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[In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan](#)

# “It Is a Geopolitical Urgency that the Sahel Be Made a Paradise”

Lessons from Afghanistan for German  
Policy-making in the Sahel

Stefan Friedrich

Will Mali become the new Afghanistan?<sup>1</sup> If it were up to Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of the al-Qaeda group in the Sahel, that is precisely what we could expect. Even before Kabul had fallen completely to the Taliban, he congratulated his Afghani brothers-in-arms with the words “We are winning. Our hour has come.”<sup>2</sup> But even in political Berlin, many wonder what the West’s hasty withdrawal from Kabul means for its involvement in the Sahel. The context of this question: Now the Afghanistan mission has ended, the mission to Mali is by far the largest for the German Bundeswehr. But to what extent can we even compare the two missions? And, despite their pronounced differences, are there lessons from Afghanistan that can be applied to Mali and the Sahel – for the Bundeswehr mission and for the direction of German (development) policy-making? A central difference between Afghanistan and the Sahel is clear to see: Western failure in the Sahel would have a far more direct impact on Germany and Europe than its failure in Afghanistan.

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### **The Sahel Is Not Afghanistan, *but* – There Are Similarities and Differences**

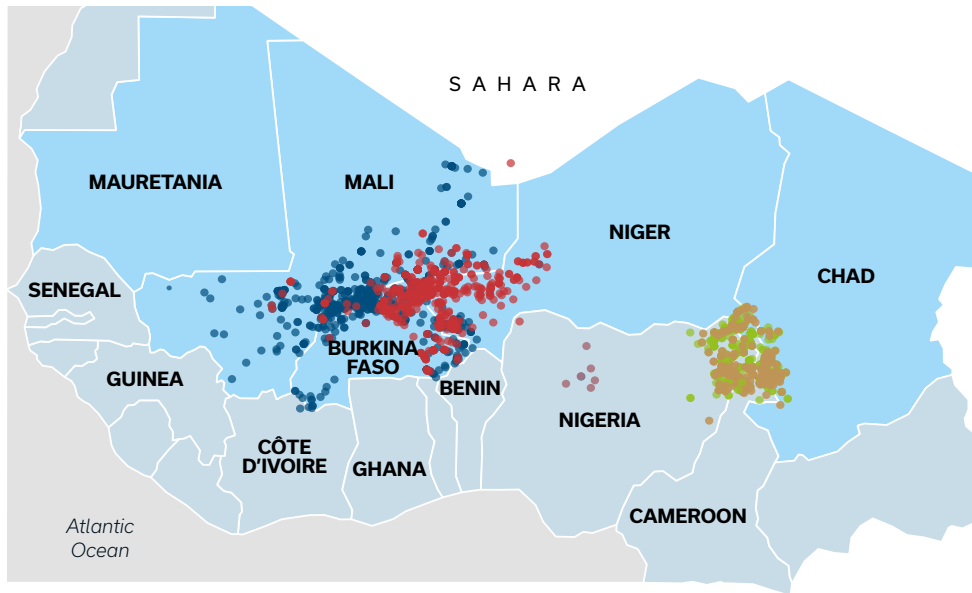
It is certainly important to note that Afghanistan and the Sahel are fundamentally different. Afghanistan has more or less fixed borders with its neighbours, whereas the Sahel region extends over several thousand kilometres from east to west and encompasses at least five countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Some borders of these countries are fluid, and it was only as part of colonial occupation that they were established in their present form. But geographical space is not the only aspect differentiating Afghanistan from the Sahel. Differences in the type of conflict occurring there could hardly be greater. In Afghanistan, the Taliban constitute a dominant group that, even after almost 20 years since having been driven from power, has remained an effective player in the region. There is no such group in the Sahel. There are only solitary, locally (sometimes regionally) active terrorist groups without any

overarching ideological, ethnic, or other form of cohesion. This has given rise to an all-against-all situation. Not counting France’s relatively good relationships with some of the elites in the region, there are no proxies for foreign powers in the Sahel like those that could be observed in Afghanistan (for the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s and the Western powers after 9/11, for instance).

