SAHEL

A RETHINK OF THE EU'S STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL:

from problematic policy-making to a new 'transformative pragmatism'

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Globalization, Conflict,
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THE GREENS/EFA
in the European Parliament

The Sahel has become primordial for European interests. Up to three different strategies (2011, 2015 and 2021) have been drawn up by the EU to underpin the mechanisms and instruments needed to intervene in a region that is increasingly perceived as a security problem. The political volatility and the level of violence, the concern about migratory flows through the region, and the growing impact of the climate crisis on the deterioration of food security and the living conditions of the local population are factors that have placed the Sahel at the centre of the EU's agenda. This report undertakes a strategic review of the strategies of the EU for the Sahel from a critical perspective that highlights the broadly securitized framework that has influenced them. Finally, the report provides a rethink of the EU's strategy in the Sahel based on the production of critical knowledge as a starting point, the need to redefine core issues that have informed EU policies, and the development of "transformative pragmatism" as a guiding principle for future action.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
AQIM	Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
CEMOC	Joint Operational Army Staffs Committee
CIDOB	Barcelona Centre for International Affairs
COIN	Counter-Insurgency
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSS	Collège Sahélien de Sécurité
DFI	Development Finance Institutions
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EDF	European Development Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
EPF	European Peace Facility
EU	European Union
EUCAP Sahel Mali	European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali
EUCAP Sahel Niger	European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger
EUMPM Niger	European Union Military Partnership Mission Niger
EUTM Mali	European Union Training Mission in Mali
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq
JNIM	Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MISAHEL	African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PDB	Public Development Banks
PSI	Pan Sahel Initiative
RAP	Regional Action Plan
RoL	Rule of Law
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TSCTI	Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative
UN	United Nations

Executive Summary

In recent years, the Sahel has become a priority for European interests. The European Union (EU) has developed up to three different strategies (2011, 2015 and 2021) aimed at strengthening the necessary mechanisms and instruments for effective intervention in a region that is increasingly perceived as a security challenge. The region's political volatility and heightened levels of violence since the outbreak of the Mali crisis in 2012, exacerbated by recent coups d' tat, as well as growing concerns about migration patterns and the escalating impact of the climate crisis on food security and local livelihoods, have firmly placed the Sahel at the top of the EU's policy agenda.

The Sahel has also emerged as a highly competitive arena for global actors, with the notable involvement of actors such as the Russian government and the Wagner Group. This proliferation of actors exacerbates the crisis of legitimacy that France, in particular, and the EU, as a collective institution, face both within the region and in broader contexts. Despite an apparent awareness within the EU of the multiple complexities and evolving dynamics at play, there appears to be a reluctance to fundamentally reassess the predominantly militarised approach taken to date in the region.

The report is set against the backdrop of regional and global changes that highlight the exhaustion and inadequacy of existing instruments. It focuses on two key aspects: firstly, an examination and reflection on the specific issues influencing the formulation of European policy towards the Sahel, which are inherently problematic; and secondly, an exploration of the fundamental elements conducive to rethinking a strategy that is both transformative and capable of fostering greater legitimacy for the EU, while at the same time generating greater cooperation with local actors.

The following sections of this report present arguments regarding four particularly problematic elements of the various European strategies towards the Sahel. First, there are concerns about the securitisation - a process whereby complex issues are construed solely as security threats requiring an immediate response - of three critical components in the region: the nature of violence, migration patterns and the escalating impact of the climate crisis. Second, the negative impacts and unintended consequences of strategies that propose highly militarised patterns of intervention are a notable problem. Thirdly, tensions and contradictions within the EU institutions during the strategy formulation process are identified, shaping the nature of the European approach in the region and influencing perceptions of consistency and coherence, thereby affecting the EU's credibility and legitimacy. Finally, a major concern is the gap between the principle of local ownership, which is embedded in strategies at a rhetorical level, and its practical implementation, where the voices and agency of local actors - especially those of a social nature - are marginalised, hindering their participation in the understanding of problems and the development of strategies. This gap also contributes to undermining the legitimacy and sustainability of any strategy formulated for the region.

Recognising and analysing this underlying problematic framework, the report argues for a reassessment of the European strategy in the Sahel, based on some fun-

damental elements aimed at addressing the challenges identified. Specifically, three main issues are raised. Firstly, the need to understand local issues through critical knowledge production, placing institutions such as local universities and local think tanks at the forefront of analysis. Secondly, a call to redefine and reshape approaches and strategies from a less securitarian standpoint, taking into account the complex structural factors underpinning the core concerns of European anxiety: violence, migration and the burgeoning effects of the climate crisis. Finally, the proposal to promote a concept called "transformative pragmatism". In contrast to the so-called "principled pragmatism" that guides European strategy in the Sahel, this means a pragmatic approach that acknowledges the limits of intervention while advocating a less intrusive, more transactional stance aimed at maximising a new added value in the midst of evolving dynamics and heightened competition.

In pursuit of these objectives, the report adopts a qualitative methodology, drawing on the conduct of 17 semi-structured interviews with various political and social stakeholders associated with the European strategy in the Sahel. These interviews were conducted between October and December 2023 in order to gather insights and perspectives relevant to the subject matter. In addition, the report benefited from a seminar held at the CIDOB Barcelona Centre for International Affairs in November 2023, which brought together around 20 international experts in the field. This collaborative forum further enriched the report's analysis and recommendations by fostering robust discussion and exchange of expertise.

Introduction

T he Sahel, a semi-arid borderland between the Sahara and the West African sub-region, encompassing the territories of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Senegal (see Annex 1), has recently emerged as a region of paramount importance for European interests. The European Union (EU) has developed no less than three different strategies (in 2011, 2015 and 2021) aimed at strengthening the mechanisms and instruments necessary for intervention in a region that is increasingly perceived as a security challenge. Political instability and the prevalence of violence, particularly since the crisis in northern Mali in 2012, coupled with concerns about migratory patterns through the region and the escalating impact of the climate crisis on worsening food insecurity and local living conditions, have put the Sahel at the top of the EU's agenda. Moreover, the past two years have underlined this perception of instability and fragility with a series of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and, more recently, Niger.

The region is also a key arena for the escalating competition between global players, particularly with the growing influence of nations from the global South. This dynamic is further complicated by the involvement of the Russian government and certain Kremlin-linked private security companies, such as the Wagner Group, whose involvement in selected countries in the region has significant ramifications. The proliferation of such actors is both a consequence and an aggravation of the crisis of legitimacy affecting France in particular, but also the EU more broadly, not only in this region but in various contexts. Brussels appears to be aware of the complexities and evolving realities it faces. However, instead of acknowledging the exhaustion and potentially detrimental effects of what is, as we will argue, a highly militarised approach to the region, it persists in an ambiguous reliance on instruments and methodologies that are clearly in need of reassessment.

