

NATIONAL AND KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS
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BRIEF POLICY NOTE

**THE EU SAHEL STRATEGY:
REALITY AND PROSPECTS**

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1. Introduction

The EU's Sahel policy focuses on Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, as well as the G5 Sahel regional organization. Because of its strategic location between the north African coast and southern Sub-Saharan African countries, the region is a crucial transit hub for migrants and thus a place of great importance to the EU. Furthermore, the Sahel is at the heart of complicated regional security and humanitarian situation, with weak state governance and fragile political systems, particularly in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali, exacerbating regional instability¹. Because of these risks and EU concerns about migration and terrorism, the EU has become more involved in the Sahel since the early 2010s. Its updated Sahel strategy emphasizes the necessity for an integrated approach, moving away from a security-focused approach and focusing more on the political dimension. The 2021 strategy emphasizes government and EU accountability to the Sahelian population and accountability between EU and Sahel partners, particularly on governance and human rights problems².

2. A region marked by protracted and complex threats

The Sahel countries, according to the 2021 Normandy Index, are among the world's most vulnerable to threats, including terrorism, violent conflict, climate change, and state fragility — more so than other Sub-Saharan countries. Since 2011, Islamist violence has increased in the region and communal tensions over land and resources³. A severe humanitarian crisis has resulted from displacement, population increase, and food scarcity. Meanwhile, poor state structures and a lack of government legitimacy thwart efforts to address threats to peace and security: recent transitional difficulties in Chad, a coup in Mali, and fatal attacks in Burkina Faso all highlight the Sahel's precarious political landscape.

The Sahel region is known for its persistent insecurity, which is exacerbated by the presence of jihadists and other armed organizations. Ansar al-Dine, a jihadist organization, mobilized in 2012 to help the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, commanded by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL). While this alliance later disintegrated, the operations of these groups resulted in the formation and proliferation of other armed factions in the region, which continue to represent a threat to this day. The Malian government requested military assistance from the French military in response to the insurgency, which pushed the rebellion back under 'Operation Serval' (January 2013–July 2014), creating a long-term reliance on

¹ European Commission, 2021

² Pérouse De Montclos, 2021

³ Lounnas, 2018

foreign armed forces. The Sahel countries have seen a dramatic upsurge in violence in the last year, with about 6 500 persons killed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in 2020⁴. Boko Haram (also known as Islamic State West Africa Province) is a jihadist terrorist organization that operates mainly in the Lake Chad region, with other jihadist groups operating in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Niger's most significant terrorist assaults occurred in January and March 2021, with 100 and 137 civilians killed in the Tillabéri and Tahoua areas near the Malian border. The Global Terrorism Index continues to place Sahel countries at the top. Meanwhile, Islamists are suspected of developing connections with criminal gangs involved in kidnappings and ambushes in the Sahel, potentially expanding their territorial impact.

Jihadist brutality is not the only sort of violence wreaking havoc in the Sahel. Since 2015, intracommunal and intercommunal disputes over land and resources have grown in Central Mali, spreading to Burkina Faso and Niger sections. The Sahel's regional, cross-border nature makes the conflict all the more difficult. Indeed, the Sahel's most insecure regions, Lake Chad and Liptako-Gourma, are located in the Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger and Chad-Niger-Nigeria tri-border zones, respectively. The possibility of violence spreading beyond the Sahel, particularly to the Gulf of Guinea, has prompted the EU to launch a new and more comprehensive policy in the Sahel, considering the larger regional context.

