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EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger?

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ABSTRACT

The policies implemented in the Sahel by the EU and individual member states have reduced the number of migrants transiting through the region towards Europe. However, the sustainability of this approach should be questioned as it may also increase domestic tensions in politically fragile and administratively weak states, leading to increased pressure on political and social systems that already are struggling to stay afloat. Thus, whereas making a country like Niger an integral part of European migration management may seem successful, the approach of the EU may also have several unintended consequences. This paper will critically examine the EU's crisis response towards the Sahel with a particular focus on Niger and the city of Agadez, arguing that while EU's approach may have reduced the number of migrants passing through Agadez, it could also come to undermine a number of local compromises that so far have helped Niger display higher resilience towards the crises that are quickly destabilising neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali.

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Introduction

Prior to the concern of the European Union (EU) with so-called fragile states as a source of migration to Europe and security threats such as transnational crime and jihadi-inspired insurgencies, the EU did not pay much attention to the Sahel. Mainly, the EU's relation to the region was defined as a traditional donor–recipient relationship. Politically, the Sahel was mainly seen as a neighbouring area to Europe that could be left to France, the former colonial power, to sort out if needed. This has changed as new European security concerns have pushed the Sahel to the very top of the EU's foreign agenda and caused a huge shift in the engagement of the EU and its member states in the region (Stambøl 2019). What this new relationship between the EU and the Sahel illustrates is therefore how security concerns also determine the formulation and implementation of other parts of EU foreign policy, development assistance included (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019).

The argument is not that concerns about large-scale migration in the EU's relationship with the Sahel are completely new. They are not. It had already begun more modestly with the Cotonou process of 2000. In Mali, migration management issues have been part of the country's relationship with the EU since 2006 (see Lebovich 2018), and Mauritania also

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received considerable attention from the EU, led by Spain between 2006 and 2009 as migrants travelled in small boats from Mauritania to the Canary Islands (see Fuchs 2006). Thus, migration is not a new phenomenon, nor are external attempts at migration management in the Sahel. What is new is the number of migrants transiting and the changes that this brought about in EU policies.

This process started to take a more systematic form already in 2011 with the publication of the *EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel* (European Union 2011), which pioneered the EU's 'comprehensive approach' to development and security. The conflict that erupted in Mali in 2012 pushed the issue of the Sahel further up on the EU agenda, and the migration crisis of 2014–2015 propelled the Sahel even higher on the EU foreign policy agenda (Bøås 2018). Current EU programming in the Sahel is therefore an illustration of a trend where the EU increasingly tries to tackle immediate security threats rather than focusing on longer term solutions such as developmental state-building, the key to which is administrative capacity-building through extensive local ownership. This is a trend in which the EU shows more 'realist' than 'normative' tendencies, placing priorities on immediate European security concerns (Bøås and Rieker 2019). The argument is not that development-related activities have vanished from EU programming in the Sahel – they have not. The EU is still the largest provider of development and humanitarian assistance to the Sahel. However, what has happened is that a new focus on the security–migration nexus is emerging as the main frame for the EU's policy engagement in the region. Thus, whereas development programming and humanitarian assistance continue, what frames the EU–Sahel relationship in political terms is a much narrower security agenda. This is evident when we review the new EU security-related programmes in the region.

This has consequences for the EU (see Stambøl 2019; Bøås and Rieker 2019) and for the countries in the Sahel that are confronted by an EU that to a larger extent than previously is pushing a new architecture of migration management as the main issue in its relationship with the states of the Sahel. This is well argued and illustrated by scholars such as Brachet (2018), Cassarino (2018), Lebovich (2018) and Frowd (2020), who have, through detailed empirical analyses, improved our understanding of the changes taking place and how they have affected the relationship between the EU and the countries in the Sahel. However, what has happened and still happens not only has important ramifications for the EU and its external relations with the states of the Sahel. This process could also have huge implications on the ground in the politically fragile and administratively weak states in the region. As Julien Brachet (2018) has shown, the transport of migrants has been intimately connected to local economies and livelihoods, and disrupting this economic activity will have consequences for local populations and may also transform informal migration-facilitating activities to full-blown transnational crime. Thus, using Niger as the case, the question asked in this paper is what happens when migration becomes securitised in a country whose relative stability is based on a fine-grained compromise carefully constructed between the elite of the political centre (in this case Niamey) and the peripheral elite (here, of the town and region of Agadez – previously a main centre for transit migration). Drawing on Raineri's (2018) argument about 'state-sponsored protection rackets' of human smugglers, this article offers a view from below, illuminating how inhabitants and migrants view the new policies of the EU that have forced the Nigerien state to resort to a much more heavy handed approach to migration management to satisfy the demands of the EU. What are the views on the ground and what are the consequences for political stability in Niger? Are the

'state-sponsored protection rackets' identified by Raineri (2018) still so solid that they keep the local elite of Agadez in line with the priorities set out by the government in Niamey? The empirical basis of this article is fieldwork conducted in Mali and Niger in November 2018 and November 2019, including interviews with national policymakers and external donors in Bamako and Niamey, and a number of in-depth interviews with local inhabitants, journalists, government representatives and people involved in migration (smugglers and migrants) in Agadez.

