

“Irregular” Migration and Divergent Understandings of Security in the Sahel

by Kari M. Osland and Henriette U. Erstad

On 23 September 2020, the EU launched its new Pact on Migration and Asylum.¹ In a refreshingly blunt press-release accompanying the Pact one could read: “The current system no longer works. And for the past five years, the EU has not been able to fix it”.²

The stated aim of the Pact is a fairer sharing of responsibility and solidarity between member states while providing certainty for individual asylum applicants. This is intended to rebuild

trust between EU members as well as improve the capacity to better manage migration. However, whether the Pact will be implemented and have an effect on EU external migration policy in the Sahel remains to be seen.

Following the 2012 crisis in Mali and further spread of instability to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso, the central areas of the Sahel region have gained prominence as “producers” of transnational security threats, such as violent extremism, “irregular” migration and human trafficking.³

With Niger also being a major transit hub for northbound “irregular” migrants, this trend was further exacerbated by the so-called European

¹ See European Commission, *Factsheet: New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, 23 September 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/new-pact-on-migration-and-asylum-package_1.pdf.

² See European Commission, *A Fresh Start on Migration: Building Confidence and Striking a New Balance between Responsibility and Solidarity*, 23 September 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706.

³ Here defined as encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

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refugee and migration crisis in 2015. This has led to unprecedented international attention in recent years, and consequently, a growing number of bilateral and multilateral donor assistance programmes and external military interventions.

Since 2015, the number of refugees and asylum seekers coming from this area to Europe has been reduced.⁴ At first glance, this could mistakenly be understood as a success-story in migration management, or alternatively, that fewer people want to travel the dangerous route across the Mediterranean. However, the situation on the ground is going from bad to worse, despite increased levels of international resources invested to foster stabilisation and development in the region.⁵ Why?

Central Sahelian states are ranked among the most fragile in the world (with Niger at the very bottom). This means that they are poor and administratively weak, lack a legitimate monopoly on violence, a well-functioning social contract and struggle to control their borders and vast territories.

In addition, they are experiencing different forms and varying levels of instability, related to both heightened minority issues (e.g.

⁴ See Eurostat, *Migration and Migrant Population Statistics*, last modified on 15 July 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics.

⁵ See, for example, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “A Review of Major Regional Security Efforts in the Sahel”, in *ACSS Infographics*, 4 March 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/review-regional-security-efforts-sahel>.

Tuareg secessionism) and a rapid expansion of jihadi insurgencies which pragmatically exploit the state’s inability to govern effectively. Attacks related to violent extremism have increased five-fold since 2016, with more than 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 alone.⁶

In this challenging environment, donors are facing what Morten Bøås refers to as a “fragility dilemma”,⁷ which manifests itself in two interrelated ways. First, while Sahelian states are in critical need of international assistance, they are also the most difficult to assist due to limited absorption capacity as their administrative and institutional capacity is low.

Nevertheless, as external stakeholders perceive violent extremism, “irregular” migration and organised crime in these states as a global security threat and therefore rely on their regimes’ support and cooperation to preserve their own security interests, donor assistance continues to increase regardless of how weak these states are or what policies their rulers pursue.

This brings us to the second element of the fragility dilemma, that this may lead to transfers of power and leverage from donor to aid recipient in ways

⁶ Mohamed Ibn Chambas, *Briefing to the Security Council on the Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)*, New York, 8 January 2020, https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/clean-20-01-08_srs_g_briefing_to_sc_january_2020_-_as_delivered.pdf.

⁷ Morten Bøås, “The Sahel Crisis and the Need for International Support”, in *NAI Policy Dialogues*, No. 15 (2019), p. 13, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:nai:diva-2328>.

that are not always recognised by the international community. As regimes in most cases are well aware that they are a top priority on the international agenda, they are often able to dictate some of the terms of donor assistance.⁸

This fragility dilemma may contribute to an increasing divergence between two forces at play in the Sahel: a state-centric regional and a people-centric transnational security complex.⁹

The Sahelian people have a very different understanding of security than that of the states and their external partners. While the latter seem to perceive violent extremism and “irregular” migration as the main threats, which are invariably tackled through military means and criminalisation, the people’s sense of insecurity is far more complex and encompasses lack of income, social exclusion, access to resources, climate-related security and so on. To substantiate the increasing divergence, a closer look at how these two complexes perceive violent extremism and migration differently is illuminating.

What the most “successful” jihadi groups in the Sahel have in common is their ability to appropriate local grievances and conflicts for their own strategic

purposes.¹⁰ By delivering basic services that the state is unable to provide, such as justice, education, healthcare or financial support, insurgents have managed to gain a foothold in local communities. This strategy has been successfully implemented by the Katiba Macina in Central Mali, as well as Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the tri-border areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

This suggests that state- and military-centred approaches to violent extremism only scratch the surface of a much larger problem. While combating violent extremism in the long term requires improved governance, one must keep in mind that the state itself is often a driver of radicalisation.

A rushed and/or forced re-establishment of state control may thus, in certain extreme cases, be counterproductive. Jihadi groups recruit both among those who feel abandoned and those who have experienced heavy-handed interference by the state. Counter-insurgency operations and strengthening state security apparatuses, which has been the focus of both the Sahelian states themselves and their international partners (e.g. EU, G5 Sahel, MINUSMA, France, US), is therefore not necessarily the solution – and has also contributed to growing resentment towards foreign intervention.

