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Kari M. Osland & Henriette U. Erstad

Published online: 02 Nov 2020.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Fragility Dilemma and Divergent Security Complexes in the Sahel

Kari M. Osland ⓘ and Henriette U. Erstad ⓘ

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo

ABSTRACT

Despite an exponential increase in international resources devoted to the Sahel, the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate. This is largely due to the so-called "fragility dilemma", faced by fragile states that are in critical need of external assistance, but have limited absorption capacity and are governed by sitting regimes that dictate the terms and upon which external actors must rely. This dilemma has contributed to an increasing divergence between a state-centric regional and a people-centric transnational security complex. In particular, a heavy-handed approach to violent extremism and external policies aimed at curbing irregular migration have had a number of unintended consequences, disrupting livelihoods and further exacerbating instability in the Sahelian states.

Ranked among the most fragile in the world, the Sahelian states are characterised as poor and administratively weak. They lack a legitimate monopoly on violence and a well-functioning social contract, and struggle to control their borders and vast territories. Different forms and varying levels of instability are prevalent, especially following the 2012 crisis in Mali and the subsequent spread of violent conflict to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, associated with heightened minority issues and the rapid expansion of jihadi insurgencies. The 2011 state collapse in Libya largely affected, or even aggravated, these dynamics (Larémont 2013). In addition, increased poverty, resource scarcity and climate variability have led to more frequent clashes over land rights and access to water, which jihadists have further exploited (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). Against this backdrop, the Central Sahel has been the beneficiary of a growing number of bilateral and multilateral donor assistance programmes and external military interventions (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2019). Despite its priority on the international security and development agenda, the situation on the ground is nonetheless rapidly deteriorating (Olojo *et al*. 2020; UN 2020a).

Since 2012, the Sahel has gained prominence as a producer of transnational security threats such as terrorism and irregular migration, a trend that was further exacerbated in

2015 by the so-called European refugee crisis.[1] To counter these threats, external stake-holders rely on Sahelian regimes' support and cooperation. However, external actors face the conundrum of how to engage with corrupt regimes besieged by violent entrepreneurs who pragmatically take advantage of the state's enduring inability to provide for its citizens.[2] In this context, the potential pitfalls of international intervention are closely related to what Morten Bøås (2019a) refers to as the "fragility dilemma". According to this notion, Sahelian states are in critical need of external assistance, but have limited absorption capacity. In the eyes of external stakeholders, these states are seen as a global security threat, against which there is no other alternative than to help the sitting regime. As a result, these regimes are able to dictate some of the terms of external involvement, ultimately strengthening their hold on power. Donor assistance may therefore unintentionally buttress and prolong corrupt and illegitimate regimes.

According to a 2017 report by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), violent conflict and large-scale insecurities in the Sahel must be understood in the context of two divergent forces: a state-centric militarised regional security complex and a people-centric transnational security complex (UNECA 2017, 13). So far, the approach taken by external actors in combatting violent extremism and what they perceive as *irregular* migration in the Sahel has been military-centred (Bøås 2018; Cold-Ravnkilde 2019). At the same time, people's sense of security is far more complex, encompassing not only physical security but also climate-related security, lack of income, social exclusion, access to resources, etc. (Gorman 2019). Porous state borders, which for individuals may help navigate these insecurities (Shaw and Reitano 2014; UNECA 2017), are perceived as a threat by both Sahelian states and external stakeholders (Raineri 2018a; Raineri and Strazzari 2019). The fragility dilemma may therefore lead to a perceived binary opposition between the state-centric, militarised regional and the people-centric transnational security complex – and, as will be argued here, further divergence between them.

This article is based on interviews with regional security actors and local community representatives from a number of Sahelian countries, representatives from international organisations and their member states, as well as secondary data. Fieldwork was conducted in Niger and Mali in November 2019 and in Senegal in March 2020. We also rely on fieldwork data collected by project partners in Niger in 2018.[3] We focus our analysis on two prevalent discourses in both complexes, namely what is termed *irregular migration* and *violent extremism*. We first present the theoretical foundations underpinning the fragility dilemma and the two security complexes. We then briefly explore regional security actors, before analysing interview material to assess the explanatory power of the outlined theoretical framework. After discussing the main findings, we end with some concluding remarks.

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[1]'Terrorism' and 'irregular migration' are terms that represent discourses that may be perceived differently at the state level and by the general public. For instance, what is perceived as *irregular* migration by the state is perceived as legitimate by those peoples who have been crossing these states' borders for generations without any regulations. Equally, *violent extremism* is a generic category often applied by state actors to all non-state groups using arms and violence, while the people of those countries may have a number of different understandings and categories (see Bøås *et al.* 2019).

[2]By 'violent entrepreneurs' we refer to armed actors, possessing some kind of political agenda, acted out in tandem with different types of income-generating activities; they rule by force and violence but also distribute resources, provide order and offer protection (Bøås 2015).

[3]All interviews are anonymised.

A fragility dilemma pitting states against peoples?

