

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 29-04-2015		2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) September 2014 - April 2015	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Security in the Sahel Region: Challenges and Opportunities				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Ait Addi, Anouar, LCDR, Royal Moroccan Navy				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES N/A					
14. ABSTRACT The Sahel is the vast, pivotal zone between the arid North Africa and the humid jungles of Central Africa. The region faces instability and disorder from a variety of causes that the states of the region cannot control on their own. Numerous factors contribute to this situation: the unstable governance, underdevelopment and economic problems, internal power struggles, high population pressure, growing activities of human and drug traffickers and terrorist organizations, and the Libyan crisis that had direct effects on the profusion of weapons of all kinds in the Sahel region. Moreover, economists and entrepreneurs consistently assert that security is a prerequisite for economic development and general investment. But none of them has questioned this proposition in the context of the contemporary Sahel. Therefore, aside from the obvious insecurity situation, the Sahel region illnesses seem to be multiple, but all of them have a common cause: underdevelopment.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Global War On Terror (GWOT), Terrorism, AQIM, Boko Haram, ISIL, Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO)					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 36	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Marine Corps University/Command a
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

Security in the Sahel Region: Challenges and Opportunities

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR:

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Royal Moroccan Navy**

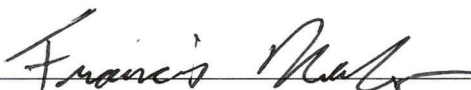
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Date: 29 April 2015

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Approved: 

Date: 29 April 2015

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Executive summary

Title: Security in the Sahel Region: Challenges and Opportunities.

Author: LCDR Anouar AIT ADDI, Royal Moroccan Navy.

Thesis: Much of the Sahel region has become an ungoverned space, a safe haven for drug and human traffickers, and terrorist organizations. The military measures that outside powers have used thus far cannot establish security in the region. In fact, the underlying cause of the region's problems is economic; only economic growth can produce a secure environment.

Discussion: The Sahel is the vast, pivotal zone between the arid North Africa and the humid jungles of Central Africa. The region faces instability and disorder from a variety of causes that the states of the region cannot control on their own. Numerous factors contribute to this situation: the unstable governance, underdevelopment and economic problems, internal power struggles, high population pressure, growing activities of human and drug traffickers and terrorist organizations, and the Libyan crisis that had direct effects on the profusion of weapons of all kinds in the Sahel region. Moreover, economists and entrepreneurs consistently assert that security is a prerequisite for economic development and general investment. But none of them has questioned this proposition in the context of the contemporary Sahel. Therefore, aside from the obvious insecurity situation, the Sahel region illnesses seem to be multiple, but all of them have a common cause: underdevelopment.

Conclusion: Instead of wasting time and effort in military security operations, the international community should focus on developing the economy, which will enable any nation state to ensure its own defense.

Preface

Coming from the Kingdom of Morocco, which belongs to the geographical area linking the Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, and most particularly being a Navy officer, I was dealing with all second-order effects of security and developmental issues generated from the problematic Sahel region.

On the other hand, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States has been conducting a *Global War on Terror* (GWOT) wherever a terrorist stronghold was identified. However, Washington by itself would not be able to eliminate every terrorist threat that may menace the US safety, security, or interests.

Characterized by geographical aridity, unclear boundary demarcation, and huge ungoverned zones, the Sahel region is the best choice as a safe haven for transnational criminal organizations where they operate almost freely and with impunity. And even during the few military operations that local, regional, or international actors have conducted to restore the security situation, decision-makers were concerned only with the “M” of the PMESII-PT variables: political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time.

Through this paper, I assessed the security situation in the Sahel region, highlighted some opportunities to be seized, and concluded with rational recommendations in order to deal properly with this thorny issue.

I conducted this research under the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Douglas E. Streusand, Professor of International Relations at the United States Marine Corps Command & Staff College, Quantico, VA. As a mentor, he was very helpful to me and gave so generously of his time, knowledge, and patience.

I would like to thank first and foremost my wife Hanane and son Mohamed Ryad for the support and inspiration to stay educated. Secondly, I am so grateful to those who made my attendance at the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College possible, particularly the Inspector of the Royal Moroccan Navy, the President of the United States Marine Corps University, and the Director of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. Finally, I want to thank my Master of Military Studies mentor, Dr. Douglas Streusand; my faculty advisors, Dr. Richard DiNardo and Lt.Col Haakon Waroe; my sponsor, Sergeant-Major Gregory Harting; and my classmates of Conference Group 16.

INTRODUCTION

“The Western world had no idea what Sahel was because history has taken the attention of NATO and Western countries to Iraq and to Afghanistan, but Sahel is potentially even more dangerous... certainly than Afghanistan.”¹

Romano Prodi, the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to the Sahel
(From October 2012 to February 2014).

“The large ungoverned area in Africa, HIV/AIDS epidemic, corruption, weak governance, and poverty that exist throughout the continent are challenges that are key factors in the security stability issues that affect every country in Africa.”²

USA General Bantz John Craddock (Former Commander of US EUCOM),
during the testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 19, 2006.

“Terrorist activities, kidnapping, illicit trafficking of all types (humans, weapons, drugs), and the existence of under-governed spaces in the Sahel contribute to the region’s vulnerability and make it susceptible to extremist influences.”³

USA General William E. Ward (Former Commander of US AFRICOM),
During the testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 9, 2010.

“Threats to our security in the decades to come are more likely to emanate from state weakness than from state strength. The future strategic landscape will increasingly feature challenges in the ambiguous gray area that is neither fully war nor fully peace. In such an environment, enabling our partners to respond to security challenges may reduce risk to U.S. forces and extend security to areas we cannot reach alone.”⁴

The DOD Quadrennial Defense Review Report (February 2010).

