



# EUROPE AND THE SAHEL-MAGHREB CRISIS

This report is written by Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Luis Martinez on the basis of research undertaken as part of the Sahel-Maghreb Research Platform, funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented as a joint-venture between the Danish Institute for International Studies and Voluntas Advisory.

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## PREFACE

This report analyses the reasons for European policy-makers coming to perceive the Sahel as a threat to Europe's own security and stability. It starts by presenting the most recent developments in the Sahel and Maghreb regions in respect of the two most significant threats to European security and stability: trans-national jihadism and cross-border migration. The report provides in-depth analysis of a series of the most important factors that are driving the increases in jihadism and migration, including the persistence of state weakness in the Sahel, the collapse of the state in Libya and the failure of regional collaboration. Furthermore, the report analyses the most significant developments in the international community's responses to the most recent conflicts and crises in the Sahel and Maghreb, including the foreign policies of France, which remains the single most important foreign actor in the Sahel, the European Union and Denmark. The report closes with a series of suggestions regarding how the European powers, especially Denmark, might adjust their policies in order to increase the likelihood of long-term peace and stability being generated in the region.

The report argues that, although European powers spearheaded by France have succeeded in reducing a number of the most immediate threats to the survival of states and societies in some of the most vulnerable parts of the Sahel, in particular in northern Mali, the international community has failed to generate the conditions that would foster long-term peace and development. As a consequence, the report suggests that the European powers should look for ways to inject life into the strategic objective of bringing the North African powers into play when attempting to solve the crisis in the Sahel. This is not an easy task, since collaboration between regional powers like Algeria and Morocco continues to be hampered by their competition for regional hegemony. Nonetheless it will be necessary to embark on this path if long-term solutions to the threats and challenges emerging in the Sahel are to be adequately addressed and peace and stability restored in the long run.

Recognizing that the European great powers must be involved in the process if it is to work, the report suggests that Denmark, as a small North European power without a colonial past in the region, should consider taking up the role of a facilitator of increased trans-regional integration between the Sahel and the Maghreb. Any such move would be aided by Denmark's strong development portfolio in the Sahel, as well as its steadily growing presence in North Africa and its current support to anti-terrorism, stabilization and development in the region.

The analysis contained in the report is based on insights generated by the work of the Sahel-Maghreb Research Platform. The Platform was financed by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented as a joint venture between the host institution, the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), and Voluntas Advisory. Initiated in November 2016 and finalized in March 2018, the Platform is coordinated by Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Senior Researcher at DIIS, and Luis Martinez, Research Director at Sciences Po.

Besides desk studies conducted in Copenhagen and Paris, the report draws on insights generated during a series of research, policy and dissemination activities. These include six public expert seminars and conferences held in Copenhagen, Dakar and Bamako, four closed policy-oriented round tables with experts and policy-makers convened at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen, four closed research seminars held at the Danish Institute for International Studies, and a dozen debriefings and advisory sessions held between experts and decision-makers at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the Danish embassies in Bamako and Ouagadougou. It also draws on insights presented in twelve unpublished policy notes authored by experts affiliated to the Platform, four unpublished policy reports destined for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, four published policy briefs, and three opinion and analysis pieces placed in Danish national newspapers.

The authors of this report and academic coordinators of the Platform would like to thank the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for generously funding the Sahel-Maghreb Research Platform. We would also like to thank the scholars involved in the Platform for sharing their analyses and ideas with a host of different audiences, ranging from peers to policy-makers and the general public. In particular, we would like to thank Hans Lucht, Senior Researcher at DIIS and expert in trans-Saharan migration, and Signe Cold Ravnkilde, Post-doctoral Researcher at DIIS and expert in state-building in Mali. We would also like to thank Abdenour Benantar, Université Paris VII, France; Mohamed Ben Lamma, Bani Walid University, Libya; Anouar Boukhars, Carnegie Endowment, Washington DC, USA; Ladiba Gondeu, University of N'Djamena, Chad; Mohammed Eljarh, Atlantic Council; Jean-Hervé Jezequel, International Crisis Group, Dakar; Cédric Jourde, University of Ottawa, Canada; Djallil Lounnas, Al-Akhawayn University, Morocco; Lémine Ould Mohamed Salem; Zakaria Ould Salem, Université de Noukachott, Mauritania; Bakary Sambé, Timbuktu Institute in Dakar, Senegal. Furthermore, we would like to thank all those we met during our fieldwork missions in the Sahel, in particular Boukary Sangare from the

University of Leiden and the Danish Embassy in Bamako, and Aly Tounkara from the University of Dakar, who on several occasions have both generously shared their analyses of the situation in the Sahel and the Maghreb.

Finally, we would like to thank the Danish Institute for International Studies for hosting the project, and Voluntas Advisory, in particular Jakob Wichmann, Alexander Kjaerum and Hannah Linnemann, for making the project happen through their professional research and administrative support.

## Sahel: A EUROPEAN SECURITY CONCERN

Over the past decade, European powers have come to perceive the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel region as a threat. Seen from Europe, the Sahel – the semi-arid band that stretches across Africa from the Atlantic coast of southern Mauritania and northern Senegal through northern Mali and Niger, southern Algeria and Libya and parts of Chad until it reaches the Indian Ocean on the Sudanese coast – has come to represent a series of security concerns for two reasons. First, there is the rapid spread of jihadist groups into the region, who, besides fighting to destroy state governments in the Sahel, also regard the European powers as their enemies. Secondly, there is the increasing pressure of cross-border migration from and through the Sahel region towards Europe.

**In part due to its own policies of intervening militarily in Libya and Mali, Europe has also become an increasingly important target and destination for these non-state actors.**

Treating jihadism and migration as European security concerns obviously risks distorting the picture of what is happening on the ground in the Sahel. Numerous studies have shown that jihadists in the Sahel (as elsewhere in the world) are primarily targeting representatives of the states and societies within the Sahel region itself. In the same way, traditional migration patterns in the Sahel have targeted North and Central African countries: about two-thirds of all migration in Africa remains within Africa.

However, in part due to its own policies of intervening militarily in Libya and Mali, Europe has also become an increasingly important target and destination for these non-state actors. Indeed, countries like France today consider jihadism in the Sahel to be a key challenge to their own security, and European-supported UN peacekeeping officers in the region have come under increasing attack from jihadists. Likewise, Italy, together with most other European countries, has placed anti-migration policies at the core of its foreign policy in Libya, the Maghreb and the Sahel.

### **Cross-Border Migration to Europe**

Cross-border migration between the Sahel and the Maghreb is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, since pre-colonial times people have crossed the Sahara looking for economic and other opportunities, and historians typically point out the deeply rooted nature of “informal”, “seasonal” or “circular” cross-border migration during the colonial era, both within the Sahel and between it and the Maghreb.

**The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects a six-fold increase in migration from Africa to OECD countries, primarily Europe, in the coming decades.**

However, as Ali Bensaad has pointed out, trans-regional migration between the Sahel and the Maghreb began to increase considerably in the post-colonial period as the thinly populated Algerian and Libyan deserts were developed for oil and gas exploitation with a labour force consisting primarily of workers from the Sahel.<sup>1</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, desert villages of a few thousand inhabitants, like Tamanrasset in southern Algeria or Sebha in southern Libya, would increase their populations considerably through the influx of informal Sub-Saharan labour migrants. The same was the case for cities in the Sahel, where states and multinational companies established exploitation sites like Arlit in Niger, which provided services to uranium mining and grew from eight thousand inhabitants to more than a hundred thousand a few years later. This was primarily due to seasonal migrant workers employed in the service businesses surging around the uranium production sites.



Due to this development of the desert, in the early 2000s it was estimated that about one and a half million sub-Saharan migrants were living in Libya, about 300,000 in Mauritania, as many in Algeria, and a couple of tens of thousands in Tunisia and Morocco, while about a hundred thousand others would pass through Agadez in Niger each year as part of the seasonal pattern of labour migration.<sup>2</sup>

The large part of that labour force would remain in the Maghreb. However, from the early 2000s a small, but significant number of sub-Saharan migrants began seeking to move further through the Maghreb towards Europe. During the 2000s, these early traces of the current migration patterns of sub-Saharan labour migrants across the Mediterranean would continue to represent a small minority of the total number of migrants crossing into Europe, with North Africans – primarily Algerians and Moroccans – figuring most prominently statistically. In 2000, for instance, it was estimated that eleven times more Moroccans were crossing into Spain than sub-Saharan Africans of all nationalities put together.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the shock effects of the 2015 “refugee crisis” in Europe, there are two key reasons why migration from Sub-Saharan Africa has become a major concern for European policy-makers over the past three years.

The first reason is connected with demographic and economic projections for Sub-Saharan Africa. The significant population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Sahel region, represents a massive challenge not only for Africa’s economies, but also, from a migration perspective, for Europe. Africa’s population is expected to grow from about 900 million in 2013 to about 2.8 billion by 2060. Moreover, the working-age population that usually comprises migration flows is forecast to grow even more rapidly, from about 480 million in 2013 to 1.3 billion in 2050. Although 70 per cent of African migration still takes place within the African continent, this development will arguably increase the migration pressure on the more developed economies.<sup>4</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF) thus expects a six-fold increase in migration from Africa to OECD countries, primarily Europe, in the coming decades. The second reason for migration becoming a key concern for Europe is the latter’s inability to close its borders with the Maghreb in the wake of the collapse of Libya. Indeed, the collapse of the Libyan economy following Gaddafi’s fall in the summer of 2011 simultaneously deprived the country’s labour migrants of one of their most prosperous job markets in Africa and allowed human smugglers to expand their transportation of sub-Saharan migrants to southern European shores considerably, notably towards Italy.

Taken together, these developments have put the issue of migration from and through the Sahel high on the European policy agenda. As we shall see later, this has prompted the EU and its member states to initiate a series of anti-migration policies targeting the Sahel.

### **The Spread of Jihadism**

Compared to trans-regional migration between Sahel and the Maghreb, the spread of jihadism into the Sahel region is a relatively new phenomenon dating back only to the late 1990s. The jihadist presence in the Sahel has emerged via two pathways.

The first pathway originated in Algeria in the north and initially targeted Mali. Following the Algerian military's successful repression and co-optation of jihadists and rebels in the late 1990s, a new splinter group called the Groupe Salafiste de Prédication et de Combat (GSPC), with its headquarters in the Kabyle Mountains in northern and central Algeria, mandated their emir from the Algerian Sahara, Khaled Abu al-Abbas (also known as Mokhtar Belmokhar), to create an outpost in northern Mali. Tolerated by the Algerian intelligence agencies as long as his fighters did not touch the petro-installations in the south, over the following decade Belmokhtar would develop relations with a number of local Islamist groups in the Sahel, as well as with Al-Qaeda's central command in Afghanistan and Iraq. By strategically marrying the daughters of leading tribes in the Sahel region, Belmokhtar would gradually acquire protection from local tribes and access to money laundering networks and smuggling routes for basic consumption items across the Sahara, a practice that later inspired other jihadists who sought to settle in the region. Following GSPC's integration into Al-Qaeda as its Maghreb branch (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM), the group increased its presence in the Sahel and split the region into two administrative entities. One region covered south-western Algeria, northern Mali and Mauritania, directed by Belmokhtar, while the second region, comprising north-eastern Mali, northern Niger and western Chad, was directed by another Algerian from the former GSPC, Abu Zeid.

