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# MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EAST SPECIAL GROUP (GSM)

## DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE SAHEL REGION

Report

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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. Despite significant local and international efforts to stabilise the Sahel region, which stretches from Mauritania to Sudan and is home to 150 million people, the security situation there is deteriorating. Insecurity has spread across porous borders with dramatic repercussions for the region's inhabitants. Conflict, in turn, is further impoverishing a region already burdened with endemic poverty, inequality and social and political exclusion. The conflict has also triggered a massive IDP and refugee crisis with thousands seeking sanctuary in neighbouring countries or further afield in the Maghreb and Europe.

2. This report will focus primarily on the central Sahel which confronts the most compelling security challenges in this vast region. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and especially the borderlands of these three countries, or the so-called Liptako-Gourma triangle, are particularly vulnerable. There is significant military activity in this zone, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and other non-state armed groups have intensified their activities there.

3. These conflicts have spread to neighbouring countries. The security challenges in the Sahel and the irregular migration flows resulting from them have had serious political, social, and economic consequences for North African and European countries. Indeed, these migration flows from the region have emerged as a particularly important matter in Europe and have provided fodder for populist anti-migration parties and movements both in Europe and beyond. The matter has placed European governments and institutions under enormous pressure and has driven policy change in a number of countries. The security situation in the Sahel region has thus emerged as a critical security challenge for the broader region. NATO is monitoring the situation closely while many of its member governments are engaged in a number of diplomatic and security efforts to support the region and those seeking to stabilise it.

4. The challenges in the Sahel are complex and multi-faceted. A perturbing colonial legacy, persistent economic instability, extreme poverty, climate change, drought and desertification, a population growth without education perspectives, youth unemployment, problems of political and social fragility, mounting terrorist threats and now a global pandemic constitute what might sadly be described as a perfect storm in which insecurity and poverty become mutually reinforcing.

5. Moreover, the difficult situation in the Sahel has also been shaped by political, social, and economic developments in North Africa and terrorist organisations fed by the instability and proxy wars in the Middle East more broadly. A consequential shift occurred in the Sahel region in 2012 when a Tuareg-dominated separatist armed group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), fuelled by the return from Libya of several thousand fighters, almost entirely occupied northern Mali and declared Gao the capital of their self-declared state. In response to violence perpetrated by the Tuareg militia and its allies, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), linked to Al Qaeda, emerged. MUJAO cleverly exploited both the aspirations and anxieties of the local population while drawing support from powerful criminal organisations operating in the region. MUJAO attracted substantial numbers of recruits from central and northern Mali and Niger, including the Fulani community's self-defence militias. MUJAO expelled MNLA fighters from Gao in July 2012 allowing it to extend its influence along the length of the Malian belt of the central Sahel. Only the French military operation Serval, launched in January 2013 at the request of Malian authorities, managed to stop MUJAO's advance toward Bamako.

6. That military operation, however, did not address underlying fragility which, in many ways, has only grown more. Insecurity has spread to neighbouring countries. Today, several armed movements linked to Al Qaeda and Daesh are operating throughout the Central Sahel. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have undergone repeated terrorist attacks which have targeted security forces as well as NGOs,

private sector actors and civilians. Mounting terrorist attacks, inter-community tensions and highway banditry suggest that to varying degrees and in selected regions, Sahelian authorities have begun to lose control of the security situation. This has aggravated conditions for a vulnerable population already marginalised by extreme poverty, demographic change and mounting climatic hazards. The arc of instability has only widened and now includes West African countries along the Gulf of Guinea littoral. Attacks against civilians, armed forces, foreigners, and workers climb. From November 2018 to March 2019, civilian fatalities rose by 7,000% in Burkina Faso, 500% in Niger and 300% in Mali. Partly as a result of this instability, the region counts half a million internally displaced people, while 1.8 million face food insecurity and another 5.1 million require humanitarian assistance (ACLED, 2019).

7. A number of international initiatives have sought to stabilise the situation. Some focus on the military dimension of the fight against violent extremist groups, while others concentrate more on the development-security nexus. The concerned members of the European Union and other partner countries in the region have invested significant resources to help the region cope with the sources of instability and irregular migration. Their policies are informed by the notion that these conflicts are at least partly rooted in deep socio-economic and developmental challenges that must be systematically addressed in order to spare the Sahel from further violence and anarchy.

## **II. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES**

### **A. POOR ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND BAD GOVERNANCE**

8. To varying degrees, the states of the Sahel exist in a state of fragility and generally occupy the lower end of international indexes ranking stability and development (Fund for Peace, 2018). 40% of the population lives below the poverty line and the region's level of development is among the world's lowest. The Sahel states are also amongst those countries with the highest employment rates in the agricultural sector, with Chad at the highest level (87%). Climate change in this arid region poses a particularly acute set of economic and humanitarian challenges. More than 90% of the workforce is employed in the informal sector and this leaves these workers and their families highly vulnerable to climatic or man-made shocks. Populations living in remote, marginalised areas like the Liptako-Gourma triangle suffer from notably harsh social and economic inequalities that stoke a pervasive sense of grievance. Tens of millions of pastoral farmers and nomads of the Sahel are particularly affected by the inequalities in access to basic services.

9. Weaknesses in the core structures of Sahelian states as well as the vast arid areas for which they are responsible have led to a practice of outsourcing what are normally fundamental state functions (management of the economy, service provision, security). An array of non-governmental actors including local chiefs, traditional tribal leaders and organisations, and even international aid groups are often asked for filling roles that normally states would carry out. This adds on governance in the Sahel with a set of unique features. There is, for example, a constant and in some cases structural interaction between national bureaucracies and international aid donors, consultants, experts, auditors, and advisers. These unique interactions can eradicate more common distinction between domestic and foreign political actors (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI, 2019).

10. Corruption poses another serious developmental and security challenge. It is pervasive and erodes public trust in state institutions and raises fundamental concerns about the issue of legitimacy. Discontent with state institutions is one of the central sources of the region's negative political developments. The World Bank's governance indicators rank all five countries of the Western Sahel among the World's lower third for government effectiveness. That said, Niger's efforts against

corruption deserve further attention and appreciation. Following the creation of the anti-corruption agency HALCIA in 2011 and with the passing of important legislation afterwards, Niger has made significant headway in improving governance and strengthening its anti-corruption framework (IMF, 2019).

11. Although conditions in the region are extremely challenging, there is a potential for growth. More concerted efforts to reinforce the private sector and direct investments, however, will be essential. The state sector alone will never be sufficient to galvanise the region's economies. Its primary function will be to create conditions needed to foster both domestic and foreign investments.

## **B. CLIMATE CHANGE AND RESOURCE SCARCITY**

12. The management and use of natural resources in the Sahel are closely linked to matters related to intra-regional mobility. The overwhelming majority of those living in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso subsist through agriculture and pastoralism. These activities are obviously highly dependent on climatic and seasonal factors: in the rainy season, flooding makes it essential to herd livestock to dry areas, while rice growing takes place in flooded areas. In the dry season, once farmers have harvested their rice crops, the livestock is returned from northern deserts to the grass fields of the south. Climate change and conflict, however, have begun to alter the traditional movement of people and livestock, and this has injected enormous uncertainty into the lives of those dependent on these traditional patterns.

13. The lack of access to sufficient amount of water for irrigation, poor soil, drought and irregular rainfall as well as limited employment in the rural areas have undermined pastoral and farming economies and have instead become catalysts for mass migration (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI, 2019). Competition for access to water and land has also long fomented tensions between vulnerable communities in the region. In recent years, desertification and resource scarcity engendered by climate change as well as demographic pressure and poor governance have exacerbated these tensions and undermined the fragile links between communities and their environment. This increasingly results in violent clashes that undermine regional security and stability. These conflicts, in turn, serve the interest of violent extremist groups that fit these events into their nefarious narratives, thereby generating new opportunities to exploit dissatisfaction and economic hardship in order to recruit new members and to justify violence.

