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DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE SAHEL REGION

Draft Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Despite significant efforts to stabilise the Sahel region, which stretches from Mauritania to Sudan and is home to 150 million people the security situation there is deteriorating. Insecurity is escalating and spreading across porous borders with dramatic repercussions for the region's inhabitants. Conflict is further impoverishing a region already burdened with endemic poverty, inequality and social and political exclusion. This has raised the number of those fleeing violence and moving elsewhere in their own countries, crossing borders into neighbouring countries or even travelling further afield to North Africa and Europe. The Sahel has become a central transit area for irregular migration flows, which poses significant challenges for authorities and local populations and has become a major challenge both for neighbouring countries and Europe.

2. This draft report will focus primarily on central Sahel which confronts the most compelling security challenges in this vast region. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and especially the borderlands of these three countries, or the so-called Liptako-Gourma triangle, are particularly vulnerable. Military activity is intense in this zone, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and other non-state armed groups have increased their presence and intensified their activities and attacks there.

3. The constant evolution and intensification of these conflicts have now spread to neighbouring countries. The security challenges in the Sahel and the migration flows resulting from them also have serious political, social and economic consequences for North African and European countries. Indeed, migration has become a central issue in electoral campaigns across European countries and has provided fodder for populist anti-migration parties and movement across the EU. The matter has placed European governments and institutions under enormous pressure and has driven policy change in a number of countries. Security challenges in the Sahel region are therefore being taken with great seriousness by NATO member countries and the worsening situation there has triggered a flurry of diplomatic and security initiatives seeking to stabilise the region.

4. The situation, however, is extraordinarily complex, and the challenges are multi-dimensional. Interrelated factors including remnants of colonial past, economic instability and extreme poverty, unprecedented weather conditions and climate change, rapid population growth, youth unemployment, fragile governance and terrorist security threats constitute what might be described as a perfect storm in which insecurity and poverty become mutually reinforcing. The Sahel is effectively caught in a vicious circle which has only worsened in recent years.

5. A consequential shift occurred in the Sahel region in 2012 when a Tuareg-dominated separatist armed group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), fuelled by the return from Libya of several thousand fighters, almost entirely occupied northern Mali and declared Gao the capital of their self-declared state. In response to violence perpetrated by the Tuareg militia and its allies, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), linked to Al Qaeda, soon emerged, claiming to protect the interests of various groups in the region. By identifying itself with vulnerable communities in the name of so-called armed Salafism, MUJAO cleverly exploited both the ambitions and concerns of the local population. But it also drew support from powerful smugglers operating in the region. MUJAO attracted substantial numbers of recruits from central and northern Mali and Niger, including the Fulani community's self-defence militias. MUJAO expelled MNLA fighters from Gao in July 2012 clearing the way for it to extend its influence along the length of the Malian belt of the central Sahel. Only the French military operation *Serval*, launched in January 2013 at the request of Malian authorities, managed to block the advance of these terrorist organisations towards Bamako.

6. But the situation throughout the region remains highly fragile and, in many ways, has worsened. Insecurity in Mali has now spread to neighbouring countries. Several armed movements linked to Al Qaeda or Daesh are now operating throughout the Central Sahel. This has only heightened the risk of inter-ethnic violence. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have undergone repeated terrorist attacks targeting security forces as well as NGOs, private sector actors and civilians. Mounting terrorist attacks, inter-community conflicts and highway banditry suggest that the region's states have begun to lose control of the security situation. The resulting insecurity has aggravated conditions for a vulnerable population already marginalised by extreme poverty, unsustainable demographic change and mounting climatic hazards. The arc of instability has thus widened and now includes West African countries along the Gulf of Guinea littoral.

7. Attacks against civilians, armed forces, foreigners, employees of mining companies are now common. From November 2018 to March 2019, civilian fatalities rose by 7000 % in Burkina Faso, 500 % in Niger and 300 % in Mali. The region counts half a million internally displaced people while 1.8 million face food insecurity and another 5.1 million require humanitarian assistance (ACLED).

8. Myriad initiatives have sought to stabilise the situation. Some focus on the military dimension of the fight against violent extremist groups while others concentrate more on the development-security nexus. The European Union, supported by concerned member states, has invested significant resources to help the region cope with irregular migration, and its policies are informed by the notion that these conflicts are at least partly rooted in deep socio-economic and developmental challenges that must be systematically addressed in order to spare the Sahel from further violence and anarchy.

II. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

A. POOR ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND BAD GOVERNANCE

9. Sahel states are fundamentally fragile and systematically at the bottom of international indexes ranking stability and development (Fund for Peace). Forty per cent of the population lives below the poverty line and the region's level of development is among the world's lowest. The Sahel states are also amongst the countries with the highest employment rates in the agricultural sector, with Chad holding the highest level (87%). Employment is dominated by the informal sector with more than 90% of workers employed in informal jobs. In Niger, 80% of those working in mining operate in the informal sector. With the majority of the population active in the primary sector, improved land, water and mining regulation is critical to reducing unemployment and easing social and political tensions.

10. Populations living in remote, marginalised areas like the Liptako-Gourma triangle suffer from notably harsh social and economic inequalities that stoke a pervasive sense of grievance. Tens of millions of pastoral farmers and nomads of the Sahel are particularly affected by the inequalities in access to basic services.

11. Weaknesses in the core structures of Sahel states as well as the sheer immensity of the territories for which they are responsible have led to a practice of outsourcing basic functions (management of the economy, service provision, security). An array of non-governmental actors like local chiefs, traditional tribal hierarchies, and even international aid groups are often charged with filling roles that normally states would carry out. This imbues governance in the Sahel with a set of unique features. One feature is a constant interaction between national bureaucracies and international aid donors, administrators including consultants, experts, auditors, and advisers. This sometimes eradicates the normal distinction between domestic and foreign political actors (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI).

12. Corruption poses another serious developmental and security challenge. This had led to a crisis in public trust in state institutions and raised fundamental concerns about their legitimacy. Discontent with poor governance has become a central catalyst for the political crisis in the region. The World Bank's governance indicators rank all five countries of the Sahel among the lower third for government effectiveness. On the other hand, Niger's efforts against corruption deserve further attention and appreciation. After the creation of the anti-corruption agency HALCIA in 2011 and the legislative progress afterwards, Niger has made significant headway in improving governance and strengthening its anti-corruption framework (International Monetary Fund).

13. Although the conditions in the region are extremely challenging, investment and growth are possible. In this sense, a strong private sector, which can provide additional jobs and further opportunities is vital in the Sahel. There are several projects implemented by international organisations and multilateral initiatives, enhancing bilateral cooperation and realisation of joint development programmes which are of utmost importance to support and strengthen private sector in the region.

