A COHERENT EU STRATEGY FOR THE SAHEL

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A COHERENT EU STRATEGY FOR THE SAHEL

Abstract

The Sahel region constitutes Europe’s southern geopolitical border. Any instability there will eventually find its way into the European neighbourhood and Europe itself. The present study examines the main challenges affecting the region and offers a critical evaluation of the 2011 EU ‘Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel’. The strategy identifies the lack of governmental capacity and systemic poverty as the key challenges the region faces and rightly points to concerted action in the security and development domains as the way forward. As such, we take a generally positive view of the diagnosis and the lines of action it envisages. However, we argue that one year after its adoption, the EU’s Sahel strategy has not lived up to expectations. For all the praising about the need for comprehensiveness, the EU’s efforts in the realm of security and development remain significantly disconnected. But ultimately, it is national caveats that pose the greatest threat to a more political implementation of the Sahel strategy. These include a denial of the strategic importance of the region, a lack of willingness to engage with Algeria and a resistance to incorporating military assistance into the EU’s toolbox.
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**AUTHOR(S):**

Dr Luis SIMON, Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BELGIUM  
Dr Alexander MATTELAER, Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BELGIUM  
Prof Dr Amelia HADFIELD, Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BELGIUM  

With research support provided by:  
Marc-Antoine MORIN, Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BELGIUM

**ADMINISTRATOR RESPONSIBLE:**

Valérie RAMET  
Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union  
Policy Department  
WIB 06 M 093  
rue Wiertz 60  
B-1047 Brussels

Editorial Assistant: Sabine HOFFMANN

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** ................................................................................................................................. 5

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**.................................................................................................................................. 6

**MAP** .................................................................................................................................................................. 7

1. **THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SAHEL** ................................................................. 8
   1.1 STATE FRAGILITY IN THE BROADER EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD ................................................... 8
   1.2 THE PROMISE OF SYNCHRONISING SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT TOOLS ..................................... 9
   1.3 CURRENT EU STRATEGY ............................................................................................................................ 10
   1.4 OPEN QUESTIONS & STUDY METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................ 11

2. **CHALLENGES NEW AND OLD IN A TURBULENT REGION** .................................................... 12
   2.1 MAPPING THE TERRAIN: MAIN STATE ACTORS AND GEOSTRATEGIC DYNAMICS ................. 12
      2.1.1 Regional Players .................................................................................................................................. 12
      2.1.2 Extra-Regional Players and Dynamics ............................................................................................... 13
   2.2 THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS ......................................................................................................... 14
   2.3 THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF THE LIBYAN CONFLICT ............................................................................. 16
      2.3.1 A New Tuareg Rebellion? .................................................................................................................... 17
      2.3.2 The Impact of Libyan Returnees on Political Stability ....................................................................... 18
      2.3.3 Reduced Response Capacity ............................................................................................................... 19
   2.4 DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES ................................................................................................................. 19
      2.4.1 Food, Natural Resources and Human Development ........................................................................... 21
      2.4.2 Governance and Human Rights ......................................................................................................... 22
      2.4.3 Economic Infrastructure, Energy and Trade ....................................................................................... 23

3. **IMPLEMENTING THE SAHEL STRATEGY** ......................................................................................... 24
   3.1 AN EVALUATION OF THE SAHEL ACTION PLAN ................................................................................... 24
      3.1.1 Political Progress .................................................................................................................................. 25
      3.1.2 Project Implementation ....................................................................................................................... 25
      3.1.3 Critical Remarks ................................................................................................................................... 27
   3.2 REGIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE CSDP ..................................................................... 28
      3.2.1 The Mali Option .................................................................................................................................... 28
      3.2.2 The Niger Option .................................................................................................................................. 29
      3.2.3 Future CSDP Options for Military Assistance ...................................................................................... 29
   3.3 TOWARDS GREATER REGIONAL COOPERATION? MAIN INITIATIVES AND OBSTACLES ............. 30
3.3.1 European-led Regional Efforts ........................................................................ 30
3.3.2 Algerian-led Regional Efforts ......................................................................... 31

4. TOWARDS A REGIONAL POLITICAL AGENDA ...........................................33

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................35
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sahel region is plagued by persisting problems as well as sudden shocks. While the former all relate to poverty and weak governance capacity, the latter are as diverse as the war in Libya and climate swings. This study provides an overview of the challenges the region faces and evaluates the ‘Strategy for Security and Development’ the EU adopted in March 2011 to address these. The first year of implementation of this strategy offers a preview of how the EU translates words into action. As this period was marked by great turbulence – witness the rekindled Tuareg rebellion and subsequent coup d’état in Mali, the increasing importance of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the prospect of a devastating food crisis across the Sahel – the old adage that no plan survives first contact with reality was again confirmed. As such, this study takes a positive view of the EU’s Sahel strategy but concludes that its implementation does not live up to the expectations it generated.

The EU’s Sahel strategy identifies Mauritania, Mali and Niger as the core Sahel countries and argues that lack of governmental capacity and systemic poverty are mutually reinforcing dynamics. It therefore proposes a comprehensive vision of EU engagement with the region that builds on four strategic lines of action: (i) development, good governance and internal conflict resolution; (ii) political and diplomatic action; (iii) security and rule of law; and (iv) the fight against violent extremism and radicalisation. While there is little to disagree with as far as the analysis of the situation is concerned, the effective implementation of this comprehensive vision is found wanting. Although efforts are being made to increase the coordination of different policy instruments, the overall thrust of the strategy is determined by the allocation of development funds alone. While this does not have to pose a problem, the inter-institutional lack of transparency over how EU funds are spent is disconcerting. The most critical shortfall of the strategy, however, is that it failed to prevent a degeneration of the precarious situation the region found itself in a year ago. At this point in time, a more political approach is needed to address the problems head-on.

One may reasonably ask why the Sahel matters to Europe. This study argues that the Sahel constitutes Europe’s southernmost geopolitical border: any instability here will automatically contaminate the European neighbourhood. As many of the countries in the broader southern neighbourhood play a key role in terms of European energy supplies, the management of migration flows and the containment illicit trafficking and terrorism, the EU cannot afford to let instability fester and spread throughout the region. Additionally, the Sahel presents a unique case in the sense that EU leadership here is the most credible, capable and potentially decisive. In other words, the Sahel is in desperate need of external assistance and the provision of such assistance aligns with the EU’s strategic interests.

On the basis of this analysis, a number of policy suggestions are advocated. First, development assistance not only needs to be complemented by an investment in regional capacity building of security tools, but these various policy instruments need to be synchronised in function of a clear political agenda. This must be premised upon the strengthening of the EU’s role in the region and the reinforcement of governance structures, friendly relations with the core Sahel countries and the recognition of Algeria and Nigeria as indispensable partners in fostering regional stability and cooperation. Second, greater coordination among the different EU development initiatives towards the region is needed and the issue of food security requires urgent prioritising as the key development challenge the region faces. Third, the planned CSDP operation should be pursued, but in the full knowledge that a more robust investment will be required over the longer term. Ultimately, it is national caveats that pose the greatest threat to a more political implementation of the Sahel strategy. These potentially include a denial of the strategic importance of the region, a lack of willingness to engage with Algeria and a resistance to incorporating military assistance in the EU’s toolbox.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACP  African Caribbean and Pacific Group of States
AQIM  Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU  African Union
CEMOC  Comité d’état-major opérationnel conjoint
CSDP  Common Security and Defence Policy
CSP  Country Strategy Paper
DG Devco  Directorate General of Development and Cooperation
EC  European Community
ECHO  European Community Humanitarian Office
ECOWAS  Economic Community Of West African States
EDF  European Development Fund
EEAS  European External Action Service
EU  European Union
HDI  Human Development Index
IfS  Instrument for Stability
MDG  Millennium Development Goals
MICEMA  Mission de la Cedeao au Mali
MNLA  Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad
NIP  National Indicative Programme
PSC  Political and Security Committee
PSPSDN  Programme Spécial pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement du Nord
TSCTI  Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative
UFL  Unité de Fusion et Liaison
1. THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SAHEL

The term Sahel commonly refers to the geographic area occupying the southern belt of the Sahara Desert and Tuareg settlements. The limits of this area however, are a subject of some dispute. Some analysts adopt a broad definition (Lacoste 2011), referring to the space delimited by the Mediterranean Sea in the north, Mauritania and the Atlantic Ocean in the west, the Red Sea Basin in the east and Chad in the south, as the ‘broader Sahara’ geopolitical region within which the Sahel is inserted. The European Union (EU), however, has adopted a narrower approach, referring to Mauritania, Mali and Niger as ‘the three core Sahelian states’ while also including ‘parts of Burkina Faso and Chad’ in the Sahel (EEAS 2011: 1). These different interpretations are due to the fact that the limits of the Sahel region are much clearer in the west (the Atlantic Ocean) and east (the mountainous terrain of northern Chad) than they are in the north and south, where the Sahel meets Northern and West Africa respectively. While the geopolitical dynamics that define the Sahel can hardly be grasped without reference to the broader Sahara region that contains it, this study follows the narrower definition adopted by the EU and refers to the Sahel as the area extending from Mauritania in the west through Mali, southern Algeria, northern Burkina Faso, Niger and northern Chad in the east (cf. López Blanco 2011a: 9). Given its interdependence with Northern Africa, the Sahel represents something of an extension of the EU's southern geopolitical border: an area of genuine significance not only in terms of its own stability and development but also as a result of the knock-on effect on European security.

1.1 State Fragility in the Broader European Neighbourhood

The Sahel impacts on Europe in a number of ways. The region’s inhospitable geography and nomadic culture breed economic underdevelopment and state fragility, generating a safe haven for terrorist groups, drug trafficking, illegal immigration and other organized crime networks that threaten Europe directly. Yet it also offers considerable potential in terms of energy and mineral supplies. Mauritania is an important source of iron ore imports, critical to Europe’s steel industry.¹ Niger is the fourth largest uranium producer in the world. It controls some 8.7% of global uranium production and provides 12% of the EU's consumption. Untapped reserves promise a second uranium boom (Grégoire 2011). The region also hosts considerable oil potential. Oil exploration efforts have been stepped up in the broader Sahel region in the last decade, with expectations being particularly promising in Chad and, to a lesser extent, Mauritania and Niger (Augé 2011). The region also plays an important role in European plans for solar energy projects such as Desertec (Brix 2009) and is a critical transit route in the Trans Sahara Gas Pipeline project, expected to bring Nigerian gas into Europe (Fabiani 2009). More broadly, the Sahel region provides geostrategic depth to North Africa, West Africa and, more indirectly, the Red Sea Basin. This means that the geopolitical dynamics defining the Sahel can spill into the EU’s maritime borders in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most evident cases are those of Algeria and Libya, two EU neighbouring countries that straddle North Africa and the Sahel, and whose politics have ramifications further afield (Lacoste 2011: 39; cf. Chena 2011). Apart from state actors, various groups of mercenaries and terrorist networks operating in the Sahel have played a destabilizing role in other neighbouring regions, particularly West Africa and the Red Sea Basin. In sum, the Sahel region is used by different actors that see it as a sanctuary for their activities, a source of raw materials and a reservoir of strategic depth.