The second pathway for the expansion of jihadists into the Sahel arose in northern Nigeria in the south and initially targeted Niger and the Lake Chad region.<sup>5</sup> Following repeated attacks by the Nigerian security forces, in the early and mid-2000s supporters of the Islamist Youssoufiyya Boko Haram movement, which had emerged in the Maiduguri area in Borno State in northern Nigeria, would find shelter in the town of Diffa in southern Niger. Organized around the central mosque in Diffa with financial support from prosperous Kanouri traders, Boko Haram was able to mobilize young Nigeriens and create a rear base in the Sahel that assured it

regular supplies of gasoline, weapons and food for the jihadists in Nigeria. According to many observers, since the capture and execution of Boko Haram's former spiritual leader, Mohammed Yousuf, Boko Haram's presence in the Sahel has been weakened in spite of reports of increased relations with Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. Hence, its current leader, Abukar Shekau, has faced continuous internal dissent and challenges to his ability to maintain the connection to the Sahel from the Lake Chad region, although the group remains capable of transporting gasoline, weapons and food through southern Libya, Niger and Chad into Nigeria. Until now, this control over smuggling networks and routes, together with financial support from the global support network, has allowed the group to "buy" support among elements of the local populations.<sup>6</sup>

While jihadism was still a modest phenomenon in the Sahel in the early 2000s, organized under the banners of emirs fleeing Algerian and Nigerian repression, the past few years have seen a tremendous growth in their activities. Indeed, today the Sahel region hosts multiple jihadist groups operating independently or in more or less stable alliances with regional and international networks and organizations like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. In Mali, for example, the country in the Sahel that has arguably been most affected by jihadism, the French-led anti-terrorism efforts to liberate the northern areas of the country from their jihadist annexation in 2012 have not prevented the Peuhl-dominated centre of the country from seeing a parallel spike in jihadist mobilization under the banners of the so-called Macina Brigades.

Much like trans-regional migration, the threat of jihadism has turned into a European problem primarily due to the weak performance of the states in the Sahel and the collapse of Libya.

Certainly, the current wave of jihadist mobilization in the Sahel region draws on many structural weaknesses on the part of states in the Sahel similar to those that have driven other types of militant mobilization in the past. Like members of ethnic, separatist, tribal, nationalist and other armed groups, jihadists in the Sahel mobilize supporters by a combination of intimidation, attraction and exploitation of a range of pre-existing conflicts over access to resources, norms and governance. They actively manipulate the injustices generated by corruption in the public and private sectors to harness support for their project to replace the existing order with an Islamist alternative. They offer protection, control and access to resources and basic services that the Sahel states fail to deliver. They point to the generalised use of disproportionate force by local and international coercive agencies to justify their own violent practices. They utilize animosities and conflicts among ethnic and tribal

groups and exploit the strains generated by the rapid population growth to garner support. Finally, they appeal to individuals whose expectations of life are hampered by the insufficient opportunities generated by domestic job markets and slumping growth rates in the already poor Sahel states.<sup>7</sup>

Until recently, moreover, jihadists were allowed considerable room for manoeuvre by the regimes and states in the Sahel. In contrast to North African states like Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, which during the 1990s build up strong security agencies geared to ferociously repressing the jihadists in their countries, the regimes in the Sahel initially allowed jihadists arriving from Algeria and Nigeria relative freedom of manoeuvre. With the exception of Mauritania and Chad, during the 2000s key Sahel countries like Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso entered into mutual non-aggression pacts with the jihadists, allowing them to operate as long as they did not attack the states' core interests, rather than engaging in costly repression campaigns that these weak states were unsure of winning.

The collapse of northern Mali in 2012 challenged this laissez-faire model on the part of the Sahel states and brought the question how to handle the jihadist expansion in the region to the forefront of both Sahelian and European governments. In 2012, northern Mali once again became the scene for a new secessionist rebellion initiated by armed Tuareg organized under the framework of their nationalist umbrella organization, the Movement National de la Libération de Azawad (MNLA). Acting in close alignment with the former Tuareg rebel leader, Iyad ag Ghali, who shortly before had created a new jihadist group known as the Supports of Religion (Ansar Dine), the MNLA successfully chased the Malian army out of the north in a short-lived rebellion. Forming an alliance with AQIM military commanders Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar, as well as units of a newly created Malian and Mauritanian Al-Qaeda affiliate known as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Iyad ag Ghali and the jihadists quickly took control of the main strategic centres in northern Mali, with Abu Zeid's units settling into the north-western region around Timbuktu, and Belmokhtar's units and MUJAO taking control of the north-eastern region of Gao.

It was this inability on the part of the Sahel states to handle the challenge of jihadism themselves, together with the failure of North African and Sahel powers to act decisively and collectively, that in 2013 prompted the French government to lead a UN-sanctioned military intervention to defeat the jihadist occupation of northern Mali and restore its government's authority over the country.

While the initial aim of chasing the jihadists out of northern Mali and restoring the government in Bamako has been partially achieved through France's military intervention and the ensuing UN peacekeeping mission, this has not prevented jihadism from spreading further into the Sahel outside Mali. As late as spring 2017, a host of the most prominent jihadist groups in the Sahel joined forces and formed a new jihadist coalition, the so-called Supporters of Islam and the Muslims (SIM). Gathering prominent jihadist leaders in the Sahel like Iyad Ag-Ghali from Ansar Dine, Yahya Abu Al-Hammam from AQIM's Sahara region, Amadou Koufa, the leader of the powerful Peulh-based "Macina brigade" of Ansar Dine in central Mali, Abderrahmane Al-Sanhaji, the "judge" of AQIM (qadi), and Al-Hassan Al-Ansari, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's deputy from Al-Mourabitoun, the new group swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri, Taleban's Haibatullah Akhundzada and AQIM's North African emir, the Algerian Abdelmalek Droukdel.

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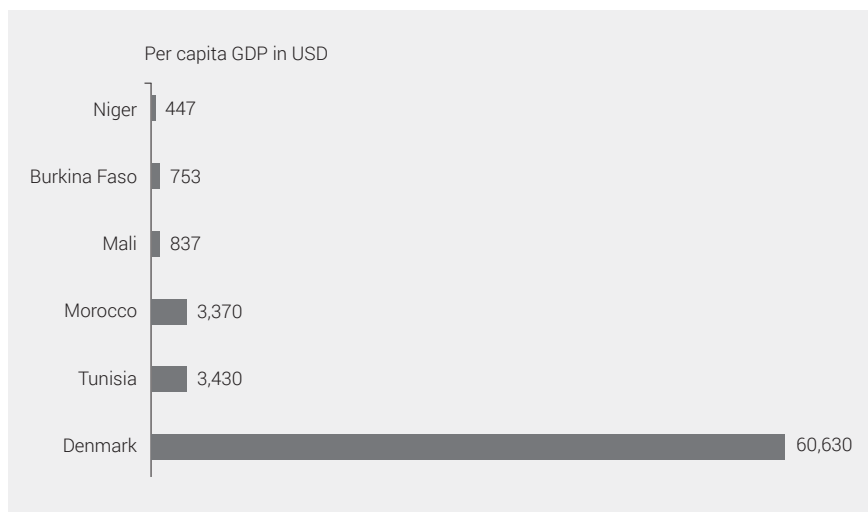
Hence, globally since 2013, the combined factors of persistent structural state weakness, increasing jihadist expansion and increasing trans-regional migration have placed the Sahel at the top of European foreign and security priorities.



## STATE WEAKNESS IN THE SAHEL


State weakness in the Sahel is a key factor in explaining why and how trans-regional jihadist movements and migration have developed into challenges and threats to European security and stability. One way to illustrate this weakness on the part of the Sahel states is to examine the macro-indicators of the various national economies. As shown in the figure below, Sahel states' GDPs per capita are some of the lowest in the world, obviously far behind those of wealthy North European states like Denmark, but also well below those of their neighbours in the Maghreb.

### Sahel state's GDP per capita remains extremely low



The tiny revenues that the Sahel states can mobilize are derived from three sources: first, the highly vulnerable agro-pastoral sector (cotton in Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad; groundnuts, rice and fisheries in Senegal and Mauritania, and livestock); secondly, highly-valued but extremely volatile natural resources (uranium in Niger; iron ore in Mauritania; gold in Mali and Burkina; oil in Chad); and thirdly, international donor aid.

However, each of these revenue streams is influenced by political factors. Economic challenges do not constitute objective, natural conditions; rather, they are filtered through and shaped by political dynamics, including harsh financial conditions imposed by foreign donors and international financial organizations, coupled with damaging clientelist practices. To various degrees, the extraction and allocation of resources in Sahelian states follow a 'neo-patrimonial' logic that undermines their economies and, in turn, their capacities as states. This also means that direct, unhindered and fair access to state services is often difficult for the average citizen of these states. Personal connections are often required, and when they are not available, resorting to paid, informal intermediaries becomes a necessity.



**Unhindered and fair access to state services is often difficult for the average citizen of these states.**

As Jean-Hervé Jezequel points out, the budgets of the Sahel states are structurally "unbalanced" in the sense that they have a weak fiscal basis due to high levels of tax evasion and the low institutional ability of these states to collect tax revenues.<sup>8</sup> Foreign donor aid therefore plays a central role in paving the way for the emergence of a "gatekeeper" logic. That is, most of the political power emanates from the capital or key sites such as major mining districts and is based on the ability of the ruling elites to control "gates" that connect the country to the outside world and through which most state resources flow.


### **Limited inclusion**

Another intrinsically linked challenge to the Sahel states is their limited ability to provide services to their populations. Sahelian and West African ruling elites are a particular problem in this regard. Over the past three decades, the ruling elites in the region have experienced little renewal and to the broader population appear to be closed circles with an exclusive interest in power. In Niger during the 2016



presidential elections, for instance, all of the prominent contenders for powers had been active in politics since at least the early 1990s. A similar situation can be observed in Mali, where the population, which is predominantly under 25 years of age, is governed by a president and a prime minister who are now in their seventies. This burgeoning gerontocracy in present-day Sahel regimes helps explain their inability to mobilize support from the younger generations in their respective populations.

Sahel states have further perpetuated notions of marginalization by focusing quite exclusively on the central regions of the country, where the governing elites live, as do the bulk of their constituents. Partially because it is cheaper and more politically expedient to provide public services to urban dwellers in the cities and towns than it is to the nomadic or semi-nomadic population groups living in the rural settlements, the state elites have neglected their states' territorial hinterlands and those living there. For example, access to public schooling varies dramatically between urban and rural areas. According to Mali's last Demographic and Health Survey (2013), the male literacy rate is 69 per cent and the female rate 47 per cent in urban areas (with the capital, Bamako, peaking at 72 and 51 per cent respectively), but only 27 and 12 per cent respectively in rural areas. In the Mopti region, which already had the lowest level of public education in Mali before the jihadists shut down public education entirely in 2012, the percentage was down to 20 per cent for men and 10 per cent for women.



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The meagre penetration of the educational system reflects the more general absence of these states from the sparsely populated rural areas outside the main cities. In northern Mali, for instance, the state had been literally absent, even before the 2012 crisis broke out. The few state representatives travelling in this area were security forces, who were seen as predators on rather than protectors of the local population, and often acted as such, with recurrent reports of widespread corruption and inadequate performance by government officials. A growing, but still minor proportion of the population has even come to see the government as a nuisance that they would like to dispose of. This is especially true of communities like the

nomadic Fulanis, who are numerically under-represented in the government and its administration. The Fulanis therefore welcomed the departure of state officials in the wake of the increasing attacks on towns in northern Mali in the beginning of 2015.