The fragility dilemma

Morten Bøås (2019a) argues that the root causes of donors' shortcomings in fragile states are related to the "fragility dilemma", which manifests itself in two inter-connected ways. First, fragile states are in desperate need of international assistance, while simultaneously being the most difficult to assist. They are unpredictable, highly volatile and vulnerable to changing conditions and, as their institutional and administrative capacity is low, the level of traditional donor aid that they can effectively absorb is limited. Until recent years, therefore, the international development community avoided engagement with such settings because tangible results seemed hard to achieve. As a consequence, traditional donors have limited experience and know-how when it comes to those fragile states that have recently become a priority on the international agenda, as is the case of Sahelian countries. Bøås (2017; 2019a) argues that the new security-development agenda has put fragile states on international life support. While this may prevent state collapse in the short term, it may also lead to the reproduction of state weakness rather than contribute to broader processes of stabilisation, development and state-building (Boone 1994; Chabal and Daloz 1999).

The second element of the fragility dilemma is that power hierarchies and dynamics are not always what they seem. In most cases, the regime in power is well aware that the country has become a top priority on the international security agenda and that external actors are highly dependent on the regime as far as their (often regional) security objectives are concerned (Bøås 2019a). In the case of Sahelian countries, three factors are especially relevant: (i) they are located in relatively close proximity to Europe; (ii) the Sahel is an area whence irregular migrations originate or through which they transit; and (iii) Sahelian countries are viewed as a potential source of global terrorism. Aid therefore continues to increase, regardless of how weak these states are or what policies their rulers pursue; these aid transfers from donor to recipient are associated with transfers of power and leverage from the former to the latter in ways that are not always recognised by the international community. Similarly, other studies have argued that African regimes have taken advantage of resources made available by security relations with external partners, to consolidate power through illiberal state-building (Jones and Soares de Oliveira 2013; Raineri and Strazzari 2019). Hence, the growing international intervention in the Sahel may in fact contribute to a growing divergence between the state-centric regional and the people-centric transnational security complex.

A state-centric regional security complex

A regional security complex (RSC) is defined by Barry Buzan (1983, 105-15) as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national security cannot realistically be considered apart from one another". This was further explored by Buzan (1991) and Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), who posited that interaction between members of the same RSC is high compared to the level of interaction between members of different RSCs. The concept of RSC applies quite well to the states in the Sahel (Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad), and even more so

to those states constituting the Central Sahel (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso). At the same time, it has to be noted that external actors like the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), the Joint Force of the Group of Five of the Sahel (G5 Sahel), as well as key Sahelian states' bilateral partners such as France and the US, are also deeply involved in various regional security arrangements. Their primary interest is to combat violent extremism and – especially in the case of the EU and its member states following the 2015 refugee and migration management crisis – to counter irregular migration.

Viewing regional responses through the lens of Peter Kropotkin's (2006) definition of international politics as intentional mutual aid, it is not surprising that external stakeholders seek to promote their own political stability and security when engaging in a fragile, distant and conflict-prone region, nor is this a new phenomenon. In recent years, however, security concerns related to irregular migration and terrorism have led to a seismic shift in how external actors engage with fragile states that have long been regarded as a potential source of such threats (Abrahamsen 2005; Howell and Lind 2009; Fisher and Anderson 2015). Against this backdrop, the nature and characteristics of the regional security responses raise an important question: whose security is being prioritised?

A people-centric transnational security complex

While the state-centric security complex is military-focused, the people-centric transnational complex has a broader understanding of security, encapsulated by the term "human security". The concept of human security became increasingly popular from the early 1990s, parallel to an increase in security studies critical of the then hegemonic state-centric, militarised national security paradigm in policy and academic circles (Newman 2010, 78). The notion of human security was first promulgated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its 1994 Human Development Report, which identified seven constitutive elements: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security (UNDP 1994). Criticism of human security as a concept has focused on its alleged uncritical character (Newman 2010) and thus little analytical value (Buzan 2004); it has also been asserted that turning everything into a security threat does not help set priorities (Owen 2004, 379). Nevertheless, the term is broadly used to denote a focus on people rather than the state as the object of insecurity, maintaining that physical violence is not the only threat to them and that, consequently, a multidisciplinary understanding of security is required. Finally, human security implies exploring the contextuality of insecurity: the historical, political and social foundations of insecurity and power relations (O'Brien and Barnett 2013; Nyborg 2019, 3-4).

In the Sahel, not only states, but also communities of people are connected by security concerns (UNECA 2017, 11). This pattern is partly due to the lack of a social contract, or even connections, between Sahelian states and their people – a point made by Peter Ekeh (1975) in his work on what he called "the two publics" in the post-colonial African state. In this perspective, it can be argued that there is a firm and lasting people-based transnational security complex in the Sahel, with Sahelian people having a very different understanding of security than that of the states in which they reside and work, or traverse (UNECA 2017, 13).

Regional security providers

Due to the unprecedented international attention in recent years, the Sahelian security complex is characterised by interactions between the national, regional and international levels, with Sahelian countries experiencing varying degrees of external involvement and intervention (Table 1).