Another significant element from a Western perspective is the fact that there has been no export of terrorism from the Sahel thus far. Unlike Afghanistan, where the 9/11 attacks were planned and prepared, as far as we know not a single terrorist attack in the West originated from the Sahel region. The societies there are familiar with conflict, but – and this is key – none of them (with the possible exception of Chad) are entangled in wars that have gone on for decades.

Despite all the differences, the two regions share common features. For instance, jihadist groups

**Fig. 1: Distribution of Jihadist Groups in the Sahel 2021**



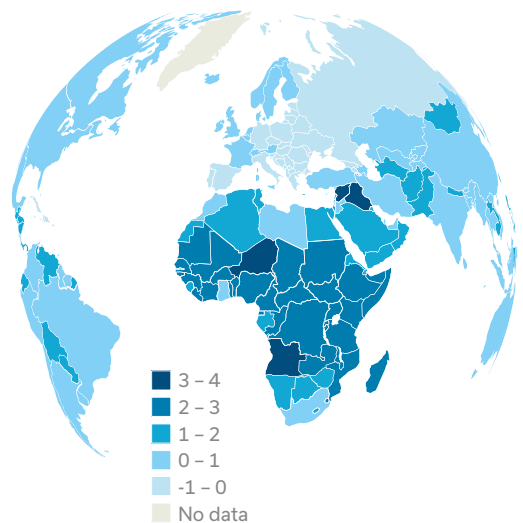
● Ansaru ● Boko Haram ● AQUIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) ● ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara)  
 ● ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province) Source: Own illustration based on German Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) 2021: Hauptaktionsgebiete islamistischer Terrorgruppen und ihrer Verbündeten 2020, used in: Dickow, Helga 2021: Sahel: Implikationen und Folgen der Corona-Krise, bpb, 21 Jan 2021, in: <https://bpb.de/325527> [5 Jan 2022], map: Natural Earth ©.

are active in both. IS and al-Qaeda are active in Afghanistan, while the Sahel sees activity by AQUIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), Boko Haram, ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), and ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province).

*Demographic Growth and Weak States - An Explosive Combination?*

Just like Afghanistan, many Sahel states suffer from a markedly dysfunctional statehood. Key attributes of a functioning state are almost non-existent there. Missing features include effective control of the state's national territory, functional administration, the provision of elementary state services not only in the capitals, but in remote areas (in some regions, such services, by contrast, are now provided by jihadist forces), a functioning, loyal military accepted by the population, assertive security forces, and many more. Serge Michailof, former Director of

**Fig. 2: Expected Demographic Development Worldwide, with a Focus on the Sahel, in Per Cent, 2025-2030**



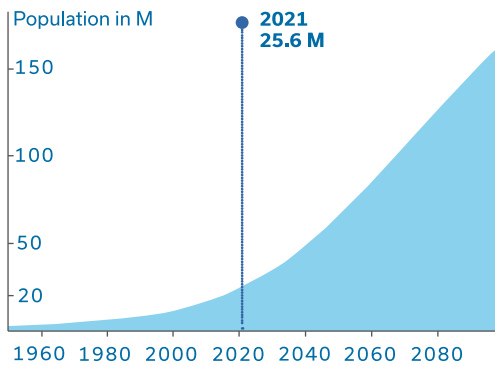
Source: Own illustration based on UN 2019: World Population Prospects 2019, in: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Maps> [1 Dec 2021], map: Natural Earth ©.

the World Bank and of the French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement, AFD) and a proven expert on Afghanistan and West Africa, sees this absence of governmental authority (*institutions régaliennes*) as a central problem for all of these countries and for the efficiency of Western development aid. More on this later.

Another very comparable element is the demographic development in these two regions. Until the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan had one of the highest birth rates worldwide. The average woman bore more than seven children (2000 fertility rate: 7.48 children per woman). In the years thereafter, this number fell dramatically, reaching the – still high – rate of 4.32 in 2019. The birth rate in the Sahel is also very high. It is 5.80 per woman in Chad, 5.92 in Mali, and 6.95 in Niger (the highest in the world).<sup>3</sup>

As figure 2 shows, the entire Sahel belt exhibits the fastest population growth in the world. Overall, it is estimated that 80 per cent of the region’s population is still under 30 years old. The UN expects Niger, which is currently home to more than 25 million people, to double its population by 2041 and exceed the threshold of 50 million.

