Mali is cut into two with the emergence in the north of a base controlled by violent national and international terrorist groups and a fragile transition process under military threat in the south. Since fighting erupted in early 2012 in northern Mali, violence has forced approximately 500,000 Malians to flee their homes and further aggravated the food crisis that has affected more than 18 million people throughout the Sahel region in the past months. These crises have had a severe impact on the socio-economic situation of Mali. They also affect security and stability of its neighbours.

In the western Sahel, limited resources, institutional resistance, and little political will for security sector reform exacerbates the threat of a regional conflict, as French and African military forces push Mali's Islamist rebels into surrounding countries. Particularly Niger is at risk as it has a long history of violence with the same groups that destabilized Mali and has not reflected on security sector reform at all.

The barren, sand-swept mountains of the Adrar des Ifoghas along the borders of Algeria and Niger in the far north eastern corner of Mali are familiar terrain for the Tuareg. But, it presents a formidable challenge for

<sup>3</sup> Secretary General United Nations, Security Council. „Report of the Secretary General on the situation in the Sahel region“. S/2013/354. 14 June 2013. 4.

<sup>4</sup> respectively 2009 and 2010



French and Chadian military forces as they keep searching for the Islamist fighters that have been pushed out of Gao and Kidal. The vast and inhospitable region makes it difficult to find and pursue the rebels, while the porous borders with Algeria and Niger make it nearly impossible to contain their movements. As the rebels are slowly forced from their mountain camps and hideouts, they could flee to Algeria or Niger and bring their conflict to these countries more directly.

All these developments have a spill over effect on neighbouring countries and compromise lasting peace and development throughout the Sahel. The west and Mali's neighbours are afraid that the Islamists, who took over northern Mali, will use the country to destabilise the rest of West Africa, including neighbouring Niger, France's main source of uranium for its nuclear industry. Nigeria already faces a growing Islamist threat in Boko Haram.

The establishment of a terrorist zone, development of criminal economy, gross violations of human rights and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation are not only making the population increasingly vulnerable. The situation increases the threat to the safety of EU citizens in the Sahel via hostage-taking and attacks as well as in Europe, particularly through the influence of extremists and terrorists networks over the diasporas, training, and logistical support from Al Qaeda affiliates in the north of Mali. It also threatens the EU's strategic interests, including the security of energy supply and the fight against human and drugs trafficking.

### **3. Breeding ground for hybrid warriors?**

Michel Reveyrand de Menthon, the European Union's representative for the Sahel region, mentioned recently at a media conference in Dakar that the French-led military intervention launched against Al Qaeda-linked militant groups in January had not eliminated the danger. For now, the rebels have fled Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, but the concern is whether the government can exert lasting control and provide security as the Islamists, experienced and highly motivated desert fighters, resort to hit-and-run tactics.

De Menthon stated: *„There has been a considerable weakening of these groups with Operation Serval but it is clear that they have the capacity for very fast reconstruction which shows that the threat remains high,”*<sup>5</sup> to continue that suicide attacks in May claimed in part by the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa in which 20 people died proved that the threat remained ever-present. He also pointed out: *„The risk of terrorism and trafficking, particularly in drugs, is evolving in a vast space and with an ever-changing enemy. ... We have scored victories but we still have to act on the origins of (terror). The fight against terrorism requires many approaches. ... We need everyone to be aware of the danger of a fanaticism without limit.”*<sup>6</sup>

A key characteristic of the violent groups in the Sahel region is the fluidity of their leadership and organisational structures. Interpersonal relationships are holding these groups together. In the case of differences between individuals, the flexibility of the organisational structure suggests it is easy for a member who is in disagreement to withdraw and set up an own movement. Consequently, when it comes to resolving conflicts,

<sup>5</sup> New Straits Time. 21 June 2013. „Terror threat still high in Africa's Sahel: EU envoy“. <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/terror-threat-still-high-in-africa-s-sahel-eu-envoy-1.305011#ixzz2YFSao2l6> (accessed 8 July 2013).

<sup>6</sup> New Straits Time. 21 June 2013. „Terror threat still high in Africa's Sahel: EU envoy“. <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/terror-threat-still-high-in-africa-s-sahel-eu-envoy-1.305011#ixzz2YFSao2l6> (accessed 8 July 2013).



the multiplicity of movements, the fluidity of structures and the weak mandate held by leaders limits the capacity of negotiators to reach inclusive, effective peace agreements.