## **C. DEMOGRAPHY AND YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT**

14. The population of the five Sahel countries (Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania) is likely to increase from 135 million in 2015 to 330 million in 2050 if current birth rates continue. The average fertility rate is 5 children per woman, and this rises to 7 children in Niger. The median age in the Sahel region is 16 years old. By comparison, in 2020 the median age is 19.7 years old in Africa, 30 years old in Turkey, 38.6 years old in Northern America and 42.5 years old in Europe (United Nations, n.d.). Children under 15 years old are considered a dependant sector of the population. That this demographic group outnumbers the working age population makes it extraordinarily difficult to improve economic and social conditions and it points to a longer-term employment problem.

15. Although young people represent the largest segment of the population in all Sahel countries, their social status and economic opportunities are limited. Precarious living conditions and social marginalisation mean that young unemployed men are effectively prevented from marrying and acquiring a modicum of social status. This kind of marginalisation is fundamentally destabilising, and experts foresee a demographic "time bomb" if means are not found to engage young people in the political and economic life of their respective countries (Foundation for European Progressive

Studies and IAI, 2019). In its current form, the Sahel's labour market is simply unable to absorb the new workers. This excess labour force has little choice but to seek informal employment in urban areas, to engage in subsistence agriculture or to migrate. Those working in such precarious conditions are particularly vulnerable and violent extremist groups often use the bait of easy money to entice a deprived and alienated younger generation. A population younger than 30 years of age lacking education, social status and economic opportunities has thus become an important element of political instability in the region.

#### **D. IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND ORGANISED CRIME**

16. Irregular migration from Sahel countries is a key concern in European countries and beyond. Development projects of European and other partner countries in the Sahel, in part, aim to provide young people employment opportunities that will encourage them to remain in their own countries. Shocking images of irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, which has become one of the world's most dangerous borders, and well-publicised cases of horrific abuses in Libya, have shaped European perspectives on the regional crisis. Economic difficulties in parts of Europe have also generated a more general backlash against migrants.

17. It is important to note, however, that the number of arrivals has fallen significantly since 2016, although more than 160,000 people have reached Europe through Mediterranean routes annually since then (European Council on Foreign Relations). This represents 0.032% of the European Union's total population of more than 500 million people. As a comparison, the number of refugees per 1,000 inhabitants at the end of 2018 stood at approximately 156 in Lebanon, 72 in Jordan, 45 in Turkey and 6 in the European Union (UNHCR / Global Trends 2018). The dramatic humanitarian situation of the migrants, the lack of coordination and solidarity among the EU member states to control the situation as well as the very unbalanced sharing of the burden in processing and caring for those migrants are all part of the greater problem. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that 34,226 migrants and refugees had entered Europe by sea between January and June 2019, a figure which represents a decrease of 34% from the same period in 2018. Arrivals of migrants and refugees to Spain and Greece in 2019, however, were each well over 10,000, accounting for almost 83% of the total arrivals, with the balance arriving in much smaller numbers to Italy, Malta, and Cyprus (IOM).

18. The irregular migration routes through arid Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Libya are highly dangerous. Those making the journey risk falling victim to criminal groups and face dangerous conditions in the desert and, if taken, during the Mediterranean crossing. Over 70% of the migrants interviewed by IOM on their arrival in Italy report that traffickers had exploited them during their journey along the Central Mediterranean routes (Migration Joint Initiative, n.d.).

19. It is important to distinguish between legal migration and irregular migration. Trans-Saharan migration is an age-old phenomenon reflecting an historically interlinked regional economy that has never easily respected national borders. Indeed, the Sahel's post-colonial boundaries were not drawn up with social, economic, and ethnic cohesion in mind. Clans and ethnic groups were arbitrarily divided in processes over which they had no control. In this sense, migration became a natural coping strategy allowing both pastoral and sedentary communities to deal with the region's climate challenges: variation in rainfall, cyclical drought as well as other climate change related matters like growing desertification and diminishing water supplies. The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods legitimises this phenomenon and endows it with a legal foundation. That Protocol conferred to citizens of the signatory countries the right to enter and reside in the territory of any member state. One implication of this is that citizens from the whole region can legally travel to Agadez in central Niger, which is considered as a hub for irregular migration to Libya.

20. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has set up monitoring centres in Agadez and Sighedine to monitor and assist West Africans passing through to Algeria and Libya. The EUCAP Sahel Niger mission has provided authorities with training to counter migrant smuggling and to enhance border security (Lebovich 2017). But EU efforts to improve migration governance in the Sahel have inadvertently pushed migrants into clandestine networks which readily exploit their vulnerability. In 2015, the government of Niger criminalised the transport of migrants and the number of migrants transiting through Niger subsequently fell from 100,000 to 150,000 a year before 2016 to 5,000 and 10,000 migrants in 2019 (Euractiv, 2020). Although the number of those transiting through Niger fell, the increase in human trafficking led to more deaths on the route between Agadez region and Libya (GMFUS). Migrants crossing through the desert routes of Mali, Niger, Algeria and Libya are increasingly at risk of falling victim to insurgents and face harsh environmental conditions in the desert where search and rescue missions are widely unavailable (IOM).

21. Even in amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Sahelian irregular migrants have continued the voyage to North Africa and, in some case, onwards to Europe despite the significant tightening of border controls including the fact that Niger has now closed its border with Libya (Euractiv, 2020) due to the pandemic. In any case, thousands of migrants have moved to the Maghreb, and this has placed strains on healthcare, housing, labour market, and education systems. An estimated 700,000 sub-Saharan migrants reside in Morocco alone according to the Migration Policy Institute (El Ghazouani, 2019), and government figures reveal a steadily growing influx of migrants from 54,400 in 2005 to almost 100,000 in 2019 (Lebovich, 2020). Migration into Algeria has also risen as the Libyan civil war diverted migrants who were intending either transit through or settle in Libya. Official figures suggest that 7,500 sub-Saharan migrants now reside in Tunisia, although the actual figure could approach 20,000.

22. In the past, Algeria and Libya played major roles in the trans-Saharan irregular migration, in part, by attracting Sahelian workers on a seasonal basis. Algeria and Mali formalised this migration through a bilateral agreement that permitted free movement between the two countries. In the name of pan-Africanism, then Libyan leader Colonel Qadhafi allowed African nationals to enter Libya without visas. The role of Algeria and Libya as migrant destination countries remains apparent today, even if the geopolitical context has dramatically shifted. Among those Sahelian people leaving their home countries, a majority actually envision Algeria or Libya as final destination whereas only 20% report that their goal is to reach Europe (Clingendael, 2017). For those migrants seeking to reach Europe, doing so might perhaps offer a superior alternative to taking up arms, in terms of personal security, income and social respectability not to mention regional security. It could be assumed that the stabilisation in Libya would contribute to addressing irregular migration on one hand and fostering economic development in the region on the other.

23. The Maghreb is thus not only a region of transit for sub-Saharan migrants; it is a destination point in itself. Migrants, however, today confront a range of daunting legal and socio-economic challenges, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered conditions for migrants all the more precarious. Morocco launched a comprehensive migration reform in 2013, which regularised the status of roughly 50,000 migrants, but salaries remain relatively low for migrants in labour-intensive sectors such as construction and domestic work (El Ghazouani, 2019). By contrast, Algeria has taken a notably hard line and sought to deport many of those who have arrived irregularly. According to the UNHCR, 53% of refugees and migrants in Tunisia have lost their jobs because of coronavirus restrictions (Dworkin, 2020). While lockdowns in Morocco reportedly put sub-Saharan migrants at risk of food insecurity. Significantly tightened border controls in the region could have adverse consequences for the economic structure of the region and the coping strategies of already marginalised and fragile communities.

