



Commentary

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By International Crisis Group

The Sahel: Promoting Political alongside Military Action

Rural insurgencies across the Sahel are destabilising the region and undermining local security and governance. In this excerpt from our Watch List 2018, Crisis Group urges the EU and its member states to continue support for the Alliance for the Sahel and promote local dialogue to buttress law and order.

The Sahel region faces particularly acute challenges. Rural insurgencies across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are expanding. Jihadi groups exploit local conflicts to secure safe havens and win new recruits. Other militias are being formed, whether to defend communities, conduct criminal activities or both. Sahelian states, supported by Western powers, rely ever more heavily on force. The new G5 Sahel joint force (FC-G5S), encompassing army units from five Sahelian states, must avoid angering local communities and stoking local conflicts. It should be accompanied by local mediation and peacebuilding initiatives, outreach to communities and, where possible, efforts to engage militant leaders.

Mali's stalemated peace process

In Mali, the epicentre of the Sahel crisis, implementation of the June 2015 Bamako peace agreement that aimed to turn the page on the country's 2012-2013 crisis, has stalled. Having acted as chief broker of the agreement, Algiers appears to have lost interest in leading the process. No African or other actor has stepped in.

Malian leaders' attention has shifted to the July 2018 presidential election. In parts of

the country, particularly central and northern Mali, a credible vote appears a remote prospect, due to insecurity and state weakness. But any attempt to postpone the vote would likely spark street protests: President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta has struggled both to restore security and stimulate development, and is increasingly unpopular even in his core constituencies of Bamako and other southern cities.

Nor have state authorities, ousted from much of the north during the 2012-2013 crisis, returned. Security continues to deteriorate in central Mali (Mopti region) and further south (Segou region), fuelling tension among communities. Jihadist groups capitalise on local disputes in rural areas, recruiting new fighters and launching attacks against national and international forces. Their reach is extending into neighbouring countries.

An expanding crisis

Northern Burkina Faso is suffering its own insurgency: notwithstanding spillover from Mali, violence there largely obeys its own logic and feeds off local dynamics. The emergence of Ansarul Islam, a Burkinabe jihadist group that has perpetrated a string of attacks against security forces and state institutions, reflects widespread discontent with the prevailing social order in the country's north. Ouagadougou and most of its foreign partners recognise that a military campaign alone will not end the conflict, but their response needs to better factor in the deep social roots of the crisis, which means greater efforts to stimulate or facilitate

“Jihadist groups capitalise on local disputes in rural areas.”

communal dialogue. Ultimately, as militants operate between Mali and Burkina Faso, the crisis also requires that Mali secure its borders and both states deepen their police and judicial cooperation.

In Niger, the October 2017 killing of U.S. Special Forces and Nigerien soldiers near the border between Mali and Niger brought international attention to a long-neglected region that has become the Sahel’s latest jihadist front line. An armed group claiming links to the Islamic State has repeatedly targeted Nigerien security forces. In response, Nigerien authorities briefly backed Malian armed groups as proxy counter-terror forces along the border. Such action can prove counterproductive, adding to the already vast quantities of weaponry in the region and fuelling intercommunal conflict. The large number of armed young men in the border area between Mali and Niger – frequently now with combat experience, including fighting both against and alongside jihadist groups – are a key source of instability. Their demobilisation and reintegration into society is a critical component of any effort to end violence.

Chad is vulnerable to instability in southern Libya, where Chadian rebels have found refuge, and in the Lake Chad basin, where the Boko Haram crisis has spread. President Idriss Deby has positioned his military as a bastion against jihadism. This stance has brought financial and political support from Western powers and largely spared him their criticism, notwithstanding the country’s fragility, growing political and social discontent, and deep economic recession. Many businesses have gone bankrupt. Unemployment, especially among youth, is high. The International Monetary Fund suspended budget support in November 2017 after Chad failed to reach an agreement to restructure loans granted by a mining and oil company. Mounting political and socio-economic

challenges pose a grave long-term threat to Chad; left to fester, these problems would till fertile ground for violent actors of all stripes, including jihadists.

Going beyond military solutions

After considerable delays, the G5 Sahel joint force has started to deploy at the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border. But it is struggling with funding shortfalls and to define its role, particularly in relation to other forces in the Sahel, from UN peacekeepers to French and U.S. counter-terrorism forces. To secure the support of local populations, the joint force should respect the rights of those living in its operations zones. Efforts to de-escalate local conflicts and, where possible, open or exploit existing lines of communication with militant leaders should accompany military action.

Sahelian states remain worryingly dependent on security assistance. Indeed, foreign donor priorities, to some degree, drive the Sahelian states’ security policies: the focus on curbing human trafficking and migrant smuggling in the region in good part reflects European worries about migration and terrorism. Yet overly strict security measures can upset fragile local economies and balances of power between central state and nomadic communities or between local authorities and ethnic or religious groups.

In this light, the Alliance for the Sahel, launched in July 2017 by France, Germany and the EU, and designed to address both security and development challenges in the Sahel region, could be a step in the right direction, if European short-term concerns over migration and terrorism do not trump efforts to reform local governance, especially in neglected rural areas. The EU and its member states should also support government initiatives to strengthen local law and order – again critical in rural areas – through its EU Capacity Building Missions (EUCAP) Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger.

In particular, the EU, including its special representative for the Sahel, should warn

governments against relying on militias as proxy counter-terrorism forces. It should instead encourage regional leaders to promote bottom-up reconciliation through local dialogues, especially in Mali. In Chad, the EU and its member states should not only pursue short-term security objectives but also seek to check, as best possible, the government's authoritarian impulses so that political space does not shrink further.