

## CHALLENGES IN THE SAHEL : OPPORTUNITIES FOR EUROPE

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The Sahel (in Arabic literally means “shore, coast”) the semi-arid African region that encompasses the southern transitional strip – between the Sahara and the arable areas – runs from the western coasts in Mauritania to the coasts of the Red Sea in Sudan. It is dotted with many threats and risks, not only to the people living in these vast lands, but also to the neighbouring countries, the stability in the Mediterranean and ultimately to Europe.

Historically, the Sahel has been a cultural and religious border area between the Arab-Islamic world of North Africa and the many peoples of the so-called Black Africa.

Essentially there are two large groups, either nomadic or sedentary, all of them competing for a series of scarce resources, especially water and the little fertile land. This cultural, ethnic, and resource divergence has been a continual source of conflict and tension between communities that has driven the region into chronic political and economic instability.

This instability continues, with some states that can hardly control all of their territory, let alone their borders, turning the Sahel region into a perfect area for the development of criminal activities such as trafficking of arms, people and drugs, as well as violent groups of a tribal or ethnic nature that often disguise their positions using the arguments of religious fundamentalism.

The common characteristics of the region's territories derive from a combination of causes and consequences such as the poverty of water and agricultural resources; poor soil; tribal, ethnic and religious tensions; lack of investment in basic infrastructure; and state failures. Many suffer from economic dependence on neighbouring countries; illegal activities; population displacements; weak political and institutional structures; and illegal trafficking routes towards Europe. All these, chronic and accumulated, result in the fragmentation and unviability of the Sahel states.

What happens in countries like Mali or Niger has direct repercussions in the waters of the Mediterranean. Instability in the Sahel translates into increased risks and threats within the region, and ultimately threats to Europe.

The Sahel region is a perfect storm of crises which have practically all occurred at the same time in the same geographical space in what has been called a “polygon of crisis”. Five areas of challenge are described here : political; demographic; food and climate; economic and security.

## **THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE**

Most of the Sahel countries achieved their independence from France in the 1960s. Thus, all these countries are young States, at least in their idea of the Nation-State, which means that they still have unstable political systems lacking maturity. It has not helped that for decades, this instability has been translated into coups. The situation has been further aggravated by the fact that state structures, apart from being young, are fragile and have a lack of resources of all kinds to face the problems that occur in their tremendously large territories.

Mali and Niger, two of the largest and most troubled Sahel countries, are unable to stabilize or control large parts of their territory due to the lack of military and police resources to control them with a state presence, and have failed to establish the rule of law and control multiple porous borders.

The lack of state power in these vast tracts of land is the ideal breeding ground for the proliferation of criminal activities, such as arms and human trafficking, but they also represent an empty space where jihadist ideas easily finds an audience. To this toxic mix must be added the strong presence of other armed groups such as ethnic and tribal militias, criminal gangs dedicated to the trafficking of arms, drugs and people, smugglers and the aforementioned religious fundamentalists.

These countries have north-south divisions with a very clear capital centre in the south, facing a periphery that suffers from neglect and the lack of investment and attention from the capital. The case of Mali is a good example of how this centralized state nucleus in the south has had corrosive effects on the marginalized north. This has led to the distrust of the Tuareg ethnic groups in the north, which has resulted in continuous rebellions and uprisings against the power of Bamako since the first days of independence.

## **THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE**

In the Sahel, not only are the states young, so too are their population. The Sahel's birth rate is one of the highest in the world, especially when compared to Europe. The case of Mali and Niger is particularly striking. The number of births for each woman is 5.8 in Mali and 6.9 in Niger. To contextualise it, in Austria and Spain the figure is 1.47 and 1.26 respectively. Along with these high birth rates, these

countries have one of the lowest life expectancies in the world, being 58 years for Mali and 62 years for Niger.

In general, the countries of the Sahel fringe are characterized by population pyramids with a very wide base, so that the vast majority of the population is less than 30 years old (Mali 70%).

So there's a complex demographic scenario, increasing urbanizing trends, with large percentages of the population living in the capitals and leaving rural areas. These internal population movements aggravate the situation in rural areas, which are disadvantaged compared to cities in terms of the distribution of public funds for the development of infrastructures (roads, hospitals, schools, etc.)