Local consequences of migration management

What this article will illustrate is how EU policy decisions taken to create a new security architecture for migration management in the Sahel have made a poor and weak state such as Niger an agent of the externalised European border. In light of this new approach by the EU, there has been a swift implementation of new policies and programmes and a redefinition of existing ones, with a focus on security-sector reform and border management. Consequently, administratively weak and politically fragile states of the Sahel suddenly find themselves navigating an increasingly chaotic myriad of international assistance programmes and military interventions. In this quagmire, neither donors nor the recipient countries have the experience or know-how to manoeuvre the new 'security-development' architecture, and still little is known about the (un)intended consequences that this 'blizzard' of new policies and programmes will have on the ground in some of the world's most weak and fragile states. Together, all these new initiatives constitute a governance architecture for migration management that effectively blurs the lines between development assistance and migration control as well as whose interests this serves. While this approach clearly has reduced the number of migrants and refugees transiting through Agadez towards Europe, it may also lead to increased pressure on political, economic and social systems that already are struggling to stay afloat. Ultimately, this may result in more conflict, radicalisation and eventually also more refugees. This paper will therefore show why and how the building of a 'Fortress Europe' in the Sahel, with extended border control deep into the desert, could turn out to have severe negative consequences for both the Sahel and Europe.

To achieve this, the paper will first offer a brief overview of the crisis in the Sahel and the patterns of transit migration. This will be followed by an examination of key EU programmes and how they have been redirected towards migration control. This review is necessary as it shows that what informs the new relationship between the EU and the Sahel is not the traditional development agenda, but an approach that signals a more 'realist' approach to the region by the EU. Thereafter, the paper will bring to the fore a convoluted case study of Niger and the city of Agadez: an ancient desert town that for a while became the migrant transit capital of the Sahel. It is estimated that 50% of the migrants who reached Lampedusa (Italy) in 2016 had travelled through Agadez (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Molenaar and van Damme 2017; Raineri 2018).

Current calculations on the number of migrants and refugees travelling through the Central Mediterranean Route suggest that the EU's approach to the 'transit-migrant hub' of Agadez has significantly reduced the number of migrants and refugees passing through this town. However, as the analysis will show, the EU's approach could also be undermining a number of local compromises that have helped Niger achieve a high degree of resilience towards the political crises that have destabilised neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali. If

this is the case, it will not only be very harmful to the population of Niger but will also leave the EU with yet another collapsing state in its extended neighbourhood. If this happens, it will also have an obvious impact on future migration trends, figures and routes.

Before I proceed to the analysis, a short note on terminology is needed. First, the people who have travelled through and continue to travel through Agadez in the hope of reaching Europe are a very diverse group. Some are seeking refuge from war and conflict in their place of origin, and many of these would qualify for refugee status if they reached Europe; while others are not necessarily in need of protection, but have lived a life where the prospects of social mobility seemed minimal, and they have therefore embarked on a journey that most of them know is dangerous, difficult and costly. The people in this latter group are often referred to as economic migrants. This is an important distinction, but as the purpose of this article is neither to assign labels nor to discuss who qualifies as a refugee and who does not, the neutral term 'migrant' is used throughout this article to refer to the people who travel through Agadez towards Europe. Concerning the states of the Sahel and Niger in particular, this article uses the terms 'administratively weak' and 'politically fragile'. The former signals a state with a low level of state capacity to care for its population or to respond to internal and external shocks (even if it wants to). The latter means that these are unsettled states where the very composition of the polity still is an issue, the social contract is very weak, and questions concerning social, economic and religious issues can easily lead to political fragmentation (Bøås and Dunn 2013). This is neither well understood nor sufficiently recognised by the international donor community – the EU included – that tends to treat the politically fragile states of the Sahel as merely other, but weaker, versions of the European ideal-type of a Weberian state (Eriksen 2011). Niger as a state is stronger than neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, but the centre of power in the circle around President Issoufou and Minister of the Interior Bazoum is based on patronage politics. Their ability to rule and control requires them to fulfil the expected vertical distribution of resources through patron–client relationships or to allow political clients to participate in and endorse frontier zone activities as the state-sponsored protection rackets that Raineri (2018) identified in Agadez. Extraction may be a motive, but equally important is to ensure regime survival through carefully constructed coalition-building with local strongmen, that keeps them within the state (see also Bøås and Dunn 2017). This means that from a 'do no harm' perspective, donors should mainstream context and conflict sensitivity into their programming. Current EU concerns about making Sahel states integral actors in European migrant management deep into the Sahel could easily jeopardise this as doing so could set in motion a dynamic where governing regimes are no longer able to maintain a ruling coalition. The result in Niger could easily become one where Niamey's monopolisation of systems of governance rapidly deteriorates, as it is challenged by alternative and armed networks of authority led by local and regional Big Men (see also Utas 2012).