“Transnational organized crime, like Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), thrive in developing countries or failed states with weak rule of law by penetrating government institutions and businesses and increasing corruption, further weakening governance.”⁵

Joint Publication 3-26 Counterterrorism, 24 Oct 2014

Any insightful observer of the contemporary world would agree that Africa is a continent of paradoxes. On the one hand, from the perspective of natural resources, geography, and climate clemency, Africa appears as the God blessed continent. Indeed, if we ask the simple question of what nature has not made available to this continent, the obvious answer would be: very little! On the other hand, Africa plays paradoxically the unflattering role of *reserve* or *reservoir* to the rest of the world. The reasons behind this unbalance are multiple, multifaceted, and multidimensional. The African continent is home to 54 nation states located in sub regions, where local countries share geographical, ethnic, religious, or cultural common characteristics, but not without conflicts.⁶ However, within this continent of challenges and conflict, the geographic area that separates the north from the south named the *Sahel region* is where all African ills are highly concentrated.

The Sahel is a vast region, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, between the north Saharan areas and south savannahs.⁷ It is the edge of the Sahara, characterized by aridity and particular environmental conditions.⁸ It encompasses several African countries from Senegal to Sudan, including Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. In its broadest sense, it also includes all or part of Mauritania, Algeria, Nigeria, and Eritrea. Aside from its obvious heterogeneity, and the problems of all kinds of trafficking, this part of the world is still missing a clear demarcation of boundaries between states. Indeed, the Sahel is an area significantly under-administered with extremely poor states that don't effectively cooperate with each other. Hence, human, arms, and drug traffickers, outlaws, and particularly terrorist groups benefit from almost total freedom of movement, which obviously benefits their activities. Security in the Sahel is a thorny issue that will have to be addressed as soon as possible.

Much of the Sahel region has become an ungoverned space, a safe haven for drug and human traffickers, and terrorist organizations. The military measures that outside powers have used thus far cannot establish security in the region. In fact, the underlying cause of the region's problems is economic; only economic growth can produce a secure environment.

This paper starts with a historical overview in order to understand the cultural dimension of the Sahel region. It then assesses the current unsecure situation that benefits transnational criminal organizations operating in the area. Finally, the study highlights possible opportunities and concludes with some recommendations that may help solve the Sahelian thorny issue.

I- History of the Sahel region

In order to better assess the actual situation of the problematic Sahel region, this study proposes to start with a historical survey. For centuries, the geographic zone separating North Africa from the rest of the continent constituted the center of gravity of the most influential civilizations in Africa. Indeed, the Sahel enticed both Arab traders looking for cotton, gold, spices, and other goods, and Europeans looking for African manpower and slaves. These two influences mixed with indigenous traditions and created a culturally heterogeneous area. Moreover, the Sahel owed its prosperity to the trans-Saharan trade routes which constituted the main, if not the only, conduit for moving goods from south to north or from west to east, and vice versa. Likewise, several roads were created from this main route as to absorb the increasing goods' demands. Consequently, these lines of communication became the cornerstone of the Sahelian life and tremendously impacted the location of towns and cities, established on the basis of availability for critical water points and oases. The success of this trade fueled many desires, to the extent of establishing the most powerful African empires along the main roads.

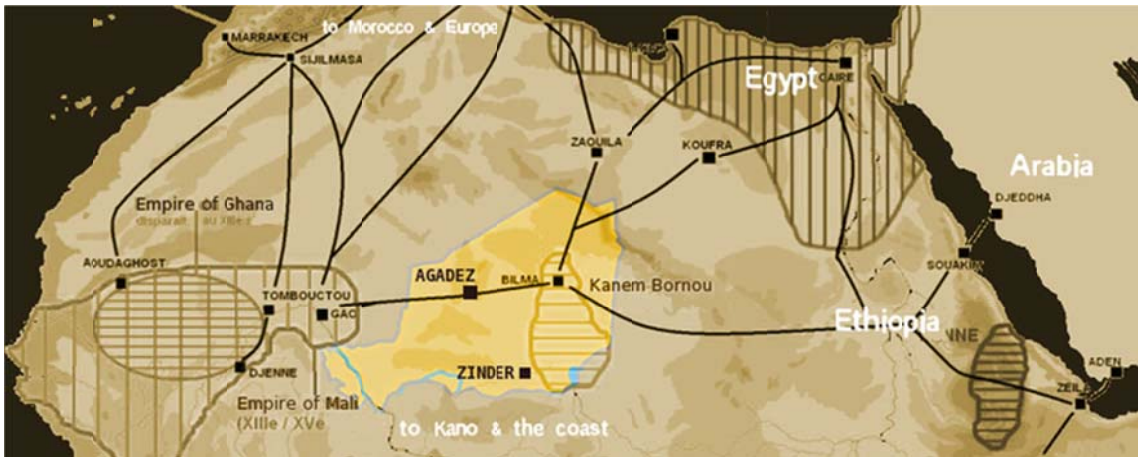


Figure1: Trans-Saharan trade routes (14th century)

1- Medieval history:

a- The Ghana Empire

Although Arab traders were the first to identify this region as the *Sahel*, the most noteworthy empire that ruled the area was the Ghana Empire. Medieval Arab chroniclers used the term *Sahel*, meaning shore or coast in Arabic, to describe the southern shore of that other ocean that is the Sahara (desert).

The empire of Ghana, which existed from the eighth century through the eleventh century, was a West African ruling power located between the Niger River to the east and Senegal River to the west. It still occupies an important place in the consciousness of contemporary Africans as a symbol of past glories beyond humiliation of the colonial era.⁹

According to the oldest evidence, Ghana's prosperity depended on the control of trade routes, especially the gold trade. Its military power rested on a powerful cavalry army, which allowed it to quickly spread its authority throughout the Sahel, among the peasant population who had little interaction with the regime. As such, around 1000 the empire extended its territories westward to the Senegal River and the Niger River to the east. The Bambouk area constituted its southern border, while the northern one was Audaghost. The capital was Kumbi Saleh, in what is now southern Mauritania (Figure 2). However, this continental triumph generated the discontent of the northern neighbor.

b- The Almoravid dynasty

The Sanhadja tribes (one of the largest Berber tribes in the south of the Maghreb) were pressured by Ghana's prosperity in the south and the Fatimids' hegemony to the west.¹⁰ Thus, the Maghrebin Berbers joined with enthusiasm the orthodox reform of Abdellah Ben Yassin Aljazouli (1042). Inspired by this ascetic, they entered what they called *Jihad*, creating the Almoravid Empire (Al-Mourabitun, "those of Ribat" or military convent). Although the bulk of their forces turned to Morocco and Spain, they did not spare their opponents in Ghana, and spread widely their domination on the Sahel.