EU initiatives include the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) (2013-) and the EU Capacity-Building Missions (EUCAP Sahel) in Niger (2012-) and Mali (2015-), with an estimated total of nearly 1,000 personnel deployed (Lebovich 2018). Since 2012, EUCAP Sahel has had a stronger emphasis on security than previous EU programmes in the region. Similarly, the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which was established in 2015 to address "the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration" (EU Commission 2015), has in fact prioritised border management, anti-trafficking measures and stabilisation efforts (Oxfam 2020). EU programmes have therefore repeatedly been subject to criticism for having a narrow security approach despite claiming to promote development (Bøås 2018; Raineri 2018a; Raineri and Strazzari 2019).

On 20 December 2012, an African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) was authorised by the UN Security Council. AFISMA was initially an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union (AU) deployment. On 25 April 2013, authority over the mission was transferred to the UN and it was renamed the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In 2014, MINUSMA's duties were broadened to "ensuring security, stabilisation and protection of civilians; supporting national political dialogue and reconciliation; and assisting the re-establishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights in that country" (UN 2020b). MINUSMA has had limited success in these tasks, primarily due to the stalled peace agreement signed between the Malian government and armed groups in northern Mali (van der Lijn et al. 2019). MINUSMA has also been criticised for shifting its strategy from liberal peacebuilding to a greater focus on militarised stabilisation and counterterrorism efforts (Karlsrud 2019). Moreover, the UN has a number of other bodies and coordinating mechanisms in place, in particular the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS).

Along with MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel has been the most important intergovernmental initiative launched by AU member states. Since 2017, the G5 Sahel has been mandated to combat terrorism, cross-border organised crime and human trafficking in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger (see Rupesinghe 2018). In particular, the Central Sahel seems to be a priority (Raineri 2018b, 12). Other regional security arrangements include, but are not limited to: the AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) (2013-), which focuses on four areas – political process, human and humanitarian rights, security, and development – in the region (Gnanguenon 2014); and the Multinational Joint Task Force against *Boko Haram* (MNJTF), originally established in 1994 as an instrument to control cross-border criminal activities in the Lake Chad Basin (Agbiboa 2018).

Table 1. Major regional security initiatives in the Sahel

	Personnel	Start date	Mandate	Main tasks	Founding countries
MINUSMA	15,610	2013-	UN (Ch. VII)	Stabilisation and transitions	UN
G5 Sahel	5,000	2017-	UN/AU-endorsed	Coordination of security response	Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Chad
Barkhane (formerly Serval)	5,100	2014-	UN-endorsed	Anti-insurgent operation	France
EUTM Mali	745	2013-	EU	Military training	EU
EUCAP Mali	140	2015-	EU	Military capacity-building	EU
EUCAP Niger	200	2012-	EU	Civilian capacity-building	EU
Alliance for the Sahel	500	2017-	EU	Coordination of dev.ass.	Germany, France, EU, African Dev. Bank, World Bank, UNDP
Takuba	n/k	2020/21-	G5 Sahel, Mali	Special forces operations	Mali, Niger, EU
Int'l Coalition for the Sahel	n/a	2020-	EU (Pau)	Coordination of response	G5 Sahel, France, UN, EU, AU, OIF*
P3S**	n/a	2019-	France, Germany	Identify security needs	France, Germany

*The *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* (often referred to as *La Francophonie*)
**Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel
Sources: UN, European External Action Service, G5 Sahel Secretariat, French Ministry of Defence, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alliance Sahel.

France also leads large-scale counterterrorism operations in the region: Operation Serval (2012-14), Operation Barkhane (2014-), extended with Operation Takuba (2020-). Barkhane, which is a sequel to Serval, is the largest French military operation abroad and aims to secure the Sahel by fighting terrorism in partnership with regional actors such as the G5 Sahel in Mali, Niger and Chad (Lebovich 2020). To strengthen cooperative counterterrorism efforts between Barkhane and the G5 Sahel, France announced the formation of the new joint special operations force, Takuba, in January 2020 (Kelly 2020). While a number of European countries will join this force, some have already played a bilateral role in military capacity-building in the region for several years, including Belgium, Germany and Italy. The US is also heavily engaged in counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, which US decision-makers view as an "ungoverned space" and breeding ground for global *jihad*. Although the US established Operation Enduring Freedom–Trans Sahara (OEF-TS) as far back as 2007, its military footprint has expanded dramatically in recent years, with the establishment of US-operated drone bases in Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou) and Niger (Agadez, Niamey). There are some 800-1,000 US personnel in Niger, overseen by AFRICOM, the US military command responsible for Africa (Powell 2018). The US, along with France, is also engaged in the fight against *Boko Haram* in the Lake Chad Basin.

