The security crisis in the Central Sahel region is increasingly worsening. The year 2020 was the deadliest since the crisis broke out in 2012, when al-Qa’ida-linked armed groups took control of northern Mali. The number of attacks attributed to jihadi groups and self-defense militias peaked, and so did the number of casualties. Violent extremism intersects community-based conflicts and inter-ethnic tensions in rural areas, while widespread violence and human rights violations by national security forces against civilians, as well as state abuses and governance failures, contribute to fuelling local insurgencies. A strong international presence is in the region: France is the main external actor, and Operation Barkhane’s military engagement has been recently confirmed by President Emmanuel Macron. Despite French resistance, an option for political dialogue with the jihadi insurgents is more and more taking hold on the ground.

What are the main features of the ongoing Sahel crisis? What is the role of the European Union? And what could be a possible way out of instability?

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Violent extremism in the Liptako-Gourma region

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Swept up in the global “Third Wave” of democratization, five of the six Sahelian countries held historic multiparty presidential elections over a fifteen-month period between late 1991 and early 1993. Chad was to follow three years later. The three subsequent decades have been ones of continuous experimentation, often marked by recurrent attempts by ruling parties to manipulate institutions to their benefit in the name of “democratic reform,” and by resulting counter-pressures from opposition and civil society groups mobilized under the banner of defending democratic achievements. A public commitment to democracy has persisted throughout, and virtually all political action - no matter how self-serving - is justified in its name. Understood broadly in these terms, what we might call “the politics of democratization” remain the hallmark of political struggle in the region.

If we measure progress in this struggle by the apparent democracy of any given government, the outcomes are clearly very mixed. At one end of the spectrum sits Chad, where Idriss Déby has been in power for over 30 years and, following another constitutional change in 2018, where he could legally continue until 2033. At the other end we find Senegal, where twice (in 2002 and 2012) incumbent presidents lost bids for re-election and quickly conceded defeat. But beyond the measures of the level of democracy achieved in specific cases at any given point, three decades of electoral processes have most importantly also had cumulative effects on state-building processes in the Sahel. Beneath the surface, the ongoing politics of democratization have had very uneven results where it matters most: in the building of institutions and in establishing their legitimacy. By those criteria the results are equally varied—yet also quite different. But that is in fact where substantive democratic progress in the longer-run must be measured.

A decade ago we might have un-controversially characterized the outcomes of democratization efforts in the region as having produced three regime types that seemed likely to persist: two democracies (Senegal and Mali), two electoral authoritarian regimes (Burkina Faso and Chad), and two regimes defined by unstable efforts at democratization (Mauritania and Niger). Yet the pressures of the security crisis that swept the region following the fall of Qaddafi in Libya and the collapse of Mali quickly showed that classifying regimes by seeming similarities in democratic outcomes often obfuscates more than it reveals. The underlying resilience of institutions has been profoundly tested by the Sahelian crisis since 2012, and more deep-rooted political realities have been exposed in the process.

Most significantly, considering our paired regime types above, just weeks after Senegal defied the pessimistic prognoses of many when President Abdoulaye Wade quickly recognized his defeat in the second round of the 2012 presidential elections, Mali’s “model democracy” collapsed. Wade’s concession confirmed Senegal as an unqualified democracy, sustained by a strong institutional architecture. In Mali, and with the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that despite a show of democratic trappings over two decades, the specific nature of political dynamics had left institutions weak and with little legitimacy.

With the plausible exception of the founding elections of 1992, Mali never held robust or widely-accepted elections. Despite constant talk of “reform”, the electoral system remained underdeveloped and poorly institutionalized; the system was highly contested even on the eve of what would have been crucial elections for a third democratic president. More broadly, and consequently, the institutions of Malian democracy and the elite that populated them had little popular legitimacy, and this despite the fact that they were much praised by the “international community,” that is by the West.
These two facts are not coincidental; indeed, they are directly related. The West’s enchantment with Mali was based on a series of characteristics - a commitment to secularization, to extensive decentralization, and to civil society movements supporting social reform processes - about which Malians themselves were much less enthusiastic. The straw man of Malian democracy thus quickly went up in flames with the spark of a new Tuareg rebellion, itself spawned by Libya’s collapse. Despite a hasty return to electoral politics in the shadow of a French intervention in 2013, there has been little progress since then, and the democratic experiment was again upended with the coup of 18 August 2020. With weak institutions and little legitimacy, the prospects both for democracy and for stability in Mali are dim.

It is instructive to contrast Mali to neighboring Niger, with which it shares striking demographic, economic and cultural similarities. In a second round of elections on 21 February 2021 Niger concluded the process that will lead to the first transition of power in the country’s history from one elected president to another. This is all the more noteworthy in a country that has experienced extraordinary instability over the past three decades. From the inauguration of the Third Republic to the current Seventh Republic, the country has experienced three coups, four transitions, and five constitutions - including one adopted by extraconstitutional means in an effort to circumvent presidential term limits.

Despite fears of terrorism and significant challenges, Niger’s electoral process exhibited many of the hallmarks of a truly democratic contest. Mohamed Bazoum, candidate of the ruling party and presumptive frontrunner with close ties to current President Issoufou, publicly proclaimed his confidence during the campaign that he would win in the first round. Yet he received only 39% of the vote, and was faced with a runoff against no less than Mahamane Ousmane, the first democratically elected president of Niger in 1993. Although there were tensions about the electoral process in the lead-up to the first round, most opposition parties subsequently agreed to retake their seats in the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). The second round took place in a context of real democratic uncertainty, with the outcome far from clear as losing candidates from the first round threw their support behind one or the other of the second-round candidates. Bazoum’s victory in the second round with some 56% of the vote has been contested by some of Ousmane’s supporters, however, and demonstrations and some violence reveal the limits of public confidence in the process. Yet it also seems clear that the cumulative effects on institution-building of three decades of intense debate, struggle, conflict, and at times compromises, over electoral processes and political institutions contrast sharply with the experience of Mali. Niger’s very instability fostered political dynamics which incrementally and cumulatively
have helped to build functional institutions for exercising democratic processes.

From this perspective, the effects of the politics of democratization on Mauritania’s institutional infrastructure are somewhat more difficult to discern. In contrast to Niger, there was little experimentation with institutions under Maaouya ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, the incumbent military leader who had himself elected president following the transition to a constitutional regime in 1991 and who remained until overthrown in 2005. A much-hailed democratic transition in 2007-08 proved to be short-lived, and was quickly followed by the circumscribed election of Mohamed ould Abdel Aziz, a process eagerly whitewashed as sufficiently “democratic” for the tastes of the outside world in the context of Mauritania’s key role in the “War on Terror.”

Abdel Aziz oversaw only limited institution-building, but he did agree - under pressure - to accept term limitations as he neared the end of his second mandate. His Minister of Defense, Mohamed ould Ghazouani, predictably elected to succeed him in 2019, has since broken with his erstwhile ally. Although ould Ghazouani’s motivations in turning on Abdel Aziz are unclear, they are of course touted in the name of democratic reform and the dismantling of corrupt clientelist networks. While this may represent a tentative opening, Mauritania’s path to a robust politics of democratic institution-building will be long, and is fundamentally challenged by core questions of national reconciliation and the integration of marginalized communities - Black Africans and Haratines of historic slave origin.