The confederation of Murabitun was born of the union of several tribes: Lamtuna, Massüfa, Guddala, and Banu Warit, in addition to the Gazzüla, Lamta, and Masmuda.¹¹ These large tribes provided the majority of manpower required for various expeditions, and greatly contributed to the strengthening of the Almoravid dynasty under which the Sahel Region peaked in power and influence. Indeed, by 1120, the Almoravid Empire extended from the Spanish Andalusia and Balears Islands to the North, and to the Senegal River southward.

The Berber dynasty was interested in this Sahelian region for many reasons. Firstly, as a state based on religious grounds since its founder Abdellah Ben Yassin, the Almoravids' holy mission was the spread of Islam, which established the basis of the Sahelian cultural identity and continues into the present days. Secondly, the need for manpower and particularly rough soldiers explains the interest in this region's warriors as to constitute a strong and deterrent military force able to face and defeat all recalcitrants and regional powers. The third and main reason is purely economic, because the control of the trans-Saharan trade routes aimed at financing the Almoravids' campaigns. Additionally, the southern expansion was intended to improve the state's income, which was limited to the booty (Ghanima), statutory taxes, and alms (Zakat).

As the following Moroccan dynasty (Almohads) was more focused on the eastern front, the northern authorities started losing power and influence in the Sahel region, which allowed local governments to resurface.

c- Mali and Songhai Empires

In the twelfth century, the king of Mali Nare-Famaghan (also named Maghan Konaté) sought to unify the neighboring tribes in order to prevent the descending Saharian nomads from making regular raids and capturing slaves. This initiative worried the king of Sosso, Soumangourou (Soumaworo) Kante who decided to get rid of that too ambitious kingdom. Nevertheless, Nare-Famaghan Konaté's youngest son, Sundiata Keita realized his father's dream by liberating the country and founding the famous Empire of Mali around 1240.¹²

The Mali Empire reached its peak during the reign of Kango Moussa, (1312-1337), better known as Mansa Musa. He hired astronomers, mathematicians, lawyers, and pious scholars who contributed in establishing the new status of Timbuktu as the Sahelian intellectual and commercial center. Furthermore, the whole region was initiated into the basics of light industry, mining, weaving, and architecture.¹³

The Timbuktu authorities controlled many vassal states, particularly trading towns. However, the Malians struggled to control the most eastern tribes, which saw the birth of the Songhai Empire in 1340. As such, after establishing a new authority in the vicinity of Songhai, the Songhai Empire expanded gradually to encompass more territories, particularly trading towns like Timbuktu and Gao. Likewise, it succeeded in establishing the largest African empire. Under the reign of Emperor Askia Muhammad, the Songhai territory extended from the Atlantic Ocean to Nigeria and encompassed what are now Gambia, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mauritania, and Niger.¹⁴ Therefore, like their predecessors, both the Mali and Songhai Empires founded their authorities upon military power, which always requires a reliable economy.



Figure 2: African Empires from 700 to 1600¹⁵

In sum, the power and wealth of all the dynasties that ruled the Sahel region depended on their control of the Trans-Saharan trade routes. Their protection of the trade routes allowed the commercial cities along them to prosper. This trade network rivaled the Asian Silk Road in importance.

2- The colonial era

Along with these long trade lines, the Sahel was covered by a multitude of smaller amplitude flow that connected the different regions. These inner currents conveyed relatively

few European goods in addition to basic local products such as handicrafts and food transported from surplus to deficit areas.

These economies were not folded over themselves, but were, instead, open to the outside world, mostly Arabs and Europeans, particularly for areas near the Atlantic Ocean like Senegal. Therefore, the region was profoundly affected by the colonial penetration that accelerated from 1875. In this context, France took possession of the entire fringe along the desert and started progressing from west to east, until it achieved a complete domination at the beginning of the 20th century with the conquest of the regions bordering Lake Chad.

a- The colonial conquest: a profound change in the Sahelian economy

The era of European colonization and global integration, facilitated by steamships, railways, and the telegraph, changed the Sahelian economy profoundly. Consequently, the Trans-Saharan trade and the local currencies disappeared gradually. Exchanges across the desert started extinguishing in 1900 for several reasons. First, the conquest of the Saharan and North-Sahelian zones was not done without difficulties, particularly in the Nigerien area, where Touareg, under the command of their leader Kaocen, resisted the French in 1917. Second, caravans, which were frequently attacked by Arab gangs and Toubou looters, were increasingly reluctant to connect Africa to the Mediterranean shores. Finally, and this is probably the main reason for the decline of the trans-Saharan trade, the cost of transporting goods became more expensive across the desert than by sea, especially as the French and British colonial administrations developed port and railway infrastructures in the south, such as the railway which reached Kano (Nigeria) in 1912. Hence, the Trans-Saharan trade dried slowly, and the only survivors were the salt caravans led by the Touareg who supplied the remote oases of Bilma and Fachi with millet, leather, and tissues, and returned southward loaded with salt, soda, and dates.

Furthermore, the colonization changed rapidly most local trade practices. In fact, the widespread use of the French Franc began shortly after the political conquest, which made the Sahelian populations abandon the practice of barter and currencies previously in use such as Cowries (small shells mainly from the Maldives Islands) and Maria Theresa Thaler. This substitution was accompanied by tremendous problems because the insufficient number of coins in circulation (especially low denomination coins such as fifty cents and one Franc) encouraged the development of a large black market, contributing in devaluing the traditional currency. It wasn't before 1920 that the use of the Franc was extended to the whole Sahel region, marking the completion of a long process of economic domination, endorsed by the establishment of customs barriers on newly created political boundaries.¹⁶

Colonization also led to the emergence of new commerce organization forms: from Dakar to Lake Chad, the European trading through its large Pan African hubs (such as the French Company of West Africa, the West African Commercial Society, or the French Nigerien Company) gradually ensured its dominance over the Sahel whose economy became closely dependent upon the metropolis. Moreover, the submission to a new economic order had direct consequences on the exploitation of natural resources. In fact, Sahelian agriculture -previously oriented to local populations' self subsistence or feeding a medium distance trade- found itself faced with the huge necessity of serving the needs of European industry.

