

Forum: Security Council

Issue: The issue of violent extremism in the Sahel-Saharan region

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INTRODUCTION

While most of the world focuses on terrorism in the Middle East, violent extremist groups that espouse fundamentalist religious narratives have expanded their terrorist activity in Africa. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has produced or inspired the proliferation of extremist groups that continue to destabilize the Sahel-Saharan region, which spans across Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

In the areas around Lake Chad, Boko Haram, which originated in Northeast Nigeria, has left tens of thousands of civilians dead and displaced almost three million people. Furthermore, the security vacuum in Libya, as well as the presence of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, intensified the risks to the Sahel region. Military intervention by regional forces, such as the G5 Sahel military force, France and the UN, have weakened such groups and reclaimed territories they once held. The drivers of militancy in the complex social, economic and political environment, however, remain very much intact.

Just in March of this year, the massacre in Ogossagou, in which 134 people were slain, including children and elders, once again shows that violence in the Sahel region is spiraling out of control and needs to be addressed immediately. The target of this attack was the “Fulani” ethnic minority, which has often been accused of having ties to jihadist organizations in the region.

Unless this understructure of vulnerability and criminality is addressed, extremist violence will remain an enduring threat to the region. Both the USA and the EU have become increasingly focused on security in the region fearing the transformation of the territory to a new safe-haven for extremist groups. In order to tackle the issue, we have to understand its roots. In this case, rivalries over the control of smuggling, as well as state officials’ tolerance of criminal activities mostly by political allies, allowed extremist groups to flourish.

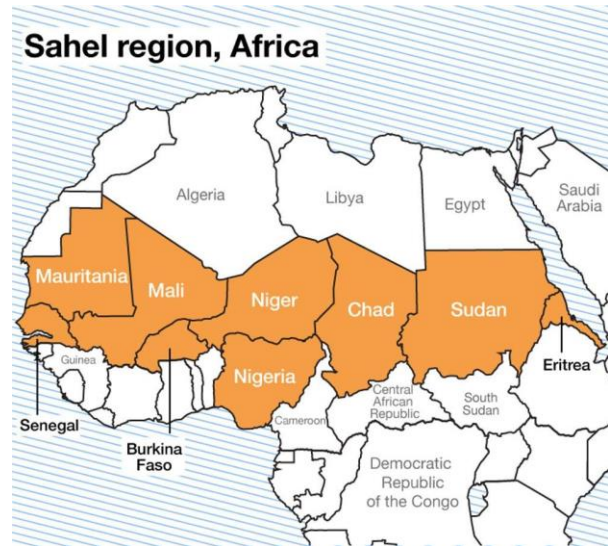
Some governments function better than others when it comes to such crises. When it comes to addressing terrorism-related cases, Niger has been particularly efficient in cutting down on non-state actors. There is a slight upward tendency when it comes to prevention/reaction to issues, such as the aforementioned slaughter. In any case, there is still much room for improvement.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Sahel-Saharan Region

Region in Africa that spans across the Sahara Desert comprising Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, as well as adjacent areas in Algeria and Libya.

Map of the Sahel (Image)¹



Militia

In this case, militia is defined as a military force, which is raised to engage in rebel or terrorist activities in opposition to a regular army.

Jihadists

Jihadists are persons involved in a jihad. A jihad, in turn, is a fight against Islam's enemies.

Violent extremism

Violent extremism is defined as the ideological commitment to achieve religious, social, or political goals through the use of violence. Such violent acts can be carried out by either a group or an individual with a relatively wide range of ideologies and beliefs.

Islamic extremism

On the other hand, Islamic extremism is defined as any form of Islam, which opposes individual liberty, democracy, the rule of law, as well as the tolerance of different beliefs and faiths. In order to follow through the implications of this extreme opposition, such actors rely on illegal, often violent means.

