Other Topics

The Situation in the Sahel

Consequences for International Engagement in the Region

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For many years, the Sahel region has been a focus of foreign, security, and development policy in Germany and the EU. Despite significant engagement on the part of the international community in the wake of Operation Serval, France's successful military intervention against terrorist groups in Mali in January 2013, the security situation has continued to deteriorate year-on-year. Not only is this instability caused by jihadist organisations such as GSIM and EIGS[1], but also fuelled by local, often ethnic conflicts, armed militias, and organised crime. What is the background of the worsening situation and what are the consequences for Europe and Germany's support for the Sahel states[2]?

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Background

In the five years from 2014 to 2019, data supplied by ACLED (an NGO specialising in conflict analysis) clearly shows a dramatic increase in political violence in the Sahel. The number of victims in the region doubled to more than 5,360 between 2018 and 2019 alone.[3] And these are merely the victims who are known of and confirmed – to the extent this is even possible in the region. After talking to refugees from central Mali and local politicians in the Tillabéri region of Niger, it seems reasonable to assume that the number of direct and indirect victims of violence in the Sahel is likely to be higher still.[4] Civilians are those most affected by the unstable situation, either directly through attacks on their villages, or indirectly by being forced to leave due to losing their livelihoods. Farmers find they can no longer cultivate their fields, while cattle breeders lose their herds to thieves or are forced to hand over some of their cattle to armed groups as "levies". Indirectly, the insecurity means markets can no longer open or many people can no longer travel to them. Many schools in the affected regions are closed, eroding their already limited capacity to provide education and training.

Yet it is not only the civilian population that is affected in these countries. Above all, the security forces are directly targeted by terrorist groups seeking to create ungoverned spaces and establish their own para-state structures. Many regions have no security forces at all or only a very limited presence at a few isolated posts. The army, gendarmerie and police force suffer a high death toll. For example, in early November 2019 at least 49 soldiers were killed in Mali during an attack on a military camp in northeast Indelimane alone. According to security experts, Mali's army has an extremely high death rate relative to the number of soldiers in the field. The attacks on military camps and police stations in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in 2019 (in In-Atès, Chinegodar, Indelimane, and elsewhere) not only demonstrated the capability of terrorist groups to mount complex and sophisticated attacks but unfortunately also highlighted the inability of the region's armed forces to adequately secure and defend even closely guarded positions. The armed forces of Mali and Burkina Faso are in a particularly lamentable state, and this is in spite of the massive support they have received for several years now, predominantly Mali's security forces.

Large parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have long since ceased to be under state control, including northern and central Mali, the north and east of Burkina Faso, and northwest Niger. Terrorist groups have taken hold in these

areas, which have also witnessed the emergence of self-defence militias (often ethnic-based). These militias, such as Koglweogo in Burkina Faso, often have strong local roots and replace the state. These self-defence groups have either been set up to counter the terrorist threat or, as is the case with Koglweogo, have spent many years trying to uphold law and order in regions where state governance is either absent or impotent. This development is exemplified by Dan Na Ambassagou, an ethnic Dogon militia in central Mali. It is accused of perpetrating attacks against members of the Peul[5] community while seeing itself as the Dogon people's protector against terrorist groups and other bandits. Following the massacre in the central Malian village of Ogossagou, a government order for this Dogon militia to disband proved ineffective because the government had neither the means nor – as some observers believe – the will to enforce it.[6]

> **The escalation in the region has also been fuelled by the increased proliferation of weapons, the lack of prospects, and the breaking up of traditional leadership structures.**
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Against this backdrop, local and ethnic conflicts have been escalating for many years, further complicating the situation. Many of these local conflicts are longstanding, with some simmering under the surface while others are clearly visible. Local authorities have often been incapable of containing them, however, the current escalation ensued due to these conflicts being instrumentalised by armed groups – not only terrorists – and to some extent by the state. It has also been fuelled by the increased proliferation of weapons, the effects of demographic growth with its associated lack of prospects for young people, and the breaking up of traditional leadership structures. Precisely the latter has been a significant factor in the current rise in violence. Traditional local authorities such

as village chiefs and religious leaders are either no longer accepted or are the targets of terrorist groups, leading many areas to experience the demise of another stabilising factor.