B. CLIMATE CHANGE AND RESOURCE SCARCITY

14. The management and use of natural resource in the Sahel are closely linked to intra-regional mobility. The overwhelming majority of the population in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is involved in agriculture and pastoralism. These activities are obviously highly dependent on climate and seasonal factors: in the rainy season, flooding makes it essential to herd livestock to dry areas while rice-growing takes place in flooded areas. In the dry season, once farmers have harvested their rice crops, the livestock is returned from northern deserts to the grass fields of the south. Climate change and conflict, however, have begun to alter the traditional movement of people and livestock, and this has injected enormous uncertainty into the lives of those dependent on these traditional patterns.

15. The lack of access to water for irrigation, poor or degraded soils, drought and irregular rainfall as well as limited employment in the villages have undermined pastoral and farming economies and have instead become catalysts for mass migration in the Sahel (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI). Competition for access to water and pasture has also long fomented conflicts between vulnerable communities. In recent years, desertification and resource scarcity engendered by climate change as well as demographic pressure and poor governance have exacerbated these tensions and undermined the fragile links between communities and their environment. This increasingly results in violent clashes that undermine regional security and stability. These clashes, in turn, serve the interest of violent extremist groups that fit these events into their nefarious narratives and thereby generate new opportunities to exploit dissatisfaction and economic hardship in order to recruit new members.

C. DEMOGRAPHY AND YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

16. The population of the five Sahel countries (Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania) could increase from 135 million in 2015 to 330 million in 2050 if current birth rates continue. The average fertility rate is 5 children per woman, and this rises to 7 children in Niger. The median age in the Sahel region is 16 years old. By comparison, in 2020 the median age is 19.7 years old in Africa, 30 years old in Turkey, 38.6 years old in Northern America and 42.5 years old in Europe (United Nations). Children under 15 years old are considered a dependant sector of the population. That this demographic group outnumbers the working age population makes it extraordinarily difficult to improve the economic and social situation.

17. Although young people represent the major part of the population in all Sahel states, their social status and economic opportunities are limited. Precarious living conditions and social marginalisation mean that young unemployed men are effectively prevented from marrying and acquiring a modicum of social status. This kind of marginalisation is fundamentally destabilising, and experts foresee a demographic “time-bomb” if means are not found to engage young men and women in the political and economic life of their respective countries (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI). In its current form, the Sahel’s current labour market is simply unable to absorb the new workers in productive activities and those considered as part of the excess labour force have little choice but to seek informal employment in urban areas, engage in subsistence agriculture or migrate. Those working in these precarious conditions are particularly vulnerable and violent extremist groups often use the bait of easy money to engage deprived and rebellious younger generation in their activities. A population younger than 30 years of age lacking social status and economic opportunities is thus a central factor of political instability in the region.

D. IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND ORGANISED CRIME

18. Migration from Sahel countries has become a source of grave concern in European countries. European led development projects in the Sahel in part aim to give young people working opportunities that will encourage them to remain in their own countries. Shocking images of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, which now represents the one of the most dangerous borders, and well-publicised cases of horrific abuses in Libya, for which especially the instability and armed conflicts in the country provide a conducive environment, have shaped European perspectives on the regional crisis. But there are also political concerns driven by a backlash in Europe where the immigration issue has become particularly salient.

19. Statistics suggest, however, that at least in a general sense, the phenomenon is actually relatively minor compared to the political and social backlash. Indeed, the number of arrivals has fallen significantly since 2016, although more than 160,000 people have reached Europe through Mediterranean routes annually since then (European Council on Foreign Relations). This represents 0.032% of the European Union’s total population of more than 500 million people. As a comparison, the number of refugees per 1.000 inhabitants, as of end-2018, is approximately 156 in Lebanon, 72 in Jordan and 45 in Turkey and 6 in European Union (UNHCR / Global Trends 2018). Rather than absolute numbers, the dramatic humanitarian situation of the migrants, the lack of coordination and solidarity among EU member states to control the situation as well as the very unbalanced sharing of the burden in processing and caring for those migrants may be the greater problems here. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently reported that 34,226 migrants and refugees had entered Europe by sea between January and June 2019, a figure which represents a decrease of 34% from the same period in 2018. Arrivals of migrants and refugees to Spain and Greece in 2019, however, are each well over 10,000 individuals, accounting for almost 83% of the total arrivals, with the balance arriving in much smaller numbers to Italy, Malta and Cyprus (IOM).

20. The migration routes through arid Mali, Niger, Algeria and Libya are highly dangerous. Those making the journey risk falling victim to criminal groups and they face harsh conditions in the desert and during the Mediterranean crossing. Over 70% of the migrants interviewed by IOM on their arrival in Italy report that traffickers had exploited them during their journey along the Central Mediterranean routes (Migration Joint Initiative).

21. It is important to distinguish between legal migration and irregular migration. Trans-Saharan migration is an age-old phenomenon that can only be understood in the context of the interlinked regional economy that has never easily respected national borders. Indeed, the Sahel’s postcolonial boundaries were not drawn up with social, economic and ethnic cohesion in mind. Clans and ethnic groups were arbitrarily divided in a process over which they had no control. In this sense migration

became a natural coping strategy allowing both pastoral and sedentary communities to deal with the region's climate challenges: variation in rainfall, cyclical drought as well as climate change related issues like growing desertification and diminishing water supplies. The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods legitimises this phenomenon and endows it with a legal foundation. That agreement conferred to citizens of the signatory countries the right to enter and reside in the territory of any member state. Citizens from the whole region can thus legally travel to Agadez, in central Niger, which has become a hub for irregular migration to Libya.

22. In the past, Algeria and Libya also played major roles in the trans-Saharan migration by attracting Sahelian workers on a seasonal basis. Algeria and Mali formalised this migration through a bilateral agreement that permitted free movement between the two countries. In the name of pan-Africanism, Colonel Qadhafi allowed African nationals to enter Libya without visas. The role of Algeria and Libya as migrant destination countries remains apparent today, even if the geopolitical context has dramatically changed. Among those Sahelian people leaving their home countries, a majority actually have Algeria or Libya as final destination whereas only 20% report that their goal is to reach Europe (Clingendael, 2017). It could be assumed that the stabilisation in Libya would contribute to addressing irregular migration on one hand and fostering economic development in the region on the other.

23. It is important to recognise that significantly tightened border controls within the Sahelian space, justified by security concerns, could have devastating consequences for the economic structure of the region and the coping strategies of already marginalised and fragile communities. For the 20% of migrants seeking to reach Europe, doing so might perhaps offer a superior alternative to taking up arms, in terms of personal security, income and social respectability not to mention regional security.