¹ <http://theconversation.com/sahel-region-africa-72569>

Arms/Drugs Smuggling

The smuggling of arms and/or drugs, often referred to as trafficking or gunrunning is defined as the illegal trade of contraband ammunition and small arms, or, in the case of drugs, the illicit transportation of substances across an international border, thereby violating regulations and other applicable laws. Such activities are often associated with transnational criminal networks.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Insecurity and political instability

Many of the Sahel's countries have been plagued by political instability for years now. A case in point is Mali, where the military coup in March 2012 brought an instant stop to 20 long years of stable democracy. As a result, terrorists, who had occupied most of the northern region, started to head down south aiming to get under their control the whole country. Only the following year, a French-led intervention put an end to their advance compounding the security and humanitarian crisis, partly by disrupting supply routes and causing food shortages.

Moreover, Burkina Faso being at the gates of coastal countries, like Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin, has a very crucial position, since militant groups would have easier access to major western African ports that would provide easier trafficking routes for drugs and weapons, should they establish a presence in those countries. The north and the east provinces, which are the poorest areas in Burkina Faso, have completely been neglected by the government, as it provides only minimal education, jobs, infrastructure and healthcare. Locals have, in turn, tied themselves with militant groups, which not only promise, but also deliver more services than the state itself. As a result, the locals are being radicalized, recruited and trained by those extremist groups.

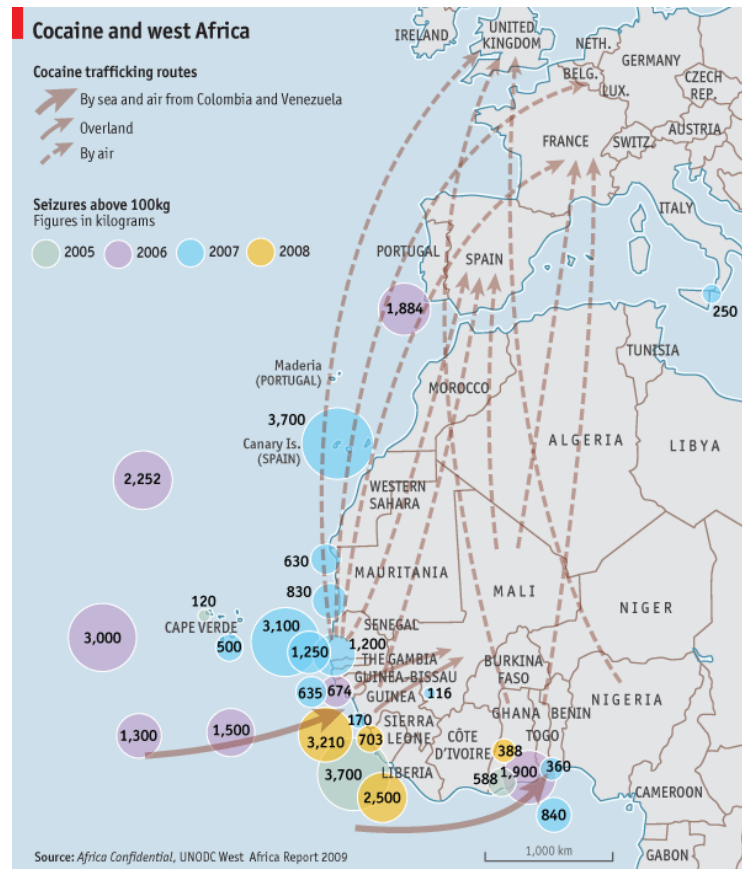
Similarly, the neighboring country, Niger, had its fair share of instability. In just 50 years of Niger's independence, the country has witnessed four coups, two armed rebellions and seven governments. Sahel-Saharan countries also face natural hazards, which contributed or even partly caused the prevalent instability in the region. Among these are droughts, desert locust outbreaks, .extreme poverty, food insecurity, and a lack of educational opportunities ([70% illiteracy rate](#)²). While the governments struggle to cover their populations' needs, these development concerns add up to the region's precarious stability. Lastly, but certainly not least, Sahel-Saharan states are even further constrained by the high rates of terrorist activity and transborder crime, the divergent

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/pursuing-elusive-stability-sahel>

interests of ethnic groups, an [influx of 136.000 Malian refugees](#)³, and a [debt reaching 77 %](#)⁴ of their GDP.

