Strategic monitoring: Final report

Security developments in the Sahel

Fanny MALATY
Léa DORIGNY

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Introduction

The Sahel designates the geographic strip of Africa marking the climatic transition between the Saharan realm in the north and the savannas of the Sudanese domain to the south, where the rains are substantial. From west to east, it goes from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. Beyond this first geographical description of the Sahel, we needed a more precise definition when we started our strategic monitoring. However, definitions of the Sahel vary greatly among authors. Some of them define the Sahel as the five members of the G5 Sahel, an institutional framework for regional cooperation, especially in terms of development and security policies. Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali belong to this regional organisation for strengthened cooperation. We chose to set aside the wider definition of the Sahel, encompassing Nigeria, Cameroon and Sudan in the East, or Senegal and Guinea in the West, these countries face different challenges than those faced by G Sahel Member States, and evolve in different contexts. Although Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali also deal with different contexts, they face similar security challenges and share a similar historical background: these five countries are former French colonies, having reached their independence in the 1960s. Moreover, these five Sahelian States have chosen to unify their strength and enhance their levels of cooperation to address the multidimensional security crisis they are facing. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis and monitoring of security developments in these five countries is central and relevant to understand one of the most complex crises in the world. That is why we focused our monitoring on G5 Sahel members.¹

When we talk about the Sahelian region, it is very often through the security and military prism. Indeed, terrorist attacks targeting both civilians and soldiers are numerous in the area. To eliminate jihadist fighters, especially in the Lake Chad Basin or in the three-borders region, military operations are frequently launched by the G5 Sahel, supported by the French operation Barkhane, the MINUSMA or the European Joint Task Takuba. But today, this crisis is more than ever multidimensional, ranging from the failure of local governance reforms to political instability, not to mention the consequences linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change is another issue, whose impacts in the Sahel are immediate and devastating, forcing millions of individuals to flee their homes and aggravating the global refugee crisis. When our monitoring started, a military coup occurred one month ago in Mali, while Niger and Burkina Faso organized legislative and presidential elections in November and December 2020. The multiplication of extreme weather events due to climate change were also catalysts for tensions: between August and September 2020, rainfalls and floods had been the worst in a decade, especially in Niger and Burkina Faso. More than 200 deaths were reported in the Sahel and at least 11.3 million individuals are threatened by food insecurity, as well as shortages in drinking water.

Considering their impact on the region’s stability, we could not ignore political developments and climate-related threats either. The trap would have been to lock oneself into a purely military perspective, neglecting important factors responsible for the security crisis in the Sahel today. Throughout our monitoring and this final report, we tried to provide the most comprehensive overview of the Sahelian security crisis. After a short presentation of our methodology, we will analyse the principal military security issues in the region. The regional cooperation to address the terrorist threat and the debates over the French military presence will be the heart of our first developments. In the second part, we will study the political instability in the Sahel, mainly through the elections that Niger and Burkina Faso witnessed and the political transition in Mali. Finally, we will show that the crisis in the Sahel is not only military or political but multidimensional. With this in mind, we will analyse the major challenges faced by Sahelian states in terms of food, climate, and health security.

¹ See Annex 1
Methodology

Monitoring, sorting and analysing information found on Sahelian states requires attention, rigour and research. For this strategic watch, we elaborated our own methodology. The first step was choosing the countries we would monitor, among the states belonging to the scientific acceptations of the Sahel. As we have already explained in the introduction, we decided to focus our watch on Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali for two main reasons. First, they are five former French colonies that gained their independence between July and August 1960. Their historical legacies have therefore common points and can be compared. Second, these five countries have chosen, since 2014, to strengthen their cooperation and to address their common issues together, within the regional organisation named G5 Sahel.

The second step was to better understand the context of our strategic watch. With this in mind, we drew the profile for each of the five Sahelian countries. Before any further research, it was important to better understand the political, military and health situation there. In a board\(^2\), we summarized general information on the national contexts, such as the regime in place, the stability of the regime and the main challenges faced by each of the countries we monitored. We also researched which actors were involved in the region, to understand the dynamics at stake. To this date, the French “Opération Barkhane”, the MINUSMA (UN program for peacekeeping in Mali), the European Task force Takuba, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force were the main actors.

We then defined the aspects of the security crisis we wanted to monitor, based on the developments of the weeks immediately preceding the beginning of our monitoring. A military coup had occurred in Mali in August 2020 perpetrated by the National Committee for the Salvation of the People. Economic sanctions were imposed by ECOWAS, until a power transition from the military to the civilian power. A significant and violent jihadist attack had also targeted 6 humanitarian workers from the NGO ACTED in Niger in August. Moreover, the organization of the elections in Niger and in Burkina Faso were important elements to consider. Similarly, climate-related threats were also quite concerning at the beginning of our monitoring: the Sahel had been hit by important floods and unusual amount of rainfalls. Finally, infection and mortality rates of COVID19 were slowing down for at least three months in Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Chad.

Based on the analysis of the most recent developments, we then defined the dimensions of the security crisis that would be the most relevant. We kept in mind six main themes, which are the main security issues in the region and the heart of G5 Sahel’s cooperation. Initially, these six topics were:

- Terrorism and counter-terrorism operations,
- Regional and international cooperation,
- Political and social unrest,
- Human rights and education,
- Climate-related risks and food insecurity,
- COVID-19 and the sanitary crisis.