This accumulated impact of the inability of the Sahel states to impose themselves on the territories beyond the confines of their capitals and main districts and create a legitimate presence there has fuelled the rise of a broad variety of armed groups in the region, ranging from separatist movements and self-defence militias to jihadist and criminal networks of smugglers and traffickers. In most cases, these armed groups have proliferated by filling the economic and security vacuums created by the departure of the state authorities in these regions. While not all these groups are ideologically opposed to the region's states, they do represent a serious challenge to their authority and capacity. Members of these armed groups and movements also demonstrate an ability to understand and adapt to local circumstances and outperform both the less motivated bureaucrats and soldiers sent from the capitals and the foreign "peacekeepers" sent from abroad.

### **Deep roots of the weak states**

Perhaps because the problems in the Sahel have only recently turned into European security concerns, many international experts, policy-makers and practitioners alike tend mistakenly to assume that the weakness of the state is itself a recent phenomenon in the Sahel. As Cédric Jourde shows, however, this is a mistake.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the very idea of a Mauritanian state or a Chadian state was an entirely foreign invention until 1960, the year when all the Sahelian states were granted independence. The state was a European invention, one with which there was absolutely no sense of identification in the Sahel, except perhaps for the very small minority of local civil servants who had served the colonial apparatus. Not only was it a foreign invention, it was also seen by the new citizens primarily as a predatory institution. For most people, the colonial state in the Sahel was a foreign governance machine that only sought to prey on communities: it collected taxes, it rounded up men for forced labour or conscription, as well as children, to be sent to the Europeans' schools, and it sought to control and slow down people's mobility. This meant limiting the mobility of Tuareg, Moor, Arab, Fulani and Toubou pastoralists or semi-pastoralists, whom French colonial officers tried to "fix" (sedentarize) on a given territory; the mobility of pilgrimages to Mecca through the French policy of quota and surveillance; the mobility of peasants, used to working fields on what had

become two sides of a territorial border; and the mobility of shuyûkh (marabouts, clerics), who went about collecting their zakat from dispersed communities of their followers, to name but a few examples. One cannot underestimate the Sisyphean challenge that lay ahead of the new Sahelian post-colonial officials, who had to take over these states in a brief period of time, thus turning an institution seen as both foreign and predatory into “their” institution, one that represents “us” the population and that is here to serve our collective interests.

Jourde thus reminds us that it is wrong to think about the fragility of the state as something that has emerged only recently, just as it is wrong to imagine that there was once a time, back in the 1960s and 1970s, when what became Sahelian states were strong (or “integral”, as the literature sometimes expresses it). Both the colonial and post-colonial states in the Sahel were, for the most part, skeletal administrative institutions. While they did have some degree of coercive power, they had little infrastructural power, understood as the capacity to govern through society. With the exception of the two “small” countries of the Sahel, Senegal and to some extent Burkina Faso (and even there, this is arguable), the actual territorial coverage of the various state institutions has always been thin. Jourde therefore encourages us to remember that Europeans faced the same structural conditions that pre-colonial rulers confronted: immense territories, harsh natural environments and low population densities. Furthermore, French and British governments were not willing to spend many resources on these territories. Local colonial administrations faced iron rule imposed by Paris and London on their administrators overseas, especially in respect of financial self-sufficiency. Colonies and their subjects had to finance the colonial effort themselves without much in the way of investment from the metropolitan centres. An easy solution to this problem was for colonial officials to rely on local chiefs and elites. It was therefore a combination of so-called traditional leaders (Shaykh, Amir, Ardo, Sultân, Naba, Jom Wûro, etc.), whose legitimacy was rooted in pre-colonial history, and Africans trained in European schools who provided most of the “state-like” human resources on the ground. Administrators were few in number and had to govern over vast stretches of territory. They could not “imprint their mark” over Sahel societies as they did elsewhere in their imperial possessions. Consider, for instance, that in 1939, some twenty years before independence, 3600 French administrators governed all of French West Africa, which at that time had a total population of approximately fifteen million stretched over 4.6 million km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence, one could argue that many of today's Sahelian states are in fact more present than ever before on their own territories. This does not mean that the state is immensely stronger than it was in the first thirty years of the post-colonial era: indeed, gendarmes and police officers fled and abandoned the citizens of Dountza in central Mali in 2012-2013 when the MNLA and then the MUJAO stormed in. But things were not much better before: in the 1970s, the Saharawi insurgents of the Polisario movement marched from the former Spanish Sahara (Western Sahara) all the way to Nouakchott and attacked it (1976) and were only stopped by a French air strike. Likewise, Chadian insurgencies rolled over the country in the 1980s and again in 2008 from the Sudanese border to N'Djamena, where they fought the government, which many believe only survived due to French assistance.

**One cannot underestimate the Sisyphean challenge that lay ahead of the new Sahelian post-colonial officials, who had to take over these states in a brief period of time, thus improving an institution seen as both foreign and predatory.**

Until very recently, the history of the colonial and postcolonial states in the Sahel is thus a history of an institution which, outside urban centres, governed through a combination of direct rule in some localities and indirect rule in most others through local power-brokers who were partly independent of the state they represented.

## STATE COLLAPSE IN LIBYA

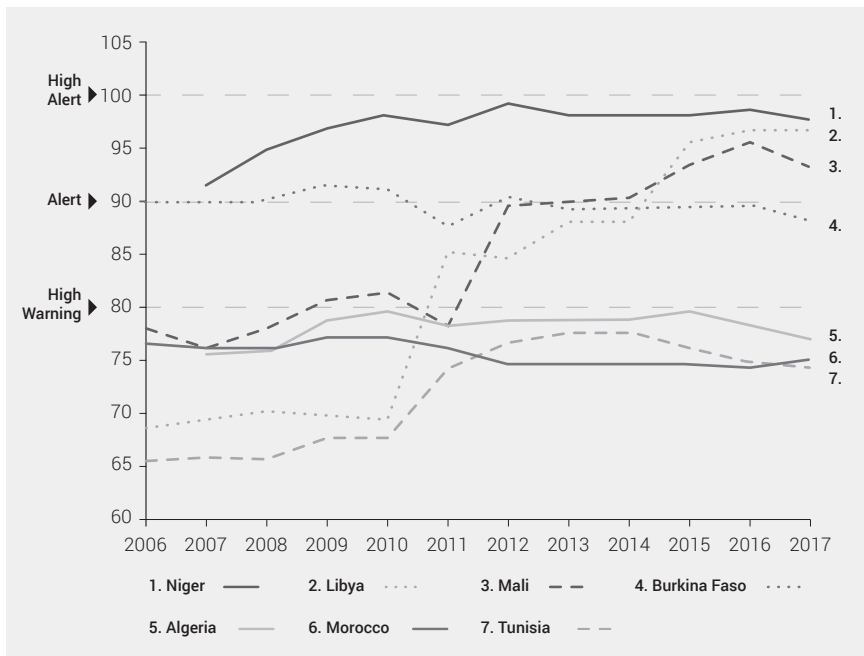
The collapsing state figures prominently in the explanation of why European policy-makers today regard the Sahel as a challenge and threat to Europe's security and stability. Up until 2011, state weakness was not an issue associated with the North African states. Under the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, (1999-) Algeria, which had been North Africa's most unstable country for decades, had left behind the violent mass conflicts that had threatened the regime's survival in the 1990s. Instead, a fragile but stable social contract had emerged based on a broad redistribution of resources generated through petroleum exports and a focused effort by the security agencies to push Islamist rebels south of Algeria's borders into the Sahel. Egypt, which in the 1980s and 1990s had experienced smaller but prolonged waves of political violence by small Islamist rebel groups, had from the late 1990s experienced little political conflict. Instead a broad de-politicization process occurred in correlation with rapid macro-economic growth and the continued embedding of the Egyptian economy into the global system. In Libya, the normalization of international relations in the late 2000s, combined with the "reformist" profile of Muammar Gaddafi's son and most probable heir, Seif al-Islam, was interpreted by many observers as a possible path towards greater internal stability, carrying with it the potential for increased regional cooperation in North Africa. Although experiencing occasional outbursts of Islamist political violence, the Moroccan monarchy could boast a remarkable degree of stability and continuity and seemed as if it were one of the few regimes in the region to enjoy relatively widespread popular support. In the small state of Tunisia, finally, the combined

efforts of investments in the small middle class and effective police repression had since the late 1990s pushed Tunisian jihadists to leave the country for more promising battlefields like that in Iraq.

To be sure, none of these North African regimes, governments and ruling elites could claim broad political support in the populations they governed. The regimes in the Maghreb were faced with their persistent inability to mobilize and sustain broad popular support. But there was and still is little reason to believe that significant population groups in the Maghreb are opposed to the existence of the states themselves. While often contesting the nature and composition of their governments and the regimes that control them, the populations of the Maghreb states generally seem to accept the post-colonial states' borders, *raison d'être* and right to exist.

However, the uprisings in North Africa in 2011 exposed cracks in the apparent strength of these North African states. Following protracted conflicts between mass-mobilized populations aiming to transform the social pacts in their countries, the capacities of all North African states have fallen over the past six years.

### State fragility has increased in Libya since 2011



Source: The Fund for Peace 2006-2016

As an indication of this process, in 2017 the annual Fund for Peace's "Fragile States Index" classified the North African states as countries with an elevated risk of state fragility, with the exception of Libya, which was issued with an "alert" regarding its fragility. This contrasts starkly with how these states were classified in the previous decade. Until 2010, North African countries were considered to be at only moderate risk of state fragility, the risk being deemed the highest in Algeria, and Libya being seen as the most stable country in the region after Tunisia. The general trend over the past six years, however, has been that the North African countries have moved closer to their Sahelian neighbours in respect of multi-dimensional indices like that elaborated by the Fund for Peace.

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As indicated in the above figure, since 2011 Libya has collapsed into a weak and indeed very fragile state. Libya's collapse is partially an outcome of policy opportunities missed by the international community. Indeed, since 2011, the UN has treated the growing crisis in Libya as an issue of secondary importance. In the wake of the international NATO-led military campaigns during the summer of 2011, which helped the insurgents put an end to Gaddafi's regime, the UN failed to support the country's transition towards a new government at all adequately.

### **Operation Dawn and Operation Dignity**

As Mohamed Eljarh points out, by 2014 the political landscape in Libya had all but collapsed.<sup>11</sup> The parliamentary elections for Libya's House of Representatives (HoR), which were to replace the transitional government formed by the General National Council (GNC) in 2012 in the wake of Gaddafi's fall, did not bring peace to the country. Rather than disappearing from the political scene, as envisaged in the Road Map for the Libyan transition, the GNC refused to recognize the legitimacy of the HoR. From this point onwards, two parallel administrations and governments emerged in sharp competition with one another without either of them being able to impose its will on the other. The HoR found refuge in the city of Tobruk in the north-east of the country, close to the Egyptian border, while the GNC had its base in Tripoli. These two political coalitions each received substantial external military support from a number of armed militias. The GNC was supported by the so-called

“Libyan Dawn”, which primarily consisted of Islamist militias, including elements of the Al-Qaida-affiliated Libyan Armed Fighting Group (LIFG), as well as the forces of the city of Misrata. Simultaneously, the HoR built an alliance with the so-called “Operation Dignity”, a coalition of armed militias created in 2014 in the eastern city of Benghazi by the former Libyan general, Khalifa Haftar, with the explicit aim of eliminating the Islamist militias. Due to its alliance with the HoR, Operation Dignity would declare itself to be the country's only legitimate armed actor, changing its name into the “Libyan National Army”.