**Fig. 3: Expected Population Growth in Niger up to the Year 2100**



Source: Own illustration based on World Population Review 2021: Niger Population 2021 (Live), n. 4.

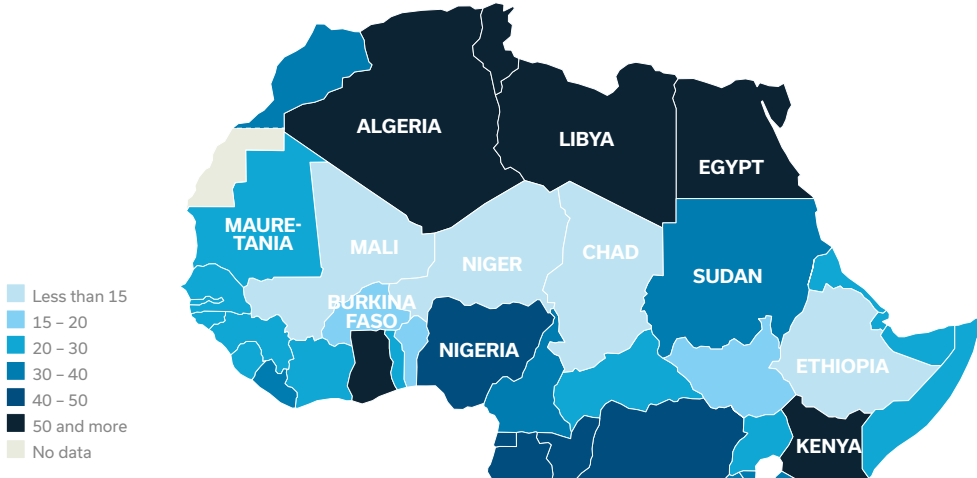
Such population growth naturally exacerbates the already prevailing great social and economic challenges, not least because these countries’ economic development is already stagnating at a very low level. For instance, they are largely agricultural or dependent on raw materials exports. There has been no economic diversification, and experts see little hope that large-scale industrialisation or a powerful service industry can be initiated in the region. We can therefore already expect (and much more so in the future) that entire generations of young people will grow up without proper education or adequate life prospects. Especially with respect to schooling, the outlook for Sahel countries is particularly bleak.

This rapid population growth contrasts with very modest growth in each of the Sahel countries’ economies. While all of them have natural resources to fall back on – there is gold in Mali, precious stones and metals in Niger, and oil in Chad – economic growth over the last few years was modest nevertheless. In Chad, it was 3.2 per cent in 2019, but only 0.8 per cent in 2020 (part of this was due to COVID-19 restrictions); in Niger, 5.9 per cent in 2019 and 3.6 per cent in 2020; and in Mali around 4 per cent for the last few years.<sup>4</sup> In virtually all of the region’s countries, this meant that population growth continuously exceeded the economic growth rates. The countries are in a poverty trap.

#### *Radicalisation Processes and Migration Flows*

The comparison between Afghanistan and the situation in the Sahel has repeatedly been made over the last ten years, and there has been no lack of warnings. For instance, the Algerian daily newspaper *El Watan* printed the following back in September 2010 (even before French troops were sent to stabilise Mali): “It is clear that the situation in the Sahel is dangerous, even explosive. It demands an urgent reaction by the states in the region before others make a second Afghanistan out of it.”<sup>5</sup> And in 2015, Serge Michailof, who has already been mentioned, wrote, the “situation in the northern Sahel is very reminiscent of Afghanistan at the beginning of the 2000s, when agricultural collapse,

**Fig. 4: Population with at Least Secondary Education in the Sahel Region 2015 in Per Cent**



Source: Own illustration based on Kaps, Alisa / Schewe, Ann-Kathrin / Klingholz, Reiner 2019: Afrikas demografische Vorreiter. Wie sinkende Kinderzahlen Entwicklung beschleunigen, Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung, Jun 2019, p. 12, in: <https://bit.ly/3JLI5JN> [5 Jan 2022], map: Natural Earth ©.