The Sahel crisis and migration and refugees

The Sahel presents Europe and the international community with a range of serious challenges – fragile states, poverty, refugees and migrants, transnational organised crime and jihadist insurgencies. Initially, this was most evident in Mali. Here, the conflict that erupted in 2012 led to military interventions by France (first Operation Serval and later Operation Barkhane), the African Union (AFISMA), and the United Nations (MINUSMA). These

interventions are also supported by the deployment of an EU police and rule of law mission (EUCAP Sahel), and by an EU military training mission in Mali (EUTM). EUCAP Sahel alone will spend over €130 million in Mali and Niger between 2018 and 2021 (European Commission 2019; EUCAP Sahel Niger 2019).

Despite all these efforts and the signing of a Peace Agreement for Mali in Algiers in 2015, the situation on the ground has gone from bad to worse. The conflict has spilled over from northern Mali to the centre of the country and also from the central parts of Mali over the border to Burkina Faso (Sangary 2016; Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). Consequently, the EU and other concerned members of the international community fear a further spill-over to other neighbouring countries. This is evident in Niger where the US is building a major drone base in Agadez and has deployed about 800 Special Forces soldiers on the ground (Penny 2018). EU programming is also rapidly increasing in Niger. Italy is present with approximately 470 soldiers. There are German troops in Niger, and even Norway recently announced that it has entered into an agreement with the state of Niger about military training missions and has sent a few soldiers to assist with the training of the Niger army (Bøås 2019).

There may be good reasons to increase the military assistance to Mali, Niger and other states in the Sahel. Nonetheless, the question we should ask is not only what external actors believe that these countries need, but also what the balance should be between the priorities of external stakeholders like the EU, and, on the other side, what is most important for the people who live in this area of the world. Europe wants fewer northbound migrants and refugees, and the elimination of what Europe understand as a potential global terrorist threat, but these may not necessarily be the main priorities of the inhabitants of the Sahel. Their concern is more intimately tied to local living conditions, which have come under immense pressure lately, whereas external interventions increasingly have taken a narrow security-first approach (Bøås 2018). This is problematic, as what is currently taking place in the Sahel is a multi-dimensional crisis that cannot easily be reduced to migrants, refugees and jihadi-inspired terrorist groups.

Mali is the epicentre of the crisis, and the situation is not yet as dire in other parts of the Sahel, but all states in this region suffer from varying degrees of political fragility and weak state capacity. Individually, none of them can respond adequately to the livelihood challenges their populations are currently facing. The situation in the central region of Mali clearly illuminates this, and the inability of both the Malian state and its main external stakeholders (e.g. the EU, France and the United Nations [UN]) to adequately deal with this has caused spill-over effects for Burkina Faso and Niger.

Once a commercial hub in the region, the region of Mopti in Central Mali is currently undergoing an economic downturn. Climatic variability impacts the productive yields of the region, as irregular rainfall and the low flooding of the Niger River reduce the area of cultivable land and agricultural production, making households vulnerable to food insecurity. Pastoralist communities have become increasingly fragile after successive droughts and poor harvest led to significant reductions in herd sizes. The livestock sector has also been hit by reduced demand and plummeting livestock prices across West African markets. Resource and rights-based conflicts in the inner delta along the Niger River in the Mopti region are not a new phenomenon, but conflicts over disputed access to and control over land and water resources are increasing (see Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019).

This has opened new spaces for violent Islamic insurgencies and transnational organised crime. In peripheral areas of the Sahel such as northern and central Mali, a void has emerged that neither the Malian state nor the international community has been able to adequately address. This is exacerbated by the multi-dimensional nature of the crisis of the Sahel: it is about conflict and chronic violence, but it is also a humanitarian crisis caused by a combination of weak statehood and stalled development, and its consequences are human displacement and large-scale transit migration. The multi-dimensional features of the crisis present the EU and the international community with huge challenges, as the very weakness of the state in the Sahel means that they lack the institutional response capacity needed to make conventional large-scale external crisis response effective (Bøås 2017).

Irregular migration from Africa through the Sahel towards Europe is not new. This has been taking place for decades, and the numbers of people transiting have waxed and waned in waves. What is new was the immense increase in the number of crossings in 2015 and 2016 through the Central Mediterranean Route: the route that connects Sahel and North Africa to Italy. According to Frontex (2017), the total number of migrants and refugees arriving on Italian shores and ports was about 40,000 in 2013, whereas this figure climbed sharply to approximately 154,000 in 2015 and peaked at over 181,000 in 2016. For most of the people who travelled the Central Mediterranean Route, Niger and Mali were the preferred transit countries. The reason for this is that many of these migrants originate from other member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and as part of the ECOWAS Treaty, citizens of member countries have the right of passage in all ECOWAS states. Thus, these citizens should be free to move all the way to the borders of Algeria and Libya. As will be shown in the case of Niger, this is a right that the EU in effect has tried to undermine.