### **Rise of armed groups**

In correlation with the paralysis of Libya's political institutions due to the power struggle between HoR and GNC, and to some extent as a consequence of it, the ability to implement decisions on the ground remained in the hands of militias and armed groups that had either fought during the rebellion against Gaddafi or were formed in the wake of the fall of his regime as self-defence and policing units. Rather than operating as a single unified actor, the armed groups were split between autonomous and decentralized actors operating outside any centralized chain of command and following the whims of militia leaders with a vested interest in their local villages, cities or regions of origin, rather than the nation as a whole. Finally, as the conflict dragged on, the absence of institutional cohesion and political unity provided a fertile environment for jihadist groups to gain a foothold in the northern cities, forces which, until then, had mainly been present in the thinly populated southern Sahara region. In particular, from November 2014, so-called “Islamic State” (IS or Daesh) expanded its presence in Libya's north after creating its first “province” in Derna. During 2015, and after being forced to flee from Derna, it gradually moved to control the northern city of Sirte, from where it expanded further along the Libyan coast during most of 2016. Later the same year it was expelled by a coalition of international military actors and militias from Misrata. One year later, by early 2017, the fight against Islamic State forces had progressed well, the bulk of the fighting on the ground being undertaken by the Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus militia from Misrata. The international, mainly US-American involvement in these operations consisted primarily in providing air support, coordinating intelligence with local groups and deploying a limited number of special forces.

In contrast to what is often assumed, the Libyan militias draw on deep historical roots and can to some extent be considered to reproduce the militia-based character of the Libyan state inherited from the Gaddafi regime. The latter had been founded on a balance between paramilitary forces, composed of a skillful mixture of the “tribes” that had sworn allegiance to the regime, enabling them to be represented



and participate in governing. The army was perceived as a threat to be neutralized, even if this meant weakening it and making it militarily incapable. The army was thus unable to promote its own values and interests as a body or institution, unlike other military institutions in the region. Nor could it develop its own economy within Libyan society, which might have allowed it to recycle its staff or form connections of influence. The political determination to sabotage the development of the Libyan army can be explained in terms of the complex, subtle and contradictory relationship between the Libyan Jamahiriya and the state. In the philosophy of the Jamahiriya, the state was destined to disappear to make room for local political structures in which the tribes would play a fundamental role. Gaddafi's revolutionary Libya was based on the model of a "just society" inspired by a "tribal" political model. In his Green Book, Gaddafi claimed that the tribe was "a natural social umbrella" and that "through its traditions, it guarantees its members social protection". By contrast, "the State is an artificial political, economic and at times military system that has nothing to do with humanity". Society must therefore be based not on the state, but on the tribe. For Gaddafi, "the tribe is a family that has become extended through births. The tribe is a large family. The nation is an extended tribe." In fact, this tribal imagery was the product of contemporary political transformations: Gaddafi's Libya was part of a longer continuity for the Libyan state, shaped by its tribal configuration ever since acquiring independence in 1951. Indeed, as historian Ali Abdullatif Ahmida shows, the kingdom of King Idris, ruler of Libya from 1951 to 1969, was founded on a religious order, but was also profoundly influenced by the tribal configuration in Cyrenaica. From this point of view, the army and state looked like the two obstacles to the success of the revolution. These perceptions of the state and army remain unchanged among today's militias.

Are these militias the products of Gaddafi's revolutionary philosophy, according to which Libya was duty-bound to remain in a "state of permanent tension"? The Jamahiriya supported the theory of "people in arms" so that "each town might be transformed into a barracks where the inhabitants would train each day", being duty-bound to maintain this "tension" through revolutionary committees. In 1995, so as to conform to this principle, Gaddafi announced that the army had been dissolved to the advantage of the people's brigades, which were now supposed to ensure the protection of the nation against all forms of aggression. After Gaddafi's fall, tens of thousands of combatants gathered into brigades linked to towns or neighborhoods and occupied the public spaces that had been deserted by the former regime's security forces to protect the revolution. The militias had derived revolutionary legitimacy from their struggle with the Gaddafi regime, but they were increasingly challenged by those elected in the elections of 7 July 2012, who

claimed political legitimacy as a consequence. For the political representatives of transitional Libya, disarming the militias and integrating them into the security forces is a major challenge. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, the Libyan authorities gave the militias an ultimatum: "The mobile national force under the command of the chief of staff asks all armed individuals, groups and formations occupying army barracks, public buildings or the properties of members of the former regime or of Muammar Gaddafi's children in Tripoli or surrounding towns, to evacuate these sites within 48 hours." Clearly it will take much longer than two days for the government to be obeyed, probably several years until a security apparatus emerges that is independent of the militias.

### **Limitations of the UN process**

Having done little to halt the deterioration of the security situation in Libya in the wake of Gaddafi's fall in 2011, in early 2015, the international community launched a series of dialogue meetings with stakeholders in the Libyan crisis under the leadership of the UN. Following lengthy negotiations, a new unity government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), was announced by the UN in October 2015, and a Presidential Council headed by the Libyan political figure Fayez al-Farraj was established to provide oversight of the GNA and appoint military leaders. It was initially supposed to govern for one year through an inclusive approach incorporating members of both the HoR and the GNC.

However, in contrast to the progress that has been made in fighting IS forces on the ground in Libya, the political process and the attempt to recreate a functioning government seems largely to have failed. As Mohammed Ben Lamma points out, Libya's political landscape remains split between several competing camps, and the failure to include the GNC in the institutional process around the GNA threatens to create new fragmentation and competition within and between the partners and coalitions that would have to hammer out a comprehensive peace deal in Libya.<sup>12</sup> Yet, for all its flaws, the political dialogue that led up to the establishment of a unity government, as well as the actual creation of the GNA, remains an important instrument for creating a comprehensive peace deal and stabilizing Libya in the long run.

By early 2017, the challenges arising from this partially disengaged approach had emerged in full. First, the UN-brokered deal excluded a number of key actors. The delegations that signed the Libyan political agreement that did emerge out of the UN-led dialogue peace process in 2015 and 2016 have little or no control over

Libya's territory or its inhabitants. The procedures that are currently being followed in the negotiations between the Libyans and the UN give the impression that the actors are sitting around the table in two blocs, but this is not the case. The camps in Tripoli and Tobruk are far from uniform, and fluid alliances are created across ideological, political, national and local cleavages that reflect Libya's recent history, the 2011 conflict, and local and regional affiliations. In addition, the inability of the UN to find viable solutions reflects the challenge involved in including the tribes that supported Gaddafi in the dialogue, in particular the Warfalla and the Warshefana, but also the Megaras, which together represent as much as 30% of the population.

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Secondly, the UN accord does not have sufficient consensus behind it. The insistence by UN Special Envoy Bernardino León on a rapid signing process sacrificed the building of a necessary consensus and cohesion around the compromise over the GNA's Presidential Council. Moreover, in reality, the GNA reflects neither the entirety of Libya's regions nor the political-military factions on the ground. As such the key question with regard to security finds no response in the UN-brokered dialogue. The political accord does not touch upon the reconversion of the armed groups or the reconstruction of the army and security services.

Thirdly, the UN-brokered peace accord is challenged by conflicts of interest between the international powers and the regional great powers. In particular, the UN-brokered agreement states that it needs to be ratified by the HoR, even though Western capitals consider this body to be of negligible importance. Another group, however, led by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia, is in favour of a more legally strict approach that favours the HoR even more. These international divisions have caused divergences in the application of sanctions against those circumventing the Skhirat Agreement. The EU and the United States have imposed travel bans and financial sanctions on the president of the HoR (Aguila Salah) and the president of the GNC (Nouri Bousahmein), but Russian and Egyptian diplomats consider these sanctions illegitimate.

Finally, regional rivalry and competition pose a substantial threat to the application of the accord. The covert support provided by regional and international great powers to different armed groups on the ground in Libya has continued to undermine the deal. On the one hand, Egypt and the UAE have developed significant cooperation on military and intelligence issues with Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army and have called for a lifting of the embargo on arms sales imposed on these actors. Other players, in contrast, such as Turkey and Qatar, have supported groups close to the Muslim Brotherhood out of a mixture of geopolitical and ideological interests. In sum, regional and international actors continue to pursue divergent objectives resulting from the ambiguities of the different states that are caught between contradictory geopolitical interests and a lack of international leadership.

The consequence of the international community's failure to address these key challenges on the ground has been to undermine the dialogue process and the peace accords signed in Skhirat. Instead of a unified Libya, the country has seen state institutions continuing to be split, with one set of institutions governing the east of the country and another the west. Rather than solving the conflicts between east and west, the Presidential Council and the GNA have created new administrative councils and institutions, thus paving the way for the emergence of a third set of rival government institutions. This hardly seems like paving the way to a restoration of peace and stability, but in fact threatens the absolute collapse of the state.

## THE FAILURE OF REGIONAL COLLABORATION

The inability of the regional powers in the Maghreb and East Africa to prevent the states of Mali and Libya from further imploding during 2012 and 2013 is the key factor that explains Europe's increasing concerns over the insecurity in the Sahel region.

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Initially there were some indications that the regional powers might play a part in solving these crises. In other words, in the wake of the ending of the bipolar world order and the beginning of US retrenchment during the 2000s, the regional powers had come to play increasingly important roles in international politics. As such, hopes grew among experts that those surrounding the Sahel would intervene to restore stability and rebuild a peaceful regional order. However, in the Sahel region itself the crisis in Mali in 2012-2013 disappointed this expectation. When the Malian state collapsed in 2012 following the implosion of Libya, a sense of insecurity and alert spread among the regional powers in the Sahel and North Africa. Regional powers like Nigeria, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt had come to fear a potential spill-over of insecurity and the potential challenge to their own territorial integrity from

armed jihadist groups and other militant non-state actors. The establishment of a territorial outpost of the Islamic State in Sirte on the coast of Libya in 2015 sparked further fears that the Sahel and North Africa could in the near future experience challenges to their regional security along the lines of those experienced in the Middle East over the past five years. However, none of the surrounding regional powers, namely Algeria, Morocco and Nigeria, proved capable of acting decisively against the threats to regional stability posed by the jihadist take-over of northern Mali and the failure of a central Sahel state that this represented.


This inability to find common ground is rooted in the non-institutionalized and unregulated competition of the regional powers. As Abdenour Benantar points out, we can understand some of the mechanisms that are driving this competition by looking at the proliferation and multiplicity of competing, overlapping and utterly ineffective “dialogue” and “peace” initiatives that the region has witnessed over the past few years.<sup>13</sup>

### **The proliferation of peace initiatives**

In the wake of the take-over of power in northern Mali by the jihadists from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies in 2012, the regional powers surrounding Mali put forward several peace and dialogue initiatives involving different constellations of local actors and regional powers. The Maghreb Union, which was launched in 1991 to bring together the major North African powers from Morocco to Libya, had been inactive for decades due to the protracted and unresolved conflict and rivalry between Morocco, Algeria and, prior to Gaddafi’s fall, Libya. As such, these initiatives came either from other regional institutions, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), or from individual member states imagining themselves to be playing a role as regional hegemons.

The first attempt to address the crisis in Mali emerged from the so-called Pays du Champ Initiative, which had been created in April 2010 by Algeria and brought together the Sahel countries of Mali, Mauritania and Niger. At the time, its objective was to coordinate security efforts, in particular the fight against terrorism and organized crime in the Sahel-Maghreb area. The Pays du Champ initiative had the aim of becoming the primary security coordination instrument in the area under the leadership of Algeria. Having a joint military command, the Comité des États-Majors Opérationnel Conjoint (CEMOC) based in Tamanrasset, as well as an intelligence unit, L’Unité de Fusion et de Liaison (UFL) headquartered in Algiers, the


initiative brought together intelligence units from eight countries in the Sahel and North Africa. However, the rapid expansion of terrorist groups in northern Mali and their eventual ability to bring into question the very existence of the state of Mali perfectly demonstrated the failure of this regional initiative. With the exception of Algeria, CEMOC's member states are militarily ill-equipped and lack the necessary financial resources to change this in the near future. Hence the initiative possesses no real national instruments that can be pooled in the case of an urgent need for collective security action in the region. As a consequence, some of the measures taken within CEMOC's framework, such as the pursuit of terrorist groups across borders, were from the outset wishful thinking rather than having any real potential for security action in the region. With regard to the exchanging of intelligence, the North Africa-Sahel environment, which is characterized by competition rather than by coordination and collaboration between the regional powers, starting with Algeria and Morocco, has greatly hampered CEMOC's ability to become a platform for sharing sensitive information that even close allies in other parts of the world would find it difficult to share. When the crisis in Mali broke out into the open in 2012, the Pays du Champ initiative therefore remained generally immobilized and incapable of responding to the crisis.