3. Compounding humanitarian and security threats

a. Climate change, land degradation, and resource scarcity

The Sahel is experiencing climate-related severe vulnerabilities amid this ongoing security crisis. According to the Notre Dame Vulnerability Index, Sahel countries are among the most susceptible and poorly prepared to deal with the effects of climate change in the world: Niger ranks 180th, Chad 179th, Mali 174th, Burkina Faso 160th, and Mauritania 151st out of 181 countries studied. The Sahel is experiencing rising temperatures, increased drought exposure, and dwindling water supplies. Climate change has exacerbated competition for resources and land in the region, leading to tensions and violent confrontations, particularly between farmers and herders. Some studies, however, advise against linking climate change to violence in the Sahel, particularly armed group activity⁵. Such approaches are frequently based on ambiguous data and can lead to ineffective responses to the dual dangers of war and climate change. Rapid population growth exacerbates resource scarcity, while analysts may underestimate land degradation due to ill-managed practices and overexploitation.

⁴ Goxho, 2021

⁵ Venturi, 2020

b. Demographics, displacement, and food insecurity

In addition to insecurity and climate change, the demography of the Sahel countries adds to the region's instability. High fertility rates and lower mortality rates have resulted in rapid population expansion, which is predicted to continue for 30 years⁶. This tendency, combined with growing scarcity and unequal resource distribution, has resulted in significant food insecurity, with 8.7 million people in the Sahel predicted to face famine or crisis between June and August 2021. Internal displacement triggered by terrorist and intercommunal violence exacerbates resources and humanitarian assistance competition. In the Sahel, there are already approximately 2 million internally displaced people, with the number anticipated to rise in the following years. Overcrowding, food shortages, and displacement have combined to create a complex regional humanitarian catastrophe that national governments cannot manage without international assistance⁷. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 outbreak has worsened humanitarian needs, mainly health services, and mobility limitations have made delivering aid to isolated locations more challenging.

c. Fragile states: Human rights, the rule of law, and state legitimacy

The lack of secure and legal political structures and unequal social relations within the Sahel countries make regional stability even more difficult. Recent political developments have revealed the Sahel's central governments' fragility and lack of democratic governance. The interim government has promised to organize democratic elections in February 2022, following the successful military coup against Malian President Keta in August 2020. Despite heavy condemnation from international actors, army colonel Assimi Gota dismissed and removed interim President Bah N'Daw and Vice-President Moctar Ouane in May 2021. President Idriss Déby died unexpectedly in April 2021, prompting an interim military council led by his son, Abdelkrim Idriss Déby, a Chadian military general. The Council has promised to hold elections within 18 months, but authorities are forcefully suppressing anti-military protests at the same time. These occurrences suggest a rise in the militarization of the highest levels of government in the region, a move away from democratic governance. These changes may substantially impact the G5 Sahel countries' shaky military cooperation.

Meanwhile, security and defense forces in the Sahel have been accused of abusing civilians during counter-terrorism operations and other types of interventions. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger government security personnel have been accused of extensive arbitrary murders of suspected terrorists and civilians alike. Furthermore, recent attacks against civilians in Burkina

⁶ Ioannides, 2020

⁷ Ioannides, 2020

Faso raise concerns about using civilian volunteers as armed forces surrogates. During counter-terrorism operations, the Multinational Joint Task Force to Fight Boko Haram (MNJTF) is also suspected of carrying out unlawful executions. National governments' vulnerability, along with their poor human rights records, has harmed their legitimacy in the eyes of their people. In addition, persistent societal inequities exacerbate instability. According to experts, government legitimacy must be improved through increased openness and accountability to address the region's long-standing security and humanitarian concerns.

4. Overview of the integrated strategy

Terrorist and intercommunal violence and political turmoil persist despite significant military deployment, development cooperation, and humanitarian aid, implying that the EU Sahel policy has had less than the expected impact on the region's security situation. As a result, the new EU integrated strategy for the Sahel, which the Council approved in April 2021, aims to emphasize state governance⁸. This new priority includes establishing state legitimacy through security sector reform, addressing human rights issues, and focusing on long-term development with civil society and local governments.