In addition, the clear unbalanced flow of continental trade did not favor the locals. In this regard, the Sahel exported basic agriculture products in addition to raw materials such as gold, iron, silver, and salt, with insignificant prices in exchange for expensive industrialized products from France and Great Britain, which contributed in worsening the local and regional economic situation.

In sum, the geographical distribution of trade centers and markets, which prevailed in pre-colonial times, had deeply changed. The disappearance of the trans-Saharan trade marked the decline of all places that served as its relay points (Oulata, Timbuktu, and Gao, for example)

in addition to the emergence of new economic hubs in a complete discordance with the cultural and historical characteristics of the region.

b- Independence

In addition to the economic fragility, the long independence fights exhausted the new nation states' ability to meet the early sovereignty challenges. In fact, the Sahelian countries had been colonized for more than six decades: mainly from the 1890s until the 1960s. This long period spent under the colonizers' tutelage left them with no organizational capacity to either lead such fragile states or preserve their sovereignty within their borders. In this sense, if the term "colonization" indistinctly refers to all kinds of occupations of inhabited territories, submission of indigenous population by force of arms, or installation of foreign powers, the Europeans' imperialist expansion in this part of the world represents a unique historical fact. This uniqueness is due in the first place to the nature of the new political objectives of overseas expansion of modern nation states being formed, who saw in the African continent an open market for manufactured goods they began to produce, a place to send unemployed peoples or without land, and finally a reservoir of manpower which could be exploited or used as soldiers in European wars. All these political objectives were legitimized and justified by the colonial discourse of "social progress" and "civilizing role" that the European powers were supposed to lead in Africa.

Furthermore, even if this period officially ended fifty years ago, the remnants are still perceivable and colonial inheritances still weigh in all forms of African life. Besides, the term "postcolonial" emphasizes not only the importance of the legacies of European colonialism in Africa at the present time, but also the actualization of the political, economic, and cultural dependency relationship that always combines the former colonial powers and new African nation states being formed. The first meaning of the postcolonial term can be summed up in the

words of William Faulkner who wrote about South America "The past is never dead. It's not even past."¹⁷

II- The actual situation:

For years, the Sahel countries have struggled with a series of political and humanitarian crises. The precariousness of governance and its impact on states' institutions have dramatically reduced the ability of Sahel states to ensure effective basic public services, promote broad participation in political life, or defend human rights. Moreover, the unconstitutional regime changes that occur repeatedly in elections marred by violence and social conflicts are clear evidences of the chronic political instability resulting in the lack of the basic tenets of the Nation-State, particularly a political dialogue, efficient parliament, and effective judicial system.

This real crisis polygon is processed by fault lines included in a long period of history, which continue to produce their effects, and by newer elements amplifying the vulnerability of the field. The very geography of this desert area encourages the questioning of the borders established by states, the post-colonial state control of space having upset ethnic boundaries, and traditional ways of life, including the free mobility of peoples and goods, caravans, trade, transhumance, and nomadism. Indeed, the telescoping of state authority and traditional authority of nomadic communities such as Tuareg, Toubou, etc. gives a comprehensive explanation of such a conflict system like the particular case of the Malian crisis.

In addition to the historical features, newer destabilizing factors worsen the Sahelian situation. Firstly, is the political failure of local states to ensure the attributes of sovereignty over their whole territories and to anchor themselves into modernity. Secondly, is Islamist speculation by dark forces, which are far from any religious faith, and most particularly from Islam. Thirdly, are droughts and famines, caused by increasing effects of global warming, in addition to poverty, economic and social insecurity, and lack or absence of future prospects for the idle youth. Fourthly, is the population explosion confirmed by recent researches asserting

that the Sahel region rapidly moved from 31 million inhabitants in 1950 to 100 million in 2013, and will most likely reach 300 million by 2050.¹⁸

The combination of all these evils makes this region a safe haven for all thugs and outlaws, particularly those dealing with all kinds of illegal traffic including drugs from Latin America, cigarette smuggling, and human trafficking. But above all, terrorism newly established and based in the area is the main reason behind the dangerousness of the Sahel region.

1- The Sahel, at the crossroads of major traffics

If the Sahel appears to be an important energy "hub", it is the same for trafficking and smuggling. The secular Trans-Saharan caravan routes became a favored crossing point for many criminal networks established in the region.

a- Drug trafficking

In recent years, the Sahel has become a substantial transit area for drug trafficking. Indeed, at the gates of Europe -the first global consumer market- the area is less dangerous -or more secure for such activities- than the most direct routes between production areas in Latin America and the European continent. Furthermore, in the early 21st century, the Colombian cartels have been supplanted by Mexican ones on the North American market, not lucrative anymore. Thus, they switched to the European market, supplied through West Africa via the 10th parallel, named the *Highway 10*. These reliable lines of communication entice further international dealers, particularly Afghani traffickers who pass their cocaine and heroin through this area and take clandestine routes across Chad, Mali, and Niger, before reaching the European final destination (Figure 3).