**None of the regional initiatives has so far been able to overcome the entrenched regional rivalries between the great powers in and around the Sahel region.**

After the coup in Bamako in 2012, ECOWAS proposed to deploy militarily in agreement with the AU. Hence both the ECOWAS Standby Force Mission in Mali (MICEMA) and the AU-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), though planned on the drawing board, lacked adequate funding, capacity and political support. However, at the end of 2013, AFISMA's concept of operations was revised and adjusted and its deployment was accelerated to support Operation Serval and the Malian authorities in recovering the northern territories from the jihadist groups that had seized them. In March 2013, as the crisis in Mali was unfolding, the AU launched its own regional peace and dialogue initiative, known as the Nouakchott Process. Proposed by the AU's Peace and Security Commission, the Nouakchott Process includes eleven member countries from across the Sahel and Maghreb, its aim being to strengthen security cooperation within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in the Sahel-Saharan region. Much like previous initiatives in the

region, however, the APSA's effectiveness has been hampered by the persistent rivalries between the regional great powers. For instance, Morocco remained excluded from the Nouackchott process until its recent reintegration into the AU.



**The proliferation of initiatives has served as a means to neutralize their very effectiveness.**

Following the collapse of the Ouagadougou Agreement in 2013, which was led by ECOWAS and presided over by Blaise Compaoré, in early 2014 the inability of the regional great powers to act decisively prompted external powers like France to take the lead in pursuing regional peace and dialogue directly with the Sahel states. In February 2014, the so-called "G5-Sahel" was launched bringing Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad together under a single structure closely affiliated with French military actions in the region. The G5-Sahel group aims at strengthening exchanges of information, border security and the capacities of the intelligence and security services in the Sahel-Saharan region. It is a local consultation framework tasked with coordinating the initiatives launched by international partners and its member states. The structure does offer some clarity to external security providers by circumventing some of the more complicated power rivalries between, for example, Morocco and Algeria. Instead, it allows the external partners to coordinate their actions directly with the Sahel states. As such, external security providers such as the French forces of Operation Barkhane and the project "Appui à la Coopération Transfrontalière au Sahel" (ACTS), as well as the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (SINUS) and the European Strategy for the Sahel, can act in cooperation and coordination with the local Sahel states. This also provides a formal instrument for the Sahel states themselves to institutionalize regional collaboration. An example is the involvement of Burkina Faso in regional mediation around the Malian conflict, which in June 2013 brought about the signing of agreements between the Malian transitional government and the Azawad movements. At the same time, the G5-Sahel suffers from all the well-known defects of the Sahel states themselves, namely corruption, a lack of national cohesion, persistent poverty and institutional failures as a result of weak governance. As such it remains questionable whether this new structure will, in the end, prove to be anything more than an empty shell allowing international actors to assume the task of security provision abandoned by the dysfunctional regional powers in the Sahel and North Africa.




The larger picture conveyed over the past few years is thus one of a strong proliferation of dialogue and peace initiatives targeting the Sahel region. As exposed in the case of the conflict in Mali, however, none of these regional initiatives has so far been able to overcome the entrenched regional rivalries between the great powers in and around the Sahel region. Hence, the proliferation of mediation and dialogue initiatives targeting the crisis in Mali, which at first sight might seem to be a positive achievement indicating progress and action, masks a more worrying conclusion, namely that the proliferation of initiatives has also been exploited by the great powers in and around Sahel as a way of neutralizing the efforts of their rivals and competitors. Based on a zero-sum logic known already from the failure to resolve the Western Sahara conflict, the regional great powers in and around the Sahel have prioritized neutralizing the initiatives of their rivals in supporting effective peace and mediation initiatives because otherwise they would be forced to compromise with these same rivals. The instrument used by regional powers to pursue this policy has been the proliferation of dialogue and mediation initiatives, choices over whom to invite having been carefully crafted to serve regional power struggles rather than local conflict resolution. In short, the proliferation of initiatives has served as a means to neutralize their very effectiveness.

### **Moroccan soft-power and Algerian disengagement**

As Anouar Boukhars points out, Morocco is also involved in several regional security cooperation initiatives that offer military and border security training to allied countries in the Sahel and West Africa.<sup>14</sup> Morocco's intelligence services are also active in some parts of the Sahel, and its telecommunication company, Maroc Telecom, which has six African subsidiaries, is suspected of gathering and sharing intelligence information on extremist groups wherever it operates. In the summer of 2016, Morocco injected itself into the struggle against Boko Haram by providing Niger with military equipment. The recent return of Morocco to the AU will have a further impact on the evolution of a Moroccan military role in the Sahel and beyond. However, Morocco's attempt to gain a foothold in the Sahel and more generally in Africa uses soft power initiatives. Acknowledging that it cannot replace Algeria as a regional security provider in the Sahel, nor in Mali, in the absence of a resolution of the conflict between Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara, Morocco has skilfully sought alternative ways, beyond hard security, to garner alliances and construct a power basis in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Over the past sixteen years, King Mohammed VI has literally been Africa-trotting, promoting the attractiveness of Moroccan businesses and developing vehicles for strategic partnerships combining complementary strengths, visions and solidarity. These royal visits are followed by economic and investment deals in banking, insurance, telecommunications, mining, renewable energy, agricultural sustainability, fishing and infrastructure. Today, the world's leading phosphate exporter, Morocco's Office Cherifien de Phosphate (OCP), Attijariwafa Bank, Maroc Telecom, Royal Air Maroc and real estate developer Addoha Group are well-rooted in several African countries. The FDI stock of Morocco in Mali rose from USD 6 million in 2002 to USD 286 million in 2011. Through these corporations, investments and the recent creation of Casablanca Finance City (CFC), Morocco aspires to become a regional financial platform and gateway to Africa's rapidly growing markets. Indeed, part of the allure of Morocco is the prospects it offers of South-South triangular cooperation in which the Kingdom uses its comparative advantages to mobilize the resources of its allies in the Persian Gulf and its partners in the developed world to invest in Africa.



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These investment forays extend beyond the friendly terrain of Francophone West Africa, where Morocco is already the first investor, to regions long considered unfamiliar or unfriendly due to their support for the Algerian-backed Polisario Front in the Western Sahara conflict. Putting economics before politics, Morocco's diplomacy has today managed to normalize relations with countries like Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, South Sudan and Zambia.

As a complement to this expansion of its economic footprint, Morocco has invested in boosting its soft power. Approximately six thousand African students are today enrolled in Moroccan universities at the expense of the Moroccan state, and Moroccan state and private media groups such as Medi 1 Radio, Hit Radio and Eco Media have made inroads into Gabon, Burkina Faso and Senegal. In 2014, Morocco created the Federation of Atlantic African Press Agencies (FAAPA), which comprises some twenty African news agencies coordinated by the Moroccan News Agency (MAP) and an African training centre for journalists. In a parallel development, the

Moroccan Cinematographic Centre (CCM) has funded several African projects and assisted in the co-production and post-production of African films. Furthermore, Morocco has invested in humanitarian aid, conducting vaccination campaigns, donating food crop seeds, deploying mobile hospital units to affected areas, building a military hospital and a cancer institute in Guinea and Gabon respectively, and helping establish a funding mechanism for seven thousand small farmers in Senegal. Finally, it has pursued an immigration policy aimed at polishing its image to the detriment of its rival Algeria, as seen in the decision to dispatch humanitarian aid to around 1500 African migrants expelled by Algeria to Niger in December 2016. Moreover, Morocco has hosted large-scale events of international importance such as the 2016 Marrakech Climate Change Conference (COP22), in which it appeared as an advocate for Africa's farmers and showcased its own initiatives in improving soil management and adapting African agriculture. Similarly, it has launched major initiatives to power agricultural sustainability and improve food security through the building of fertilizer plants adapted to local soils in several African countries, most notably Rwanda, Ethiopia and Nigeria.

The dramatic rise of jihadism in the Sahel has provided Morocco with an opportunity to tap into an additional instrument of soft power, namely religion. Drawing on the Tidjania Sufi order, which boasts millions of adherents in West Africa, and whose most visited holy site is in the Moroccan city of Fez, Morocco has exploited this heritage to nurture powerful networks of influence in the Sahel and beyond. For years, Morocco has been financing the construction of mosques, restorations of religious edifices and the provision of copies of the holy Quran in many countries, including most recently in Tanzania and Madagascar. At the same time, King Mohamed VI has actively promoted a spiritually orientated and tolerant brand of Islam, known as the Sufi-Maliki tradition, as an alternative to the Salafi and jihadist tendencies in the Sahel. The country's multimillion-dollar Mohammed VI Institute for training imams, inaugurated in 2015, and the Foundation for the African Ulama, constructed in 2016, are good illustrations of how Morocco is attempting to shape Islam in Africa.

Morocco's foreign policy in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa over the past one and a half decades has returned it handsome geopolitical and economic dividends. Today, Moroccan diplomacy is working smoothly in most of Africa, as shown by its recent reintegration into the African Union. In spite of this appearance as a hyperactive actor in the Sahel and in sub-Saharan Africa, however, Moroccan foreign policy has had no direct effect on the Malian crisis, nor on the broader question of

security and stability in the Sahel region. Rather, Morocco's long-term aim is directed at rebalancing the kingdom's cultural, religious and economic ties with the Sahel region and Africa in general in the very long run after three decades of exclusion due to its annexation of the Western Sahara.


Algeria, the region's undisputed military powerhouse, has persistently avoided taking on too much responsibility in either of the crises in Libya and Mali. Rather than intervening and re-establishing order, Algeria watched unmoved as jihadist groups gained a foothold in northern Mali and grew into a force that threatened the country's territorial sovereignty. In 2012 and 2013, this attitude rebounded on Algeria in the form of renewed threats to its vital oil and gas exploitation sites in the Sahara and of fears of a potential spill-over of separatist ambitions among its domestic Tuareg population groups in the Tamanrasset region. While beefing up its domestic security and border controls, Algeria has abstained from acting as a regional hegemon and is instead insisting on an African and regional solution to the crises surrounding it.

### **Competition rather than collaboration**

Neither of today's major powers in North Africa seems capable of contributing actively to solving the Malian crisis or to providing long-term security and stability in the Sahel. Both countries' interpretations of the Malian crisis have been influenced by their respective internal concerns and their assessments of the need to balance one another and prevent any possible tilt of one in favour of the other. Unwilling and unable to take an objective stance in respect of the crisis in Mali, they have mutually reduced themselves to spectators rather than actors in both conflict resolution and the broader process of providing security and stability in Mali and the Sahel. In the wake of the retrenchment of the US superpower and the ending of the bipolar world order, experts initially aired hopes that the regional powers in and around the Sahel would fill the void and re-establish a functioning regional order and stability, as seen in other parts of the world. They have now been disappointed, as over the past five years the regional powers in and around the Sahel have failed to provide any effective or viable regional security.