state corruption, and the absence of the state in rural areas paved the way for the Taliban”.<sup>6</sup>

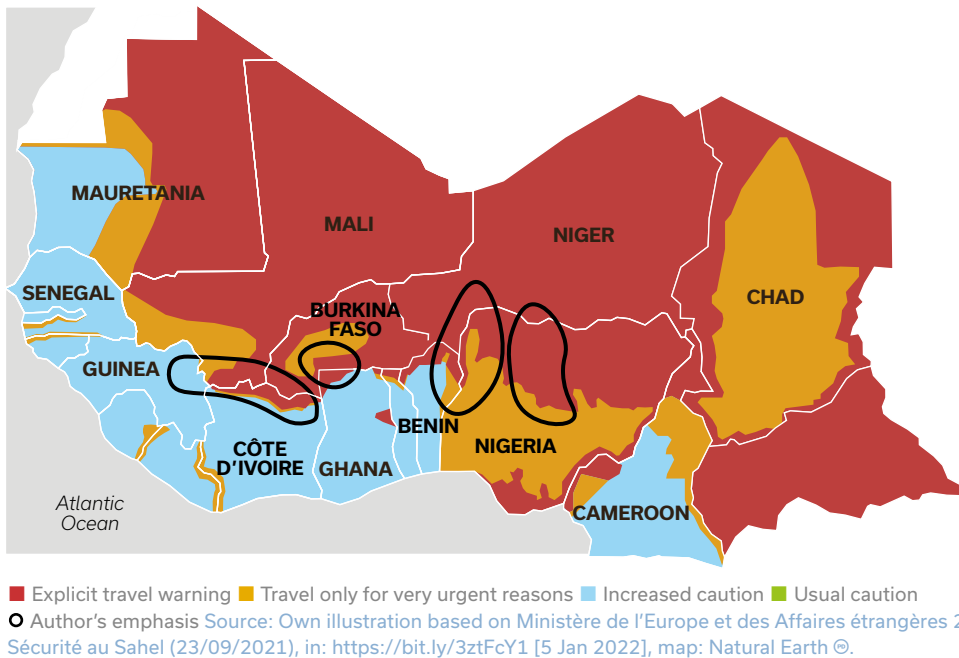
The fact that the September 11 attackers were trained in Afghanistan shows that such developments can present distant societies with very concrete threats. Are we facing a similar threat from the Sahel?

The lack of prospects of an entire generation in the Sahel region could certainly make many young men – and also women – more receptive to radical ideologies. But even without a direct terrorist threat, which would hit the countries themselves at first, the enormous population growth will be a huge challenge for the neighbouring continent of Europe in the mid- to long term. The hopelessness in their home countries combined with the hope for a better life somewhere in Europe communicated via social media is already generating massive migration movements from the Sahel region across North Africa towards Europe. The pressure will further increase in the future, especially when anchors of stability to the north (the Maghreb) and south of the Sahara (countries on the Gulf of Guinea) come under pressure from developments in the

Sahel region. Erol Yayboke of the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) summarised the problem as follows:

“Multiple overlapping factors drive irregular migration through the Sahel. Mostly young and male, the majority of migrants cite economic reasons as primary considerations [...]. However, this livelihood insecurity is linked to other destabilizing factors. Governance is absent or poor. Basic services in remote areas are scarce. Trust in government is low, and thus violence is common. Extremist organizations have unleashed an unprecedented wave of attacks on civilians in recent years. Climate change compounds this insecurity. Deadly conflicts over resources have increased and now account for more deaths than extremism. Temperatures in the Sahel are rising 1.5 times faster than in the rest of the world, resulting in alternating extremes of droughts and floods and in turn displacing entire communities and reducing agricultural yields. Add to the mix insufficient information about the dangers of migration and significant pull factors – including regular access to social media and stylized visions of life in Europe – and it is no surprise that people embark on perilous journeys.”<sup>7</sup>

**Fig. 5: Security Situation in the Sahel 2021**



All these factors and particularly the combination of a precarious security situation, dynamic demographic development, and a poor economic outlook create a highly explosive mixture – for the society in the Sahel, but also potentially for the world beyond.