In the first weeks, we slightly adapted this orientation to the developments monitored in the Sahel. For instance, the topic « Regional and international cooperation » gradually merged into the

\(^2\) See Annex 2
military and political aspects of the security crisis, as it was not a key security issue in itself. Another example was the topic « Political and social unrest », which evolved into « political developments » as it seemed more comprehensive and allowed a broader analysis of what was happening in the Sahel on a political level.

To find information, we mainly used Google News to obtain the most recent information on the region. We also searched country by country, as it provided more precise information, either from French media outlets such as Le Monde, Le Figaro, TV5Monde or RFI, as well as from local and national newspaper. At the very beginning of our watch, we did not follow Sahelian newspapers specifically. But with time, we noticed that Sahelian newspapers, as well as English, Spanish and German newspaper could provide different interpretations of regional developments. Therefore, we also followed foreign media outlets such as El Pais, The New York Times, and Deutsche Welle, as well as Sahelian newspapers:

- For Mauritania: Aljazeera, Arabnews, Challenge.ma
- For Burkina Faso: Burkina24, Lobservateur bf, Lepays.bf.
- For Mali: Maliweb, Abamako,
- For Niger: Actuniger, Aniamey, Iciniger, Nigerinter,
- For Tchad: Alwihdainfo, Tchadinfos, Lepaystchad.

Lastly, to sort and classify the information retrieved from the media, we used Google docs. This tool is particularly easy to use for group works and allowed us to share the information instantaneously, from one day to another. When our watch started, we wrote day by day what happened on this Google docs. However, we found it a little bit confusing. We decided therefore to change our way to report the news we found and to classify them by themes. Each month, we created a new Google doc with the six themes we aimed to monitor. Day after day, we filled each of the six categories with the information we found. This final report provides an overview of the key findings reached after monitoring security developments in the Sahel from 23rd September 2020 to 31st January 2021.

I. Military security: terrorism and regional instability

a. The terrorist threat at the heart of the security crisis

Overview

Since the 2011 Tuareg insurrection in Northern Mali, Sahelian states continue to face a large repertoire of threats. Terrorist armed groups have proliferated, mostly grouped under two banners. On the one hand, the JNIM, affiliated to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb with half a dozen groups and approximately 2,000 soldiers. The JNIM, led by Iyad Ag Ghali, is particularly active in Northern Mali and Burkina Faso. Their terrorist attacks are usually claimed in the name of political goals, to gain geographical and political control over territories. On the other hand, the Islamic State in the Great Sahara, formerly linked to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, has remained particularly active in the “Three-borders region”, across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. The group encompasses at least 800 jihadists and its attacks target both civilian and military facilities, including humanitarian workers of ACTED in Kouré in August 2020.

The multiplication of terrorist armed groups has led to a severe security crisis in the Sahel, forcing the displacement of millions of civilians. Terrorist attacks mostly concentrate in the Three-borders region and the Lake Chad Basin3. The deadliest attack of our monitoring occurred on 3 January 2021, in the Nigerian villages of Tchoma Bangou and Zaroumadareye. 105 civilians were killed and at

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3 See Annex 3 and 4.
least 10,600 civilians were forced to flee. This attack was neither claimed by ISIS nor the JNIM. MINUSMA blue helmets were also targeted by terrorist armed groups, making this mission the most dangerous UN peacekeeping mission. Meanwhile, in Northern Nigeria, Boko Haram has remained extremely active. The deadliest attack of 2020 in the North East of the country occurred on 28 November in Koshebe, on the day of the first elections ever held since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurrection in 2009: at least 76 civilians lost their lives in this massacre.

The extension of this security crisis to Southern Sahelian States is an important risk of destabilisation, especially for Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal which could also fall into a cycle of violence. In the North, the stalemate and the proxy war in Libya will also continue to further destabilize the Sahel. Finally, the rivalry between terrorist organizations is an additional factor of destabilisation in the region. terrorist armed groups affiliated to Al Qaeda are competing with local branches of the Islamic State in Western Africa for control over territories and populations. From September 2020 to February 2021, we monitored multiple clashes between local branches of ISIS and al-Qaeda occurred in Mali, especially in the region of Gourma.

Religious and ethnic tensions

The growing terrorist threat has also fuelled tensions between religious and ethnic communities in Burkina Faso and Mali, particularly between Fulani and Dogons. Indeed, to address the terrorist threat, governments have encouraged citizens to take arms and form militias. In Burkina Faso, the growing insecurity since 2019 has led more than 2,000 civilians to join the “Volunteers to Defend the Homeland”. Yet, the transparency and accountability of these half-military half-civilian militias remain highly criticized. NGOs, international human rights organizations and the MINUSMA have reported a significant number of exactions committed against civilians, mostly motivated by ethnic or religious ideologies. The village of Farabougou in Northern Mali has been one of the theatres of these violent intercommunity tensions during our monitoring. Encircled by armed men on 14 October, the village remained under a siege for several weeks. This tense situation had built upon intercommunity tensions between Bambaras and the Fulanis, two religious and ethnic groups coexisting in Mali. A reconciliation forum held in Niono, with the participation of the Malian authorities, failed to reconcile the parties.

