

Burkina Faso and the Sahel Crisis: What Options for Italian Foreign Policy?

by Marco Davì

Triggered by the 2012 collapse of the Malian state, when the threat posed by an alliance of separatist and Islamist militants to the country's territorial integrity prompted a French military intervention, insecurity and conflict have continued to spread across the Sahel, crucially amplified by instability spill-overs from Libya and underpinned by inherent fragility drivers.¹

Chronically porous borders enabled al-Qaeda-linked groups and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to exploit local fragilities and undermine socio-political systems across the region, with radical ideology catalysing pre-existing grievances, generational divides and distrust in central governments and their Western

supporters.

From its origins, the Sahel crisis has progressively morphed into a complex multidimensional emergency. It is primarily characterized by the interplay of manipulated intercommunal tensions over resources, socio-economic exclusion and political marginalization, along with the erosion of mutual trust between security providers and local communities resulting from poorly-executed counterterrorism responses. With the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation increasingly posing a threat, European powers have been searching for comprehensive strategic responses to the combined challenge of jihadist violence, transnational criminal networks and migration.

¹ Notably, weak governance and state legitimacy, limited human development, vulnerability to climate change, ineffective community conflict resolution mechanisms.

Marco Davì is a conflict and security consultant with the World Bank. A peacebuilding and stabilization expert, he was deployed as a Security Sector Reform Officer in Burkina Faso (UN Peacebuilding Fund Immediate Response Project), in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO) and in the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI). The views expressed in this article are personal and do not reflect official policy of the World Bank Group or of the United Nations.

Despite a limited footprint in Africa,² Italy has also recently strengthened its engagements in the Sahel, including the 2019 high-profile visits of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to Niger and Chad; that of former Defence Minister Elisabetta Trenta in Niger; and the visit by Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Emanuela Del Re in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.

Against this backdrop, Burkina Faso³ has experienced a continuous worsening of its domestic security environment. The country, until 2015 relatively untouched by regional developments, has turned into a major Sahelian crisis hotspot and a link of insecurity to the wider area of the Gulf of Guinea. A rapid progression of kinetic events across its territory, including multiple attacks in the capital, resulted in over 2,000 casualties as of 2019.⁴ Violent attacks by militants linked to al-Qaeda (Ansar Dine, Ansarul Islam) and the ISGS, initially concentrated in Burkina Faso's Sahel region bordering Mali and Niger, have steadily spread to other parts of the country, targeting army bases, police and gendarmerie posts, the local public administration and civilians.

² Rome has 22 embassies in Africa, against the 44 of France and the 39 of Germany.

³ One of the least-developed countries, ranking 182nd out of 189 in the 2019 Human Development Index.

⁴ José Luengo-Cabrera, "Burkina Faso: Reported Fatalities", *Twitter post*, 14 January 2020, https://twitter.com/j_luengocabrera/status/1217215487974760448; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), *Political Violence Skyrockets in the Sahel According to Latest ACLED Data*, 28 March 2019, <https://acleddata.com/?p=14444>.

Conflict dynamics have progressively revealed the interconnected strategic objectives pursued by armed groups in Burkina Faso: target the presence of state institutions; trigger, catalyse and exacerbate intercommunal tensions; polarize national politics; and weaken the legitimacy of the central government, including by eroding trust in security forces and their handling of the crisis.

In the politically delicate context stemming from the 2014 popular uprising that ended the 27-year-old regime led by President Blaise Compaoré and the failed 2015 coup, the government's militarized response to the crisis has achieved limited results. It has been specifically challenged by chronic capacity deficits to confront an asymmetric threat with considerable operational resilience and by the lack of a national security vision.

More worryingly, the military's human rights abuses have alienated local communities⁵ and played into the jihadist narrative, facilitating ideological penetration and opportunistic exploitation of local grievances. Intercommunal violence and the contentious role of self-defence groups, now promoted by the government to exercise basic security functions, increasingly threaten social and national cohesion, fuelling youth radicalization. Finally, the progressive loss of control over national territory enables armed groups to control and distribute resources, demonstrating strength.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Burkina Faso: Atrocities by Armed Islamists, Security Forces*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/node/328438>.