Thus, as the EU at least temporarily had succeeded in shutting down the Eastern Mediterranean Route through the agreement with Turkey, the EU started to search for innovative ways in which new as well as existing policies and programmes could be utilised to achieve a similar sharp reduction in arrivals to Europe along the Central Mediterranean Route. The answer the EU found was EUCAP Sahel, the European Trust Fund for Africa, and similar programmes that either already had a focus on security-sector reform and improved border management or could be redefined for such a purpose. These programmes did not replace existing, more traditional EU programming in development and humanitarian assistance, but they were placed on top of them and have become the political framework for EU involvement in the Sahel.

EU programmes and policies in the Sahel: from good intentions to Europe first?

Security-sector reform constitutes the core of EU's efforts to protect and restore state authority and improve border management in the Sahel. While the EU, along with other development assistance partners, has been present in the Sahel for a long time, the new programmes that this article is concerned with have a much stronger emphasis on the security sector and improved border management than previous programmes did, thus making these programmes key components of the EU's new migration management efforts in the Sahel – an approach that clearly indicates a new direction in EU foreign policy where the idea of Europe as a normative power is much less visible than European interests in improved border management in the Sahel – a concept that for all practical purposes

translates to preventing migration to Europe through improved border control by the states in the Sahel.

The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa

According to the EU, the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa reflects the historical and comprehensive partnership between the EU and Africa. Established at the Valetta Summit on Migration in November 2015, the objective of the EUTF for Africa (2019) is to foster stability by addressing root causes of conflict, forced displacement and irregular migration, and thereby to contribute to better migration management. Currently, the EUTF for Africa is valued at over €4.5 billion, with almost 90% of the contributions coming from the EU, while the rest comes from member states of the EU and other donors (Stambøl 2019). Two hundred and ten actions have been approved in the three regions of Africa where the Fund operates – the Horn of Africa, with €1406.1 million; North Africa, with €659.2 million; and the Sahel/Lake Chad, with €1953.2 million. The EUTF is therefore not a mission like EUCAP and EUTM, which are part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), but a fund that operates through other programmes.

In the Sahel, the EU perceives the 'problem of porous borders' to be one of the key challenges. The EU is therefore involved in several projects with border mandates and components. In interviews, officials with the EU delegations in Mali and Niger stated that one of the most significant changes to their work is that borders and border management have become one of their main targets, as have supporting the Ministry of Interior and working with police, things they never did before (see Cissé et al. 2017). This also means equipping the EU delegation with new expertise and staff in areas not traditionally pertaining to the foreign policy sphere. The EUTF is therefore a tool for EU headquarters as well as at the delegation level, which has the mainstreaming of migration management in all EU external action as its core objective. While the EU's border control activities are mostly security focussed, they also sometimes include components which aim at local development particularly in (remote) border areas.

Examples include Programme d'Appui au renforcement de la Sécurité (PARSEC), an EUTF programme (€29 million). It is funded by EUTF but implemented by Expertise France, a French agency. This is the common way in which most of these programmes are executed on the ground. The main aim is to improve security and border management in the Mopti and Gao regions. However, so far, PARSEC has only focused on Mopti and the border to Burkina Faso. This programme is working in co-ordination with EUCAP Mali and EUTM, but is also operating as a supporting component of a larger Malian government plan to increase the presence of state forces in the region and support local governors' capacity to protect and administer security. PARSEC also rehabilitates and equips border posts (such as the one in Koro). Equipping border posts normally means, among other things, installing the International Organization for Migration (IOM)-developed Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) software (which links to the Interpol database and has the possibility to include biometric data collection) as well as solar panels to ensure there is electricity so these technologies can function. PARSEC objectives also include setting up a fluvial brigade, maintenance of vehicles, communication and a multi-force co-ordination crisis room. These activities may be much needed, but the question can also be asked how much of this really has to do

with the root causes of instability, conflict and migration. This is, for all practical purposes, migration management through improved border control.

Another example of this trend is Groupes d'Action Rapides - Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel (GAR-SI). This is a regional EUTF project (worth €41.6 million) with planned implementation in all G5-Sahel countries. It is not a border control project *per se*; rather, this project aims to train specialised counterterrorist units (also responsible for stopping transnational organised crime) within the G5-Sahel countries' gendarmeries, which will co-operate with one another across borders and control border areas. The units will be mobile, flexible and 'autonomous', able to control territory as well as having the power of judicial police to arrest perceived criminals. This may sound like an efficient way of bringing the state back to peripheral border regions. However, as GAR-SI units are supposed to set up checkpoints and control people travelling along the Mali–Burkina Faso border, local populations that depend on crossing this border regularly for livelihood purposes may not only see this as an attempt by the Malian state and its external supporters to make their lives even more difficult, but also detest it as another way that state officials can make money at their expense. As administratively weak as the Malian state is, the GAR-SI trained units will not be under much surveillance, meaning that they could easily engage in petty corruption as well as other money-making schemes along the border. In this regard, it is interesting to note that when the author and colleagues, in a meeting with EUCAP Mali in Bamako in October 2018, asked EUCAP Sahel Mali officials whether they had reflected on how local populations along the border would interpret the new policy of improved border management, we were met with bewilderment. The thinking seems to be both that what is good for Europe – improved border management – must also be good for local populations, and that what works in Europe (GAR-SI is based on a Spanish module) should also work in the Sahel. This seriously calls into question the context and conflict sensitivity that EU policies and programming in the Sahel supposedly have (Bøås and Rieker 2019).