b. Counter-terrorism efforts: a mixed review

General overview

In 2014, Sahelian armies joined forces in the “G5 Sahel”, composed of seven contingents from Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. The goal of this Joint Task Force was to coordinate better the efforts of national armies, in order to eradicate a transboundary threat: jihadist terrorism. Three corridors of 200km large on each side of their borders are the operational areas of these contingents. Yet, the capabilities of the G5 Sahel armies have remained limited due to the lack of funding, capacities, and training to support the 5,000 soldiers on the field, who continue to answer more to national commandments. To strengthen the efforts of their national armies, Sahelian states solicited the help of the French government, which deployed Opération Serval in 2013 in Mali, followed by Opération Barkhane across the Sahel after 2015. A UN peacekeeping missions, MINUSMA, has also been deployed since 2013 to support the peace and stabilisation process in Mali.

Considering the proliferation of actors in the region, a summit was organized in Pau in January 2020 to strengthen the cooperation between France and G5 Sahel States. A combat partnership was

\[^4\text{See Annex 5.}\]
formed under “the Coalition for the Sahel”, to unify the actions of African and Western military forces in the region around four pillars:

1) Fighting against terrorist armed groups
2) Strengthening the military capacities in the region
3) Supporting the return of the state and its administration on the territory
4) Providing development assistance.

Following this summit, a joint commandment mechanism was created, and 600 additional French soldiers were deployed within the Barkhane operation, scaling up its military personnel to 5,100. Between September 2020 and February 2021, bilateral visits between the French government and the heads of Sahelian States have multiplied. In November, both the French Minister of Armies, Florence Parly, and the Minister of European and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, have expressed their full support to Niger in addressing security and development challenges, during the context of political transition.

Finally, since the Pau Summit, in an attempt to internationalize its presence in the region, the French government has also been calling on European Member States to deploy troops to address the terrorist threat in the Sahel. In March 2020, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and Sweden have agreed to contribute to this military effort through a European Joint Task Force named “Takuba”. As of July 2020, the first elements of the French, Czech and Estonian Special Forces were deployed. Nevertheless, a year after the Pau Summit, the integration of military capabilities in the G5 Sahel Joint Force has not delivered its promises to enhance coordination between actors in the region. Delays in the deployment of contingents continue to hamper coordination: in October, the government of Chad and the African Union pledged to deploy 1,000 and 3,000 soldiers respectively by the end of 2020 in the G5 Sahel Joint Force. This deployment has still not occurred to this date.

A mixed military result

From September 2020 to February 2021, counter-terrorism operations have yielded major successes. At the end of September 2020, operation “Lafiya Dole” led to the neutralisation of seven top commanders and fighters of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin. At the end of October 2020, Operation “Bourrasque”, mobilizing French, Nigerien and Malian soldiers, as well as American and British aerial support, was the first operational deployment of the European Task Force Takuba and led to the neutralization of at least 100 jihadists. Similarly, mid-November, the French military authorities welcomed major tactical successes, including the neutralization of Bah ag Moussa, a high-ranking official of the JNIM. Early January 2021, the French and Malian forces pursued their efforts in Operation “Eclipse”, and killed over a hundred jihadists, seizing significant amount of war materials. These operations were interpreted as a strong message sent to terrorist armed groups, regarding the revival of the French military presence in the region. Yet, tactical military successes remain short-term and have not succeeded in eradicating the terrorist threat in the region. For instance, the neutralization of the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdelmalek Droukdel, in June 2020 has not led to the destruction of the JNIM. On the contrary, in November 2020, the Algerian veteran Abou Oubeida Youssef was appointed as the new head of the terrorist organisation. Moreover, French and Sahelian forces have also suffered from major military setbacks.

5 Among them were Abu Usman, Alhaji Shettima, Modu Mainok, Bukar Gana, Abu Summayya, Amir Taam, and Amir Kuraish.
As of mid-November 2020, we observed a multiplication of terrorist attacks targeting French contingents and soldiers. On November 30, the JNIM attacked the French military headquarters in Kidal, Menaka and Gao, but no casualties were reported. Yet, on December 28, the French Ministry of Armies deplored the loss Brigadier-chef Taneri Mauri and 1st class Snipers Dorian Issakhanian et Quentin Pauchet in the explosion of a vehicle on the road from Gossi to Hombori. On January 3, 2021, Sergent Yvonne Huynh and Brigadier Loic Risser died after being also hit by an improvised explosive device during a recognition patrol in the Menaka region. These attacks were claimed by the JNIM, to oppose the French presence in the Sahel and its policy towards Islam. These attacks have brought the total number of French soldiers killed in Mali since 2013 to 47. Their deaths have fuelled criticisms regarding the efficiency of the Barkhane Operation in what appears as an unwinnable war, due to the geographic constraints of the region and the deep roots of terrorist organisations in the population. The results of the Ifop poll of January 2021⁶ showed that, for the first time since the deployment of the Serval Operation in 2013, 51% of the surveyed population now disapproved of the French military involvement in Mali. The growing opposition in the French public opinion against the deployment of French soldiers in the Sahel could urge the government to review its strategy in the coming months.

c. Scenarios ahead

1st option: A French disengagement from the Sahel

Considering the growing opposition of the public opinion in France and in the Sahel against the deployment of French soldiers in the Sahel, the future of the Barkhane Operation remains uncertain. The growing resentment of Sahelian communities was particularly salient in the aftermath of a controversial operation, led by French forces in Hombori on January 3, 2021. While the French contingent claimed to have neutralized dozens of alleged jihadists through air strikes during what had appeared to be a jihadist rally, civilians and Fulani associations from the region accused the French troops of having murdered at least twenty civilians during a wedding. The Malian Ministry of Defence denied the allegations, assuring that only jihadist fighters had been killed, but MINUSMA and OHCHA observers were sent to the region on January 25.