The involvement of members of the Peul ethnic group in numerous terrorist groups poses an extremely complex and highly dangerous problem. This ethnic group is scattered throughout West Africa, from Guinea and Senegal to Nigeria and Chad. Many Peul are traditional cattle breeders, who continue to drive their herds thousands of kilometres across West Africa. The most prominent Peul is probably Amadou Koufa, the founder of Katiba Macina in central Mali.[7] Amadou Koufa is now one of the main leaders of GSIM, a group affiliated to Al-Qaeda. This is why many people in the region consider the Peul to be allied with terrorists. This is a dangerous amalgam, as it means an entire ethnic group is under suspicion as terrorist sympathisers, which could further stoke ethnic conflict given that they are located throughout the whole of West Africa. Unfortunately, this generalisation about the Peul finds resonance in Europe, too.[8]

We cannot overestimate the significance of local conflicts in terms of the scale of the region's instability. Many terrorist groups cleverly exploit these conflicts, taking advantage of the government's absence or poor reputation to portray themselves as the trusted guardians of order (as do other militia groups). However, in many regions the state's absence is not a new phenomenon. Since gaining independence, most of the Sahel countries have as yet failed to exercise full control over their territory and to consolidate their state presence in every corner. This is hardly surprising in view of the vast distances involved, poor infrastructure and limited resources. This loss of control has been worsening especially since the near-collapse of Mali in 2012/2013, and the fall of Burkina Faso's longtime President Blaise Compaoré in 2014.

Therefore, the causes of the current crisis in the Sahel have their origins in the distant past, and are closely linked to the fragility of the states in this region. The precarious security situation is

not solely a consequence of the activities of terrorist groups. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most of the original leaders of the jihadist groups came from the north, moving into northern Mali from civil war-torn Algeria. The collapse of Libya after the fall of longstanding dictator Gaddafi in 2011, also played a key role in building up and arming the number of armed groups in northern Mali during 2012. This combination of external and internal factors ignited the powder keg that is the Sahel.

The international community has been heavily involved in the region since at least 2013. After terrorist groups had sidelined the separatist militias of certain Tuareg groups and established their rule in northern Mali, Timbuktu and Gao, the army staged a coup in the capital, Bamako. This led to even greater chaos in this already weak state. French President Francois Hollande decided to deploy troops to prevent terrorist groups in the north of Mali advancing on the south. This ultimately successful deployment began in January 2013 under the name Operation Serval. Subsequently, the international community sought a diplomatic resolution to the crisis – which was considered to be an internal North-South conflict in Mali – by means of the Algiers Accord signed in 2015. At the same time, France continued the fight against terrorist groups by launching Operation Barkhane, a UN Mission to stabilise Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), was established and training and advisory missions to strengthen local security forces (EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger) were set up. In parallel, development cooperation for the Sahel was expanded. Germany participated considerably – for the first time in West Africa – in both EUTM and MINUSMA.

The focus of the international community was clearly and almost exclusively directed towards Mali. Only France's anti-terror Operation Barkhane took a Sahel-wide approach. The German public also continues to perceive the conflict in the Sahel as an operation in Mali.

Fragile states, underdevelopment, vast space: Many experts have long understood that instability affects the whole Sahel region.
Source: © Yves Herman, Reuters.

instability affects the whole Sahel region in light of its fragile states, underdevelopment and the vast areas involved. Today, it is above all the three states of the central Sahel – Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger – that stare disaster in the face.

What Conclusions Can Be Drawn from This?