Rapid population growth in these countries leads to competition for scarce available resources. A very young, poorly literate, urbanized population, with few and bad employability options, fuels the clashes between communities, especially in rural areas, even more so when these tensions are encouraged by religious fundamentalists who use these situations of need to spread their message of hatred.

## **THE FOOD AND CLIMATE CHALLENGE**

For obvious reasons, these two challenges are closely linked. In the Sahel countries there are two well differentiated climatic zones: A fertile south and an arid north and centre with subsistence agriculture. During the year there are really seasons, the rainy one during the summer and the dry one that lasts almost 10 months of the year.

The already scarce agricultural resources in rural areas in the interior of these countries have been suffering a progressive decrease in their production due to the advance of desertification caused by climate change. For example, the historic Malian city of Timbuktu, formerly considered the gateway to the desert but surrounded by fertile lands, is now engulfed by the sands of the Sahara desert moving south. This desertification directly affects the precarious subsistence agricultural economies, forcing many people to leave the rural environment and to emigrate either to the cities or north to Europe, increasing the numbers of irregular immigration.

Over the past five decades, persistent droughts have contributed to recurring famines. The humanitarian crisis that the Sahel is currently experiencing has its origin in the food crisis that began in 2010. The situation worsened in 2012 when more than 12 million people were in danger as a result of a major food crisis in the region. This extreme situation has especially affected the younger generations in a society with generally a low average age. This current situation means that millions of people are in a permanent state of food insecurity.

According to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) “*Over the last half century, the combined effects of population growth, land degradation (deforestation, continuous cropping and overgrazing), reduced and erratic rainfall, lack of coherent environmental policies and misplaced development priorities, have contributed to transform a large proportion of the Sahel into barren land, resulting in the deterioration of the soil and water resources.*”

It is certain that desertification will increase, pushing more and more population to cities where employment is scarce, something that will lead to frustration and social discontent, which may ultimately be a perfect environment for the jihadists among unemployed youth. Knowing these likely future consequences, it is essential to articulate employment policies that serve the population most exposed to the effects of climate change.

## **THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGE**

Sahel countries, although poor or with serious social and economic problems, possess enormous wealth in strategic raw materials such as gold, uranium, iron, phosphates and possibly oil. However, exploiting and exporting these mineral and resource reserves is a difficult task and beyond the scope of regional states, so they call upon foreign companies (French, Russian, Chinese, etc.) for their exploitation.

The vast majority of the workforce in the Sahel countries are engaged in agriculture. In some countries like Mali, its contribution to GDP is around 40%. But not only in macroeconomic terms is agriculture important, because of its central role in the food security of millions of people whose only means of subsistence is agriculture. However, agricultural activity in the Sahel remains underdeveloped and precarious (especially in the absence of mechanization) due to an almost total dependence on three to four months of rain a year.

The different cycles of droughts that followed each other in the 1970s and 1980s caused massive losses in agricultural and livestock production, as well as loss of human lives due to hunger, malnutrition and related diseases, resulting in massive displacement of people and economies shattered.

The increasingly evident climate change is having a clear negative impact on agricultural production and food security in the Sahel

The boundaries of the Sahel countries between the nomadic / livestock north and the agricultural / sedentary south generates tensions over access to natural resources, especially grazing land and water. Climate change and the reduction of cultivated fields will increase these tensions. Similarly, tensions surfaces when mining areas are in grazing areas.

The Sahel countries are among the poorest in the world, especially Mali and Niger. The high dependence of GDP on agricultural activities means that their exposure to the negative impacts of climate change is high. Its effects are likely to be translated into the increase of desertification and the reduction of areas with access to water and cultivated fields. This will have a knock-on effect of clashes between farming and herding and pastoral communities, as well as reduced harvests and associated famines.

As far as the informal economy is concerned, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that 60-70% of the region's economy is outside of legal frameworks. Factors such as drought, poor harvests, desertification and the failure of the state have led many local farmers and herders to conduct illicit businesses simply to make a living. According to the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Africa, the annual revenue from illegal smuggling into the Sahel amounts to €50 billion.