Following this controversial operation, the French Minister of Armies Florence Parly confirmed in an interview on January 4 that a reduction of the French military presence was “very likely” due to recent military successes (Le Parisien, 2021). Nevertheless, on February 15 and 16, 2021, a joint summit of the G5 Sahel was held remotely from N’Djamena. An announcement on the reduction of soldiers in the Barkhane forces was highly expected. Yet, against all odds, President Macron announced that no adjustment to the current status of Barkhane would be made for the time being: “a French withdrawal would be a mistake” (Le Monde, 2021). Following his consultations with Heads of Sahelian States, he explained that the French government wants to shift from a logic of external operations (“Opex”) towards the fight against terrorism. Despite how vague this announcement was, this evolution could imply an increased use of Special Forces, aerial operations, and armed drones. According to President Macron, the reduction of the French military presence in the region is premature: it depends significantly on the “sahelisation” of the fight against terrorism, through the enhanced capacities of Sahelian national armies, and on the “internationalisation” of the effort to address the terrorist threat and support Sahelian armies.

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2nd option: An internationalisation of the military effort

To internationalize its presence in the Sahel, France is seeking support from American and European partners. On one hand, the full deployment of operational capabilities within Takuba is the necessary condition to the withdrawal of French troops from the region. During the G5 Sahel Joint Summit of N’Djamena, President Macron presented the French goals for Takuba: reaching 2,000 soldiers, with a French pillar of 500 men, to support Sahelian armies through an enhanced cooperation. Yet, the intended and necessary augmentation of capabilities of the Takuba Task Force is barely making any progress. To support Estonian, Swedish, French, and Czech soldiers, the Italian government promised the deployment of 200 soldiers within this European Task Force. Other countries such as Greece, Hungary and Serbia have expressed similar interest, without defining a clear strategy to meet this end. Even though the Belgian government announced on December 9, 2020 the deployment of 250 soldiers in the Barkhane operation as of October 2021, we can hardly expect a significant increase in the European military engagement in the region.

On the other hand, an enhanced American engagement in the Sahel could occur in the coming months. Washington’s financial support to the intelligence and surveillance capacities of the Barkhane operation already amounts to $45 million per year. On November 9, the U.S. announced its intention to scale up its contributions to the fight against terrorism through an additional amount of $30 million. This increased financial support seemed to demonstrate the growing American concern over the severe security crisis in the Sahel and its impact on regional destabilisation. As President Biden was sworn in, his policy towards the Sahel remains awaited by France. However, the Pentagon has thus far remained very elusive regarding the evolution of its strategy in the Sahel. Paris also hopes to obtain soon more information and commitment from Washington to the anti-ISIS international coalition in Iraq and Syria.

3rd trend: the option of a dialogue

Because of the difficulty to internationalize efforts in the fight against terrorism and the insufficient capabilities of Sahelian armies, the option of a dialogue with terrorist armed groups could be explored further. The dialogue with terrorist armed groups used to be a banned option from the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. Yet, under the pressure of the Sahelian populations, and following several forums such as the “Conférence d’entente nationale” in 2017, the demand for a dialogue with the leaders of terrorist armed groups, like Iyad Ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa, has been growing while Bamako has gradually opened to this idea.

The release of hostages in October was the confirmation of this opening: indeed, on October 5, 2020, the Malian authorities released 205 jihadists and paid an alleged ransom ranging from 10 to 20 million euros to the JNIM, in order to obtain the release of four hostages. This process was extremely controversial among Sahelian States. On December 3, 2020, the Malian Prime Minister, Moctar Ouane, expressed the desire of his government to “engage in a dialogue with “all the children of Mali, without any exclusion”, to “meet the will of Malians and consider national realities” (France24, 2020). Yet, Sahelian states fear that the payment of ransom could set a precedent and have deplored the absence of concertation in the G5 Sahel. The President of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Kaboré, deplored the high price paid to obtain the release of four hostages, while the Algerian authorities denounced the payment of ransoms to terrorist armed groups as counter-productive strategies.

