



SAHEL-SAHARA DIALOGUE REPORT 4TH EDITION

The Sahel Facing Contemporary Geopolitical Challenges and Changes: Towards What Prospects for the Region?

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Contents

Abbreviations	04
Background	06
Introduction	07
I. OPENING CEREMONY	08
II. CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS	09
Introduction to the conference proceedings	09
Panel 1. Analysis of security dynamics and challenges in the Sahel and their impact on regional stability and the Gulf of Guinea countries.	10
Panel 2. What integrated regional approaches and strategies to sustainably address hybrid and dynamic security threats in the Sahel?	13
Panel 3. Collective security in the Sahel: How can civilian populations contribute to peace and stabilization efforts in the region?	16
Panel 4. Sharing experiences and analyzing national resilience strategies against the backdrop of growing insecurity in the Sahel	19
Panel 5. The prospects for lasting peace in the Sahel: Towards which possible scenarios in the short, medium, and long term?	22
III. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS	24

Abbreviations

ACLED	The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ATGs	Armed terrorist groups
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
BSIAT	<i>Brigade spéciale des investigations anti-terroristes et la lutte contre la criminalité organisée</i> (Special anti-terrorist investigations and organized crime unit – Burkina Faso)
CMA	<i>Coalition des mouvements de l’Azawad</i> (Coalition of Azawad movements)
CNESS	National Centre for Strategic and Security Studies
CNS	National Security Council (Niger)
CONASUR	National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (Burkina Faso)
COTN	<i>Commandement des opérations du théâtre national</i> (national theatre operations command – Burkina Faso)
CSO	Civil society organization
DSFs	Defence and security forces
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FES PSCC	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa
HACP	<i>Haute autorité à la consolidation de la paix</i> (High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace – Niger)
HCDS	<i>Haut conseil pour le dialogue social</i> (High council for social dialogue – Burkina Faso)
HCRUN	<i>Haut Conseil pour la Réconciliation et l’Unité Nationale</i> (High council for reconciliation and national unity – Burkina Faso)
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara



JNIM	<i>Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin</i> (Support Group for Islam and Muslims)
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
MPSR	<i>Mouvement patriotique pour la sauvegarde et la restauration</i> (Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration – Burkina Faso)
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
ONAFAR	<i>Observatoire national des faits religieux</i> (National Observatory for Religious Information – Burkina Faso)
ONAPREGECC	<i>Observatoire national pour la prévention et la gestion des conflits communautaires</i> (National Observatory for the Prevention and Management of Community Conflicts – Burkina Faso)
PNDES	<i>Plan national de développement économique et social</i> (National social and economic development plan – Burkina Faso)
PPP	Public-private partnership
PUS-BF	Sahel Emergency Programme (Burkina Faso)
SALW_s	Small arms and light weapons
SDS	<i>Stratégie pour le développement et la sécurité dans les zones sahélo-sahariennes du Niger</i> (Strategy for Development and Security in the Sahel-Saharan Regions of Niger)
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNOWAS	United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel
VDP	<i>Volontaire pour la défense de la patrie</i> (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland – Burkina Faso)
VE	Violent extremism

Background

For years, the countries of the Sahel have been grappling with a succession of political, humanitarian, and security crises with negative impacts on peace, stability, and development in the region. The threats of destabilization in this huge area encompass a broad spectrum of economic and social factors (poverty and inequalities), political factors, and inter-community tensions linked to access to and use of natural resources that are increasingly scarce due to climate change, among other reasons. Insecurity is also fuelled by the presence of extremist groups (AQIM, ISGS), coupled with limited government capacities and, above all, a lack of clear strategies on the part of the region's political leaders to combat those groups, along with organized cross-border crime, which is facilitated by the immensity of the territory and the porous nature of the borders, and the illegal circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). In addition to these structural factors, a number of other vulnerabilities cause further upheaval in the Sahel. Firstly, since 2020, the region seems to be experiencing setbacks in terms of democracy due to the return of the phenomenon of unconstitutional changes of government through military coups d'état in some Sahelian countries. Secondly, some countries in the region are seeking to redefine their strategies to 'respond more effectively to the security needs of their citizens' by diversifying their partners and involving new players. Finally, the region seems to be suffering from the after-effects of the coro-

navirus pandemic since its emergence in 2020, as well as from the war in Ukraine, both in socio-economic terms (with widespread economic inflation) and in terms of security (with the reorientation of the priorities of Western partners, whose support seems to be increasingly focused on Ukraine to the detriment of the Sahel region).

It should also be noted that the growing insecurity in the Sahel is beginning to spread to the Gulf of Guinea countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Ghana, and Togo), raising fears of a spread of the extremist threat in the light of recent attacks that the national authorities ascribe to armed terrorist groups (ATG). The transnational and hybrid nature of the threats and challenges to security and stability in the Sahel and their rapid spread throughout the region therefore call for an integrated response from the Sahel States. Despite major efforts to stabilize and secure the region, it cannot be denied that the solutions proposed thus far have proved inadequate, or even ineffectual. This is borne out by the frequency of extremist and criminal attacks, resulting in recurring losses of civilian and military lives, constant flows of displaced persons and refugees fleeing their villages, and the resurgence of coups d'état in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea-Conakry. The key doubtless lies in the communitarization of security responses to the security challenges facing the region.



Introduction

The phenomena of radicalization and violent extremism (VE) have become global concerns over the past two decades. In the Sahel-Saharan region, they constitute serious threats to peace, security, and development. They add further complexity to a context already characterized by multifaceted crises that are putting the peace and social cohesion of the region's countries to the test.