24. But there are also concerns about illegal trade at play. Regional trade has varied over the centuries and included the movement of slaves, gold, ivory, cattle, cereals, and salt. From the 1990s and 2000s, products that were both illicit and high value-added, such as arms and drugs, opened up new if hardly welcome commercial opportunities. Trafficking in hashish, for example, is 12 times more profitable than trafficking in cigarettes, while trafficking in cocaine is 25 times more profitable than trafficking in hashish. Since the end of the 2000s, illicit trade expanded to include methamphetamine and legal drugs diverted from their medicinal uses (Tramadol, Rivotril). It is, however, very difficult to estimate the quantities moving through the region. Indeed, given the conflict situation, few seizures are actually made in the Sahelo-Saharan strip (International Crisis Group, 2018).

25. The circulation of arms in the Sahel is particularly costly as it has helped militarise criminal actors which now routinely deploy armed groups to protect or intercept convoys. Arms trafficking directly threatens regional security while drug revenues have disrupted local economies, poisoned inter-community relations and called into question old hierarchies and respect for traditional authority. The fall of Gaddafi in 2011 created an open arms market in Libya, but it is no longer the sole source of arms supplies for armed groups operating in the Sahel. Since 2015, the flow of arms from Libyan stockpiles or diverted by Libyan armed groups has fallen, while national military stocks have become an important new source of arms deployed by non-state military actors operating in the region (Conflict Armament Research, 2016). Military bases are increasingly the target of militant attacks, and militant groups are often able to abscond with deadly military equipment. The security vacuum in Libya allows traffickers, terrorists and non-state actors to exploit highly porous and unguarded borders. After Gaddafi's fall, a range of armed groups, terrorists and mercenaries from neighbouring countries, began to operate both in Libya and in the Sahel. It is estimated, for example, that there are at least 3,000 Sudanese mercenaries now fighting in Libya for the so-called Libyan National Army. There are mounting concerns that these mercenaries will be ever more inclined to offer their services to armed groups operating in the Sahel (The Guardian, 2019).

26. Drug, arms and human traffickers often employ the same routes and contacts, and they have found innovative new ways to finance military operations. The wealthier trafficking networks are said to operate with the tacit support of some state actors, and to corrupt high-ranking officials, civil servants, defence and security forces officials and senior politicians. It is alleged that these officials, in turn, provide active cover or simply refrain from enforcing the law. Some traffickers essentially transform themselves into political entrepreneurs and position themselves to influence local or legislative elections. These operators also willingly invest in the legal economy to diversify or launder illegally gotten assets. In the process, they aim to purchase a degree of legitimacy and to openly partner with the state to fight rival gangs.

27. In Mali, for example, experts say the major traffickers have links both with the Malian authorities, (who deny this) and with political-military groups in the north of the country. In many cases, trafficking networks are integrated into or merge with these groups, which themselves depend on drug trafficking for funding and access to arms. Moreover, the fight against drugs and arms trafficking has assumed a lower order of priority for international actors engaged in anti-terrorist operations. The reluctance to engage more resolutely against drug traffickers is due to the lack of resources to conduct such operations, the sheer complexity of the networks and implicit recognition that these groups are often protected by powerful players in the state with which western governments are working (International Crisis Group).



## E. VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS AND ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS

28. Over the past two decades, the Sahel has become something of a crucible for violent extremist movements. These movements, some of which do not hesitate to conduct deadly terrorist attacks in the region, are highly fractured. Some express allegiance to Al Qaeda and others to Daesh. These allegiances often reflect tactical calculations rather than particular ideological or sectarian preferences.

29. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has been active in Western Niger since 2015. In 2017, four members of US special forces and five Nigerien soldiers were killed in an ISGS ambush. The same year, Paris and Niamey decided to take on the ISGS and began working with two local armed Tuareg groups that had signed the Algiers peace agreement – the Movement for the Salvation of the Azawad (Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad, MSA) and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés, GATIA) (*Libération*, 2019). In March 2017, several violent extremist groups (Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front, Al Mourabitoun and the Saharan Branch of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM) joined forces and created Nusrat al-Islam (Group to Support Islam and Muslims, GSIM). GSIM is now the official branch of Al Qaeda in the region. It operates primarily in Mali but has taken responsibility for attacks in other Sahel countries. In October 2019, French forces killed its self-proclaimed religious leader Ali Maychou in coordination with the Malian forces and with US support (*Le Monde*, 11/19).

30. These violent extremist groups are notably amorphous and rapidly change their names, base of operations, structures, and alliances. The boundaries separating them are porous. It would also be misleading to characterise them simply as part of a global extremist movement directed from outside that exploits the Islamic concept of Jihad. Indeed, local, and regional dynamics provide the most coherent explanation for the emergence of these groups, which have so capably exploited the vulnerability of the region's population. Extremist propaganda throughout the Sahel plays on a general sense of desperation. In rural areas, people have limited access to justice and little or no protection for themselves and their property. A deep crisis of confidence and trust has emerged between vulnerable populations and the defence and security forces, which often are not positioned or even inclined to provide security to the public. These conditions make the population more vulnerable to a type of propaganda that both exploits and misconstrues the Islamic concept of Jihad, and which sadly, leads some disaffected people to form self-defence militia, often based on ethnicity but exploiting essentially misunderstood religious precepts.

31. The gap between the broad needs of evermore fragile Sahelian societies and states incapable of offering hope for the future has opened a door for violent extremists to weave themselves into the fabric of Sahelian societies. The widening gap between citizen and state is one of the root causes of radicalisation (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI, 2019). Harsh poverty is also a factor as extremist groups are often able to offer wages to vulnerable men who are willing to participate in violence to generate desperately needed income for themselves and their families. For some fighters, joining a violent extremist group means multiplying their income by a factor of 20. Violent extremist groups thrive in areas where the state is absent, or sovereignty is contested. In societies characterised at once by mounting tensions over access to arable land and pasture for grazing and demographic dynamism, violent extremists fan the flames of social and political conflict while paradoxically imposing a very rough and crude social order.

32. Thus, rather than serving as proxies for the so-called global jihad, violent extremist groups in the Sahel are essentially products of local and regional dynamics and operate essentially in that milieu. This is reflected both in their recruitment of marginalised communities and in their operations against state institutions they perceive as fundamentally illegitimate. Not surprisingly therefore, violent extremism in the central Sahel is hardly a coherent monolith. It is rather a set of disparate

armed insurrections that largely although not exclusively constitute a response to worrying socio-economic and political challenges which have grown more compelling in recent years. The appeal of the so-called global jihad carries is less important in fuelling these movements than are poverty, police and military repression, the struggle for access to grazing areas, and the quest for genuine political representation within the community (International Alert, 2018). In the face of explosive social and political tensions and the absence of an effective state presence locally, extremist groups are even perceived by some communities as offering a means to re-establish law and order. In effect, they are seen as a state where no state seems to exist. This remains part of their appeal even if their capacity to deliver on promises generally falls well short of expectations and more often than not only worsens already difficult conditions. That said, in the harsh circumstances of life in the Sahel, the rudimentary and biased interpretation of Islamic law introduced by these so-called jihadists might seem to some as preferable to very poor governance or anarchy (International Alert, 2018).