Particular complex is the mixed pursuit of the key actors political agenda with criminal activities. In Somalia, al-Shabaab derives a large part of its income from widespread extortion and commission on seizures affected by pirates. In Mauritania and Mali, the battalion led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar has largely financed its activities through cigarette, cocaine and weapons smuggling. In between, hostage taking has become the most lucrative activity, widespread among al-Shabaab, AQIM, MUJAO and Boko Haram.

Obviously, there is an urgent need for better knowledge, information sharing and comprehensive understanding. Particularly the constant changes and the unpredictability of the involved violent actors, groups and organisations require much more careful and specific analysis than in the past. This includes historical analysis going to the roots of conflicts and problems. The majority of violent organisations in the Sahel-Sahara have their roots in conflict pitting them against their country of origin. What is happening presently is that violent groups are signing up to a transnational terrorist network as a further stage in their movement's development and this development is likely to proceed dynamically unless sufficient thought and action is being applied.

In fact, nobody should be surprised, if this development would move in direction of the present rise of asymmetric threats, especially in evolving forms of hybrid warfare as we have seen in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Syria and as we could expect in a conflict with Iran. The Sahel as breeding ground for hybrid warriors – this could be an ultimate threat to security.

Hybrid warfare is a potent, complex variation of warfare that blends conventional, irregular and cyber warfare. It describes attacks by nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, improvised explosive devices and information warfare. Hybrid warfare is a potent, complex variation of warfare, a multi-modal form of fighting through systematic and synergetic incorporation of a wide-array of military and paramilitary concepts. More than simply adding irregular to regular military capabilities on the same battleground, hybrid warfare integrates them in a systematically designed context.

Since 2006 Lebanon War experience, military analysts have discovered the rise of hybrid threats. Clearly, Hezbollah has mastered the art of light infantry tactics against heavy mechanized forces. It even demonstrated its abilities to hit Israeli naval assets through, i.e. the *NS Hanit*, an advanced class corvette from coastal launchers. Likewise, during the Operation Cast Lead and the Operation Pillar of Defence in 2008 and in 2012 respectively, Gaza groups adopted a kind of hybrid warfare-type strategy. Currently, another hybrid warfare case, the Syrian Civil War, is on going. Furthermore, not only the armed opposition has been conducting hybrid concepts, but also the Baathist dictatorship has shaped its violent strategy by utilizing a wide-array of means ranging from indiscriminate shelling and air force bombardments in combination with Shabiha paramilitaries within operational integrity. The more non-state actors' access to game changer weapons increases, the more likely it is that hybrid conflicts will spread. Besides, weakening state capacity in several nations following the "Arab spring" would possibly augment this menacing development.



#### 4. Cui bono?

Who is profiting from the past development and who is losing? The answer to this question is sadly linked to the fate of the Tuareg. Where the Sahara desert is of ultimate inhospitality over a million Tuareg people spend their life. As within that very environment they can only survive in small groups, they have formed nomadic family associations. The families are belonging to clans. Their culture differs significantly from all neighbours. Vagrancy, light skin colour, a matrilineal family structure in which women choose their life partner, an own alphabet, veils for men – but not for women – constitute despite common commitment to Islam distinct differences.

In the decolonization of West Africa the focus was on the preservation of the economic structures. To this end the Tuareg had no importance. Consequently, their territory was divided among the states in Niger, Mali, Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso. For a long time the Tuareg were not too much concerned because nobody competed with them for their habitat. Only if people invaded – usually to exploit mineral resources – it came to armed conflict between Tuareg and government security forces and because of on going discrimination and political exclusion because of their nomadic lifestyle. This has led to repeated rebellions 1916/17, 1962/64, 1990/95 and 2007/09. It has also created a sense of disillusionment with the central governments, and a loyalty to tribal counterparts, which supersedes national considerations.

With the fall of Gaddafi the Tuareg – comprising a considerable part of the Islamic Legion – had to meet the challenge travelling approximately 2,000 km through the desert to their homes. Several Tuareg clans had to cooperate closely to ensure successful return. They took weapons and vehicles from the arsenals of the Libyan army, on the one hand to compensate for outstanding pay, on the other hand, to protect themselves against attacks on the way.

Upon arrival at their families they found remarkably deteriorated circumstances. One reason for this was the prolonged drought, which threatened to become a new famine throughout the Sahel. On top – without their salaries from the Gaddafi regime – there was no money available to buy tools and other industrial products for their families. The breeding of camels and goats usually covers only their own needs, while the traditional source of income – the transport of goods in caravans through the desert – on the one hand by globalized logistics on the other hand through the collection of taxes the increasingly assertive active African states gradually dried up. In this situation desert people without own urban settlements attempted to establish a nation-state. They ultimately failed – again.

