

Dossier: Geopolitical Turmoil and its Effects in the Mediterranean Region

Security Challenges, Migration, Instability and Violent Extremism in the Sahel

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The Sahel: “the Corridor of All Dangers”

The Sahel, which stretches from Mauritania to Sudan,¹ is an immense eco-climatic zone on the southern edge of the Sahara desert; it boasts a scattered population of 150 million (OCHA, 2016). The permeable boundaries have historically been crossed freely by tradesmen who passed through the historic city of Timbuktu in northern Mali. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Sahel dominated the news due to the drought and famine that caused the death of more than 100,000 and affected 50 million people, one million of whom remain dependent on food aid. Today, the Sahel is on the brink of re-experiencing an even worse tragedy due to certain conditions that have been exacerbated, mainly in Mali and Niger, by the consequences of the Libyan civil war and the toppling of the Gaddafi government, following NATO's intervention in 2011 (Zoubir, 2012). The Sahel, depicted by a senior Algerian official as the “*couloir de tous les dangers*,” or the corridor of all dangers, (Interview with former Prime Minister, September 2011) has also been dubbed “Sahelistan,” (Laurent, 2013) in reference to pre-2001 Afghanistan, that is, an uncontrolled region where jihadists could undergo military training and prepare terrorist assaults transnationally, mainly against Western interests both on European soil or in the Sahel's

neighborhood or against the governments in the region (e.g., Mali and Algeria in January 2013). The Sahel today presents a gloomy picture, especially when one considers that this expanse has traditionally been a zone of interaction between “Arab/Mediterranean Africa” and “Black Africa” in which all kinds of human, financial, religious exchanges have taken place. This region has now been replaced by smuggling of all kinds and terrorist routes and has thus attracted the attention of many capitals, especially Algiers, Beijing, Berlin, Brussels, London, Madrid, Paris, Riyadh, Rome, and Washington because of the dangers it represents for international security (Zoubir, 2012a).

The Sahel features all the ills of underdevelopment, but it also suffers from the fragility of states, ethnic conflicts, the presence of violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and trafficking. Although analysts do not all agree on a definition of what constitutes the Sahel (the long strip that for some encompasses ten countries from the Atlantic to the Red Sea Basin), the focus in this article will be limited to Mali and Niger, and peripherally to Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania; Nigeria is also added because of its recent role in the southern periphery of the Sahel and the growing linkage between the jihadist group Boko Haram and the VEOs in northern Mali.

The Sahel: *État des Lieux*

The Sahel states are among the poorest in the world, figuring in the Low Human Development category of the UN Development Programme. On the UNDP Human Development scale, Mauritania, Mali,

¹ The Sahel comprises parts of northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, the southernmost part of Algeria, Niger, the northernmost region of Nigeria, central Chad, central and southern Sudan, the extreme north of South Sudan, Eritrea, Cameroon, Central African Republic and the northern reaches of Ethiopia.

Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger rank 157, 175, 185, 186, and 187, respectively. All the development indicators (literacy, nutrition...) are considerably low (UNDP, 2016). This poverty and the dire socioeconomic conditions, such as high unemployment, weak educational and social infrastructures, and precarious agricultural resources, have created a propitious terrain for the expansion of illegal trafficking, such as drugs, irregular migration, cigarettes, gasoline, medicines, light weapons, vehicles, automobile spare parts, and, more recently, the recruitment of young men by VEOs. The illegal arms, drug and human trafficking is said to generate US\$ 3.8 billion annually (ICG, 2015).

The instability generated by the various factors enumerated above have obviously prevented the Sahel from attracting foreign direct investments or tourism, which had been an important source of revenue. The kidnapping of foreigners, one of the main sources of revenues of the jihadists, has deterred foreigners from travelling to the region.