Additionally, there are a number of coordinating initiatives, particularly the Alliance for the Sahel (or the Sahel Alliance) and the International Coalition for the Sahel. The Sahel Alliance (2017-) is a donor coordination group whose primary purpose is to coordinate development assistance, with six priority areas, which also encompass security: youth employability, education and training; agriculture, rural development and food security; energy and climate; governance; decentralisation and support for rolling out basic services; and internal security. In October 2018, a partnership agreement was signed between the Sahel Alliance and G5 Sahel to better coordinate donor support and the needs expressed by Sahelian countries. The International Coalition for the Sahel was launched during the Pau Summit of January 2020 by the heads of state of France and the G5 countries. The stated aim is to facilitate coordination and interaction on military, security, political and development issues at the regional level, including all actors and levers involved. Finally, the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) is an integral part of the Coalition, and was established by France and Germany in 2019 to enhance coordination between major partners (G5 Sahel) in efforts to "build the capacities of the armed forces" and the "return of the State" (Federal Foreign Office of Germany 2020).

In sum, the Sahel in general, and the Central Sahel in particular, have been the recipient of a growing number of external assistance programmes and military interventions in recent years. With its varying levels and types of engagement, as well as the diverse composition of regional security providers, the Sahelian security complex is therefore a highly compound one.

Dominant themes in regional security responses

Building on the discussion of regional security complexes and providers, this section presents and analyses interview material to shed light on two dominant themes in regional security responses in the Sahel: violent extremism and irregular migration.

Violent extremism

Violent extremism poses a severe and growing threat to both the people and states of the Sahel.[4] Violent extremist movements have been spreading since 2012 from northern Mali to central Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, further escalating from 2018 onwards (Bøås *et al.* 2019; UNDP 2020). This expansion cannot be viewed in isolation from Muammar Gaddafi's fall in 2011, which caused an influx of both Tuareg fighters and weaponry from Libya to Mali, thus being a catalyst for armed rebellions and jihadi-inspired insurgencies in subsequent years (Bøås 2019b). Furthermore, when the Islamic State started losing its "territorial caliphate" in Iraq and Syria in 2018, jihadism found fertile ground in Africa.

Today, external actors are primarily focused on the Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups *Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM, Group to Support Islam and Muslims) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[5] What these jihadi groups have in common is that they tap into local grievances and conflicts, such as those over land, trading/fishing and grazing rights, and into anti-state sentiments, seeking to displace state authority and control (Bøås *et al.* 2019; Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). The way in which these groups have managed to integrate and gain ground in the Sahel – as well as other regions – "calls for a more nuanced study that observes variation, rivalries and interconnections related to material, organisational and ideational resources among different armed groups" (Bøås *et al.* 2019, 9; see also Bøås and Dunn 2017). A recurrent theme in the literature is that the success of these groups is largely explained by their ability to govern by delivering basic services (such as justice, education, healthcare and support to those affected by food insecurity) and security where the state fails to do so. As a local journalist put it:

> The justice system implemented by the jihadists, based on the *sharia*, is considered straightforward, fair and effective, to the extent that now people proactively call for the intervention of jihadists to settle disputes.[6]

The *Katiba Macina*, for example, an Islamist group that operates in the Mopti-Segou region of central Mali, has also targeted the most vulnerable in Malian society, recruiting among the poorest and least educated communities, particularly men who "don't have anything to lose" (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019, 9). These tactics are also evident in Niger:

> Radicalisation in Niger affects especially the most marginalised tribes, who have been excluded from decision-making, feel disempowered and abandoned by the state, and fail to assert themselves in disputes over the management of natural resources. Radical leaders, such as Abu Walid al-Sahraoui in the region of Tillabéri, have provided the material and ideological resources to turn long-brewing frustrations into action, and take revenge against the state.[7]

As such, it is their ability to appropriate local grievances for their own strategic purposes that is the real strength of Salafi-inspired insurgents in the region (Bøås 2019a). If the state is not able to provide for its citizens, these groups can step in and fill the gap. Hence, in order to win the battle against jihadist insurgents in the long term, Sahelian states should cater to most of those needs that underlie the concept of human security,

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[4]Mali and Niger are among the top ten states most affected by terrorism in Africa (Institute for Economics and Peace 2019). Attacks have increased fivefold in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger since 2016, with more than 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 alone (*Al Jazeera* 2020).

[5]For a comprehensive overview of violent entrepreneurs active in the Sahel, see Zenn (2020a).

[6]Interview with journalist, Bamako, 16 November 2019.