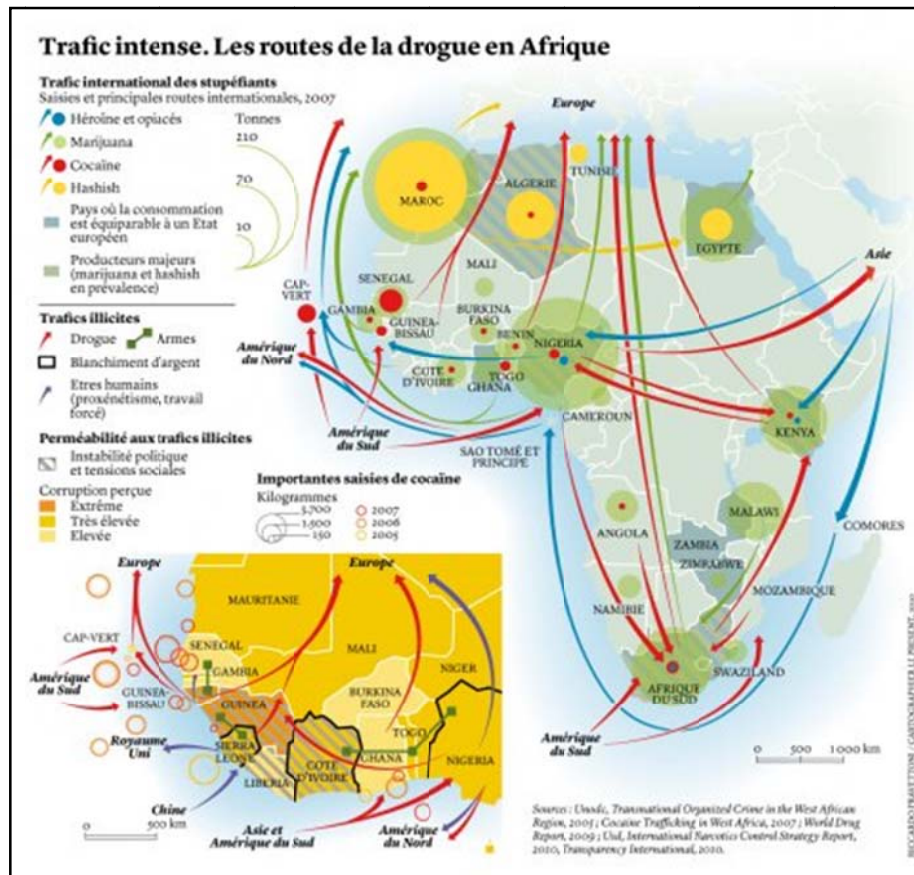


Figure 3: African drug routes¹⁹

Benefitting from an uncontrolled space at all dimensions, the international traffickers expanded their business to include the air lines of communication. The famous case of the Boeing of *Air Cocaine* was very revealing of the carelessness of local governments.²⁰ In early November 2009, a Boeing 727, probably coming from Venezuela, landed in the desert of northern Mali, not on an airport runway but on a large flat expanse roughly backfilled, and unloaded its cocaine. However, the plane stuck in the sand and was unable to take off again. Thus, traffickers burned it in order to clear all evidences. Later investigations concluded that the aircraft was leased in Venezuela, but was flying under a Guinean license that had expired several months earlier.

b- Other traffics

Other criminal organizations found great interest in this region of Africa. In fact, the Sahara became also a trafficking hub for toxic waste, oil, cars, medicines, cigarettes, weapons, and migrants. These last three deserve a special attention given the importance of the issues they generate in addition to their involvement in the general security situation in the Sahel.

Firstly, cigarette smuggling across the Sahel is a very ancient practice. The amount is difficult to quantify but would count several hundred million dollars per year. Target markets for these trades are first those of the Maghreb, Egypt, and the Middle East, while counterfeit cigarettes come from plants, particularly in Nigeria, or are diverted from official channels. This very lucrative smuggling interests local terrorist groups, and even if they are not directly involved, they impose a "protection service" for smugglers in exchange for a tithe on merchandise. In this context, the fact that Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of the highest leaders of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), was nicknamed *Mister Marlboro* illustrates the strong involvement of such terrorist organizations in the Sahel cigarette smuggling.²¹

Moreover, the *Sahel Ocean* is ideally placed in terms of illegal immigration to Europe.²² Despite measures to curb this phenomenon and multiple cooperation initiatives with governments in the region, the Sahel continues to be a place of passage for thousands of migrants. The long distance separating the two continents in addition to the risks involved, particularly the sea state often degraded, do not discourage the African youth who dreams to reach the European Eldorado (Figure 4). Transit countries are then faced with organized crime that lives on illegal immigration and an influx of refugees when attempts to join the European coasts fail, which has been the case for the last decade. In this regard, many countries, particularly those in the north, are nowadays considered countries of residence rather than just transit areas for these migrant flows.

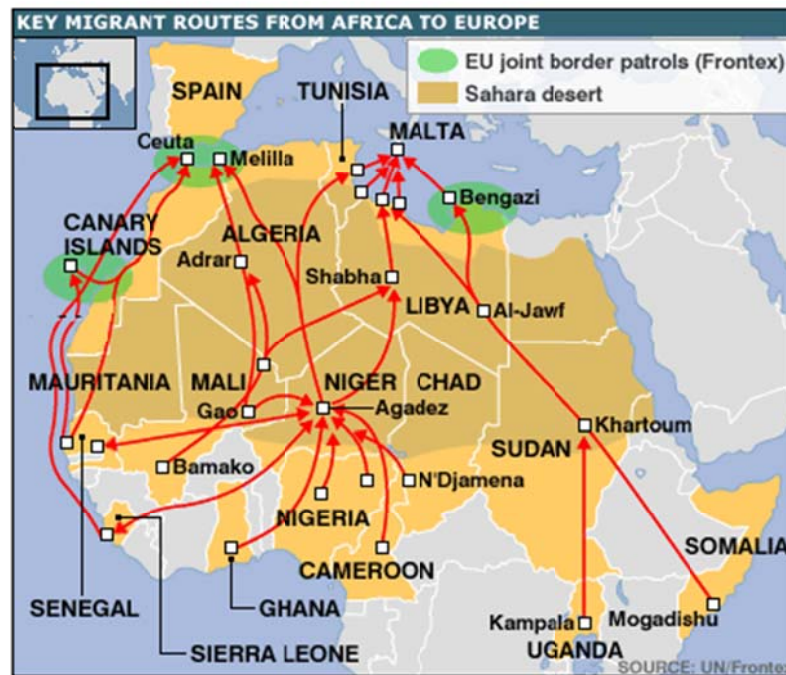


Figure 4: Key migrant routes from Africa to Europe²³

Furthermore, as a large gray area, the Sahel is also an ideal place for arms trafficking. The supply is made easy due to multiple peripheral conflicts which, when turning off or falling in intensity, provide many arms to traffickers in the region. Despite the agreement signed in 2006 within the framework of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States),²⁴ which prohibits the transfer of such goods, it is easy to obtain in the Sahel almost all possible conventional arms such as Italian automatic pistols, Russian or Chinese Kalashnikovs, Israeli machine guns, heavy machine guns, mortars, grenades, and even anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank, and surface-to-air missiles!²⁵ This opening of the Sahel to illegal arms trade is a real source of insecurity for the entire region. It helps equip local terrorist groups and supports the development of protest homes, such as the reborn rebellion of the Tuareg in Mali. Additionally, it constitutes an arsenal at hand for criminal gangs in Europe who consequently saw a relative commoditization of large caliber weapons in recent years.