PROBLEMATIC POLICY-MAKING AND "TRANSFORMATIVE PRAGMATISM"

In the context of regional and global transformations, and recognising the exhaustion and inadequacy of current instruments, this report seeks to examine two key facets: firstly, to explore and reflect on the nuanced elements that underpin the problematic formulation of European policy towards the Sahel, and to identify the inherent challenges; and secondly, to reflect on the fundamental principles that could help to re-imagine a transformative strategy capable of generating greater legitimacy and cooperation with local stakeholders in this period of crisis and evolution.

In this way, we believe that four particularly problematic elements lie at the root of the various European strategies in the Sahel. First, securitisation - the perception and framing of complex issues as singular security threats requiring immediate responses - affects the understanding of three crucial elements in the region: the nature of violence, migration patterns and the escalating impact of the climate crisis. Second, the adverse effects and unintended consequences of strategies advo-

cating heavily militarised approaches to intervention pose a notable challenge. Thirdly, tensions and contradictions within the EU institutions during strategy formulation contribute to shaping the European approach in the region, while projecting an image of inconsistency and incoherence, thereby undermining the EU's credibility and legitimacy on the ground. Finally, a critical issue is the principle of local ownership, which reveals a gap between rhetoric and practice. While strategies incorporate this principle at the rhetorical level, the actual involvement and influence of local actors - especially social actors - is severely limited, both in understanding societal issues and in designing and implementing strategies. This discrepancy further undermines the legitimacy and sustainability of any implemented strategy.

Furthermore, as highlighted earlier, these four challenges have unfolded in an evolving and increasingly competitive global and regional landscape. The proliferation of new global actors, including Russia, China, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, has facilitated the diversification of choices for local political entities - a phenomenon we might call "strategic polygamy". This is happening at a time when international actors, particularly France and more broadly the EU, are experiencing a gradual erosion of their authority and legitimacy and are facing increasing challenges from local forces.

Recognising and analysing this underlying problematic framework, the report argues for a re-evaluation of the European strategy in the Sahel, based on a few basic elements aimed at addressing the problems identified. Specifically, three questions are posed. First, there is a call to cultivate critical local knowledge production by placing actors such as local universities and local think tanks at the forefront of analysis in order to fully grasp local challenges. Secondly, there is a proposal to redefine and reshape approaches and strategies from a less securitised standpoint, taking into account the complex structural factors underlying the three central axes - the nature of violence, migration patterns and the escalating impact of the climate crisis - that lie at the heart of European concerns. Finally, there is a proposal to promote an approach called "transformative pragmatism". In contrast to the EU's "principled pragmatism" that characterises European strategy in the Sahel, this approach advocates a rethink based on a pragmatism that recognises the limits of intervention, increasing competitiveness and structural changes in the region. It also emphasises a strategy based on a less intrusive and more transactional approach, aimed at generating added value.

METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

The methodology used in this report follows a qualitative approach. In order to contextualise the findings presented here, the research team conducted an in-depth literature review of European Sahel strategies and related documents, as well as key EU strategic materials. In addition, both grey literature and academic sources on EU engagement in the Sahel were examined. This comprehensive review allowed for a meticulous genealogical analysis of EU involvement in the Sahel, providing a nuanced understanding of the evolution of EU behaviour in the region within the broader context of geopolitical dynamics.

In addition, a total of 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the research (see Annex 6.2.). These interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face at EU institutions in Brussels, supplemented by a sub-set conducted in Barcelona and remotely between October and December 2023. The interviewees covered a wide range of expertise, including academics, development and humanitarian specialists, professionals from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and policy officers from various EU institutions. It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted with the utmost respect for the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, whose identities were carefully protected throughout the research process.

In view of the complex dynamics outlined in this report, the research team organised a closed seminar at the headquarters of the CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) in Barcelona on 10 November. This one-day event, which focused on the key question "What role for the EU in the Sahel?", attracted the active participation of more than 20 experienced professionals from a variety of backgrounds. These included representatives of public institutions, academics, development and humanitarian experts, and members of European civil society active in the Sahel (see Annex 6.3). The seminar was carefully structured around two thematic axes, each chaired by a distinguished Sahel expert specially invited for the occasion. The opening session, entitled "The EU in the Sahel: an assessment of the challenges and contradictions of the strategy of the last decade", provided a comprehensive analysis of the European Union's involvement in the Sahel over the last ten years. The subsequent session, entitled "Security and political dilemmas in the Sahel: the role of external actors", provided a forum for in-depth discussions on the multiple security and political hurdles facing the Sahel, with a particular focus on the contribution of external actors. During these discussions, the research team seized the opportunity to gain invaluable insights and perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders. The collaborative discourse facilitated a refined understanding of the complexities inherent in EU engagement in the Sahel, thereby contributing to the overarching goal of formulating well-informed policy recommendations.

Following this introduction, the report is divided into three main sections. The first section examines the evolution of three key European strategies in recent years: the 2011 Security and Development Strategy, the 2015-2020 Regional Action Plan and the 2021 EU Sahel Strategy. Through this comparative analysis, we aim to analyse the rhetorical frameworks used to address different issues, as well as the nature of the responses and the integration of the concept of local ownership. The second section focuses on four aspects that we identify as particularly problematic within the European strategy formulation process: the securitised lens through which Brussels interprets three key issues (violence, migration and climate crisis); the negative repercussions of these approaches, illustrated through concrete examples; the discordant institutional dynamics characterised by tensions and contradictions between EU institutions in strategy development; and finally, the manifestation and implementation of the principle of local ownership. The third section focuses on three fundamental aspects that are central to unravelling the problematic facets outlined and initiating a reassessment of the basic tenets of an approach conducive to what we call 'transformative pragmatism'. This recalibrated approach has the potential to underpin greater legitimacy and sustainability of the strategy in the region.

Understanding the evolution of the EU's strategies in the Sahel region

T he Sahel has become one of the world's regions with the highest levels of violence and presence and activity of extremist groups. Paradoxically, the increase in the intensity of violence in this region has coincided with the growing presence of international missions and interventions. As a result, the European military presence has had not only to coexist and, in many cases, coordinate with the operations of other European countries (such as France), but also with the military presence of the US or other actors. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of the evolution of violence and security problems over the last decade and to understand the characteristics and evolution of EU missions in the region.