The international community's focus on terror and terrorist groups thus only tackles one element of the problem of instability in the region. To some extent, it focuses more on one of many symptoms rather than on the cause of the problem. French expert Mathieu Pellerin sums up the current situation with regard to jihadist groups as follows: jihadism in the Sahel is predominantly glocal and should not primarily be understood "[...] as a uniform movement of a religious nature, but rather as an agglomeration of local insurgent hotspots fuelled by social, political and economic divisions, some of which go back many years".[9]

Therefore, conflicts in the Sahel region cannot be reduced to a simple fight against terrorism. In resolving this problem, the deradicalization of terrorists and their sympathisers can thus only represent a minor part of the solution – to mention just one element of the traditional strategy for tackling religiously motivated terrorism. This is because experts largely agree that religion is not a significant factor behind the growth of terrorist groups in the Sahel. Islamic extremism may play a role among some recruits, particularly in the leadership cadres, but its role is negligible among the mass of GSIM and EIGS members.[10] The complexity of motivations is often overlooked, in terms of both terrorist recruitment and the causes of local conflicts, which are often oversimplified. For example, the much-described conflict between crop farmers and herders – and its Cain and Abel

While this is understandable in view of the Bundeswehr's involvement in the EUTM and MINUSMA missions, which are limited to Mali, it does not reflect the reality in a region where borders have little significance.

This narrow focus on Mali is all the more surprising in view of the fact that Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad came together to form the G5 Sahel alliance back in 2014. Its declared aim is to strengthen the bond between economic development and security in the region. In 2015, in the wake of the refugee crisis and images of illegal migrants on the beaches of the Mediterranean in Libya, Niger came to the fore as the hub of the "Central Mediterranean route", including in Germany. However, until recently, and particularly in Germany, engagement in Mali and Niger was considered to be virtually separate, with stabilisation and anti-terror operations occurring in one place while the development and management of illegal flows of migrants happened elsewhere. Whereas those who know the region have long understood that

type portrayal – does not correspond to reality. To cite just one example, in the North West of Niger, two traditional herder populations, Tuareg and Peul, are in conflict. And this also is an oversimplification. Moreover, the potential for conflict arising from land grabbing (from the point of view of those affected) by wealthy Malians or Nigeriens using the land laws of the modern state is often underestimated. In many regions of Burkina Faso, the officials of Eaux et Forets, the water and forestry commissions, attract hatred for handing out punishments to traditional hunters. They are considered to be the corrupt representatives of a national environmental protection system that is incomprehensible to the rural population.[11]

Even today, there seems to be little appreciation of the complexity of the situation. It is true that the main security threat is currently from terrorist groups, but the greatest threat to stability in the region remains fragile state structures combined with poverty and lack of prospects for an extremely young and growing population.

The absence or fragility of state structures has consequences that call into question the governmental and social cohesion of these states.

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In view of this, the international community's military and political engagement tends to focus on combating the symptoms of terrorism or on trying to fill the void left by the state in many key functions. Notwithstanding, Operation Barkhane cannot be a long-term replacement for national security forces, nor can international actors such as MINUSMA permanently assume the functions that should be carried out above all by governments in the region. When international engagement began in 2013, the hope was that governments of the region would be able to gradually assume their core functions, supported and protected by the international community. Unfortunately, this hope has turned out to be illusory. France's Chief of Defence Staff François Lecointre hit the nail on the head when, speaking of Mali, he said: "Our optimism has been dashed and Barkhane has not been accompanied by a return of the state apparatus or by an effective overhaul of the armed forces, particularly in Mali. Furthermore, the concrete implementation of the peace and reconciliation agreement has remained stalled, with chaos persisting in areas such as Azawad or Liptako, where the presence of the state, if maintained, was not accepted and was even contested."[12]

There is almost unanimous agreement among experts that the main problem lies in the region's state structures, that is to say, their fragility or complete absence, along with their reputation for inefficiency and corruption. The consequences of this extend far beyond the problematic security situation and call into question the overall governmental and social cohesion of these states. Even in relatively safe and stable regions such as western Mali, the state wields little authority. For example, a Malian prefect reported that he received scant respect from the local people during his work in the Kayes region. This was partly because the limited amount of government resources that he was able to mobilise was so small compared to the money that expatriate Malians sent back to their villages. It meant that nobody even imagined they could get something from the Malian government.[13]

More of the Same, or a New Start for International Engagement?