The core of the Sahel is an area that encompasses the north and northwest of Mauritania, and the north of Mali and Niger. It is characterised by the near total absence of state authority. Mauritania, Mali and Niger are legally but not always materially in control of large swaths of their territory. With populations

¹ Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
and economic resources concentrated in the west (Mauritania) and the south (Mali and Niger), these states have for generations been blighted by chronic poverty, entrenched under-development, recurring food crises and hostile geographic conditions. Distances between these countries’ core and Sahelian regions are large and the lack of governance in the Sahel has generally been perceived by the core Sahelian states as a nuisance rather than a serious threat upon their politico-economic centres. Additionally, these states lack the material resources – and sometimes even the incentive – to make a difference in the area. In contrast to the highly mobile criminal and terrorist networks that operate in the Sahel and enjoy the connivance and often the support of local populations, the armed forces of Mauritania, Niger and Mali are staggeringly understaffed and under resourced. The comparison with the neighbouring Northern African countries is highly illustrative in this regard. If Algeria, Morocco and Libya spent, respectively, $8.6 (2011), $3.34 (2011) and $2.54 (2010) billion in defence, Mali, Niger and Mauritania spent $200 (2011), $46 (2010) and $107 (2011) million respectively (IISS 2012). In terms of manpower, the differences are striking as well. In contrast to Algeria’s 147,000-strong armed forces or Libya’s 76,000, Mauritania, Mali and Niger count in their armed forces 15,870; 7,750 and 5,300 personnel respectively (Tisseron 2011: 103).

With the above background in mind, it is hardly surprising that various European states have taken a lively interest in the Sahel. Since the First Yaoundé Convention between the European Community (EC) and African states in 1963, EU engagement has operated through the mechanism of development cooperation. However, given the lacklustre results in terms of trade and development, as well as the region’s deteriorating security environment, the EU has recently increased its efforts to address the region from a more comprehensive perspective. In this spirit, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was tasked in 2011 with drafting a ‘Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel’ (EEAS 2011; hereinafter referred to as the ‘Sahel strategy’). Before turning to the specific challenges confronting the Sahel, it is well warranted to consider the interplay between different foreign policy tools in the region.

1.2 The Promise of Synchronising Security and Development Tools

It has become commonplace to assert that security is a precondition for development. The so-called ‘security-development nexus’ has become a familiar feature in the academic literature as well as in the EU’s foreign policy acquis. The Sahel strategy lifts this conceptual linkage to an altogether new level of detail, as the ambition to synchronise development and security tools can be found on nearly every page.

As already argued, the Sahel includes wide stretches of geographic space that are de facto beyond effective governmental control. The growing awareness of the limitations to what development money can achieve in a near anarchical environment largely explains the EU’s increasing emphasis on capacity building. If governments obtain the instruments to improve the region’s security, the conditions are created within which development efforts can truly flourish. As the Sahel countries are struggling to make progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, it is clear that their limited capacity for governance needs to be addressed. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that there exist competing models on how to go about this capacity-building challenge. Debate may exist over what is the appropriate level of such efforts (local, national, regional) and over what capacities to prioritise over others (civil administration, taxation, border management, counter-terrorism etc.)

2 For a more detailed overview of these countries material limitations and their challenges to effectively guarantee security and stability in their Sahelian zones see Tisseron (2011: especially pp. 103-105).
The effective synchronisation of the EU’s security and development tools holds a great promise. As a *sui generis* international actor, the EU is blessed with the widest range of instruments to assist the development of the Sahel as well as to protect its own interests. However, the fulfilment of this promise will be neither swift nor simple. Effective synchronisation will require extensive situational awareness as well as an insightful assessment of what different policy instruments can realistically deliver. It is to such purpose that this study seeks to contribute.

### 1.3 Current EU Strategy

The Sahel strategy drafted by the EEAS and adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council on 21 March 2011 represents a major EU policy initiative that was several years in the making. In order to be able to evaluate this document it is useful to trace the historical context in which it was written. In what follows, we briefly discuss the agenda-setting stage, the drafting process and the overall direction of implementation in 2011.

Concern for the situation in the Sahel region first came to the fore during the 2008 French Presidency, when several member states, and key officials within the EU institutions understood the situation as a deteriorating one. Under the 2009 Swedish and 2010 Spanish Presidencies, fact-finding missions were dispatched to Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Algeria, which included Commission and Council Secretariat staff as well as national experts. On a country-by-country basis, they evaluated political as well as technical issues relating to security sector capacity and development progress. The findings of these missions were then taken up in a joint paper by the Commission and the Council General Secretariat (Council 2010).

In response to continued unrest in the region (i.e. multiple kidnappings and the killing of a French national by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or AQIM), a group of eight member states sent a letter to the High Representative with a request to intensify the level of European engagement.³ At the Foreign Affairs Council of 25 October 2010 agreement was reached on the need to develop a Sahel strategy. This led to the creation of the Sahel task force within the newly established EEAS under the leadership of the Director for West and Central Africa. Apart from EEAS staff, the task force included elements from the Directorate-General of Development and Cooperation (DG DevCo), the Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO), the office of the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, and representatives of the Commission’s newly created Foreign Policy Instrument responsible for managing the Instrument for Stability (IfS). In early 2011 a draft version of the Sahel Strategy was discussed at the level of ambassadors in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the Committee of Permanent Representatives, resulting in a request to shorten the document.

The Foreign Affairs Council of 21 March subsequently endorsed the strategic objectives, regional focus and lines of action of the Sahel strategy. The Council also invited the High Representative and the Commission to proceed with the implementation stage. From this point onwards, partner countries were involved in designing concrete activities. A second round of missions was organised with a view to building legitimacy and collecting input. Apart from the countries already mentioned, these also included Nigeria, the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The EU’s Sahel task force coordinated the staff work supporting the allocation of the 450 million EUR originally foreseen in the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) for Mali, Mauritania and Niger and an additional 150 million made available by DG DevCo. The long-term component of the Instrument for Stability also included support for capacity building programmes for Sahel counterterrorism efforts.

³ The member states involved were Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden (Gros-Verheyde 2010).
1.4 Open Questions & Study Methodology

This study aims to provide an overview of the current obstacles that the Sahel region faces as well as an evaluation on where the EU stands in the implementation of its 2011 Sahel strategy.

Treating security and development as closely related but analytically distinct, differentiation is made between the longstanding, systemic challenges the region faces and the more immediate challenges that have emerged in recent months. The former include, inter alia, weak governmental capacity (crime, illicit trafficking and terrorism spilling into ungoverned spaces), generalised poverty, chronic agricultural under-development, moderate to severe climate variability and recurrent food crises. The latter pertain to the regional impact of the conflict in Libya, the rekindled Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, the increasing importance of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and the risk of the 2012 food crisis escalating into a political crisis.

Keeping the above challenges in mind, the present study also offers an evaluation of the EU’s Sahel strategy. Its key shortcoming is the lack of a systematic and detailed overview of all actions that are being undertaken by the EU in the Sahel region. In spite of all the discourse stressing the importance of a comprehensive approach, fragmentation continues to be the order of the day – even if ad hoc synchronisation has increased. This is particularly the case with the long-standing development frameworks implemented by DevCo, i.e. the EC-ACP (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific) Cotonou Partnership Agreement (with its comprehensive series of Country and Regional Strategy Papers, and Regional Indicative Programme for the Sahel), which do not feature in the EEAS Sahel strategy despite providing the working foundation for a majority of the new strategy’s objectives.

While the media have amply highlighted the growing humanitarian emergency as a result of famine and drought that struck first the Horn of Africa and now the Sahel itself, little attention was paid to the destabilization of the region as a consequence of the “insecurity fall-out” of the Libyan conflict. As such, analysis of the big picture has often been missing. At the same time, the prospect of a new CSDP mission in security sector capacity building offers a genuine opportunity for a significant push forward in terms of civil-military diplomacy. In order to fully exploit such opportunity, a long-term investment in political dialogue is required, not only at the bilateral level but also at the regional one, especially with a greater involvement of Algeria.

In terms of study methodology, recourse was made to a wide range of sources. These included a selection of publicly available primary EU documents and a wide range of secondary literature, drawing on scholarly research, think tank reports, current statistics and a variety of development empirical data gleaned from relevant NGOs. Furthermore, a total of twelve in-depth research interviews were conducted between January and April 2012. This involved officials from the EEAS, the Commission and selected member states. These interviews took place on the basis of anonymity but with the understanding that all content could be used for the purpose of this study.
2. CHALLENGES NEW AND OLD IN A TURBULENT REGION

Given the endemic weakness of state structures in the Sahel, both external forces and non-state actors play a critical role in the region’s life and politics. The former can be divided into ‘regional’ external actors (a category in which Algeria, Libya and Nigeria stand out) and extra-regional ones, the most important here being the US, China and Saudi Arabia (leaving Europeans aside). The latter include indigenous nomadic groups, like the Tuareg, but also terrorist organizations and drug-trafficking networks. Non-state actors interact with each other, and with the various state actors who operate in the region. While this penetration by external forces and non-state actors is the result of a lack of governance structures, it paradoxically constitutes itself a systemic obstacle to the consolidation of state structures. It is through the lens of this vicious circle of weak governance structures, external penetration and non-state actors that one must read the region’s specific security and development challenges. This section first introduces the main state actors, geostrategic dynamics and non-state actors defining the region and then zooms in on the specific security and development challenges that currently assail it.

2.1 Mapping the Terrain: Main State Actors and Geostrategic Dynamics

2.1.1 Regional Players

The two key ‘external’ players in the Sahel are Libya and Algeria. Both states straddle North Africa and the Sahel and thereby act as the connecting vessels between the latter region and the European neighbourhood.