Security-based responses have shown their limits. In order to promote better management of this problem, at both national and international level, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism recommends that each State take the necessary steps to establish a coordinated framework for action to organize the prevention and control of VE throughout its territory. Similarly, the meeting of ministers responsible for security and religious affairs from the G-5 Sahel countries, held from 11 to 14 May 2015 in Niamey (Niger), adopted a key declaration clearly stating that radicalization and violent extremism are major scourges requiring both immediate, concerted, cross-cutting responses and longer-term measures. With this in mind, the G-5 Sahel Executive Secretariat has drawn up a regional reference guide to support the Member States in their efforts to design and develop their national strategies. The guide, adopted in N'Djamena (Chad) on 22 November 2018 by the G-5 Sahel member countries, advocates a transnational and regional approach in responses to the threats posed by radicalization and VE.

The overall diagnosis of the situation is as follows:

- The Sahel region remains immature and unstable, providing fertile ground for the development of illicit activities and destabilization.

- Since 2015, armed violence has been growing and spreading in Liptako-Gourma. Attacks ascribed to violent extremist groups have multiplied and spread to Mali, and subsequently to Niger and Burkina Faso.
- An increase in terrorist attacks and violent incidents perpetrated by non-state armed groups and terrorist groups affiliated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as well as massive population displacements and growing humanitarian needs.
- The proliferation of military coups in Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso.
- Expansion of terrorist groups into coastal countries, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, and growing ties with organized crime networks and pirates to facilitate trafficking in drugs, arms, and munitions.
- A reconfiguration of the regional security forces, particularly following Mali's withdrawal from the G-5 Sahel and France's withdrawal of Operation Barkhane forces.
- The repositioning of power rivalries in the West African region particularly in the Sahel.

The fourth edition of the Sahel-Sahara Dialogue on the theme of *'The Sahel Facing Contemporary Geopolitical Challenges and Changes: Towards What Prospects for the Region?'* was an opportunity to establish a permanent framework for dialogue between specialists in security issues from the countries of the Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea and the African continent, to promote better collective security, share experiences of resilience in the face of insecurity and put forward feasible strategic recommendations for political decision-makers and partners in the region (UN, AU, ECOWAS, EU, G-5 Sahel, and MNJTF).

I. Opening ceremony

The opening ceremony was attended by West African experts of eight different nationalities, including practitioners, academics, researchers, CSO representatives, think tanks, defence and security forces, state institutions, sub-regional organizations, and diplomats. Speeches were given by the Director of the FES PSCC office, the Chargé d’Affaires of the Federal German Embassy in Niamey, Niger, and the Director of Security Studies and Forecasting of Niger’s Ministry of the Interior and Decentralization.

In his address, the Director of FES PSCC, after welcoming and thanking the participants for their attendance, highlighted the enormous challenges facing the Sahelian sub-region and their inevitable spread to the coastal countries. The Chargé d’Affaires of the Federal German Embassy in Niger began his speech by recalling that, in his view, the Sahel continues to be threatened by multiple and varied phenomena including terrorism, violent extremism, and the impacts of climate change, all of which have political, economic, and social consequences.

In his view, the Sahel region remains of great significance to Europe, not only in terms of migration and the fight against terrorism, but also in terms of new opportunities for cooperation, particularly with regard to the region’s potential for renewable energy. He also emphasized the issue of maintaining the rule of law and protecting the civilian population, particularly the most vulnerable groups, as guiding principles of German foreign policy, as well as the issue of consolidating democracy.

Finally, the Controller General of the Police and Director of Security Studies and Forecasting at Niger’s Ministry of the Interior and Decentralization, who was called upon to officially launch the meeting, began his address by pointing out that there were three aspects that needed to be taken into account in any counter-terrorism strategy. In his view, it was vital to combine defence, development, and diplomacy in order to deal effectively with the phenomenon. He also raised other points, such as the repentance programme currently being implemented in Niger.



II. Conference proceedings

Introduction to the conference proceedings

The introductory note, presented by a journalist and author specializing in security issues in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, focused on the following theme: The Sahel facing contemporary geopolitical challenges and changes: Towards what prospects for the region? In his introduction, he identified a number of characteristic features of the current context in the Sahel:

- A lack of significant improvement in the Sahelian countries (Burkina Faso, Mali), and low resilience in Niger).
- The continuing risk of the threat spreading to the Gulf of Guinea countries (Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire).
- A change in the modus operandi of terrorist groups in the tri-border area between 2019 and 2020, involving the systematic targeting of civilians and orders to evacuate villages, has led to a marked worsening of the humanitarian situation.
- Unconstitutional changes of government in Burkina Faso and Mali, along with their implications for the management of the security crisis.

Commonly observed factors aggravating the security crisis in the region include:

- The security option favoured by the authorities, focusing solely on the military, which continues to show its limits. This leads to budgetary trade-offs heavily in favour of the defence and security sectors, which weakens the State's capacity to deliver other public services, such as health and education.
- The setbacks in efforts to build a transnational and regional response (issues with the G-5 Sahel, lack of real coordination between the Accra Initiative, the G-5 Sahel and the LCBC/Multinational Joint Task Force).
- The endogenization of the threat and tensions within and between communities.
- Intensifying rivalries between ISGS and JNIM against a backdrop of territorial conquest.