In support of economic development, the EU has launched various programs and funds, together with the UN and the World Bank have pledged an additional €1.3 billion to support the Priority Investment Plan, a regional investment initiative of the G5 Sahel countries aimed at developing more than 40 infrastructure projects. The economic support of the EU is also reflected in actions with displaced people as well as with host communities. Humanitarian aid is focused on people affected by conflict and insecurity, providing them with shelter, emergency food aid, access to medical care and clean water, treatment for malnourished children.

## **THE SECURITY CHALLENGE**

The Sahel region has been characterized by instability, especially the northern areas bordering the Sahara. On a cultural level, the region's tribes are accustomed to nomadism and merchandise smuggling, an activity that over the years has evolved into the trafficking of drugs, weapons and people that we know today.

Apart from this, the region has been prone to tribal revolts and uprisings against the central power, such as the Tuareg revolts in Mali on up to three occasions since the country gained independence from France. The last of these rebellions occurred in 2012 with the already known result of the alliance of interests with jihadist groups and the taking of large tracts of land, including the historic city of Timbuktu.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the presence of armed jihadist groups in the Sahel, especially after the defeat of Daesh in other theatres of global jihadism and also with the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. The latter has meant that large quantities of weapons and mercenaries left Libya moved in the direction of the Sahel, representing a major destabilizing asset. Since then, the jihadist movement has found in the Sahel a perfect space to echo and develop

under encouraging conditions such as the absence of a state presence, discontent and underdevelopment, social and economic crisis, accompanied widespread illicit economic activities.

But in addition, in Mali jihadist groups have taken advantage of and encouraged tribal and ethnic clashes in their favour, moving closer to the predominant Tuareg groups to pursue common economic goals and achieve territorial dominance, something already achieved in 2012 in Azawad.

That attempt to establish an independent state in the Sahel based on Islamic law (Sharia) as a reference, was answered by the international community, with France at the head deploying *Operation Serval* after the request for help from the Bamako government. Had they not acted to stop the advance, all of Mali would have fallen under jihadist rule, which would have had unknown consequences for the region.

*Operation Serval*, in 2014, was expanded in objectives and geographic area under *Operation Barkhane*, and since 2020, *Operation Takuba*, a European military working group that aims to advise, assist and accompany the Armed Forces of Mali in Gao province in the east of the country. The eastern provinces of Mali, near the triple border with Burkina Faso and Niger, are today the most active in terms of jihadist presence that has turned south.

Despite those efforts, thanks to which the Tuareg and jihadist groups were pushed back into the desert, the Sahel remains sanctuary for the most radical elements of global Jihadism after their expulsion from Syria and Iraq. These groups are comfortable, supported and protected in areas where the rule of law and the state have no presence. For this reason, it is essential to tackle the problem with the international community supporting regional governments in terms of political stabilization, economic support, humanitarian assistance and SSR led by the EU.

The active role of the EU in the region is reflected through the three relevant missions of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). The missions are EUCAP Sahel Niger (focused on training and advising the security forces in Niger in the fight against terrorism and organized crime); EUCAP Sahel Mali (training and advising the Malian security forces to ensure the democratic order); and the EUTM-Mali mission (training and support mission for Malian army personnel).

This special focus on Mali is due to the fact that it is there where the new battlefield against global jihadism is located. Mali has many shortcomings in terms of security, like the Sahel countries in general (Chad is a separate case), increased by the large area of land they occupy and the few and poorly equipped forces they have to control it. Mali has just over 4,000 military personnel and Niger 5,500, insufficient figures for territories that are 15 times larger than Austria and 2.5 times larger than Spain. Their Armed and Police Forces have little technical training and

low and unstable motivation, which, added to the scarcity and precariousness of means, makes projecting state power to those areas a complicated task.

For this reason, the European Union, through the two missions it has on the ground mentioned above, is enhancing and strengthening military capabilities to confront the security challenge posed by jihadists and Tuaregs in the north. It is also worth mentioning the peacekeeping role played by the United Nations mission, MINUSMA, a mission that seeks to fill local security gaps until state forces are able to act autonomously. In addition to this mission it seeks to create stabilization conditions for the effective deployment of humanitarian aid programs. This mission has become the most dangerous in the world of all those carried out by the UN.