THE MULTILAYERED ORIGINS OF INSTABILITY IN THE SAHEL

To varying degrees, Sahelian states generally occupy the lower echelons of international human development indicators[1]. A significant portion of the population (40%) resides below the poverty line[2]. Moreover, the Sahel states feature prominently among countries with the highest rates of employment in the agricultural sector, with 69% of Chad's and 73% of Burkina Faso's population employed in agriculture[3]. However, the arid nature of this region, with more than 90% of the workforce engaged in the informal sector, renders workers and their families highly susceptible to both climatic and man-made shocks[4]. Populations that reside in remote and marginalised areas, such as the Liptako-Gourma triangle or the Kidal region in northern Mali, experience pronounced social and economic disparities that contribute to a widespread sense of grievance among communities as inequalities in access to basic services disproportionately affect tens of millions of pastoral farmers, herders and nomads in the Sahel[5].

1   United Nations Development Programme. 2022. "Human Development Report 2021-22.". September 8, 2022. https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22.

2   Crola, Jean Denis. 2019. "Sahel: Fighting Inequality to Respond to Development and Security Challenges." Oxfam . https://doi.org/10.21201/2019.4481.

3   World Bank. 2021. "Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estiate)". World Bank. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS.

4   Quak, Evert-Jan. 2018. "Drivers, Challenges and Opportunities for Job Creation in the Sahel." UK Department for International Development. https://assets.publishing.service. gov.uk/media/5c6ad4b340f0b61a25854a4e/455_Drivers_Challenges_and_Opportunities_for_Job_ Creation_in_the_Sahel.pdf.

5   Baele, Fr d ric, Virginie Baudais, Shourjya Deb, Ti man Diarra, Oumarou Hamani, Thomas Ou draogo. 2021. "Humanitarian protection in the Liptako-Gourma region: Local protection mechanisms and humanitarian response". SIPRI and Danish Refugee Council. https://www. sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/rapport_final_juin_2022_final_eng.pdf.

Table 1. Introductory data for the Sahel G5 countries

Country	Fragile States Index 2023 (rank)	Human Development Index 2023 (rank)	Share of population under the national poverty line	Share of population employed in the agricultural sector (%total)	Gini index	Share of population exposed to any shock*
Burkina Faso	21st	184th	41,4%	73%	43,00	87
Chad	9th	190th	42,3%	69%	37,50	77
Mali	13th	186th	44,6%	68%	32,36	86
Mauritania	37th	158th	31,8%	29%	36,00	89
Niger	24th	189th	40,8%	71%	37,30	92

* Exposure to any shock includes: income, education, social protection, finance, water and electricity (Doan *et al.,* 2023)
Source: Own elaboration with data from The Fund for Peace. 2023; UNDP. 2022; World Bank. 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Doan et al. 2023.

Corruption poses another serious developmental and security challenge. It is pervasive, erodes public trust in state institutions and raises fundamental concerns about the issue of legitimacy[6]. In this sense, discontent with the state institutional ability to secure basic needs is one of the central sources of the region's negative political developments. The World Bank's governance indicators rank all five countries of the Western Sahel among the World's lower third for government effectiveness[7]. Likewise, according to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Mali, Chad and Mauritania remain below the continental average in terms of governance conditions, with Chad being by far the Sahelian country with the worst conditions for participation and inclusion rights[8]. Since the 2020-2022 period, violence, rule of law, accountability and regulatory effectiveness have significantly worsened[9]. Competition on water for irrigation and cattle, irregular rainfall and limited employment opportunities in rural areas continue to adversely impact pastoral and farming economies. Consequently, the delicate connections between communities and their environment are undermined. Variations in transhumance corridors and increasing displacement has led to violent ethnic and communal clashes that pose a threat to regional stability due to their transnational nature and the incapacity of local States to mediate and provide effective management mechanisms for the use of

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6   onkar, Ahmet Berat . 2020. "Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region." NATO Parliamentary Assembly: Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Group (GSM). https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-02/042%20GSM%2020%20E%20rev%202%20fin%20%20-%20DEVELOPMENT%20AND%20SECURITY%20CHALLENGES%20IN%20THE%20SAHEL%20REGION_0.pdf.

7   World Bank. 2023c. "Worldwide Governance Indicators." World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators/interactive-data-access.

8   Mo Ibrahim Foundation. 2024. "Overall Governance Trends". https://iiag.online/data.html.

9   World Bank, 2023, *op. cit.*

natural resources[10]. Importantly, this scenario serves the interests of violent extremist groups, who are incorporating these events and dynamics effectively into their narrative.

In 2023, of all militant Islamist-linked fatalities reported on the continent, 50 percent were located in the Sahel. By comparison, the Sahel accounted for 30 percent of the continent's militant Islamist-linked fatalities in 2020. In this sense, fatalities in the Sahel represent a near threefold increase from the levels seen in 2020, when the first military coup in the region occurred[11]. As of 2019, Burkina Faso replaced Mali as the epicentre of crisis intensity in the region while year over year the number of recorded casualties has increased exponentially both in Burkina Faso and Mali. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), in 2023 the number of people killed by acts of political violence doubled in Burkina Faso, placing highest after Nigeria in West Africa. Across the Central Sahel, ACLED also reports a dramatic increase in conflict fatalities, with a 38 per cent growth in political violence and an 18 per cent growth in civilian deaths in 2023[12]. In this sense, the Sahel region now ranks as the world's epicentre for terrorism, accounting for 43% of all terrorism deaths worldwide compared to just 1% in 2007[13].

The spread of violence in the region has been shaping a very complex network of irregular actors in which two main actors stand out for their preponderance and influence: the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Both have been weaving alliances with particular local groups and actors in which the "localisation" of global narratives such as jihadist agendas have been key[14]. For some authors,recruitment strategies and multiple alliances of these two groups have differed substantially[15]. While JNIM has sought to integrate local groups into more nodal networks that appeal to a broader base of local community groups (termed "pastoralist populism"), the ISGS has sought to integrate local groups into a hierarchical system of "loyalty and affiliation" to the central Islamic State (IS), which has driven a campaign of violence that has escalated in brutality and cyclical attacks through looting and retaliation[16]. Such increased level of violence has led to massive forced displacements in recent years, especially in Burkina Faso and Mali, with around 3 million refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs in 2023.[17] Under this context, Sahelo-Saharian migration, a phenomenon

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10   Focus group, 18/11/2023.

11   Africa Center for Strategic Studies. 2024. "Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Violence in Africa". Infographic. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2024-deaths-militant-islamist-violence-africa-rise/.