Further to the south, the Nigerian authorities dragged their feet for some time before launching a military campaign to oust Boko Haram. As a result, since the mid-2000s the group has been able to establish a presence outside Nigeria in the Lake Chad region, northern Cameroon and Niger. Finally, Egypt, the region's second largest investor in military equipment (only surpassed by Algeria), has largely reduced itself

to an inactive observer of the collapse of order in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi and the subsequent establishment of an outpost of Islamic State in the country. Bogged down by its own internal transition after the fall of Mubarak and the subsequent repression of a full-scale rebellion in Sinai, Egypt adopted a limited strategy of propping up Khalifa Haftar in Libya as the cheapest option, giving it a local proxy capable of stabilizing its borders with Egypt and countering Libya's growing number of jihadists.



**Over the past five years the regional powers in and around the Sahel have failed to provide any effective or viable regional security.**

However, the inability of the regional powers to restore order is not only a threat to the security and stability of the Sahel and North Africa, it is also a threat to Europe. Given its geographical proximity to North Africa and the Sahel, Europe cannot afford to see a collapse of security in the region. It will not be able to tolerate the direct security threats that are likely to emerge from the creation of a bastion of global jihadists in the Sahel or North Africa, nor the flows of refugees and migrants from increasingly unstable and economically underperforming regions. Whether acting directly in multilateral engagements, as under UN's MINUSMA and in Operations Serval and Barkhane, or in direct collaboration with local states, as in the current G5-Sahel initiative, in the absence of capable and willing regional powers in and around the Sahel, sooner or later the EU and its member states will be dragged into the role of providing security and acting as de facto regional hegemony in the Sahel.



# FRENCH COUNTERTERRORISM

France, the former colonial power in the Sahel and the Maghreb, remains the single most important external actor in the Sahel, and possibly also in the Maghreb region. Since 2013, France has responded to the failures of domestic governments and regional powers by trying to handle the increasing threat from jihadists through its own foreign policy. This decision was not taken as part of a long-term strategic bid for regional hegemony, but seems rather to have been dictated by the sudden threat of the collapse of the Malian state.

**In 2008 The French government produced a “Defence White Paper” that set out a policy of further reducing France’s strategic and military presence in Africa.**


In response to increasing budgetary deficits, and in coordination with a more proactive American security presence in the Sahel in the wake of Al-Qaida’s attacks on 9/11, during the 2000s the French government sought a way to gradually decrease its obligations as a security provider and major development-aid donor in the two key regions of “Francafrrique”. In 2008 The French government produced a “Defence White Paper” that set out a policy of further reducing France’s strategic and military presence in Africa. However, the collapse of the state in northern Mali in 2012 and the ensuing inability of other regional and international actors to react decisively to the expansion of jihadist networks out of northern Mali prompted the French government to set aside its strategic decision to downsize its presence in

the Sahel and instead reengage militarily in the region. The ensuing Operation Serval, launched in early 2013, initially had a limited timeframe and a reduced strategic objective, namely to halt the advance of jihadist groups from northern Mali towards Bamako in order to rescue the Malian state from collapsing entirely. In time, however, the military intervention dragged France into an unanticipated strategic redeployment in Sub-Saharan Africa. In doing so, it replaced its initial aim of countering the advance of jihadist groups in northern Mali with the goal of fighting the jihadists affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in Operation Barkhane. In a document entitled “Qui est l’ennemi?” from 2016, the French Minister of Defence, Yves le Drian, explained that France’s strategy in Africa was to prioritize the fight against terrorism and jihadism in collaboration with the United States. In January 2014, the French Minister of Defence announced that France would move “from a position inherited from decolonization, with large settlements, to the formation of more discrete projects oriented towards the fight against terrorism.”<sup>15</sup> Later the same year, the Minister of Defence expressed satisfaction with the results of Operation Barkhane in Mali: “Mali has embarked upon a democratic process. Terrorist groups have withdrawn, even if there remains what we may call metastases.” The metaphor describing terrorism and jihadism as a cancer suggested that the beaten jihadist groups no longer threatened the existence of the Malian state, although a number of territories still had problems and were still contested. According to official statistics, between August 2014 and July 2017 the French forces neutralized more than 410 terrorists and seized more than 22 tons of weapons.<sup>16</sup> According to the French Minister of Defence, Operation Barkhane had therefore succeeded in achieving two complementary objectives, namely:

“ ...the fight against terrorism and the support for the training of G5 Sahel armies. On both objectives, the situation is progressing. France has trained more than 20,000 soldiers, and every day our joint attacks weaken the enemy. There is still a lot of groundwork to be done regarding equipment, which is why I wanted a real transfer policy ranging from training to delivery to maintenance. In the meantime, we will continue to evolve our country support system, just as we do with the deployment of Operational Assistance Liaison Detachments (DLAOs). These operations, conducted by the French army in collaboration with the national armies, show excellent results.<sup>17</sup> ”



France's military involvement in the Sahel is based on the idea that jihadist terrorism is neither an expression of socio-economic problems nor a consequence of France's military interventionism. Rather, it is seen as the culmination of an ideological struggle between anti-democratic jihadists and democratic France, as also manifested in the recent attacks by jihadists in France itself. As such, it is also perceived to be the prelude to a war fought by jihadist groups against French democratic values. France's engagement is based on the idea that reducing poverty in the Sahel would eliminate neither the extremists nor the jihadists. In consequence, French military operations prioritize the destruction of the human and material infrastructure of the jihadists as a means to reduce their capacity and ultimately eliminate them altogether. Only then will France be able to support the Sahel states in restoring their authority and putting in place development policies targeting the most abandoned regions.



**French military operations prioritize the destruction of the human and material infrastructure of the jihadists as a means to reduce their capacity and ultimately eliminate them altogether.**

While there are major challenges to the sustainability of the French security provision in the Sahel, including the continued inability of French and Malian forces to exercise control over the entirety of Malian territory and its population groups, Operations Serval and Barkhane have nevertheless ensured the survival of the Malian state over the past five years.

### **A feasible objective?**

However, the French military strategy in the Sahel raises a number of questions about objectives, financing and collaboration, starting with common definitions. Is jihadism, for instance, primarily an expression of ideology? And even if we agree that it is, will it be possible to defeat such an ideology by reducing the military and human capacities of its supporters? Experiences from elsewhere suggest the opposite, including experiences within the region. Although the French military operation in northern Mali has succeeded in halting the advance of the jihadists and even chasing them partly out of the region, it has not succeeded in halting the expansion of jihadism in the Sahel more generally. Indeed, over the past three years jihadism has expanding rapidly into previously untouched areas adjacent to northern Mali,

including the northern border regions of Burkina Faso and the regions in central Mali around Mopti. While the former separatists, the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad coalition (CMA), the government and pro-government militias (Plateforme) increasingly cooperate in implementing the Algiers Peace Accord, jihadist groups outside the peace agreement continue to mushroom, further undermining security within several Sahel states. The ongoing threat from jihadist groups was highlighted by the attack on the Operational Coordination Mechanism (OMC) in Gao, which is responsible for deploying mixed patrols, by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb linked to Al-Mourabitoun. Moreover, jihadist groups have announced the formation of a new alliance, the Group of Support for Islam and Muslims, which brings together four al-Qaida organizations and affiliates under one umbrella organization consisting of Ansar Dine (and its affiliate the Macina Liberation Front), Al Murabitun and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)'s Sahara battalion. Adding to the increasingly complex security environment in the Sahel, Boko Haram has stepped up its asymmetric attacks and expanded its operations into Chad and Niger following its loss of territory and operating bases in Nigeria. Recent events in Kidal also illustrate how French counterinsurgency operations may feed into local antagonisms against UN peacekeepers. On April 2016, after three French soldiers died in an IED explosion in Kidal, French forces increased arrests as part of their investigation of the event. In response to the arrests, Kidal residents protested and decided to storm the airport held by Uhe N's peacekeeping force, MINUSMA. Such events galvanize support for the jihadist groups and serve to prove the latter's narrative of the brutality to which Western colonial powers resort in order to protect their own interests. Hence, despite some remarkable military gains, the French counter-terrorist Operations Serval and Barkhane are stimulating the very challenges they are supposed to be overcoming. This is not just a question of providing ammunition for anti-western militant mobilization but, more directly, of supporting the illegitimate and often highly repressive governments of the Sahel region in imposing their will on their peripheries. In other words, the international military operation risks perpetuating the very root causes of the symptoms it is fighting. France may therefore risk sliding into the same type of endless "war against terror" that the American-led campaigns experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq during the first decade of the 2000s.

### **The search for partners**

Apart from defining the overall objectives for engagement, another key issue is finance: who will foot the bill for running the military operation in the Sahel? France does not have sufficient economic muscle to pay the costs alone, and as a consequence it has sought to mobilize European budgetary support by presenting its

military repression of jihadists in the Sahel not only as a means to protect French interests, but also as a tactical response to a common threat to the whole of Europe. As the former director of the Joint Defence College, General Vincent Desportes, put it in 2017:

“ The Sahel must be the priority mission because we are responsible for it, and it is our close neighbour. Unlike Afghanistan, it is our war, a long-term military action that will require the support of local armies for a long time. The Sahel is not only a threat, but also a strategic asset. In the current state of the French armed forces, we should therefore focus on this mission. In the long term, we will have to reinvest in our defence at the height of security issues. Finally, the goal of the military engagement in the Sahel is only to create favourable conditions for the implementation of a political solution. The Sahel's problems comprise the high growth in population and the lack of employment. It is time to build a truly global strategy, now missing, to move forward simultaneously on three lines of operation: security, governance and development. In Afghanistan, the coalition spent \$1 trillion in vain, of which about \$800 billion funded kerosene and bombs. This strategy can only be European, and the first partner to convince is Germany.<sup>18</sup> ”

France has also tried to compensate for its overly prominent role in the military struggle against the jihadists by finding a regional partner in or around the Sahel. Francois Hollande initially tried to convince Algeria to fill this role, but in vain. While the Algerian President Bouteflika quietly allowed French fighter jets to refuel over Algerian air space without consulting parliament, the Algerian regime would not be lured into taking responsibility for the consequences of a military intervention that it had opposed and saw as disruptive of its own strategic interests in the Sahel and the Maghreb. As a consequence, Emmanuel Macron has more recently groomed Chad to become a key military ally, or what he refers to as “a leader of the new military architecture under construction”. According to Macron, Chad will be able to assist France in this endeavour by drawing on its seasoned and well-equipped army, which in 2013 proved its abilities by dislodging AQIM troops from the Adrar des Ifoghas, as well as in the struggle against Boko Haram in Nigeria. The overture to Chad seems to have created an opening, and the Chadian president later explained that, provided European countries supplied financial and military equipment, his

country would “be at the forefront of the fight against terrorism in the G5 space.” However, shortly afterwards the Chadian president also stated that his country had reached the limits of its capacity: “We cannot continue to be everywhere, in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, and monitor 1,200 kilometres of our border with Libya. All this is excessively expensive, and, if nothing is done, Chad will unfortunately be forced to withdraw.”<sup>19</sup>

**Both the national governments involved in the G5-Sahel initiative and their international supporters recognize that a military response will remain insufficient to combat jihadism in the Sahel.**

However, the main obstacle to France’s ability to secure substantial financial support for its engagement in the Sahel is linked to the fact that, while regional powers in North and East Africa and the Sahel seem to share France’s concerns over jihadist terrorism, and while European governments are well aware that jihadists have nothing good in store for them, European powers operate with an alternative and at present more compelling threat scenario when it comes to the Sahel. In Italy, Germany, the Balkans, Greece, Spain and a number of north and east European countries, migration is seen as a far more urgent problem than jihadist terrorism. That does not just leave France at risk of having to foot the majority of the bill for its military engagement in the Sahel; it also leaves it at risk of remaining the priority enemy number one of jihadists in Africa, and perhaps more broadly in the Middle East. The key strategic approach adopted by France in order to handle this situation has been to represent its military engagement as one component among others in the EU’s so-called “comprehensive approach” to security, development and diplomacy in the Sahel.