However, despite the seriousness of the situation, there is still hope, as demonstrated by the resilience of the Sahelian populations. The responses devised by decision-makers must therefore be holistic, with the support and contributions of the region's partners. A transnational and regional approach is therefore vital if we are to respond effectively to the challenges of insecurity in the Sahel and the coastal countries (G-5 Sahel, Accra Initiative, Liptako-Gourma Authority, ECOWAS, etc.).

Panel 01.

Analysis of security dynamics and challenges in the Sahel and their impact on regional stability and the Gulf of Guinea countries

For more than a decade, the Sahel region has been experiencing a multidimensional crisis that has shaken the foundations of states weakened by misgovernance and corruption, in a region where climate change is exacerbating the scarcity of resources. The consequences are a breakdown in social cohesion, various clashes and conflicts resulting in numerous civilian and military deaths and internally displaced persons, and a loss of state control over whole swathes of territory. Despite military, civilian, cooperation, and development interventions, the security situation continues to deteriorate, with a significant impact on human rights, abuses against civilian populations by the warring parties, the gradual territorial expansion of the threat towards the Gulf of Guinea countries, and an overall impact on the stability of the region.

In January 2023, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) reported a deteriorating security situation, a growing number of victims of violence, the spread of terrorism and a disastrous humanitarian situation in the Sahel. According to ACLED data, in the space of two years (2020-2022), nearly 2,500 civilians were killed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger alone, and millions of people had to flee their homes due to violence in these three central Sahel countries. Millions of children were also deprived of education in the region. In addition to the many other challenges facing the region, it has also been hit with the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of coups d'état. This raises the following questions:

- What are the security dynamics at work in the Sahel that fuel the persistence and deterioration of the security situation?

- Who are the main actors driving these dynamics and influencing the security situation in the region, and how do they interact?
- How might the situation affect neighbouring countries in the Gulf of Guinea?

The alarming security climate currently prevailing in the Sahel is influenced by multiple, hybrid, and opportunistic actors. It is important to understand that the endogenous dynamics have been compounded by exogenous dynamics. The combination has generated new vulnerabilities, with whole stretches of territory under the control of armed groups, the consolidation of transnational organized crime and the proliferation of weapons, as well as various military interventions that have created new sources of conflict and the emergence of new non-state armed actors. The steady deterioration in the security situation in the Sahel is placing the region at the heart of foreign powers' power politics. The increasing complexity of the situation and the ineffectiveness of crisis exit strategies are having an impact on the region's development and accentuating poverty, which generates new crises. The critical security situation in the Sahel and its spillover into the northern coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea is destabilizing the entire West African region. For example, Côte d'Ivoire has gone from zero incidents in 2016 to 17 in 2022, Togo has gone from one (01) incident in 2021 to 20 in March 2023, and Benin has gone from one (01) incident in 2021 to 38 in 2023. Ghana is said to have dormant cells. These figures clearly show that the phenomenon of insecurity is increasingly spreading to coastal countries with the rise of armed groups and, above all, the communitarization of conflicts. Cross-border regions from



Senegal to the Lake Chad Basin have always had some degree of residual insecurity. What is new today is that incidents are increasing in number, reflecting pressures from armed groups towards coastal countries in the form of incursions and large-scale coordinated attacks on strategic targets. The root causes of the growing number of attacks in these cross-border areas lie in persistent social tensions and modes of governance and conflict management that are mostly ineffectual. Ultimately, with few exceptions, religion is rarely the primary factor driving people towards radicalization and violence. On the contrary, poverty and idleness, along with a sense of injustice, draw people towards violent armed groups, whether their focus is criminal or religious. Young people in these regions are easy targets for these groups, which are often on the lookout for recruits.

Cross-border areas, as well as conflict zones such as Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad Basin, are experiencing severe social tensions. These tensions manifest themselves in three ways, which vary from one area to another.

- The first type of tension is tension between communities, which leads to a number of clashes. On the border between Mali and Senegal, for example, frustrations stemming from violence linked to descent-based slavery can serve as footholds that allow extremist groups to expand beyond the Sahel.
- The second challenge identified in cross-border areas of coastal countries is mainly linked to access to natural resources. Conflicts over resources are another apodictic cause of social tensions. Admittedly, this type of conflict is not new, but is strongly influenced by new dynamics such as the circulation of arms and climate change.
- Finally, there is a scarcity of natural resources and arable land due to climate change and population growth. Traditional modes of access to and management of natural resources,

founded on subsistence farming, have been disrupted. While traditional mechanisms have long guided social relations with regard to the management of these resources, they are no longer sufficiently effective in the face of growing demand.

The issue of governance is at the heart of conflict dynamics, particularly in cross-border areas. The changing context in these territories, particularly due to the pressures brought about by violent armed groups and climate change, has not been met with appropriate, targeted policies. Among the thorniest issues are access to justice and the relationship between the central government and its constituents, especially the most vulnerable groups such as women and young people. While young people are increasingly calling for peaceful, safer, healthier, and more inclusive societies, there are no effective policies in place to meet their demands. There is also a clear gap in the area of natural resource governance. Finally, cross-border, coastal areas are strategically important for violent extremist groups, particularly when it comes to financing their activities. The tensions surrounding gold producing areas, particularly those connected with environmental degradation, local governance, and the circulation of arms, also represent a clear opportunity for violent extremist groups to gain a foothold.

The spillover of the crisis into the coastal countries is indicative of the limitations of the 'all-military' approach. Indeed, in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, an excessive focus on a military response to the detriment of a more holistic approach has only produced temporary tactical successes rather than long-term strategic gains. More appropriate responses are needed to curb the spread of insecurity towards the coastal countries of West Africa and promote peace and stability in the region.