**Libya** is geographically and historically tied to the dynamics of the Sahel, which has often led to frictions with Algeria. Over the past decades, the Qadhafi regime played a strong role in its southern periphery, intervening directly via training, arming and financing activities in Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan (Lacoste 2011). Qadhafi has also provided political, financial and operational support to the Polisario front (Lacoste 2011:18), fostered a Mauritanian-Malian rapprochement and used his gas and oil cash reserves to strengthen Libya’s position in Mali (*Maghreb Intelligence*, 12 August and 24 November 2010). Relying on a strategy of controlled chaos, he simultaneously provided financial aid to Bamako as well as money and weapons to Tuareg groupings in the north. Especially concerned by Qadhafi’s support for the Polisario front, Algeria attempted to limit this process of encroachment in its own periphery.⁴

**Algeria** is a critical player in the Sahel. With a GDP of some $264 billion in 2011, it is by far the largest economic actor in the region (*CIA World Factbook* 2012). It has a stable budget, with reserves of approximately $160 billion, providing the state with a financial autonomy that derives largely from its hydrocarbon exports. Algeria has the 10th largest natural gas reserves in the world and is also the 10th biggest producer of natural gas, producing around 30 billion m³ per year. Aside from being a source of stability and strength for the regime, its gas wealth provides Algeria with an enormous source of external leverage. Algeria provides around 15% of EU gas imports (Eurostat 2011). This gives Algiers a degree of leverage vis-à-vis the EU that no other Northern African country possesses (Darbouche and Dennison 2011). With a defence budget of $8.6 billion in 2011, Algeria has the largest military budget in Africa (*IISS* 2012). It is particularly strong in the field of counter-terrorism capabilities but has recently also invested considerable resources in acquiring high-tech conventional weaponry. Its large fleet of aircraft endows it with significant internal power-projection capability. Although it is wary of taking its

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⁴ Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
military beyond its own borders (even in situations of hot pursuit) Algeria plays a leading role in coordinating the Sahelian fight against terrorism.\(^5\)

Algeria regards itself as the natural leader in the Maghreb and Sahel regions, and perceives France (and often the EU), Morocco (a French ally) and Libya as the main threats to the existing status quo in those regions. In contrast to Libya, Algeria primarily follows a defensive approach, seeking to limit the influence of others, but wary about exercising power beyond its own borders. It enjoys strong relations with a number of European countries, particularly Spain and Italy, but also Germany and the UK (with whom it has engaged in increasing cooperation over the last few years in the security field). It also has a strong relationship with China and Russia – most notably in the defence-industrial field. Most importantly, Algeria has over the past decade become a key partner of the United States. The US is Algeria’s top export destination, taking in 25% of Algerian exports. Since 11 September, the US has come to regard Algeria as a key asset in the fight against terrorism in both the Maghreb and Sahel regions, and to that end established a bilateral counterterrorist contact group with Algeria in February 2011 (Chena 2011).

Although not wedded to the Sahel as directly as Algeria and Libya, Nigeria has been increasingly pulled into the region. The rise in activity of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, a group for which the Sahel offers strategic depth, is likely to increase Nigeria’s interest in the region. But so is too the increasing stability in northern Mali, which has become an object of broader regional concern and resulted in the implication of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where Nigeria plays a leading role. With the second largest GDP in Africa ($414 billion in 2011, CIA World Factbook 2012), a defence budget of $2,23 billion (IISS 2012: 316) and its large oil and natural gas reserves, Nigeria is an emerging leader in the neighbouring West African region and is strongly committed to the fight against Islamist terrorism. In addition, the realization of the EU’s project to bring Nigerian gas to Europe from the Sahel (via Niger and Algeria) requires far greater security in the region. Its democratic nature, concern for energy security and commitment to fight the spread of terrorism and radical Islamism in the region align Nigerian interests with those of the EU.

2.1.2 Extra-Regional Players and Dynamics

Since 11 September 2001, the war on terror has drawn the United States into both the Maghreb and the Sahel as part of an effort to fight terrorism at its source. This engagement was first embodied by the 2002 ‘Pan Sahel Initiative’, aimed at protecting borders against arms trade, drug trade and terrorist movements (Ellis 2004). In the framework of the Pan Sahel Initiative, the U.S. sent 150-strong special units that have subsequently engaged in counter-terrorism training and assistance in Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad (Tisseron 2011). In 2005, the Pan Sahel Initiative was upgraded into the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), which reached out to other countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Senegal and Nigeria and then Burkina Faso and Libya. The TSCTI expanded not only geographically, but also functionally. Originally encompassing only military cooperation, it now includes action by USAID (to foster education), the U.S. State Department (enhancing airport security) and the U.S. Treasury Department (assisting the region’s macroeconomic policies). A number of exercises have been conducted since 2005 in the framework of the TSCTI in order to improve coordination among the partners in the field of counter terrorism. Beyond these multilateral initiatives, the U.S. has also placed special emphasis on developing bilateral ties with Algeria, which has become a key US partner since the latter’s renewed engagement in the region following the terrorist attacks of 11 September.\(^6\) Besides Algeria, the U.S. has sought to continue its strong security cooperation with

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\(^5\) Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.

\(^6\) Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
Morocco, with whom it has engaged in a number of bilateral counter terrorism exercises (Chena 2011: 115). The American approach to the region is characterised by a counter-terrorism mindset. Its financial and development aid is primarily aimed at building up indigenous anti-terrorist capabilities.7

While maintaining a relatively low profile in the realm of security, China has significantly stepped up its presence in the Sahel in recent years. Lured by the region’s raw materials and energy sources, Beijing has rapidly become the region’s top trading partner and a key investor and development aid donor.8 Particularly rapid and substantial has been Beijing’s penetration into the mining and energy sectors of the broader Saharan region. Over the last decade, the Chinese have been increasingly active in oil exploration in Chad and, to a lesser extent, Niger and Mauritania (Augé 2011). China is also the first exporter of iron ore from Mauritania, where Mimmetals is engaged in a number of projects. CNNC, another Chinese company, recently gained a concession to exploit China’s first overseas uranium mine in Niger, where the French had so far enjoyed a monopoly (Simón 2012). China’s development policy vis-à-vis the region has come hand in hand with its mineral extraction needs. In the words of one European official: “the Chinese are not providing any aid beyond what they need to get mining concessions”.9

Last but not least, influences emanating from the Arabian Peninsula have historically played an important role in the Sahel, notably by spreading Islam and Arab culture in an otherwise nomadic environment. These influences continue to affect the region’s politics. Saudi Arabia finances the construction of mosques in Mauritania and Mali, which act as a transmission belt for the spread of Salafism and subvert the more moderate indigenous Sufi tradition.10 The presence of radical schools of Islam has become increasingly pronounced in the region over the last decade. Additionally, financial flows emanating from the Arabian Peninsula have made their way into the hands of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, leading to a further radicalization of the movement.11

2.2 The Role of Non-State Actors

The permanent presence of non-state actors and the destabilizing effects their activities have upon the region’s political and economic life represent a critical security challenge for the Sahel. The many non-state actors that populate the region can be divided into those groups for whom the Sahel is their only area of action (particularly the Tuareg), those for whom it is a source of strategic depth (such as AQIM whose main target is Algeria, the Polisario front or, potentially, Boko Haram) and those for whom it is a transit area into other environments (i.e. drug trafficking networks). Below we briefly introduce the main non-state actors and dynamics.

The Tuareg are the main indigenous social group inhabiting the Sahel. They share a nomadic lifestyle and are mostly found in the northern parts of Niger and Mali, but also in southern Algeria and Libya and the northern parts of Burkina Faso (cf. Bourgeot 1990, Lohmann 2011, Kaplan 2012). They interact with the main political actors in the region who often offer them economic opportunities, including AQIM and drug trafficking networks, but are a resilient social group that does not integrate into other structures. In societal terms, the Tuareg represent a permanent and structural challenge to the integration of the northern parts of Mali and Niger into their respective states. This said, in Niger some

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7 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
8 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
9 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
10 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
11 On the exposure of the Sahara-Sahel region to the Arab world see López Blanco (2011a: 11). On the geopolitical contiguity between the Grand Sahara region and the Arabian Peninsula and the historical role played by the Arab world in the politics of Sahara and Maghreb see Lacoste (2011: 24-31).
Tuaregs are now relatively well integrated in the national system. The Garde Nationale in particular has a strong Tuareg component. It is in Mali where the difficulties for integration are greater and Tuareg rebellions have been more frequent. The Mouvement National de Liberation de l’Azawad (MNLA) only represents the latest incarnation of a deeply rooted movement of Tuaregs demanding the political autonomy of their desert lands.

Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a well-established terrorist group that benefits from the region’s lack of governance and economic structures and uses drug flows as a critical source for financing its activities (Lopez Blanco 2011a: 1). It also provides economic assistance to the local population and uses marriages into local tribes as key elements in its strategy of local implantation in the Sahel (Chena 2011: 115). AQIM is an evolution of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC in its French acronym) and is composed mainly of Algerians within its cadres. 400-men strong, it is divided into two main branches, one based in Algeria and the other in Mali. The Algerian branch is the core of AQIM. The Mali branch constitutes a rear base that gives AQIM strategic depth for its operations in Algeria and Mauritania. Mali itself is not a target for AQIM, rather a safe haven, which leads many to wonder whether there is a tacit agreement of ‘live and let live’ between AQIM and the Malian state. While it is being progressively transformed, Algeria continues to be AQIM’s priority target and Algerians continue to occupy the key positions within the organisation. AQIM is also expanding to the east and north, particularly Libya and Tunisia, with the convulsion caused by the Arab spring having “opened new opportunities for business” across the region. While AQIM is ideologically and institutionally linked to Al Qaeda global, its agenda is mostly local, and more particularly Algerian. Over the past few years, there has been a strengthening of ties between AQIM and Boko Haram.

Over the past decade the Sahel has become an increasingly important transit hub for drug-trafficking networks connecting suppliers in Latin America (cocaine) and Morocco (hash) with the markets in Europe and the Middle East. Morocco is the world’s number one producer of hash (21%). Whereas the old routes went directly from Morocco to Spain or, through Algeria, onto Spain, France and the rest of Europe and the Middle East, since the early 2000s there has been a process of route diversification that sees the drug be transferred from Morocco to northern Mauritania and from there to northern Mali and Niger, from where it splits in two directions: one northwards towards Libya and via the Balkans to Europe and another via Chad and Sudan to the Red Sea and Middle East. The Sahel stretch of this hash route implicates Tekna, Berrabich, various Tuareg groupings in Niger and Mali and also AQIM in southern Algeria. There are no reliable data on how much hash goes through the Sahelian route (Julien 2011).

Cocaine comes from Latin America, particularly from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. The more traditional routes are the purely maritime ones, via the Caribbean and the Azores onto the Iberian Peninsula or via Cape Verde, Madeira and the Canary Islands onto the Iberian Peninsula. But heightened security has also led to a cocaine route diversification in the last decade, with the establishment of a new route that connects Venezuela and Brazil with West Africa. It comes via two main intakes: one in Guinea Bissau and Conakry (which sometimes leans on entry points in Senegal and Mauritania) and a second one via the Gulf of Guinea via Ghana and Benin). Once the cocaine reaches West Africa, it proceeds to European markets via various aerial, maritime and land routes. The key Sahelian connection for cocaine is

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12 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
13 On the evolution from GSPC to AQIM see Benchiba (2009) and Boukraa (2010).
14 Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, February-March 2012.
15 Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, January-March 2012.
16 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
17 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
Mauritania, which acts as the key transit state to take the drug to Europe via Morocco. It is estimated that some 15% of cocaine's global production goes through West Africa, between 80 and 100 tones a year according to some estimates (Julien 2011: 130). The flow of drugs also brings with it a proliferation of weapons that often feeds into peripheral armed groups; this in turn has an impact into the region’s politics as different tribes compete to gain access to the cocaine networks, either by playing a role in transport, acting as informants or providing security to the convoys.\(^{18}\)

Besides the Touareg, AQMI and drug-trafficking networks, there are other (more peripheral) non-state actors that, although operating outside the Sahel’s ‘core’, affect and are affected by the region’s dynamics. In this category the Polisario Front and Boko Haram stand out.