Origins and Evolution of Illicit Regional Flows

With so porous borders between these countries criminal organizations and traffickers capitalize on the lack of control. To state the obvious, extremist groups depend on a stable provision of weaponry and other supplies steadily contributing to the flow of illicit smuggling. During the 1990s, there were cuts to Algeria's budget that caused a partial economic slump. Moreover, the embargo imposed on Libya stimulated contraband. In addition, conflicts in northern Niger, Mali and Algeria turned the region into a major arms trafficking hub. The same networks that controlled contraband now smuggled weapons as well. This situation is aptly illustrated by the case of Hadj Bettou, who, during the early 90s, dominated contraband and weapons smuggling in southern Algeria benefiting from the protection of senior security officials. The smuggling of cigarettes was also a great contributor to the establishment of networks which allowed and even endorsed the growth of drug trafficking. Throughout the development of drug smuggling in the Sahel Region, there have been two distinct flows that expanded rapidly: the South American cocaine flow to Europe, as well as Egypt and Libya, and the Moroccan cannabis flow to Egypt, Libya and the Arabian Peninsula, both of which originated around 2005. According to the UNODC (United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime), it is estimated that around 14% of Europe's cocaine, or 20 tons (valued at USD \$1 billion), transited West Africa in 2008. Traffickers utilize both aerial and coastal routes to smuggle their goods into Europe.



Map of common trafficking routes in 2009 (Image)⁵

³ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/malisituation>

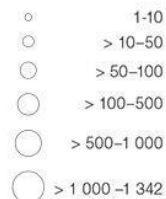
⁴ <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2019/pursuing-elusive-stability-sahel>

The Impact of Organized Crime

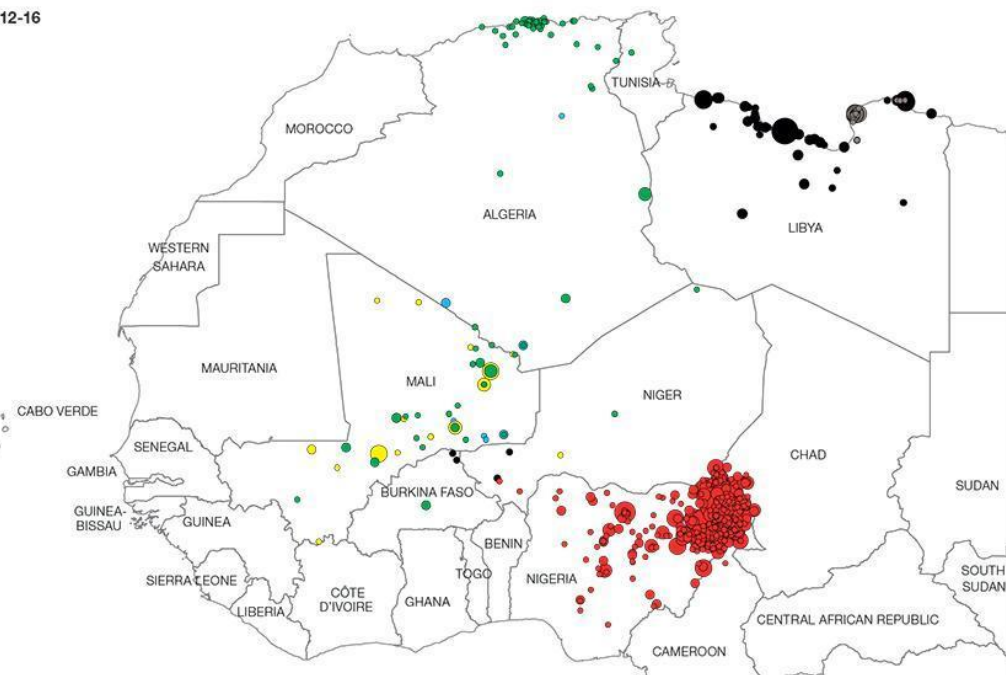
Despite the fact that the entire Sahel and Sahara region was plagued by state-criminal collusion, the role of organized crime in chaotic northern Mali was particularly active. Around 2003, during a period when Mali was a major recipient of foreign assistance from the European Union, the United States, and individual EU member states, organized criminal activity escalated. External aid was particularly focused on counter-terrorism and state capacity, with countries providing technical and training assistance. The leading donors among these countries, France and the United States, grew ever more frustrated by Malian leadership's reluctance to tackle AQIM. As the situation in Mali deteriorated, the EU focused on implementing a major push in expanding the state's security presence, especially in the northern regions, formally known as the "*Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development of Northern Mali (SDNM)*". This program was primarily designed to boost state capacity, but, once again, neglected to address the fundamental problem of organized crime. Additionally, despite the donors' frustration with the Malian leadership, they failed to exert stronger pressure on the government, despite having the chance to leverage the substantial aid allocated to Mali.