[7]Interview with local scholar, Niamey, 9 November 2019.

especially in remote and rural areas. In fact, according to a survey conducted by the Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix (IMRAP) in Mali, the key obstacles to peace are poor governance, the quest for recognition by unemployed youth and chronic insecurity.[8] This has also been identified as a primary driver of radicalisation in neglected regions in Niger:

> In Tillabéri, it is less about the heavy-handed interference by the state than the absence of the state, leading the population to feel neglected and marginalised. Lack of opportunities in Tillabéri also generates a sense of frustration and uselessness among the youth, who are then denied all the traditional avenues of social achievement.[9]

Tackling these challenges requires improved governance. Nevertheless, a rushed and/or forced re-establishment of territorial state control and authority over so-called "ungoverned spaces", which has been the focus of both the Sahelian states themselves and their international partners in recent years, is not necessarily a solution, but can be part of the problem. This brings us to the other side of the equation, namely that too much (or the wrong kind of) state interference is also a well-documented driver of violent extremism in the Sahel. This paradox was succinctly explained by an informant:

> In Diffa, radicalisation is largely the result of state abuses. The army came from afar and did not trust the people: they broke into houses, searching elders and women. This shocked the population, to the point that the youth revolted and launched its own ethnic-based [Kanouri] self-defence militia.[10]

Indeed, state violence against civilians has increased significantly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger since 2019, with human rights violations often being attributed to the heavy-handed approach of state forces (ACLED 2020). In Mali, the government in Bamako has also been accused of manipulating ethnic cleavages by pitting self-defence militias against one another in order to avoid confrontation with a united front.[11] Moreover, in 2019, amidst the worsening humanitarian crisis in Mali, counterterrorism operations allegedly forced more than 80,000 people to flee their homes (Moody 2020). In the meantime, according to UN estimates, more than 600 out of 900 schools in central Mali are closed, each with 150 students on average: "give them five years, they'll all be in Quranic schools and become easy targets of jihadist propaganda".[12] Growing resentment towards Sahelian governments and their external partners' poor record[13] aligns perfectly with the anti-state and anti-Western rhetoric of violent entrepreneurs. ISGS' successful expansion in the tri-border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has been attributed to its appeal to local populations against exploitation "by Western companies, governments and their allies in the region".[14] In Agadez, informants also expressed frustration over the growing foreign military presence in the country, especially the US military base that was established without the involvement of local stakeholders.[15]

Violent extremism in the Central Sahel thus continues to be fuelled by a combination of local grievances, state repression and growing scepticism towards foreign intervention.

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[8]Survey results provided in an interview with Zoumana Fane, Programme Manager (IMRAP), Bamako, 19 November 2019.
[9]Interview with humanitarian NGO worker, Niamey, 3 November 2019.
[10]Ibid.
[11]Interview with high-ranking UN official, Bamako, 15 November 2019.
[12]Ibid.
[13]General impression from interviews in Niger in November 2019.
[14]Interview with analyst at local NGO, Bamako, 18 November 2019.
[15]Interviews with elected official, Agadez, 12 November 2018; local community leader, Agadez, 13 November 2018.

Moreover, while regional responses prioritise counterinsurgency operations against "global" threats such as JNIM and ISGS, the reality on the ground is far more complex (ACLED 2020). This suggests that state-centric approaches to violent extremism in the region only scratch the surface of a much larger problem. At worst, they may even be counterproductive. We argue that this is testimony to a clash between different security complexes in the Central Sahel.

Irregular migration

Cross-border mobility and porous borders have long been a source of resilience for Sahelians, and thus a key factor in the people-centric security complex (UNECA 2017, 14; see also Raineri 2018a; Scheele 2012). In fact, to adapt to the region's extreme climatic and ecological conditions, the region's populations have for centuries relied on seasonal and livestock migration, with pastoralism playing a key economic role (Sissoko *et al.* 2011; UNECA 2017). As noted by Mark Shaw and Tuesday Reitano (2014, 4), cross-border activities include the smuggling of goods and labour: "the capacity to smuggle contraband, derive profit from trafficking, and migrate across the porous borders of the region is the resilience strategy that most communities employ to survive".

Today, the borderlands are also the hotbed of a vast majority of cross-border security challenges, such as terrorism, illicit trafficking and organised crime. Therefore, the region's internal and external porous borders are now perceived as a threat, both to the Sahelian states and to their external stakeholders.[16] A widespread perception that there is a clear link between irregular migration and these cross-border threats has profoundly influenced stabilisation efforts in the region (Fakhoury 2016; Raineri 2018a; Abebe 2019: Bøås 2020). Accordingly, Sahelian governments have received significant support from external actors to strengthen border management, migration governance and other security-related measures that restrict the cross-border movement of people (Raineri and Strazzari 2019). This has largely contributed to the securitisation of irregular migration. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Niger and, in particular, the region of Agadez.

Since the Sultanate of Aïr was established in the 15th century, Agadez has been a "gateway to the desert" – a focal point for trans-Saharan economic and cultural exchanges, as well as intra-African migration (UNESCO 2020). The transnational smuggling networks operating in Agadez constitute an integral part of the local political economy, which has largely revolved around the migration business ("*le commerce autour de la migration*") (Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen 2017). Migrant smuggling has long been a major source of income in the region; and business has thrived due to recent migration, with many communities providing facilities, services and security to smugglers and migrants (Bastia and Skeldon 2020). The fall of the Libyan regime in 2011 further contributed to this boom, bolstering Agadez' status as a strategic transit hub (Bøås 2019b). The migration business also provided much-needed employment for economically marginalised Tuareg, including those who returned from Libya after 2011. According to some, this has contributed to Niger's relative resilience to conflict in comparison to Mali (Bøås 2019b).