33. These explanations of what is transpiring in Sahelian societies raise serious questions about how best to counter the threat. Purely military responses are bound to fall short and threaten to plunge the region into a vicious cycle in which state counter-terrorism military operations inflict heavy costs on local populations while driving evermore residents into the hands of violent extremist groups. Subjecting members of some ethnic communities to arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial executions, as documented by human rights organisations, is only aggravating a serious problem and is widening the abyss between Sahelian states and their citizens. New approaches are clearly needed, and the international community needs to help foster both state renewal and genuine dialogue while helping to transform national security forces into genuine security providers. This will be far easier said than done, and, of course, ultimate responsibility for these transformations lies with the people and governments of the region.

34. There are also legitimate concerns that what is transpiring in the Western Sahel could spread well beyond the region. Indeed, there is evidence that coastal Western Africa is already under threat. In June 2020, an insurgent group with links to the Sahel killed 14 soldiers in Côte d'Ivoire. The movement of militants across borders has intensified along with the smuggling of livestock, drugs, and guns, which are a key source of income for extremist groups. Benin, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo have registered an uptick in this kind of trafficking. There are indications that these groups have also forged links with Nigerian insurgent groups. ISGS fighters have increasingly sought sanctuary across the borders to the south and have begun to recruit fighters in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. For ISGS and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), expansion into neighbouring countries provides new sources of income and prestige, for example, by seizing control of ports or gold mines while launching attention-grabbing attacks (The Economist, 9/7/20).

35. Finally, fighters from the Middle East have also begun to operate in the Sahel, particularly as their own room for manoeuvre in Iraq and Syria has diminished substantially. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, around 2,500 Tunisian Daesh members were transferred to Libya from Syria, prompting concerns about possible spillovers of such violence into the Sahel zone.

### **III. RESPONSES AND INITIATIVES**

36. There have been a number of initiatives in the Sahel region to reinforce the security, social and political order. But as is so often the case in crisis regions, a problem has arisen due to a lack of coordination among these efforts. Indeed, some have described a "traffic jam" of initiatives in the Sahel that have a collective impact of overwhelming the very state structures that they are meant to assist (International Crisis Group, 2018).

## A. AFRICAN REGIONAL INITIATIVES

### 1. African Union

37. The African Union (AU) has launched two initiatives in the region: the Nouakchott Process in 2013, and the AU Strategy for the Sahel Region in 2014, with the objective of encouraging cooperation and better coordination among stakeholders in charge of security in the region. The AU Strategy for the Sahel region seeks to help the region improve governance, security, and development. It is a multidimensional concept to address the complexity of the Sahelian crisis and is acknowledged in 15 other Sahelian strategies advanced by regional and international actors working to mitigate this crisis. The AU has appointed a special representative for the Sahel and established the headquarters for its Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) in Bamako. The results of these initiatives, however, have been limited. Despite its ambition to provide a long-term structural approach for building peace and security challenges on the African continent, the African Union and its African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) simply lack the reach and resources to thwart the growing spiral of violence and social upheaval in the Sahel.

38. The Nouakchott Process sought to cultivate exchange and cooperation among security actors in the Sahel, but the initial spirit of solidarity has largely faded, and its last ministerial meeting took place in 2015. The implementation of the 2014 Sahel strategy has undergone a similar fate, due to the lack of a clear division of labour among stakeholders as well as limited financial and human resources allocated to those in charge of its implementation (Institute for Security Studies, 6/18).

39. The African Union's approach has factored in climatic and environmental factors and engaged a broad range of countries including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan. As the arc of crisis widened, the AU further engaged Algeria, Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, and Senegal. Engaging the principal Maghreb actors represented a more comprehensive approach to conflict resolution in the Sahel. But the initiative lost focus as enlarging the scope triggered a proliferation of ambitions and goals. This undermined the rapid response to what was a worsening crisis (*Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, 2019). Although the AU effort has been coherent on paper, the level of resources and political commitment is not sufficient to galvanise a process capable of addressing the root causes of regional conflict. A narrower effort focused intensely on these challenges in the region's five most vulnerable countries is needed to address more effectively the Sahelian crisis.

### 2. ECOWAS

40. Established in 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a 15-member regional group with a mandate to advance regional economic integration. Member countries are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo. As mentioned above, regional integration efforts led by ECOWAS have facilitated regional migration and commercial exchange. All member states grant ECOWAS citizens the right to enter, reside and operate economically in the territory of other member states. In the 1990s, when conflicts shook Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOWAS transformed itself into a regional security actor. Under the aegis of the AU's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), ECOWAS has emerged as one of the most consequential regional security organisations on the continent.

41. Generally judged by the international community as a more suitable forum for coping with the Sahel crisis than the AU, ECOWAS obtained the authorisation from the UN Security Council to organise a military mission to support the Malian government during the Northern Mali conflict. It launched the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) in December 2012.

However, logistical problems and material bottlenecks undermined ambitions to deploy forces rapidly into the field of operations. ECOWAS has had grave difficulties mobilising the 3,300 soldiers that it had initially hoped to deploy. The mission finally failed for lack of sufficient financial support. But military planners operating within ECOWAS had also underestimated the strength of extremist groups operating in central Mali (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung). The mission was folded into the UN mission (MINUSMA) in the summer of 2013.

### **3. G5 Sahel**

42. As one of the less developed regions in the world, the Sahel region faces many challenges, such as extreme poverty, food crises, poor governance, crime, corruption, as well as terrorism. The security of this region is a source of concern not only for the Sahel but also for the whole continent and beyond.

43. Besides terrorism, the issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is another challenge which requires an immediate solution. The said issue has direct impact on the security problems. Due to insufficient food supply, lack of water sources, terrorism and intercommunal conflicts, Sub-Saharan Africa has been witnessing an unprecedented level of human mobility. The challenges emanating from the human influx are also one of the root causes of illegal immigration, which heavily affects immense human trafficking in the region. As multifaceted challenges require collective response, a set of initiatives has been forged by the international and regional actors to tackle troubling issues overwhelming the region. G5 Sahel is one of the important components of these initiatives.

44. The constitution of the G5 Sahel in February 2014 represented a response to the military and diplomatic deficits of ECOWAS. Its mechanisms and approach to managing the Sahelian crisis have superseded those of the AU. The G5 Sahel is a framework for cooperation among five Sahelian countries (Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Mauritania). Originally conceived as a vehicle for strengthening the bond between economic development and security, it has increasingly focused on security matters. G5 Sahel's mandate is wide-ranging and, in addition to the fight against terrorism and organised crime, includes the restoration of state authority and the return of refugees and internally displaced people. Ultimately, the G5 countries must take responsibility for protecting their population and revitalizing the State. The role of the international community should be to facilitate this process by working closely with G5 countries.

45. In 2017, the five countries formed the G5 Sahel Joint Force. It is composed of 5,000 military personnel from Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad. Its purpose is to combat violent extremist groups. The operations of the Joint Force are oriented towards the border areas and extend over three zones: The Western zone with a command post in Mauritania, the Central zone with a command post in Niamey, and the Eastern zone commanded by Chad. Until now, each battalion has been responsible only for its zone. In a 2018 report, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres suggested that it was taking too long for the Joint Force to become fully operational. Since the Ouagadougou Summit in January 2020, progress has been made in the area of force mobility, with some elements of the G5 forces now operating outside of their basing areas. To make the Joint Force more operational in the fight against terrorism, battalions should be able to intervene outside their usual area of action. The same applies to the right of pursuit on foreign territory, where the force's troops are permitted to move 100 km beyond national borders.