7 Among them were the French humanitarian worker Sophie Pètronin, the Malian opposition politician Soumaila Cissé, and two Italian citizens: Nicola Chiacchio and Pier Luigi Maccalli.
The positioning of the French authorities on this exchange of hostages, and more broadly, on the possibility to dialogue with terrorist armed groups has remained unclear. The French government denied any involvement in the release of hostages early October and expressed its strong opposition to the possibility of a dialogue with terrorist armed groups. In an interview on November 20, President Macron affirmed that with jihadists “we do not talk, we fight” (Jeuneafrique, 2020). Yet, it seems very unlikely that the Malian authorities could have obtained the release of a French hostage without, at least, informing the French government. At the end of December, we observed a slight evolution in the French opposition to negotiations with terrorist armed groups. A source of the Élysée confirmed the slow opening of Paris to the idea of a dialogue between Sahelian states and jihadist groups (Le Parisien, 2020). The dialogue would only be possible with groups possessing a national agenda and are neither affiliated to al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State. The same source stressed than any talks with Iyad Ag Ghaly or his lieutenant Amadou Koufa would be opposed by Paris as they are considered too close to the central hierarchy of al-Qaeda. Therefore, the gradual opening of Paris to this idea could make the scenario of negotiating with terrorist armed groups more likely in the coming months. However, a participation of the French government in these negotiations remains very unlikely.

II. Political instability: between democratic transitions and disruption

a. Electoral processes in a context of extreme insecurity

Burkina Faso and Niger organized their presidential and legislative elections respectively on November 22 and December 27, 2020. These political processes occurred in a context of significant political and military instability, marked notably by the coup in Mali and the rise of insurrectional violence.

Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, six years after the overthrow of President Blaise Compaoré, the authorities opened up the political space to the opposition. With thirteen presidential applications selected by the Constitutional Council, the government did not appear to have exerted pressure on the institutions responsible for organizing and supervising the elections. Indeed, Major General Yacouba Isaac Zida, former Prime Minister of the transition and number two of the Presidential Security Regiment of Compaoré was able to apply. His influence over certain segments of the armed forces and ongoing legal proceedings for « desertion in peacetime » could have been a ready-made excuse to remove him from the presidential election. Among other candidates were members of the civil society or of new segments of the opposition, which demonstrated a certain renewal of political actors and of the quality of public debate. Despite this relative political openness, Roch Marc Kaboré was re-elected as head of state, with 57% of the votes and 56 seats at the Assembly.

However, the context of violence and insecurity has presented obstacles to the holding of elections in Burkina Faso. Several polling stations were difficult to access for agents of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) due to heightened levels of insecurity. The holding of the vote was therefore impossible in some areas. According to the CENI, 1,619 sectors and villages out of the 9,299 in the country were not covered by enrolment operations. In addition, numerous people displaced by violence were not able to vote, as their identity documents had been either lost or destroyed. Burkina Faso has one million internally displaced people and 30% of them were unable to vote because of their lack of identification documents (IOM, 2020). In addition, hundreds of 6% voting stations were not able to open on the D-day, amid terrorist threat (RFI, 2020).
Anticipating the criticisms of the elections’ results due to these obstacles, the parliament had adopted a new law in August 2020. This law made it impossible to contest the result of elections, even if one part of the population would not manage to vote: “en cas de force majeure ou de circonstance exceptionnelle entraînant l’impossibilité d’organiser les élections sur une partie du territoire national, l’élection est validée sur la base de la partie non affectée par la force majeure” (LibreInfo, 2020). However, this modification favoured parties with a strong presence in secure areas of the territory, in particular the central plateau around Ouagadougou, such as the presidential party, the People's Movement for Progress (MPP), and the former ruling party, the Congress for democracy (CDP). Therefore, the extend to which these elections were held in a fair and free manner is debatable.

**Niger**

In Niger, the electoral campaign for municipal and regional elections began on December 2nd. Ten years after the coup that led to the fall of President Mamadou Tandja, the country witnessed for the first time in its history a transfer of power from one democratically elected president to another. Indeed, President Mahamadou Issoufou, after his two terms allowed by the Constitution, did not try to apply for a third term, nor to amend the Nigerien constitution to remain in power. Among the 40 applications, the Constitutional Court approved 30. Like in Burkina Faso, this was a sign of the renewal of the political class. Enrolment operations were also disrupted amid terrorist threat. For instance, in the region of Tillaberi, CENI’s agents were targeted by jihadists, who threatened anyone who dared to vote. During the first round, coverage rate was only 85.12%, as scores poll stations were not able to open. The second round was also disrupted as seven members of the CENI were killed when their car hit an explosive device, in Golye village, Tillabéri region. Mohamed Bazoum and Mahamane Ousmane won the first round of the presidential elections, with respectively 39,33% and 16.99% of the votes. The second round took place on February 20, 2021 and Mohamed Bazoum was finally elected as President.

**b. Disruption in Mali: military coup, political transition**

Mali witnessed a military coup on August 18, 2020, by the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). It was the fourth coup d’etat in Mali since its independence in 1960. At that time, Mali was embroiled in war, fighting with widespread terrorist and inter-ethnic violence for years. Tensions between the former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta had been rising since the end of 2019, after several deadly attacks against Malian soldiers. In addition, the legitimacy of the Former President was besmirched by the revelation of alleged irregularities and fraud committed during the legislative elections of March and April 2020. Protests and demonstrations had started on June 5, 2020 and became bloody over the summer, leading to the military coup in August 2020.