*Growing Political Instability despite International Interventions*

These developments lead to a greater measure of political instability, too. For instance, in the last 15 months alone, Mali has witnessed two military coups, and the long-time president of Chad was killed by shots fired from within his inner circle (the details remain unclear, and government has been assumed by a military council under the leadership of the late president's adopted son, Mahamat Idriss Déby). New elections are to be held in each country only after a transitional phase of 18 months – a timetable that has now been extended to five years by the Malian transitional government. And on 24 January 2022, rumours became reality, since there was another coup in Burkina Faso following

massive protests against the government, which has proven unable to improve the country's fragile security situation. Like Afghanistan in the 2010s, the Sahel region experiences a continuously deteriorating security situation despite the deployment of a wide range of military stabilisation missions and extensive engagement in the area of development cooperation.

French troops were the first on the ground with Operation Serval (2013 to 2014), followed by Operation Barkhane (2014 to 2021), involving up to 5,100 French soldiers. After terminating Barkhane, the fight against terrorism will be continued under the multinational Task Force Takuba, which was formed in March 2020. The Bundeswehr has been deployed to the Sahel since 2013. In Mali, German troops were involved in the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and in the UN-led MINUSMA stabilisation mission.<sup>8</sup> While the EUTM Mali mandate encompasses all five Sahel countries, where the G5<sup>9</sup> Sahel Joint Force, among others, receives military advice and training, the UN peacekeeping mission is limited to Mali and Niger. In Niger, the

Bundeswehr is also involved in training special forces.<sup>10</sup> Despite all these efforts, the security situation has become increasingly tense for each of the past eight years. This is illustrated by French Foreign Ministry maps of the Sahel region: they include more and more areas with explicit warnings that they should be avoided (*formellement déconseillé*). In the period between August 2020 and June 2021 alone, additional areas on the south flank of the Sahel region were designated as dark red. Travellers are therefore explicitly advised against areas in northern Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Nigeria (see fig. 5). Particularly with respect to Burkina Faso, the French maps strikingly demonstrate how much the situation has deteriorated in this central Sahel country over recent years (see fig. 6).

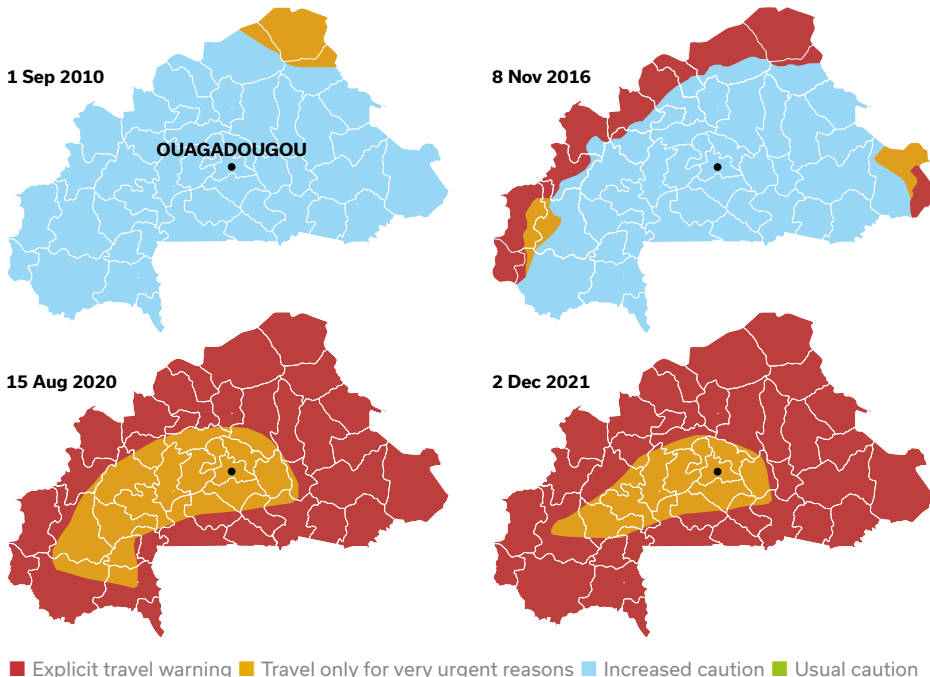
The differences between Afghanistan and the Sahel region, for which more examples could be cited, are certainly significant. But there are