Ironically, while the Sahel countries are among the poorest in the world, they are very rich in natural resources: iron ore (Mauritania); uranium (Niger, 4th world producer); and potential for oil (Chad, Mauritania, and Niger). However, the revenues from natural resources, including oil and uranium, are used for militarization and rent redistribution among clans in power, thus exacerbating frustrations and claims by marginalized groups. Furthermore, the incapacity of the Sahel states to fight terrorism and drug trafficking effectively provides the justification for foreign intervention under the guise of security, especially from those powers eager to control the mineral wealth of the Sahelian states.

In addition, the Sahel has witnessed a high population growth; the fertility rate in Mali, Mauritania, Chad and Niger is 6.4, 4.7, 6.3, and 7.6, respectively. The result has been the existence of impressively young populations in those countries. These youths do not all have access to education, cannot find jobs, and have no loyalty to their home states, which are perceived as corrupt and neglectful of their citizens.

Economic growth in these countries has been slow. For instance, in Niger, economic growth slowed to 3.6% in 2015 (down from 7.0% in 2014). (African Economic Outlook, 2016). Although GDP growth is respectable, this has not translated into wealth redistribution or sustainable poverty alleviation pro-

grammes. In addition to all these difficulties, the Sahel states suffer from bad governance at most levels. The authoritarian, repressive governments have often neglected certain areas, e.g., northern Mali, which became so-called “safe havens,” where organized crime and trafficking of all sorts bind with the local populations, thus becoming substitutes for the weak state authorities, often bought off by local criminals. The collapse of the Libyan government and its fallouts resulted in the circulation of light weapons as well as more sophisticated arms (Zoubir, 2012b). The absence of political institutions, authoritarian and inefficient rule, absence of development, and weak infrastructures have exacerbated ethnic conflicts, as is evident in Mali. These conditions have provided the auspicious ground for two major developments: 1. irregular migration to Europe, facilitated by the various criminal networks that have sprung up in the region and on the Mediterranean shores; 2. the rise of Salafism and violent extremism in a region hitherto reputed for the practice of traditional, tolerant Islam.

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One other factor that will certainly contribute to conflicts in the Sahel and the resulting migration is climate change. As pointed out in a recent study, “the region is one of the world’s climate change hotspots. Increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, more frequent droughts and floods and land degradation threaten the livelihoods of a population in which the majority relies on agriculture for survival. Environmental shocks, insecurity, chronic hunger and malnutrition have a dangerously symbiotic relationship in the Sahel.” (OCHA, 2016). Climate change in the Sahel will inevitably have a major effect on socioeconomic and political developments and will therefore act as a “multiplier of threats,” in that it will exacerbate the strains and contradictions already existing within given Sahel societies, nota-

bly all those linked to access to shrinking resources (Safir, 2016). Climate change will affect food security, aggravated by an impressive demographic growth rate; estimates project a Sahel population of more than 230 million by 2050 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015). This fast population growth in poor areas will make it a daunting challenge for any government to eliminate poverty and disparities, fight starvation and malnutrition, increase education enrolment and health structures, or to ameliorate the delivery of basic services. The nexus between food security and migration, regardless of the nuances, is also a driver of domestic or cross-border migration (Knoll, Rampa, Bizzotto et al. 2017).

Migration: The Inevitable Escape

Undeniably, the socioeconomic, climatic, demographic, and political conditions prevailing in the region, coupled with shrinking resources, largely account not only for the instability in the region, but also for the desire of young and not so young people to migrate to Europe via the Sahara Desert. In recent years, it is estimated that 53% of the refugees to Europe are aged between 18 and 34 years; of those, 80% are male (Pauwels and Parkes, 2017). It has been reported that 106,705 migrants arrived in Europe from Africa and the Middle East in 2015 (IOM, 2015). In 2014, 8,532 Malians migrated to Europe (Murphy, 2014). It is interesting to note the new finding which revealed that “most migrants surveyed in Libya over the course of 2016 had completed up to the secondary or vocational level of education. 77% of them had been unemployed prior to their departure, and 88% reported having left their countries due to economic reasons” (IOM, 2017). This finding and others show that irregular migration is a complicated issue, not least because the origins of the migrants are not always clearly defined, and likewise their motivations (casualties of socioeconomic conditions, asylum seekers, refugees). But, whatever their motivations they all share the same objective, follow the same crossings, and are often under the control and exploitation of the same smugglers. The number of migration seekers has continuously increased, difficulties using the traditional passages notwithstanding. Indeed, while the