46. The explosion of violence in Burkina Faso in recent months illustrates both the agility of the violent extremist groups and the operational limitations of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Armed groups operating on both sides of the three borders region are now driving southward towards Benin and Togo, outside the G5's purview. In light of the expansion of the conflict, the ambitious initial geographical scope of ECOWAS seems more relevant than it initially did simply because the conflict

is metastasising beyond the G5 Sahel states. New and not yet fully articulated initiatives like the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), announced by France and Germany at the Biarritz G7 Summit in August 2019 are, in fact, responses to the broadening geographical scope of the crisis.

47. The G5 Sahel is a fledging organisational security formation facing many drawbacks and difficulties. To this extent, it often requires external support to alleviate its vulnerability. The Sahel countries mainly cooperate and act with the international community to address their security concerns. Many countries provide significant contribution to the G5 Sahel initiative through bilateral and organisational platforms. Apart from the UN peace keeping mission (MINUSMA) in Mali, some other military forces deployed by different actors in the Sahel keep conducting military operations in the region. There are also international fundraising efforts for the Sub-Saharan countries. However, the efforts to achieve security and stability objectives in the region have not yet attained the expected results.

#### **4. WAEMU**

48. In December 2019, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), which includes Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, agreed to overhaul its common currency. The CFA franc, a legacy of French colonialism – was renamed the ‘Eco’. The new currency will remain tied to the euro through a fixed exchange rate. Participating states will no longer need to deposit half their foreign exchange reserves with the Banque de France (Euractiv, 15/1/20) nor will there any longer be a French representative on the board of the West African Central Bank). The French government has hailed the reform as a symbolic renewal of French-African relations (BBC, 2020).

49. The decision, however, created tensions with Anglophone West African countries left out of the system. In fact, ECOWAS had previously agreed to adopt an independent single currency called ‘eco’ (Brookings Institution, 2020). Prominent critics include the Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari. However, commentators have argued that Nigeria itself has stalled negotiations on a joint ECOWAS currency due to a reluctance to comply with common fiscal standards. Amidst the coronavirus crisis, the launch of the eco, originally foreseen for June 2020, is now indefinitely delayed. WAEMU countries have made it clear they are reluctant to put at risk an already fragile economic situation for the launch of the currency. Discussions are unlikely to resume before upcoming elections in Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Fröhlich, 2020).

### **B. NON-AFRICAN INITIATIVES**

#### **1. MINUSMA**

50. The UN established the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013. MINUSMA currently counts 15,365 personnel and has a budget of roughly USD 1 billion. The UN Security Council must renew MINUSMA’s mandate every year: it did so in June 2020, unanimously adopting resolution 2531 (2020) which extended the MINUSMA mandate until 30 June 2021.

51. MINUSMA’s central priority is to support the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement, signed in 2015 between the Malian government and the Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA), an umbrella group of northern rebel groups. It supports efforts to restore state authority in northern Mali, to establish a new institutional architecture for the Malian state, to back security sector reform efforts, to demobilise fighters, and to facilitate national reconciliation. Other objectives include protecting civilians while encouraging national and local dialogue. Counter-terrorism operations, however, are not part of the mandate although unrelenting terrorist attacks have severely limited

MINUSMA's ability to carry out its mission effectively. MINUSMA has to expend enormous military and logistical efforts simply to maintain a presence in northern Mali. Around 80% of its military resources are dedicated to force protection in order to secure its own infrastructure and defend the convoys on which the mission depends to supply its bases. Public opinion in Mali has grown critical of the mission. Malians have accused MINUSMA of passivity in the face of terrorist threats, and there have been charges that the blue helmets place their own security above that of civilians. The government at times has used the mission as a scapegoat for its own shortcomings – a practice that hardly builds legitimacy and public support for the UN operation (SWP).

## **2. European Union's Missions and Operations**

52. The European Union has emerged as another important actor in the Sahel. In 2011, the EU External Action Service (EEAS) adopted the Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing the interlinked challenges faced by the region. The EU's approach stresses the link between development and security. With the sharp increase in migrant arrivals on European shores in 2015, several EU member states pushed for a more security-oriented response (Davitti and Ursu, 2018). They view migration both as a security challenge and as a threat to European liberal order. However, some experts argue that the external projection of domestic European fears puts the success of the mission at risk (Venturi, 2019).

53. The introduction of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, improved coordination among the EU's different missions and instruments. EU delegations in the Sahel are present in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. They operate as liaison offices between Brussels, CSDP missions and external local and international actors. The EU Special Representative for the Sahel, Angel Losada, is currently mandated to coordinate the EU's overall approach.

### *a. EUTF – Sahel and Lake Chad region*

54. In November 2015, European and African Heads of State and Government convened in Malta for the Valletta Summit on Migration and launched an Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) to help the region build stability and address the root causes of irregular migration in Africa's three regions: Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa. The Sahel and Lake Chad region includes 12 countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. Sub-Saharan Africa is now a focal point of the EU's external migration policy, particularly since the closing of the so-called Balkan Route in 2016 following the EU-Turkey deal.

55. The budget for the Sahel and Lake Chad region is EUR 2 billion (for a total of 4.7 billion for all EUTF regions) and draws from the EU budget, the European Development Fund, and contributions from EU Member States as well as Norway and Switzerland. It currently funds 100 projects divided into four categories: Improved governance and conflict prevention; more reliable migration management; building resilience; and generating new economic and employment opportunities. Sixteen percent of the budget is dedicated to border management and security in the Sahel and Lake Chad region (and 31% in the whole EUTF). Some NGOs have charged that the EUTF has diverted funds allocated for development aid to migration and border control and is thus poorly positioned to address the root causes of mass migration.

### *b. CSDP Missions and the Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC)*

56. The EU launched EUCAP Sahel Niger in 2012 and EUCAP Sahel Mali in 2015 to help establish an integrated, coherent, sustainable, and human rights-based approach among the various Nigerien and Malian security actors in the fight against terrorism and organised crime. Over 100 international

experts, the majority drawn from European security forces and justice departments, are permanently deployed in Niamey to support this effort.

57. EUCAP Sahel Mali completes the military pillar of the EU strategy in Mali, the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). The EU launched the mission in 2013 to help strengthen the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces with the aim of helping the country build a self-sustaining military capable of defending the population and territory. EUTM Mali is composed of almost 700 soldiers from 23 EU members and 5 non-member states (Georgia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, and the Republic of Moldova). In addition to training and education, the mission provides advice at the strategic and operational level to the Ministry of Defence, the Malian Armed Forces as well as to the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

58. In 2017, the EU established a Regional Coordination Cell (RCC). Its 15 experts coordinate the EU's operational efforts and identify needs and gaps within the CSDP missions. It is strictly focused on security and defence. In 2019, in a further effort to make its work more effective at a regional level, the EU renamed the RCC, and it is now known as the Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC). The objective will be to strengthen the G5 Sahel's regional and, where appropriate, national capacities, in particular to support the operationalisation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force military and police components. The ultimate goals are to improve cross-border cooperation and to enable EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger to provide strategic advice and training to other G5 Sahel countries. In March 2020, the mandate for the EU training mission in Mali was broadened to enable EUTM to provide military assistance to the G5 Sahel Joint Force as well as national armed forces in the form of military advice, training and mentoring. Its mission was prolonged until 18 May 2024 and its budget raised to EUR 133.7 million over the next four-year period (Council of the European Union, 2020).

59. The European Commission adopted a "new comprehensive strategy for Africa" in March 2020. This strategy is based on five priority areas of cooperation: green transition and energy access, digital transformation, sustainable growth and jobs, peace and governance, and migration and mobility. The goal is to move from an aid-centric framework towards an EU-Africa partnership. Meanwhile, the EU's main economic development agreement with African countries, the Cotonou Agreement, is set to expire by the end of the year and is in the course of renegotiation (Lebovich, 2020).