ECOWAS immediately imposed economic sanctions on Mali, to be lifted only once the political power would have transitioned from the military to the civil. The African Union decided to suspend Mali from its institutions and condemned the coup. Moreover, with time, the Malian political class and the public opinion denounced the behaviour of the junta at the power. At first, the military junta took measures that seemed to follow the recommendations of ECOWAS for a political transition. For instance, on November 9, two decrees were adopted to create a National Council for Transition (CNT). Yet, this CNT was used to secure the control of the military junta over political institutions. The first decree determined the transitional body’s membership criteria and specified that the vice president of the transition, Assimi Goïta, would be responsible for determining the final list of members after a review of applications. The second decree detailed the method for allocating seats at the CNT.
According to this second decree, the CNT would be composed of 121 members and 1/5 of the seats would be set aside for the military, while other parties would have to share between 5 and 11 seats (at most) at this Council. At the time, opposition parties already began to express their strong disagreement and reservations about how the CNSP was dealing with the situation. Several political forces decided to stand together and to decline to participate in the election of the CNT, including the former majority Together for Mali (ENP) and Convergence for the Development of Mali (CODEM). On January 18, 2021, the CNSP was dissolved by a presidential decree. This dissolution had been long awaited by ECOWAS and the Malian political class. According to the Transition Charter, once the bodies responsible for managing the transition were created, the CNSP was called to disappear. But it lasted much longer than the Charter had initially allowed.

Despite these changes, the military junta has thus far remained in power. More than that, its chief, Colonel Bah N’Daw, seems to be at ease in his new political and highly strategic functions. December 2020 and January 2021 marked the stabilisation of this military-political government. The President of the Transition in Mali went on December 16, in Niamey, Niger. He had a face-to-face interview with the President of the Republic of Niger on December 16 and 17. This interview focused on an examination of bilateral relations and an exchange of views on African and international subjects. The two leaders also reaffirmed their determination to forge a solid partnership in order to promote South-South cooperation. On December 26, the transitional Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, accompanied by four ministers began an important trip across the country. Meanwhile, voices of the oppositions to the military junta have become now relatively silent. Negotiations between the government and the UNTM, the biggest trade union in Mali, started on January 7 to pacify the social situation. The President of the Transition, Colonel Bah N’Daw, and his Ministers seem to be accepted on the national and regional levels. The international recognition of this new government came with the diplomatic visit of Colonel Bah N’Daw in Paris on January 26, as well as with its participation in the G5 Sahel meeting in Niamey on February 15 and 16.

c. Scenarios ahead

1st scenario: Democratic transitions in Niger and Burkina Faso

In Niger and Burkina Faso, the presidential elections seem to have confirmed the democratic path chosen by these two young democracies. We witnessed a political openness in both countries to the participation of the political opposition, able to compete. However, the fight against terrorism remains a key problem for the political stability and the organisation of electoral processes. Disruption of voting operations allowed only a partial electoral participation in both countries. Opposition parties used the non-ability of the governments to organize the elections in every part as a ground to contest the results. In Niger, protests broke out on February 23 and two people died in clashes between police and supporters of the defeated candidate in Niamey. In addition, the disruption of voting operations would probably reinforce, in the regions concerned, an already very present feeling of political marginalization, in particular among the nomadic Peuls. The Tillaberi region is a stronghold of the opposition, whose members see problems with electoral enlistment as an attempt to suppress their votes. In Burkina Faso, the new electoral law making it impossible to contest the result of these elections, even if one part of the population would not manage to vote, raised many criticisms from the opposition parties. Therefore, in both countries, the insecurity will stay at the heart of the political debate.
2nd scenario: A separation from the military and the political powers in Mali?

In Mali, after four months of uncertainty, the current government seems now quite well settled. If some changes occurred because of international pressures, the military junta has not been dislodged. On the contrary, it benefits from a national, regional, and international recognition lately. Therefore, on the political level, the immediate future of Mali would probably not be about the overthrow of the military junta. However, the developments about human rights in Mali should be the object of a particular attention. The international commission on Mali, established in January 2018 by the UN published a report in January 2021, saying that the Malian army has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. The report details 140 cases in which crimes were committed, against thousands of victims (dead, wounded, tortured, displaced, etc.). Moreover, at the end of December, The UNHCR has helped 3,000 Malian refugees to return to the refugee camp of Goudoubo in Burkina Faso. In addition, several arrests by the Malian intelligence services and the State Security occurred on December 22. Some human rights organisations have deplored extrajudicial arrests and the absence of information regarding the detention conditions. On January 13 in Kobou, in northern Mali, the Malian army killed three of the prisoners. Two human rights associations are calling for an independent investigation. Violations of human rights are numerous in Mali and this will need to be addressed by the international community as soon as possible, based on evidence provided by NGOs and UN Agencies on the ground.

III. The multidimensional humanitarian crisis in the Sahel

a. Climate and food crisis

In a context of chronic poverty and high population growth, insecurity and climate hazards have remained important drivers of the aggravation of the humanitarian crisis. Repeated shocks, including severe drought episodes and floods, have led to the disruption of the livelihoods of the most vulnerable populations in the region. In total, the 2020 rain season in the Sahel has forced more than 360,000 individuals to flee their houses. Due to the exceptional amount of rainfall in August and September 2020, the Niger River overflowed several neighbourhoods in Niamey, causing the death of at least 65 civilians and the destruction of more than 32,000 houses. The EU and the African Bank of Development unlocked emergency aid envelopes, respectively amounting to €4,2 million and €29,2 million, to support the Nigerien government’s efforts to distribute kits for primary needs and provide emergency shelters to those in need. In Chad, floods have also forced the displacement of 11,500 individuals, while in Ouagadougou, heavy rainfalls have affected more than 2,300 households and have led to the death of at least 41 inhabitants at the end of September. The capital of Burkina Faso still lacks the appropriate infrastructures to mitigate the consequences of heavy rainfalls and facilitate the evacuation of water. In light of this emergency, the government declared the state of natural catastrophe, allocating an envelope of €7,6 million for emergency relief and support to the population.