Against this backdrop, conflict diagnostics increasingly emphasize an insurgency dimension in the region, suggesting the need for a paradigm shift beyond aggressive counterterrorism that risks undermining the social contract. Given the complexity of the crisis, the current Burkinabé security response is facing considerable operational and strategic challenges, both in terms of countering threats effectively and delivering population-centric security to reduce risks of conflict extension. This deficit specifically jeopardizes government-led and internationally-supported humanitarian and development efforts to reduce fragility and support the restoration of state presence (Programme d'urgence Sahel, EU-UN-World Bank Prevention and Peacebuilding Assessment).⁶

Crucially, what is needed is not "less security and more development", but a radically *different approach* that places *human security* at the core of peacebuilding and conflict transformation strategies to comprehensively tackle drivers of violence and fragility. Pursuing such a paradigm shift across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus obviously remains politically challenging.

⁶ Burkina Faso Government, *Programme d'urgence pour le Sahel au Burkina Faso (PUS-BF): le Conseil d'orientation stratégique (COS) a tenu sa deuxième session*, 30 September 2019, <https://www.sig.bf/?p=19034>; Christian Lara and Gabriel Delsol, *Sustaining Peace in Burkina Faso: Responding to an Emerging Crisis*, New York, International Peace Institute, May 2020, <https://www.ipinst.org/?p=28555>.

Conflict transformation problematizes the status quo and calls for a renegotiation of the social contract, no easy task. In addition, the path dependency inherent to current repressive strategies, undermines commitments to conduct complex analyses required to adapt the military's operational posture. Finally, significant resource constraints limit the scope of a strategic pivot towards population-centric security and conflict-sensitive development, due to dependency on external donors' political agendas.

Nevertheless, Burkina Faso should balance immediate security responses with a comprehensive peacebuilding strategy, under strong national leadership to defuse the jihadist rhetoric of neo-colonial interference. In addition, reforms to improve security sector accountability and rebuild trust with the population should be accelerated, by placing security sector reform (SSR) at the core of a national HDP strategy that prioritizes a restoration of public administration presence to improve the welfare of local populations.

Critical improvements in Burkina Faso's operational effectiveness and human security outcomes are contingent on sustained progress of SSR measures embarked upon by the first democratically-elected civilian government since independence. While SSR efforts aim to improve civilian control of the armed forces, accountability, effectiveness and governance, the uneasy relationship between the government and the military, given the history of military coups and the worsening security

emergency, have complicated an already delicate reform trajectory.

These reforms, however, are not only important for democratic consolidation, but key to address the spread of violent extremism. Civil-military relations, accountability and oversight of the security sector remain top priorities to execute responsible counterterrorism interventions and deliver inclusive security. In particular, rebuilding mutual trust between security forces and the population is critical to effectively counter a hybrid threat through collaborative early-warning and improve human security, thus strengthening state legitimacy.

National-level efforts can only succeed if ongoing regional initiatives are strategically aligned. Since 2013, international intervention in the region expanded from the French Serval operation in Mali, to the Sahel-wide Barkhane operation, and the G5 Sahel countries Joint Force (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger). In addition, bilateral and multilateral capacity development initiatives have also been deployed by the EU.⁷

Despite such density of security actors, failure to adequately address deep fragility drivers risks undermining progress toward the ultimate objective of peace and security. In this regard, the France-G5 Sahel Pau Summit⁸

⁷ European Union Training Mission in Mali, (EUTM Mali), European Union Training Mission in Niger (EUTM Niger), European Union Capacity Building Mission in the Sahel (EUCAP Sahel).