24. The Saharan trade has always been driven by immutable economic laws of supply and demand. Regional trade has varied over time and included the movement of slaves, gold, ivory, cattle, cereals and salt. From the 1990s and 2000s, new products that were both illicit and high value-added, such as arms and drugs, opened up new if hardly welcome commercial opportunities. Trafficking in hashish is 12 times more profitable than trafficking in cigarettes while trafficking in cocaine is 25 times more profitable than trafficking in hashish. Since the end of the 2000s, illicit trade expanded to include methamphetamine and legal drugs diverted from their medicinal uses (Tramadol, Rivotril), mainly for local consumption. It is however very difficult to estimate the quantities moving through the region. Indeed, given the conflict situation, few seizures are actually made in the Sahelo-Saharan strip (International Crisis Group, 2018).

25. The circulation of arms in the Sahel is particularly costly as it has helped militarise criminal actors which now routinely employ armed groups to protect or intercept convoys. Arms trafficking directly threatens regional security. Drug revenues have disrupted local economies, poisoned inter-community relations and called into question old hierarchies and respect for traditional authority. Described since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 as "an open arms market", Libya is no longer the sole source of arms supplies for the multiple armed groups operating in the Sahel. Since 2015, the flow of arms from Libyan stockpiles or diverted by Libyan armed groups is diminishing while national military stocks are the source of arms for non-state military actors operating in the subregion (Conflict Armament Research). Military bases are increasingly the target of militant attacks, and when these attacks succeed, militant groups abscond with deadly military equipment that they use for their own aims. Moreover, the security vacuum in Libya also allows traffickers, terrorists and non-state actors to exploit porous borders for their other ambitions. After the oust of Gaddafi regime, several armed groups, terrorists and mercenaries from neighbouring countries, emerged or at least reached considerable sphere of action in Libya and in the Sahel. A humble estimate of at least 3,000 Sudanese mercenaries now fighting in Libya for the so-called Libyan National Army raises concerns

for the aftermath of the Libyan war as these mercenaries have the potential to offer their services to armed groups of the Sahel in the near future (The Guardian).

26. Drug, arms and human traffickers often employ the same routes and provide opportunities for armed groups to finance military operations while further expanding their criminal activities. The wealthier trafficking networks often operate close to political circles and are clearly in a position to corrupt high-ranking officials, civil servants, defence and security forces officials and senior politicians. These officials, in turn, provide active cover or simply refrain from enforcing the law. Some major traffickers essentially transform themselves into political entrepreneurs and position themselves to control local or legislative elections. These operators also willingly invest in the legal economy to diversify or launder illegally gotten assets. In the process, they effectively purchase a degree of legitimacy and are thus able to openly partner with the State to fight rival gangs.

27. In Mali for example, experts say the major traffickers have links both with the Malian authorities, (who deny this) and with political-military groups in the north of the country. In many cases, trafficking networks are integrated into or merge with these groups, which themselves depend on drug trafficking for funding and access to arms (International Crisis Group, 2018). The fight against drugs and arms trafficking has assumed a lower order of priority for international actors engaged in anti-terrorist operations and the fight against illegal migration and human trafficking. The reluctance to engage more resolutely against drug traffickers is due to the lack of resources to conduct such operations, the sheer complexity of the networks and implicit recognition that these groups are often protected by powerful players in the state with which western governments are working (International Crisis Group, 2018).

E. VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS AND ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS

28. Over the past two decades, the Sahel has emerged as a crucial arena for the development and growth of violent extremist movements. But the movement is highly fractured with some extremists expressing allegiance to Al Qaeda and others to Daesh. This often reflects tactical calculations conditioned by local conditions rather than any particular ideological or sectarian preference. They have gained notoriety for the brazenness and violence of their attacks.

29. ISGS has been active in Western Niger since 2015. In 2017, four members of US special forces and five Nigerien soldiers were killed in an ambush by ISGS. The same year, Paris and Niamey decided to take on the ISGS and began working with two local armed Tuareg groups that had signed the Algiers peace agreement - the Movement for the Salvation of the Azawad (*Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad*, MSA) and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (*Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés*, GATIA) (Libération). In March 2017, several violent extremist groups (Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front, Al Mourabitoun and the Saharan Branch of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM) joined forces and created Nusrat al-Islam (Group to Support Islam and Muslims, GSIM). GSIM is now the official branch of Al Qaeda in the region. It operates primarily in Mali but has taken responsibility for attacks in other Sahel countries. In October 2019, French forces killed its self-proclaimed religious leader Ali Maychou in coordination with the Malian forces and with US support (Le Monde, November 2019).

30. These violent extremist groups are notably amorphous and rapidly change their names, locations, structures and alliances. The boundaries separating them are porous. It is thus not accurate simply to characterise them as part of a global extremist movement directed from outside that exploits the Islamic concept of Jihad. Indeed, local and regional dynamics provide the most coherent explanation for the emergence of these groups, which have so capably exploited the vulnerability of the population. Extremist propaganda throughout the region plays on the general sense of desperation. In rural areas, people have limited access to justice and little or no protection

for themselves and their property. A deep crisis of confidence and trust has emerged between a vulnerable population and the defence and security forces, which fail to genuinely provide security to the public. These conditions make the population more vulnerable to a type of propaganda that both exploits and misconstrues the Islamic concept of Jihad, and which sadly leads some disaffected people to form self-defence militia, often based on ethnicity but exploiting essentially misunderstood religious precepts.

31. The gap between the broad needs of ever more fragile Sahelian societies and states incapable of offering hope for the future has opened a door for violent extremists to entrench themselves into the fabric of Sahelian societies. The widening gap between citizen and state is one of the root causes of radicalisation (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and IAI). Harsh poverty is also a factor as extremist groups are often in a position to offer wages to vulnerable men who are willing to participate in violence to generate desperately needed income for themselves and their families. For some fighters, joining a violent extremist group means multiplying their income by a factor of 20. Violent extremist groups thrive in areas where the state is absent, or sovereignty is contested. In societies characterised at once by mounting tensions over access to arable land and pasture for grazing and demographic dynamism, violent extremists help fan the flames of social and political conflict while paradoxically acting as guarantors of a very rough and crude social order.