### **3. Alliance Sahel**

60. In July 2017, France, Germany, and the European Union launched the Sahel Alliance, which intends to help Sahelian states restore the foundations of stable societies capable of sustaining development and peace in the region. This effort also engaged the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme. Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Denmark, and The Netherlands have agreed to participate. The Sahel Alliance was created to improve the effectiveness of development aid in the region and to provide an integrated interlocutor for the G5 Sahel states on development issues. The aim is to enhance coordination among development partners (mainly the development agencies of above-mentioned member states, as well as international development partners) and accelerate the implementation of assistance and projects, while addressing the needs expressed by the beneficiary countries and the G5 Sahel Secretariat. In January 2019, the Alliance announced the goal of undertaking 730 projects by 2022, with global funding of EUR 11 billion.

#### 4. The United States

61. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the United States introduced a range of security measures to monitor Al Qaeda in Africa. These primarily consisted of surveillance programmes, security cooperation instruments as well as intelligence and logistical support for US allies and partners. Following the establishment of the Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, the US military presence in Africa had grown to roughly 7,200 personnel by the end of 2018, primarily at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti. In April 2018, then Defence Secretary James Mattis estimated that the U.S. had 1,000 military personnel in Nigeria, Niger, and Mali (Lawfare).

62. In the Sahel, small groups of US special operations forces have advised local troops and militia to defeat violent extremists in the field (Foreign Policy, 2020). The US military also provides much-needed intelligence, logistical (including airlift and refuelling) and drone support to its French ally. ISGS fighters ambushed US troops in Niger in October 2017, which resulted in the death of four Army special operations soldiers. According to then Secretary of Defence James Matthis, US forces in Niger at the time were operating under a “train and advise authority”. In 2019, the US military started moving its drone operation from Niamey to Agadez (Niger), where it had constructed its so-called Air Base 201. At the time, this represented the largest US Air Force-led construction project in recent history. Agadez is more centrally located and has provided the US military with surveillance over a larger and more strategically consequential area.

63. Plans for global US force restructuring now suggest that US special operations forces in Africa will be substantially reduced by 2021, and there is some support for abandoning Agadez Air Base 201 and ending assistance to French forces in the Sahel. A debate seems to be underway within the US government regarding the engagement of US troops in the region or at least in the number of troops engaged in these counter-terrorism efforts. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, however, has stressed the need to take on the ISGS in West Africa particularly as the threat has proven such a difficult challenge to the region’s governments and international partners (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). At a January meeting of the United Nations Security Council, the United States called for a reduction in the number of UN peacekeeping troops in Mali, suggesting that “peacekeeping missions are not the answer to growing threats” there. US officials also suggested that MINUSMA should stop trying to enforce the 2015 Algiers accord and focus instead on the protection of civilians, calling more generally for a new approach (France 24, 2020).

64. During the Pau Summit in January 2020, French and G5 Sahel heads of state expressed their gratitude for the crucial support provided by the United States and welcomed the continued US presence in the region. AFRICOM Commander General Stephen Townsend said during a Senate Armed Services budget hearing that America’s military footprint in Africa should remain a key part of the US strategy to counter Russian and Chinese influence around the world (Szuba, 2020). In March 2020, the State Department announced it had created a special envoy for the Sahel region who would be tasked with addressing the problem of growing violence in the region (Pamuk, 2020). That same month, US military advisors for the first time accompanied forces in Niger on a major counter-terrorism mission close to the Nigerian border, the first such activity since the introduction of engagement rules after the 2017 ambush (Gibbons-Neff). It is generally recognised that the neutralisation by French forces of the leader of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdelmalek Droukdal, in June 2020 would not have occurred without vital intelligence provided by the United States.



## 5. France

65. As violent extremist groups advanced south and threatened to attack Bamako in January 2013, France launched its relatively small-scale operation Serval, at the request of Mali's then President Traoré. Clear political goals coordinated international diplomacy and an effective use of military force turned operation Serval into a short-term success and stopped Bamako from falling into the hands of violent extremists. However, if Operation Serval has helped stabilise the country to a certain extent, it was not structured to address the conflict's underlying causes and some argue that it has triggered the dispersal of terrorist movements in neighbouring countries, notably in Libya and Niger.

66. In July 2014, France expanded its presence throughout the region with the launch of operation Barkhane. Barkhane's mission has been more ambitious and includes: fighting terrorism in a territory the size of Europe, bringing out the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and supporting the Malian armed forces and MINUSMA. Consisting of 4,500 French soldiers with operational headquarters in Chad's capital, N'Djamena and operating with a yearly budget of EUR 600 million (French Senate), Barkhane is operating in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Small units composed of special forces elements capable of intervening very quickly have been deployed in the field to take on extremist fighters with the support of fighter aircraft, drones, and a range of intelligence assets. In December 2019, France carried out the first armed drone airstrike during an assault against armed terrorist group fighters in Mali's Mopti region. Since the beginning of its operations Serval and Barkhane in 2013 and 2014, 44 French soldiers have died in combat in the Sahel.

67. The loss of 13 French soldiers in Mali on 25 November 2019 underlined the challenges France's armed forces confront in the Sahel amid intensifying insurgent attacks. The incident represented the single largest loss of life for the country's military forces since 1983. Although Barkhane's tactical successes on the ground are real and France's intervention and efforts have prevented the situation from worsening, these efforts are undermined by a political impasse, which triggered a coup d'état in Mali in August 2020 (see below). Barkhane alone clearly cannot bring about a political solution (French Senate), and the French military has admitted as much. Its objective is more limited and does not seek to eradicate terrorism but rather to draw terrorist groups on to the military field where they are more vulnerable to local armies. The hope is that this operation will strengthen the capacity of Sahelian states to assert full authority over their territory. There have been some successes. In June 2020, for example, French special forces killed the leader of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdal in Northern Mali. The operation was made possible by a combination of human and technical intelligence gathered by French and American services (Roger and Alilat, 2020).

68. Barkhane has a growing international dimension and benefits from both US and European support. Denmark, for example, has deployed two helicopters and up to 70 troops to support Barkhane, while Estonia is to almost double the size of its Barkhane contingent in 2020. Chinook helicopters from the United Kingdom provide critical support for the operation while Germany is training police and gendarmerie in Burkina Faso. Germany has pledged EUR 10 million for equipment, and a similar amount for advising troops (Goxho, 2020).

69. France has consistently advocated stronger international engagement, and its MoD announced the creation of the international special operations task force Takuba in November 2019 (Kelly, 2020). Takuba's objective, in addition to freeing up Barkhane personnel and enabling them to focus on pursuing insurgents and preventing attacks, is to advise, assist and accompany Malian Armed Forces, in coordination with G5-Sahel partners and other international actors on the ground, including the UN mission MINUSMA, as well as the EU missions EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger. Takuba will ultimately consist of a French contingent and special operations elements from numerous European nations including Ireland, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Greece and Italy. The plan is ultimately to have

500 operators in the task force. The first 100 troops, comprised of French and Estonian special operations forces, were deployed in Summer 2020.