12   Nsaibia, H ni. 2024. "The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-Long Conflict". Conflict Watchlist 2024. ACLED. https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/.

13   Nsaibia, H ni. 2023. "Fact Sheet: Attacks on Civilians Spike in Mali as Security Deteriorates across the Sahel." ACLED. September 21, 2023. https://acleddata.com/2023/09/21/fact-sheet-attacks-on-civilians-spike-in-mali-as-security-deteriorates-across-the-sahel/.

14   Mateos Martin. 2022, op cit.

15   Raleigh, Clionadh, H ni Nsaibia and Caitriona Dowd. 2020. "The Sahel Crisis since 2012", African Affairs, 120 (478): 123-143. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa022.

16   Mateos Martin. 2022, op cit.

17   UNHCR. 2024. "R4 SAHEL Coordination Platform for forced displacements in the Sahel". https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis.

not only related to violence but also to a historically interlinked regional economy that has never easily understood the meaning of national borders has now become the paramount concern for EU countries[18].

Figure 1. Fragile States Index 2023. G5 states

The maximum value for each category is 10

	Burkina Faso	Chad	Mali	Mauritania	Niger
Demographic Pressures	8.3	9.5	8.8	8.6	8.9
Refugees and IDPs	8.2	9	8.5	8.3	7.9
Group Grievance	5.8	8.1	8.5	7.6	7.7
Human Flight and Brain Drain	7	7.7	7.7	5.7	6.6
Economic Inequality	8.3	8.7	7.2	7.2	7.8
Economy	7.2	8.4	7.5	6.3	6.4
State Legitimacy	7.4	9.1	8.6	7.8	6.6
Public Services	8.6	9.6	8.9	8.4	9.5
Human Rights	7	8.4	7.5	6.4	6.7
Security Apparatus	9.3	8.7	9.6	5.7	8.3
Factionalized Elites	8.2	9.5	7.2	8.8	9.6
External Intervention	8.7	7.9	9.5	6.2	7.4

The maximum value fore each category is 10.

Source: The Fund for Peace (2023) • Created with Datawrapper

Source: Own elaboration from The Fund for Peace. 2023.

Mobility was and is one of the key elements of sustaining life in the Sahel. The Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) Protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods legitimises this phenomenon and endows it with a legal foundation[19]. However, one implication of this is that citizens from the whole region can legally travel to Agadez (Niger) or Nouadhibou (Mauritania), considered as hubs for irregular migration towards the EU. In this sense, a troubled colonial legacy, economic instability, extreme poverty and political and social fragility have coupled with the conducive conditions for illicit migration, trafficking and the opportunistic relocation of many violent extremist organisations with increasingly deadly consequences. Against this backdrop, the migration and refugee crisis of 2015 will amplify and emphasise the securitarian dimension of EU policy in the Sahel.

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18   onkar. 2020, *op cit.*

19   Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).1979. "Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment", 29 May 1979, A/P 1/5/79 https://www.refworld.org/docid/492187502.html.

EU STRATEGIES IN THE SAHEL: A BRIEF AND CRITICAL OVERVIEW
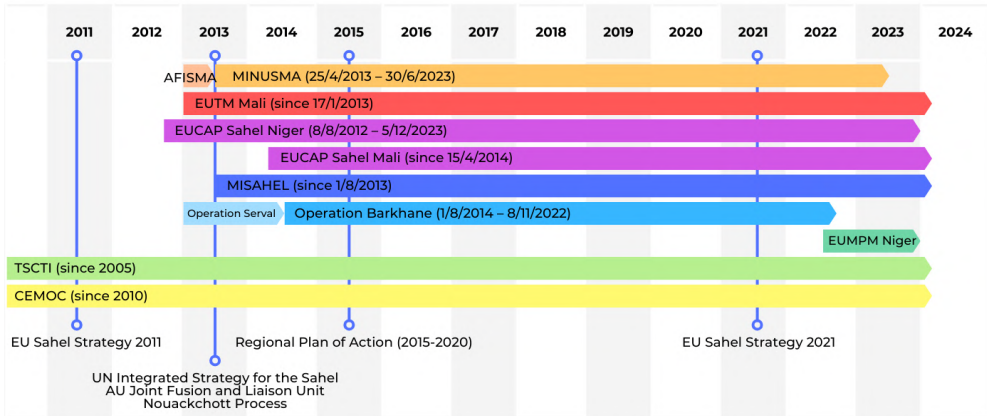
With it all, the last couple of decades have witnessed the implementation of an array of strategies, aid initiatives and military interventions by diverse international actors. These endeavours been criticised because of their limited ability to reverse the deteriorating conditions in the Sahel, with some authors arguing that their predominantly militaristic approach has exacerbated the situation rather than alleviating it. [20, 21]

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States identified the Sahara-Sahel region as a potential theatre for the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Consequently, the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) was launched in 2002 to bolster cross-border security cooperation among Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. Subsequently, the initiative evolved and expanded into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), a comprehensive counter-terrorism program. In 2010, Algeria established the Joint Operational Army Staffs Committee (CEMOC) with Mali, Mauritania and Niger to coordinate efforts against terrorism and criminal activities. In 2011, Tuareg rebels launched attacks in Mali seeking autonomy for the northern region known as Azawad. The conflict escalated southwards until the decisive French military intervention *Serval* stabilised the situation on the ground by 2013 while ECOWAS also organised a military mission sent to support Malian government forces known as the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), later transformed into the United Nations (UN) mandated Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) under the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (2013). Concurrently, the African Union's (AU) Joint Fusion and Liaison Unit, established by the militaries of eight North and West African countries in 2010, aimed to facilitate the exchange of information and coordinate collective actions against terrorism, weapons smuggling and narcotics and established the AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL), which, since the Nouakchott Process in 2013, has failed to operationalise the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in the Sahelo-Saharan region. This mosaic of strategic initiatives, in which we need to include the European Union's Strategies for the Sahel (2011, 2021) and the Regional Action Plan (RAP) (2015-2020), collectively signify a concerted effort to address the complex challenges posed by terrorism, governance, poverty and related criminal activities in the Sahara-Sahel region but also show how little consensus there has been among states and intergovernmental organisations as to which countries to tackle and which dynamics to prioritise.

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20   Pichon, Eric and Mathilde Betant-Rasmussen. 2021. "New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel. Addressing regional challenges through better governance". European Parliament Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161_EN.pdf.

21   International Crisis Group. 2021. "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy". Africa Report, 299. https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/299-sahel-stabilisation-strategy_0.pdf.