2- The impact of the Libyan crisis

The Libyan crisis and the fall of Colonel Kadhafi had a very destabilizing effect on the security situation in the Sahel. Indeed, the return of people who lived in Libya (mostly Tuareg) and the proliferation of many weapons previously held by Libyan forces raise a real concern and pose a serious threat to both the present and future of the Sahel region.

Libya has been since the 1970s a haven for the Tuareg, and many of them have acquired Libyan nationality and served in the armed forces. The fall of Colonel Kadhafi has deprived the Tuareg community not only of a tremendous protector, but also of greater financial support, knowing that Libya has funded their previous rebellions and allowed many Tuaregs to find jobs on its soil. However, identified as a backing force to the old regime, the Tuareg became quickly undesirable in Libya and were forced to return to their home areas. By the end of November 2011, more than 2,000 combatants had already returned to the only city of Timbuktu. Such an influx of men, mostly aged between 20 and 40 years who have lost their jobs and were left with no means to support their families, cannot remain without consequences on already poor and vulnerable areas. Furthermore, these fighters did not return empty handed. But, due to the transformation of Libya into an open armory, their pickups were loaded with heavy machine guns and all other categories of weapons.²⁶ Hence, although the Libyan crisis cannot be considered as a precursor to the degraded security situation in the Sahel region, it certainly generated fatal consequences to the already unsecure area, which mostly favored terrorist organizations operating in this part of the world.

III- Focus on terrorist organizations

The current situation of the Sahel region is extremely worrying. Many terrorist groups are identified in the area, such as AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), the Movement for Oneness (or Unity) and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA or MUJWA), or Ansar Dine. As all these groups are derived from or inspired by AQIM, the actual work will highlight the latter organization's role in the region.

1- AQIM, the Sahelian ulcer

The AQIM name - "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", a literal translation of "Tanzim al-Qaeda fi-Bilad Al-Maghrib al Islami" - appeared for the first time on 24 January 2007 when the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) changed its name to the new sobriquet, completing its allegiance to the organization of Usama Bin Laden which had been decided a few months earlier, on 11 September 2006. The GSPC was born in 1998 in Algeria, following a split in the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a terrorist organization created in 1992 in the wake of the cancellation of the elections by the Algerian government mainly influenced by military Generals. However, during the 1990s, the GIA was involved in the worst massacres of the entire Algerian civil war, which provoked a broad movement of condemnation and rebuff in the GIA ranks. Hence, Hassan Hattab, one of its commanders, dissociated and created in September 1998 the GSPC whose primary objective was the regime representatives, sparing civilians as much as possible. This strategic shift required the extension of its activities to the desert and the strengthening of logistics capabilities through the recruitment of small armed groups.

The events that marked the start of the third millennium led to a turning point in the history of the GSPC, particularly the September 11 terrorist attacks and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in March 2003. In this regard, as the new Emir Abdelmalek Droukdal devoted a deep admiration for Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, he approached him and sent hundreds of fighters to

support Al-Qaeda in Iraq.²⁷ This collaboration had tremendous consequences on AQIM. Firstly, it enabled Droukdal to assert his authority over the troops. Secondly, it hardened an important number of Maghreb fighters and provided them with very useful Guerilla skills, particularly when dealing with western forces. Lastly, it was a great occasion to approach Al-Qaeda headquarters and gain their confidence and their green light to finally operate under their command in the Sahel Area of Operations. This historical event was first announced by Ayman Al-Zawarihi on the fateful date of September 11th 2006, but the effective birthday of AQIM would be 24 January 2007, when Droukdal announced the transformation of GSPC into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.²⁸

2- The spread of violence in the Sahel

The advent of AQIM didn't just consist of a name change, but it also led to the appearance of a new warfighting strategy that fully entered the former GSPC to the global jihadist scene. As such, the year 2007 was marked by unprecedented violence, especially with the introduction, in Algeria, of the method of suicide attacks, extensively used in Iraq.

However, the madness of AQIM couldn't hide the fact that very soon this organization (contrary to what both Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri envisioned at the time of its affiliation with Al Qaeda) was unable to exceed its Algerian logic and take action on the European soil. Furthermore, the combination of military efforts conducted by North-African countries and their firm boundaries' control aborted the AQIM dreams of widening northward, which explains their interest in the Sahel region as a base of operations (Figure 5).

On the other side, it would be unrealistic to think that AQIM would cut ties with the people of the Sahel. Indeed, mainly originated from Algeria, the terrorist members are not at home in northern Mali and surrounding areas. They largely depend upon the indigenous people in both operations and logistic domains, particularly Humint (Human Intelligence), knowledge of the terrain, water, food, or fuel supply.

The attacks and hostage-taking committed by AQIM, associated with the governments' inability to deal with it, have destroyed the security climate in the Sahel region in recent years. Violence and insecurity have deterred many investors and other economic actors from intervening in an area already facing chronic underdevelopment and extreme poverty.

a- The avoidance logic

As a first consequence of the security degradation, the Sahel has been labeled as an area to avoid. One of the most spectacular cases of the implementation of this logic was the cancellation of the Paris-Dakar rally in January 2008.³⁰ Indeed, shortly after the killing of four French civilians and three Mauritanian soldiers, AQIM issued a statement threatening openly the sporting event whose route passed through Mauritania. After Intelligence services confirmed the imminence of the threat, the Rally's organizers cancelled the race and transferred it to the South American continent.