The Sahelian crisis has revealed equally divergent underlying effects of the politics of democratization in the paired electoral authoritarian regimes. Most strikingly, in Burkina Faso the popular uprising that ended Blaise Compaoré’s twenty-seven years in power in 2014 was followed by a negotiated transition among key actors. Despite challenges, widely-lauded elections were held within a year and a democratically elected government inaugurated. In November 2020 President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré defeated thirteen opponents to win re-election in a first round. These elections were held in a context of extraordinary security challenges, a situation which threatened to derail the process. But, strikingly, in the end most key actors supported a very pragmatic adaptation of the electoral code to do the best possible under the circumstances so that the elections could proceed. Although he long managed to hold on to power, the intense politics of contestation and institutional debates that marked Blaise Compaoré’s tenure clearly left a legacy of functional electoral processes and elite commitment to constitutional rule in Burkina Faso.

It is far from clear - and indeed highly unlikely - that anything resembling this process has taken place in Chad. On the contrary, the deepening personalization of power that has characterized
Idriss Itno Déby’s rule has continued apace, abetted by his Western allies in recognition of his willingness to engage militarily in the region during the Sahelian crisis. When the day comes that Déby is no longer there, by whatever means that comes to pass, one finds it hard to imagine the possibility that Chadian institutional infrastructure could sustain a transition to mirror the experience of Burkina Faso. Chaos, alas, is more likely.

In considering the region’s one-time electoral authoritarian regimes, the Sahelian crisis since 2012 has again underlined the fact that our earlier classifications of democratic progress were based on ephemeral indicators. Within each of the pairs, we find that the politics of democratization in the decades following the transitions of the early 1990s played out in ways that supported the building and legitimating of functional electoral processes in one case, but not necessarily in the other. These processes are rooted in the specifics of the give-and-take of political struggles over institutions, and the impact on them, in each case. Considered from a longer historical durée, the state of democracy in the Sahel must be evaluated in light of the impact of the politics of democratization on the construction of functional state institutions.
Proliferation of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: Evidence of State Failure?

Ornella Moderan
ISS AFRICA

Non-state armed actors have been playing an ever-increasing role in powering violence and insecurity in West Africa’s Sahel region. These actors range from politically-motivated armed groups and violent extremist groups to self-defense militias and state-sponsored local security outfits. But these categories are not clear cut, and analyses reveal the role of states in drawing their contours.

Some analysts have described the multiplication of state-owned defense and security forces in the region as a “traffic jam” of military interventions. A similar metaphor could apply to non-state armed actors. Their proliferation reflects states’ inability to exercise the legitimate monopoly of force in a way that would effectively secure their citizens and preserve the integrity of their territory. Significantly, non-state armed actors overwhelmingly operate in spaces where the state’s presence has traditionally been weak.
or contested, such as rural, border and other remote areas that have remained disconnected from highly-centralised state models.

That these actors gained considerably more momentum in Mali and Burkina Faso than in Niger also reflects different state strategies and capacities. Learning lessons from its history of minority rebellions, Niger implements a security doctrine that fully claims the state’s sole responsibility to protect, defend and exercise the monopoly of force. This approach translates into a zero-tolerance policy for local militias and self-defense groups, which authorities perceive as a pathway to long-term fragility. Yet, Niger is not spared from violent extremist groups’ increasingly gaining ground on its territory.

Neighbouring Burkina Faso comes from a very different historical background, where local security initiatives are seen as a legitimate expression of communities’ self-reliance. Building on a tradition that dates back to at least the 1980s revolution and its CDR - committees for the defense of the revolution - committees for the defense of the revolution - the state reacted to the continued deterioration of the security situation since 2017 by encouraging forms of local vigilantes and self-defense organisations, as national forces were increasingly overwhelmed.

The adoption in January 2020 of a law establishing the Volunteers for the Defense of the Country (Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie, VDP) created a new category of state-sponsored armed actor. But it also raises challenges with regards to International Humanitarian Law (IHL). A key principle of IHL is the requirement for parties in conflict to distinguish between armed and non-armed actors - a distinction that has become increasingly difficult to make as civilians take on a “volunteer” role as defense and security forces auxiliary.

Arguably, the increase in violence against civilians could have a relation with the blurring of this basic IHL distinction, as it erodes the notion of combatants versus non-combatants, military versus non-military targets. It certainly does have consequences on the normalisation of violence and widespread accessibility of weapons.

The creation of VDP compounds an already confusing security landscape, where traditional non-state actors play a significant role, with serious accountability issues. In Burkina, these include koglweogos, a security initiative that functions at a local level and regularly faces allegations of human rights abuse. Some of these actors were reportedly contracted as security details during the November 2020 elections in Burkina, raising questions about the risk of political manipulations in the long-run.

In Mali’s central regions of Mopti and Segou, the aggravation of age-old local conflicts against the backdrop of a limited presence of state defense and security forces has fuelled the proliferation of community-based self-defense groups and local militias. Easy access
to weapons in a context of widespread insecurity facilitated the formation of these local groups, which pose serious human rights challenges and participate in spiralling inter-community violence.

Some of these groups relied on existing structures, such as hunters’ societies that are traditionally responsible for protecting villages and communities. The Dozo are one such corporation, which has become a major armed conflict actor in the central regions of Mali.

As local conflicts increasingly crystallized along identity lines since 2017, specific sub-groups from the Dozo tradition emerged with an agenda to defend a particular community against others. Dan Na Ambassagou, probably the most famous one, claims to defend the interests of the Dogon community that lives in parts of central Mali. The group was reportedly involved in large-scale inter-community violence in 2019, leading to a decision of the Malian state to dissolve it. But this dissolution was never effective, highlighting the state’s helplessness in controlling these actors.

But the landscape for non-state armed actors in the Sahel goes beyond local vigilantes, self-defense groups and militias, to include politically-motivated and violent extremist groups. Again, while these groups are usually described as separate categories, analysis reveals that lines may be thin, and that states participate in their drawing.

For instance, the decision by Mali’s government and its international partners to allow some of northern Mali’s armed groups and not others into the negotiations that eventually resulted in the 2015 Agreement for peace and reconciliation created different categories. This categorization was largely based on the perceptions of the Malian state and its international partners, including Algeria, of which groups qualified as “rebels” pursuing a political cause, versus “extremist groups” with whom dialogue could not be envisaged. It has borne long-term consequences.

On the one hand, armed groups that are signatory parties to the 2015 Agreement in Mali have gained a form of official recognition as legitimate partners for the state to work with, including in the framework of an operational coordination mechanism that brings together state and non-state armed actors to secure parts of northern Mali. This has provided them with access to opportunities and resources and contributed to legitimizing their posture.

On the other hand, groups that either declined to participate in the Algiers process or were excluded from it have since remained largely disqualified from formal conflict management and stabilisation mechanisms that would allow the state to consider their grievances and include them in dialogue efforts.