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[16]Roughly 90 per cent of all terrorist attacks conducted by ISGS have occurred within 100 km of one of these borders (Le Roux 2019).

Following the refugee crisis in 2015, Agadez has caught the eye of European decision-makers due to its status as sub-Saharan Africa's hub for irregular migration to the north (Raineri 2018a; Carayol 2019). According to estimates, 30 per cent of migrants passing through the region's desert end up on a boat to Europe (Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen 2017). At the peak of the crisis, nearly half of those who arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa had travelled via Agadez; more than 250,000 migrants allegedly passed through the region in 2016 alone (Tinti and Westcott 2016).

Since 2015, Niger has therefore been the target of a number of external policies to curb migration, with the EU and its member states steering the efforts. The EU's approach has focused on the externalisation of border management, which in essence is about influencing migration from – and the migration policies of – non-EU countries, particularly those located on key transport and migration routes (Reslow 2019). Most notably, the EU pressured the Nigerien government to adopt Law 36-2015, making it the first African country to pass a law on migrant smuggling (Massalaki 2015). Similarly, the mandate and resources of EUCAP Sahel Niger were adapted to help Nigerien security forces control irregular migration flows better (Raineri 2018a, 65). While Nigerien officials do emphasise that the law was in their own interest amidst a fast-evolving security environment,[17] it is questionable whether they were fully aware of its unintended consequences in the region.[18]

The securitisation of migration and subsequent policies has indeed disrupted livelihoods in a region in which sources of income and opportunities for employment are few.[19] Agriculture and pastoralism – another crucial source of jobs and wealth – are also facing increasing problems due to the strengthened border management: climate change and rain variability make agricultural output unpredictable at a time when seasonal migration, which used to be a safety valve in case of bad crops, is becoming increasingly difficult.[20]

According to a 2014 survey, open borders are a key priority in dealing with what is perceived to be the leading existential threat – poverty (Danish Demining Group 2014). For this reason, earlier local administrative reforms had attempted to ease border formalities as a way to promote legality.[21] The sudden implementation of Law 36-2015 caught local communities by surprise and resulted in much frustration.[22] The alternative job opportunities promised by Law 36-2015 for those involved in the migration business have also failed to materialise. So far, there has been only limited training for jobs for which there is no demand.[23] Moreover, many find the law discriminatory, as it is applied only in the Agadez region.[24] The result of these dynamics is that people are increasingly attracted by easy money ("*l'argent facile*"), which has led to increased recruitment to other forms of organised crime.[25] Consequently, unemployment, trafficking and banditry are on the rise:[26]

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[17]Interview with high-ranking government officials, Niamey, 6 and 16 November 2018.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Interviews with civil society representative, Agadez, 11 November 2018; migrant smuggler, Niamey, 6 November 2019; Nigerian human trafficker, Agadez, 7 November 2019.
[20]Interview with elected official, Agadez, 11 November 2018.
[21]Interview with high-ranking state official, Niamey, 7 November 2018.
[22]Interview with elected official, Agadez, 10 November 2018.
[23]Interviews with elected official, Agadez, 10 November 2018; elected official, Agadez, 7 November 2019; traditional leader, Agadez, 9 November 2018.
[24]Interview with traditional leader, Agadez, 9 November 2018.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Interview with elected official, Agadez, 10 November 2018.

> Migration will never end. Now it is relatively calm, because people have been told the EU will provide an alternative. But it will restart soon unless a solution is found immediately. Otherwise, people will turn to banditry, and from there it is just one step to radicalisation.[27]

The top-down implementation of the law has also undermined state legitimacy in Agadez, fuelling resentment against the government and its external partners.[28] Niamey is also criticised for allegedly widespread corruption, abuses and systematic extortion of migrants by Nigerien security forces.[29] For local politicians, speaking out against the government in Niamey has become a source of political legitimacy and popularity in the region.[30] In a nutshell, these developments, which EU officials claim Brussels has failed to recognise as consequences of Law 36-2015,[31] have contributed to rising tensions in the fragile and conflict-prone country.

Two divergent security complexes – and how to bridge the gap

Our interviews with actors of, and stakeholders in, the people-centric and the state-centric security complex indicate that perceptions of security and insecurity lie at the heart of the divergence between these complexes. This is particularly evident when it comes to the understanding of migration, as external migration policies such as those of the EU have had a negative impact on the livelihoods of border communities and contributed to rising tensions. This is not as clear in the case of violent extremism, although our interviewees emphasise that current counterterrorism strategies fail to address the underlying causes of radicalisation and that the subsequent path to political violence remains unchecked as insecurities and needs are not being adequately addressed. Furthermore, the militarised and security-oriented approach to violent extremism has indirectly (and unintentionally) contributed to exacerbating local conflicts in the Central Sahel.