The **Polisario front** (Pour la liberation de la Seguïet el-Hamra et du Rio de Oro) is a Sahrawi national liberation movement that pursues the independence of Western Sahara from Morocco. It receives financial, political and logistical support from Algeria and, to a lesser extent, Libya. For Morocco, the Western Sahara is a natural extension of its territory and a source of revenue via fisheries and phosphates. For Algeria, aside from the moral issue (given the country’s strong commitment to anti-colonialism), the front offers the promise of additional hydrocarbons, a key exit to the Atlantic for its exports and, geopolitically, an asset to box Morocco. Extra regional actors, for their part, tend to support Morocco’s stance on the Western Sahara as a means to check Algeria’s regional supremacy (Chena 2011: 117). Leaning on Algerian financial support, the Polisario front has recruited paid volunteers from the whole Saharan space (from Mauritania to Sudan) as well as Nigeria (Lacoste 2011: 39). Libya has also sought to expand its influence within the Polisario front. The Qadhafi regime has sent volunteers and money to sustain the Polisario Front against the Moroccan army, a connection that Algeria has sought to disrupt.

**Boko Haram** (‘Western Education is Sin’) is a Salafist group that operates in north-eastern Nigeria and battles what it perceives to be a Christian-biased and western leaning state (Johnson 2011; cf. Onuoha 2010). Animated by the country’s ethnic and religious tensions and grounded in the strong Islamist tradition of the country’s north-east, Boko Haram (formed in 2009) underwent a process of radicalisation and has become an increasingly important actor over the last few years. While it does not currently have a direct impact upon the Sahel, it operates in southern Niger, which provides it with a source of strategic depth against Nigeria. This said, its closeness to the region and interaction with a number of Sahel actors means that Boko Haram’s very existence and expansion is likely to impact the Sahel in a number of ways. First, according to a number of European officials, “there is a really serious threat that the Nigerian state will begin to consider Boko Haram a priority and refocus its attention and resources to the south”, thereby affecting its ability to deal with the situation in the north.\(^{19}\) Second, there is evidence of a growing connection between Boko Haram and AQIM, two groups that share a Salafist ideology and a hostility to states they perceive as being close to the West (Nigeria and Algeria respectively), and can get in touch with each other for training and financial assistance.\(^{20}\)

### 2.3 The Regional Impact of the Libyan Conflict

The revolutionary turmoil that engulfed northern Africa in 2011 had important repercussions in the Sahel. In particular, the 2011 war in Libya is having an important impact on the region. Perhaps most importantly, the influx of fighters and weapons from Libya has a direct negative impact upon the security situation in northern Mali and, to a lesser extent, Niger. The human and material fallout from the Libyan crisis has now substantially aggravated many of the long-standing challenges the Sahel faces

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\(^{18}\) Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.

\(^{19}\) Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, March 2012.

\(^{20}\) Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
and may well precipitate a regional crisis of political stability. As many worrying trends develop simultaneously, the response capacity of both local players and external actors may be stretched thin.

### 2.3.1 A New Tuareg Rebellion?

As the violent response to the protests against the regime of Muammar Qadhafi in early 2011 initiated a rapidly escalating civil war in Libya, regional security implications quickly multiplied. Large quantities of arms and ammunition from Libyan stockpiles found their way into the trans-Sahel smuggling circuit (cf. UN 2012a). This not only concerned various types of small arms, but reportedly included more advanced weapon systems such as man portable surface-to-air missiles (Cristiani 2011). In turn, this allegedly triggered covert scramble efforts by the United States and various EU member states to trace and collect as many missiles as possible. In spite of the efforts made by the Sahel countries in limiting the inflow of weapons, illicit arms proliferation remains one of the primary side effects of the Libyan conflict.

The most critical factor in the security equation, however, seems to be the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya. The Qadhafi regime displayed a propensity for recruiting foreigners for repressing the local population and Tuareg fighters played an increasingly important role in the Libyan security forces (as did elements from the Polisario front). As the Libyan war progressed, the role of such foreign fighters became even more prominent. The downfall of Qadhafi in the autumn of 2011 therefore heralded the return of ‘unemployed’ Tuareg mercenaries to their traditional habitat in the Sahara desert. Numerical estimates of this inflow of Tuareg fighters range from several hundreds to several thousands, most of them ending up in northern Mali (Duteil 2012; Stewart 2012). These Tuareg fighters were endowed with significant military expertise and substantial financial and material resources. The precarious stability that had existed in northern Mali since the end of the last Tuareg rebellion in 2009 quickly started unravelling.

From October 2011 onwards these fighters organised themselves into a new group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (French acronym MNLA). The objective of this group is to free northern Mali from Bamako’s limited degree of state control (cf. MNLA 2012). In terms of political affiliations, the MNLA is intent on distancing itself from AQIM, whereas the Malian government has an incentive to suggest the existence of such a relationship in order to induce Western support (cf. Stewart 2012; Stratfor 2012a). Discussions with European officials indicate that the precise relationship between AQIM and Tuareg communities remains unclear. As one official explained: “they are anarchists who see Bamako as a bunch of usurpers claiming their land”. In mid-January 2012 an insurgency offensive started with an attack on military barracks and a National Guard base in the Gao region. Further assaults followed in the Kidal and Timbuktu regions and were met by governmental counteroffensives (cf. Stewart 2012). In this context, a UN assessment mission voiced concern about “reigniting embers of past rebellions” (UN 2012b).

In the course of March 2012, the situation escalated dramatically when the MNLA and Ansar Dine, a newly formed Tuareg-group of Islamist inspiration, succeeded in pushing the governmental security forces out of northern Mali. This in turn heralded a coup d’état against the already fading regime of Amadou Toumani Touré. Disgruntled by the way the Malian government had been handling the Tuareg revolt, a set of junior officers installed a military junta on 21 March (cf. Groga-Bada and Boisbouvier 2012; ICG 2012). International condemnation came swiftly. Mali was put under an economic embargo.

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21 Interview with EU official, Brussels, January 2012.
22 Interview with multiple EU officials, Brussels, March 2012.
23 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
by ECOWAS and its membership in the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie was suspended. This pressure brought about a framework agreement (signed on 6 April) stipulating that the junta would hand power back to a transitional government in return for a lifting of ECOWAS sanctions and an amnesty deal. The Tuareg rebels in the meantime took advantage of the window of opportunity to declare the independence of Azawad (cf. Financial Times, 6 April 2012). At the time of writing, no diplomatic recognition has been forthcoming and ECOWAS started preparations for a possible military intervention aimed at restoring the territorial integrity of Mali (Mission de la Cedeao au Mali or MICEMA).

In some ways, the success of the Tuareg revolt can be interpreted in the light of the uneasy heritage of the Malian Programme Spécial pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement du Nord (PSPSDN). Within a broader context of political decentralisation and infrastructure development, this programme aimed to reinstate the administrative and security presence of the Malian state in its northern territories. This programme – receiving significant financial support from the EU through the IFS – was by some perceived as a drive towards militarisation. In spite of the laudable goal of boosting development activities, the PSPSDN seems to have inadvertently contributed to the problem it was supposed to prevent. What is clear is that a protracted Tuareg insurgency could take hold that uses smuggling activities for achieving financial sustainability and destabilises the region for an extended period. Fears about possible spillover effects are running high in Algeria and Niger (cf. e.g. Le Monde 7 April 2012). Although Niger has been generally more successful than Mali in the socio-political integration of the Tuareg community and shielding itself against an influx of fighters, the tension in Niamey about the current situation is palpable.

2.3.2 The Impact of Libyan Returnees on Political Stability

The return of Tuareg fighters to their Saharan habitat represents but a small part of a much broader trend of population movements instigated by the Libyan conflict. By the end of 2011, the International Organisation for Migration registered 209,030 “returnees” from Libya (95,760 in Niger, 82,433 in Chad, 11,230 in Mali and 780 in Mauritania). When combined with unregistered migration, overall figures are estimated to be about twice as high (UN 2012a: § 18). These returnees are overwhelmingly adult males with low levels of education who provided manual labour in the petrodollar-fuelled Libyan economy. Furthermore, the violence in northern Mali is causing significant numbers of internally displaced persons. A recent ECHO situation report estimated the overall number of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in northern Mali alone at over 122,000.

With a looming food crisis in sight, these population movements are set to aggravate an already precarious humanitarian situation. This must be seen in combination with the economic impact that this reversal of labour migration causes. The remittances that these workers used to send home represented a major coping mechanism in times of food crises (UN 2012a: § 22). It is also unclear to what extent the post-Qadhafi Libya will return to its policies of investing significant amounts of financial resources into its Sahelian Hinterland (cf. Cristiani 2011). As a result, one could argue that the increasing population density, water scarcity and loss of income could transform a humanitarian emergency into a full-blown political crisis precipitating more violence.

The popular thesis that intense resource scarcity will in itself trigger violent conflict does not seem to be supported by conclusive empirical evidence (cf. Benjaminsen 2008; Turner 2004). Recent scholarship indicates that patterns of socio-political inclusion of various population groups prove a much better indicator of the onset of conflict than (drought-induced) resource scarcity (Benjaminsen et al. 2012; Theisen et al. 2011). This would suggest that the various Sahel countries are at different degrees of political risk. The more inclusive approach taken towards the Tuareg population in Niger would set this

country at a lower level of risk than Mali. Along the same line of thinking, the political exclusion of peripheral tribes has been a recurring conflict trigger in Chad (cf. Mattelaer 2008). As the close relationship the Chadian regime maintained with Qadhafi in recent years has come to an abrupt end, much uncertainty remains over the future of Libyan-Chadian relations and the possible return of the all-too-familiar pattern of conflict by proxy (cf. ICG 2011). In Mauritania, the political assimilation of moderate islamists (as opposed to AQIM) might be seen as a strategy of co-optation that offers a way to avoid the escalation of political competition into violent conflict (cf. Thurston 2012).