To some extent, persistent debates on whether or not (and how) to initiate dialogue with violent extremist groups echo the notion of states’ ability to redefine the category which a politically-motivated non-state armed group
belongs to, based on the decision to either admit or disqualify it as a legitimate interlocutor. While shifting categories is possible, it is more difficult for an armed group that has been labelled "terrorist".

ISS research shows that, regardless of categorization, all non-state armed actors operating in the Sahel engage in local conflict dynamics, and that most of them also benefit from illicit trafficking activities. While the common argument that non-state armed groups, especially those who use a radical rhetoric, exploit and exacerbate local tensions and conflicts does bear truth, it is also an oversimplification of what really is at stake. Regardless of the category they fit into, non-state armed groups are all directly or indirectly involved in illicit activities and local conflicts.

The positioning of these groups in relation to local conflicts varies depending on the context and their strategic objectives. They usually take advantage of existing governance deficiencies, social frustrations, and unaddressed local conflicts to establish and consolidate power over local communities, using inter-community dissensions to divide and rule when this serves their purposes. Violent extremist groups can either be parties to conflicts or serve as mediators and their presence can also lead to temporary cessations of conflicts.

In their overwhelming majority, conflicts in the Sahel arise locally, and the failure of state institutions and their territorial breakdowns to settle them peacefully at that level often translates into escalation and violence. The inability of state justice systems, that are often perceived as distant and corrupt, to handle local conflicts in a just and timely manner nurtures local frustrations, that form a fertile ground for violent extremist groups to build upon.

Rather than a single conflict, the Sahel is confronted with a multiplicity of overlapping conflict systems involving a large array of state and non-state actors. Stabilisation will remain a hard-to-reach goal so long as the complex dynamics of non-state armed actors are not fully factored into the equation to inform comprehensive strategies by Sahel states and their international partners.
A year has passed since the relationship between the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama‘at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) deteriorated into a full-fledged turf war in the Sahel, joining the league of conflict between Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS). The conflict between JNIM and ISGS is among the deadliest in the world. What the inter-jihadi battles across the broader Middle East and Africa have in common is that they are either cyclical or gradually decline. It is probable that the JNIM and ISGS fight will follow a similar path, especially given the external pressure both groups face from the French-led Operation Barkhane.

JNIM and ISGS - respectively the regional affiliates of the global terrorist organizations Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State - share common origins in the network of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). ISGS formed in 2015 after splintering from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated

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Al-Mourabitoun, although its relationship with Al-Qaeda-aligned counterparts remained characterized by collision, coexistence, and tacit territorial arrangements. Formed in 2017, JNIM gathered several disparate jihadi groups – including AQIM’s Sahara branch, Al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and Katiba Macina into a Sahelian conglomerate – and also tied the local Burkinabe jihadi group Ansaroul Islam to the alliance.

The unique relationship between the two groups has been shaped by long-standing personal ties, coordinated actions to confront common enemies, and lack of jihadi infighting. It is often described as the “Sahelian exception.” JNIM’s and ISGS’s pre-interwar configuration brought the benefits of pooling resources, exchanging tradecraft, and providing support in a complex and ambiguous insurgency ecosystem to confound enemies about the character of jihadi affairs and the control landscape. ISGS emerged as a small and shadowy group reliant on a rudimentary media infrastructure, giving it a clear disadvantage in promoting its struggle compared to JNIM, which in contrast inherited the combined numerical strength, military, and media capabilities from its already well-known constituent groups.

However, ISGS’s appropriation of grievances, especially protection demands and state neglect, and exploitation of rivalries among pastoralist populations in the marginalized and hostile “tri-state border” region (or the Liptako-Gourma), enabled its growth. By tapping into a range of local conflicts and issues, ISGS also managed to incorporate weakened or marginalized JNIM units. In rural Gao, it built trust by engaging in the fight between primarily Arab and Tuareg Imghad communities, drawing Katiba Salaheddine into its ranks. Disagreements over access to pasture in the Inner Niger Delta (the flood-prone and vegetation-rich wetlands in central Mali’s Mopti and Segou regions) caused dissent within Katiba Macina and spurred fighters to switch allegiance to the Islamic State. Violence along ethnic fault lines in northern Burkina Faso further provided ISGS the opportunity to attract Ansaroul Islam units on the fringes.

Mounting competition between JNIM and ISGS paralleled the two groups’ collusion. JNIM’s unwillingness to share territory in some of its traditional strongholds and ISGS’s incessant poaching of the former’s members likely engendered mutual perceptions of treason. JNIM’s openness to engage the Malian government in dialogue and signing agreements with Donso militiamen aroused mistrust of the commitment and credibility of the tacit coalition. Islamic State’s integration of ISGS into its overall structure as a distinct faction of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) put the final nail in the coffin of the strained JNIM and ISGS coalition.

The insurgency reached its peak in 2019 when JNIM and ISGS in a simultaneous offensive overran military outposts in the tri-state border.
region, forcing local armies to withdraw. In that year, ISGS’s activities had reached a level nearly on par with those of JNIM. In early 2020, France declared ISGS “enemy number one” after the group had killed more than 400 Malian, Burkinabe, and Nigerien soldiers in the course of a one-year period in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

To counter ISGS’s onslaught, France surged troops and scaled up military operations alongside local forces. More than 430 ISGS fighters were killed in 70 French operations in 2020 compared to approximately 230 JNIM combatants killed in 20 operations during the same time period. After weakening ISGS’s capabilities, French forces in October 2020 shifted focus to JNIM, which was considered by senior French military officials to be the “most dangerous enemy” for international and Malian forces. This was demonstrated by a series of recent deadly attacks carried out by JNIM against French, United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and Malian forces.

However, disunity and fighting between ISGS and JNIM ultimately weakened the insurgency, with the groups intermittently contesting influence and territory among themselves rather than their previously shared adversaries. This wasted human resources, and exposed the groups to surveillance and airstrikes. Since the first skirmishes in 2019 until the present (as of 2 January 2021), the two groups have clashed at least 125 times, resulting in an estimated 731 fighters killed on both sides.

During the initial escalation between January-April 2020 in the Inner Niger Delta, JNIM largely pushed ISGS out of the area, although ISGS maintains discrete pockets such as in Dialloube and Kounari, in the Mopti Region. The fighting soon spread to other areas. Eastern Burkina Faso, along the borders with Niger and Benin, experienced sporadic fighting, but it is in the tri-state border region where the most gruelling combat has taken place (see figure below). The tri-state border region constitutes key ground that JNIM and ISGS continue to contest — in Islamic State propaganda described as the “triangle of death.”