32. Thus, rather than serving as proxies for the so-called global jihad, violent extremist groups in the Sahel are products of local and regional dynamics and operate essentially in that milieu. This is reflected both in their recruitment of local, marginalised communities and in their objectives of fighting states they perceive as illegitimate. Violent extremism in the central Sahel, moreover, is hardly a coherent, uniform monolith. In fact, they embody a disparate set of responses to a range of profound socio-economic and political challenges. In reality, the appeal of the so-called global jihad carries much less weight than the unlawful detention of a loved one, the struggle for access to grazing areas or the quest for recognition within the village (International Alert). In the face of explosive social and political tensions, extremist groups are sometimes perceived by local communities as offering a means to re-establish law and order. This remains part of their appeal even if their capacity to deliver what is expected often falls well short of these expectations. That said, in the harsh circumstances of life in the Sahel, the summary brutality inspired by a rudimentary and biased interpretation of Islamic law introduced by the so-called jihadis might seem to some preferable to the corrupt impunity that results from poor governance and anarchy. (International Alert).

33. There has also been a rapid spread of self-defence militia. These often correlate to widening ethnic cleavages which could be a harbinger of coming inter-communal violence. This too suggests that a purely sectarian interpretation of what is transpiring in the Sahel is misleading and fails to account for what is really transpiring in these traumatised societies.

34. These explanations of what is transpiring in Sahelian societies raise serious questions about how to counter the threat. Purely military responses are bound to fall short and threaten to plunge the region into a vicious cycle in which state counter-terrorism military operations inflict heavy costs on local populations, driving even more residents into the hands of violent extremist groups. Subjecting members of some ethnic communities to arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial executions, as documented by human rights organisations, is only aggravating a serious problem and is widening the abyss between Sahelian states and their citizens. New approaches are clearly needed, and the international community needs to help foster both state renewal and genuine dialogue while helping to transform national security forces into genuine security providers. This will be far easier said than done.

III. RESPONSES AND INITIATIVES

35. Many initiatives have been established in the Sahel region to begin to build a more enduring security, social and political order. But as is so often the case in crisis regions, a problem has arisen due to a lack of coordination among these myriad efforts. Some speak about “traffic jam” of initiatives in the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2018), with many initiatives simply working at cross purposes with others while overwhelming the state structures that they are meant to assist. Below is an account of several of the most important of these initiatives.

A. AFRICAN REGIONAL INITIATIVES

1. African Union

36. The African Union (AU) launched two initiatives in the region: the Nouakchott Process in 2013, and the AU Strategy for the Sahel Region in 2014, with the objective of encouraging cooperation and better coordination among stakeholders in charge of security in the region. The AU Strategy for the Sahel region has three components: governance, security and development. It is a multidimensional concept adapted to the complexity of the Sahelian crisis and is acknowledged in 15 other Sahelian strategies advanced by regional and international actors working to mitigate this crisis. The AU appointed a special representative for the Sahel and established the headquarters for its Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) in Bamako. The results of these initiatives have been limited. Despite its ambition to provide a long-term structural approach for building peace and security challenges on the African continent, the African Union and its African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) have not yet managed to deter the growing spiral of violence and social upheaval in the Sahel.

37. The Nouakchott Process initially sought to cultivate exchange and cooperation among security actors in the Sahel, but the initial spirit of solidarity has largely faded, and the last ministerial meeting took place in 2015. The implementation of the 2014 Sahel strategy has undergone a similar fate, partly due to the lack of a clear division of labour between the stakeholders as well as limited financial and human resources allocated to those in charge of its implementation (Institute for Security Studies, June 2018).

38. The African Union adopted a wide geographical and strategic vision of the Sahel, initially premised on climatic and environmental factors. This vision includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan. As the arc of crisis extended, it was widened to include Algeria, Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and Senegal. The thinking behind including the main Maghreb actors was that it would help build a more comprehensive approach to conflict resolution. But the obvious problem was that the initiative lost focus as too many actors were involved resulting in a proliferation of ambitions and goals. This was hardly conducive to achieving a rapid response to a worsening crisis (*Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*).

39. The AU initiative seems comprehensive and coherent on paper. However, its members are not deeply committed to the process and have not provided the requisite financial and operational support needed to achieve the goals it has established for itself. Moreover, this broad approach is at odds with many other representatives of the international community which favours a more focused intervention on the five most vulnerable countries at the heart of the Sahelian crisis.

2. ECOWAS

40. Established in 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a 15-member regional group with a mandate to advance regional economic integration. Member countries are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo. As mentioned earlier in this draft report, regional integration efforts led by ECOWAS eased regional migration movements. All member states grant ECOWAS citizens the right to enter, reside and operate economically in the territory of other member states. In the 1990s, when conflicts shook Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOWAS transformed itself into a regional security actor. Under the aegis of the AU's APSA, ECOWAS has emerged as one of the most consequential regional organisations on the continent.

41. Generally judged by the international community as a more suitable forum for coping with the Sahel crisis than the AU, ECOWAS obtained the authorisation from the UN Security Council to organise a military mission to support the Malian government during the Northern Mali conflict. ECOWAS launched the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) in December 2012. However, logistical problems and material bottlenecks have undermined goals to deploy these forces rapidly into the field of operations. ECOWAS has had grave difficulties mobilising the 3,300 soldiers that it had initially hoped to deploy. The mission finally failed for lack of sufficient financial support from ECOWAS and other international financial institutions. Furthermore, military planners within ECOWAS underestimated the strength of rebels and violent extremist groups operating in central Mali (*Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*). The mission was ultimately folded into the UN mission (MINUSMA) in the summer of 2013 – and by then, France's intervention with Operation *Serval* had helped stabilise the country to a certain extent. The operation is argued to cause the dispersal of terrorist movements in neighbouring countries, notably in Libya and Niger. Eventually France had to abandon the idea of a short-term engagement in Mali and has launched the Operation *Barkhane* in the Sahel region. Although, Operation *Serval* succeeded in repelling the terrorist groups occupying northern Mali, the country is still unstable.

3. G5 Sahel

42. The constitution of the G5 Sahel in February 2014 represented a response to the military and diplomatic deficits of ECOWAS. Its mechanisms and approach to managing the Sahelian crisis have superseded those of the AU. The G5 Sahel is a framework for cooperation among five countries (Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Mauritania). Its original mandate is wide-ranging and also includes, in addition to the fight against terrorism and organised crime, the restoration of state authority and the return of refugees and internally displaced people. Originally conceived as a vehicle for strengthening the bond between economic development and security, it has increasingly focused on security matters. France has been a driving force behind the creation of the G5 Sahel and has done so to promote the notion that regional governments must ultimately take responsibility for their own fate. The paradox, of course, is that France has felt it necessary to be a catalyst to this process, which, in itself, speaks to the weakness of the region's state actors.