⁸ Ibid. See also Will Jones, Ricardo Soares de Oliveira and Harry Verhoeven, “Africa’s Illiberal State-builders”, in *Refugee Studies Centre Working Papers*, No. 89 (January 2013), <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/africas-illiberal-state-builders>.

⁹ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Conflict in the Sahel Region and the Developmental Consequences*, Addis Ababa, UNECA, 2017, <https://repository.unece.org/handle/10855/23474>.

¹⁰ Natasja Rupesinghe and Morten Bøås, “Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali”, in *UNDP Policy Briefs*, 2019, <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2630393>.

Our interviewees¹¹ emphasise that current counter-terrorism strategies fail to address the underlying causes of violent extremism, which remains unchecked as insecurities and needs are not being adequately addressed.

We also see similar dynamics in the field of migration. The populations in the region have for centuries relied on seasonal and livestock migration, with pastoralism playing a key economic role.¹² However, as the borderlands are also the hotbed of a vast majority of cross-border security threats, such as terrorism and various forms of organised crime, Sahelian governments have received significant support from external actors to strengthen border management, migration governance and other security-related measures that restrict the cross-border movement of people.¹³

This disruption of human migratory patterns stretching across national borders has adversely affected human security through a loss of migration-generated income, and consequently, those affected may join armed groups or engage in other illicit activities

¹¹ Interviews with local community representatives from a number of Sahelian countries between 2018 and 2020.

¹² UNECA, *Conflict in the Sahel Region and the Developmental Consequences*, cit.

¹³ See, for example, Luca Raineri, "Human Smuggling Across Niger: State-sponsored Protection Rackets and Contradictory Security Imperatives", in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2018), p. 63-86; and Morten Bøås, "EU Migration Management in the Sahel: Unintended Consequences on the Ground in Niger?", in *Third World Quarterly*, 25 July 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002>.

because there are no real alternatives.¹⁴

While external actors perceive "irregular" migration as a threat, people in Central Sahel perceive migration as an integral part of their resilience towards broader insecurities. However, the ways in which it is dealt with by external- and state actors, seem to undermine popular coping mechanisms.

External migration policies such as those of the EU do the opposite of "addressing root causes" of irregular migration, which has been so popularly promoted by EU institutions and governments as a tool to reduce the number of arrivals to Europe over the past five years.¹⁵ What has perhaps been most effective about the strategic use of official development assistance is persuading third countries such as Niger to act as the EU's external border guards,¹⁶ which is not a sustainable solution.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Luca Raineri, "Human Smuggling Across Niger", cit.

¹⁵ European Commission, *A European Agenda on Migration* (COM/2015/240), 13 May 2015, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52015DC0240>. This so-called migration-development nexus is also underlined in the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2017 New European Consensus for Development (in article 41).

¹⁶ See Jolanta Szymańska et al., "The External Dimension of EU Migration Management: The Role of Aid", in *PISM Policy Papers*, No. 6/181 (July 2020), https://pism.pl/publications/The_External_Dimension_of_EU_Migration_Management_The_Role_of_Aid.

¹⁷ For more on this, see Eva Magdalena Stambøl, "The Rise of Crimefare Europe: Fighting Migrant Smuggling in West Africa", in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2019), p. 287-307.

Our interviews with national and international state representatives, as well as with representatives of a number of local communities in the region, indicate that different perceptions of security and insecurity lie at the heart of the divergence between the state- and people-centric security complexes. By prioritising security over developmental state-building, external actors have not only failed to address the underlying causes of insecurity in the region, but also strengthened incumbent regimes who increasingly are committing atrocities against civilians.¹⁸

These developments have unintentionally undermined core elements of human security and in effect contributed to rising tensions in already fragile and conflict-prone environments, which is in line with the two interconnected ways the fragility dilemma manifests itself.

External assistance and regional responses are needed in the Sahel, given the nature of the daunting challenges to be tackled. However, when regional security responses are co-opted by state actors' interests, they could contribute to strengthening illiberal regimes, rather than strengthening state capacity and contributing to more effective states.

To better understand how to deal with this fragility dilemma, we need

¹⁸ See Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians”, in *ACLED Analysis*, 20 May 2020, <https://acleddata.com/?p=21696>.

more research on the governance in fragile states and the power projection between the international and the local. However, what we do know is that any security-oriented effort needs to be fine-tuned to improve living conditions to prevent a further appropriation of local grievances by jihadist insurgents. To this end, military means are necessary, but far from sufficient.

When it comes to the understanding of migration, external migration policies such as those of the EU which have effectively criminalised migration have had a negative impact on the livelihoods of border communities and contributed to more instability. Instead, the EU should both focus on root causes and facilitate legal pathways in order to more effectively assist in the managing of the migration phenomenon.

When trying to improve the security situation while avoiding the unintended consequences of these efforts, understanding the differences between what constitutes an existential threat for the state and external actors on the one hand and the people on the other, is part of the challenge.

The EU New Pact for Migration and Asylum seems to be an important step in the right directions as internal reforms and improved mechanisms for more balanced burden-sharing is far more sustainable in the long term than the externalisation of borders to fragile and conflict-prone third countries.

It remains to be seen whether the Pact will be implemented and in fact lead to a significant shift in the external dimension of EU migration

management. If this indeed comes about, such efforts can contribute to diminishing the gap between a state-centric and a people-centric understanding of migration in the Sahel.

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