Furthermore, the Sahel is currently one of the areas that all governments, particularly westerners, urge their citizens not to visit, such as the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs who qualified most of the Sahel countries as red labeled or highly inadvisable (Figure 6). As a result, the local tourism has been negatively affected, particularly in territories that depended almost exclusively on this unique resource, like the Nigerien city Agadez or the historical Timbuktu previously named the desert pearl.

But tourism is not the only sector suffering from this red zone classification. Many NGOs, specialists, and researchers avoid going to these regions, contributing even more to the difficulties and feelings of abandonment of the local communities.



Figure 6: The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' travel advice on 22 September 2014³¹

b- AQIM, a temptation for young Tuareg

Officially, there is no organic link between AQIM and the Tuareg. The ideology of the Salafist terrorist movement had never found echo among Tuareg populations. In fact, although mostly Sunnite Muslims since the Arab invasions of the seventh century, the Tuareg do not claim Islam as part of their identity; this role is primarily held by their Tamasheq language.

Moreover, between 2006 and 2007, some skirmishes opposed the two groups, particularly when the Algerian authorities provided Tuareg with weapons to fight AQIM. However, it seems that the actual relationship between them is more peaceful and continuously improving. For the Tuareg, it is a strategic choice. Without the support of Kadhafi and engaged in a new campaign against the Malian authorities, it would be unwise to face the two fronts simultaneously. In addition, young generations, out of the control of the oldest, are seduced by both the AQIM anti-Western discourse and by a large amount of very lucrative crime. In return, the terrorist organization gained not only a strategic ally, but also enlarged its AO, including the whole Sahel region.

c- The growing threat of the Boko Haram sect

The fundamentalist preacher Mohammed Yusuf founded the Boko Haram sect (*Jama'at Ahl Al-Sunna li Da'wa Wal-Jihad*) in 2002 in Maiduguri (north-east of Nigeria), advocating the establishment of an Islamic Emirate based on the strict adherence to the Sharia law.³² In response to his violence, Mohammed Yusuf was captured in 2009 by the Nigerian forces and killed in prison. Therefore, the sect shifted to a clear radicalization and extended its action beyond the sole northern part of the country. Even if Boko Haram cannot be considered as the Nigerian Muslim community's representative, the sect knew how to manipulate this population's grievances in order to recruit young, oppressed, and mostly ignorant Muslims. Such a narrative is not only in the logic of an anti-western message that Boko Haram wants to convey, but it especially aimed to accelerate the fall of the Nigerian government, which was embodied by the former President Goodluck Jonathan, who, in addition to being Christian, is from the south, the most developed and most favored part of Nigeria.³³

Like most of the terrorist groups operating in the area, Boko Haram saw in AQIM a strategic ally. In fact, they believe in fighting the same enemy or at least for the same *holy cause*, which is the *liberation* of their claimed territories from all infidels and apostates (from the sect's stand point) and the strict application of the Sharia law in the way they view it. Hence, since 2009, the sect built ties with AQIM and clearly changed tactics with the extension of its activities to include kidnapping, trapped cars, bombing, etc. However, on 7 March 2015, the actual leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, announced his allegiance to the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the latter immediately accepted this demand. On 12 March 2015, ISIL's spokesman Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani announced that the terrorist group's self-proclaimed caliphate (Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi) had accepted the Nigerian sect's pledge of loyalty, appointed Shekau as the Islamic Governor of the West-African region, and urged African Muslim fighters to join the cause of *Jama'at Ahl Al-Sunna li Da'wa Wal-Jihad*

(Boko Haram).³⁴ This allegiance is not a surprise, but it constitutes the largest reinforcement to the so-called Islamic State since its self-proclamation of the Caliphate.

Several reasons explain this strategic alliance. Firstly, this occurred three weeks prior to the Nigerian presidential elections, which the Islamist insurgents had already threatened to disrupt. Although the recent defeat of Goodluck Jonathan is due to the combination of governance, economic, and security issues, the alliance between ISIL and Boko Haram had a destabilizing effect on the former president's campaign. Secondly, Abubakar Shekau realized that he no longer can rely on AQIM's support to prosper and that ISIL's backing would not only provide him more legitimacy, but it would also allow him to spread his AOR to encompass the whole West-African soil. Thirdly and most importantly, the Nigerian sect needed a richer and stronger ally more than ever to deal with the West-African coalition. In fact, starting on 8 March 2015, some 8,700 soldiers from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin have formed a coalition Task Force along with the Nigerian Army in order to defeat the terrorist organization.³⁵ This operation seems to be successful, because in few days, it allowed for the recuperation of key states such as Yobe, Adamawa, and Borno.³⁶ As such, the Alliance with the world's most effective terrorist organization would ensure to Boko Haram the required support, particularly with regard to funds, logistics, military expertise, and flow of fighters.

In conclusion, the dementia of these terrorists heavily compromises the future of the region. The creation of a terrorist arc in this part of Africa would certainly worry anyone interested in the future of the continent and its development.

IV- Opportunities and Recommendations

National security, political, governance, and development issues along with the fight against drug trafficking and the related organized crime, and the defense of human rights have regional ramifications. In addition, the unfair participation in political life and access to social services have regional dimensions, given the links that marginalized groups develop across borders. Moreover, criminal and terrorist groups act nationally, regionally, and internationally. The environmental and economic shocks that explain the humanitarian crises also have regional and international dimensions.

Based on this analysis and considering the efforts made so far at all levels, an integrated strategy should seek to help both the governments and peoples of the region to address the causes of instability in a long-term perspective. In this regard, any course of action should simultaneously integrate the following three strategic objectives:

1- An effective and inclusive governance for the entire region

Effective governance depends upon the legitimacy of an efficient state based on political inclusion and Rule of Law as well as the capacity and responsibility to provide basic services, particularly with regard to the security domain. To this end, all efforts should be initially integrated into an international framework such as the UNDAF³⁷ (United Nations Development Action Framework) and later - in a medium term - pass the baton to regional institutions. Such a governance requires the conduct of the following steps and measures:

- Promote democratic practices such as equitable access to resources and socio-economic services, political dialogue, free and transparent elections, and broad community participation through the reinforcement of the capacities of national institutions to effectively govern all of the national territories.