43. In 2017, the five countries formed the G5 Sahel Joint Force. It is composed of 5,000 military personnel from Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad and its purpose is to combat violent extremist groups. The operations of the Joint Force are oriented towards the border areas and extend over three zones: The Western zone with a command post in Mauritania, the Central zone with a command post in Niamey, and the Eastern zone commanded by Chad. Until now, each battalion has been responsible only for its zone. In a 2018 report, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres suggested that it was taking too long for the Joint Force to become fully operational. Since the Ouagadougou Summit in January 2020, progress has been made in the area of force mobility with some elements of the G5 forces now operating outside of their basing areas. To make the Joint

Force more operational in the fight against terrorism, battalions should be able to intervene outside their usual area of action. The same applies to the right of pursuit on foreign territory, where the force's troops are permitted to move 100 km beyond national borders.

44. The explosion of violence in Burkina Faso in recent months illustrates both the agility of the violent extremist groups and the operational limitations of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Armed groups operating on both sides of the three borders region are now driving southward towards Benin and Togo, outside the G5's area of action. In light of the expansion of the conflict, the ambitious initial geographical scope of ECOWAS now seems more relevant than it initially did simply because the conflict is metastasising beyond the G5 Sahel states. New and not yet fully articulated initiatives like the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), announced by France and Germany at the Biarritz G7 Summit in August 2019 are, in fact, broadening the geographical scope of concern.

B. NON-AFRICAN INITIATIVES

1. MINUSMA

45. The UN established the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013. MINUSMA currently counts 15,365 personnel and has a budget of around USD 1 billion. The UN Security Council must renew MINUSMA's mandate every year: in June 2019, the Security Council extended the MINUSMA mandate for another year. It is important to note that currently, 1,100 German soldiers take part in this mission.

46. MINUSMA's central priority is to support the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement, signed in 2015 between the Malian government and the *Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA), an umbrella group of northern rebel groups. At a practical level, MINUSMA is helping to restore state authority in northern Mali, establish a new institutional architecture for the Malian state, support security-sector reform, demobilise fighters, and support national reconciliation. Other objectives include protecting civilians as well as facilitating national and local dialogue. Counter-terrorism operations, however, are not part of the mandate although unrelenting terrorist attacks have severely limited MINUSMA's ability to carry out its mission effectively. MINUSMA has to expend enormous military and logistical efforts to maintain its presence in northern Mali. Around 80% of its military resources are dedicated to force protection in order to secure its own infrastructure and defend the convoys on which the mission depends to supply its bases. Public opinion in Mali has grown very critical of the mission. Malians have accused MINUSMA of passivity and there have been charges that the blue helmets place their own security above that of civilians. The government, for its part, occasionally succumbs to the temptation to use the mission as a scapegoat for its own failures - a practice that hardly builds legitimacy and public support for the UN operation (SWP).

2. European Union's Missions and Operations

47. The European Union has emerged as yet another important actor in the Sahel. In 2011, the EU External Action Service (EEAS) adopted the Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing the interlinked challenges faced by the region. Emphasising the development and security nexus, the strategy takes the view that economic development and state capacity building cannot be separated. In 2015, however, with the sharp increase in migrant arrivals on European shores, some EU member states that view migration as both a security challenge and as a threat to the European liberal order pushed for a more security-oriented responses (Davitti and Ursu, 2018). However, some experts argue that the external projection of domestic European fears puts the success of the mission at risk. (Venturi).

48. Since the introduction of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, the EU, for its part, has improved coordination among its different missions and instruments. EU delegations in the Sahel are present in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. They operate as liaison offices between Brussels, CSDP missions and external local and international actors. The EU Special Representative for the Sahel, Angel Losada, is currently mandated to coordinate the EU's overall approach.

2.1. EUTF – Sahel and Lake Chad region

49. In November 2015, European and African Heads of State and Government convened in Malta for the Valletta Summit on Migration and launched an Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa's three regions: Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa. The Sahel and Lake Chad region includes 12 countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. Sub-Saharan Africa has become the focal point of the EU's external migration policy, particularly since the closing of the so-called Balkan Route in 2016 following the EU-Turkey deal.

50. The budget for the Sahel and Lake Chad region is EUR 2 billion (for a total of 4.7 billion for all EUTF regions) from the EU budget and European Development Fund, combined with contributions from EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland. It currently funds 100 projects divided into four categories:

- Improved governance and conflict prevention
- Improved migration management
- Strengthening resilience
- Generating new economic and employment opportunities.

51. Sixteen percent of the budget is dedicated to border management and security in the Sahel and Lake Chad region (and 31% in the whole EUTF). Some NGOs have charged that the EUTF threatens to divert funds allocated for development aid to migration and border control, thereby neglecting the root causes of mass migration.

2.2. CSDP Missions and the Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC)

52. The EU launched EUCAP Sahel Niger in 2012 and EUCAP Sahel Mali in 2015 with the aim to help establish an integrated, coherent, sustainable and human rights-based approach among the various Nigerien and Malian security actors in the fight against terrorism and organised crime. Over 100 international experts, the majority of whom are from European security forces and justice departments, are permanently deployed in Niamey to support this effort.

53. EUCAP Sahel Mali completes the military pillar of the EU strategy in Mali, the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). The EU launched the mission in 2013 to help strengthen the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces, with the aim of achieving self-sustaining armed forces capable of contributing to the defence of the population and territory. EUTM Mali is composed of almost 600 soldiers from 21 EU members and 4 non-member states (Georgia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and the Republic of Moldova). In addition to training and education, the mission provides advice at the strategic and operational level to the Ministry of Defence, the Malian Armed Forces as well as to the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

54. In 2017, the EU established a Regional Coordination Cell (RCC). Its 15 experts coordinate the EU's operational efforts and identify needs and gaps within the CSDP missions. It is strictly focused on security and defence. In 2019, in a further effort to make its work more effective at a regional level, the EU reinforced and renamed the RCC into a Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell

(RACC). The objective of the cell's activities will be to strengthen the G5 Sahel's regional and, where appropriate, national capacities, in particular to support the operationalisation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force military and police components. The ultimate goals are to help put these forces improving regional cross-border cooperation. Another ambition is to enable EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger to provide strategic advice and training in other G5 Sahel countries in a timely and targeted manner.

3. Alliance Sahel

55. In July 2017, France, Germany and the European Union announced the launch of the Sahel Alliance, which intends to help Sahelian states restore the foundations of stable societies capable of sustaining development and peace in the Sahel. This effort later engaged the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Denmark and The Netherlands have agreed to participate.

56. The Sahel Alliance was created to improve the effectiveness of development aid in the region and to provide an integrated interlocutor of the G5 Sahel states on development issues. The aim is to increase the coordination among development partners (mainly the development agencies of above-mentioned member states, as well as international development partners) and accelerate the implementation of assistance and projects, while addressing the needs expressed by the beneficiary countries and the G5 Sahel Secretariat. In January 2019, the Alliance announced the implementation of over 730 projects by 2022, with global funding of EUR 11 billion.