G5 Sahel

The precarious security situation in the Sahel is further exacerbated by the almost total absence of any functional regional arrangement that covers all the core Sahel countries. In contrast to the regional war zone that developed in the Mano River Basin in the late 1990s, the Sahel has no clear regional body (ECOWAS), or an obvious regional hegemon (Nigeria). The few regional bodies and communities that exist either are dysfunctional or are severely hampered, in their ability to execute policy, by the old rivalry between Algeria and Morocco (Bøås 2018). This situation is not likely to change any time soon.

This is the main reason why France, Germany and the EU are placing considerable emphasis on a new regional arrangement, the G5 Sahel. This new regional body, created in 2014 by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, will formally work to strengthen regional co-operation on security and development, aiming to identify common projects that focus on infrastructure, food security, agriculture and pastoralism, and national security – important issues that host some of the root causes of conflict in the region.

External stakeholders in search of a regional framework have expressed considerable interest in the G5 Sahel initiative, and it could become a new functional framework for security and development co-operation in the Sahel. However, if this is to take place, external

stakeholders such as the EU need to realise that a regional arrangement is rarely more than the sum of the member states; and the member states in question here are all relatively weak. Thus, alongside institutional support for the G5 Sahel, state capacity must also be strengthened in the member countries. This is not impossible, but it will be a slow and difficult process, with several setbacks likely. This is evident from the EU and international community engagement in Mali since 2013.

The danger, however, is not only that this process will be rushed by external stakeholders (who want to see swift results on the ground), but also that too much emphasis will be placed on narrow security parameters and far too little on the development parts of the G5 Sahel agenda. The EU seems particularly interested in the development of a police component within the planned G5 military force (Stambøl 2019). Thus, external stakeholders like the EU – who will have to bear most of the cost – are mainly interested in the G5 Sahel as an arrangement to get more ‘boots on the ground’. And these ‘boots’ will be directed mainly towards the external priorities of improved border control, to reduce northbound migration flows and combat those defined (by the same external stakeholders) as jihadist terrorists – and thus a threat to global security. That would further contribute to turning the Sahel into yet another front in the global war on terror.

It is in the light of such priorities that we should interpret the pledge of half a billion dollars for a G5 Sahel military force. As Reuters (see Carbone and Emmott 2018) reported from the meeting that took place in Brussels on 23 February 2018: ‘The European Union, which believes training local forces will allow it to avoid risking the lives of its own combat troops, doubled its contribution to 116 million Euros’. There is therefore every reason to be concerned that if this goes through, the G5 Sahel contribution will be framed by the same narrow security parameters as other ongoing EU and international community initiatives, at the expense of the development agenda of the G5 Sahel, which at least contains some promise of tackling the real root causes of turmoil in the Sahel. The EU pledge of support for the Sahel is thus in fact a pledge of support for European political stability, and not necessarily for sustainable investment in a peace, reconciliation and development agenda for the Sahel.

EUCAP Sahel

The EUCAP Sahel is an EU civilian mission operating under the CSDP. It is based on national chapters. EUCAP Sahel Niger was launched in 2012, aiming to support Nigerien Security Forces and to strengthen their capacities through training, strategic advice and equipment (EUCAP Sahel Niger 2019). Since 2016, its mandate has increasingly been tuned to improved border management, the objective being to support ‘Niger to better manage and control irregular migration flows and to fight smugglers and traffickers taking advantage of people in despair [...] as these threats endanger both local populations and European citizens’ (EUCAP Sahel Niger 2019, 1). However, as we will see in the next section of this paper, it is not necessarily the case that the citizens of Niger, and particularly those living in a transit hub such as Agadez, share the view of the EU that defines irregular migration through Niger as threat to the citizens of this country. Nonetheless, based in Niger’s capital, Niamey, EUCAP Sahel Niger has since 2016 had a permanent field office in Agadez to implement its mandate in this part of Niger. As part of this mandate, EUCAP Sahel Niger also supports Niger to establish a mobile border control unit. According to the EU mission, this will improve the fight against security threats in instable border regions such as Agadez. The question is whose security the EU really is

concerned with: those who live in the border regions, or the security of liberal European regimes that came under pressure from right-wing parties due to the inability of European governments to manage the refugees and migrants that poured into Europe in 2014 and 2015?

