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# Rethinking security across the Sahara and the Sahel

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»» There has been a marked intensification of conflict across the Sahara and the Sahel. This has created a new normal, where ethnic tensions are reinforced, religious divisions are more pronounced and crises are less local. The current conflicts in Mali, Libya, and Nigeria – for example – show this, having been deeply shaped by a cross-section of Saharan radicalised militants that mix with transnational smuggling networks and independence movements. To be sure, the old normal was also marred by terrorism and other forms of political violence, border disputes, and occasional acts of banditry. But the nature of conflicts in the Sahel and the Sahara has changed, and the patterns of violence have become more complex. The sources of crises have also become more mobile, acquiring a cross-border dimension that requires regional solutions. So far, bilateral, regional, and international responses have been numerous, but largely contradictory and short-sighted.

The good news is that regional and international actors are increasingly aware that any effective response framework needs to be well-coordinated, and adapted to the geographic and organisational interdependence of networks and populations across the Sahel-Sahara zones. The bad news, however, is that it has been very difficult to design and implement a coordinated security and development strategy that transcends the narrow confines of counter-terrorism, international institutional rivalries, and regional inter-state rivalries.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The nature of conflicts across the Sahel and the Sahara has changed: the patterns of violence increasingly cross borders, while reinforcing pre-existing political, ethnic and religious tensions.
- The growing mobility of conflicts means that there is a real prospect of deeper links between regional militant groups, such as Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.
- International actors have produced a plethora of Sahel strategies, but to fully tackle the new insecurity, they should work much more closely with regional institutions.

»»»»» **FOUR PHASES OF CONFLICT**

The Saharan-Sahelian space has witnessed four phases of conflict escalation and violence. Each stage has its own distinct characteristics regarding intensity of conflict, alongside the tactics employed and strategies pursued by various actors. The post-colonial phase (1960-75) was the period of least intense conflict. The main disturbances came from the three-week 'war of sands' between Morocco and Algeria (1963), the aborted Tuareg rebellion (1963-64) in Mali and the successful military coups in Libya (1969), Mali (1968), and Niger (1974). The long drought (1969-73) that struck the countries on the southern border of the Sahara (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, and Chad) also had severe dislocating effects on both nomadic groups and agro-pastoralists, especially the Moors, Arabs, Toubous, Tuaregs and Peuls. Some of these populations, especially Tuareg, fled to Algeria while others sought exile in Libya. But none of these internal disturbances seriously undermined the stability of the post-colonial system, though their side effects would be felt in subsequent phases of conflict.

The second conflict phase (1975-90) was more intense and destabilising. The Western Sahara dispute exploded into a full blown zero-sum regional confrontation between Morocco, Algeria, the Polisario Front (a Sahrawi independence movement founded in 1973 and based in Algeria), and Mauritania. The first casualty of the conflict was Mauritania, which saw its heavy war losses lead to a military coup in 1978 and the withdrawal of all Mauritanian claims to Western Sahara. Mauritania's exit left Morocco battling the Algerian-backed guerrilla Polisario Front until the ceasefire of 1991. Since its inception, the conflict has never managed to break loose from geopolitical rivalry between Morocco and Algeria. The second phase also saw some other low-intensity border disputes between Burkina Faso and Mali (1985-86), Nigeria and Chad (1987), and Libya and Chad (1973-87).

The third phase (1990-2003) began with the entry into hibernation of the Western Sahara

dispute, and the settlement of the Libyan and Chadian conflict by the International Court of Justice in 1994. But it is the intensely violent conflicts that erupted in Algeria, Mali, and Niger that mark this period. The bloody Algerian civil war (1991-98) was provoked by the army, which aborted the Islamists' then emerging dominance of the electoral process on 11 January 1992 (prior to that the Islamists had won municipal elections and the first round of parliamentary elections). The second Tuareg rebellion, which started in Niger before spilling over into Mali (1990-95), coincided with turbulent political developments and the military overthrow of Mali's Traore government in 1991. These rebellions were contained through a series of tenuous agreements, brokered by Algeria.