number of those using the western Mediterranean routes has decreased dramatically (less than 5,000 arrivals in 2014), the central and eastern Mediterranean routes have become more popular. Indeed, between 2015 and 2016, the central Mediterranean route increased by 16% (IOM, 2017). Between 2013 and 2014, the central Mediterranean Route saw an increase of 376% (Altai Consulting, 2015). Although the number of migrants landing in Italy had fallen to 154,000 (lower than in 2014), the central Mediterranean route remained under intense migratory pressure in 2015 (Frontex, 2015). The same year, though, the eastern Mediterranean route became by far the main route of entry to Europe for migrants and asylum seekers (GMDAC, 2015); the eastern Mediterranean route was, for obvious reasons, the preferred route for Syrian and other refugees from the region. But, for migration from the Sahara-Sahel, the central Mediterranean route still remains the most popular, albeit the deadliest route – more than 300,000 people have reached Europe from North Africa through this route since the end of 2013 (GMDAC, 2016). Indeed, since 2014, 17 out of every 20 migrant deaths in the Mediterranean have occurred on the central Mediterranean route. During the same period, one out of 50 migrants attempting to cross has died. The trend has continued as more people have died in the central Mediterranean in the first five months of 2016 than the equivalent period in any other year (GMDAC, 2016).

Climate change in the Sahel will inevitably have a major effect on socioeconomic and political developments and will therefore act as a “multiplier of threats”

Of course, all this is linked to North Africa, in general, which is not only a point of departure for Algerian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Moroccan and Tunisian migrants (Sánchez-Montijano and Girona-Raventós, 2017), but is also the transit point for African migration to Europe through the Sahel. The flow of asylum seekers to Egypt, which doubled between 2011 and 2014 (Altai Consulting, 2015), is not surprising. Libya, for its part, serves as the hub of organized smuggling. Undoubt-

edly, the political instability and near-chaos in Libya have certainly allowed the smugglers to exploit the conditions to consolidate their presence, but also, conceivably, to lure migrants wishing to migrate to Europe. The organization of smuggling does not translate into safer conditions for crossing the Mediterranean. For example, in 2015, over 5,700 migrants perished or disappeared during migration, a growth of about 9% compared to 2014; more than 3,770 of that figure died in the Mediterranean (GMDAC, 2015). The Sahel states serve as transit points not only for Sahelian migrants, (Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, etc.), but also for Sub-Saharan African immigrants (Nigeria). For instance, Mauritania is the main transit place for Senegalese migrants (Altai Consulting, 2015). Undoubtedly, both Europe and the North African states perceive this increasing migration as a political, economic and security threat. For the former, it is obvious that this influx represents a political danger due to the rise of right-wing populism domestically. Politicians in Europe have difficulties explaining to their electoral the welcoming of huge numbers of refugees at a time when Europe itself is facing difficult economic challenges. Although the security threat from refugees is minimal – there is no evidence that a large number of terrorists have infiltrated Europe through migration – the fear persists that such penetration is possible. For the North African states, the wave of migrants from the Sahara-Sahel region has also been problematic because a sizable number of migrants decide to remain in Algeria or Egypt; such migration represents an economic burden difficult to assume in times of serious financial challenges. Furthermore, the sexual and labour exploitation that this migration generates is a particularly difficult question to tackle in Europe and North Africa. Many of the women migrants, particularly those from Nigeria, are trafficked for sexual exploitation (Altai Consulting, 2015). Others are trafficked for the purpose of labour exploitation. The existence of “slave markets” of migrants on their way to Libya has now been documented (IOM, 2017; Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017). The choice of the central Mediterranean for migration through the Sahel and northern Africa will remain the main route for African migrants. This is