Most importantly, the fighting reflects a shift in the power ratio between the two groups and ISGS’s ability to seriously challenge JNIM. Neither JNIM nor ISGS has managed to penetrate far into or maintain more than a negligible presence in the opponent’s traditional strongholds, underscoring the importance of each group’s level of embeddedness and the role of geographic and ethnic affinities. Islamic State frequently boasts about ISGS’s purported victories against JNIM in its propaganda output. This reflects the Islamic State Central’s demand on its regional affiliate to adopt a more hostile posture towards its Al-Qaeda competitor, after incorporating ISGS into the organizational infrastructure in March 2019. JNIM, in contrast, has gone to great lengths to hush up the hostilities, and instead more subtly
Battle between JNIM and ISGS (1 January 2020 - 31 December 2020)

used victim-narratives to discredit ISGS’s often excessive targeting of civilians. This is part of JNIM’s more comprehensive approach to building broad popular support by re-localizing and mainstreaming its struggle. Hence, ISGS and JNIM exhibit contrary trajectories and different approaches. Nevertheless, the two platforms have proven to perform well for armed mobilization in a conflict-ridden region. For the time being, they represent two incompatible visions of insurgent social order. Despite the frequent fighting between JNIM and ISGS, the former continues to fight a multi-front war and maintains a significant operational tempo. However, the war between JNIM and ISGS is becoming increasingly costly as both face sustained pressure from counterinsurgent forces spearheaded by the French Operation Barkhane mission. Deconfliction may already have occurred in certain locales, such as in eastern Burkina Faso, where fighting was sporadic. Hence, ISGS and JNIM could agree to a modus vivendi even though the relationship is unlikely to return to the status quo ante bellum.
Violence, Dysfunctional States, and the Rise of Jihadi Governance in the Sahel

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During the last decade security experts and practitioners have frequently described the Sahel as the quintessential exemplification of an ungoverned space. According to this narrative, large parts of the region’s territory remain out of the reach and control of local governments. Because of the structural fragilities and lack of resources, most of the Sahelian peripheries are seen as places deprived of any form of order, lands of chaos where local populations struggle to survive in a sort of perpetual and violent anarchy.

While the very concept of ungoverned space applied to the Sahel has already been discussed and contested in the past, this interpretation of the conditions on the ground appears to be even less useful today, as it fails to capture one of the most important developments characterizing conflicts and insurgencies in the region. When in January 2013 France deployed the Opération Serval and reconquered the main cities of northern

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Mali, all projects aiming at creating a new and independent state in the area - whether it be an ethnic-based or an Islamic Republic of Azawad - seemed to have been stopped once and for all. Nevertheless, what started as a struggle for independence instrumentally supported by jihadist combatants, has changed and evolved since then. Nowadays, conflict(s) in the Sahel are better described as a complex web of local grievances and transnational insurgencies, where different armed actors are finding their way for imposing their authority and control over expanding pieces of territory.

One of the main factors explaining the changes that have occurred in the spaces and the dynamics of conflict in the Sahel is linked to the strategic redeployment implemented by the jihadist groups who participated in the 2012 rebellion. By exploiting their knowledge of the territory and their linkages with rural communities and traditional leaders, the jihadist groups - starting from those affiliated with al-Qa’ida - developed a strategy of expansion and regionalization which changed their nature, transforming them into a galaxy of local insurgencies and big men networks more or less unified under the ideological banner of the Jihad. The success of this transformation has been indirectly but decisively favoured by the reactions and the initiatives implemented by the states of the region. With the implicit acceptance of their international partners, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso opted, with different degrees of intensity, for assuming a security-first approach for dealing with the expanding insurgencies in their territories. A dangerous mix of public stigmatization against different ethnic groups - the Tuareg and the Fulani in particular - and counterinsurgency and counterterrorism initiatives characterized by numerous exactions and brutalities committed against local populations by the state security forces, fostered popular grievances vis-à-vis the central authorities, consequently reinforcing the presence and the legitimacy of the jihadist insurgent actors.

In this sense, while the level of violence reached in central Mali, in the Tillabéri region in Niger, or in the Sahel province in Burkina Faso is unprecedented, the dysfunctional relationship between these states and the local populations is not. Sahelian states have never been absent from their territorial peripheries, but they have rather exerted their authority and rule through neo-patrimonial systems of governance, built on clientelist chains of command that have favoured the spread of corruption and the mismanagement of local resources and public services. In most of the provinces and regions currently under the control of the insurgent groups the social contract between local inhabitants and their respective states was already broken, and local disputes of different natures - whether connected to class, land management or ethnicity - were already affecting social relationships. This is not to say that the jihadist insurgent groups have been able to impose their presence in these areas without the use of violence. The case of Katiba Macina in central Mali and the inner Niger Delta
is particularly illustrative of a dynamic which has been reproduced by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in the Tillabéri region or by Ansarul Islam in the Sahel province few years later.

Led by the Fulani preacher Amadou Kouffa and member of the JNIM ‘Ulama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin’ - Group to Support Islam and Muslims, the alliance of the various Sahelian groups linked to al-Qaida and led by Iyad ag Ghali, as of 2015 Katiba Macina progressively imposed itself as the de facto dominant actor in an area roughly corresponding to the inner Niger Delta and the administrative region of Mopti. During a first phase Katiba Macina mainly employed violence to assert its position against state security forces and state representatives, but also against those traditional and religious leaders who were opposing its penetration in the area. Nevertheless, in the following years the group has demonstrated all its ability to exploit the mounting grievances and insecurity in the area. On the one hand, Katiba Macina has begun to present itself as the protector of those communities – in particular the Fulani – who were suffering from the attacks and the exactions committed by state security forces and the different ethnic-based militias which started to appear in the area since 2016. On the other, once the military conquered large parts of the territory in the centre of Mali, Katiba Macina started to act as the central political and administrative authority in the area. By mixing sharia-based and traditional forms of rule and management, the group has built a veritable jihadi system of governance, with the more or less voluntary support of local traditional authorities. The group now administers justice; regulates social behaviours and the access to and exploitation of the land; delivers essential services; and collects taxes through the imposition of the zakat. Recent research suggests that during 2020 Katiba Macina also acted as peace broker, settling conflicts between opposing Fulani and Dogon communities living in the area.

Recalling Charles Tilly’s famous aphorism “War makes States”, what we observe in different areas of the Sahel today is the formation of hybrid political orders which more and more resemble jihadi “proto-states”. Even if any form of external recognition must be excluded, it is still undeniable that different jihadist groups are now exerting a sort of sovereign authority on the areas under their control. What is more troubling is the fact that this authority is exerted with the agreement of at least a part of the local populations, who see jihadi governance as more fair and egalitarian than the system of rules previously implemented by state’s authorities. All interventions and initiatives aiming at contrasting terrorist activities and restoring the presence of the state in the Sahel must take this latter element into account, in order to avoid replicating the same errors that favoured the emergence of these proto-state entities in the area.
Human Rights Abuses: A Threat to Security Sector Reforms in the Sahel

Flore Berger
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The year 2020 is likely to be remembered as an infamous one for defense and security forces in the Sahel. The first six months were particularly damning. Following the Pau Summit in mid-January, national armies stepped up their counterterrorism efforts. These coincided with a sharp increase in human rights violations committed during military operations across the region. Between April and June, human rights violations and abuses perpetrated by security forces outnumbered those at the hands of jihadist groups, according to MINUSMA’s findings.