On the security side, the responsibility lies first and foremost with those committing violent acts – violent entrepreneurs, those who exploit the vulnerable and those involved in organised crime. There is indeed a risk of idealising everything local, thus underestimating the physical threat to civilians. Here, we are neither implying that military means should not be used at all to counter violent extremism – indeed they are necessary but not sufficient (Assanvo *et al.* 2019); nor are we disputing the self-interest of the external parties, as states and non-state actors clearly have strategic interests of their own, encompassing political, economic and security dimensions. Furthermore, it is also understandable that enhanced border management is deemed a necessary countermeasure to cross-border threats. However, other approaches might be more effective in avoiding state collapse. The problem is the plethora of simultaneous challenges against which too little has been done so far. Sahelian states must deal with these challenges and cater to basic needs such as security, law and order, employment. Nevertheless, the challenges are regional (in the case of climate change, global) and the region's states

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[27]Interview with elected official, Agadez, 12 November 2018.
[28]Ibid. Interview with government official, Bamako, 14 November 2019.
[29]Interviews with civil society representative, Niamey, 22 November 2018; humanitarian aid worker, Niamey, 22 November 2018. See also Raineri (2018a).
[30]Interview with elected official, Agadez, 11 November 2018.
[31]Interview with EU official, Niamey, 21 November 2018.

have too little capacity. To be sure, the efforts of external actors represent only "a drop in the bucket". One should, however, expect the situation to improve given the amount of resources devoted to the region.

A hard security approach carries the risk of making the situation worse for the most vulnerable because it is not possible to distinguish between violent entrepreneurs, pure criminals and profiteers (some of whom fund resistance activities) on the one hand, and those who are involved in illicit activities simply to survive and cope with harsh and changing conditions on the other. Indeed, "an attempt to interdict all smuggling in such a region has the serious consequence of depriving many non-terrorists of their livelihood" (Ellis 2004, quoted in UNECA 2017, 81). Although violent extremism and irregular migration are interconnected, it is not transborder mobility as such, but rather its exploitation by violent entrepreneurs and other criminals, that poses the main threat to the countries' border security.[32]

In terms of explanatory value, we argue that the notion of divergent security complexes unpacks and points to different understandings and priorities in dealing with the same phenomena. In particular, it alludes to an important paradox:

> The very coping strategies and remedies that provide resilience to the populations as they seek to overcome these threats are those considered by state actors as major threats to the state and resisted by military approaches. By extension, the porous borders, which are a source of resilience to the people as they seek various coping mechanisms across borders in the bid to overcome their insecurities, are also the very source of threat to Sahelian States (UNECA 2017, xi).

Depriving people of their livelihood does the opposite of addressing the root causes of what is perceived by the states as irregular migration, although fewer people are arriving on European shores. The EU's external migration policies towards Niger are indeed largely disconnected from the realities of Sahelian peoples seeking to address a range of other existential threats (UNECA 2017, 82), which is a clear indicator of divergent security complexes on the issue of migration. In the case of violent extremism, current strategies also fail to adequately address local grievances, in addition to unintentionally fuelling them by contributing to state repression and, hence, growing anti-state and anti-Western sentiments.

Furthermore, while regional security responses may prevent state collapse in the short term, the divergence in the two outlined security complexes may contribute to undermining sustainable processes of stabilisation and developmental state-building. To reduce this divergence, international intervention and assistance must be grounded in an understanding of the contextual history and the ways in which these states function (Bøås 2018). In particular, the combined effect of the disempowerment of local authorities and the presence of large areas beyond state control and reach in many of the Sahelian states makes it crucial to improve dialogue with local communities.[33] Sustainable plans can only be developed together *with* those affected – not *for* them.[34] Injecting a human security dimension into (in)security and the state-centric regional security complex would lead to a more grounded understanding. However, there are reasons to believe that there is an

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[32]Interview with Nigerien border control officer, Niamey, 22 November 2018.
[33]Interview with independent consultant, Dakar, 5 March 2020.
[34]Interview with academic, Dakar, 3 March 2020.

embedded resistance to expanding the notion of security, in particular from the military.[35] This is in itself somewhat of a paradox since armed forces personnel are often the first to acknowledge that the solution usually cannot be military alone.[36]

Talking about the myriad of international initiatives in the Sahel, one informant stated that "who does what" is "the million-dollar question", especially in the field of security.[37] Can a lack of coordination between the Sahelian states and their external partners serve as an additional explanation for the deteriorating security situation? Judging by the sheer number of coordination mechanisms and bodies, one would think not; in fact, the initiatives mentioned above are only the most prominent ones. The UN alone has more than 20 different strategies for the Sahel,[38] to which must be added the bilateral initiatives to coordinate domestic efforts towards each of the Sahelian states, often led by a special coordinator. There is thus no guarantee that more actors, mechanisms and initiatives will lead to more coordinated efforts on the ground, especially as it is almost impossible to avoid duplication. What is needed is *better* coordination, combined with an explicit focus on the fragility dilemma and thus on narrowing the gap between the different security complexes.