also comparable areas. Here, it is important to emphasise that there can be no simple transfer of lessons from Afghanistan to the Sahel; nevertheless, any policy considerations in the Sahel region should take account of experience gained from the failure of the Afghanistan mission with attention to the very specific conditions prevailing in the Sahel region.

### Central Challenges in the Sahel Region

The Sahel region faces a number of challenges – from economic and political to demographic and security-related. A distinction should be made between challenges arising from the Sahel itself, its location, its traditions, its culture, and so forth, on the one hand, and those emanating from eight years of international efforts to help stabilise the region and defend it against terrorist threats, on the other.

**Fig. 6: Deterioration of the Security Situation in Burkina Faso 2010–2021**



Source: Own illustration based on Courbois, Christian 2021: Update of the French MEAE's vigilance map, concerning Burkina Faso from September 1, 2010 to November 30, 2021, via Twitter, 30 Nov 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3pUIDEZ> [5 Jan 2022], based on information from the Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, in: <https://bit.ly/32PvpQc> [5 Jan 2022], maps: Natural Earth ©.

### *Sahel-Specific Challenges*

We will not review all of the above-mentioned challenges. Yet there are challenges that have still not been explicitly addressed due to a focus on the comparison with Afghanistan and that must not be neglected. Time and again, experts on the region refer to fundamental conflicts that were present even before the spread of jihadist forces in the region, such as the fact that Mali's territory encompasses two completely different cultural areas: the north, which tends to be Arab in culture, and the south, which is more of a "black African" culture. The founding of Mali and the establishment of its capital in Bamako

(in the south) made the southern part of the country dominant, something that is difficult for northern groups such as the Tuareg to accept. Many observers think that one reason for the rebellion in the north of Mali in 2012, which was put down only with French intervention, is precisely this north-south polarisation, and not so much a religiously motivated conflict. Religious elements first came into play when the Tuareg allied themselves with jihadist elements, which then became dominant.

In any case, jihadists are becoming more and more adept at capitalising on existing ethnic conflicts, such as the land usage conflict between



Forced migration: A woman who fled from armed militants in her home region is seen in a camp for internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso. [Source: © Zohra Bensemra, Reuters.](#)



Fulani shepherds and Dogon farmers. Given the rapid population growth already mentioned, a conflict between the younger generation and the old elites is manifesting itself in various countries. Social conflicts, too, – between urban and rural, traditional and modern, and, of course, rich and poor – can be observed. All these conflicts overlap, which makes them extremely difficult to resolve. The difficult labour market situation has already been addressed. Then there are the challenges arising from the ways in which advancing climate change is affecting societies. Progressive desertification of many areas in the Sahel region can already be observed and is reducing crop yields. This means that the most important economic sector, agriculture, is also coming under severe pressure – even as population continues to grow.

## Europe does not have the option of simply abandoning the region entirely.

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### *Challenges Due to International Involvement*

One of the contradictions of all international interventions is that they themselves may become obstacles for conflict resolution. Several observers have noted that the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) process initiated during the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement primarily became a business model for local players in the region. Some observers go as far as to say that many players in Mali have no interest whatsoever in bringing the DDR process to a close, since that would dry up sources of income.

And as long as international partners assume responsibility for tasks that the state should rightfully carry out, and do so free of charge, local partners have little interest in assuming it themselves. Another problem particularly evident in Mali is that the number of aid organisations and international donors has grown so great that they are impossible to keep track of;

there is little if any coordination of support, and they are impeding each other's efforts to expend funds. There is also competition for the best local talent, ultimately impairing the establishment of local structures (see below).