### 2.3.3 Reduced Response Capacity

All the security challenges mentioned above are daunting in themselves when one considers the limited means available to local governments. Their simultaneous occurrence magnifies the challenge in the sense that whatever response capacity is available to governments is stretched to its limits. The governments of the Sahelian countries have already declared a national crisis, yet the situation is set to aggravate significantly – at least in humanitarian terms – in the months ahead. As their appeal for international assistance comes at a time when most donor countries are intent on cutting budgets in order to improve their fiscal situation, it is doubtful whether significant amounts of external help will be forthcoming. Key debates in this regard will relate to the future policies pursued by external actors such as Algeria, Libya and the EU.

In the past, the key to mitigating Sahel problems – such as previous Tuareg rebellions – was via the mediation that Algeria was able to provide. The broader context of the Arab Awakening however has left Algeria in a position of vulnerability. While political protests in Algeria were limited, the state is in no way immune to the turbulence that occurred in the other Arab states in northern Africa. Even if the domestic unrest is contained, the Algerian neighbourhood is undoubtedly going through a period of profound instability. The future of the Libyan state itself is especially crucial. If Libya was to regain its feet quickly, and collaboration on regional stability achieved, the challenges in Sahel may be manageable enough. Should Libya struggle to regain functional statehood, it will require a significant amount of Algeria’s political bandwidth – at the expense of the Sahel. Furthermore, the situation on the Sahel’s southern flank may not appear as dire, but it hardly constitutes a bedrock of stability. The recent crisis in Côte d’Ivoire, for example, displayed some similarities to the conflict in Libya in terms of regional impact, albeit on a smaller scale.

At the level of the broader international community, the picture does not look radically different. Continuing protests in Syria, uncertainty of the future of Iran’s nuclear programme, the stability of Iraq in the aftermath of the American withdrawal – to give but a few salient examples – all pose reasonable yet competing claims for the attention of the international community. Even if the future of EU and member state development funding may become uncertain as the fallout from the Eurozone crisis (and fiscal austerity in particular) continues. In sum, international actors with significant crisis response capacity to spare are in short supply. The risk of the Sahel falling off the political radar screen is therefore not negligible.

### 2.4 Development Challenges

From 2000 onwards, development cooperation between the EU and ACP countries has repeatedly come under strain as a result of the dramatic transformations of the Cotonou era. Now, the volatile cocktail of insecurities and under-development in the Sahel raises the stakes considerably. As Fiott (2011) argues, the region presents the EU’s much-vaunted holistic development policy with precisely the challenge it sought – or perhaps feared. The problems are not merely myriad in number, but multifarious in type. From the structural weaknesses arising from poor-quality governance to swathes of recent criminality, the Sahel presents a multi-layered pile-up of local problems, regional instabilities and
international insecurities. Whether a proximate neighbourhood or buffer zone, the Sahel is paradoxically regarded as both an endemic threat to the EU and also a zone in which the EU can truly come of age as an international development actor. Doing so however means taking the ‘comprehensive approach’ not just seriously, but into the field. If all goes well, the Sahel strategy could emerge as “the best example of what the EEAS should do”, if not, it could consign EU development policy to permanent irrelevance.  

As the most under-developed part of the continent, what is true for Africa is a truism for the Sahel. Generic development obstacles of chronic societal instability, entrenched economic under-development, and perennially poor governance are profound. After an abbreviated series of case studies on the core Sahel states, the following section briefly examines the challenges facing the region. This is done using a slightly compressed version of the EU’s own development objectives: (1) food, natural resources and human development (2) governance (3) economy (including energy security).

**Development Snapshot Mali**

Mali is one of the poorest countries on earth. The country suffers from a hostile climate and has few naturally-occurring resources. The Food Agricultural Organisation recently declared a state of emergency with regards to food scarcity in the region. Agriculture being the largest sector of the economy, a famine will force Malians from productive to subsistence agriculture. With an estimated GDP per inhabitant of $1200, and half of its population living with $1,25 per day, Malians have problems making both ends meet. The resulting instability has had its toll on economic opportunities. If nothing improves security and provides citizens with financial opportunities, the country will be stuck in a permanent downward spiral of under-development.

**Development Snapshot Mauritania**

The United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI) ranks Mauritania in the bottom 20. Due to its arid climate and its geographical location, the vast majority of the poor people (that live with less than $1,25 a day) live in the eastern segment. Due to limited state financial resources, less than half the population has access to clean water. Limited resources also mean a limited school system. It is estimated that as many as 50% of the population is illiterate. Gender inequalities are also to blame for poverty. Women do not have the same access to health care, are less educated, have to live with arranged marriages and little to no access to bank loans. Female empowerment must be one of the solutions to develop the country.

**Development Snapshot Niger**

Niger sits second to last in the 2011 HDI. According to the United Nations Development Programme, 59,5% of the population live in conditions of poverty. The education and the justice systems rely heavily on outside aid because the government does not have the financial resources to sustain them. Little access to water, sanitary installations and gender inequalities are chronic problems. However, as opposed to other Sahelian nations, Niger has an advantage. It is one of the largest producers of uranium in the world. The country is the fourth largest exporter of uranium in the world. The French company Areva NC buys roughly 50% of Niger’s uranium, closely followed by China. By 2015 Niger is forecast to become the second largest uranium producer in the world. While uranium prices rise, Niger has access to a potential influx of foreign currencies to develop its infrastructures. Niger will therefore have to choose carefully where to put its export revenue and how guarantee a decent investment climate in order to attract investors. If these revenues fall – as a result of the downturn in civil nuclear policy, for example – Niger could be left with a stalled industry.

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25 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
2.4.1 Food, Natural Resources and Human Development

Despite the security and development nexus, the prime goal of development is poverty-reduction, particularly in states that are not only economically fragile but also environmentally vulnerable. The majority of Sahel populations are habitually poverty-stricken not only because of the perennial harsh climate, but also because of structural state weakness. Simply put, Sahel states provide minimal social and agricultural support for households to protect against the severest effects of this climate, which include floods, droughts and windstorms. Households attempt to withstand such shocks by selling either crops or livestock, but depleted reserves then provide little resilience against the next crisis. The choice of negative coping mechanisms is stark: incur high levels of debt to attempt to access what remains available (usually at a higher cost), go hungry, or migrate.

Between 2010 and early 2012, the region experienced exceptionally irregular rainfall and resulting poor harvests. This problem is compounded by the interrelated problems of an overall increase of demand coming from returnees from the Libyan and Cote d’Ivoire crises, and rapidly rising food prices in 2012. These factors are combining to aggravate massively the serious problem of persistent food insecurity in the Sahel. While media coverage in 2011 focused overwhelmingly on the drought in the Horn of Africa, there are almost 12 million people in the Sahel at risk of moderate to severe malnutrition. The well-known development challenge of the Sahel has now turned into a dramatic humanitarian challenge, as ECHO and various UN reports testify. What then is the key challenge of the Sahel: the climate itself or climate change?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECHO Figures</th>
<th>Total population living in affected areas</th>
<th>Population at risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>6 006 711</td>
<td>5 458 871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>3 542 000</td>
<td>700 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>5 000 000</td>
<td>2 500 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>850 211</td>
<td>210 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23 778 331</td>
<td>11 688 115</td>
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</table>

The Climate Challenge

The Sahel is paradoxically an area characterised by great dryness and sporadic though heavy rainfall causing flooding. Both severity and uncertain prediction of drought and floods are the prime causes behind the “persistent low margins” for adaptation to specific and perennial crises (Fiott 2011). As the majority of rural Sahel households are dependent on rain-fed agriculture, they face twin seasonal challenges of stretching their stores from harvest to harvest, and accessing needed micronutrients via home production or purchase (Burney et al. 2010).

While the transhumance method by which herders use alternate grazing areas reveals some adaptability to the harsh living conditions of the area, both herders and sedentary farmers have been affected by swift population increases, soil degradation, low fertility and low crop yields (Fiott 2011). Sahel states have worsened this situation primarily through continuing under-investment in food production, allocating a mere 5% of their annual budget on agriculture, but also providing little in the way of health resources for endemic malnutrition. Meanwhile, the poorest Sahel households spend
more than 70% of their daily income on food. States have also failed to rein in rampant deforestation, which has an enormous impact on degrading the quality of the soil, reduces crop yields and increases desertification.

**The Implications of Climate Change**

What of climate change-induced variability in the Sahel? To some observers, rainfall has lessened, while others argue that: “What is ‘normal’ to the Sahel is … variability of the rainfall supply in space and from year-to-year and from decade-to-decade” (Hulme 2002). An alternative argument is an increasing number of dry years, which has impoverished the soil. Unfortunately, Sahel soils “are inherently fragile, low in carbon and poor in plants nutrients” (UNEP 2006). Only abundant water can decently maintain soil fertility, which is the key to sustainable agriculture. A recent report makes clear the scale of this particular challenge:

> Typical smallholder staple production systems are often both risky and relatively low-return, as the low commercial value of staple crops, is exacerbated by poor yields and erratic rainfall – two problems that are expected to worsen in the next few decades under climate change (Burney et al. 2010: 1848).

Gradually rising temperatures are also a likely culprit, explaining both increasingly impoverished Sahel soil and desertification. In a sense, the specific climactic phenomenon identified as having altered due to climate change is not of strategic importance of its own because the physical features of the Sahel itself have long been highly vulnerable to climatic fluctuations (Benjaminsen et al. 2012: 99). Ultimately, whether via climate characteristics or climate change, the reality is the same: climate-affected areas are also the region’s poorest. Both winter drought and summer flood features will continue seasonally and sporadically. Soil fertility and agriculture writ large remain at risk. The implications are clear: humanitarian disasters must be prevented through resilience-based development programmes that provide smallholder irrigation (e.g. through solar-powered drip irrigation).

**2.4.2 Governance and Human Rights**

Instances of the impact of poor governance on subsistence include negligible regulatory control of supply-demand patterns, little provision for promoting household resilience to scarcity, over-use of water and food sources, under-investment in new sources of arability, and unregulated soil and water pollution. Subsistence corruption by government officials is another feature. Water corruption is particularly damaging; siphoning funds off public water sector budgets skews the already uneven allocation of water resources for the state and compounds the difficulty of effective hunger alleviation and sanitation. The 2008 Global Corruption Report suggests that water corruption represents 20-30% of funds yearly absconded from public water sector budgets; translating into US$48 billion in additional costs over the next decade to reach the MDGs on water and sanitation (Transparency International 2008).