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE SAHARA-SAHEL

Number of victims, 2012-16



Groups



Note: The groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) are Al-Mourabitoun and Those Who Sign in Blood. Only violent events attributed to an identified perpetrator are taken into consideration.

Source: ACLED, data 2012-16, www.acleddata.com/data/africa

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Extract: Walther, O. (2017), "Wars and Conflicts in the Sahara-Sahel", West African Papers, No. 10, OECD Publishing, Paris.

The attack on 23 March 2019, the deadliest in the region since 2013, by a so-called Dozo militia killing about 150 Fulani villagers in central Mali, indicates an ever increasing volatile security environment with intercommunal entrenched grievances.

A similar to Mali state in western Africa, which faces a different kind of organized crime, is Côte d'Ivoire. Passing freighters and boats face pirates on a daily basis. Captain and crew are sometimes taken hostages and freed when ransoms worth millions of dollars are paid. Criminal networks also use the ports for their smuggling operations, as they can then access their European neighbors next. All of this further contributes to the funding of these organizations.

Places with increased activity of violent extremist groups in the Sahel Region (Image)⁶

Implicit Motives

Originally, terrorism was theorized to be the systematic use of violence and intimidation by a group or non-state army to achieve some political goals in the context of guerrilla warfare and insurgency. It is important to understand the motives of these extremist groups in order to fend them off. While the exact meaning behind their actions is not always clear, there are a few examples to be considered. MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa), for instance, seeks the global implementation of [Sharia law](#)⁷, which is a set of rules based on the Quran for both public and private behavior. Such goals, ambitious as they are, cannot be considered realistic, and could be looked upon as an 'excuse' for the actions committed to achieve them. The same goes with other groups, such as the Ansar al-Dine, which shares the same goals in its effort to legitimize its atrocious attacks.

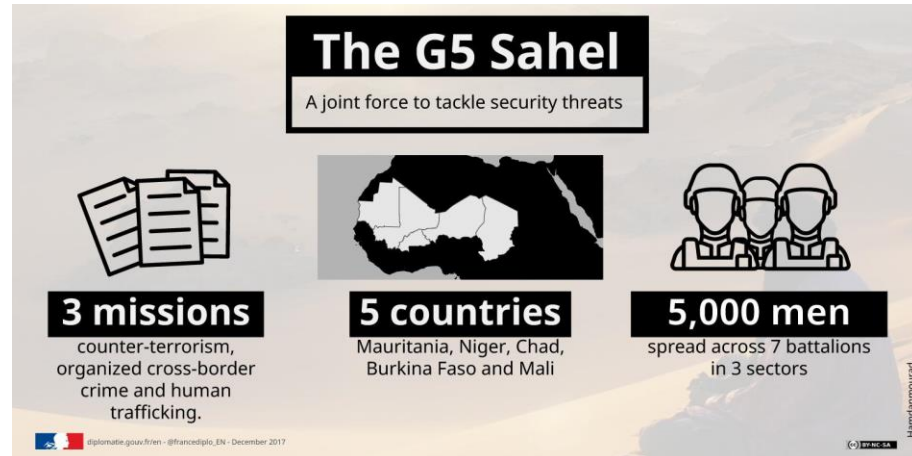
MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