Figure 2. Timeline of the international missions and main policy strategies in the Sahel

| 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |

AFISMA   MINUSMA (25/4/2013 – 30/6/2023)

EUTM Mali (since 17/1/2013)

EUCAP Sahel Niger (8/8/2012 – 5/12/2023)

EUCAP Sahel Mali (since 15/4/2014)

MISAHEL (since 1/8/2013)

Operation Serval   Operation Barkhane (1/8/2014 – 8/11/2022)

EUMPM Niger

TSCTI (since 2005)

CEMOC (since 2010)

EU Sahel Strategy 2011   Regional Plan of Action (2015-2020)   EU Sahel Strategy 2021

UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel
AU Joint Fusion and Liaison Unit
Nouackchott Process

Source: *Own elaboration*

In the Sahel, prevailing instability within the region underscores the exposure of numerous populations to various threats, thereby emphasising the need for strategic and comprehensive policy measures. It is widely assumed in media and politics that sahelian dynamics are susceptible to reach Europe despite the lack of evidence that directly links sahelian terrorism and migration to European shores. However, the political saliency of these dynamics has been key for the EU to ultimately develop a keen interest in the region given that some of its member states, namely former colonial powers like France but also countries like Germany, Spain and Italy, have been deeply engaged with the states of the Sahel and concerned how this can destabilise the broader Mediterranean region.

The 2011 Security and Development Strategy

In 2011, the EU adopted its first strategy for the Sahel, the "European Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel" (hereafter 2011 EU Sahel Strategy or 2011 Strategy). The 2011 Strategy early became the flagship of the so-called security-development nexus[22] approach of the EU's stabilisation model, with medium and short term goals set by an integrated approach to governance. On the one hand, medium term objectives – 5 to 10 years– were to enhance political stability, security, governance and social cohesion in the Sahel states in order to promote sustainable development, with a clear mandate to maintain Al Qaeda in Islamic

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22   The "security-development nexus" refers to the intricate relationship between security and development, recognizing that these two dimensions are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. This discourse developed in the 1990s is a commitment to a broader understanding of the idea of security as "human security". i.e. security is understood as "freedom from fear", but also as "freedom from want". These claims emphasise the need to include socio-economic well-being and human development in the conceptualization of international security. For further readings see also: Duffield, M. 2001, 2010, 2014.

Maghreb (AQIM) and criminal networks away from the population[23]. On the other hand, short term objectives – 3 years– focused in improving basic services in contested areas, reducing terrorist attacks and kidnappings while limiting the capabilities of terrorist and criminal groups, improving the capabilities of Sahelian states to combat criminal trafficking and terrorism across the region, support peace agreements, etc[24].

The 2011 approach considered security and development in the Sahel as intertwined inasmuch as achieving the former was understood as a precondition for Sahelian states' economic development and poverty reduction[25]. Under these terms, security meant hard and palpable actions, with direct references to capacity-building of the military, law enforcement and rule of law sectors to better face terrorist threats and organised crime[26]. On the other hand, developmental objectives appear diffuse and conflated, with general quotes to creating economic opportunities for rural communities as well as mitigating the negative effects of climate change[27]. In a similar vein, the transnational and regional nature of the challenges that Sahelians face was portrayed as crucial to achieve security and development in the Sahel. It enforced a securitized regional approach so that "all the states of the region benefit from capacity-building in the fields of governance, security and development cooperation"[28]. With this, the Strategy not only aimed at portraying a prominent EU role in fostering economic development in the region but also to become a more salient security provider, especially for Sahelians and EU citizens, but also in a broader sense[29].

Although it is true that security and development constitute the backbone of the strategy as necessary and complementary objectives that set the basis for the European comprehensive approach[30], generalisations on other priorities (or the lack of) need to be highlighted. For instance, the first of such priorities is "to enhance transparent and locally accountable governance and re-establish an administrative presence of the state"[31], assuming there was a previous presence of the State in peripheral/marginal regions. Migration, while a crucial sector in the Sahel for the EU –as demonstrated by the launch of Operation HERA in

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23   European External Action Service. 2011. "Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategy_for_security_and_development_in_the_sahel_en_0.pdf.

24   Ibid.

25   Ioannides, Isabelle. 2020. "Peace and Security in 2020 Evaluating the EU Approach to Tackling the Sahel Conflicts." European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654173/EPRS_STU(2020)654173_EN.pdf.

26   European Union External Action Service. 2011, *op cit*.

27   Ibid.

28   Ioannides. 2020, *op cit*.

29   Ibid.

30   Mora Tebas, Juan Alberto. 2015. "EU-SAHEL. Regional Action Plan (2015-2020): A Tangible Holistic Approach." Instituto Espa ol de Estudios Estrat gicos. IEEE. https://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA50-2015_UE-Sahel__JAMT_ENGLISH.pdf.

31   European External Action Service. 2011, *op cit*.

2006[32]–, is absent in the document[33]. Despite being one of the most visible concerns, the initial EU Sahel Strategy did not relate to migratory flows, which were first included in 2015 after the Valletta Summit on Migration.

The completion of the aforementioned priorities was to be achieved via actions based in four areas: a) development, good governance and conflict resolution; b) political and diplomatic action; c) security and rule of law; and d) fight against radicalisation and violent extremism[34], [35], [36]. These guidelines suggest a European approach aimed at being reactive and adaptive to changing situations on the ground and to multilevel action –local, national, regional, and global. However, whereas the initial focus was multidimensional in tackling both security and development, the resulting approach has generally been excessively militarised to tackle terrorism[37] –and irregular migration flows after 2015.

Indeed, the 2011 Strategy, has often been perceived not as an integrated approach but as a preliminary security exercise to establish "a precondition for development"[38]. Moreover, the European rhetoric drawn from the 2011 EU Sahel Strategy, not only conditions development to military security but also establishes European interests and stability as a starting point. There is an evident lack of the Sahelian perspective in the way the Strategy is laid out, without any one single demand or objective of the Strategy coming from Sahelian voices. With stalled progress in the field, the discursive framework of the 2011 Strategy hardened over time[39] while concurrently facing criticism for contributing to "the securitization of EU development policy"[40]. Although some specific short term results were achieved kinetically, dealing with long-term regional stability has fallen out of reach since

32   Operation HERA represents a collaborative maritime initiative undertaken by the European Union with the aim of overseeing migration patterns and curtailing the influx of irregular migrants along the Western African Route, spanning from the western coasts of Africa to the Canary Islands, Spain. The inception of this operation was prompted by a surge in migrant arrivals at the Canary Islands in 2006. Notably, it continues to be an annual undertaking, overseen jointly by Spain and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX).