Subsistence corruption is permitted simply because states possess inadequate legal frameworks controlling land and water use. As a result, contradictions between “sectoral laws on land, water and pastoralism, and between these and legislation on decentralisation, exacerbate tensions around property rights over land and water” (Cotula 2012). Corruption has a further negative impact of undermining trust in the legitimacy of a given regime. This can poison the investment climate, reducing much-needed external funding, and prompt local disenchantment with the state’s ability to provide legitimate employments structures. In the Sahel, low state capacity has severely limited opportunities for additional income.
2.4.3 Economic Infrastructure, Energy and Trade

As the EC-West Africa Regional Strategy Paper (2008-2013) points out, there is an odd irony at work in the environmental narrative of the Sahel:

West Africa has considerable potential as regards energy, with oil and hydroelectric power sources and a climate offering substantial prospects for solar energy. Despite these advantages however, energy costs remain very high and hinder the competitiveness of the enterprises in the region. These costs are the result of flawed policies on prices, investment and management of the sector, which have led to poorly performing and inefficient production and distribution structures … [plus] the large number of regional and national networks involved and the large geographical areas to be covered. (EC-West Africa Regional Strategy Paper 2008-2013, 33)

On the plus side, the area has pockets of natural resources, enough to attract the attention of established and emerging energy importers from Europe and China. On the other, with the world’s lowest electricity consumption, the Sahel represents genuine energy under-development (Intelligent Energy for Europe Programme 2006: 19). Heavily reliant on traditional biomass (primarily coal, charcoal and wood) for as much as 80% of its energy, the region is also dependent on imported fossil fuels. The challenges are to make available modern energy services, reliable and extensive energy infrastructure, and sufficient production capacity. Although many external players are interested in lucrative mining contracts, the sour investment climate of the Sahel prevents local governments from being very selective. Getting the Sahelian states to abide by the heavy lifting of the 2005 Amended Cotonou Partnership Agreement (rather than signing contracts that promise short-term returns) is perhaps the greatest challenge for the EU in this regard.

African ‘green growth’ may present the best method to circumvent the deep reliance that developed states now have on fossil fuel imports and make a virtue of its heavy agricultural dependence and weak ecological carrying capacity. Promoting “investment flows towards green growth in middle and low-income economies” is required in order to kick-start the mainstreaming of green technologies and “correctly price scarce resources and address failures of market signals” (Kaberuka 2012). In this regard, the following projects warrant specific highlighting.

The Regional Solar Programme (RSP), a cooperative project between the EU and the Permanent Inter-States Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel, promotes rural economic development via photovoltaic pumping and electrification systems. The technology is uniquely suited to the desiccated Sahelian climate and has quickly become popular amongst villages and private operators. Photovoltaic-powered drip irrigation is the latest generation of this technology, representing a quantum leap forward from basic water provision to dramatically enhanced agricultural yields. This produces enhanced food availability and can be accessed for both home production and purchase of local smallholders (including female farmers).

Desertec is a project proposal by a consortium of primarily German energy investors to establish a single market in electricity throughout the EU-Middle East-North Africa region. Although the proposed extensive array of parabolic photovoltaic troughs are to be built in North Africa and the Middle East, some parts of the Sahel region could provide similar desert-based solar power plants, supplemented by wind and hydro power. The benefits for this under-developed region in terms of generated export earnings and overhauled electricity grid infrastructure would be considerable (Knies et al. 2008; cf. Brix 2009).
3. IMPLEMENTING THE SAHEL STRATEGY

With the important exception of the implications of the Libya conflict, the EU’s Sahel strategy accurately identified most of the challenges affecting the region. In order to counter such challenges, the strategy identifies a series of strategic lines of action that set the framework for a number of concrete projects. This section takes stock of the first year of implementation of the strategy, provides background information on potential future action and offers an assessment of the strengths and shortcomings of the strategy. Firstly, we will analyse the plan for action that was developed after the strategy was adopted. This will include a critical commentary on the implementation work. Secondly, we zoom in on the long-standing debate over the advisability of CSDP action, which is receiving renewed prominence in the light of the deteriorating security situation. Thirdly, we analyse the rhetoric about the need for more regional cooperation. In this regard close attention will be paid to the role of Algeria as the only remaining regional powerhouse.

3.1 An Evaluation of the Sahel Action Plan

The Sahel strategy proposed intensified engagement along four strategic lines of action: (i) development, good governance and internal conflict resolution; (ii) political and diplomatic action; (iii) security and rule of law; and (iv) the fight against violent extremism and radicalisation. On the basis of these four lines of action and in consultation with the partner countries, the EEAS developed a plan of action that built on the existing engagement and proposed a set of new initiatives.

A visual overview of this plan as well as a financial breakdown of EU funding are provided below.

EU Strategic Lines of Action
for Security and Development in the Sahel

Based on: EEAS (2011) and Lopez Blanco (2011b)
3.1.1 Political Progress

The overall trend as identified in the Sahel strategy implementation report is that significant progress has been made while challenges remain. Positive developments have taken place not only within the region but also with respect to the overall coherence of EU action. In the former category, one can point to the high degree of acceptance of the strategy by partner countries, a convergence of threat perceptions and intended policy responses and – perhaps most important – an increasingly cooperative attitude of Algeria. As recent ministerial level visits indicate, a significant level of ‘quiet diplomacy’ is ongoing (cf. Gros-Verheyde 2011).

The most visible progress, however, relates to the functioning of the EU structure itself. As a flagship project of the EEAS, the Sahel strategy is receiving a high degree of political as well as bureaucratic attention. As such, the awareness of the interconnectedness between the security and development domains has increased. One study argues, for example, that the Sahel task force structure is to some extent ‘forcing actors to work together’ and that rather than ‘securitising development’ the strategy is ‘developmentising security’ (Lopez Lucia 2012).

One other aspect that has so far remained largely unnoticed is the increase in coordination responsibilities of the EU delegations. In the context of the Sahel, the scarcity of country expertise combined with the increased availability of financial resources is effectively creating a window of opportunity for delegation-led initiatives spanning all fields of action and building a more coherent EU foreign policy from the bottom up. This also includes a greater role in fostering information exchange concerning European efforts and bilateral initiatives by individual member states.

3.1.2 Project Implementation

Since the adoption of the Sahel strategy, a number of new projects have been set-up and others already in the implementation stage have progressed. While a detailed overview would go beyond the remit of the study, a number of ‘project highlights’ warrant some attention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development &amp; good governance</th>
<th>Mali (ongoing, starting, planned)</th>
<th>Mauritania (ongoing, starting, planned)</th>
<th>Niger (ongoing, starting, planned)</th>
<th>Regional (ongoing, starting, planned)</th>
<th>Total / line of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>245</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security &amp; rule of law</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10,5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight against extremism</td>
<td>6,5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9,5</td>
<td>3,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total / destination</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>49,5</td>
<td>29,5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sahel strategy - financial implementation (amounts in MEUR) - grand total 660,7 MEUR

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26 Interview with multiple EU officials, Brussels, March 2012.
27 Interview with multiple EU officials, Brussels, March 2012.
28 The consolidated financial overview below is based on the Sahel strategy implementation report (EEAS 2012).
A number of initiatives are situated at the regional level. The **Counter Terrorism Sahel** programme, financed through the long-term component of Instrument for Stability (€6,7 million, 2012-2014 period), aims to strengthen local capacities and improve regional cooperation for fighting terrorism and organised crime. It includes the creation of a virtual Sahel Security College similar to the European Police College for training justice and law enforcement actors and fostering the sharing of information and expertise. The College’s “kick-off” is to take place in the spring of 2012 and the first courses (e.g. train the trainers) are scheduled from September 2012 onwards. Within all three countries involved (Mali, Mauritania and Niger) the programme also foresees specifically tailored assistance to civilian law enforcement actors. An implicit intention exists, however, to associate military cadres as much as possible, as their exclusion is deemed to be counter-productive. The implementation is in the hands of a consortium that is led by CIVIPOL (a French agency) and also includes Spanish, Belgian, Italian and Austrian partner agencies. Another programme funded by the IFS (€2,2 million) is the **West Africa Police Information System**. This initiative aims to design a platform for police information exchange linking in a first phase the tools of 5 countries (Benin, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), ECOWAS and INTERPOL. The European Development Fund also provides financial means (€41 million between 2012 and 2017) for the **ECOWAS Peace and Security Project** with the twin aims of strengthening institutional capacity and implementing selected thematic components of ECOWAS conflict prevention efforts. In turn, the **ECOWAS Drug and Crime Action Plan** receives another EDF envelope of €19,7 million.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10th EDF Budget</th>
<th>EU Sahel strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>€533 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>€156 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>€458 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As argued by **Mali**’s Country Strategy Paper (CSP) and National Indicative Programme (NIP), “the inadequacy of the infrastructure and the costs of energy and transport are the main factors holding back the country’s development”, whilst critical levels of poverty (affecting 73% of the rural population), lack of health and education blight much of the population. The 9th EDF focused on north-south road infrastructure, decentralisation and implementation of the Strategic Framework for Poverty Reduction. The 10th EDF is tied in closely to the government’s Strategy Framework for Growth and Poverty Reduction, dividing its €533 million funding into four main tranches: governance (11%), economic development of the North and Niger delta (50%), reform in the education, health and transport sectors (28%) and other programmes providing support for productive sectors under Economic Partnership Agreements (11%). The Sahel strategy, for its part, makes clear that the PSPSDN remains an objective by which to combat insecurity and terrorism in northern Mali; alongside targeting drug trafficking. Mali will direct its €50 million ‘Sahel envelope’ along 5 main sectors, reflecting the administrative and security themes of its PSPSDN: Justice (€20 million); Decentralization (€15 million); Security (€8 million); Conflict Prevention/ Resolution (€6,5 million); Political/Diplomatic Support (€0.5 million). It should be noted that many of these programmes are currently on hold as a result of the Tuareg rebellion.

**Mauritania**’s CSP/NIP identifies 2 focal sectors of the 10th EDF funding of €156 million: Governance (€47 million) and regional integration and transport (€56 million). In addition, general budget support for poverty alleviation (€40 million) is envisaged alongside ‘activities outside the focal sectors’ (€13 million). Mauritania’s comprehensive national strategy to fight terrorism identifies 5 components: doctrinal and religious; cultural and academic; communication; political; justice, defence and security.
Mauritania will spend its €8,4 million ‘Sahel envelope’ on these internal components. This includes, for instance, a major border security project financed through the short-term component of the IfS.

As argued by Niger’s CSP/NIP, the 10th EDF has two objectives: supporting the National Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy and the practical application of ownership, alignment and harmonisation of results-based management. Given the strong imbalance between its demographic growth and its gross economic growth, Niger will spend its €458 million in boosting rural growth and improving regional integration and good governance. For Niger, the Sahel strategy identifies the current action plan for judicial reform (via the Superior Court of Niger dealing with terrorism and trafficking), and the need for a specific strategy to fight insecurity and terrorism. Niger will thus divide its €91,6 million ‘Sahel envelope’ between administrative improvements (judiciary reforms) and alleviating the ongoing food crisis (2011 saw the EU release €12 million to address the food crisis). Additional short-term IfS support (€9,1 million) has been made available to help Niger cope with the reintegration of the Libyan returnees.