The deteriorating security situation in the coastal countries of West Africa raises serious concerns.

Violent extremist groups can potentially find fertile ground here, particularly in view of the sometimes weak social cohesion, limited local governance and the lack of effective presence of the central government. However, there are still grounds for optimism. Local solutions can be

found to prevent the situation from worsening and coastal countries from becoming hotbeds of violent conflict. Otherwise, Al-Qaeda's plan to expand from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea could well come to fruition.

Recommendations

- Promote cross-border collaboration to reduce the political divide emerging in the Sahel and coastal countries and bridge the gap between centralized policy-making and local communities.
- Promote social cohesion and peacebuilding by stepping up community awareness-raising campaigns to ensure that people live together in harmony. Both state actors and civil society have a role to play in this process. For example, in March 2022, the World Bank announced a \$450 million regional investment in the northern part of the Gulf of Guinea countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo), aimed at building confidence and resilience through horizontal (inter-community) and vertical (government-constituents) social cohesion, helping to improve living conditions in a context of conflict and vulnerability.
- There is a need for better coordination as part of a transnational approach. Case-by-case solutions should not preclude more strategic approaches involving local, national, regional, and international players. Improving the harmonization of approaches between the African Union, ECOWAS, the G-5 Sahel, and the Accra Initiative could, for example, form an important framework for experience sharing in the sub-region. The existence of such a framework could also facilitate collaboration with local, national, and regional civil society initiatives, as well as cooperation with technical partners.



Panel 02.

What integrated regional approaches and strategies to sustainably address hybrid and dynamic security threats in the Sahel?

Despite major efforts to stabilize and secure the region, it cannot be denied that the solutions proposed thus far have proved inadequate, or even ineffectual. This is borne out by the frequency of extremist and criminal attacks, resulting in significant losses of civilian and military lives, growing numbers of displaced persons and refugees, and the resurgence of coups d'état in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea-Conakry. Coordinated and collective approaches are urgently needed to effectively respond to dynamic and hybrid security threats. This will mean integrating national security policies into a comprehensive Sahelian security and defence policy to promote better collective security in the face of the region's security challenges. This raises the following questions:

- Could community-based security be the solution to instability in the Sahel?
- How can an intra-Sahel cooperation agenda be developed to effectively respond to the security challenges in the region?
- How can such cooperation be made real and sustainable?

The challenges facing the region are enormous. They include, but are not restricted to, security, political, socio-economic, and environmental issues. They are compounded by aggravating factors such as the vast scale of the territory, the crisis of confidence between governments and constituents, the strained relations between the DSFs and civilians, failing institutions that are not fulfilling their roles properly, the increasingly tangible crisis of confidence between the Sahel states, and more. At the same time, governments increasingly feel that they are on their own in the face of the security challenges besetting them.

While the terrorist footprint remains marginal for the time being in the Gulf of Guinea region compared with the Sahel, community instabilities and divisions remain a fertile breeding ground for the expansion of terrorism. This raises fears of a shift from distant threats to the endogenization or territorialization of violence in coastal countries. The situation in eastern Burkina Faso leaves Benin vulnerable to attacks by armed extremist groups, as the two countries share 306 km² of borderlands. However, the threat does not originate in Burkina Faso alone. Information gathered by Promediation points to the presence of a katiba in the heart of Parc W, on the territory of Niger. Usman Dan Fodio's katiba, which is linked to ISGS, is believed to number around forty members, led by a Beninese man by the name of Abdallah. He is said to be a Yoruba born on the border between Benin and Nigeria. He left to fight in Mali in 2012, joining the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).

Weak responses by states, which are struggling to guarantee the security of their populations in the Sahel, has motivated the people to secure arms to protect themselves and set up watch committees and self-defence militias. Local communities are attempting to take their destiny into their own hands by replacing sovereign forces. The local political elite see this form of community-based organization as an alternative solution to the problem of insecurity. While in some countries the approach is frowned upon, in others it is seen as a patriotic act in the face of the growing number of armed attacks by terrorist groups operating in the Sahel region, with offshoots in the Gulf of Guinea (JNIM and Al-Qaeda). This is the case in Burkina Faso, where

the recruitment of Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP) has become an institution, although it is intended as a short-term alternative. Using this approach, the implementation of security policies can be entrusted to communities living in areas where they are familiar with the problems and issues at stake. On an operational level, the approach also helps to better anticipate attacks because terrorist groups pass on information/intelligence at the planning stage. In addition, local communities are able to identify any outsiders and are also aware of any deviant members involved in terrorist acts. Nonetheless, community involvement in security issues requires prior risk assessment to avoid fuelling community conflicts, given the ethnic divisions caused by terrorism in Sahelian countries, which can undermine social cohesion.

Communitarization could be effective if conflicts were more effectively managed upstream. In so doing, the major risk is that communities will arm themselves illegally through trafficking networks, rendering it impossible to mark and record the weapons. Over the long term, these weapons could heighten the vulnerability of the communities, which would use them against each other in clashes. Given this situation, the decision to adopt a community-based approach to security as a solution is perplexing.

Due to the transnational and multifaceted nature of their security threats and their limited available resources, Sahelian countries need to engage in a sincere and robust cooperation process to address their common challenges. Sahelian states need to develop cooperation mechanisms that combine security and development while ensuring mutual

support. Mechanisms for the management of common borders should be strengthened through community integration based on the principles of community policing and the return of government presence through the provision of basic social services. Sharing information in real time and conducting joint security operations along common borders in perennially affected areas will help strengthen public confidence. There is also an urgent need to enhance and operationalize the dissemination of operational intelligence instantly on the ground in the Sahel, in the event of threats targeting any of the Member States, in order to reduce response times. A joint intelligence analysis and reporting unit could help to speed up the response.