EUCAP Sahel Mali is of more recent origin. It was established after the crisis in Mali escalated in 2012, coming into existence in January 2015 with, like EUTM, a mandate to support the restoration of state authority in Mali (EUCAP 2018). To do so, EUCAP provides ‘assistance and advice to the national police, the national Gendarmerie and the national guard in the implementation of the security reform set out by the new government’ (EUCAP 2018). It has, as of October 2017, trained around 3400 officers in, amongst other things, command structure, professional methods, human rights and gender issues (EUCAP 2017). Its mandate was renewed in January 2017 until January 2019, with a budget of 29.7 million EUR for the first year of operations (EUCAP Sahel Niger 2019). In its second mandate, there is a greater emphasis on Mali’s counterterrorism services and, most relevant to this article, support to Malian authorities concerning irregular migration, including trafficking, as well as border control (EUCAP 2017). Thus, the same trend is obvious in the case of Mali: a multi-dimensional crisis is reduced to narrow security concerns, more aligned to short-term European needs than aiming for a long-term, sustainable solution to the crisis in the Sahel.

EUTM

The EUTM was established by the EU member states in February 2013, in the context of a request from the Malian government and based on UN Security Council Resolution 2085 (UNSC 2012). Its stated objective is to support Mali’s Armed Forces (FAMA) in restoring state authority throughout its territory. To do so, it seeks to enhance the leadership of FAMA by providing ‘legal and leadership skills education as well as ... tactical and strategic education, [the] training planning process, basic military principles and International Humanitarian Law’ (European External Action Service 2016). The EUTM consists of 575 servicemen, with participants from 27 countries (EUTM 2018). The budget for the third mandate is €33.4 million. Most personnel are stationed in the Koulikoro training camp 60 kilometres northeast of Bamako. EUTM Mali remains a non-executive mission and does not, therefore, participate in combat or accompany FAMA in operational zones (European External Action Service 2016).

The EUTM’s third mandate was given in March 2016 and lasted until May 2018. This mandate expanded operations northwards towards the River Niger loop, and hence aimed to expand trainings to the regions of Gao and Timbuktu. In May 2018, the European Council decided to extend EUTM for two more years, and to double its funding. The security sector is therefore at the core of the EU’s efforts in Mali as well. Together with other international actors, the EU has invested large amounts of money and resources in Mali over the last six years. Vast EU resources have been spent on training Malian security forces – its police and military – as well as improved border management to restore state authority in Mali. Six years in, however, the situation in Mali remains as chaotic and insecure as it was in 2012. Despite intentions to restore state authority and build local ownership, the EU’s efforts seem characterised more by imported solutions, external needs and a general lack of context and conflict sensitivity. While the EU may have sought to avoid getting stuck in the sand, this looks increasingly to be the case, and as we turn to the case of Niger and the attempt by the EU to extrapolate European border control to the desert city of Agadez,

we will argue that what this case shows is the need for critical reflections on the EU approach to the Sahel and serious rethinking of the sustainability of results achieved on the ground.

Niger and Agadez – another castle in the sand?

In Niger, the mandate and resources of EUCAP Sahel Niger was strengthened to allow it to work with and support Nigerien security forces to crack down on irregular migration. Basically, this is an attempt to pay the Nigerien state to prevent migrants from going farther north. In addition, the EU urged the government of Niger to adopt a new law (Nigerien Law 036) that would criminalise migrant smuggling, making all forms of support to facilitate the crossing of an international border without legal authorisation in exchange for profit illegal. The law imposed high penalties, including imprisonment, confiscation of property and removal from public office. In Niamey, this law was quickly implemented without much debate, clearly suggesting that the Niger government was acting under a lot of pressure from the EU and important European donor countries. This begs the question of who the beneficiaries of this new attempt to curb migration through a policy of securitisation are.

At least according to a survey conducted by the Danish Demining Group (2014), which asked people in Niger who live in the borderland between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso to rank the top 10 security threats, only 2% reported cross-border trade, including human trafficking, as one of these. This should not come as a surprise, as many inhabitants of Agadez believe that the town not only benefitted from migration, but also managed migration quite well. The following quote (from an interview conducted in Agadez in 10 November 2019 with a man in his mid-thirties, who previously worked as driver carrying migrants to the Libyan border) expresses a sentiment generally shared by our interviewees:

Before, in almost all the neighbourhoods where migrants were staying, the population of these neighbourhoods benefited. In addition, there were traders, motel owners and the people who housed them that benefited. Now all these things have changed, it is not like before. [...] It was the international community that prevented migrants from coming. Migration management in Agadez was done as follows: once the migrants arrived in Agadez at the bus station, they were greeted by someone who would take care of them during their stay in Agadez, hosting them at home and finding them a vehicle to continue.