33   Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021, *op cit.*

34   European Union External Action Service. 2011, *op cit.*

35   Mora Tebas. 2015, *op cit.*

36   Pichon, Eric. 2020. "Understanding the EU Strategy for the Sahel." European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652050/EPRS_BRI(2020)652050_EN.pdf.

37   Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021, *op cit.*

38   G zkaman, Armağan. 2023. "The European Union -Sahel Relations: An Elusive Nexus between Development and Security,". International Congress on Eurasian Economies, session 6C: 394–400. https://www.avekon.org/papers/2729.pdf.

39   Mateos Martin. 2022, *op cit.*

40   Bergmann, Julian. 2018. "Neofunctionalism and EU External Policy Integration: The Case of Capacity Building in Support of Security and Development (CBSD)." Journal of European Public Policy, 26 (9): 1253–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1526204.

the publication of the 2011 Strategy. The comprehensive approach[41] to security and development that was initially envisioned has not translated well into practice and its militarization has proven to be largely unsuccessful and even counterproductive[42], especially due to a lack of ownership and political engagement of local elites in the capacity-building missions[43].

The 2015-2020 Regional Action Plan

While the huge amounts of development aid that the bloc has allocated to the region cannot be underestimated[44], it is undeniable that, both in terms of significance and implementation, European assistance in the Sahel has been spearheaded in the eyes of the international community by the three peace support operations envisioned to operate within the CSDP architecture. Along with the allocation of a total of €600m for Mali, Niger and Mauritania (shortly after extended to Burkina Faso and Chad) in the 10th EDF (European Development fund)[45,46], the EU focused early into regionalizing security assistance through two CSDP missions, the civilian EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali and Niger (EUCAP Sahel Mali and Niger) between 2012 and 2023 for Niger and since 2014 in Mali, and the military EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) since 2013. These have coexisted with MINUSMA (between 2013 and 2023) and *Barkhane* (between 2014 and 2022) in conjunction with the G5 Sahel Joint Force. However with persistent instability in Libya marked by political fragmentation and internal conflicts, a protracted civil war in Syria, that not only led to a dire humanitarian crisis but also contributed

41   Some authors such as Bernardo Venturi argue that the Sahel has been a "laboratory of experimentation" for implementing the EU comprehensive approach. See: Venturi, Bernardo. 2017. "The EU and the Sahel: a Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security-Migration-Development Nexus". Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Working Paper 17(38). https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1738.pdf; and –2022. "The EU's Diplomatic Engagement in the Sahel". Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Working Paper 22(08). https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2208.pdf.

42   Goxho, Delina . 2021. "Unpacking the EU´S New Sahel Strategy." Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations. April 22, 2021. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/unpacking-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy/.

43   Colomba-Petteng, L onard. 2023. "What Do 'Local Elites' Seek from EU Security Policies in the Sahel? Re-Thinking the Agency of Non-European Actors." Cooperation and Conflict, October. https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367231197522.

44   Since 2014, the EU has mobilised €8 billion for the Sahel region to cover for its integrated approach. Of these, €4.6 billion have been for development cooperation, whereas humanitarian assistance amounts up to €1.16 billion. (European External Action Service. 2021. "Sahel. Strategic Communications. An Integrated Approach to Address the Different Challenges." August 2021. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/sahel-region_en#9354).

45   ACP-EC Council of Ministers. 2013. DECISION No 1/2006 of the ACP-EC COUNCIL of MINISTERS of 2 June 2006 Specifying the Multiannual Financial Framework for the Period 2008 to 2013 and Modifying the Revised ACP-EC Partnership Agreement. Europa.eu. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22006D0608.

46   Council of the European Union. 2013. "Council Regulation (EU) No 370/2011 of 11 April 2011 Amending Regulation (EC) No 215/2008 on the Financial Regulation Applicable to the 10th European Development Fund, as regards the European External Action Service." Official Journal of the European Union. 2013. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32011R0370.

to the overall destabilisation of the Middle East and, the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISIL) further exacerbated a securitarian management of crises, with profound implications in policy for neighbouring regions and stabilisation and peacebuilding strategies overall.

It has been thoroughly argued and criticised both internally and externally that within the framework of the 2015 Mediterranean refugee crisis, the operational focus of both EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali underwent a strategic realignment, emphasising their roles in providing assistance to national authorities in tasks related to border control and migration management[47]. Scholars have noted that the EU also compromised its own norms by pushing its own security agenda above local demands and needs. Even EUCAP trainers have complained about the imbalance between the technical and normative parts of the capacity-building and security sector reform (SSR) programs put in place[48]. Clearly, after 2015 the emphasis on stability has been pivotal and the adoption of the RAP 2015-2020 further strengthened a security-first approach.

The RAP delineated strategic actions, initiatives, and new emerging areas of focus for the upcoming years through a collaborative process with Member States. While similar to the 2011 Strategy, notably the RAP publicly disclosed the individ-ualised resource allocations of Member States across the entire region. Although this marked a commendable step toward transparency, it concurrently brought to light pronounced imbalances in both budgetary contributions and task implementation. France emerged as significantly over-represented and over-burdened while other Member States demonstrated limited engagement with the Sahel region, offering marginal and sector-specific contributions[49]. The primary objectives outlined in the RAP encompassed the prevention and countering of radicalization, establishment of conducive conditions for youth, combating illicit trafficking and transnational organised crime and for the first time, addressing issues related to migration and mobility as well as focusing on border management[50]. To further consolidate these efforts, the EU appointed a new Special Representative for the Sahel in December 2015 tasked with guiding EU actions in the region and facilitating coordination with local institutions[51]. On July 13, 2017 at the initiative of France and Germany, the Sahel Alliance was created to better coordinate and accelerate the deployment of development aid among the main development partners[52] of Sahelian States[53].

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47   Interviews CE1, PO2, PO1.

48   Jayasundara-Smits, Shyamika. 2018. "Bracing the Wind and Riding the Norm Life Cycle: Inclusive Peacebuilding in the European Capacity Building Mission in Sahel–Mali (EUCAP Sahel–Mali)." Peacebuilding 6 (3): 233–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2018.1491683.

49   Interview PO2.

50   Council of the European Union. 2015. "Council Conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020." General Secretariat of the Council. April 20, 2015. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21522/st07823-en15.pdf.

51   Council of the EU Press Release. 2015. "EU Appoints New European Union Special Representative for the Sahel," 2015. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-relea-ses/2015/12/07/eu-appoints-eu-special-representative-sahel/.