The last and most turbulent phase (2003-present) marked the official debut of terror groups and criminal organisations in the Saharan desert. The spectacular 2003 kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists travelling across the Algerian desert and their transfer to Mali where they were ransomed for €5 million by an Algerian terror group, later renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), became the trade mark activity for violent extremists and jihadist gangsters to finance their operations. This period was also characterised by volatile politics and military coups in Mauritania (2005 and 2008), Niger (2010), Mali (2012), and Burkina Faso (2014). The Arab revolts of 2011 also had dreadful destabilising consequences on some parts of the Sahel-Sahara region. The popular protests and armed uprising in Libya quickly decayed into fratricidal chaos, destabilising its fragile southern neighbours and contributing directly to the 2012 collapse of order in Mali.

**RECURRENT TURNOVERS OF POWER**

Most countries across the Sahel and the Sahara strode into the new millennium burdened with the baggage of semi-democratic politics, ethnic divisions, and ingrained socio-economic inequalities. The mechanics of this legacy still hangs over the

region. Democratic transitions have been messy, often punctuated by coups, protests, and rebellions. In Niger (2009) and Burkina Faso (2014), elected leaders were ousted after trying to bulldoze constitutional amendments through parliaments that would eliminate their term limits. Mauritania saw its brief democratic experiment upended by a coup in 2008, only one year after the military was pressured to relinquish control to civilian rule. Only Senegal has never experienced a coup – a feat rarely equalled in a region prone to military interventions – and managed to have a peaceful transition of power. The 2011 mobilisation of the opposition in Senegal forced the then 85-year-old

president, Abdoulaye Wade, to back off plans for a constitutional change to prolong his tenure for another (third) term.

There are many factors that explain the recurrent turnover of power across the Sahel. Prior to the 1990s, political transformations were usually triggered by conflict, stagnating socio-economic development, and

foreign interference. In the 1990s, other variables gained in importance. Popular mobilisation against rigid austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sparked a wave of protests between the mid-1980s and early 1990s that hustled in a new era of political transformations in Mali, Niger, and Senegal. But the failure of this round of political transformation to temper mass demands for less corruption and more economic and social justice paved the way for another wave of rebellions, popular protests and militancy in the new millennium.

The outbreak of Tuareg insurrections in the 1990s and 2000s across the Sahel-Sahara was precipitated by both endogenous and exogenous factors. The

underlying factors for the eruption of violence were group-based discrimination and region specific neglect. The post-independence Saharan states promoted agriculture and sedentism at the expense of Tuareg pastoral nomadism. This feeling of identity-based discrimination was exacerbated by the states' neglect of their Saharan hinterlands. The short-term drivers of the rebellions, however, were regional in nature. Libya's war losses in Chad, the contraction of oil prices in the 1980s, and international economic sanctions led Gaddafi to order the decommissioning of thousands of Tuareg from the armed forces. Thousands of Tuareg were also expelled from Algeria, which suffered a serious economic downturn in the 1980s. The return of legions of well-trained Tuaregs was one the main catalysts for the 1990s rebellions in Niger and Mali.

A couple of decades later, exogenous shocks from Libya brought terrible consequences to Mali. History does not repeat itself, but, as Mark Twain noted, it sometimes rhymes. The 2011 fall of Gaddafi in Libya triggered a disorderly chain of events combining societal imbalances and shifting ethnic fault lines in northern Mali. Deprived of their historical patron, thousands of Nigerien and Malian Tuareg tribesmen returned home with vehicles, weapons and military expertise, unsettling the prevailing status quo and upsetting the power relations among and within ethnic and tribal groups.