Previous strategy for the Sahel

International entities, including the EU, have made significant investments in the Sahel, particularly since the early 2010s, in security, humanitarian aid, and development. Indeed, the EU's involvement in the region is a strategic priority, not least because it wants to curb and regulate migrant flows from the African continent while also assisting in the reduction of terrorist activity. In March 2011, the Council established the first EU strategy for the Sahel in response to irregular migration and terrorism risks. The European Sahel Security and Development Strategy aimed to boost regional security while supporting development in Sahel countries. It specified steps to be taken in the areas of (i) development, good governance, and international conflict resolution; (ii) politics and diplomacy; (iii) security and the rule of law; and (iv) the battle against extremist violence and radicalization⁹. Following the G5 Sahel collaboration in February 2014, the plan was expanded in March 2014 to include Burkina Faso and Chad, bringing the total number of G5 Sahel countries to five¹⁰. In April 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council approved the Sahel regional action plan for 2015-2020 as the strategy's implementation framework, bolstering the strategy's security component¹¹. However, there is universal consensus that the security-focused approach failed to produce the desired results

⁸ Council of the EU, 2021

⁹ Venturi, 2019

¹⁰ Venturi, 2020

¹¹ Pichon, 2020b

since regional terrorist groups continue to operate and grow in the region, even threatening to expand farther into the Gulf of Guinea.

Analysts argue that the failure to eradicate terrorism is due to a lack of governmental legitimacy and control over Sahel territory. At the same time, poverty and a lack of economic possibilities have also been linked to increased radicalization and terrorist recruitment in some places. In some locations, human rights violations by state security and defense forces have escalated public hatred of government authorities. Persistent insecurity has hampered progress in the Sahel region's development and governance sectors, forcing the EU to modify its approach to the Sahel conflict.

New strategic priorities

Promoting better governance

The new EU policy emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive approach focused on strengthening governance in light of the increasingly complex threats in the Sahel. This entails promoting greater openness and accountability in Sahel countries to address human rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance challenges. The EU policy also emphasizes the importance of expanding state presence and services by assisting in deploying state structures and the delivery of essential public services. Security sector reform is likewise a top objective, focusing on improving human rights and decreasing impunity in military and security circles. As a result, the Sahel approach strives to increase state legitimacy by ensuring that nations follow through on their promises to the people and hold government actors accountable.

According to the strategy, this is a "civilian and political leap forward," according to the Sahel Coalition's aims, which were determined during the N'Djamena summit in February 2021. This entails deploying both short- and long-term security solutions that support long-term economic, social, and environmental growth¹². Despite its strong focus on governance and long-term development, the new plan also addresses migration, a critical problem in EU foreign policy in the region. The document takes an incentive-based approach to the issue, stating that it wants to "continue to foster fruitful cooperation on migration" with Sahel states, but it doesn't detail what such cooperation will include.

Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts

Along with security and governance aid, the EU has promised development assistance to the Sahel region, focusing on combating climate change's effects. The EU will safeguard natural habitats, conserve biodiversity, battle desertification, and improve population resilience. To

¹² Alliance Sahel, 2021

mitigate the adverse economic effects of climate change and environmental degradation, this will also entail addressing security issues and improving job prospects. Furthermore, development assistance will be used to encourage sustainable agriculture techniques and aid in reducing food and water insecurity to meet the Sahel's increasing struggle for land and resources. Young people will also become a focal point for development aid, which will be diverted to education, employment, and political involvement.

Furthermore, the EU will continue to offer humanitarian aid to Sahel nations, focusing on meeting the expanding needs of displaced and conflict-affected peoples. Protecting people in crisis, providing unhindered humanitarian access, and improving civil-military collaboration have focused on EU initiatives. The EU will assist initiatives to promote peace through mediation and peacebuilding that address both the immediate and root causes of conflict and insecurity. The most susceptible Sahel regions will be targeted, such as Lake Chad and Liptako-Gourma. An overriding goal of EU intervention in the Sahel will be to link humanitarian help, support for sustainable development, and support for peace.