G5 Sahel

⁶ <http://www.west-africa-brief.org/content/en/violent-extremism-sahara-sahel>

⁷ <http://www.billionbibles.org/sharia/sharia-law.html>

According to the G5 Sahel official website, the G5 Sahel is an intergovernmental cooperation framework, which was created on 16 February 2014 and is headquartered in Nouakchott. The organization aims at supporting development and fighting insecurity



and instability in the Sahel-Saharan region.

G5 Sahel Overview (Image)⁸

The G5 Sahel Joint Force is one of the components of this organization. To accomplish its goal of defeating militant groups, it employs 5000 men. In order to operate, the Force has a budget of roughly EUR 400 million, with about 50 million being pledged by the EU, their largest donor.

Lastly, despite their dedication to fend for themselves, the organization suffers from numerous problems, such as funding. Although these five states have joint forces, the group still consists of five individually weak states, who fail to provide for their own citizens due to lack of money for big operations within the group. As a result, they heavily rely on external funds provided by the EU or the USA. Moreover, another issue is that neighboring countries, especially Algeria, refuse to join the organization, on the pretext that this initiative will fail to solve the problem at hand and call for dialogue with non-jihadi organizations instead. Despite Algeria's willingness to collaborate within its capabilities, it refuses to provide any form of military aid and intervention.

UNODC (United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime)

⁸ <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/crises-and-conflicts/g5-sahel-joint-force-and-the-sahel-alliance/>

In 2014, the UNODC was involved in brokering an agreement between Morocco, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Algeria, and Mali in order to address the problems caused by organized crime, terrorism and drug trafficking, which was known as the Sahel Programme. In order to reach these objectives of fighting crime and terrorism, the Sahel Programme strengthens and enforces the accountability, accessibility and efficiency of criminal justice systems in Sahelian states.

Ever since that agreement, the UNODC holds annual conferences, in which Maghreb states and the representatives of the G5 Sahel discuss the implementation of the said programme. The latest meeting, held between 24 and 26 of April 2019, was an opportunity to present the achievements of the cooperation between the UNODC and the Sahelian states in recent years and more specifically:

- Chad's ratification of the UN Convention against Corruption (June 2018).
- The establishment of a Special Brigade to combat organized crime in Burkina Faso (autumn 2018), as well as Anti-Terrorist Investigations.
- The seizure of 18kg of Heroin and nearly 30kg of cocaine by the JAITF (Bamako's Joint Airport Interdiction Task Forces), more than 100kg of gold and 2.5 tons of cannabis by the JAITF of Niamey, and the list goes on...⁹

AQIM (Al Qaeda in Maghreb)

Al Qaeda is probably the most well-known Salafi-jihadist militant group, because of their infamous and not only 9/11 attack in the US. The organization roots go back to Algeria's civil war in the 1990s. AQIM's objectives, as a terrorist group, include ridding North Africa of any Western influence, installing fundamentalist regimes based on sharia, and overthrowing governments they deem apostate in countries, like Libya, Mali, Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. While these states are Al Qaeda's "near enemies", it has been declared that France and Spain are its foremost "far foes". France particularly has had a long history as the region's colonial heavyweight, while it is also one of the main donors that provide counter terrorist regimes with political and military support. AQIM makes this very clear by regularly threatening to stage attacks in France.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is Nigeria's largest Islamist group, founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf. Boko Haram is translated as "western education is forbidden". Being at first a nonviolent organization and looked upon by the people as an alternative to the

⁹ <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2019-04-24-unodc-4th-steering-committee-sahel-programme.html>

government in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram was a thorn in the sides of the State. After the death of Boko Haram's first leader and the demise of thousands of its supporters following a pushback from the government, the group, now with its new leader Abubakar Shekau, graduated from crude attacks with homemade bombs to large scale abductions we can see today. With their new hardline leader radicalizing the organization, they began hitting a number of religious buildings, including churches, as well as their biggest international target, the UN headquarters in the capital of Nigeria, Abuja. The violence continued to escalate and, by May 2013, the militants controlled much of their home state of Borno.