In Mali, counterterrorism operations were increasingly carried out in collaboration with (or at least with the support of) Dozo hunters and resulted in mostly Fulani civilian casualties. This reality exacerbated existing conflict dynamics in the non-flooded zone (zone exondée) of the Inner Niger Delta, the epicentre of communal violence for the past two years. Yet this trend was not limited to...
Mali. Throughout the Central Sahel, Nigerien and Burkinabé forces perpetrated numerous violations against their populations, with the deadliest incident involving Nigerien military killing and burying in mass graves 102 civilians in northern Tillabéri. Some extrajudicial killings were reported to have taken place under the command of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

In 2020 the number of human rights violations largely exceeded figures from 2019. This is not due solely to state security forces. State abuses against civilians – often under the guise of counterterrorism – are yet another layer of violence, with the population getting trapped in attacks by self-defense militias, jihadist groups, signatory groups, and other unidentified groups involved in criminal activities and banditry.

In Mali, the comparison is telling. In 2019, MINUSMA documented 325 cases of human rights violations and abuses with the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) being responsible for 7% (23 cases), extremist groups 26% (85 cases) and communal militias 63% (174). In 2020, 1,958 cases were reported, an increase of 600% compared to the previous year. The FAMa were responsible for 17% of cases (equivalent
to 351 cases), extremist groups 25% (484 cases) and communal militias 35% (680 cases).

The deficiencies of the defense forces are numerous and well known. They range from inadequate equipment and training, to lack of transparency regarding staffing and troop deployment, budgets and procurement processes, all the way to mismanagement and bad practices made possible by widespread corruption.

Thus far, the security sector reform (SSR) framework promoted by international partners - with the EU (EUTM, EUCAP) and the UN (MINUSMA, UNDP) in the lead - has failed to address these deficiencies. There is a shared responsibility in that failure. On the one hand, the Malian SSR process is not without its shortcomings: the multiplicity of initiatives and donors, the lack of coordination and/or collaboration, the lack of knowledge of the security sector and the context it operates in, the focus on the short-term and low-risk, the mismatch between the proposed objectives and the realities and the needs of the population. The list goes on.

On the other, Sahelian governments have favored the status quo and have been evading the hard choices and political cost to true reform.

As such, SSR efforts have failed to lead to meaningful reform, and have even, at times, exacerbated armed forces' deficiencies. Human rights abuses are a good illustration of this. One of the most detrimental SSR premises is that stability will be achieved by re-deploying defense and security forces throughout the country. But focusing on their mere deployment and presence in areas where these forces are - or even just perceived as - predatory, has in fact led to additional backlashes and human rights violations. This approach stems from a broader tendency to prioritize security measures above everything else, and that, to this day, justifies an international presence in the region.

Neither the international community nor the Sahelian countries are blind to this shortcoming. New strategies and policies have put a greater emphasis on improving governance - especially on fostering greater trust between the state authorities (including armed forces) and the populations - and less priority on providing security services. But these new initiatives have so far failed to yield positive results. For example, community policing initiatives have been initiated by Malian authorities, often with the support of MINUSMA. This approach promotes a partnership between security forces, communities and government through community policing committees in rural areas. The goal of community policing is not only to build trust. It is also to improve the capacity of security forces, including their intelligence gathering capacity, with the support of the communities. But civilians are generally afraid to alert the security forces because they fear reprisals from violent armed groups. More importantly, they do not believe that security
forces will be there to protect them in case of retaliation.

The current widespread environment of human rights abuses and impunity should no longer be underestimated and set aside. First and foremost, human rights violations threaten SSR at its core, the accountability of the forces being a key principle of SSR, if not the most crucial one. In addition, without progress on the political aspects of SSR - strengthening internal discipline as well as internal and external control of the forces, reinforcing the justice system and penal services - there will be no lasting SSR progress. And finally, because human rights abuses are fueling recruitment of armed actors on all sides (militias, jihadists, bandits), exacerbating violence - in short, adding fuel to the fire.

1. For example, EUTM’s trainings being carried out far away from theater of operations and how the new French-led initiative Takuba is meant to address this issue. See Anna Schmauder, Zoe Gorman, Flore Berger, Takuba: a new coalition for the Sahel?, 30 June 2020.

2. For a good overview of these shortcomings, see PRIO. Compounding Fragmentation Security force assistance to fragile states in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, 2020.

3. This is the case for example of the Stabilisation Strategy for Central Mali (SSCM) adopted in 2019 or the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection (MSPC) framework plan for the improvement of trust between the security forces and the population (2018-2021).

4. See for example in Mopti in October 2019 and Timbuktu in November 2020.
What’s Next for Operation Barkhane in the Sahel?

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In the run up to the G5 Sahel summit in N’Djamena, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian expressed the French government’s desire and goal for the summit to mark a “diplomatic, political and development surge”. Held on 15 and 16 February, the event itself was like a balance sheet of activities in the region. For its part, France emphasised the key role of Sahel actors and the importance of bolstering regional military, political and diplomatic organisation through more decisive development initiatives. At the same time, France sees it as critical to enhance regional cooperation with the Gulf of Guinea - an area beset by the very real danger of jihadist expansion - and with North Africa, particularly Morocco and Algeria.

The summit involving the heads of state of Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad came amidst growing signs of a downsizing of France’s military presence in the Sahel. Just over a year ago, the Pau summit marked the
beginning of a new phase in relations between Paris and the Sahelian capitals. Politically, this first summit was a means to bring new legitimacy to France’s political and military presence in the Sahel. By inviting African presidents to a gathering in Pau, in the Atlantic Pyrenees, France was sending a message it wanted its African partners to recognise the centrality of the French presence in the Sahel and the importance of Barkhane counter-terrorism operations. This involvement of African leaders should particularly have put to rest anti-French conspiracy theories and allegations of collusion with jihadists seeking to destabilise the region to gain control of its resources.

Militarily, the Pau summit legitimised a stronger French presence (a further 600 soldiers deployed to the region, marking an increase from 4,500 to 5,100) and focused military action on Liptako-Gourma, the “three-border region” spanning Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. French military involvement was also integrated into the Coalition for the Sahel framework, which is based on four pillars: strengthening the capabilities of G5 Sahel states’ armed forces; fight against terrorism; support for the return of the state and administrations in the territory; and development assistance.

Operation Barkhane has undoubtedly helped curb regional mobility of armed groups, despite an increase in insurgent activities in the rural parts of Liptako-Gourma. In 2020, French military operations resulted in the elimination of jihadi leaders in the Sahel, including Abdelmalek Droukdel, Emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Bah ag Moussa, one of the main commanders of Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), an Al-Qaeda affiliate in the central Sahel. The military objectives recently achieved by Barkhane, as claimed by the Minister of Defence, Florence Parly, weigh heavily on the balance of relations with regional and European partners, who are called upon to be more broadly and directly involved in the crisis as “the war against terrorism is not only a French war, but a war of Europe and its allies.” In spite of the tactical successes in recent months, the political and economic costs - over one billion euros in 2020, 76% of public spending on military operations - of Operation Barkhane remain significant, and it is increasingly hard to convince public opinion that the loss of life - fifty-seven French soldiers killed since 2013 - is worth it.