The G5-Sahel initiative is the first regional military response mechanism to target the transnational threats posed by jihadists in the Sahel. Nonetheless, both the national governments involved in the G5-Sahel initiative and their international supporters recognize that a military response will remain insufficient to combat jihadism in the Sahel. Jihadist mobilization in the Sahel exploits a host of local, regional and global strains, and in particular it targets marginalized population groups who have for decades been abandoned by their governments, among others Tuaregs, Peuls, Toubou, Songhai and Haratins. While building social and family links with notable families in the region and intimidating opponents into passivity,

jihadists also offer social and political answers to the problems felt by these groups. Hence they respond to the persistence of social injustice and the arbitrary exercise of power in rural parts of the Sahel with an offer to create a new state – the Islamic State – and a new equitable justice system based on the Sharia. In the face of ethnic rivalries, jihadists emphasise the importance of their common Muslim identity as a means of conflict resolution and arbitration.

A successful response to the jihadist threat in the Sahel should therefore be based first on a shared understanding that jihadism poses a real threat to both the states in the Sahel and their European partners. Secondly, it must be based on an understanding that military solutions must go hand-in-hand with broader socio-economic, ideological-theological and social initiatives to support the weak and failing states of the Sahel in becoming providers of equitable justice, economic opportunities and political inclusion.



## EUROPEAN ANTI-MIGRATION POLICY

In tandem with France's efforts to suppress jihadists in the Sahel, over the past few years the European Union (EU) and its member states have engaged forcefully in curbing the migration flows out of the Sahel, notably those through Libya. This policy focus has come about as the result of a gradual adjustment. From an initial twentieth-century understanding of the Sahel as an object of French post-colonial interest and EU development assistance, the EU adopted its first so-called "Sahel strategy" only in 2011. This strategy, which adopted a security prism primarily in reaction to the proliferation of jihadist groups of North African origin like AQIM in Mali, Niger and Mauritania, introduced the EU's so-called "comprehensive approach". On the basis that security and development were mutually dependent, this combined more traditional development instruments with new security-oriented initiatives ranging from the capacity-building of law enforcement agencies to preventive measures against the proliferation of jihadist and other radical thinking and mobilization. Another key idea in the strategy was to invest in facilitating closer regional cooperation among the Sahel states, as well as between the Sahel region and neighbouring regions. In particular, the EU identified the need to bring the Maghreb states on board to address the challenges facing the Sahel countries, like poverty, food scarcity, drought, the youth bulge, corruption, weak governance, internal conflict, violent extremism, trafficking and terrorism:

“ Many of the challenges impact on neighbouring countries, including Algeria, Libya, Morocco and even Nigeria, whose engagement is necessary to help resolve them. The current political developments in the Maghreb have consequences for the situation in the Sahel, taking into account close relations between the countries of the two regions, a significant presence of citizens of the Sahel countries in the Maghreb and the risks that arise from the proliferation of arms in the region. ”

(SSDS 2011: 1).


### **A new concern**

It is possible that the weakening of state authority in several Maghreb countries in the wake of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 ended up undermining some of these initial ambitions for prioritizing closer regional integration between the Sahel and the Maghreb. In any case, a new concern among European policy-makers over the potential increase in undocumented migration from the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa through the weakened Maghreb countries and into southern Europe via the so-called “central Mediterranean migration route” would in the following years trump the initial aim of fostering increased Sahel-Maghreb integration and collaboration, as expressed in the 2011 strategy document. In particular, the inability of Libya’s militias and political parties to establish a functioning transitional government after Gaddafi’s fall in late 2011 would stir up increasing concerns in Europe about migration flows across the Mediterranean. In 2014-2015 the combination of a descent into civil war and confrontations between Libya’s major political parties and militias during the summer of 2014, which pressured African migrants hosted in Libya to move on towards Europe, and the overburdening of the refugee camps for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey would push the migration issue to the forefront of European strategic thinking about the Sahel.

In April 2015, the Council of the EU adopted an amended five-year strategy for its engagement in the Sahel, the so-called “Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020”. In contrast to the Sahel Strategy of 2011, which focused on combating terrorism and its root causes, the Action Plan of 2015 introduced a new and stronger focus on countering undocumented migration and mobility in the Sahel without forgetting the fight against jihadists and terrorists.



Framed as a prolongation and continuation of the Sahel Strategy of 2011 and its comprehensive approach to security and development, the EU identified three amended domains of action and concern related to migration: improving conditions and opportunities for young people in the Sahel; managing borders, migration and mobility; and combating trafficking and transnational organized crime. The fourth domain of concern remained preventing and countering radicalization and extremism.



**The EU has replaced its push for the Maghreb countries to take responsibility in the Sahel with a strategy of strengthening the capacity and cooperation between the Sahel countries themselves.**


The Action Plan also saw a decrease in the importance that the EU accords to bringing regional actors in the Maghreb into play when addressing the challenges and threats to European security and stability in the Sahel. Instead of providing concrete ideas and allocating funds to initiatives that could facilitate, lure or gently push regional powers in the Maghreb into playing a stronger role in addressing the crisis in the Sahel, the EU now states vaguely that it sees a need to “develop a common space for dialogue and cooperation between the EU, Maghreb and Sahel” (AP 2015: 10) and that relevant Commission services and the EEAS will therefore “explore ways to enhance the cooperation on a European/Maghreb/Sahel level, as well as with other relevant West African and neighbouring countries, on issues of common interest” (AP 2015: 7).

The EU’s downscaling of its push for the Maghreb countries to take more resolute action to solve the multiple crises in the Sahel has been replaced by what looks like a strategy that on the one hand aims to reinforce Sahelian national states in controlling their own borders, populations and territories, while on the other hand aiming to generate horizontal, east-west regional security and economic integration among the Sahel countries. To mention but the most obvious example, the EU allocated funds for the French-guided initiative to create a new security and trade framework between Mauretania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, the so-called G5-Sahel. While Morocco has agreed to undertake a minor task under this initiative, Algeria reportedly remains sceptical of the new security framework and its possible boost to France’s geopolitical presence in the Sahel.

In any case, the core framework is one of French/European/Western direct support and finance that aims to enable the Sahel countries to handle their security threats in the future. As such, it reinstates the separation between the Sahel and Maghreb regions, rather than supporting their vertical integration. It thus enhances the push to reconfirm the colonial borders that continue to serve as a guiding principle in post-colonial nation-building strategies in both the Sahel and the Maghreb countries.

### **Results and consequences**

It remains to be seen whether the EU's attempts to reduce migration into Europe will succeed. However, scholars and experts have expressed doubts and pointed out that these initiatives and policies have so far made little progress: the migration pressure has remained historically high, with 170,000 migrants, primarily from Sub-Saharan Africa, crossing the Mediterranean from the Maghreb in 2016 (compared to 30-40,000 annually during the first decade of the 2000s) and an equally high number being registered by the IMO for the early quarters of 2017. European attempts to seal off the Mediterranean, in combination with the collapse of the Libyan economy, has created increasingly perilous conditions for migrants inside Libya, as manifested most blatantly in the re-emergence of modern slavery conditions for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa under the auspices of both the private militias and elements in the EU-supported Libyan government's border forces. Illicit trafficking and criminal networks have been further boosted by the increase in the informal economy and smuggling dividends under pressure from local policing initiatives funded by the EU and its member states. This has stoked prices for assistance to migrants illegally crossing the Sahara and the Mediterranean.



### **Militarization of the Sahel may be slowing down migration towards North Africa currently, but it is unlikely to stop it.**

While the European powers have drawn up advanced plans to obstruct the transit migration via Niger to Libya and further on to Europe, its projects to address the root causes of migration in the Sahel and the West African region seem less developed and less creative. In the absence of a credible state in Libya, the EU is currently focusing on putting the brakes on transit migration into the country. Yet, closing the Libyan-Niger corridor by military means, even if this unlikely project can be momentarily realized in such a vast region, remains a short-term solution.

Though there are legitimate reasons for countering cross-border militant jihadism, along with the smuggling of arms and drugs and the trafficking of women, the forcible suppression of the ancient trans-Saharan routes may create more long-term problems than it solves.

First, the region, and especially the semi-nomadic peoples in the northern parts of the Sahel, need cross-border trade and mobility. There is a long history of trade and commerce between the countries, and the poor depend on mobility as a coping strategy. Secondly, when the Libyan economy bounces back – and oil production is soon expected to reach a million barrels per day – African migrants will be needed to rebuild the country. A strong and prosperous job market in Libya can take the migration pressure off Europe. Thirdly, enforcing security from the outside, especially on seminomadic peoples, is having a detrimental effect on their livelihoods and could generate further political instability. Fourthly, any growing focus on security and border control must take into account the beneficial effects of regional migration for development and regional integration. Effectively, the freedom of movement enshrined in the ECOWAS protocols now stops in Agadez. Finally, militarization of the Sahel may be slowing down migration towards North Africa currently, but it is unlikely to stop it. Reports suggest that new and more dangerous routes crossing even harsher terrain are currently opening up and putting migrant lives at risk.

The EU therefore faces a need to develop ways of integrating an African labour force into the receiving countries that contributes positively to growth and public finances, especially in countries where the population is aging. It should also be remembered that the resulting remittances are a stabilizing factor for the sending countries in both alleviating poverty and insulating weak economies, like Mali's, against external shocks. Secondly, in order to manage migrants' movements, Europe must invest in better family planning, health, education and job opportunities. Managed the right way, the World Bank argues, Africa's demographic development may lead to a positive transition capable of becoming a window of opportunity for the impoverished region. The EU must not just focus on stopping people from moving, but also on giving people reasons to stay at home, or at least to migrate within the growing economies of the African continent alone. More roads to progress on the African continent are needed, not fewer. In fact, economic growth and meaningful youth employment is probably the strongest and most lasting source of security when it comes to preventing radicalization, as well as with regard to high-risk migration to Europe, whereas fencing in the continent could have the opposite effect.



## DENMARK IN THE SAHEL


In recent decades Denmark has built up a strong track record as a relatively important donor country in the three central Sahel states, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, in two of which it also has embassies. Over the past decade, this involvement with development has also been complemented by a number of security and stabilization efforts, including troop deployments to the UN force (MINUSMA) in Mali and allocations of funding for activities in the Sahel as part of the 2012 and 2017 stabilization funds. Developed as an “integrated” approach to development and security in the Sahel, this aligns well with the EU’s “comprehensive” strategic approach.

When in June 2017 the Danish government launched a new Foreign and Security Policy Strategy, the Sahel figured among the key security challenges that Denmark would prioritize in the coming years. In alignment with the EU Action Plan of 2015, for the first time ever the Danish strategy identified the reduction of migration from Africa and the Middle East as its top priority, and it also restated its goal of combating terrorism in Africa and the Middle East. This came well before the emergence of foreign policy issues like Brexit, the challenges to the EU framework and to economic globalization, and Denmark’s role in the Arctic. Among the twelve pledges made in the strategic document to enhance Denmark’s security and stability, seven were directly related to handling the crises in the Sahel. The government made strategic pledges to continue contributing to the military suppression of jihadists in Africa and the Middle East and prioritized countering the negative effects of drought and population growth in the Sahel. It also promised to strengthen its system for the readmission of rejected asylum-seekers and made pledges to increase investments to create opportunities for young and women in Africa. It promised to continue to

promote good governance and economic growth in North Africa and the Middle East, and to increase its contribution to the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM). Finally it promised to expand the capacities of the Ministry itself by creating migration-related positions at key embassies (e.g. in Nairobi) and appointing a special envoy to the Sahel and Maghreb.