Boko Haram appears to be well-funded and part of a wider radical movement. It seems that Abubakar Shekau has been trying to raise his standing in the movement with videos and statements praising the Charlie Hebdo attacks. In such statements, Boko Haram's leader has confirmed receiving funding from Al Qaeda showing their connection to the jihadist movement.

Last year, Boko Haram's actions focused on Lake Chad and the region around it. Attacks include the death of 62 soldiers in Geidam; 27 people in Ngala; 25 in Guzamala; etc.¹⁰ By October of 2018, 2.5 million people had been displaced due to the so-called 'nine-year' Boko Haram crisis around Lake Chad.

European Union

Back in 2018, the EU and France ramped up their funding to EUR 1.3 billion for the G5 Sahel. Most of the money raised has come from the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, which was set up in the EU-African Union summit meeting of 2015. The goal of this meeting was to reduce migration from the Sahel to the EU. The European Union has also launched several military missions in Africa, which are part of the Common Security and Defense Policy.

France

Having established military bases in Africa during the colonial period, France managed to maintain its military presence after the so-called "flag independence" of its former colonies back in the 1960s. Following the independence struggle of "French Africa", France and the respective states formed a Colonial Pact. While the details of this pact are too many to be analyzed, in summary, it was a sort of lopsided agreement, which maintained France's control over these African states' economies. This included France's possession of foreign currency reserves and its control over each country's

¹⁰ <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2019-01/west-africa-and-the-sahel.php>

strategic raw materials; it also demanded that all military equipment is to be imported from France, as well as the complete control over the training of police and army. While the measures do not end here, what is crucial about the effects of this pact is that France could now resist any change since it has troops available in Africa to put down any leader with different ambitions. In the last 50 years, a total number of 67 coups took place in 26 countries in Africa, 60% of which happened in Francophone Africa. Demonstrating their power, the French began disciplining African leaders, with Sylvanus Olympio being the first back in 1963. The Togolese Prime Minister and President was assassinated because he rejected the CFA franc and wanted to implement Togo's own currency. He was first on a long list of wiped out African leaders; the French not only assassinated African leaders who did not come to terms with them, but also incited a series of coups trying to overthrow any government they deemed unfit.

Currently, the French troops deployed in Africa are estimated at about 3500 to 4000 spread across the five Sahel nations.

United States of America

The United States has been at war in Africa for many years now. Back in 2018, the US military had missions in about 20 African countries focusing on the assistance of African militaries in countering violent extremism. After establishing AFRICOM (Africa Command 2007), American military presence slowly expanded from 2 000 to about 6 000 troops by 2017, all the way to 7 200 troops by the end of 2018.

As of November 2018, the Pentagon announced their plan to decrease the number of American soldiers involved in counterterrorism operations in Africa over the following three years. The strategy is to reduce the number of troops by about 25% shifting them from the front lines of battle to more advisory and strategic roles.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
1898	France completes the conquest of Mali.

1900	Colonial rule under the French in Chad began.
June 20, 1960	Mali became fully independent within the French Community.
August 11, 1960	Chad gained independence from France.
1963	Creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).
1998	Creation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) by Hassan Hattab, in Algeria.
2012	Major droughts further weakened the already vulnerable Sahel communities.
December 20, 2012	Operation Serval: French military operation in Mali, aimed at ousting Islamic militants from northern Mali.
February 16, 2014	Creation of the G5 Sahel.
August 1, 2014	Operation Barkhane: French troops to fight Islamist militants in Sahel resulting in the death of three of the five Islamic leaders.
2015	Due to the pressure from the European Union, Niger was forced to criminalize migrant smuggling. Thousands of smugglers are now unemployed and could easily be exploited by major jihadist groups.
2018	Burkina Faso was the victim of numerous insurgent attacks. The G5 Force, however, did not carry out any missions in the affected areas over the whole year.