However, it should be recognized that the Member States are affected in different ways and that the links they forge with other, non-member countries in the context of bilateral cooperation can be detrimental. There is a need to strengthen confidence in the relationships between the states. In so doing, the rights of surveillance and hot pursuit should be reviewed to allow actions that have already been initiated to be continued in depth in another territory.

It is important to emphasize that it is not possible to tackle common challenges without a commitment to the integrated management of cross-border community issues through conflict resolution, government presence, and sound, effective, and sustainable cooperation based on trust and the financing of regional actions through the states' own internal resources.

Recommendations

- Based on the foregoing, it is important to note that practical and sustainable cooperation between Sahelian countries is contingent on each country's commitment to maintaining balanced, trust-based relationships in the implementation of their agreements. Defining common intervention policies for development actions and ensuring that each Sahelian country takes an equal part in financing them, thereby guaranteeing complete autonomy, is a priority.
- It is vital to extend cooperation mechanisms to non-member countries, given their considerable experience in this area. No regional counter-terrorism policy can succeed without the involvement of outside countries, due to the strategic advantages conferred by their geographical positions on the one hand and their experience on the other, as in the cases of Algeria, Libya, and the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. All stakeholders should also pool their resources in the area of airspace surveillance, with a view to enhancing mechanisms to detect trafficking in war materiel, smuggling, and cross-border movements of terrorist and organized crime groups.
- Harmonizing intervention strategies and organizing regular joint exercises between member countries' defence and security forces can boost operational cooperation by strengthening trust between their armed forces.
- It is equally important to develop and strengthen police and judicial cooperation by conducting joint investigations and sharing information on terrorists and criminals arrested in a country, as the same actors are often involved in criminal activities in every country in the Sahel region. Transfers of legal proceedings from one country to another could also be envisaged, depending on the resources available. Countries should also be encouraged to develop informal cooperation by setting up information exchange platforms to reduce delays in transmitting requests for assistance.
- Encouraging public/private partnerships (PPPs) in the management of security issues at regional level is fundamental. While Interpol can help with the arrest of wanted persons in different countries by issuing alerts, it is increasingly urgent to set up information-sharing mechanisms with mobile phone operators to trace numbers used by criminals and terrorist groups, as well as stolen phones sold in other countries that are apparently used to facilitate communication between groups without being identified. To this end, the establishment of a Sahel-wide itemized telephone billing platform would facilitate tracing of foreign numbers.

Panel 03.

Collective security in the Sahel: How can civilian populations contribute to peace and stabilization efforts in the region?

Among the many challenges facing the Sahel, security is without a doubt the most urgent. In response, there has been a focus on military action, but without producing the expected results. On the contrary, insecurity and instability persist in the region. This raises the issue of the involvement of the various segments of the population (women, youth, and civil society) in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. A statement issued on Wednesday 3 February 2021 by the Presidency of the UN Security Council stresses the importance of the role played by women in the Sahel in conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, and post-conflict situations. It emphasizes that women need to participate on an equal footing and be fully and meaningfully involved in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. Women, youth, and civil society organizations are at the heart of efforts to achieve sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security.

- What roles can civilian actors play in the peace and security processes in the Sahel?
- How can they contribute to promoting peace and stability in the region?
- How can collaboration between various stakeholders be improved to ensure a more effective and sustainable response?

The contributions of civilians to the promotion of peace and stability in the region are many and varied.

In the Sahel, local populations are undertaking a great many citizen initiatives to improve collaboration between communities and all stakeholders (government, DSFs, strategic partners), but there

is a lack of effective support from the authorities. In Ménaka, Mali, for instance, as part of its efforts to promote peace and security, the IGDAH association conducted an operation called 'Ménaka sans arme' (Ménaka without weapons), which achieved acceptable results in the town using its own resources. Women have also played an important role in the search for peace between the platform and the Coalition of Azawad Movements (CMA) by helping to bring the two parties to the bargaining table. They have also played an important role as mediators between the state and the other armed groups. An increasing number of women are now involved in monitoring the peace and security agreement, with at least 12 women at the time of writing, compared with just one at the outset. It is therefore vital to support and strengthen women's participation in the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

For that reason, it is important to work together with all the stakeholders to achieve lasting peace and stability. It is important to include the public in the talks, and women need to be involved in the process (forums, popular consultations, etc.) in order to help deconstruct negative stereotypes. The G-5 Sahel women's platform has long been working with women who were initially victims of the crisis but who are increasingly becoming actors in the war. This is why the platform is seeking to train a growing number of women community mediators who will play an important role in the search for peace and security. The voice of our grassroots communities needs to be heard, as they have an important role to play. A woman knows who is a terrorist by night and who is a shepherd by



day, because she knows that it can only be her husband or her son.

There are four important points to remember about the contributions of civilian populations:

- The first point is the spontaneous response of the population to the problem.
- The second point is the use of culture, the arts, and traditional values to combat terrorism.
- The third point relates to prevention and deterrence in the fight against terrorism.
- The fourth point pertains to the fight against impunity, corruption, injustice, and bad governance.