In the short-to-medium term, the disengagement of French forces deployed as part Operation Barkhane seems unlikely, but a partial adjustment of the strategy on the ground is deemed a priority. This should result in the withdrawal of the additional soldiers deployed in early 2020 and increased use of remote warfare operations, with more recourse to intelligence, special forces and drones. In principle, all decisions about the need to restructure France’s military presence in the region have been postponed until the next summit. However, these dynamics are key to
understanding the diplomatic pressure France is putting on its European allies to take part in the Takuba task force, which is largely made up of special forces units and will accompany, advise and assist local armed forces in the fight against jihadi groups. Similarly, the efforts to empower the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which is now part of the joint command mechanism for military operations, are also designed to achieve a more shared approach.

While the killing of several jihadi leaders has signalled a change of pace in military operations in the Sahel - one hundred and twenty-eight combat operations conducted and several hundred fighters killed in 2020 - the local populations are deeply divided as to the French presence in the Sahel. France has been accused of interfering in the political and strategic choices of state actors in the Sahel. Governments in the region are limited in their options to negotiate a political solution to the crisis through dialogue with the insurgents largely because of French opposition - as confirmed by President Macron’s words during the N’Djamena summit - despite widespread support for this among political and social actors in Mali and Burkina Faso. The French position on this issue was quite nuanced during the Pau summit and did not explicitly exclude dialogue with Al-Qaeda linked groups. However, recent statements excluding any possibility of negotiating with ‘terrorists’ - and particularly with jihadi leaders Amadou Kouffa and Iyad ag Ghali - seem to be more clear-cut, although the top military authorities stress the decision “lies with Malian politicians”. Secondly, the inability to ensure the safety of civilians in the face of armed violence by Salafi-jihadi groups, self-defence militias and national armies is reflected in the growing resentment of local communities for French forces. Beyond largely baseless conspiracy theory-like accusations, the ‘collateral effects’ of counter-terrorism activities in the Sahel - only a few weeks ago, guests at a wedding in a village in central Mali were allegedly bombed during a strike that was part of Operation Barkhane - damage Paris’ legitimacy in the area and increase the political costs of France’s involvement. The urgency of partial disengagement from the Sahel is also tied to these aspects.
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The EU in the Sahel: Prospects for a New Strategy

Andrew Lebovich
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The summit meeting held last month in N’Djamena, Chad, between the G5 Sahel states and partner nations was, for the participants, a chance to applaud many purported gains since the January 2020 Pau Summit as well as the challenges ahead. It was also the occasion to repeatedly applaud the efforts of the European Union as well as EU member states in the Sahel. This engagement has continued to grow since the EU first published its integrated Sahel Strategy in 2011, and now stretches across a wide array of domains, from security cooperation to justice and state assistance to development aid. Yet as the EU works on an update of its strategy, numerous questions about this engagement remain, as member states and the EU, seek to avoid the worsening “traffic jam” of international engagements in the region.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE EU IN THE SAHEL

The EU adopted its regional strategy early before the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and
subsequent state collapse in Mali's north, and it sought quickly to help rebuild state security force capacity in the region, launching what would eventually become three Common Security and Defense Program (CSDP) missions in the region: EUCAP-Sahel Niger in 2012 focused on police and internal security capacity building, the EU Training Mission (EUTM) for Mali’s military in 2013, and EUCAP-Sahel Mali in 2014. European Member State interest, meanwhile, grew as security worsened in Mali especially after 2015, and after the “migration crisis” and Valetta Conference in 2016, that drew further attention to the central Sahel and security threats and political disarray in Libya. The growing communal and jihadist violence in Burkina Faso also raised concern from European nations worried about a larger breakdown of governance in the region and more recently the potential spread of violence to coastal West African States.

Both institutionally and on the member state level, Europe has steadily increased its involvement in the Sahel, but not always with clear strategic vision or effective coordination. This increased effort stems from several factors, including individual member state interest (particularly with regards to migration as well as long-term development priorities in the region), a French push to generate support for its military efforts under Operation Barkhane and to more broadly “Europeanize” security and development cooperation in the region, the EU's own vision of the Sahel as a kind of “laboratory” for its integrated policy, and the variations of the "security-development nexus" that have guided it in part.

This growing European presence and activity has also taken on several different forms; over the past several years a number of EU member states have opened new embassies throughout the region, while also writing their own Sahel strategies and naming special envoys (who meet regularly with each other and the EU’s own Special Envoy for the region). The EU also was a founding member of the Sahel Alliance in 2017, which seeks to coordinate international development spending in the region and whose membership now counts 13 members and projects of approximately EUR 17.1 billion. Spain’s Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya currently presides over the Alliance, as well as EUTM as it plans its regional expansion, although Germany will take over command of the latter later this year.

UNCLEAR RESULTS AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

This influx of personnel, material, and intellectual production has had only a limited impact on the situation in the region. Although the Sahel Alliance was meant originally to not only coordinate development activity but to also bring in a new focus on governance, it has struggled with setbacks and coordination problems; the announcement of the more specifically governance-focused Plan for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) at
the G7 Summit in Biarritz in August 2019 and the official announcement of the Coalition for the Sahel at the Pau Summit in January 2020 demonstrated the continued frustration with the slow progress of improving governance and internal security in the Sahel, while also shining a harsh light on the ongoing weaknesses of regional security forces despite the CSDP programs and years of international training and assistance.

The worsening security situation throughout 2019 and into 2020, and in particular the threat from both the al-Qaida aligned Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM in Arabic) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Liptako-Gourma have prompted the more recent European push on joint security cooperation as well as governance promotion, but with a number of potential pitfalls. Several European partners participate in Operation Barkhane, while Estonia, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Italy have contributed or will soon contribute troops to the Mali-based Special Forces Task Force Takuba, with others possibly to follow, although it remains unclear for now what role these non-French forces will play in direct combat or training and accompaniment of Malian and other regional troops.

Yet for the talk and real work of coordination and reorganization of European contributions in the Sahel, these efforts remain at times unwieldy or ill-defined, with some like Takuba still existing on an ad-hoc basis. And despite a much greater effort to include governance in EU strategies and policy initiatives in the region, the first and last “pillars” of the Coalition for the Sahel – security and development – remain far more fleshed out than the second and third, which focus on internal security and the redeployment of the state. The P3S, which is supposed to encompass these two pillars, has for now only a small staff and a limited role, belying the emphasis of the EU and particularly Germany on these issues.

Writing after the N’Djamena summit, EU HR/VP Josep Borrell emphasized that good governance issues such as fighting corruption, and helping curb impunity and abuses against civilians would be “at the heart” of EU actions in the Sahel. But the EU is still debating what a focus on good governance means in concrete policy terms, and a number of difficult steps must be taken in an already-fragile context to ensure real reform that benefits the people of the Sahel. And in an environment where state trust is often low and security mismanagement have left some communities at the mercy of armed groups or forced them to protect themselves, pushing for the “return of the state” is not enough, and may make matters worse in some areas. The focus on governance must be more than words in policy documents and must be translated into real actions and policies in the region, if this massive and growing effort is to have anything resembling its intended impact of helping stabilize the Sahel.
The vast majority of African migrants move from one African country to another. Rare are those who leave the continent. This might not be what many people in Europe think, but this is what official data and social scientists’ research show.