A promising approach in this regard is the so-called Localisation Strategy (LS), developed by Pierre Dehaene (2019) and implemented by the Belgian Special Forces in Niger. The strategy is tailored to the local context of fragile states; it starts from the need to build trust, empowering the local people and enhancing the social fabric in order to strengthen resilience and avoid unintended consequences of external assistance.[39] One example of this approach is reliance on local manufactures, rather than imports, for the provision of non-lethal military equipment.[40] Coordination is a challenge since many different foreign partners want to contribute to military capacity-building; to this end, an informal "fusion cell" has been created to foster coordination and harmonisation of practices and doctrines between Niger's main partners.[41] Another promising approach, according to representatives of Sahelian states, external states and international organisations, is the aforementioned MNJTF.[42] The MNJTF approach has placed emphasis on exploring the threats experienced by the population and bridging the link between humanitarian, security and development actors.[43] However, the success of MNJTF depends on the perspective taken: on the one hand, it managed to suppress *Boko Haram*; but on the other, it led to the creation of a splinter group – the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Zenn 2020b) – which until recently has had a more sophisticated approach than *Boko Haram*, trying to win over the civilian population and mainly attacking military personnel (The Soufan Center 2019).

This analysis has pointed to several unintended consequences of the divergence between regional and transnational security complexes, to which external actors' primary

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[35]Interviews with Sahelian military staff and military staff belonging to international assistance forces in Central Sahel, Dakar, 2-6 March 2020.
[36]Interviews with international civil servants working on the Sahel, Dakar, 2-6 March 2020.
[37]Interview with EUCAP Sahel Mali staff, Bamako, 13 November 2019.
[38]Interview with UN representative working on the Sahel, Dakar, 5 March 2020.
[39]Interview with Belgian Special Forces, Niamey, 4 November 2020.
[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid.
[42]This was mentioned by several informants in a sub-regional meeting on multilateral cooperation to address climate-related security and development risks with a focus on the Sahel, held 3-4 March 2020 in Dakar, Senegal. Due to Chatham House rules, none are quoted.
[43]Interview with MNJTF staff, Dakar, 5 March 2020.

aim of fighting terrorism and irregular migration has contributed. These include: the appropriation of local grievances by insurgencies, including the lack of governance structures and the growing resentment towards Sahelian states and their external partners (which lead to further violence through militia proliferation); the strengthening of incumbent regimes – instead of states – by prioritising security over developmental state-building (resulting in increased state atrocities against civilians); and the disruption of human migratory patterns stretching across national borders (which adversely affects human security through loss of migration-generated income). Consequently, those affected may join armed groups or engage in other illicit activities because there are no real alternatives. These developments have unintentionally undermined core elements of human security and in effect contributed to rising tensions in the region, which is in line with the two interconnected ways the fragility dilemma manifests itself.

Conclusion

The combination of the daunting challenges facing people and their states in the Sahel, the transnational nature of these challenges and related risks, the lack of resources and capacity within the Sahelian states make it clear that regional responses are necessary. It also highlights that external assistance is essential. However, with their own interests at stake, donors seem to tolerate and support regimes that fail to comply with basic principles of good governance and development. The strategies implemented by Sahelian states to deal with these challenges have become increasingly violent, in conjunction with the resources made available by donors. Hence, as regional security responses are co-opted by state actors' interests (though they do overlap in some cases), they could contribute to strengthening illiberal regimes, rather than building effective states. This fragility dilemma raises important questions regarding the interplay between aid delivery and state-building in fragile states, particularly those perceived as a producer of regional and global security threats. While external intervention and support – be it developmental or in the security sector – constitute a power projection by external actors, in the cases of highly corrupt, illegitimate regimes, this might have severe unintended consequences for the population at large in the longer term. More research is therefore needed on the 'black box' of governance in fragile states and the unintended consequences of international intervention and power projection in such complex environments.

When trying to improve the security situation while avoiding the unintended consequences of these efforts, understanding the differences between what constitutes an existential threat for the state and external actors on the one hand and the people on the other, is part of the challenge. While external actors perceive both irregular migration and violent extremism as existential threats, people perceive migration as an integral part of their livelihood that contributes to their resilience to new security threats. The latter encompass those pertaining to climate change, which functions as a risk multiplier, making areas in the Sahel unlivable and further increasing competition over water and land. Against this backdrop, the securitisation of the Sahel has led to an overshadowing of human security, and thus to an increasing divergence between the state-centric and the people-centric security complexes. Or, put differently, the stabilisation strategies are undermining coping mechanisms and, by extension, Sahelian resilience. While improving security conditions in Sahelian states is imperative, it cannot be achieved without bridging this gap. As long as

regional security responses are not fine-tuned to improving living conditions, they will fail to prevent the further appropriation of local grievances by jihadist insurgents. To this end, military means are necessary, but far from sufficient.

Acknowledgments

Notes on contributors

Kari M. Osland is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway, where she heads the Peace, Conflict and Development Research Group.

Henriette Ullavik Erstad is a Research Fellow in the Peace, Conflict and Development Research Group at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway. Email: henrietteue@nupi.no Twitter: @Henriette_UE

ORCID

Kari M. Osland 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2733-1574
Henriette U. Erstad 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0100-9467

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