For the Sahel countries to equip themselves with Armed and Security Forces that provide guarantees and security against the challenge posed by the multiple threats in their territory, the role of the European Union is fundamental. In 2011 in the *Security and Development Strategy for the Sahel*, a series of action priorities were identified, fundamentally focused on the development of security; promotion of the rule of law; improvements in governance; support to the conflict resolution process and radicalization prevention plans.

Since then the European Union has appointed a Sahel Special Representative, a position held by the Spanish Ángel Losada since 2015. The main mission of this figure is to represent the European Union politically and coordinate the agenda with regional governments, managing the implementation of the plans to restore and establish the peace, stability, security and development in the Sahel and in Mali in particular.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is clear that much work remains to be done, not only in Mali but throughout the Sahel region. The Sahel is probably plunged for years of political disintegration, underdevelopment and social conflicts of various reasons, causing serious threats to be projected from this area to the entire region but also beyond, to the Mediterranean and Europe.

The combination of all the challenges mentioned here, especially that of security and its potential impact on the stability of North Africa and its repercussions in Europe, make it more necessary than ever to deploy proactive policies with combined measures in fundamental areas such as cooperation in matters of security, politics, economic development and social stability.

Despite the commitment displayed so far, with the European Union and the United Nations at the helm, it is still not possible to talk about peace. Local

governments are still unable to enforce the rule of law throughout their territory; levels of corruption are high; poverty and underdevelopment are widespread and the jihadist discourse continues to find adherents. This very complex, ethnically, culturally and historically unstable region has become for years a new sanctuary of global jihadism, making the Sahel one of the most dangerous regions on the planet right now.

Precisely for this reason and because of the impact that this can have at all levels, it is necessary to resolve the instability in which the Sahel, especially Mali, is plunged. International action must be focused on strengthening state capacities in matters of security so that they can project their power over the entire territory.

The European Union must continue to play a leading role, especially on everything related to Security Sector Reform (SSR) to strengthen military and police capabilities that make it possible for states like Mali to confront the jihadist threat autonomously and with some guarantee of success.

In words of Ángel Losada, Special Representative of the European Union for the Sahel, *"we must be optimistic about the future of the region and place the issue of the Sahel among the priorities of the international agenda"*. We must not lose sight of the variety of challenges and multidimensional threats that are present today and in the near future in the region.

The line of action established by the European Union must be followed with a comprehensive perspective that focuses on the promotion of governability; the promotion of social dialogue and conflict resolution; sustainable economies with a future; social development especially among youth and enhancement of security and rule of law capabilities. However, all these lines of action should not be tackled exclusively by the EU civilian and military personnel who work there, but must have the active and committed participation of regional and local administrations.

As Federica Mogherini, the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said: *"The stability and the development of the Sahel region are crucial, not only for Africa but also for Europe. We are neighbours, and whatever happens on one of our continents has a knock-on effect on the other. We need to unite our forces to tackle terrorism and all forms of trafficking, including human trafficking, and to improve the management of our borders."*

While throughout this paper the multiple challenges and threats facing the Sahel have been highlighted, it is fair to mention that the Sahel is also full of opportunities of all kinds, economic, social, development and cooperation. These opportunities will open and they can be harnessed to the benefit of all stakeholders if the designed plans are well executed and threats are abated before it is too late.

Facing the demographic challenge in the Sahel is essential since it represents a multiplier of conflicts that exacerbate poverty in the short and medium term, something that will ultimately push large masses of the population to emigrate to neighbouring countries or Europe, with the destabilizing factor that that can mean in countries not prepared for it. Helping to fix the population in their places of origin will be the desirable consequence of a fruitful north-south collaboration for The perception among global jihadism that the region is a kind of golden destiny in which to rebuild, reorganize and return to the armed struggle with renewed forces must be eliminated.

The future of Sahel is defined in one sentence by former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan:

*"There is no development without security, and no security without development."*

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