But unlike previous episodes, these events did not have the same destabilising effect on Niger as on Mali. Niger largely escaped the devastating opportunist assaults by Tuaregs and associated radical Islamists that chased the Malian army and sank its massive northern territory into chaos. The different impact is partly due to the Nigerien government's pro-active and aggressive approach to monitoring its borders with Libya, disarming ex-combatants and reintegrating the 90,000 Nigerien migrants forced to return home. The Nigerien armed forces also never left the country's northern territory, unlike the Malians who were bound by the 2006 Algiers agreement with Tuareg rebels to withdraw the bulk of government forces from the north.

## The prospect of cross-fertilisation between Boko Haram, AQIM and other regional militant organisations is a nightmare scenario

»»»»» Other factors are attributable to the relative success of the government in Niger in managing the Tuareg question, such as integrating an appreciable number into the civil service, government and armed forces. Decentralisation, for example, has allowed a good number of former rebel leaders and dissident voices to head local and regional councils. The north-south divide that is a central feature of the Malian crisis is also less pronounced in Niger, where the Tuaregs are more dispersed nationally than in Mali. This does not mean that the chaos in Libya and persistent instability in Mali and northern Nigeria is not affecting Niger. The 2013 twin terrorist attacks on Agadez and Arlit are believed to have been hatched in southern Libya. Southwest Niger is especially vulnerable to penetration by jihadist groups operating in Mali. The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), present in the Gao region that borders Niger, draws part of its recruits from black Songhais and Peuls in the Niger valley, some of whom are Nigeriens.

Similar danger stems from the Nigerian violent extremist group, Boko Haram, which uses the countries on the edge of northeastern Nigeria as both recruitment grounds and fall-back bases. In February 2015, Boko Haram – which is currently battling Nigerian security forces – widened the fight to strike across the border into Niger and Chad. Earlier, it retaliated against Cameroon for entering the war against it. As the group expands its operations, its exact nature and composition is becoming harder to discern. Some Boko Haram fighters are known to have received training from regional militant groups, including AQIM, but the group remains very localised and focused on domestic issues. Grievance and resentment politics against government corruption, poor governance and the brutality of security services resonates in Nigeria's restive northeastern Borno state, and are the driving force behind Boko Haram's endurance. But like other insurgent groups in the Sahel, Boko Haram has become a magnet not only for angry and disillusioned young men in the marginalised Muslim northeast, but also for criminals, gangsters, and opportunists.

## **THE SPREAD OF CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT**

The links between violent political insurgencies and crime are not new. For example, during the 1990s Algerian civil war, the Islamist insurgency ended up dabbling in transnational trafficking and Mafia-style organised crime. Another troublesome characteristic of that insurgency was its expansion beyond its borders. The settlement of Algerian terrorists in northern Mali helped embroil the region into a tangled web of militancy, extremism and criminality. Similar worries exist today about the increasing reach of Boko Haram across northern Nigeria and into neighbouring countries. Unchecked militancy runs the risk of not only fuelling Muslim-Christian discord in Nigeria, but also in Chad, where all its recent civil wars have been exacerbated by religious tensions. It also raises the spectre of growing links between different conflicts across the vast Sahara and Sahel regions.

The prospect of cross-fertilisation between Boko Haram, AQIM and other regional militant organisations is a nightmare scenario. AQIM and MUJAO already draw their membership from a cross-section of Saharan countries. Cross-border mobility is a fixture of conflicts in the Sahara and Sahel and looks set to increase. When Boko Haram lost its leader in 2009 and was under siege from Nigerian security forces, its leaderships regrouped in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Ethnic and tribal affiliations often transcend national frontiers, for example along the Algerian-Malian borders. The leading actors in the terrorist group MUJAO, for instance, hail from the Lamhar tribe, an influential Arab group based in Gao but that also has tribal and business ties in southern Algeria. The same applies to the so-called Arab Mauritians who operate within MUJAO or AQIM. Many are connected to tribes that are scattered throughout Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali.