Moreover, floods have caused a spike in malaria infections due to high levels of humidity. In Niger, at least 2,450,000 cases of Malaria were confirmed in 2020, of which 2,450 have died. This represents an increase by 30% in cases, compared to last year’s level. The mortality rate of malaria is 35 times higher than the COVID-19 mortality rate. Agriculture has also been highly disrupted by these extreme weather events. Floods have devastated thousands of hectares of crops, broke dikes and dams, and forced millions of individuals to flee their villages, thus aggravating the food crisis in the region. In October, the International Committee of the Red Cross estimated that 11,3 million individuals were impacted by food scarcity in the Sahel, and at least 16,7 million people could suffer from hunger.
As the COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted agricultural activity and supply chains, at least 12.9 million individuals could be food insecure in Nigeria in June 2021 against 9.2 million today. The World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization warned in early November 2020 against the increase of hunger in Western Africa, from North-Eastern Nigeria to South Sudan. According to these two organizations, the combination of conflicts, economic declines, climate-related disasters, and the pandemic have pushed the populations deeper into the food crisis. Estimating that 30 million people need urgent food, nutrition and livelihood assistance in the Sahel, the United Nations Agencies have urged financial backers to scale up their contributions in the region. Following a fundraising event co-hosted by the United Nations, Denmark, Germany and the EU mid-October, donor countries promised €1.4 billion to scale up humanitarian aid to the Sahel. At the end of November, Germany showed dedication and leadership in the fight against the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel by granting an additional €18 million to the World Food Program, to address food insecurity in Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon. Yet, these financial efforts have not succeeded in overcoming food and climate insecurity in the region thus far. Stressing the gravity of the humanitarian crisis in the region, the UN Secretary-General, on January 7, 2021, appointed for the first time a Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel.

b. Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences

According to the UNHCR, the combination of extreme weather events, extreme poverty, and high levels of violence with the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Sahel has forced the displacement of at least 1.5 million of people. The first wave of COVID-19 hit the Sahel during summer 2020. In October and November, the measures taken to control the pandemic appeared to have been successful. In November, the average was around 10 new infections per day in Burkina Faso and Chad, while the average was less than 4 infections per day in Niger. In Mali and Mauritania, the average in both countries was around 40 new cases of COVID-19 each day. In addition, the statistics in the Sahel called no comparison with the figures we know in Europe. In November, the total number of deaths due to COVID-19 was 275 in Mauritania, 104 in Chad and 135 in Burkina Faso.

However, at the end of December, the number of COVID-19 cases increased significantly in the Sahel. The five Sahelian countries adopted significant measures to counter the transmission of the virus, such as partial lockdowns, curfews, the extension of the state of emergency and restrictions on domestic and international travels. Hygiene kits were distributed and communication campaigns to raise awareness on precautionary measures were also deployed, with the help of international organizations, such as Unicef. Mauritania, Niger, and Mali closed their schools and universities for one month. In Chad, the reimposition of a lockdown in the capital of the country has sparked protests, led by health students, artists and the Chadian League for Human Rights denouncing the opacity of decision-making. However, evidence show that these measures succeeded in slowing down the propagation of the virus and helped curbing the infection and mortality rates in the region. Nevertheless, the five Sahelian countries try to find and implement solutions to fight the COVID-19 pandemic in the long run. While curfews and lockdowns are not well accepted, the deployment of the vaccination strategies is very limited and will not begin in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad before March 2021, at the earliest. Another pandemic worries the authorities: the outbreak of Ebola in Guinea. At least 8 people have been reported dead for Ebola at the end of February 2021. The former Ebola pandemic that ended in 2016 killed more than 10,000 persons in West Africa.

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8 See Annex 6
The effects of the COVID-19 crisis are affecting Sahelian societies already weakened by conflicts and worrying economic situations. The pandemic is driving humanitarian needs across the region at unprecedented levels. Indeed, direct and indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the disruption of supply chains and the slowing exchanges of goods and services due to lockdown, add to intensifying conflicts, growing food insecurity, and structural inequalities. The poorest layers of the populations are the most exposed to the socio-economic consequences of the sanitary restrictions adopted by governments. For instance, in Ouagadougou, the closing of the principal market for a month and the absence of clients after its reopening has mostly been detrimental to informal workers and farmers. Similarly, the World Bank estimates that in rural villages located in centre Mauritania at least a quarter of the population suffers from food insecurity. In Mali, the difficulty of ensuring the continuation of classes remotely for pupils and students could have a significant impact on the access to education, particularly for girls who are the most likely to drop out of schools. This has been accentuated by the important impact of the severe drought in 2019 on agriculture.