### **Policy Recommendations – A Lot Is Being Done, but Are We Doing Enough, and Are We Doing the Right Things?**

There are definitely no easy solutions for the Sahel. However, it is important to remember that Europe in particular does not have the option of simply abandoning the region entirely. If we were to do that, the problems there would, sooner or later, reach Europe in the form of destabilisation of states in our immediate vicinity in North Africa, the destabilisation of anchors of stability on the south and west flanks of the Sahara (Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, etc.), increasing migratory pressure towards Europe, and many more. Inaction is not an option, as the facts clearly show. But what should be done? And what can actually be done?

First, it is important to note something very positive: a very great deal is already being done. The international community is involved in the region in a variety of ways – militarily, economically, politically, and with humanitarian and civil society efforts. Many billions of dollars and euros are being invested to make the situation on the ground safer and advance development in the region's countries. Germany is especially active in those countries defined as anchors of stability, and which are being funded as part of so-called reform partnerships.

The discussion above shows that the security situation in the region continues to deteriorate despite international involvement; meanwhile, three of the five countries in the Sahel are governed by putschists, and economic growth lags far behind demographic growth.

Below are five areas in which the international community could improve its approaches to and impact on developments in the region.<sup>11</sup>

*1. Military Involvement: Moving Away from Pure Counterterrorism and towards Providing Secure Living Space for Ever-larger Parts of the Population*

Combatting terrorist groups must not be the sole objective of military intervention. The elimination of terrorist groups is a positive development – and there may be scenarios in which this is the only thing that external players are able to achieve. But terrorist groups come and go, especially in the Sahel. What will be decisive for the region is whether there are secure places for the population to live. Creating such spaces can start small and would ideally increase incrementally to ever-greater areas of the Sahel. Military involvement must have a positive effect on the population’s sense of security.

It is paramount here that the local military organisations in particular achieve these positive

effects. It will be indispensable that local armies be held to their responsibility and that they fulfil this role. International troops should be used primarily for training and advice. The critical security work must be done by native military organisations, in order that the feeling of security is sustainable and not dependent on the presence of international troops.

Many observers call for local military organisations to be advised by small teams with flexible missions. While the EUTM “tanker” does excellent work, it often appears too inflexible for local needs and requires an excessive number of troops for its own security. This leads to costs that are disproportionate to utility. The personnel used for the training in question should also be reconsidered. Various observers complain, for example, that quick trainer rotation (usually every six months) and the fact that many of them have insufficient intercultural expertise



Sustainable security: International troops should be used primarily for training and advice and not become indispensable in the long run. Source: © Emilie Regnier, Reuters.

tends to impede the creation of robust structures and a relationship of trust between trainers and local forces. Nor does this “tanker” make it particularly credible that misconduct by political leaders from partner countries could actually be sanctioned. The EUTM mission and associated structures within the EU and the partner countries are simply too slow and complicated. The political will of the partner countries is decisive here. The fact that the governments in Mali, and possibly Burkina Faso, have brought or are planning to bring the paramilitary Wagner Group from Russia into the country as a security contractor should also be interpreted as a sign of dissatisfaction with support provided by the international community.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, military presence alone cannot achieve long-term stabilisation successes; it must be coupled with measures targeting the underlying challenges.<sup>13</sup>

## *2. Involvement in Establishing State Structures: Citizens Must Feel that the State Is Performing Its Functions*

The problems in the Sahel will definitely not be solved by purely military means. Ultimately, the support respectively the establishment of the states will be decisive. This will require greatly increased effort on the part of international donors to all countries of the Sahel so that the state can prove – also to its population – that it is functional. The aforementioned Michailof views this as one of the biggest failures of the Afghanistan mission: “The fatal error was relying too much on the power of Western forces, failing to establish a national army and police forces early enough, and neglecting the reconstruction of functional local governments.”<sup>14</sup>