4. The United States

57. ISGS's Tongo ambush of US troops in Niger in October 2017, which resulted in the death of four US Army special operations soldiers, caught many by surprise, including members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Lawmakers were alarmed to learn that so many US troops had been deployed in a conflict zone without sufficient Congressional scrutiny. Indeed, until that point, there had not been a great deal of discussion about the US military role in West Africa.

58. That said, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the United States introduced a range of security measures to monitor Al Qaeda in Africa. These primarily consisted of surveillance programmes, security cooperation instruments as well as intelligence and logistical support for US allies and partners. Following the establishment of the Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, the US military presence in Africa had grown to roughly 7,200 personnel by the end of 2018, primarily at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. In April 2018, then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis estimated that in Nigeria, Niger and Mali alone, the U.S. had 1,000 military personnel (Lawfare).

59. In the Sahel, small groups of US special operations forces advise local troops and train local militias to defeat violent extremists (Foreign Policy). The US military also provides much-needed intelligence, logistical (including airlift and refuelling) and drone support to its French ally. After the Tongo ambush, the US was granted authority to arm its drones in Niger.

60. In 2019, the US military started moving its drone operation from Niamey, to Agadez (Niger) where it finished building Air Base 201. This is the largest US Air Force-led construction project in recent history and costs are estimated at USD 100 million. Agadez is more centrally located and provides the US military with surveillance over a larger, more significant area.

61. Recent discussions in the Pentagon of a large-scale pullback from West Africa have suggested that there is some support for abandoning Agadez Air Base 201 and ending assistance to French forces in the Sahel (The New York Times). During the Pau Summit in January 2020, French and G5

Sahel heads of state expressed their gratitude for the crucial support provided by the United States and expressed support for a continued US presence. AFRICOM Commander General Stephen Townsend said during a Senate Armed Services budget hearing that America's military footprint in Africa should remain a key part of the US strategy to counter Russian and Chinese influence around the world (Szuba). In this regard, it should be noted that the 2019 General Report of the NATO PA's Political Committee drew attention to the increasing role of China and Russia in Africa which may affect the influence of individual Allies, NATO and other international organisations on African security issues. ([NATO PA](#), 2019)

5. France

62. As violent extremist groups advanced south and threatened to attack Bamako in January 2013, France launched its relatively small-scale operation *Serval*, at the request of Mali's then-President Traoré. Clear political goals, coordinated international diplomacy and an effective use of military force turned operation *Serval* into a short-term success and stopped Bamako from falling into the hands of violent extremists. However, the operation was not structured to help address the conflict's underlying causes.

63. In July 2014, France expanded its presence throughout the region with the launch of operation *Barkhane*. *Barkhane*'s missions are ambitious, to say the least, and include: fighting terrorism in a territory the size of Europe, bringing out the G5 Sahel Joint Force, supporting the Malian armed forces, and MINUSMA. Consisting of 4,500 French soldiers with operational headquarters in Chad's capital, N'Djamena and a yearly budget of EUR 600 million (French Senate), *Barkhane* is operating in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Small units composed of special forces elements capable of intervening very quickly are deployed in the field with the support of fighter aircraft, drones and a range of intelligence assets.

64. The loss of 13 French soldiers in Mali on 25 November 2019 underlined the challenges France's armed forces confront in the Sahel amid intensifying insurgent attacks. This represented the single largest loss of life for the country's military forces since 1983. Although *Barkhane*'s tactical successes on the ground are real and France's intervention and sacrifices have prevented the situation from worsening, these sacrifices are undermined by a political impasse which is weakening the peace agreement in Mali. *Barkhane* alone cannot bring about such a political solution (French Senate) and the French military has admitted as much. Its objective is more limited and does not seek to eradicate terrorism but rather to draw terrorist groups on to the military field and make them vulnerable to local armies. At best the hope is that this operation will strengthen the capacity of Sahelian states to assert full authority over their territory.

65. In December 2019, France carried out the first armed drone airstrike during an assault against armed terrorists group fighters in Mali's Mopti region. French minister of Defence Parly had made the decision to arm France's surveillance drones in September 2017.

66. *Barkhane* has a growing international dimension and benefits from both US support and European support. Denmark, for example, has deployed two helicopters and up to 70 troops to support *Barkhane* while Estonia is to almost double the size of its *Barkhane* contingent in 2020. Chinook helicopters from the United Kingdom provide critical support for the operation while Germany is training police and gendarmerie in Burkina Faso. Germany has pledged EUR 10 million for equipment, and a similar amount for advising troops (Goxho).

67. France is now pushing for stronger international support. French Minister of Defense Parly announced the creation of the international special operation task force *Takuba* in November 2019, with a deployment in Mali in 2020 (Kelly). Its precise role is still to be defined, but one of the aims is

to improve the basic training of local forces, freeing up *Barkhane* personnel and enabling them to focus on pursuing insurgents and preventing attacks. Estonia, Belgium, Czech Republic and Sweden have signalled that they will participate, but the United States and Germany have declined to join the task force.

68. In response to growing hostility in West Africa towards the French and international military presence, President Macron asked G5 Sahel leaders to offer public support for France's military presence. In January 2020, during the Summit organised in Pau, the city where most French soldiers who died in November 2019 were stationed, the G5 leaders "expressed the wish for the continuation of France's military engagement in the Sahel". The increasing number of terrorist attacks and casualties on both sides has served as a catalyst to unite French *Barkhane* and G5 Sahel Joint Force under a new command structure, known as the Coalition for the Sahel, and henceforth the operations will be carried out jointly.

69. In February 2020, Mrs Parly announced the deployment of 600 additional soldiers, primarily in the three borders area. France will also reinforce G5 Sahel forces, while a combat group of around 50 special forces personnel will form the nucleus of Takuba (Guibert).