Whether forced out – like the Algerian militants in the late 1990s – or drawn by new opportunities, the militants who roam the Sahara desert are faced

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with few hurdles. Political inter-connections and illicit interactions are unconstrained by the jurisdictional barriers instituted by the individual sovereign states (based on territorial locations crafted by colonial powers). The routes used by militants and traffickers have been traversed by nomads for centuries. The only major change concerns the leap from the camel to the pickup truck.

Containing the geographical scope of instability across the Sahara and the Sahel is difficult, since the growing links between conflicts and the fluidity of alliances between non-state actors in those conflicts make the regional space both cluttered and permeable. For example, both the aggrieved nomadic Toubu tribes of the Sahara (in southern Libya, northern Chad and north-eastern Niger) and the Tuareg irredentists in Mali (and their sustained social networks in southern Algeria and other countries of North-west Africa) bring a regional dimension to local problems. Countries of the region and the international community recognise this interconnected nature of the threat and have responded with a plethora of regional strategies.

The African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU) have all adopted Sahel-specific strategies designed to tackle the causes of insecurity in the region. The World Bank and the African Development Bank (AfDB) have also joined the fray. Unfortunately, the lack of harmonisation of these multiple initiatives leads to a duplication of efforts and resource dispersal. The coordination mechanisms that exist have only a limited degree of interaction and possess weak monitoring systems. Another major reason why these initiatives have so far met with only limited success is attributed to their narrow counter-terrorism focus. The efficacy of counter-terrorism programmes in building the capacity of Sahelian states to 'find, fix and finish' terrorist groups, and protect their borders against illicit smuggling of arms and drugs, is undermined by the lack of focus on non-military solutions that

prop up democratic governance, fight public corruption, and tackle social inequality.

Mali is a textbook case study of the failure of Western governments and international donors to correctly diagnose the sources of Sahelian state fragility. Before the 2012 crisis, international actors were all too eager to dispense economic and military aid to Mali, while ignoring how state corruption and nepotism were eroding state authority and exacerbating socio-political tensions in the north. Focusing on building the security capacity of such a government only compounds state fragility (see also FRIDE working paper number 126 – *Fragile States: an urgent challenge for EU foreign policy*).

## CONCLUSION

The major challenge for international actors is to connect their plethora of initiatives designed to address security and development challenges across the Sahara and the Sahel. There is growing recognition of the multidimensional nature of threats, and regional interdependence of political networks and ethnic populations. But the efforts of different actors (local, regional and international) show little coherence and almost no consensus on regional approaches to intervention – which should also be tailored to the different local contexts. Each regional strategy fits its sponsor's political priorities and strategic purposes. Algeria, for example, supports initiatives that it can dominate and that especially marginalise its arch-rival Morocco. This undermines the effectiveness of multilateral initiatives like the AU's Nouakchott Process – a regional platform established in 2013 to promote security cooperation – because it forces Morocco to seek and promote other alternatives (Morocco is not a member of the AU).

In turn, Morocco has shown its determination to protect its geopolitical interests by resurrecting the Tripoli Process in 2013, a border cooperation initiative, and revitalising the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), which covers



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»»»»» over half of Africa's countries – except Algeria. The Sahel G5, launched in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger seeks to circumvent these limitations by not formally including Algeria and Morocco. The problem, however, with this increasingly cluttered inter-governmental setting is that it risks undermining other multilateral processes and institutions like ECOWAS.

Even so, the EU and its international partners should encourage local and regional ownership by propping up these fragile home-grown initiatives, whose implementation relies on external funds and technical support. Already, a number of EU and UN strategies are implemented in concert with the AU and ECOWAS. Another example of synergies that deserve support is the recent proposal by the AfDB to establish and manage 'action funds for the Sahel' that would pool donor contributions together. A coordinated international approach that skilfully uses the comparative advantage of each regional institution would greatly help tackle rising insecurity across the Sahara and the Sahel.

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