mainly due to the closing of the eastern Mediterranean route, which was made possible with the signing and implementation of the agreement between the EU and Turkey, on the one hand, and the relative permeability of Libya’s borders, on the other hand. However, neither the closure of the eastern Mediterranean route nor the life-threatening perils posed by the central Mediterranean voyage will dissuade would-be migrants from seeking to cross to Europe. The continued deaths will raise political and ethical issues for the states on both shores of the Mediterranean. The EU has taken numerous initiatives, the most recent being the EU Migration Partnership Framework (June 2016), to address the issue of irregular migrations. They include migrant relocation, military actions against smuggler networks and vessels, but also the launch of “an ambitious External Investment Plan to help create opportunities and tackle the root causes of migration” and “to increase financial and operational support and to invest in long-term economic and social development, security, rule of law and human rights, improving people’s life and tackling the drivers of migration.” (European Commission, 2016). The plan is to partner with “key third countries of origin and transit” and to initiate further agreements, the so called “compacts,” with Sahel states, such as Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali and Ethiopia. The EU also intends to increase its engagement with Tunisia and Libya.

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Awareness of the nexus between the lack of development, on the one hand, and security and migration, on the other hand, is a positive first step in addressing the numerous challenges in the Sahel. However, increasing “financial allocations devoted

² In December 2016, the EU announced the launch of 28 measures to address the root causes of irregular migration in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin to a total amount of EUR 381 million. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-4348_en.pdf

ed to tackling the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement” will certainly not be enough² as long as the EU continues to partner with “key third countries” whose responsibility in continued underdevelopment is great. Working with the Sahelian-North African authoritarian, repressive and corrupt regimes, without some degree of conditionality and verifiable assurance regarding the implementation of good governance and the respect of human rights, will not be enough to stem the waves of migration or of violent extremism. Worse still, state authorities, like those in Mali, “are either complicit in migration, such as by providing migrants free passage in exchange for a toll at roadblocks or by issuing false passports, or that they lack the effective presence and/or capacity to counter human smuggling.” (Molenaar and Van Damme, 2017). Furthermore, some EU Member States must recognize their responsibility in the worsening of the conditions in the Sahel and its vicinity due to military interventions and or collusion between European countries and their multinationals in the corrupt and exploitative behaviour in those states. Last, but not least, cooperation with the internationally recognized but ineffective government in Libya before any determined initiative is taken to restore order and stability in the country will fail to produce stability, not only in the country, but also in the entire North Africa-Sahel region.

Instability and Violent Extremism in the Sahel

The rise of violent extremism hardly occurs in a vacuum; its emergence and the security challenges it represents derive from the internal political and socioeconomic dynamics evolving in each state. The correlation between violent extremism and the domestic socioeconomic and political conditions is indisputable whether in North Africa (Zoubir, 2017), the Sahel (ICG, 2015) or elsewhere. The incapacity of the fragile Sahel states to control parts of their territories, coupled with the conditions enumerated above, allow for the emergence of “safe havens” or uncontrolled/ungoverned spaces in which VEOs

and criminal groups can operate freely. In the Sahel, VEOs become substitutes for state authorities and even provide some basic services to the impoverished local communities. The revenues generated by illicit activities allow the VEOs and their allies among criminal groups to establish a new type of governance that escapes the control of the State as has happened in northern Mali or north-east Niger, for example. Unsurprisingly, “ancestral trade and migration routes between the Sahel and Sahara communities are now often being used for smuggling drugs, migrants or illicit products filling the space left by conflict, weak governance and lack of cross-border cooperation” (OCHA, 2016). This lucrative illicit business results in fierce, often violent, battles for control of those smuggling routes. It also results in official corruption as governments use organized crime as a political resource by allowing their allies to benefit from criminal activities (Lacher, 2012). Furthermore, the nexus between VEOs and traffickers, though real, is often exaggerated as this does not take into account the religious dimension of some of the VEOs who are totally opposed to the consumption or distribution of drugs.³