- Support local governance and enable authorities to expand public services in the whole national territory in order to ensure more equitable access to resources and socio-economic services.
- Promote and support the development and implementation of the Sahelian legislation on decentralization.
- Empower political parties in the Sahel countries to promote a peace policy, encourage the political participation of women and young generations, and create an open structure for dialogue between parties.
- Promote the knowledge exchange and the sharing of lessons learned between electoral commissions in the Sahel region in order to prevent conflicts generated by elections.
- Strengthen national and regional human rights mechanisms in order to fight against impunity and reinforce independent justice systems to effectively combat corruption.
- Develop effective national and regional Early Warning systems to address potential problems of governance and security threats. The current ECOWARN (ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network) has shown its inefficiency.³⁸

2- National and regional security mechanisms able to deal with cross-border threats

National, sub regional, and regional security mechanisms based on respect for human rights and Rule of Law must be strengthened and must become fully operational. Although regional organizations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and the Sahel-Saharan States Community have been operating in this area, their interventions have not been as successful as expected. The main reason behind this failure is the lack of trust among countries, which led to their non-cooperative attitudes when facing border threats. Therefore, the resolution of territorial disputes seems more imperative than ever to enable any nation-state to meet its sovereignty challenges. Likewise, the birth of new fragile states would generate more security problems to

this already insecure area. In this context, several separatist groups keep claiming wrongly some strategic areas and establish alliances with terrorist groups like AQIM to achieve their goals. The cases that best illustrate this issue are the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA) in the Northern Mali, and the separatist front Polisario (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia El-Hamra and Río de Oro) in the South of Morocco, which inhibit both security and economic cooperation in the whole region.

In this regard, the Sahel countries can rely, at least temporarily, on the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) developed by the United States, which provides a multifaceted approach to regional security that spans the “3Ds” (Diplomacy, Defense, and Development). This strategy aims to assist these countries in improving their capacity to monitor and control border areas and enhance their overall long-term security capacity. The program embraces a holistic approach to address security issues through the following key functions:

- **Military Capacity-Building**, which consists of training and equipping security forces in order to enable them to control and secure their respective borders, and to identify and deal with terrorist threats within their territories.

- **Law Enforcement Anti-Terrorism Capacity-Building**, which consists of enhancing the ability of Law Enforcement officials to conduct professional investigations and effectively participate in securing borders against all kinds of illicit trafficking.

- **Justice Sector Counterterrorism Capacity-Building**, aiming at developing a judicial system capable of prosecuting terrorists and managing prison facilities in order to prevent radicalization and recruiting activities among detainees.

- **Public Diplomacy and Information Operations**: using soft power (either religious or cultural) to promote moderation and tolerance to counter extremist ideology.

- **Community Engagement**, which consists of engaging civil society, particularly prominent leaders to enable them to softly counter violent extremist cells and report serious security threats to local security forces.

- **Vocational Training**, aiming at offering vocational training and socio-economic opportunities to the population exposed to terrorist risks in order to prevent their recruiting from terrorist organizations.³⁹

3- Integrated humanitarian and development Interventions and Plans to ensure long-term resilience

Multisectoral approaches will enhance the resilience of the Sahelian peoples and erect a bridge between humanitarian and development programs to address the underlying causes and subsequent consequences of insecurity and other vulnerabilities, in addition to promoting long-term development. The following steps might help mitigate the Sahelian economic issues:

- Support the capacity of local authorities and institutions to create and implement mechanisms to broaden the participation of the community in the development process to include vulnerable groups like women and young generations.

- Support the development and consolidation of policies and practices in order to improve the allocation, management, accountability, and independent oversight of public resources.

- Urge the Sahelian countries to opt for the concept of sustainable development, taking into account the balance between its three aspects: Ecologic, Economic, and Social.⁴⁰

- Take advantage of regional innovative examples and experiences of countries that have succeeded in the field of sustainable development, particularly the case of Morocco, viewed as a leader in this context with its effective NIHD (National Initiative for Human Development).⁴¹

- Enhance the capacity of governments and other stakeholders to use natural resources in order to advance human development in four interrelated areas: participatory legislation, policy,

and planning; exploration centered on the population; effective collection and management of the revenue; and investment in human development.

Although these lines of effort may seem very generic and unrealistic, at least in a short term perspective, they must be integrated within any strategy aiming at solving the Sahelian thorny issue throughout a holistic approach (Governance-Security-Economy).

CONCLUSION

In security terms, the situation in the Sahel region remains very fragile and worrying. The dangers of terrorism, illicit trafficking, and organized crime need to be addressed in detail. However, any strategic vision must take into consideration not only these security issues, but also political and development ones within a sub regional and regional framework.

Furthermore, after conducting this analysis, all indicators refer more or less directly to three basic concepts of the study and management of such a crisis: First, the population initially as an object and later as a subject; second, the government and development respectively as theoretical and practical means; and security as a final end.

To conclude, inaction or short-term actions are no longer options to solve the security issues in the problematic Sahel region. Any strategy should more focus on soft power rather than tanks and air strikes' hard power.

NOTES

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- ³² Boko Haram is a haoussa word meaning: Western education is a sin. *Boko* refers to “book” and *Haram* is an Arabic word meaning “forbidden”. Therefore, all books, (or education) except the Koran, are forbidden, because they represent the *hated* Western education. Their official name is *Jama'at Ahl Al-Sunnah Li Da'wa Wal-Jihad*, literally meaning Congregation of the People of Tradition (Sunnah) for Proselytism and Jihad.
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³⁸ The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) is an observation and monitoring tool for conflict prevention and decision-making. As set out in Article 58 of the revised 1993 ECOWAS Treaty, its establishment and functioning are defined by the Protocol, Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security of December 1999. The implementation of this tool begun in 2003.

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