70. In response to manifestations of hostility in West Africa towards the French and international military presence, President Macron asked G5 Sahel leaders to offer public support for France's military presence. During the Summit organised in Pau in January 2020, the city where most French soldiers who died in November 2019 were stationed, the G5 leaders "expressed the wish for the continuation of France's military engagement in the Sahel". The increasing number of terrorist attacks and casualties has served as a catalyst to unite French Barkhane and G5 Sahel Joint Force under a new command structure: announced at the Pau summit at the request of Sahel states. The impetus given in Pau has materialised with the creation of the Coalition for the Sahel, which the G5 Sahel countries – celebrating the 60th anniversary of their independence this year – and the European Union officially launched on 28 March 2020. The Coalition for the Sahel aims to provide a collective response to the challenges in the region. In February 2020, French Defence Minister Florence Parly announced the deployment additional soldiers, primarily in the three borders areas. The reinforcement of Barkhane decided at the beginning of the year – with the deployment of 600 additional soldiers-, increased coordination with the Sahelian forces, the concentration of joint efforts towards the "three borders" zone, on the borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and the creation of the Takuba Task Force, have made it possible to weaken the ISGS.

#### **IV. COUP D'ETAT IN MALI**

71. In August, a military coup in Mali resulted in the forced resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Soldiers from the Kati army camp outside of Bamako stormed presidential buildings and arrested government officials, including Keita. The military leaders responsible for the coup – referring to themselves as the "National Committee for the Salvation of the People" – then announced plans for new elections. The coup followed on the heels of sustained protests in Bamako related to contested parliamentary elections in March, which had been held despite the coronavirus pandemic. Protests were fuelled by the so-called June 5 Movement (5M) and the influential imam Mahmoud Dicko. The anti-Keita protests were also inspired by the worsening security situation and an ongoing economic crisis.

72. The coup has raised additional questions about international stabilisation efforts in Mali. The African Union voted to suspend Mali's membership and has called for the release of the president and other officials. The UN Security Council condemned the mutiny and called for the immediate release of the president and government officials (BBC, 19/8/20). ECOWAS members also agreed to close borders with Mali, stop all financial flows there and eject Mali from all ECOWAS decision making bodies (BBC, 19/08/20). France and the U.S. also quickly condemned the coup (BBC, 19 Aug 2020), Turkey expressed her concern and sorrow, and voiced the support to the efforts of the UN, African Union and ECOWAS to return to the constitutional order (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 19/08/20). The *Organisation internationale de la francophonie* suspended Mali's membership. The military released Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in late August (Al Jazeera, 27/8/20). The Malian authorities have adopted a Transition Charter and a roadmap to revise the electoral framework and prepare for credible elections, strengthen governance, fight against impunity, implement the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement and address the threat of terrorism.

73. The coup has posed a clear dilemma for Mali's international partners, including France. The impact on the G5 Sahel Joint Force is not entirely clear. The coup has certainly raised uncomfortable questions about military training in that country. For its part, the EU has suspended its training mission in response to the coup, and has indicated that it is prepared to support only "legitimate

national authorities” (Al Jazeera, 26/8/20). Germany has acknowledged that several of the rebels were trained in Europe although EU High Representative Josep Borrell has stressed that the EU had not trained the four most prominent leaders.

74. In response to the coup, West African members of ECOWAS imposed comprehensive sanctions on Mali. But in early October, these sanctions were lifted to support the handover to civilian rule. The interim government has nominated former Defence Minister retired Colonel Bah Ndaw to serve as interim President and former Foreign Minister Moctar Ouane as Prime Minister of the transition, which should last 18 months. Ndaw has appointed a 25-strong government tasked with leading the country to elections. Coup leader Assimi Goita has been appointed as Vice-President responsible for security and defence issues. Military officers currently hold four key cabinet posts – defence, security, territorial administration, and national reconciliation. Civilians will also hold positions as well as representatives of former armed Tuareg groups that signed a peace deal with the government in 2015 (Aljazeera, 6/10/20).

75. Former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who was detained on the day of the coup and later sent to the UAE for a health treatment, returned back to Bamako on 22nd of October. He is under the state control and security surveillance in his private residence in Bamako since his arrival to Mali. The release of Somalia Cisse, who was kidnapped during the parliamentary elections campaign on 25th of March in Timbuktu, is also a positive development in peace and stabilisation efforts undergoing in Mali.

76. Following the announcement of a civilian transition period government by the CNSP leaders, ECOWAS lifted sanctions imposed on Mali on 6th of October, and similarly the African Union dropped the suspension of Mali’s membership to the Union on 9th of October. The President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, the Elected Chair of the ECOWAS Authority, as a sign of solidarity and cooperation with the new administration, visited Mali for supporting efforts made by the CNSP to restore constitutional and democratic order in the country.

## **V. IMPACTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON THE SAHEL REGION**

77. As has been the case in much of the developing world, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a severe economic downturn in the Sahel region. The manufacturing, retail, trade, and entertainment sectors have been particularly struck. Economic growth is expected to contract worldwide, and developing and underdeveloped countries will assume a particular burden because many developing countries lack reserves that might cushion the impact. The pandemic has prompted many African governments to introduce unprecedented measures to contain the virus, including confinement and travel restrictions (France 24; Kone). Although indispensable, these measures are striking at the region’s already weak and vulnerable economies. Borders have closed, “sanitary state of emergencies” have been declared, travel, tourism and trade have fallen significantly, and unemployment is on the rise (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro, 2020). The world’s major economies are now entering a recession, while lockdowns have disrupted global value chains. Demand for Sahelian goods and services has slumped while the sharp decline in commodity prices has struck the region’s oil exporters (Ongley and Selassie, 2020). African oil exporting countries have been struck hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related fall in energy prices (Africa News, 2020). Other countries in West Africa will also suffer from the decline in commodity prices. Chad, for example, will experience an estimated USD 0.9 bn revenue loss, representing 8% of that country’s GDP (Tyburski, 2020).

78. Concerns are growing that enforced isolation measures and economic fallout are likely to fuel security challenges and political tensions in the region, particularly in countries with planned

elections. The essential measures to contain the virus may be perceived as authoritarian attempts by governments to consolidate control, potentially resulting in a loss of faith in democratic processes (Fletcher and Rouget, 2020).

79. The World Food Programme (WFP) has expressed serious concerns about the potential impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian supply chains. Food insecurity in the Sahel region has worsened in recent months (UN News, 2020). The WFP forecasts that Burkina Faso will see food insecurity levels more than triple, with the number of food insecure people rising from 680,000 in 2019 to more than 2.1 million people by June 2020. The number of those confronting food insecurity is also expected to increase to 1.3 million people in Mali and 2 million people in Niger (WFP, 2020).

80. The Sahel region also has some of the world's weakest health care systems. The COVID-19 outbreak thus poses a major regionwide challenge as some health systems have been severely damaged by almost a decade of violence and war. It is difficult to deploy even basic preventive measures like hand washing as access to soap and clean water is very limited (DeYoung, 2020). Poor nutrition and housing further weaken the defences of the region's inhabitants. Disease like malaria has long posed a serious regional problem and failure to properly cope with it is indicative of the broader structural challenges the region confronts in the face of the pandemic. As this report has stressed, governance in the Sahel is very weak, and this too gravely complicates the region's capacity to respond to the pandemic. Central governments are hard-pressed to assert authority across national territories, making the delivery of medical support particularly challenging (Le Quiniou, 2019). The concern is that an outbreak of the virus would almost immediately overwhelm health care systems in many Sahelian countries and could result in a devastating loss of life and broader instability.

81. COVID-19 poses a particular threat to those living in densely populated refugee camps where it would be very difficult to contain the spread of disease. Health care in these camps is often of a very poor quality, making the situation even more worrisome. These camps have a significantly lower capacity to contain the spread of the virus and access to health services is very limited (Molnar and Naranjo, 2020). Moreover, social distancing in these circumstances is not realistic. The poor health of many inhabitants makes them particularly vulnerable. Moreover, some camps have been targeted for violence. In April 2020, the UNHCR expressed alarm about conditions in Burkina Faso after armed groups targeted Malian refugees, compelling some of them to leave the camps. Indeed, Burkina Faso has undergone a massive displacement of more than 838,000 people since January 2019 – a number which increases on a daily basis. UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch recently said that “the approaching lean season, coupled with the armed conflict and COVID-19, will generate further dramatic situations and displacement of populations” (UNHCR, 2020). The mass movement of people could easily become a vehicle for spreading disease.