3.1.3 Critical Remarks

The above makes clear that EU engagement with the Sahel region is significant and on the increase (cf. Council Conclusions on Sahel 2012). It is not surprising therefore that many programme-specific areas display signs of progress. On the basis of contacts with officials, a number of critical remarks can be made as well. These concern a continued fragmentation of efforts in combination with a lack of transparency, and a tendency to underestimate the importance of food security challenges and the fallout of the Libyan conflict.

In spite of the popular discourse promising to synchronise all different EU instruments, important shortfalls in realising a truly comprehensive approach remain. This concerns in particular the sharing of information detailing how development money is spent. Interlocutors from the humanitarian as well as the security community indicate that, in spite of everyone’s praising of the strategy’s comprehensiveness, they are not kept in the loop on development programming. In addition, a detailed compilation of all EU engagement across the different lines of action is not available. The EEAS plan of action does provide a broad overview, but it is not clear how the different stepping-stones identified on the lines of action (e.g. ‘safe and secure environment gradually achieved’) are linked to concrete actions that can realistically deliver the desired effect. For all the claims made about an integrated approach, the Sahel strategy remains overwhelmingly driven by the development agenda – as the relative allocation of financial means testifies.

As far as the analysis of the humanitarian community is concerned, the truly critical issue that needs to be addressed is that of food security. It seems surprising therefore that in the overview of EU financial assistance, food security is only covered as a secondary issue (one programme in Mali and a sub-programme in Niger). The additional funding made available from the EDF B envelope arguably provides a partial response to this criticism, but it remains a fact that the lion’s share of development money is spent elsewhere. This has led ECHO to step in with important sums of money. Since 2007, ECHO has allocated over €250 million to combat malnutrition in the Sahel. In 2012 alone it spent €123,5 million on actions such as prepositioning food stocks and nutrition operations (ECHO Factsheet 2012). While there is clear support at the highest political level for making food security an urgent priority (cf. the Council Conclusions on Sahel 2012, which approvingly note the allocation of an additional €164,5

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29 Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, February and March 2012. Having said this, development officials vehemently contested this accusation.
million), rigorous follow-up is necessary as emergency humanitarian aid is no substitute for long-term agricultural development.

The discourse that ‘progress is being made while challenges remain’ has become a familiar one to describe many conflict hot spots – some of which are manifestly deteriorating. It could be argued that the regional impact caused by the conflict in Libya was severely underestimated until the dramatic escalation of events in Mali in March 2012. Although some EU interlocutors maintained a resolutely upbeat tone, others were more critical. As one interviewee explained: “the whole point of having the Sahel strategy was to act preventively, but we were simply too slow. As the years went by, the situation has now clearly deteriorated beyond the point of prevention.” As debates in the UN Security Council make clear some non-Western states do not hesitate to depict the increase of instability in the Sahel as a direct consequence of the Western-led intervention in Libya – a position that France and Britain disagree with (cf. UN 2012b). From a European perspective, it seems clear that any existing causality is likely to be of an unintended kind. Yet the intervention in Libya has had a profoundly negative effect on the European agenda in the Sahel, which now results in a certain level of political schizophrenia.

3.2 Regional Capacity Building through the CSDP

The proposal for engaging with the Sahel region through the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy has been in circulation for more than two years (cf. Gros-Verheyde 2010). On the one hand, operation EUFOR Chad/CAR had already set an important institutional precedent of how different EU instruments receive an important boost in political visibility through CSDP action. On the other hand, the deteriorating security situation – in combination with an evolution in thinking on the part of the EU structures and member states – has put this option again high on the agenda. It is therefore useful to trace the origins of this proposal and assess what it could realistically deliver.

3.2.1 The Mali Option

When the idea of CSDP engagement originally surfaced, it envisaged the EU offering military support to the Malian security forces redeploying to the north of the territory. The near-total absence of state control in the north was identified to be the root of the problem. Several hundred European military advisors would have been required to accompany the Malian army in their drive to re-establish a forward presence. This proposal encountered two major obstacles. Some member states displayed great reluctance whenever the use of military means was discussed. At the same time, the Malian government at the time assumed a somewhat ambiguous position on whether it would actually welcome such support – or whether it was indeed willing to extend its control over its northern territory. As a result of these obstacles, the proposal seemed to have died quietly. In this context, one can only wonder whether the implementation of the Malian PSPSDN would have run more smoothly if it had received not only EU financing but also mentoring in the field.

In the autumn of 2011 the terms of the debate started to shift. The arrival of returnees and Tuareg fighters from Libya wetted the local appetite for increased external assistance. At the same time, the CSDP structures started redesigning the proposal as a civilian mission with a geographical focus on Niger. As this was the most cooperative partner state, it was hoped that Niger might ‘lead the way’ and that progress here would convince the other Sahel to jump on the train. The Foreign Affairs Council on 1 December 2011 encouraged the High Representative to take forward preparatory work on “a CSDP engagement to reinforce regional security capabilities in the region, in close cooperation with the African Union”.

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30 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
3.2.2 The Niger Option

On 9 March 2012, a draft Crisis Management Concept was presented to the Political and Security Committee and was surprisingly well received (cf. Gros-Verheyde 2012a). The proposed CSDP mission would provide advice, assistance and training to the gendarmerie and other law enforcement agencies in Niger with a view to make operational the equipment and infrastructure financed by the EU and its member states. The overall objective would be to improve the control of borders and territory and enable government intervention wherever required. As such it would involve extensive coordination work with regional partners as well as accompanying measures in terms of equipment and infrastructure (e.g. developing a joint information system including all law enforcement actors). In practical terms, this proposal boils down to reinforcing the existing EU funding programmes with human expertise. A few dozen experts would serve to boost the capacity of the EU Delegation to help implement projects in the security realm, hence ensuring the detailed follow-up that Community measures struggle to generate by themselves. On 23 March 2012, the Foreign Affairs Council approved the Crisis Management Concept for a civilian CSDP Advisory, Assistance and Training mission in the Sahel (Council Conclusions on Sahel 2012, cf. Gros-Verheyde 2012b). In light of the sharp deterioration of the situation in Mali in the following weeks, the consensus in the PSC reportedly was that the mission became more urgent – leading to calls for an accelerated deployment.31 A technical mission was planned to visit the region in May and the Concept of Operations is expected in June, with a view to deploying EU personnel by July.

On a more critical note, it could be argued that the proposed Niger option – designed with a view to accommodating the imposed political constraints – is unlikely to deliver a turn-around of the current downward security trend in the region as a whole. Although the proposed measures are likely to be individually useful, they do not provide a clear answer to an escalation of the rebellion in Mali and the continuing threat posed by AQIM and criminal groups. It seems therefore likely that the proposed mission may require expansion in the short to medium term future. While a geographic expansion to include Mali, Mauritania and potentially other states is already on the agenda, it is not outside the realm of possibilities that a more robust (i.e. armed) EU presence might be required (e.g. in order to provide a sufficient level of force protection or to provide air mobile transport).

3.2.3 Future CSDP Options for Military Assistance

Can the CSDP architecture also be of use in the realm of military assistance? One option that has recently emerged on the radar screen is that of offering assistance to the military operation that ECOWAS intends to undertake in Mali (cf. Gros-Verheyde 2012c). Such assistance may be financial (through the African Peace Facility), but may also include material support in those areas where ECOWAS capabilities are limited (intelligence, logistics, planning etc.) Another option is to use the CSDP framework for coordinating the existing bilateral military assistance programmes pursued by individual EU member states. Before considering such options, it is useful to ponder what the debate about military assistance boils down to, namely a quest to endow the Sahel states with the material means to exercise full control over their territory.

Robust action against terrorist groups and criminal trafficking networks implies the conduct of long-range, intelligence-driven desert operations. These require highly mobile armoured forces and significant air support for reconnaissance, surveillance and transport purposes. The key problem is that the Sahel states – or ECOWAS, for that matter – have only very limited means to move their security forces around over their vast territories. The respective air forces of Mali, Mauritania and Niger consist of

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a handful of airplanes and helicopters each (cf. IISS 2012). The only armed forces in the region that are well equipped for such tasks are those of Morocco and Algeria. Correspondingly, what the Sahel states are most interested in is not so much training and advice but rather the provision of extra material capabilities, especially in the realm of surveillance and air-mobile assets. This would give the Sahel states more flexibility to use their limited resources wherever they are needed the most and therefore directly increase their territorial control capacity.

Given that individual EU member states as well as international partners such as the US are already providing significant military support to the Sahel states on a bilateral basis, it could be envisaged to use the CSDP structures in Brussels as well as any eventual mission that may materialise as a framework to coordinate all ongoing and future assistance. Such a coordination role would entail no extra financial commitments from member states unwilling to play a role but still provide a boost to overall policy coherence and endow such assistance with greater international legitimacy.

3.3 Towards Greater Regional Cooperation? Main Initiatives and Obstacles

The porosity of the Sahel borders and transnational nature of the political dynamics that characterise the region mean that lasting security and stability requires not only the strengthening of state-structures and greater economic development, but also comprehensive dialogue among the main regional actors. This said, the lack of serious interaction among the core Sahel countries is patent, which is not surprising in a region defined by weak governance structures and populated by non-state actors that have connections with (and often the connivance of) various governments.

Sustainable cooperation among the so-called core Sahel countries is for the moment not viable. Aside from the fact that all three countries lack the resources and capabilities to exercise effective control in large swaths of their territories, there is a lack of political trust among them, particularly between Mauritania and Mali. In the words of one EU official, “The Mauritanians don’t trust the Malians. The only country acceptable to all three is Niger, but they are very poor and disorganized.” Against this backdrop, we must distinguish two main frameworks of regional cooperation, led by two different external actors: European and Algeria.

3.3.1 European-led Regional Efforts

While acknowledging the many hurdles that stand in the way, Europeans are acutely aware that regional cooperation is a prerequisite for stability in the Sahel. In this regard, both the EU and individual European countries are building on a similar political approach to the region. This consists in a dual-track approach that includes both the fostering of multilateral initiatives (such as the above-mentioned Sahel Security College, West Africa Police Information System, ECOWAS Peace and Security Project and ECOWAS Drug and Crime Action Plan) and an effort to engage the core Sahel countries in a bilateral manner as a step to then work on coordinating their efforts. While Mali has been so far been the main focus, the EU has as of September 2011 decided to reorient its strategy and reward the best practices by prioritising (in terms of aid and assistance) those countries that show the will to tackle the region’s security problems. In this spirit, the EU is intent on refocusing its efforts on Mauritania and Niger in particular.