IV. IMPACTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS ON THE SAHEL REGION

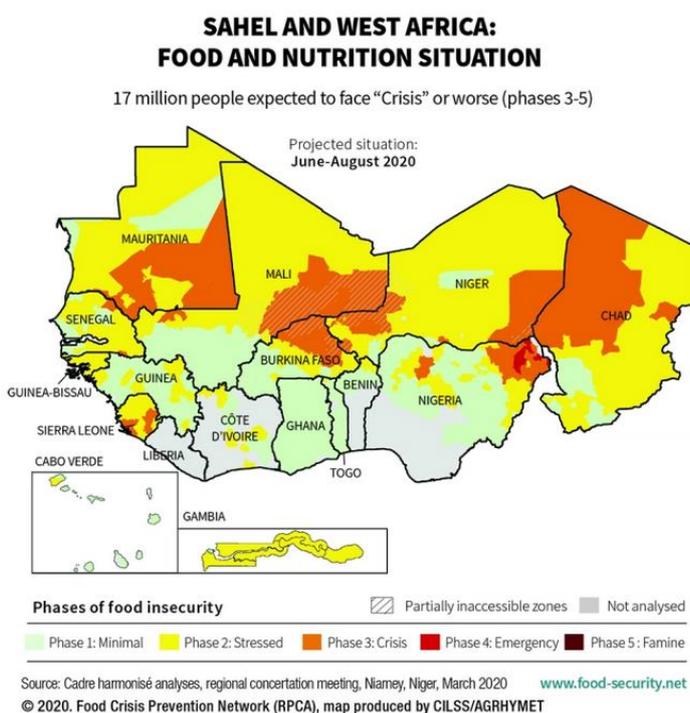
A. ECONOMIC IMPACT: ECONOMIC GROWTH AND UNEMPLOYMENT

70. As has been the case in much of the developing world, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a severe economic downturn in the Sahel region. The manufacturing, retail, trade, and entertainment sectors have been particularly struck. Economic growth is expected to contract worldwide, and developing and under-developed countries will assume a particular burden because many developing countries lack reserves that might cushion the impact. The pandemic has prompted many African governments to introduce unprecedented measures to contain the virus, including confinement and travel restrictions (France 24, 2020; Kone, 2020). Although indispensable, these measures are striking at the Sahel region's already weak and vulnerable economies. Borders have closed, travel, tourism and trade have fallen significantly, and unemployment is on the rise (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro, 2020). The world's major economies are now entering a recession, while lockdowns have disrupted global value chains. Demand for Sahelian goods and services has slumped while the sharp decline in commodity prices has struck the region's oil exporters (Ongley and Selassie, 2020).

71. Indeed, African oil exporting countries have been among the hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and the related fall in energy prices (Africa News, 2020). Other countries in West Africa will also suffer from the decline in commodity prices. Chad, for example, will experience an estimated USD0.9bn revenue loss, representing 8% of that country's GDP (Tyburski, 2020).

B. POLITICAL IMPACT

72. Concerns are growing that enforced isolation measures and economic fallout are likely to fuel security challenges and political tensions in the region, particularly in countries with planned elections. The essential measures to contain the virus may be perceived as authoritarian attempts by governments to consolidate control, potentially resulting in a loss of faith in democratic processes (Fletcher and Rouget, 2020). 2020 is a particularly important year for Africa, as 18 African countries carry out presidential, parliamentary, and local elections. Among these 18 countries, 4 are in the broader Sahel region: Cameroon – National Assembly, Senate and local (Feb 2020); Mali - National Assembly (May 2020); Burkina Faso – President, National Assembly (Nov 2020); Chad – National Assembly (December 2020) (Kuwonu, 2020).



73. The World Food Programme (WFP) has expressed serious concerns about the potential impact of Covid-19 on humanitarian supply chains. Food insecurity in the Sahel region has worsened and more than five million people are now facing severe food insecurity ahead of the coming lean season (across the Central Sahel in Africa – encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger –) (UN News, 2020). The WFP forecasts that Burkina Faso will see food insecurity levels more than triple, with the number of food insecure people rising from 680,000 in 2019 to more than 2.1 million people by June 2020. The number of those confronting food insecurity is also expected to increase to 1.3 million people in Mali and 2 million people in Niger (WFP, 2020).

C. SOCIAL AND HEALTH IMPACTS

74. The Sahel region has some of the world’s weakest healthcare systems. The Covid-19 outbreak poses a major region-wide challenge as some health systems have been severely damaged by almost a decade of violence and war. It is difficult to deploy even basic preventive measures like hand washing as access to soap and clean water is very limited (DeYoung, 2020). Poor nutrition and housing further weaken the defences of the region’s inhabitants. Disease like malaria has long posed a serious regional problem and failure to properly cope with it is indicative of the broader structural challenges the region confronts in the face of the pandemic.

75. As this draft report has stressed, governance in the Sahel is very weak, and this too gravely complicates the region’s capacity to respond to the pandemic. Central governments are hard pressed to assert authority across national territories, making the delivery of medical support particularly challenging (Le Quiniou, 2019). The concern is that an outbreak of the virus would almost immediately overwhelm healthcare systems in many Sahelian countries and could result in a devastating loss of life and broader instability.

D. REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS

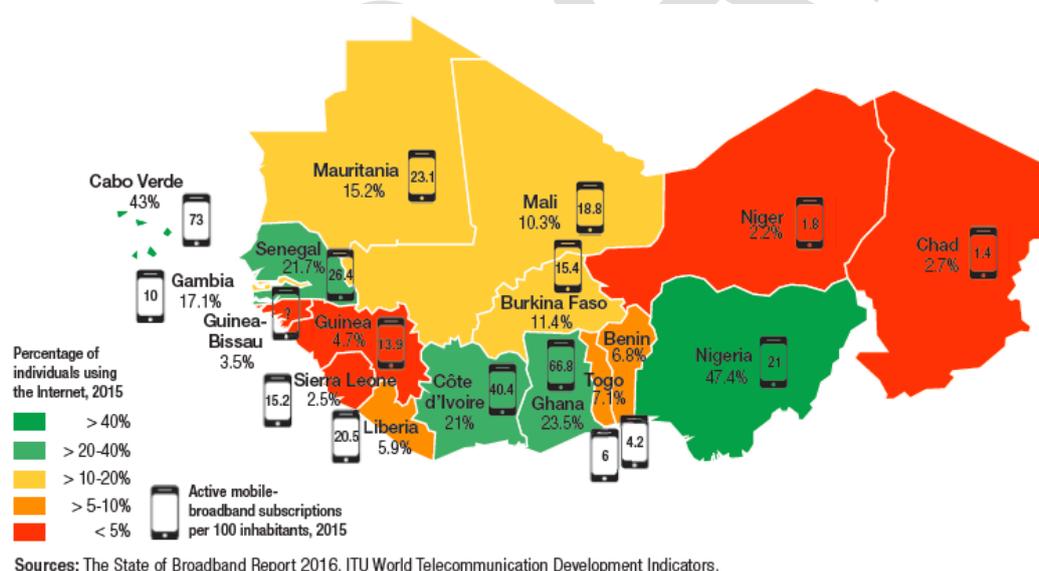
76. Covid-19 poses a particular threat to those living in densely populated refugee camps where it would be very difficult to contain the spread of disease. Health care in these camps is often of a very poor quality, making the situation all the more worrisome. These camps have a significantly lower capacity to contain the spread of the virus and access health services is very limited (Molnar and Naranjo, 2020). Moreover, social distancing in these circumstances is not realistic. The poor health of many inhabitants makes them particularly vulnerable. Moreover, some camps have been targeted for violence. In April 2020, the UNHCR expressed alarm over insecurity in Burkina Faso as armed groups had targeted Malian refugees, compelling some of them to leave the camps. Indeed, Burkina Faso has undergone a massive displacement of more than 838,000 people since January 2019 – a number which increases on a daily basis. UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch recently

said that, “the approaching lean season, coupled with the armed conflict and the Covid-19, will generate further dramatic situations and displacement of populations.” (UNHCR, 2020). The mass movement of people could easily become a vehicle for spreading disease.