52   France, Germany, the European Union, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the World Bank, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Denmark. The United States, Norway and Finland have observer status.
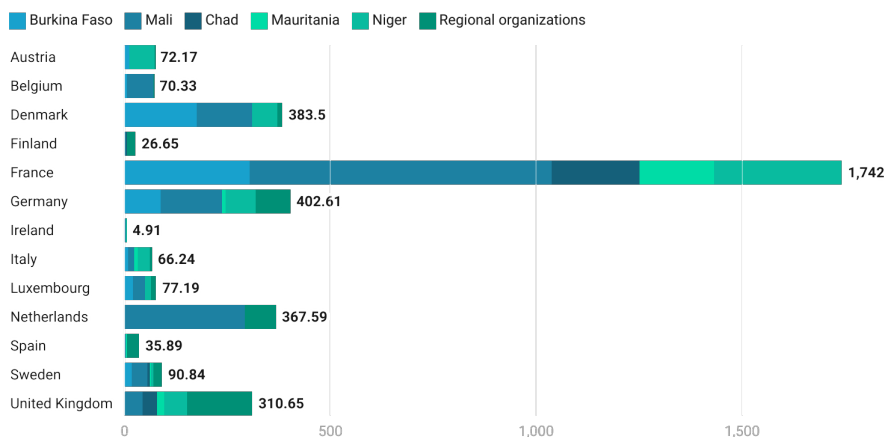
53   Alliance Sahel. 2023a. "The Sahel Alliance at a Glance." Alliance Sahel. 2023. https://www.alliance-sahel.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/AlliancSahel_EnBref_EN_WEB.pdf.

Overall, in terms of financial support, the EU along with its Member States was able to mobilise a total of 8 billion euros in the 2014-2020 period. During the deployment of the RAP, the EU has allocated €4.6 billion for development cooperation instruments in the region and €1.16 billion for humanitarian assistance. Notably, in response to the Covid-19 crisis, the EU was able to redirect €449 million to address both the health and socio-economic impacts[54].

However, a closer reading shows a highly disappointing outcome given the amount of human and financial resources committed and the persisting deteriorating conditions in the region. The imprecise nature of the description of the projects, "political dialogue focusing notably on human rights", "reform of the justice sector" or "fight against food insecurity and malnutrition"[55] present a rather vague picture that does not specify concrete actions, what goals are supposed to be attained, which milestones are supposed to be reached or which normative and technical standards are used as benchmarks for project completion. In the case of approving and monitoring projects, officers complain about the lack of information from the local perspective and if even surveys are done before and after implementation[56]. Policy specialists in Brussels argue that despite that individually, small scale normative actions at state and civil society level have worked, or at least have not catastrophically failed, there is a need to scale them up. Project by project the generally established objectives are reached but they do not integrate and translate further into the political level and thus render somewhat ineffective medium and long term normative projects[57].

Figure 3. Economic contributions to the Regional Action Plan (2015-2020)
In millions of euros. Only countries with contributions larger than €1 million are included

Legend: Burkina Faso · Mali · Chad · Mauritania · Niger · Regional organizations

Country	Value
Austria	72.17
Belgium	70.33
Denmark	383.5
Finland	26.65
France	1,742
Germany	402.61
Ireland	4.91
Italy	66.24
Luxembourg	77.19
Netherlands	367.59
Spain	35.89
Sweden	90.84
United Kingdom	310.65

In millions of € / Only countries with contributions larger than 1 million € are included
Source: Addendum III of Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020 · Created with Datawrapper

Source: Own Elaboration based on *Addendum III of the Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020*.

54   European External Action Service. 2021, *op cit.*
55   Council of the European Union. 2015, *op cit.*
56   Interview PO1.
57   Interview PO1.

The heightened securitization of EU cooperation in the Sahel region coincides with the escalating priorities of Europe's security and interests in the area. This shift is particularly noticeable following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the Brexit decision and the Mediterranean refugee crisis of 2015. These events have induced both EU Member States and the Brussels apparatus to adopt a progressively pragmatic approach in crafting and executing the common foreign and security policy, a trend vividly reflected in Europe's Sahel policy. In stark contrast with the European Security Strategy of 2003, the 2016 EU Global Strategy presents itself as a more pragmatic reflection towards the EU´s international relations, openly stating the EU´s vital interests and no longer enthusiastically emphasising democratisation while pushing for a "Europe of Security''. The differences between both strategic documents are significant and highlight a trend towards what some have coined "Realpolitik with European characteristics"[58].

In 2003, for the EU, "spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order"[59]. After 2016, the EU "will be guided by clear principles. These stem as much from a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world. Principled pragmatism will guide our external action in the years ahead."[60]

The security of the EU itself, the neighbourhood, how to deal with war and crisis, stable regional orders across the globe, and effective global governance became the cornerstones of EU action in the Sahel after 2016. In this sense, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) become pivotal focal points within the EU's strategic priorities[61]. The document consistently interconnects the MENA and the Sahel region, aligning North Africa with West Africa and the Sahel through the overarching framework of the neighbourhood policy's spill-over vision[62]. This approach notably blurs the traditional demarcation between internal and external security concerns and sets up the basis for multi-year (mostly security) assistance programs without clear strategic objectives. Additionally, it advocates for an improvement of EU Member States' hard power capabilities while arguing that "living up consistently to our values internally will determine our external credibility and influence"[63].

In this period, significant shortcomings have been unveiled while at the same time the EU's credibility and leverage in the Sahel has been considerably tarnished. After the August 2020 coup d' tat in Mali, the EU and especially French postures

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58   Biscop, Sven. 2016. "All or Nothing? The EU Global Strategy and Defence Policy after the Brexit." Contemporary Security Policy 37 (3): 431–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1238120.

59   Council of the European Union. 2003. "European Security Strategy – a Secure Europe in a Better World." General Secretariat of the Council. 2003. p.37. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d0928657-af99-4552-ae84-1cbaaa864f96/language-en.