Cui bono? All states with Tuareg minorities have in the future to expect less resistance from them. They can exploit their natural resources with fewer challenges. The biggest winner is Algeria state energy group Sonatrach:

- The safety of the gas pipeline from Nigeria to Algeria, to be operational by 2015, will certainly benefit from weakened Tuareg.
- Since 2006, oil deposits in the Taoudenni-Basins have been explored. The area is located in the deserted Azawad near the Mauritanian border. Sonatrach shares the Mali awarded mining rights with Italy's ENI.
- Also in the running for suspected gold, uranium and manganese deposits in north eastern Mali Algeria is expected to be in a frontrunner position.



The Saudi financiers of Ansar al-Dine—a group of local Ifoghas, Tuareg, Berabiche Arabs and other local ethnic groups who want Sharia law implemented everywhere in Mali and across the Muslim world – have increased their influence in West Africa. But also China hopes that the fall of the Touré regime provides the country with an improved access to raw materials.

Losers are the refugees who have fled from fighting. Loser is the Republic Mali, once considered as a democratic island of stability in a generally insecure region. Loser is the U.S. having invested annually a triple-digit millions of euros to support Mali as a stabilizer in West Africa. Biggest losers are the Tuareg. As they have not managed to strengthen their weak position, a large part of them unnoticed of the public and inaccessible for humanitarian aid is deemed to starve in the desert.

#### **4. Recommendations**

A flood of weapons and militants across the Sahel has fuelled the rise of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the aftermath of the 2011 Libya war. Keeping rebel groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) from regrouping and launching further attacks will be difficult without on-going western support. Mali's conflict will not end when France leaves. American drone policing, combined with ECOWAS efforts on the ground, will be helpful. Yet these efforts are unlikely to permanently "solve" the problem without dramatic reforms not just of the security sectors in western African nations, but even more with regard to enable them for better governance.

The intervention of the past months needs to become a longer-term engagement aiming at supporting stability and better governance throughout the region. A comprehensive approach should address humanitarian aid, development cooperation, the establishment of a credible political process, border security and organized crime. This requires both regional as particularly international cooperation – the states of the Sahel are clearly too weak to address their problems by themselves. In order to consolidate their development and security, they need international and particularly European assistance.

Integrated, comprehensive strategies need to be applied – in terms of a trans-border, regional approach on the one hand, and in terms of combining military, political and development cooperation on the other hand. In this context, the work of the EU Training Mission to Mali is particularly beneficial.

Particularly the region's porous borders necessitate that the Sahel states work together for example by consolidating existing border programs into a kind of "Sahel Border Security Initiative" in order to reduce costs and achieve greater efficiency. Such an initiative could involve all Sahel states, the EU and relevant organizations with experience in border control and counter-trafficking assistance activities, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the World Customs Organization, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee, and INTERPOL. It should also include the US and focus on training and implementation of adequate technologies in support of border control. Western border control agencies could provide expertise, training, and consultation.

Additionally the entry of drugs into West Africa should be countered by shifting some of the European Union's maritime forces deployed off the coast of Somalia to West African waters. The political framework for regional cooperation exists, through organizations such as ECOWAS. The African response to events in Mali demonstrates an encouraging willingness to confront regional crises in a collective African approach.



Such collective approaches could be further strengthened, if the distrust between key actors in the region – among those Mali, Mauritania and Algeria – could be overcome. Particularly Algeria should get its act together and take the lead. NATO's 'Building Integrity Programme' could be extended to the Sahel region, to reduce the risk of corruption in the security and defence sectors. After the demise of the regime of Amadou Toumani Touré there is now an opportunity to improve regional security cooperation.