Civil society plays an active role in strengthening collaboration between the DSFs and civilian populations, in developing security policies and strategies, in building stakeholder capacity, in ensuring accountability, and in the democratic governance of the security sector. The media broadcasts content calling for cohesion and unity. Emphasis needs to be placed on civilian-military cooperation, and public demonstrations need to be properly managed to prevent chaos, while avoiding stigmatizing a certain category of the population by labelling them as terrorists. To facilitate collaboration, there is a need to positively deconstruct certain narratives, to facilitate citizen oversight of the delivery of security services, to guarantee the safety of civilians involved in sustainable peace initiatives, to conduct community activities in sensitive areas such as the tri-border area, and for the military to provide mobile public services.

Civilians therefore have an important role to play in promoting security in the region. This is evidenced by Niger's national proximity security

strategy, which is currently being rolled out and was developed through the efforts of civilians. CSOs are increasingly involved in drawing up public security policies. This includes citizens' petitions calling for greater transparency in the allocation of funds to the security sector, mediation, and conciliation, the organization of activities to strengthen social cohesion, and the fight against small arms and drug trafficking. All of which are initiatives by civilians aimed at promoting peace and stability in the Sahel.

However, it should be noted that there is a tendency to restrict civic space because the political climate is not conducive to the development of initiatives on defence and security issues, which remain the preserve of the public authorities and a very sensitive issue in their eyes. CSOs are trying to take action, even though dissenting voices are not allowed to express themselves on the issue of terrorism.

The populations are doing their best to sound the alarm, but there is no response from decision-makers, and this remains a problem in the fight against terrorism. As a result, the people are caught between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand they are looted by terrorists, and on the other they are often executed by the DSFs.

Civil society organizations must not remain on the sidelines of this process, as they are closest to the people and are in direct contact with the various stakeholders in the crisis (the people, armed groups, and government). They have neutral status and can act as mediators in resolving conflicts between the various stakeholders. This is why it is imperative to involve women, youth, and civil society organizations in the process of building peace and social cohesion.

Recommendations

- Deconstruct prejudices among stakeholders on both sides (civilian and military).
- Facilitate citizen oversight of the delivery of security services.
- Ensure the safety of civilians involved in sustainable peace initiatives (through a data protection mechanism for whistleblowers).
- The DSFs would do well to engage in socio-community activities (such as drilling boreholes or organizing clean-up days in public places) and set up mobile public services in conflict zones to deal with potential emergency situations in regions where the need arises.
- Refrain from any acts that violate human rights or fundamental freedoms (torture, repression, assault, rape, or kidnapping of civilians).



Panel 04.

Sharing experiences and analyzing national resilience strategies against the backdrop of growing insecurity in the Sahel

As military measures have shown their limits in containing the threat, a new dynamic has been set in motion by the Sahel countries. The military response was reshaped following the Pau summit in January 2020, which set priorities and improved coordination between partners. The international coalition for the Sahel came into being in April 2020, with integrated and coordinated activities based on four pillars: the fight against armed terrorist groups; capacity-building for the armed forces of the region's countries; support for the restoration of government and administration in the region; and development aid. Each Sahelian state has its own strategy designed in accordance with the specific realities of its ecological environment and its social, cultural, and economic components. The key areas and implementing programmes of each counter-extremism strategy are designed to be inclusive, flexible, and dynamic, in order to meet the expectations of the beneficiaries. Good practices are developed in response to specific expectations. Some are sustainable, others are dynamic, reflecting the volatility on the ground and the expectations of victims. In the face of insecurity and instability, each Sahelian country has focused on an option based on the specific situation on the ground. While continuing to take military action, governments, in a bid to provide more endogenous, urgent, and effective responses to the growing insecurity situation, have adopted short and medium-term responses aimed at addressing the root causes of the crisis and restoring peace in the country.

In Mali, self-defence groups have been set up on a community basis (mainly Dogon). In addition,

there are private groups known as 'mercenary groups'.

Mauritania has opted for dialogue with extremist groups, a strategy backed by training programmes in Islamic sciences and economic and social integration.

In Niger, there is talk of inter-community dialogue and inclusive endogenous measures that involve a change in terrorists' attitudes in terms of the methods they use in their action and, possibly, their redefinition under certain conditions, in return for training leading to economic and social reintegration. Niger has drawn on the experience it has accumulated following the rebellions of 1990 and 1996, and the strategy for preventing radicalization and combating violent extremism in Niger, which is intended to be inclusive and participatory and fully in line with the G-5 Sahel regional guide, involves both the DSFs and specialized bodies.

- The National Security Council (CNS), chaired by the President of the Republic, represented in the interior of the country by the Regional Security Councils and the Departmental Security Councils.
- The National Centre for Strategic and Security Studies (CNESS), which is attached to the office of the President of the Republic.
- The Strategy for Development and Security in the Sahel-Saharan Regions of Niger (SDS - Sahel - Niger), which operates in the Sahelian areas of the country to build the basic infrastructure needed for development.
- The High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP), whose President is a member

of the CNS, has branches in all eight regions of the country. By identifying the concerns of different segments of society and using a consistent and complementary approach (government, partners in development, humanitarian, and security actions), the HACP, with its experience in the field, has become the linchpin of recovery actions and good practices in terms of building community resilience and social cohesion. In partnership with several international and national NGOs, the HACP has supported the creation of a framework involving students in the fight against radicalization. UNESCO clubs, which are present in all Niger's universities, have set up mechanisms to prevent radicalization and violent extremism (VE). This is the first programme to combat radicalization in schools in Niger.