May 12, 2019	Six killed in an attack on a Catholic church in Burkina Faso.
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RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Security Council Resolution S/RES/2295

29 June 2016. This resolution aimed at countering terrorism in Mali. The Security Council authorized the 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)' to protect civilians against asymmetric threats increasing its military presence and extending its mandate for another year.

Security Council Resolution S/RES/2359

21 June 2017. This resolution unanimously adopted the deployment of the G5 Sahel force. The Council wholeheartedly welcomed the Joint Force that would address the threat of terrorism, as well as their strategic concept of operations.

Security Council Resolution S/RES/2227

30 June 2016. This resolution focused on the renewal of MINUSMA reminding its primary responsibility to maintain the sovereignty of Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Mauritania and Niger.

Security Council Resolution S/RES/2468

30 April 2019. This resolution pertained to Western Sahara. It aimed at the extension of MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), as well as putting into effect cooperation between the affected states.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

As with many contemporary problems plaguing our world, the most reliable answer to this particular issue is financial assistance. In a country, where instability is

obscuring the fight against terrorism, donations play a crucial role. Another driving factor is military support, which in the past has been provided mainly by France and the USA. The G5 Sahel is also aimed at stability, although the goal here is the autonomy of these states so that they do not have to solely rely on external help.

It is obvious that for the time being the Sahel-Saharan region still heavily depends on foreign aid. Whenever territories were lost, France or the US intervened and reclaimed these regions, which shifted the fight back in their favor. Saudi Arabia has also in the past pledged to offer equipment worth 100 million Euros.

Both the UN and the EU have lobbied in the past for better coordination when it comes to allocating resources to these African countries. Smuggling routes have also been uncovered and illicit goods seized in large amounts, although the same criminal networks providing these goods are still intact.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

When it comes to tackling this issue, coordination is the key. Instability is the first problem to be addressed in these countries. As the past experience has shown, assigning such vast amounts of money to corrupt governments can have serious consequences. Weapons that were originally imported to help fight non state actors started disappearing and were then found in the hands of terrorists. While funds play a vital role in tackling the political instability, relying exclusively on money is a misguided policy. One could consider the possibility of supervising the allocation of funds assigned; however, the path down that road is tricky, since there is a fine line between control and intervening in a sovereign country.

It is well known that extremist groups are often allied with local criminal networks; so, any feasible approach to the issue must include strategies to break such alliances. It is highly likely that this will include the cooptation of some criminal elements by the Malian government or guarantees on the part of the state or their communities that they will be shielded from prosecution. If there's a way to cut off the supply of weapons, or at least make it harder for such groups to smuggle them, by implementing, for example, border controls, it would substantially weaken them. Additionally, these groups depend on a stable income, which they can earn by typical means, such as large-scale drug trafficking, etc. One way to uncover these operations would be through enacting laws against money-laundering and imposing stricter controls. All this, however, has its roots in the instability that characterizes these countries, since it can be quite challenging to enforce laws in nations, whose governments do not have full control of their territory.

Ultimately, any solution to the conflict has to address the issue of structures and practices that allowed state complicity with organized crime to thrive. Such practices include the maintenance of government-allied militias that received a green light to

engage in smuggling, and the absence of legislative and strong judicial balances and checks on the executive at a regional and local level. While it may be tempting to recommend a decisive crackdown on smuggling to cut off funding sources and disrupt criminal networks, zero-tolerance policies toward smuggling are not only unrealistic because of the security forces' limited resources and the huge expanses over which such networks stretch, but also they turn out to be counterproductive. In northern Mali, for example, there are no alternative sources of income that could even remotely rival those of drug and contraband smuggling. Moreover, with the collapse of tourism, partly caused by the development of the kidnapping industry, the situation has further deteriorated, and the recovery of that income source will likely take many years even if the situation stabilizes and the abductions cease. The harsh truth is that, until there are viable economic alternatives, hunting down smuggling networks would further alienate local communities from their governments.

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