⁸ French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *G5 Sahel – Pau Summit – Statement by the Heads of*

signalled the inception of a strategic shift, including enhanced security cooperation between G5 Sahel countries and France, European support mobilization, strengthening the Alliance Sahel development aid and advancing the Partnership for Stability and Security in the Sahel (P3S).

This changing strategic landscape, along with a phase-out of US military assistance in the region, is ushering in opportunities for Italian foreign policy to shape international support in the Sahel, building on its ongoing engagements in the area, and particularly in Libya and Niger.

Italy already contributes to multilateral security efforts⁹ through the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (7 elements),¹⁰ EUCAP Niger (2), EUCAP Sahel (4), the EUTM in Mali (12), and the Spain-led GAR-SI Sahel project.¹¹ Between 2017 and 2019, Italy also

State, 13 January 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/news-about-defence-and-security/article/g5-sahel-pau-summit-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-13-jan-2020>.

⁹ Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Operazioni Internazionali in corso*, http://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Pagine/Operazioni_int.aspx.

¹⁰ Versus Germany's 346 and Romania's 218 troops. See UN Department of Peace Operations, *Troop and Police Contributors: Contributions by Country and Mission*, April 2020, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/03_country_and_mission_23_0.pdf.

¹¹ Rapid Action Groups-Monitoring and Intervention in the Sahel. See European Commission website: *EUTF- (GAR-SI SAHEL)*, https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/regional/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapides-surveillance-et_en.

entered into bilateral agreements with Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, contributing to the work of the G5 Sahel coalition. A provider of development aid in the region, Italian bilateral ODA to Burkina Faso stands at over 4.9 million euro in 2018,¹² against the 82 million US dollars of France.¹³

With scope for deeper engagement and building upon established local partnerships and the experience from its military assistance to Niger, Italy could contribute to articulate an innovative regional strategy that works across the security and development nexus, promoting coherence between bilateral, EU and multilateral interventions. Starting with Burkina Faso, given its sources of resilience, including traditional peaceful interethnic relations and strong civil society, Italy could pilot support to a decisive strategic response along the following engagement options.

Firstly, as part of the bilateral political dialogue, Italy could advocate for and support implementation of prevention and peacebuilding strategies, focused on governance and human rights, particularly critical in the lead-up to the November 2020 presidential elections. Secondly, Italy could endeavour to strengthen policy coherence of multilateral and regional initiatives to improve security/military accountability, including capacity

development support to defence forces (such as the battlefield evidence analysis assistance Italy is already delivering in Burkina Faso), dovetailing with ongoing efforts by Nordic partners to improve confidence between local communities and the state. In this regard, by linking its participation in the French-led Takuba Special Operations Task Force in Liptako-Gourma¹⁴ to the development and delivery of ambitious comprehensive peacebuilding actions, Italy could strategically influence the direction of European security and development assistance.

As noted, innovative long-term response strategies need to include comprehensive peacebuilding approaches addressing the root causes of insecurity and violence, while promoting conflict-sensitive development focused on inclusive and accountable governance. With Africa increasingly essential for “glocal jihadists”,¹⁵ a systemic prevention approach across the HDP nexus remains crucial to lower the resonance of radicalization messaging and limit exploitation of local tensions. With a renewed engagement in the region, Italy has the potential to support a much-needed paradigm shift in the global response to the crisis, addressing complex insecurity roots in Burkina Faso and in the Sahel through a human security approach.

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¹² Italian Development Cooperation Agency, *Open Aid: Burkina Faso*, <http://openaid.aics.gov.it/en/recipient-country/BF?year=2018>.

¹³ “Coopération pour le développement: le Burkina a reçu 828 milliards FCFA en 2018”, in *L’Economiste du Faso*, 30 December 2019, <https://www.leconomistedufaso.bf/2019/12/30/cooperation-pour-le-developpement-le-burkina-a-recu-828-milliards-fcfa-en-2018>.

¹⁴ A high threat density region across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

¹⁵ See for instance Jean-Luc Marret, “Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A ‘Glocal’ Organization”, in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (2008), p. 541-552.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

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