Thus, what the EU and international community at large seem to understand as risk to security may therefore just be a way of life locally: a livelihood strategy due to the lack of other possibilities to earn a living. External security concerns are therefore not necessarily shared by those who live in these areas. Based on our interview material, it is obvious that a good number of people in Agadez believe that European attempts at externalising migration control have deprived them of an important aspect of their livelihood; the question is, however, what implications this may have for stability in a politically fragile country such as Niger. At least according to the Secretary General of the Governor of Agadez, who (in an interview with the author on 7 November 2019) argued that the 'EU reconversion plan' (that is, the plan to support human smugglers to take up other types of legal livelihoods) 'had only targeted a small minority of the smugglers in Agadez, generating great frustrations and tensions'.

Securing Niger – yet another castle in the sand?

Political and social stability is not something that can be taken for granted in Niger. Since its independence from France in 1958, Niger has been through a volatile political history. Military regimes and different republics have come and gone, with frequent military coups and rebellions in the peripheral northern parts of the country. The Tuareg minority in the north have rebelled on several occasions, and the general lack of livelihood opportunities gives insurgencies the opportunity to recruit amongst youth who see little prospect for a better future. In fact, working in the transit migration ‘hub’ that developed around Agadez was one of the few growth sectors in the country that gave people an opportunity to earn some extra money (see Raineri 2018).

Prior to the new European focus on Niger and Agadez, the number of informal ‘travel agencies’ that offered trips from Agadez to Sebha in Libya increased significantly. In 2007, there were 15; in 2013 there were 70. Similarly, the number of so-called ‘ghettos’ offering accommodation to migrants rose to about 100 (see Raineri 2018). The result was that for the first time in decades, Agadez became a ‘boom’ town. This provided extra income not only for its inhabitants, but also for people who came from near and far to take part in the bonanza of the transit migration ‘hub’. The argument made is not that this should have been allowed to be the future of Agadez, and the economic foundation of the town. This is clearly not sustainable nor wanted. However, if you attempt to dismantle something that provides people who have very little with something more, then you must be able to give these people an economic alternative. As one informant in Agadez stated:

There has been support for projects that provide transportation costs for migrants to return to their homes, that provide them with food, take care of their health, but what support has Agadez received? Commitments have been made, but they have not been respected. If not, you will create grievances that may undermine the fragile social stability that currently exists in Niger (interview, local citizen in Agadez, 12 November 2019).

This is exactly what has happened in this part of Niger, when the new Law against the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants (Law 036) that the EU pushed through was implemented. This law criminalises smuggling migrants outside Agadez. However, while the letter of the law is concerned with smuggling migrants outside Agadez, in practice the efforts to enforce this law start in Agadez. According to a local human rights activist, ‘Law 036 has weakened the region’s economy. Before, 6000 migrants left each week. There were formalities they did with the police, accommodation in “ghettos”, catering; we talked about 60 billion a year. Now all that has dried up, the whole chain suffers; sellers of cans, wood, landlords etc., and the repressive nature of the law [e.g. the seizure of smugglers’ vehicles that are auctioned off] is poorly appreciated by the population’ (see also Abebe 2019).

Initially, this law was not enforced equally; some groups were targeted more than others. Those least affected were those close to the state – what Raineri (2018, 74) identifies as a ‘state-sponsored protection racket’. In this case, the Tuareg elite that controls the administration of Agadez, in close connection with Niamey, while most of the vehicles confiscated in the clampdown on the migration ‘industry’ belonged to Tebu traffickers (Molenaar and van Damme 2017; Raineri 2018). The Tebu are a small minority group in Niger (constituting less than 0.5% of the population) that historically has been politically marginalised and economically deprived. However, this time their fortunes had looked better as they had gained a prominent position in the transit migration due to their control of the Tummo border-crossing to Libya.

The Tebu are obviously not happy with this situation, and what has happened will add to this group's already lengthy list of grievances against the state. However, with regard to state stability, a more pertinent question is what will happen with the current alliance between the president of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, and the Tuareg of Agadez. Issoufou's rise to power was supported by several groups, but he made a particular alliance with the Tuareg elite that controls Agadez and thereby also a considerable part of the migration industry. The Tuareg elite needed a political patron in Niamey, and Issoufou needed both their political and their economic support. The Sultan of Agadez plays a key role in this regard. Traditionally, the power of the sultan had been established as an arbitrator to mediate between the different Tuareg tribes of Air (the historical name of the region). This means that the Sultan was supposed to be an outsider – historically, a black person from the Tahoua region, forbidden to marry local Tuareg women. This tradition has been lost over time due to the increased politicisation in Niger of traditional and religious authorities. The current Sultan is the son of a Tuareg woman from Agadez, and his father was close to former president Tandja. The current Sultan has continued the practice of his father by trying to be close to whoever is in power in Niamey while simultaneously being an arbitrator between Niamey and local chiefs and big men. Thus, the current sultan is close to President Issoufou and his party branch in Agadez, to the extent that his wife is an elected Member of Parliament (MP) for the president's party. The sultan's traditional role as an impartial arbitrator between the Tuareg tribes has therefore changed to him being a main interlocutor between the power in charge in Niamey and the strongmen of the region. This may, until now, have kept together an informal ruling coalition that unites elite interests in the centre and the periphery. However, the question is, What will happen to this alliance if the president is forced by external stakeholders like the EU to also limit the activities of traffickers that are part of the state-sponsored protection racket?