In Burkina Faso, the deterioration in the security situation since 2015, which, according to figures from the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (CONASUR), had caused more than 3,000 deaths and forced at least 1.9 million people to flee their homes by 31 January 2023, has led to a number of initiatives by successive governments since 2015 to build resilience in the face of the insecurity ravaging the country. Communities have also developed endogenous resilience capacities in response to the situation. The new constitutional charter for the transition led by the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR), adopted on 14 October 2022, assigns four priority actions to the transition, including the fight against terrorism, the restoration of territorial integrity, and a response to the humanitarian crisis.

- On the military front, these include operations to secure territory and control areas and opportunities nationwide (Seno, Tapoa, Nakortougou, Ignouli, Foutouri, Otapuanu, Doofu, etc.), the implementation of a strategic plan for the reform of the national armed

forces, adopted by decree in 2017, and the creation of a national theatre operations command (COTN), initially attached to the office of the President and now attached to the General Staff of the Armed Forces, to increase operational efficiency and reorganize the military regions, which have been increased in number from three to six in order to create a more closely-knit network across the national territory. Two air-force regions, six gendarmerie regions and six rapid intervention battalions have also been created.

- On the political front, a state of emergency has been declared in fourteen (14) of Burkina Faso's 45 provinces. Secondly, a law was passed in 2020 and revised in 2022 to set up VDPs, with the aim of upgrading the status of these auxiliary members of the armed forces and improving operational coordination between them and the DSFs. In October 2022, the country recruited 50,000 additional VDPs. A national security policy and a national strategy to prevent radicalization and combat violent extremism were also introduced in 2021, followed by the adoption of a national counter-terrorism strategy in 2022. In the aftermath of the coup d'état of 24 January 2022, local dialogue committees were also set up to restore peace with groups in Burkina Faso that had no ties to Al-Qaeda or Islamic State (ISIS). These talks are said to have paved the way for the lifting of the blockade on the town of Djibo (capital of Soum province in the north), which was able to receive supplies from the army in April 2022. Similarly, a number of institutions for dialogue and national reconciliation have been set up, including a national observatory for the prevention and management of community conflicts (ONAPREGECC), a high council for reconciliation and national unity (HCRUN), a high council for social dialogue (HCDS) and a national observatory for religious affairs (ONAFAR).



- On the socio-economic front, development programmes have been set up to strengthen communities' resilience in the face of terrorism. These include, firstly, the Sahel Emergency Programme (PUS-BF) set up by the government in 2017 at a cost of more than CFA F 400 billion to provide a holistic response to insecurity, initially in Burkina Faso's Sahel region before being gradually extended to other regions beginning in 2019. The programme comprises four (04) components: socio-economic, governance, defence and security, and programme management and institutional support. Secondly, the national economic and social development plan (PNDES) I & II: a programme of the government of Burkina Faso and its partners, the first phase of which covered 2016-2020, and the second 2021-2025. This programme aims to bring about a far-reaching qualitative transformation of the national economy. Phase I helped strengthen the country's security network, increasing coverage from 60% in 2016 to

70% in 2019, and set up the Brigade spéciale des investigations anti-terroristes et la lutte contre la criminalité organisée (special anti-terrorist investigations and organized crime unit – BSIAT) in October 2018.

Overall, the political and military measures taken since the start of the security crisis are still struggling to produce the expected results. In socio-economic terms, the figures put forward by the government of Burkina Faso for the implementation of phase one (2017-2020) of the PUS appear satisfactory, with 1,500 types of investment made in terms of basic social infrastructure in the hardest-hit areas, to the tune of more than CFA F 300 billion. But these areas (Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord, Centre-Est, Est, Boucle du Mouhoun) continue to face serious security and humanitarian threats.

Despite all the initiatives undertaken by the various countries, challenges remain in terms of strengthening the fight against insecurity and building resilience in the Sahel.

Recommendations

- Fight corruption and promote good governance.
- Strengthen the judicial system and respect for human rights.
- Create the conditions for strong collaboration between the civilian populations and the DSFs.
- Combat the stigmatization of certain communities.

Panel 05.

The prospects for lasting peace in the Sahel: Towards which possible scenarios in the short, medium, and long term?

The UN Special Representative for the region noted that the Sahel continues to face multidimensional challenges, unprecedented levels of insecurity and humanitarian challenges, socio-political instability exacerbated by the impact of climate change, and food insecurity exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine. Since 2020, there has also been a trend towards a resurgence of military coups in some countries. Similarly, some countries in the region are said to be redefining their strategies for combating extremism by 'diversifying' their partners. We also note that the region's Western partners seem to be increasingly shifting their priorities towards supporting Ukraine to the detriment of the region.

The current snapshot of the Sahel reveals a region with territories no longer under the control of the central government, with an alternative administration that is rudimentary or completely absent. In the region, pseudo-jihadist groups have stabilized around two main nuclei (ISGS and GSIM/JNIM), which are engaged in open competition and conflict. Institutional crises are emerging in certain countries in the Sahel (Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso), and certain groups are undergoing radicalization in urban areas.

The region has also become a battleground of influence between powers, characterized by a proliferation of security stakeholders (international partners, UN forces, national armies, militias, national and international auxiliaries, independence groups, etc.). This suggests that there is a lack of clear roadmaps for ending the crisis. There are several factors shaping development in the Sahel. In the immediate term, these include the success of the political transitions

in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad; the impact of the growing strength of the Malian army and Burkina Faso's strategy; and the outcome of the ISGS/GSIM-JNIM confrontation.