To date, the international community has largely relied on three approaches: military counter-terrorism, training local security forces, and classic development cooperation. The rationale behind its engagement so far can be summarised as follows: international troops involved in actions such as Barkhane and MINUSMA should give countries of the region the time they need to build up their own forces. To this end, they are provided with training and material support by missions such as EUTM. In parallel, the

provision of non-military development assistance aims to build social cohesion and create economic opportunities.

Unfortunately, this three-pronged approach of stabilisation by international troops, training and material aid, and development cooperation has produced no lasting effect analogous to the efforts in Afghanistan. On the contrary, particularly in Mali, the country's ruling elites have shown little interest in actively pursuing this approach by improving their security capabilities. They are instead happy to rely on the likes of MINUSMA to provide security for national elections or transport Malian politicians safely from A to B. Meanwhile, popular support for international engagement is dwindling. Throughout

the Sahel, mainly France but also MINUSMA are coming under fire. Even among elite circles, there is a growing feeling of hostility towards the country's former colonial rulers. Conspiracy theorists accuse France of pursuing its own interests by keeping terrorist groups in the region alive – otherwise wouldn't the French army have wiped them out long ago?[14]

But what is the alternative? In principle, the international community's substantial commitment to development and security is certainly the right one. But it lacks a clear focus on the key factors that are vital for stabilising the region. These particularly relate to the core functions of the region's governments. Therefore, establishing a new direction for international engagement primarily

What's next? In principle, the international community's substantial commitment is certainly the right one – but it lacks a clear focus. Source: © Sylvain Liechti, Reuters.

entails setting clearer priorities, demanding greater commitment from partners, and increasing the efficiency of military support measures.

1. Many experts believe that efforts undertaken by the international community should predominantly focus on the core functions of the state.[15] Not only should this involve improved support for the region's armed and security forces, but also for all its core functions, such as the legal system, education, territorial administration, health care, and central government institutions. Even with the best will in the world and making optimum use of their resources, there is no way that the Sahel states can increase expenditure on their security apparatus while at the same time providing the investment in education and administration that is so desperately needed. These are some of the poorest countries in the world. Here too, the international community has to step in. On top of these deficiencies in basic governmental functions comes the aforementioned inadequate infrastructure and the vast geographical areas involved. Any effective control of state territory can only be achieved through improved infrastructure (especially roads). The international community can provide support with this too. Yet, a resounding success is unlikely to be attained if the considerable resources announced by the international community are not adequately concentrated, but rather scattered amongst several equally important priorities.[16]

2. This should be accompanied by more targeted support for the countries, with clearly formulated objectives in line with the principle known in Germany as *Fördern und Fordern* – providing support but making demands. For example, despite the international community's repeated demands, the Malian armed forces still have no personnel management system worthy of the name. This should no longer be tolerated. As it stands, nobody can say with any great certainty how many Malian soldiers are actually in Bamako, who is serving in what units, and where. How can training programmes for the Malian armed forces be expected to produce effective results under these conditions? States should also be held accountable in terms of revenue. The chairman of Mali's National Employer's Council recently had strong words to say about the country's extremely low customs revenues, saying it was an example of an import economy plagued by corruption, nepotism and the power of the Malian state to increase its own revenues.[17]

3. There is also the potential for improvement in current approaches to military support. For instance, training could certainly be improved if there were greater continuity with regard to EUTM leadership and trainers. Even the EUTM leadership is currently on a six-month rotation. In terms of time alone, this makes it impossible to build strong relationships, learn about the country, and consolidate projects. However, the German training initiative provides a positive model. It entails working with local partners in the armed forces to identify needs and define projects. This creates a relationship of mutual trust as it allows the stakeholders to get to know each other.

The severity of the current situation in the Sahel means international involvement in the region is vital. However, the international community cannot substitute the region's governments over the long run. National governments at least need to assume the majority of their core functions, and the sooner the better. The aim must, therefore, be to support governments in fulfilling their core functions and provide aid for developing infrastructure. This should not only be done through supporting priority areas such as security and administration, but also – in light of the known governance problems – through conditioning.