There are indications that this is happening. Less economic activity in the city will also hurt the well-connected ones, and informants revealed that even well-connected smugglers of Tuareg origin had been arrested. Most of these had only spent some months in prison, but they had to pay high fees to get out, to the extent that some well-connected smugglers even had to sell their villas to raise the money necessary to secure their release from prison. This is not a chain of events that will go down well with a local elite that in the past has rebelled against state authority. Not only could this come to undermine the political compromise between the local Agadez elite and the regime in Niamey, but the consequences of European migrant management in Niger are also starting to become manifest, at a precarious point in time.

The reason for this is that 2020 seems crucial for the stability of Niger's political landscape. The elections for the National Assembly and for the country's next president will take place at the end of the year (presidential elections will take place on 27 December 2020). This will happen in a context of unrest, humanitarian distress, political and economic dissatisfaction, and threat to local authorities, especially in rural areas. Violent activities by insurgents and other non-state armed groups in the regions of Diffa (bordering Lake Chad and Nigeria) and Tillabèri (bordering Burkina Faso and Mali) have already caused (1) loss of sovereignty in different communes that is severely compromising voting registration; (2) heavily contested losses in the security forces; (3) a threat to the political balance between the state and traditional authorities; and (4) massive internal displacement and food insecurity. Agadez is not yet that much affected by this. However, as the reduction of migrant flows already has

impaired local economic activities relying on circular migration, this is increasing the local population's sense of economic dispossession and catalysing voters' resentment towards the economic performance of the current government. This could have consequences for current President Issoufou's attempt to have his current Minister of the Interior Mohamed Bazoum elected through the ballot box as his designated successor. If this fails, not only could it throw Niger into a political turmoil that would have effects on the country's stability, but it could also throw current EU policies, including migration management, into uncharted territory, as the EU's current approach not only to Niger, but to the Sahel region, is anchored in regime stability in Niamey.

Conclusion

The issue of migration and border control is not a new item on the EU agenda; it has been there for a long time. What is new is the extent to which it has come to inform and also determine a number of other policy issues. The EUTF and EUCAP Sahel illustrate this trend. It is not possible to understand the current fusion of security and development policy that the EU and member states are implementing in the Sahel without taking into consideration the issue of the new architecture of migration management that the EU seeks to implement.

As this article has shown, what the EU is trying to achieve is an intervention in fragile states in the Sahel such as Niger, in which a transit-migrant hub like Agadez is transformed into a European extrapolated border post. Thus, while the Trump administration in the US talks about building a wall on the border with Mexico (a wall that in all likelihood never will be built), the EU is constructing less invisible 'walls' in the Sahel by working through local governments. While this strategy has had some success – if success is measured as fewer migrant arrivals on European shore – this initial success is not necessarily sustainable.

The main reason for this is that the EU, like all other external stakeholders, is struggling to find the balance between narrow security concerns and a larger developmental agenda where military security is but one part of a larger equation. In abstract terms, the EU knows what is required: the states of the Sahel need stability, transparency and legitimate institutions that can extract revenue from taxes, fees and duties to deliver economic development and services and make their countries more resilient to climate change effects (see Fjeldstad et al. 2018). The EU is, at least in theory, also aware that its policies in a fragile political environment as the Sahel should be context- and conflict-sensitive. The problem for the EU is how to achieve this in fragmented, conflict-prone societies where the very idea of the state has eroded, if not completely vanished – and this takes place in a situation where the due diligence agenda of 'do no harm' quickly comes into conflict with other main interests of the regimes of Europe, namely to reduce northbound migration as much as possible before these migrants reach the shores of the Mediterranean.

The challenge that this constitutes is also obvious when we consider the track record of the EU and international community at large in assisting state-building efforts in fragile states. Most often, these fall short of achieving their stated objectives, even at times making a difficult situation worse, leaving countries on an artificial international life-support system. This may prevent total state collapse, but it certainly does not represent a sustainable path to recovery, stability, reconciliation and development. The EU and the international community also struggled with this prior to the refugee and migration management crisis of 2014–2015, but the new and narrower focus that a 'European security first' approach represents has only made it

harder to imagine other and more sustainable solutions. This suggests that the current approach that seems to give priority to immediate EU interests may, in the long run, achieve the opposite. It would certainly not be without irony, albeit a tragedy to Niger, if an unintended consequence of the externalisation of European migration management contributed to undermining the stability of the regime that Europe depends upon for this purpose.

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