Migrating through the Sahel, to or across the Sahara and northern Africa, is not a recent phenomenon. However, for years, European media and governments have been focused on the minority of people who, having crossed the desert, went on to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In an attempt to stop this “flow” of sub-Saharan migrants heading for Europe irregularly, and to address the so-called root causes of migration, the EU and its member states have implemented migration policies directly within Africa, and especially in the Sahel. Keen to strengthen their own security sectors and boost development cooperation, several Sahelian governments actively cooperate with this effort.
No matter that there are probably no identifiable root causes, such as poverty, livelihood insecurity, absence of institutions, lack of public services, violence, conflicts over resources, demographic growth or climate change, to mention only the most commonly highlighted. No matter that there are probably as many combinations of factors as there are migrants, including personal, cultural, relational, biographical factors, which cannot be influenced, but which should not be negligible if we consider the very large number of people facing poverty, etc., and the very small number of people trying their luck to get to Europe. No matter that these migrations are marginal considering the total population of the two continents, and all the other forms of their mobility. The EU has spent billions of euros to stop them. Nobody knows with what effect on the irregular migration towards Europe, but what we know for sure is that travel through the Sahel and the Sahara is now made extremely expensive and unnecessarily risky by increased levels of checks and control.

The Sahel and the Sahara have been transformed into a vast “frontier zone” where migrants can be subjected to random checks, sent back to their home countries, or even arrested: anywhere and at any time. Even if most of the people who receive such treatment have no intention of travelling beyond the African continent. Even if the migration through the Sahel is legal for migrants coming from an ECOWAS country (i.e. most of the west-African countries), due to free movement protocols. And even more for people travelling through their own country.

In Niger, which has emerged as Europe’s most active partner in the Sahel, restrictive laws and harsh penalties apply not only to people who have actually crossed an international border irregularly, but also to many people who reside in Niger legally. That includes Nigeriens who act as drivers and guides for travellers. Until recently, like in all the Sahelian countries, migration was not considered a problem in Niger. Things changed when the EU put pressure on Niger’s government to “break the business model of (people) smugglers”, especially in the northern part of the country, where the town of Agadez is considered by European experts to be a continental hub for irregular migrants on their way to Libya and then Europe via the central Mediterranean route.

Through the civil programme EUCAP Sahel Niger and the New Migration Partnership Framework, the EU assists the Nigerien national and local authorities and their security forces in developing policies, techniques and procedures “to better control and fight illegal migration,” and in enforcing Niger’s 2015 law on migrant trafficking and smuggling. It defines a smuggler as “any person who, intentionally and in order to gain, either direct or indirect, financial or material benefit, facilitates the illegal entry or exit of a foreign national to or from Niger.” On the ground, this law is
used to indiscriminately target people who are not involved in any kind of trafficking and, sometimes, not even in smuggling.

In the Agadez region, anybody who organizes passenger transport - such as drivers or guides with off-road pick-up trucks that can take around 30 passengers - can now potentially be accused of participating in “illicit migrant trafficking” and can be arrested and sentenced. Transporting - or simply housing - foreign nationals (whether they are in an irregular situation or not) in northern Niger means risking fines of up to CFA 30 million (€ 45,760) and prison sentences of up of 30 years. And you don’t have to be “caught in the act” to be arrested or sentenced. People driving the kinds of trucks described above are automatically considered “smugglers.” They can be arrested several hundred kilometres from any border, on the simple basis of (assumed) intent. This means that even those drivers who are not involved in people smuggling or any illegal activities are changing their itineraries to avoid checkpoints. The problem is that by taking more off-beat, less travelled routes, drivers not only reduce their chances of being arrested - but also of being rescued in the case of breakdowns or attacks. They also avoid pressure from their peers to treat their clients decently, thereby increasing the dangers of Saharan travel for all.

All these measures run contrary to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both stipulate “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own.” It also disregards the principle of the presumption of innocence, on which all major legal systems are based.

And finally, the more controls are strengthened, the more illegality becomes professionalized and insecurity becomes more widespread, justifying more controls according to a logic and a legitimization that is half humanitarian, half security, in an vicious circle.
Migration in the Sahel: Putting Human Rights and Cooperation on the Map

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Discourse and policymaking around migration in the West Africa region tend to be dominated by the EU lens focusing on containment and the ‘fight’ against irregular migration. Particularly following the 2015-2016 migration ‘crisis’ in Europe, reducing irregular arrivals to the EU has been one of the main priorities of migration-related projects and funds, making it fundamental to ensure that states of ‘origin’ or ‘transit’ act to deter irregular movements. In recent years, the Central Mediterranean Route has seen the number of migrants decreasing, reassuring EU states that their investments have paid off.

RESURGENCE OF MOVEMENT ALONG THE ATLANTIC ROUTE

However, the recent resurgence of movement along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, a route which was heavily utilized in the early to mid-2000s but has been more or less “dormant” ever since, seems to question the validity of such an approach. In 2020, more than 23,000
refugees and migrants arrived on the shores of the Canary Islands, compared to approximately 2,700 in 2019. With approximately one recorded death for every 20 arrivals, the Atlantic route is the most dangerous irregular maritime route to Europe. Despite these risks, refugees and migrants interviewed in the course of recent MMC research reported being pushed by economic imperatives and the lack of opportunities — for instance lack of education, of access to land, bad governance (i.e. the fishing sector in Senegal) etc. This was often amplified by social and family pressure and the 'success stories' of others who 'made it'.

According to a Gambian migrant interviewed in Mauritania, "Anyone who has nothing will not be respected. I migrated to escape poverty and stigmatization, to have something of my own such as a well-built house, a vehicle. [I want] to build a better future for me and my family, to no longer ask my relatives for things, to be independent of other people, because I am seen as a jinxed but poor person who cannot provide for the needs of my relatives."

The migration journey along this route impacts refugees' and migrants' physical and mental health. The boat passage is very long, arduous and characterized by seasickness (which can be fatal in very severe cases), insufficient food and water, intense fear and dehydration, putting refugees and migrants in considerable danger. Interactions with smugglers could also result in protection incidents, such as extortion, scams, and physical violence. In addition, refugees and migrants interviewed for the study also reported violations at the hands of border police and other national authorities. There are also longer-term impacts of the route reported by refugees and migrants related to emotional and mental health.

For those who return to their country of origin from Mauritania, the recent MMC research on the Atlantic route points to a tendency towards re-migration. Refugees and migrants may find it difficult to return home after a failed migration attempt, particularly as migration journeys often require substantial family investment at the great personal sacrifice of relatives and result from collective family decisions. Thus, many persevere in their migration quest, even if it entails considerable risk or hardship.