A comprehensive approach to a complex region

The new Sahel strategy emphasizes the importance of taking a more holistic and local approach to combating regional instability. While the strategy's primary geographical focus remains the G5 Sahel countries, it also considers the growing nature of regional concerns such as terrorism and population displacement. When supporting Sahel stabilization processes, the more prominent regional environment, including developments in the Gulf of Guinea and Libya, will be considered. The EU recognizes that the persistence of regional insecurity is primarily due to factors outside of the Sahel¹³. Aside from its broader global scope, the new approach aims to promote customized responses at regional, national, and local levels, considering specific requirements and situations. The approach also calls for consultation with a broader spectrum of stakeholders, including local and decentralized governments and national civil society organizations¹⁴. However, the instruments utilized to carry out this action have yet to be made public.

5. Actions, stakeholders, and partnerships

Field action and collaboration

On the ground, EU assistance to the G5 Sahel countries takes various forms, both military and civilian. The civilian capacity-building operations EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012-2022) and

¹³ Pichon, 2020a

¹⁴ Venturi & Barana, 2021

EUCAP Sahel Mali (2013-2023), and the military training mission EUTM Mali have been deployed the EU on the ground in the Sahel¹⁵. EUTM Mali – which also has a regional mandate – was given a four-year extension by the Council in 2020, bringing the total number of ground employees to 1200. Following the August 2020 military coup, EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali were temporarily suspended, but they resumed operations in November 2020. The EU has also established a regional advisory coordination cell (RACC), a network of European experts assisting the G5 Sahel countries in security and defense cooperation. Individual EU member states also provide military assistance. Since 2012, France has had a substantial military presence in the region. With about 5100 troops deployed in the region, the French armed forces are conducting Operation Barkhane. However, in June 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that France would withdraw from the region while remaining committed, mainly through Takuba, a task force established in 2020 by the several EU Member States to combat terrorism Liptako-Gourma region.

Joint task forces such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Multinational Joint Task Force to Combat Boko Haram (MNJTF), and the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (Minusma) are also supported by the Member States. At the G5 summit in Pau (France) in January 2020, Macron and the G5 heads of state launched the Coalition for the Sahel, which will serve as an umbrella for several initiatives in the areas of (i) counter-terrorism, (ii) military capacity building, (iii) support for the re-establishment of state structures and services, and (iv) development aid¹⁶. France and Germany established the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) in 2019 to broaden the geographical scope of cross-border counter-terrorism actions beyond the G5 countries¹⁷. In 2020, the Coalition for the Sahel incorporated this effort. Aside from military assistance, the EU has pledged €2.6 billion in development aid to the Sahel countries through the Sahel Alliance. For 2020-2022, this money will support 85 current development initiatives in sectors like agriculture, essential public services, and governance. Furthermore, the EU will continue to mobilize electoral observation missions in Sahel countries to promote and monitor national elections.

EU institutions

EU missions in G5 countries serve as a conduit between field operations and EU headquarters, particularly the European External Action Service (EEAS). To coordinate EU humanitarian response, development, trade cooperation, and military deployments, delegates transmit needs and dangers on the ground to headquarters and confer with local and state authorities. These

¹⁵ Venturi, 2019

¹⁶ French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020

¹⁷ Pichon, 2020b

processes are also heavily involving diplomatic delegations from EU member states. The EEAS Sahel Task Force, at the institutional level, coordinates the work of the relevant EEAS departments, as well as the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO), Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), and the Service Department for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI). The task force includes the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. Emanuela Del Re, the EU Special Representative for the Sahel, was appointed in June 2021 to oversee EU efforts in the Sahel, working with EU delegations, missions, and regional authorities in the G5 Sahel nations.