V. SOCIAL CHALLENGES AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE SAHEL

77. Experts warn that measures to contain the pandemic could paradoxically provide violent extremist groups an opportunity to extend their influence (Shortell, 2020). Charging security forces with the task of enforcing unpopular isolation measures could further undermine their legitimacy and feed into the narrative of oppression that these groups employ to recruit fighters and supporters (Fletcher and Rouget, 2020). In Niger, for instance, a lockdown and temporary ban on collective prayers, two decisions taken to fight the pandemic, have sparked violent protests (Le Point, 2020). Over the long term, the combination of food insecurity and diminished economic prospects could produce a social and political explosion throughout this fragile region.

78. There are myriad long-term implications for economic and social development. Although school closures are an efficient step to enforcing social distancing within communities, extended closures could undermine the development of human capital in the region and thus diminish economic opportunities over the long term (World Bank, 2020). Distance learning is simply not an option in much of the region. Many people in Sahelian countries lack access to computers and communications technology. Only 64% of the population have a mobile ICT connection, compared to 71% in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and 95% worldwide (World Bank, 2017).



79. African governments are now receiving financial and other assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the African Development Bank (AfDB) as well as bilateral assistance to combat the economic fallout from Covid-19 (Gandhi, Schaeffer and Madden, 2020). In mid-April, for example, the IMF approved USD115.3 million emergency assistance for Burkina Faso to finance the health, social protection and macroeconomic stabilization measures aiming to support the economy and to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (IMF, 2020). A number of prominent voices in Africa are now calling for immediate debt relief in the form of a two-year freeze on external debt repayments for vulnerable African countries. The argument is that

this would create the fiscal space governments need to respond to the pandemic. (Okonjo-Iweala et al., 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

80. Years of military and financial support have failed to resolve the underlying sources of conflict in the Sahel. The international effort to address these has intensified, but the situation is deteriorating. One serious problem remains the proliferation of overlapping initiatives. The lack of coordination among these different initiatives undermines the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. It is therefore important to create a framework for coordination among the various international actors operating in the region to ensure that peacekeeping efforts are successful.

81. As the violent extremist threat expands and civilians die in inter-ethnic conflicts without investigation or punishment, the presence of foreign forces is increasingly difficult to fathom or accept for local populations. In Mali, in particular, *Barkhane* and MINUSMA are subject to mounting criticism. There is a real lack of understanding of the action and mandate of foreign forces and this problem will have to be addressed through improved outreach and engagement with social actors on the one hand, and policies. However, as long as the security situation continues to deteriorate, the presence of foreign forces will always be questioned. Concrete results are also needed on the ground to convince public opinion.

82. Terrorism and migration remain the primary reason for the international and European involvement in the Sahel. The conflating of these two distinct phenomena is problematic as the sources of each are highly complex. Simple solutions will not work, and military initiatives alone certainly will not address the underlying problems. Counter-terrorism efforts in the region requires a common stance and a comprehensive approach and should be carried out without making any distinction among terrorist organisations. The disproportionate allocation of funds and resources to border management and the lack of economic alternatives for the communities affected by migration suggest that this problem will continue and could well worsen over the coming years. There is also some criticism that the EU migration policy is counterproductive in the Sahel. Keeping migrants in transition countries by force affects local economies and increases insecurity.

83. Current developments in the Sahel underline what some observers, diplomats and experts have been arguing for some time: It is of little help to look at the multiple layers of conflict exclusively through the lenses of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

84. Terrorism and extremist violence are certainly enormous challenges that need to be addressed, but are not the primary threats to the Sahel population. Indeed, to focus on terrorism and violent extremism is to overlook the contours of the political causes of instability, such as the lack of state authority and legitimacy, the rule of law, and human security. Besides, it should not be omitted to support and assist the Sahel states to build democratic political systems which promote and enable the participation and fair representation of their respective citizens. By focusing on terrorism, the governments of Sahel states feed the worst fears of Western partners, but also conceal their own failures.

85. Military and humanitarian responses, even well-coordinated, cannot substitute for genuinely political solutions. A new social contract is needed between the Sahel states and their people. Governments must restore their relevance by providing basic services adapted to the diversity of this region. More political energy and resources from the international community are needed to support these ends. Focus and discipline are needed but buy-in from society and leaders is essential.

86. Irregular migration, organised crime and terrorism in the Sahel derive from the strong security interdependence and weakness to generate joint responses against region-wide threats. Libya was - and to a certain extent still is - the base and route to Sahel-Europe two-way movement for migrants, illicit traffickers and terrorist groups. Thus, challenges faced by the Sahel states and the instability in Libya affect each other in a negative way. Restoring stability in Libya would significantly contribute to the efforts in countering terrorism, fostering economic development and addressing irregular migration in the Sahel and South Mediterranean region. Therefore, in Libya, an inclusive intra-Libyan political and reconciliation process should be facilitated, based on the Libyan Political Agreement of 2015 and its institutions, UNSC Resolution 2259 (2015) and other relevant UNSC Resolutions. In this context, the Berlin Summit, in January 2020, was an important step. Also, the UNSC has endorsed the released conclusions of the Summit by adopting UNSCR 2510 (2020). However, it is regrettable to note that despite the outcomes of the Summit the Libyan National Army led by Haftar increased the violence against the internationally recognised Government of National Accord.

87. There is a vicious circle in the region between economic weakness and security and political stability. Despite bad governance and poor economic conditions in the region, steps to be taken towards developing the economy are of great importance in terms of breaking this vicious circle. There are no easy answers for the Sahel but it would be more beneficial to develop economic and financial support projects by considering the local priorities and the needs of the countries as well as their own projects instead of expecting them to implement directly projects suggested by third parties. Yet, Africa belongs to Africans.

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