In its current programming, Danish development assistance in the Sahel is implementing these strategic priorities in the form of four general domains of engagement: security, migration, growth and governance.

In the security domain, Danish assistance is targeting internally displaced people, refugees and local communities and is contributing to countering refugee pressures through strengthened protection and improved livelihoods, education and employment opportunities. Denmark also aims to foster peace-building and state-building on several levels, from capacitating public institutions in local communities to central institutions nationally, and also involving civil society, including faith-based organizations and the business sector, as important participants. In Mali, for instance, this includes engagements in reconciliation and conflict mediation and efforts to decentralize the government and boost its legitimacy. In Niger, Denmark supports accountability and inclusive governance, alongside civil-society organizations. In Burkina Faso, Danish initiatives are targeting local access to justice and improved public financial management, as well as fighting organized crime through the instruments developed by the UN.



**Current French, European and Danish foreign and security policies in the Sahel aim to consolidate state capacities in the Sahel and facilitate local security collaboration in the G5-Sahel framework.**

Within the domain of migration, Denmark is seeking to counter irregular economic migration and is addressing its root causes by enabling sustainable development, protection and human rights for the benefit of both local communities and displaced people. In Niger, for instance, Denmark is planning to initiate more specific migration-related activities in parallel with efforts to support the combatting of organized crime and border management.

In the growth domain, Denmark is seeking to invest in inclusive (i.e. pro-poor) and sustainable growth in the energy, water, agriculture and food sectors. In particular, it is seeking to support activities leading to decent job creation, entrepreneurship, innovation and the growth of micro-enterprises and SMEs. In Mali, for instance, Denmark aims to support private-sector growth and development and to counter Mali's vulnerability to climate change, while in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, it is supporting agricultural growth and development.



**The ability of European policies to reduce and eventually curb migration out of Africa into Europe is questionable.**

Finally, Denmark is working within the domain of governance to improve basic freedoms, democracy, human rights and gender equality with a particular focus on sexual and reproductive health and the rights of women and girls. Furthermore, it is also seeking to counter the spread of violent extremism and radicalization by supporting inter-faith dialogue, education and job creation, as well as preventive initiatives targeting youth groups and developing the capacity of local authorities. In Mali, for instance, Denmark aims to support the spread of human rights and co-existence, stability and security. It is also seeking to promote human rights in Burkina Faso. In Niger, it supports the management of demographic growth through programmes aiming to enhance women's sexual and reproductive rights.

It is, of course, still too early to assess whether these new initiatives will deliver on the strategic priorities or not. Given the close overlap with the EU's priorities, it is relatively safe to assume that the concerns expressed by scholars and experts about the effects of these initiatives being implemented within the EU framework also apply to the Danish efforts.

The current French, European and Danish foreign and security policies in the Sahel seem implicitly to be targeting two overall outcomes: first, the consolidation of state capacities and the stabilization of their societies; and secondly, facilitating local security collaboration by horizontally integrating the five key countries in the Sahel into the G5-Sahel framework.

It is a fair assumption to make that achieving these two strategic objectives in the future would benefit the EU and its member states. It would create structures and actors capable of preventing jihadists and migrants from threatening European stability and security through their own efforts. By boosting cooperation on border security and counterterrorism among the Sahel states, Europe would be granted the opportunity to re-adopt the role of donor, supporter and trainer of national authorities and regional institutions in the Sahel, which would then hunt down jihadists, be able to control their territories and limit the movement of migrants.

As we have seen, however, it is also at least uncertain whether the current policies are having this result. While France's military engagement in the Sahel since 2013 may have saved Mali from a full state collapse, the campaigns to counter jihadism are being challenged, with mixed results. Aside from the question of whether these activities are targeting the correct drivers behind the mobilization (ideology rather than local power struggles, poverty, foreign military intervention etc.), the results are worrying: apart from the areas of northern Mali where French troops are present and active alongside MINUSMA, the UN-peacekeeping force, jihadist mobilization is spreading rapidly across the Sahel from Niger through central Mali to Burkina Faso and beyond. France may therefore be in for a very long, if not endless war against jihadism. Although it may have the stamina to shoulder the losses in human lives that any such operation will demand over the years, it does not currently have the financial capacity to foot the bill.

The ability of European policies to reduce and eventually curb migration out of Africa into Europe is also questionable. The continuing high numbers of arrivals of African migrants on European shores suggest that effective border control mechanisms are not in place. At the same time, the blatant abuses suffered by African migrants on their way to Europe constitute a challenge to the moral foundations of these European border policies. As long as the criminalization of migration remains the go-to model for European policy-makers, illegal trafficking, which originally emerged in response to the closure of legal migration opportunities, is likely to continue to blossom and boost both the informal economy and the dividends of smugglers and criminals.



## CONCLUSION: FACILITATING TRANS-REGIONAL INTEGRATION

This report has shown that a new perception has arisen among European and North African decision-makers of a series of threats and challenges emerging from the inability of states in the Sahel region to adequately address the growing activity and pressure from transnational non-state actors, in particular from jihadist groups and migrants.

In defiance of the attempts made over the past century by colonial and post-colonial state-builders in the Sahel and North Africa to separate the two regions, jihadists and migrants are today pushing them closer together.

This new reality of increased security interconnectedness between the Sahel, the Maghreb and Europe is the product a combination of long-term structural under-development and a series of conjunctures in regional politics, ranging from state weaknesses to rivalry and paralysis among the regional powers.

European foreign policy strategies, ranging from the strategic documents elaborated by the EU's foreign service to the policies of a small Scandinavian member state like Denmark, has adequately diagnosed the lack of trans-regional integration and collaboration across the Sahara between the more powerful North African states and the less consolidated Sahel counterparts. This is a key factor responsible for generating these challenges and threats.

Nevertheless, the current foreign policy responses of the EU and its member states tend to work against this. In the wake of the relative weakening of the capabilities of several of the most prominent North African powers during and after the Arab

Uprisings of 2011 – including a full state collapse in Libya – the European powers have all but abandoned their commitment to push for trans-regional integration across the Sahara. Instead, they have engaged in short-term tactical moves aiming to produce a minimum of stabilization by handling the immediate threats to European interests, from support for the toppling of Gaddafi in 2011 through the French and UN's military efforts to suppress jihadists and stabilize Mali and its surroundings in 2013 to the latest efforts to boost regional security integration among the Sahel states under the umbrella of the G5-Sahel platform.

### **Engaging regional powerhouses**

There is an obvious need to continue the current efforts to combat jihadists, control migration and build states and regional integration in the Sahel. However, at the same time, the EU and its member states should recognize the limited strategic reach of such efforts and consider complementing them with a deeper push that reignites the ambition set out in European strategic documents prior to the Arab uprisings of turning North African powerhouses into partners in handling the challenges of migration, jihadism, and underdevelopment and under-performance in the states in the Sahel. In spite of the obstacles that any such effort will encounter from unwilling and suspicious states used to zero-sum thinking about power relations in the region, the EU and its member states have no alternative. Experiences from other world regions, including Southeast Asia and the Middle East, indicate that, in cases where global super-powers are increasingly disinclined to bid for regional hegemony, long-term stabilization and peace creation depend on regional great powers, whether Iran or Pakistan or, in the Sahel region, Algeria, Morocco and also, but perhaps in a slightly longer perspective, Egypt.

As stated in the EU's own "Sahel Strategy" from 2011, it is hard to imagine that the current crises over migration and jihadism and their impact on European security and stability can be adequately solved without the strong involvement of the regional economic and security great powers in the Maghreb. Whether we are focusing on security provision, reducing migration, economic development or border controls, the EU and its member states like France might be able to foot the bill and sustain the pressure from losses of human lives under the current forms of engagement, both initially and for some time into the future. However, it seems unlikely that any of these actors will be able to do so in the long run. Dividing the task with the regional powers in the Maghreb would permit Europe to share both the security risks and the economic burden of handling the crises in the Sahel.

The genuine involvement of both Algeria and Morocco in this endeavour would simultaneously limit the risks of spoiler politics being enacted by the partner that seems least likely to gain from European-engineered regional politics; for the time being, that state is Algeria. Equally, the solution to the migration challenge is neither to open nor to close the doors to Europe completely. The current criminalization of emigration from Sub-Saharan Africa into both the Maghreb and Europe does little to find long-term solutions to the problem of surplus labour and the ensuing emigration pressure being transferred from the Sahel into Europe. The involvement of the Maghreb powers – in particular Morocco and Algeria, but in time also Tunisia and Libya – in absorbing the migration pressure on Europe by opening legal “circular” or “seasonal” labour immigration from the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa would help alleviate the current pressures on the Central Mediterranean migration route.

There are several concrete steps that the EU and its member states could consider to kick-start the move towards opening up increased trans-regional integration between the Sahel and North Africa.

### **Promoting circular migration**

Within the spectrum of its migration policy, the EU and its member states could consider downscaling their push to seal off the borders between the two regions. Instead, they could launch programs to encourage and legalize the type of cross-regional “circular” or “seasonal” labour migration between the Sahel and the Maghreb known in past decades through targeted investments in local economies and job creation in North Africa to help absorb the surplus labour that is expected to emerge in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa over the coming decades.

### **Increased security cooperation on the regional level**

Within the domain of security, European powers could consider reducing their efforts to include both Morocco and Algeria – and ideally also Egypt – in the security cooperation of the G5-Sahel. The current support from Morocco but not Algeria is a recipe for generating spoiler dynamics further down the road, and with it, eventually, long-term failure. In particular, the EU could increase its efforts to link Algeria to the G5-Sahel platform, for example, by identifying ways of merging the CEMOC regional security platform with the newly established G5-Sahel security structure. It could also seek ways to facilitate practical hands-on security collaboration between sovereign neighbouring countries based on the model developed by Tunisia and Algeria in their anti-terrorism efforts in the regions bordering Libya.

### **Denmark, a possible facilitator**

Much of the above will obviously be left to the work of the great powers. Nonetheless, small European powers like Denmark may have an important role to play in this process as well. Given that no other European actors are currently pushing seriously to increase trans-regional integration between the Maghreb and the Sahel, a country like Denmark could find itself with a prominent role to play in this process, possibly in cooperation with its other Nordic partners.

Denmark enjoys a relatively sober reputation and a high level of credibility among governments and populations in the Sahel and North Africa alike. While some of the more recent positioning of Denmark on the international scene – including the government’s aim to profile Denmark as a particularly unattractive European country for immigration from the Global South– Denmark’s long-term and comparatively large involvement in stabilization efforts, humanitarian assistance and both economic and political development in the Sahel provides a good basis for such diplomatic efforts. Denmark also enjoys good relations with key North African players like Algeria and Morocco, as well as good working relationships with both of the major international security providers in the two regions, France and the US. For this reason, and preferably in cooperation with like-minded powers, Denmark could act as a neutral mediator, convenor or “facilitator” of cross-regional meetings and dialogue between Sahelian, North African and European powers in order to bring the region’s partners together. Strategically, such an effort would also be aligned with Denmark’s long-term goals. Given that Denmark’s most recent defence and foreign policy strategy has led to the appointment of a Special Envoy for the Sahel and Maghreb tasked with facilitating the coordination of issues related to solving the crisis in the Sahel and its implications for Europe, the Danish government has no need to create a new instrument to carry out this task. Moreover, the complementary decision to open an embassy in Algeria alongside its representations in Morocco, Mali and Burkina Faso also means that Denmark is relatively well equipped to provide diplomatic support to such commitments.

## NOTES

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