– translated from German –

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1 GSIM (Groupe de Soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans) is an Al-Qaeda-related association of several terrorist groups. EIGS stands for Etat Islamique dans le Grand Sahara, a terrorist group that claims to be part of the so-called Islamic state.

2 In this article, the geographical name Sahel refers to the countries of the G5 Sahel group: Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. The focus of this article is on development in the three states of the central Sahel: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The equally dramatic situation in the Lake Chad region where Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad meet is not dealt with here.

3 ACLED 2020: Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2020, 23 Jan 2020, in: https://bit.ly/2L2ipu3[4 May 2020].

4 Interviews conducted by the author in Bamako and Niamey 2019 and 2020.

5 Peul is the French name for Fulani or Fulbe.

6 The Ogossagou massacre of March 2019 led to the deaths of more than 130 people but remains unresolved.

7 Roger, Benjamin 2018: Mali: Amadou Koufa, le visage peul d'Al-Qaida, jeuneafrique, 20 Nov 2018, in: https://bit.ly/3dgjNp1 [4 May 2020].

8 In December 2019 the prominent French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy claimed in Paris Match magazine that a "pre-genocidal situation" existed in Nigeria against the country's Christians, driven by the Peul ethnic group to which the current Nigerian president belongs. Lévy, Bernard-Henri 2019, "Au Nigeria, on massacre les chréstiens", le SOS de Bernard-Henri Lévy, Paris Match, 5 Dec 2019, in: https://bit.ly/3b1v6jb [4 May 2020]; Roussy, Caroline 2020: "BHL au Nigeria: le spectacle contre l'info" (interview with Vincent Foucher), IRIS, 24 Jan 2020, in: https://bit.ly/35D31hk [4 May 2020].

9 Mathieu Pellerin 2019: Les violences armées au Sahara. Du Djihadisme aux insurrections? Etudes de l'IFRI, IFRI; Nov 2019, p. 11, in: https://bit.ly/2SzSi1G [5 May 2020].

10 For example, Malian sociologist Ely Dicko, a prominent expert on the conflict situation, is one of many experts who rightly points out this complexity. See i. a. Topona, Eric 2020: Iyad Ag Ghaly et Amadou Koufa, portraits de deux chefs djihadistes, Deutsche Welle, 12 Feb 2020, in: https://p.dw.com/p/3XggV [4 May 2020].

11 The following provides a valuable overview: Assanvo, William / Dakono, Baba / Théroux-Bénoni, Lori-Anne / Maïga, Ibrahim 2019: Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), 10 Dec 2019, in: https://bit.ly/2WsKDTX [4 May 2020].

12 Lagneau, Laurent 2020: Général Lecointre: Au Sahel, la capacité de régénération des terroristes est 'forte', Zone Militaire, 7 Mar 2020, in: https://bit.ly/2SGtipH [4 May 2020].

13 Interview with the author in Sikasso 2018.

14 This widespread criticism of France is also reflected in the work of Salif Keita, a musician who is also well-known in Germany. Monier-Reyes, Lucie / Duhamel, Sébastien 2019: Au Mali, Salif Keita accuse la France de financer les djihadistes, TV5MONDE, 16 Nov 2019, in: https://bit.ly/2W5NiUH [4 May 2020].

15 Serge Michailof is one of the advocates of an increased focus on the core government functions. Publications at: Fondation pour les études et recherches sur le développement international (Ferdi), in: https://ferdi.fr/en/biographies/serge-michailof [6 May 2020].

16 The Sahel Alliance coordinates the development assistance provided by key donors to G5 Sahel states. The Sahel Alliance website provides information on a variety of projects in six sectors, from agriculture to internal security. There is no evidence of a real focus. Alliance Sahel, in: https://alliance-sahel.org [6 May 2020].

17 Togola, Mamadou 2020: Mamadou Sinsy Couilbaly, président du CNPM: "Les fraudes sur les produits pétroliers font perdre à l'Etat plus de 10 milliards FCFA par an", Maliweb.net, 11 Feb 2020, in: https://bit.ly/2KYRcZ8 [4 May 2020].