Mauritania is perhaps the brightest spot, in the sense that it is the more willing and able and less problematic of all three. It has the strongest capabilities in the region and has shown a real commitment to tackling the problem of terrorism and lack of governance structures in the Sahel. At a

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32 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
33 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
34 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
bilateral level, Mauritania is supported primarily by Spain and France but also increasingly by Britain, particularly in the field of counter-terrorism. 35 Niger has also shown political will in battling terrorism and insecurity in the north, but it is very underdeveloped and faces a critical lack of resources and capabilities. The EU has currently reoriented its efforts towards Niger, with a particular emphasis on development and good governance. France has provided military aid and maintains a Military Assistance Operational Detachment in northern Niger (Chena 2011: 115). Finally, although also engaging in bilateral cooperation with the French (who keep another Military Assistance Operational Detachment in northern Mali) (Chena 2011: 115) and having been the greatest recipient of EU aid, Mali’s commitment to strengthening security in the Sahel is in doubt. In the words of a European official, “Mali is the core of the problem and the core of the solution.”36 The EU’s expectation was that shifting resources away from Mali and onto Niger and Mauritania will create an incentive for Mali to commit to strengthening security and development in the Sahel. 37 It will be only once all three are committed to a common framework and endeavour that inter-Sahel cooperation can occur and that the region’s security and development problem can begin to be tackled effectively.

3.3.2 Algerian-led Regional Efforts

So far, the main framework of multilateral coordination is counter-terrorism focussed and led by Algeria. Only the Algerians have the capability, expertise and financial clout to make a real impact in the security of the region. Algeria hosts the Comité d’état-major opérationnel conjoint (CEMOC), a joint operational staff committee for Sahelian counter terrorist forces in Tamanrasset and an intelligence fusion centre (Unité de Fusion et Liaison, UFL) in Algiers that provides support to the CEMOC. Given the need to consider the security dynamics of the Sahel in their broader geopolitical context, Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania are planning to expand their counter-terrorism structures to the so-called ‘second ring’ of Sahel countries, namely Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad and Senegal. 38 Boko Haram’s growing activeness in northern Nigeria and its potentially destabilizing effects on Niger make this expansion increasingly necessary.

The US, for whom Algeria is its closest partner in the region in the area of counterterrorism, accepts Algeria’s role as the region’s natural leader in security matters (Chena 2011: 112). While Washington harbours some doubts about the depth of Algeria’s commitment to reduce terrorism in the Sahel, it sees no alternative to Algiers’ leadership.39 Although not engaging directly in the CEMOC and UFL structures, America’s bilateral coordination with Algeria represents a support of this wider framework. The EU, for its part, has had little interaction with this framework. In the words of an EU official, “we have tried to assist with this process by engaging in the institutions, but the Algerians want to control everything”.40 This said, the EU realises the importance of this framework and will continue to make efforts to engage it. According to a number of European officials, relations with Algeria have improved over the last two years, particularly for fear in Algiers of a contagion from the Arab spring and the worsening security situation in the Sahel as a result of the Libya crisis. In this context, Europeans are optimistic about the possibility of sending a liaison officer to the UFL soon.41 Having

35 Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, February-March 2012.
36 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
37 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012. However, at the time of writing (April 2012) it was still unclear to what extent the outbreak of a full-blown crisis would be followed by a re-shifting of attention back to Mali.
38 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
39 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
40 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
41 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
said this, the lack of interaction between the European-led initiatives and the Algerian-led ones remains the greatest obstacle to improving security in the Sahel region.

The lack of EU engagement in the Algerian-led regional cooperation initiative (or, for that matter, greater EU-Algerian regional cooperation in any other form) is explained by mutual EU-Algerian suspicions and also EU suspicions about Mali, a state most Europeans perceive to be too close to Algeria and insufficiently committed to fighting terrorism and insecurity in the region. In turn, the Algerians perceive the EU (in whose initiatives they often see a French hand) as a potential challenge to the status quo and therefore are wary of anything that smacks of EU direct involvement, let alone a military presence. Algiers prefers to deal with European countries bilaterally. The British have a liaison officer at CEMOC and the Algerians cooperate with the Germans in counter terrorism. A related problem is that Europeans see the CEMOC and UFL as an “empty shell” and have doubts about Algeria’s commitment to strengthening security in the Sahel. In the words of a European official, “there are suspicions that the CEMOC and the UFL in Algiers might be an Algerian ploy to sterilize any other attempts” to combat terrorism and insecurity in the region “that might evolve.”

Many in Europe and the United States wonder to what extent the relatively low level insecurity represents a real problem for the Algerian regime. In the words of one EU official, “the Algerians know where AQIM is, but they are not going after them because they say they do not want to go beyond their borders.” In fact, the existence of terrorism in southern Algeria and the Sahel serves Algiers in a number of ways. Internally, it may serve to strengthen the stability of the regime. Many believe that it was the strong memory of terrorism and insecurity that prevented the Arab spring from taking hold in Algeria. Additionally, the existence of terrorism in the Sahel provides Algeria, given its prominent position in the region and excellence in the area of counter terrorism, with the possibility to lead and strengthens its utility and hand vis-à-vis the United States (Chena 2011).

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42 Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, February-March 2012.
43 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
44 Multiple interviews with EU officials, Brussels, March 2012.
45 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
46 Interview with EU official, Brussels, March 2012.
47 Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2012.
4. TOWARDS A REGIONAL POLITICAL AGENDA

The Sahel matters. It is an inescapable part of the broader European neighbourhood. The region’s underdevelopment and general insecurity affect EU interests directly – through migration, illegal trafficking and terrorism – but also by spilling into other regions that are of vital importance to the EU, notably North and West Africa. What is more, in the Sahel the EU has the ability to make a decisive difference. It is a part of the world where EU leadership is credible and capable. Fostering stability and prosperity in the Sahel is not only an objective in itself that benefits a rapidly growing and desperately poor population. It is also a means to help establish a ring of well-governed neighbouring countries protecting European prosperity and security.

Given the Sahel’s current situation, development efforts are on their own likely to reproduce the existing political dynamics, unless they are accompanied by a more transformative political agenda. In the past, the ‘right of political initiative’ has all too often been left in the hands of the individual EU member states. This fostered fragmentation of the overall effort and led to a regional perception that the EU is beholden to national agendas. The implementation of the Sahel strategy offers a unique opportunity to overcome these problems. A more comprehensive and genuinely European engagement with the region can deliver a strong impetus to break with the ways of the past. For this to happen, the following policy suggestions need to be considered.

- Development money not only needs to be complemented by investment in a regional capacity built-up of security tools, but these different policy instruments need to be synchronised in function of a political agenda premised upon the strengthening of the EU’s role in the region and of the core countries’ governmental structures. It must emphasise the inclusion of all population groups, friendly relations with neighbouring countries and a judicial approach towards domestic security issues that respects human rights.

- The EU as a whole needs to acknowledge that Algeria is the indispensable power in the region. Given that Algeria does not need European development money and has important strategic leverage over the EU in terms of energy supplies and security cooperation, current instruments for EU-Algeria engagement are inadequate. As argued elsewhere (cf. Darbouche and Dennison 2011), the EU must seek to build a ‘differentiated partnership’ with Algeria that acknowledges this country’s economic requirements. This needs to be done at the EU-level rather than pursued ad hoc by individual member states in a fragmented fashion.

- Apart from diplomatic outreach to Algeria, the EU should pursue a closer partnership with Nigeria and reinforce its partnership with ECOWAS in the context of the Sahel. This, however, must be seen as a complement to greater ties to Algeria and not as an alternative to it. If Algeria is the centre of gravity of the northern half of the Sahel, Nigeria plays a similar role in the south. While the most pressing problems pertain to the northern part of the Sahel, the emergence of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, its challenge to Niger and links with AQIM make the southern front an up and coming threat to the security and development of the Sahel as well as neighbouring West Africa –another region of vital strategic concern for the EU.

- The Sahel strategy is premised on a synthesis of development objectives and security goals. However, the actual operationalisation of such synthesis is found wanting, as the Sahel strategy takes into account neither the range nor the rationale of existing EU-Africa projects in the region. It must be remembered that the current EU strategy for sub-Saharan countries, including Sahel states is an uneasy amalgam of (1) the long-standing development goals of the Cotonou Partnership (including the security provisions of the 2003 Amended Cotonou Partnership), (2)
CSPs and NIPs (national and regional) targets (3) achieving the MDGs and (4) the Eight Thematic Partnerships of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy. Yet none of these are systematically engaged with in the EEAS Sahel strategy. As such, a future revision of the Sahel strategy must make a greater effort to incorporate and integrate the wide array of instruments and frameworks that govern the EU’s relations with the countries in question.

- Building upon the model offered by the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plans, a new series of individual Sahel country Action Plans should be negotiated on a bilateral basis with each of the Sahel states. The lack of practical synergies between the Cotonou framework, EDF funding lines, ECHO budgets, and the proposed development and security goals of the Sahel strategy is disconcerting. Failure to address these disconnects means duplication, contradiction, and complications between separate EU strategies vis-à-vis the same region and countries. Accordingly, the proposed individual Sahel country Action Plans should be conceived inter-institutionally to ensure synergies between the strategic objectives laid out in the Sahel Strategy and DevCo/Cotonou/EDF benchmarks.

- The key development challenge that needs urgent prioritisation concerns the issue of food security. As long as the region is going through repeated food crises, all economic development will be systematically undermined as countries retreat into a near Hobbesian state. The prevention of future food crises requires above all a push towards innovative agricultural reform, increasing production capacity (crops or herds), via harvesting machines, good practice/training on harvesting and treatment of seeds, increased storage facilities, drilling of wells, etc.

- The proposal for CSDP action needs to be pursued, but in the full knowledge that greater efforts will be required. Apart from being a fully complementary tool to existing Community measures, a civil-military CSDP mission constitutes by far the best means to ensure a high level of political interest from the member states. This will generate significantly more visibility for EU action as well as a more in-depth debate within European capitals on the effectiveness and coherence of the existing European engagement. However, this debate cannot avoid some self-criticism. A small civilian mission will turn out to be insufficient. Given the geography of the terrain, military assistance to local armed forces will inevitably be required. An incremental approach of expansion, furthermore, risks driving up the overall cost. By going beyond a specific operational role and moving on to coordinate future military assistance by member states, the EU’s policy coherence, situational awareness and ultimate effectiveness could be greatly improved.

- European budget lines are not meant to finance the policy preferences of individual member states. However, the current division of labour between the EU and member states ensures just that. As the EU stays clear from the military component (critical to ensuring the security of the Sahel region), its efforts on other fronts (i.e. development, policing, civilian CSDP) reproduce a situation whereby a handful of member states call the shots strategically and the EU’s role is but one among other instruments at the service of national agendas. Paradoxically, the comparative benefit of a military CSDP component (in which costs lie where they fall) is that it allows those member states that have a stronger interest in the region to contribute more and it strengthens the voice of other member states (who contribute financially via non-military instruments anyway) by improving the legitimacy and accountability of the policy process.
A Coherent EU Strategy for the Sahel

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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