MIXED MIGRATION DYNAMICS IN THE REGION

It is important to note that the resurgence of movement along the Atlantic Route is taking place in a regional context where the dynamics at the origin of migration and displacement remain very strong and are even intensifying in some cases. In 2020, in certain parts of West Africa the security situation drastically deteriorated, with consequences for regional mobility. In Burkina Faso, for instance, the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) almost doubled, reaching 1,074,933 as of 31 December 2020. Conflict-induced North-South movements have reportedly also been identified, in particular between Burkina
Faso and Cote d’Ivoire. These are expected to continue as the Sahel conflict threatens to move southwards.

Also, the impact of Covid-19 on mobility is felt in the region. After a substantial decline in migration flows in West Africa in March - at the time when regional governments implemented travel bans and border closures - there has been a month by month increase in flows. MMC’s research shows that the pandemic has already become a driver of migration, with more than one-third of West African refugees and migrants respondent who left after April 2020 indicating that the Covid-19-related crisis was in some way a factor in their decision to leave, mostly due to the impact on economic factors. It also shows that despite a perception of increased protection risks related to the closure of borders - and the need to rely to a greater extent on underground routes - people continue to migrate.

PUTTING HUMAN RIGHTS, COOPERATION AND SOLIDARITY BACK AT THE CENTRE

To conclude, the resurgence of movement along the Atlantic route and associated dynamics during the journey, in the Canary Islands and in the context of deportations to Mauritania, is a clear reminder that the human rights of concerned individuals should be at the centre when responding to mixed migration challenges. Refugees and migrants intercepted at sea and returned to Mauritania, after the physically and mentally taxing boat journey, should be systematically allowed more time to rest and recuperate, rather than immediately being taken to and left at the borders with Senegal and Mali without further support. EU states should put in place sound screening procedures to make sure that vulnerable individuals, or refugees and migrants entitled to some form of protection in Spain, are not deported. When deporting, EU states should put in place all guarantees and safeguards needed to make sure that people returned to Mauritania are treated in line with international human rights standards. Alternate modalities of return with greater support and accompaniment to the migrant’s country of origin should be established.

In addition, the situation in the region and its potential impact on migration drivers is a reminder that, while tackling yet another ‘crisis’, EU states should continue investing in economic cooperation, support to conflict resolution and, when needed, solidarity, as is the case for the discussion about Covid-19 vaccination in the global south. Last, but not least, safe and legal pathways for migration from West Africa to Europe, including through the development of opportunities for circular migration, should be increased.
Fifty years ago, long before it came to be known as a hotbed of Islamic terrorism, the world’s attention turned to the Sahel to bear witness to the devastation wrought by drought. With talk of climate change as a threat multiplier, to conflict, food insecurity, governance, migration, etc., one might ask: will the Sahel ever escape crisis?

On the surface it may look like history, crisis is bound to repeat itself in this most vulnerable of places. In fact, the nuanced understanding of the XX century evolution of the Sahelian climate that has intervened in these 50 years lays the foundation for anticipating and managing future change, a situation that is in stark contrast to the unexpected onset of persistent drought in the late 1960s. Two elements are key. First of all, climate change has already happened. The persistence of drought in the 1970s and 1980s can be partially attributed to the influence of emissions from fossil fuel burning. Therefore, adaptation lessons can be learned from the
past. Secondly, the situation that led to drought is unique to the past. Therefore, it is at best simplistic and at worst wrong to equate future change with drought. As observed in recent years, current change is consistent with a more variable climate. On time scales of days, it is the intensity in rainfall that has increased since the driest mid-1980s, not the number of rainy days. On time scales of years, the Sahel is characterized by alteration between abundant and deficient rainfall, not by the persistence of either condition.

Underlying apparent complexities are well understood processes. Above all is the dominance of oceanic over continental processes. Oceanic influence is synthesized in the contrasted roles of local and remote oceans. The remote oceans, the Indian and Pacific, because they comprise the regions of warmest sea surface temperature, set the global conditions that determine where it rains. In the Sahel, these conditions are met when the local ocean, the North Atlantic, supplies sufficient moisture to the monsoon. The influence of human-caused emissions on sea surface temperatures is integral to this picture. In the western hemisphere (North America and Western Europe) reconstruction after World War II was powered by fossil fuel energy, leading to increases in greenhouse gas emissions and in pollution. Because it has an atmospheric lifetime of decades, if not centuries, carbon dioxide, the most abundant anthropogenic greenhouse gas, is well mixed in the atmosphere. The increase in its concentration associated with human activity has resulted in warming, including that of the global tropical oceans, which emerged in the early 1970s, and has continued unabated to this day. In contrast, pollution, especially the sulfate aerosols that are a byproduct of burning (the sulfur in) coal, because it is largely rained out in a matter of weeks, is not well mixed. It is this pollution that is critical in distinguishing future from past. In Western Europe and North America sulfate aerosol concentrations increased until the enactment of environmental legislation in the 1980s. Because they reflect incident sunlight, sulfate aerosols can mask warming regionally. Consequently, sea surface temperatures in the North Atlantic basin did not keep up with global tropical warming, and the moisture supply to the monsoon dwindled. Starved of moisture, the Sahel, the northern edge of the monsoon, suffered persistent drought. However, the footprint of pollution has changed in recent decades. Cleaner air around the North Atlantic has resulted in the emergence of warming.

The climate of the Sahel is now shaped by the competition between the warming of both local and remote oceans. This competition is at the heart of the increased variability since the mid-1990s. At the same time, an overall wetter monsoon climate, with potential for extreme rainfall events that trigger widespread flooding, is not unlike what is expected from warming.
In sum, the Sahel already knows climate change. We know what action(s) can be taken to anticipate impact in the short term and to increase resilience in the long term. In the short term, recognition that the envelope of possible outcomes is affected by human-caused emissions does not mean that the future of climate is predetermined. The year-to-year variability in Sahel rainfall that expresses the chaotic nature of climate still needs to be reckoned with. Confidence in climate prediction as a tool to manage climate risk is rooted in research to understand historical Sahelian drought. Current seasonal prediction systems, based on multi-model ensembles, have skill on the regional scale at lead-times up to 6 months ahead of monsoon onset. This skill is the basis for climate services being increasingly exploited by disaster responders such as national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies and the UN World Food Programme. The concept of forecast-based financing - investing in financial resources for humanitarian assistance based on a probabilistic forecast, in anticipation of a possible crisis, not after the crisis has hit - has gained ground. In the long term, precisely because it has suffered through persistent drought, the Sahel has already learned valuable lessons in adaptation (despite future climate change not equaling drought). Technologies based on local knowledge and aimed at reducing land degradation and soil erosion, and at making more efficient use of rainfall - for example the agro-forestry and soil & water conservation technologies that are involved in re-greening - are natural candidates to adapt to a more variable climate. Their impact on food security - indeed, the nexus of climate, food security and environmental change - is being actively investigated. If we harness the knowledge that has accumulated over the past 50 years, we can free ourselves of the crisis narrative, and look to climate change as an opportunity to act based on evidence, and build a sustainable future in the Sahel.