Based on the above factors, the following scenarios can be envisaged for the Sahel:

- The best-case scenario: the pseudo jihadists eliminate each other, the national armies win military victories, territories are reconquered, intra- and inter-community reconciliation is underway and transition processes are brought to a successful conclusion.
- The worst-case scenario: the pseudo-jihadist cancer spreads, certain states collapse, and a 'Haitianization' process begins, with gangs and dictatorships taking over parts of national territories.

Potential short-term developments in the region include the weakening of pseudo-jihadist groups (possible defeat of JNIM), more military victories in the Eastern Spindle, complications in the transition process and recurring political tensions.

In the medium and long term, the current crises will inevitably lead to substantive change, with states being rebuilt, the emergence of commanding leadership, a long period of crisis and countries being reformatted (for digital technology, globalization, education, particularly for girls and women, and adaptation to climate change).

The future of the Sahel is difficult to predict. The ability of the authorities to respond appropriately to the various challenges, particularly with regard to governance, is vital. The potential



escalation or de-escalation of the crisis will depend on a number of factors, including the following:

1. National governments are unable to break with current trends, or to meet the needs of the poor. Due to their strategies focusing on security alone, security spending has reached 30%, 24%, and 18% of the budgets of Chad, Mali, and Niger, encroaching on the funding of basic social services. This has the potential to lead to a further breakdown in trust, a surge in local violence, a series of coups d'état, and regional spread.
2. Governments, their partners, and local communities are becoming aware of the complexity of the crisis and are working to renew the social contract through courageous and ambitious reforms, social reconstruction, and joint construction of security.
3. States are failing to the detriment of new armed actors due to demographic pressures, local conflicts, growing inequalities, and governments' inability to provide public services. Mali's population is set to double by 2040, from 21.5 to 40 million, and Niger's from 23 to 55 million. Young people will make up three quarters of the population, exerting exponential social demands and pressures. According to the United Nations Population Fund, in the region, half the population is under 15, and half the children do not attend school. They will be the adults of 2040.
4. The repositioning and intensification of power rivalries in the West African and Sahel region and the impact of competition (NATO/Russia/China, and to some extent the BRICS).
5. Developments in the Maghreb (rivalries between Morocco and Algeria, developments in Libya and Tunisia, etc.).

III. General recommendations

For Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

- Work towards the establishment of a coastal or Sahel-Gulf of Guinea countries dialogue programme alongside the Sahara dialogue in order to share and capitalize on experiences and prevent mistakes that promote the spread of terrorism and violent extremism to coastal states.
- Help the Gulf of Guinea countries draw up national strategies to prevent violent extremism and organize funding for their implementation.
- Encourage government and political players to develop realistic mechanisms to include and involve local communities (women and youth), CSOs, and elected representatives in policies and strategies to find solutions for peace, conflict prevention, and security.
- Strengthen support for the various partners working in the field: national NGOs, CSOs, national or regional women's and youth organizations, etc.
- Set up a framework for information sharing and synergy of action between the various partner structures mentioned above.

For CSOs

- Move towards the specialization of CSOs in their areas of intervention, particularly in the field of security, and pool joint actions between CSOs working in this area.
- Involve CSOs in counter-terrorism initiatives by obtaining seats in national decision-making bodies.
- Strengthen the skills and/or capacities of CSOs in counter-terrorism and violent extremism strategies.
- Promote collaboration between CSOs in the Sahel and coastal countries and establish judicial and criminal cooperation between Sahelian and Gulf of Guinea countries.

- Highlight the need for synergy of action between stakeholders in order to tackle insecurity.

For policymakers

- Work to implement holistic and integrated strategies that combine military and security responses, diplomatic measures, and bilateral and regional cooperation and development programmes focusing on prevention and human security, according to whether the country is already under attack, under threat, or still not under any visible threat.
- Prioritize intelligence by involving the police, gendarmerie, and other entities, avoid a purely military response, and create a joint information unit between the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea countries. There is also a need to promote human intelligence, which is an important tool for preventing violent extremism, by strengthening cooperation between the DSFs and local populations.
- Support multi-stakeholder dialogue, including with terrorist groups, to demonstrate their commitment to national harmony.
- Coastal countries should adopt national strategies to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.
- Strive for good governance in the fields of defence and security, as well as the fight against impunity within the DSFs, whatever their status, to reduce abuses and human rights violations against civilian populations.
- Create community mechanisms for recovery and stabilization in the regions affected by the crisis.
- Work to further build relationships of trust to strengthen collaboration and reciprocal legitimacy and reduce mistrust on the part of local populations. Work with civilians and involve them in promoting peace and security:



peaceful coexistence is no longer an option but a necessity.

- Promote civic and citizen education to strengthen the commitment to democratic values and encourage greater citizen involvement in the implementation of national policies.

For international and regional players (UN, AU, EU, ECOWAS, G-5 Sahel)

- Promote productive dialogue between the players so they can establish an effective and robust consensus-based mechanism to coordinate the various strategies currently being implemented piecemeal in the Sahel.
- Support transition governments in setting up strong institutions to ensure that the people, the governments, and the region as a whole benefit from stabilization and a way out of the crisis.
- In implementing development programmes, there is an urgent need to focus on strengthening local governance, including community governance in dealing with security issues, and to place particular emphasis on institutional, technical, technological, and organizational capacity-building, including support for local development.
- Ensure that institutional reforms enabling peaceful changes of government and transition processes are implemented in accordance with established timetables (for example, procedures involving presidential terms of office).
- Emphasize the coordination of efforts between the AU, ECOWAS, and the Accra Initiative to better combat insecurity through joint intergovernmental cooperation frameworks and joint border management mechanisms.