If governments have taken swift action against the pandemic, in the coming months it will not be enough. Mid-November, the EU announced an envelope of €92 million to strengthen the responses of Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chad has been the first country in the world to have asked for a debt restructuration to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial backers are also likely to extend the debt moratorium until the end of 2021. Despite the financial support of international organizations, such as the extension of the IMF’s debt relief measures for Mali and the use of “COVID-bonds” by Niger, long term solutions to address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are necessary.

c. **Scenarios ahead:**

The Sahel is today undergoing one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time. The need for financial assistance and relief mechanisms is more than urgent. On October 16, the UNICEF Spokesperson Marixie Mercado stressed the consequences of the multiple crises on regional stability, in particular the surge in armed violence and the socio-economic fallouts from COVID-19. Children, and girls in particular, are the most at risk in one of the poorest regions in the world, where unemployment, COVID-19 and climate disasters are everyday obstacles to education. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, 7.2 million children are estimated to need humanitarian assistance, and more than one million children have been forcibly displaced. Thousands of schools were shut down due to the multiplication of terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, investing in the future generation’s safety, education and well-being is at the core of long-term and sustainable development goals.

In light of the dire humanitarian situation, the multiple calls of international organizations and NGOs could lead the most advanced economies and financial bakers to scale up their contributions to the Sahel. The ongoing debates on the French public aid for development, and on the orientation of the French strategy for development and international solidarity 2022-2025, show the particular attention given to Sahelian countries. An increase in development aid and humanitarian assistance could also be expected from European countries, which have mostly shown a greater readiness to engage in civilian activities to foster development, rather than deploying military troops and soldiers in the Sahel to fight terrorism. The International Crisis Group released a paper in November, urging the European Union to reorganize the hierarchy of its priorities in the Sahel (Le Monde, 2020). The Group argues that the EU should focus its multidimensional approach more on governance reform and state-building. Rebuilding the public service and fostering human and social development are considered as the absolute priorities considering the grave humanitarian crisis in the region. However, considering the hard impact of the
pandemic on African countries, in particular due to the decision of the most advance economies to shut down their domestic markets, we do not expect significant African-led initiatives and financial support to address humanitarian needs.

Lastly, the multiplication of extreme weather events is forcing the international community to consider the consequences of climate change on development strategies. Addressing climate-related threats, mitigating environmental risks, and building the resilience of developing countries are now important targets of sustainable development strategies promoted by international and regional organisations. For instance, mid-December, the Directors of the African Development Bank approved, a technical assistance project named “Desert to Power” initiative. This initiative aims at transforming the Sahel region into a renewable energy powerhub, by harnessing its potential in solar energy. Therefore, we could expect a multiplication of similar initiatives in the coming months, as part of international efforts to adapt to climate change and mitigate environmental risks.

This scenario tends to be confirmed by the new momentum given to the Great Green Wall project at the beginning of 2021, during the One Planet Summit. This initiative carried out since 2005 by the African Union is an attempt to fight against the desertification of the Sahel, by restoring 100 million hectares of degraded land. The goal is to protect the biodiversity, boost agriculture, create employment and improve the living conditions for Sahelian populations. To accelerate the realization of this project, the actors present at the One Planet Summit promised a $14.3 billion envelop over the period 2021-2025. Among donors were the World Bank and the European Commission. The African Bank for Development committed to mobilise $6,5 billion for the project. Yet, since 2005, only 4% of the territory has been covered thus far due to the lack of political commitment from world leaders and the inconsistent access to financial resources for Sahelian States. Between political promises and the multiplication of climate-related hazards, we could expect an increased effort from the international community to address climate insecurity in the Sahel in the coming years.
Bibliography


Annexes


Annex 2: Overview and general presentation of G5 Sahel countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country profiles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential republic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growing insecurity in North Burkina Faso.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Important development challenges (education, health, humanitarian crisis since the beginning of terrorist attacks in 2016, low income).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential elections soon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Called « Republic », but the same President since 1990.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Almost failed state.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very violent region and frequent terrorist attacks in the Lake Chad Basin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Covid-19 cases remain low, but challenge to maintain the regular health services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi presidential, democratic republic. The current President is at the power since 2009 though.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growing insecurity especially since this summer, when f)rench humanitarian workers were killed by terrorists.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republic. A military coup overthrew the previous President this summer though.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unstable country, regularly hit by military coup.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under Ecowas' sanctions and embargo since August 2020.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growing insecurity and violence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>An Islamic Republic since the first democratic elections in 2007.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holds the Presidency of the G5 Sahel.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less terrorist attacks reported.</td>
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Annex 3: Number of civilians, soldiers and MINUSMA blue helmet killed in the Sahel from 24 September to 20 January

Annex 4: Maps of terrorist attacks targeting civilians and military presence in the Sahel region.

Annex 4-a. 21 October 2020 to 20 November 2020
Annex 4-b. 20 November 2020 to 18 December 2020

![Map of West Africa with markers for terrorist attacks against civilians, French military bases in Mali attacked by Al Qaeda, and the village of Farabougou, still under siege.]

Annex 4-c. 18 December 2020 to 1 January 2021

![Map of West Africa with markers for terrorist attacks against civilians, military operations having led to the neutralization of jihadis, and terrorist attacks against civilians.]

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