It is important that it really be local institutions that ensure services (health, social services, education, etc.) for the population. Because of the important role local security actors may play in this context, these should be integrated into international donors’ development efforts. However, donors are very often (no doubt owing to negative experiences in other contexts) far

too hesitant and restrained to do more.<sup>15</sup> In this context, it is also important to proactively tackle the problem of the “crisis economy”. Approaches involving international players poaching the best talent in the country for work on their own projects are not expedient. As long as international players pay many times the salary that can be earned in local administration, there will always be a trend towards bleeding national administrations dry. Ultimately functional, effective administrations can be organised only if this brain drain to international organisation structures stops. Michailof speaks of parallel administrations in which salaries are sometimes five to even 40 times higher than in normal public administrations.<sup>16</sup>

## **Unabated population growth in the region poses a challenge to the future not only for the affected countries themselves, but also for neighbouring countries.**

There is a need for a binding agreement among all international organisations, including the UN, EU, and others, that establishes a cap on salaries. This must be based on the salary structure in local administrations. If this is not done, the development of state structures is doomed to failure in the long run. Besides salary, it is of course critical that administrative positions be filled based on qualifications and merit.

## *3. Additional Investment in Agriculture*

It has already been mentioned that, in addition to the exploitation of certain natural resources, agriculture forms the backbone of economic development in Sahel countries. Against this background and the need to create as many jobs as possible, greater consideration should be given to promoting agriculture. A comprehensive, decentralised irrigation programme with massive support from the international



community should play a vital role here.<sup>17</sup> Also for this, a secure environment (see point 1) is critical.

In addition to these activities, massive support should also be lent to large cross-regional projects aimed at erecting a Great Green Wall in the Sahel. Here, Germany, apparently unlike the French AFD, is involved only as part of EU funding. This is despite the fact that the project's sponsoring organisation, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, is based in Bonn.<sup>18</sup>

#### *4. Greater Focus on Demography and Greater Modesty in Civil Society Goals*

Given the extremely rapid population growth, it is imperative for the international community to pay more attention to this challenge, even though international donors are loathe to do so. But the Sahel countries are trapped by the current population growth to an especially great degree and have no alternative “if they want to avoid the Malthusian collapse that threatens”.<sup>19</sup> Unabated population growth in the region poses a challenge to the future not only for affected countries themselves, but also, as indicated above, for neighbouring countries.

And the discussion of whether, in light of enormous problems facing the region, the international community should insist on compliance with all desirable principles from the outset, must remain open. The establishment of structures that are formally democratic but not so much in practice, might not be desirable either. Initially, the priority should be to establish structures with which the state can demonstrate its ability to act. Intermediate solutions should be allowed, and they do not signal that the goal of democratic development has been abandoned.

#### *5. Expanding the Field of View: Supporting the Central Sahel and the Anchors of Stability around It*

In public discussions in Germany, the mission to the Sahel region is often referred to as the “Mali mission”. Although the majority of German military forces in the region are currently deployed

to Mali, our focus should not be restricted to that country.<sup>20</sup> French Foreign Ministry maps showing the security situation in West Africa are not the only evidence that evermore territory is becoming insecure, even in areas of countries that had previously been considered anchors of stability in the region. One example is the spread of insecurity south from Burkina Faso across the borders of Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin.<sup>21</sup>

Currently we may still be in a position to provide these countries with greater economic, political, and, if necessary, military support in order to slow the creeping process of heightened security threats and possibly even roll them back.

### **Conclusion**

Shortly after the fall of Kabul and the withdrawal of the last NATO soldiers, some voices accused the West of throwing in the towel too soon. Even the former Co-Chairman of the green Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung believes that the West often lacks strategic patience. And “liberal democracies have trouble maintaining military missions over long periods and weathering setbacks”.<sup>22</sup>

The die has been cast in Afghanistan, and the West has withdrawn. However, in the Sahel the key now is not to retreat, but to set the right course that will allow the region to develop sufficient strength to stand on its own two feet. It does not seem to be too late for this. But we will need perseverance, the right strategy, and, of course, the support of the population, both here and there. It will not be easy, nor does it have to go according to René Billaz, who called it a “geopolitical urgency that the Sahel be made a paradise”.<sup>23</sup> It will be enough if the countries in the region could realise more of their potential – to their own advantage, but also to that of their neighbours to the north and south.

*– translated from German –*

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**Dr. Stefan Friedrich** is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Sub-Saharan Africa Department.

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