Wolfram Lacher observed in his recent analysis on organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara region: *“Organized criminal activity escalated in northern Mali during a period when the country was a major recipient of foreign assistance from the United States, the European Union (EU), and individual EU member states. External security-related aid was heavily focused on counterterrorism and space capacity, with donors providing training and technical assistance. ... As the situation deteriorated, the EU began promoting a major push to expand the state’s administrative and security presence in northern Mali ... Like other donor assistance in the security domain, the plan was primarily designed to boost state capacity but neglected the fundamental political issue of state collusion with organized crime.”*<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the whole region needs greater co-ordination by international donors and financial institutions to find long-term development solutions and the promotion of economic development. International engagement should be used to provide for greater literacy at the elementary level, as a means by which to fight extremism on an ideological level. This is not just a case of allocating the aid, but also of helping governments to use it effectively. Obviously there is a broad scope for action. Western governments should seize the opportunity by supporting regional initiatives to improve cooperation, rather than try to play a leading role themselves. Both, EU and NATO could have a key role. Support could build on the practical and logistical support already provided by the EU in Mali, as well as the EU military mission for the training of the Malian military, to encourage region-wide engagement with issues concerning national and international security. Organizations, such as the OSCE/ODIHR, should aim at increasing their ability to consult and train the respective governments.

The UN approach to bring about long-term change via a comprehensive strategy rings well in my ears and reminds me that building actionable knowledge is at the very core of NATO’s “Comprehensive Approach to Security” that Heads of State and Government endorsed at the 2008 Bucharest Summit and that is clearly guiding security policy in NATO and EU.

Knowledge Development is at the very core of the “Comprehensive Approach”. Sharing information and knowledge provides for continuous situation awareness in order to gain a better understanding of the scope, scale and impact of changes on the overall situation. Within this process developing a knowledge base has become a particular relevant approach in which systems in the operations environment are analysed, knowledge about the different political, military, economic, social, infrastructure and information domains of the respective environment need to be developed in order to understand the behaviour and capabilities of key actors and their interaction and to make informed decisions. This kind of systems analysis also needs to be applied to the Sahel region – a continuous, iterative and collaborative process, conducted in close co-operation with internal/external think tanks, experts, (GOs, NGOs) as required.

Valid processes and information often already exist within given support decision-making structures. The

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfram Lacher. „Organized Crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region“. The Carnegie Papers. Middle East. September 2012. 17-18.





problem is that this “information” or isolated knowledge often resides in the heads and offices of subject matter experts across and external to the organisation. It is not fused, deconflicted, or shared, at least not in a well-established manner nor is it often available in an electronically retrievable format. Therefore, there is a need to “connect” or fuse existing information, and the processes that are used to develop it, so that the decision-maker is presented with a clear holistic understanding, as early as possible in the decision making process.

The challenge is to make the relevant information available in a form that can be analysed and distributed in near real time and to develop a level of shared understanding that supports timely and effective decision-making. Consequently two parts to any knowledge development solution are:

- The adaptation of processes and staff structures to break down traditional barriers and stovepipe organisations.
- Technical solutions that support a collaborative exchange and ease of access of information.

Once knowledge has been developed it must be “transferred” to decision makers and users in a timely manner. This will require tools and procedures to either ‘push’ knowledge to the user, or allow the user to ‘pull’ knowledge depending on the situation and operational requirement to ensure appropriate knowledge transfer. Knowledge development needs to be underpinned by Information Management, as it is critical to making knowledge accessible and to share knowledge across those involved in comprehensive action and decision-making. Knowledge development relies on both human expertise and the exploitation of information technology to enhance common situation awareness and understanding. It concentrates on collaboration and sharing of information to provide a common understanding of a complex situation respectively environment. It envisages one pool into which different staffs “dip” as required to suit their information and intelligence requirements.

In looking at the already existing and envisaged cooperation and analysis in the Sahel region the importance of building a valid knowledge base appears to me as a striking requirement. Romano Prodi, the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy for the region, has proposed to establish a „*Sahel Development Research Institute*“ in order to support the bottom up planning process. This could be well a centrepiece of a Knowledge Base Mosaic that looks in a comprehensive fashion at the broad set of challenges given in the Sahel region. Other national and international institutes could and should share their respective information and knowledge. The intelligence part of the knowledge base, has been created already in 2010 with the UFL – Unité de Fusion et de Liaison – in order to facilitate the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. Participating countries are Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad.

The UN Secretary General states in his observations and recommendations of his report: „*The security environment in the Sahel remains fragile. The threat of terrorism, trafficking and organized crime requires a comprehensive response. Our collective focus needs to be simultaneously on security, diplomacy and development, taking sub regional and regional threats and opportunities into consideration, including relations with West Africa and the Maghreb. Business as usual is not an option.*”<sup>8</sup>

To me clearly the development of an actionable knowledge base for the Sahel region has the potential to sig-

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<sup>8</sup> Secretary General United Nations. Security Council. „Report of the Secretary General on the situation in the Sahel region“. S/2013/354, 14 June 2013. 11.



nificantly contribute to improving the status quo.

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#### Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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