The conditions of marginalization and disenchantment among the youth in the Sahel are such that those who cannot migrate to find a better life – because they cannot afford the high costs extorted by the smugglers – end up either joining criminal groups or VEOs as a means of survival. In sum, disillusionment with the secular State, fueled by lack of education and jobs, can lead to radicalization that may be channelled by Islamist organizations or even violent jihadi groups (ICG, 2015). In this environment, the Salafi ideology becomes a substitute for the traditional tolerant Sufi Islam practiced in the region.

The Sahel’s VEO network is so complex that it is hard to accurately understand who’s who, who does what, and who’s allied with whom; this is explained by the fact that changes of alliances are regular occurrences. For instance, the notorious Emir Mokhtar Belmokhtar (MBM) broke away from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2012, then merged his own organization with the Movement of One-

³ According to interviews I conducted with security officials and journalists, the drug traffickers pay for the right of passage and for protection, but the VEOs, in general, would not allow the drugs to remain in the area. The same cannot be said about corrupt state officials.

ness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO in French), giving birth to the powerful Salafi Jihadist Murabitun (Almoravides) organization, whose primary objective is to revive the unity and lost supremacy of the Almoravides dynasty, which had ruled for centuries over the area. In December 2015, the organization reunited with AQIM. What is significant is the ability of AQIM and its affiliates to knit close relations with the neglected local Tuareg, Arab Berabiches, and other ethnic communities in northern Mali to which it provides funds and, seemingly, governance. A plethora of relatively autonomous cells and brigades, most of which are linked to AQIM, operate in the Sahel.⁴ One of AQIM's most important allies is the Tuareg group Ansar-ed-Dine, whose troops had begun marching toward Bamako in 2013 before being stopped thanks to the French intervention. An AQIM/Al-Murabitun dissident group pledged allegiance to IS to become, in 2016, the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) under Adnan Abu Walid Sahraoui (Warner, 2017).

All these groups, whatever their religious/ideological leanings, operate in a complicated environment. AQIM and IS affiliates, respectively, are a real nuisance, especially since they carry out attacks against UN personnel, innocent civilians, and French-Malian troops. They also launch attacks in other areas in Burkina Faso, Niger and elsewhere. France's intervention in Mali has succeeded in weakening the groups but not eradicating them. All the intervention really did was to kill a few of the leaders and disperse the groups, but the root causes that generate such groups are still present. In Mali, failure to implement the peace settlement (Algiers Accords) has worsened conditions, as civilians are caught between various groups; they are forced to pay allegiance either to jihadist groups or to the Malian military whose brutality has added to the intricacy of the situation (Sonner and Dietrich 2015).

Securitization policies and military interventions will not resolve the many issues in the Sahel. The EU's awareness of the inevitable nexus between security/migration and development and its willingness to act accordingly through development programmes is praiseworthy but not sufficient. The few hundred mil-

lion euros to support some programmes are simply not enough. There is a real need to deal with the actual roots of the current conditions. One of the roots of radicalization is unemployment and marginalization. Therefore, tackling this issue through genuine development programmes is vital for security in the Sahel-North Africa and Europe. The EU needs to understand that supporting repressive governments as proxies for its security will bring more insecurity.

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⁴ Some of these brigades are: Yusuf Ibn Tashfin, Al-Ansar, Al-Furkân, Tariq Ibn Ziyad, among others. For more details, see: MÈMIER, M. "AQIM et al-Mourabitoun-Le djihad sahélien réunié ?", *Études de l'Ifri*, January 2017, www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/der.memier_aqim-al-mourabitoun_fr_2017.compressed_0.pdf

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