Financing

While the strategy's implementation is still being debated, it will be supported by two primary financing sources. Part of the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF), the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (Global Europe Instrument) has allocated up to €29 181 million (in current prices) to sub-Saharan Africa; €6 358 million for the instrument's thematic component dedicated to (i) human rights and democracy, (ii) civil society, (iii) stability and peace, (iv) global challenges such as health, education, and migration; €9 534 million for the 'emerging challenges and priorities cushion' and €3 182 million for the rapid response component dedicated notably to 'contribute to stability and conflict prevention in situations of urgency, in emerging crisis, in crisis and post-crisis situations,' 'to strengthening the resilience of states, societies, communities and individuals, and to link humanitarian aid and development activities. All of those elements may benefit the Sahel approach, but the breakdown was not accessible at the time of publication. The European Peace Facility (EPF), which took effect on March 22, 2021, could provide an alternative financing source for the Sahel strategy's military components. The EPF is an off-budget fund financed by annual contributions from the Member States, up to a maximum of €5 700 million (in current prices) for the period 2021-2027 that will function as a fund for CFSP external activity with military and defense implications. The facility aims to improve the EU's ability to respond quickly to crises and give long-term capacity-building assistance to EU partners like the Sahel countries. For the first time in EU history, the EPF will allow the EU to supply military equipment to partners outside the EU budget.

6. Outlook

Navigating additional EU-Africa frameworks

The new Sahel integrated strategy is part of a larger picture of several different EU frameworks. To begin, the proposal for a comprehensive strategy with Africa in 2021 includes critical topics

mentioned in the Sahel strategy, such as climate change and sustainable growth. It also identifies cooperation on peace and governance as a strategic goal, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa's most vulnerable regions, notably the Sahel countries. Finally, the proposal seeks to "provide a balanced, coordinated, and complete approach to migration and mobility," reflecting the Sahel strategy's approach to migrant cooperation. However, this recommended policy has yet to be considered with the African Union. The Post-Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the Organization of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS), which has yet to be ratified, also defines strategic priority areas. Human rights and democracy promotion, peace and security, development, climate change, long-term economic growth, and migration are only a few of them. Finally, the EU migration deal outlines the EU's new migration policy with partner nations in greater detail. Support for nations hosting refugees outside the EU, providing economic possibilities close to home, combating migrant smuggling, facilitating return and readmission, and building orderly avenues for legal migration are all strategic concerns for migration¹⁸. These goals also apply to Sahel countries.

Main challenges for the EU strategy

Analysts inside and outside the EU institutions have advocated that the international response to the Sahel conflicts should shift away from military action and toward improved governance¹⁹. Several studies have linked weak state institutions and malfunctioning military forces to the rise and expansion of jihadist and other armed organizations. Attacks on international peacekeeping forces have recently increased, cruelly highlighting their perception as a side with disputed national authority. According to a policy brief published by the Centre for European Reform, the EU must avoid backing governments that lack legitimacy to avoid further alienating local populations – and perhaps increasing radicalization risks. Two possible solutions are increased communication with civil society and local governments, which are critical to the new strategy. While the new strategy's political focus acknowledges the necessity for stability, a Chatham House research report notes that "success depends first and foremost on political leaders' goodwill (much more than on their capabilities) to change and renew their social contract with citizens²⁰."

Concerns have also been expressed about the new EPF. While it will empower the EU to arm its allies, several experts caution that this will necessitate close monitoring and management to prevent military equipment from falling into the wrong hands. Others believe that the EPF risks fueling rather than stabilizing conflict by reinforcing oppressive military forces. The Sahel

¹⁸ Pérouse De Montclos, 2021

¹⁹ Venturi, 2019

²⁰ Pichon, 2020a

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countries will serve as a test case for the monitoring mechanism accompanying the EU's support through the EPF due to the fragile political context and recognized abuses by defense personnel. Finally, the EU is still working on the strategy's implementation details. While the strategy takes a comprehensive and balanced approach to address insecurity in the Sahel by prioritizing political action, researchers and regional civil society actors recommend that the EU could seek alternative initiatives in the future, such as growing support for dialogue and mediation between civilian and armed parties, which could help move the goal of regional stabilization forward.

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