82. Experts warn that measures to contain the pandemic could paradoxically provide violent extremist groups an opportunity to extend their influence (Shortell, 2020). Charging security forces with the task of enforcing unpopular isolation measures could further undermine their legitimacy and feed into the narrative of oppression that insurgents employ to recruit fighters and supporters (Fletcher and Rouget, 2020). In Niger, for instance, a lockdown and temporary ban on collective prayers, two decisions taken to fight the pandemic, have sparked violent protests (Le Point, 2020). The combination of food insecurity and diminished economic prospects could produce a social and political explosion throughout this fragile region.

83. There are myriad long-term implications for economic and social development. Although school closures are an efficient step to enforcing social distancing within communities, extended closures could undermine the development of human capital in the region and thus diminish future economic opportunities (World Bank, 2020). Distance learning is simply not an option in much of the

region as many inhabitants lack access to computers and communications technology. Only 64% of the population has a mobile ICT connection, compared to 71% in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and 95% worldwide (World Bank, 2017).

84. African governments are now receiving financial and other assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the African Development Bank (AfDB) as well as bilateral assistance to combat the economic fallout from COVID-19 (Gandhi, Schaeffer and Madden, 2020). In mid-April, for example, the IMF approved USD 115.3 million emergency assistance for Burkina Faso to finance health care, social protection and macroeconomic stabilisation measures aiming to support the economy and to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (IMF, 2020). A number of prominent voices in Africa are now calling for immediate debt relief in the form of a two-year freeze on external debt repayments for vulnerable African countries. The argument is that this would create the fiscal space governments need to respond to the pandemic (Okonjo-Iweala, 2020).

85. The closure of markets and borders has further disrupted the structurally weak pastoral sector which has already been made vulnerable by conflict. Difficulties in moving food and people and restricted access to markets have caused food prices to rise and led to the loss of livelihoods. Traditional urban retail food markets account for 80 to 90 percent of food sales in the Sahel. In Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou, all 40 livestock markets were closed in March 2020. As such measures are gradually lifted across the region, markets have nonetheless remained poorly frequented. Pastoralists may therefore have no alternatives but to sell their livestock at extremely low prices to landholders, risking the escalation of economic inequality. Thousands of pastoralists are reportedly stuck in coastal states such as Togo and Benin and will not be able to travel back to the Sahel in the rainy season. The concentration of animals in border areas puts pressure on grazing areas and water points, while limited access to veterinary care increases the risk of diseases in the herds (Bisson, 2020).

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

86. Years of military and financial support have failed to resolve underlying sources of conflict in the Sahel. International efforts to address these have intensified, but the situation is deteriorating. One serious problem that remains is the proliferation of overlapping initiatives that is overwhelming the state structures that they are supposed to assist. The lack of coordination among various actors undermines the fight against terrorism and makes it more difficult to address its root causes in the Sahel. It is thus essential to start contemplating to construct, in consultation with the Sahel countries, a framework fostering coordination among the various international actors operating in the region to ensure that peace-making efforts are successful. In this respect, there are initiatives such as Sahel Coalition and the Sahel Alliance aimed at achieving a better coordination and convergence of efforts to help stabilise the region. Developments on the ground and time will show whether these initiatives will meet this objective.

87. As the violent extremist threat and terrorist attacks expand and with civilians dying in inter-ethnic conflicts, the presence of foreign forces has become increasingly difficult for local populations to fathom or accept. In Mali, in particular, Barkhane and MINUSMA are subject to mounting criticism. There is a genuine lack of understanding about the mandate of foreign forces, and this problem will have to be addressed through improved outreach and engagement with social actors. As long as the security situation continues to deteriorate, the presence of foreign forces will not be universally welcomed. Concrete results are needed on the ground to generate public support. Important successes have been obtained in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, depriving armed terrorist groups of any solid territorial foothold. Beyond military successes, stabilising this region requires substantial efforts in terms of governance, humanitarian aid and development, and the

coordination of all these efforts is the key to their effectiveness. However, resolution of regional conflicts will remain the ultimate responsibility of the governments and people of the region. The international community can only provide support and encourage reconciliation.

88. Terrorism and irregular migration remain the primary reason for the international involvement in the Sahel. Conflating these two distinct phenomena is problematic as the sources of each are highly complex. The restoration of peace and stabilisation is conditional on re-establishing security and reinforcing both the state and public services. Simple solutions will not work, and military initiatives alone certainly will not address underlying problems. Counter-terrorism efforts in the region require the region to focus on the causes of insurrection and not just the insurrection itself. Comprehensive approaches are essential. Unfortunately, the lack of economic alternatives for many Sahelian communities and the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacting suggest that the socio-economic sources of conflict are likely to endure and could well worsen over the coming years. There is also some criticism that the EU migration policy is counterproductive in the Sahel. Keeping migrants in transition countries by force affects local economies and increases insecurity. A significant humanitarian and development effort is needed, particularly in response to the worsening humanitarian crisis, as well as the challenges of climate change, and the need to empower women and young people.

89. Current developments in the Sahel underline what some observers, diplomats and experts have long argued: it is of little help to look at the multiple layers of conflict exclusively through the lenses of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Terrorism and extremist violence are certainly enormous challenges that need to be addressed, but they are not the primary threats to the Sahel population. Politically, these problems are at least partly the consequence of diminishing state authority and legitimacy, the weak or non-existent rule of law, declining human security, and ever-widening poverty and hunger. This suggests that support for the region must help the region address these issues in addition to support on matters of hard security.

90. Even well-coordinated military and humanitarian support will achieve little if some level of political comity is not achieved in these societies. Robust social contracts are needed between the Sahel states and their citizens. Governments must restore their relevance by providing essential services – a requirement the COVID-19 crisis has made all the more compelling. More political energy and resources from the international community are needed to support these ends. Focus and discipline are needed but buy-in from society and leaders is also essential.

91. Irregular migration, organised crime and terrorism in the Sahel are all multinational threats exacerbated by weak states. Libya, which itself is now beset by a very weak state and ongoing insurrection, has provided the Sahel with a route for migrants, illicit traffickers, and terrorist groups. The worsening situation in Libya has thus had direct implications for the stability of the Sahel. Restoring stability in Libya would significantly contribute to the efforts in countering terrorism, fostering economic development, and addressing irregular migration in the Sahel and South Mediterranean region. Supporting an inclusive political and reconciliation process in Libya should be the aim of NATO countries which themselves need to forge a common position on the Libyan question. Efforts are needed to build on the Libyan Political Agreement of 2015, UNSC Resolution 2259 (2015) and other relevant UNSC Resolutions. In this context, the Berlin Summit, in January 2020, represented an important step.

92. The complex and interconnected challenges of the Sahel region do not only affect NATO's long-term Mediterranean Dialogue partners in the Sahel – such as Mauritania – or bordering the Sahel – such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia – but have a high potential of transiting across the Mediterranean to NATO territory itself. It is up to the countries of the Sahel to restore the bond of trust with their populations – trust without which no viable political project is possible. The

transatlantic community of nations should support these societies in this process because stability in this region would confer important security benefits to the Alliance. Forging a sense of shared responsibility will be the key to making progress towards these ends. NATO itself should not shy away from looking closer at this regional hot spot and explore ways how to support international efforts in the Sahel in close consultation and cooperation with the countries in the region.

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