60   European Union. 2016. "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe a Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy." p.8. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

61   Ibid., 35.

62   Ibid., 30.

63   Ibid., 15.

have been criticised for their ambivalence and hypocrisy[64], [65], [66]. While with the 2020 coup EUTM Mali and the operational scenario of Barkhane remained relatively stable, with the 2021 coup, the so-called "coup within the coup"[67], [68] led by Asimi Goita, the second junta was vociferously denounced by France, ultimately ending Barkhane, largely diminishing the effectiveness of EUTM Mali and facilitating access for Russia´s Wagner Group[69]. Simultaneously the Elys e showed no hesitation in endorsing the military seizure of power in Chad in 2021 which resulted in Mahamat Idriss D by assuming leadership of a transitional government following the sudden demise of his father, President Idriss D by. In order to adhere to the interests and policies of France as a Member State, the EU maintained a reserved stance during Chad's military power grab. While denouncing the forceful suppression of protesters and emphasising the junta's need to commit to the 18-month electoral deadline, the EU adopted a cautious approach to avoid overly critical consequences given Chad´s significant role as security provider in the Sahel and the burgeoning diplomatic tensions with neighbouring regimes[70]. In Burkina Faso, the EU analysis presents many shortcomings. The 2011 Strategy depicted Burkina Faso as "relatively successful in pursuing economic development and having a role in several anti-terrorist activities in the region"[71]. Considering this, the RAP had a surprising absence of EUTM and EUCAP initiatives in the country despite its well-documented deterioration in the years after the 2011 Strategy was published. By the end of 2023, Burkina Faso has experienced two military coups in January and September 2022 and jihadist violence originating from the tri-border area with Mali and Niger has infiltrated vast rural regions of the country.

The prevailing situation underscores a significant departure from the initial assessment outlined in the 2011 Strategy and the implementation of the RAP 2015-2020 has proven to be excessively militarised and limited. Inequalities continue to exacerbate while violence, extremist groups and criminal organisations continue

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64   Caruso, Francesca and Francesca Lenzi. 2023. "The Sahel Region: a Litmus Test for EU-Africa Relations in a Changing Global Order". Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), Instituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Fondation Jean-Jaur s. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/feps_ps_9782931233177.pdf.

65   Interviews PLO1, PLO3.

66   European Parliament. 2024. "Joint Committee of Foreign Affairs and committee on Development and subcommittee on Security and Defence. 23/01/2024." Reference ID: 20240123-0930-COMMITTEE-AFET-DEVE-SEDE. https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/joint-committee-on-foreign-affairs-and-committee-on-development-and-subcommittee-on-security-and-def_20240123-0930-COMMITTEE-AFET-DEVE-SEDE.

67   Jezequel, Jean-Herv . 2021. "Mali, a Coup within a Coup." International Crisis Group. May 27, 2021. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/mali-un-coup-dans-le-coup.

68   European External Action Service. 2022. "Burkina Faso: Remarks on Behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Debate Following the Coup de Force | EEAS." EEAS Press Team, October 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/burkina-faso-remarks-behalf-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate-following-coup_en.

69   Interview PLO3.

70   Interview A5.

71   European Union External Action Service . 2011. "Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategy_for_security_and_development_in_the_sahel_en_0.pdf.

to proliferate in an increasingly complex political and diplomatic environment in which other international actors like Russia, China or Turkey have emerged as an alternative to EU partnerships. In 2020, with changing regimes in the region, a global pandemic, continued increase in violence and with strategic peers rising in influence in the region, there was a clear need to qualitatively and quantitatively recalibrate both political and risk analysis of the Sahelian context but also to assess the adequacy of the security-development approximation. A focus on a multi-phased, security-first approach to stabilisation has left civil, political and social fields of governance rather unattended in the EU's Sahel policies while, at the same time, Sahelians have consistently witnessed how European security interests and agendas are pushed forward in their countries.

The 2021 EU Sahel Strategy

A decade after the first EU Sahel Strategy of 2011, Brussels renewed and rebranded its action plan, "The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel" 2021. European policymakers assessed that "the profound security crisis affecting parts of the region since 2012 [was] hampering its development and risk[ed] wiping out the progress made in recent decades"[72]. In 2021, the EU admitted that the security and development scenarios in the Sahel remain challenging inasmuch as violations of human rights, corruption and impunity increase the fragility of the social contract and challenge the legitimacy of the State, already weak by 2011 due to its prolonged marginal presence in regions within their own territorial limits since independence[73]. In this sense, the Strategy's narrative is again inconsistent. It argues about the "progress made in recent decades" while declaring that the "considerable military deployment, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance" have not been enough to break the cycle of intercommunal violence, terrorism and political unrest[74].

With the 2021 Strategy, the objective was to distance from the security-centred and militarised approach that characterised the previous documents[75], portraying a more normative approach that prioritises promoting good governance, human rights and economic development to address the root causes of insecurity[76]. However, these redefined guidelines for European intervention were established to satisfy different interests: migration control for Mediterranean countries with long-term development programmes in the region, supporting France's Barkhane military operation, and, above all, introducing "a European dimension into the security and development sector of the region"[77].

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72   Council of the European Union . 2021b. "The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel." General Secretariat of the Council. https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf.

73   Ibid.

74   Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021, *op cit*.

75   Bilquin, Bruno, and Eric Pichon. 2023. "The Coup in Niger Consequences for EU Policies in the Sahel." European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/753951/EPRS_BRI(2023)753951_EN.pdf.

76   Lenzi and Caruso. 2023, *op cit.*

77   Ibid.

Bearing in mind the need to redefine the EU Sahel Strategy, the 2021 guidelines were based on security, development, migration and governance[78]. In 2021, Security, despite connecting it to governance conditions, continues to be linked to means related to strengthening the fight against terrorism, armed groups, cross-border trafficking and organised crime. In fact, with newly created instruments like the European Peace Facility (EPF), the EU was supposed to be able to deliver lethal equipment, signalling again a strong commitment to military solutions while concurrently emphasising the need to strengthen normative SSR based on democracy, respect for human rights and international humanitarian law[79]. In terms of development, the agenda experiences a shift, with assistance now focused to "encourage the countries of the Sahel in their efforts to achieve sustainable and inclusive development, including habitat protection, preserving biodiversity and combating desertification"[80]. The 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are given a more central role, with climate change now encompassing most of the development agenda. Migration is formally consolidated as a key aspect of the EU Sahel Strategy as opposed to 2011. Similarly, gender equality and the role of women acquire a more prominent role, especially in the peacebuilding and peacekeeping sectors.

In general terms, in the 2021 Strategy the promotion of good governance receives much bigger emphasis than in the previous policy initiatives although lines of action appear conflated with the ones implemented in the 2011-2020 period. Cooperation in the field of governance not only means helping with the provision of basic public services but also tackling corruption and human rights violations, including security forces and, therefore, strengthening justice and accountability mechanisms becomes central[81]. This provision also envisions the need to strengthen the multilateral system and working in close collaboration with the UN –and MINUSMA– and ECOWAS, as well as entangling more normatively with the dynamics already set by the two EU civilian missions –EUCAP Sahel Niger and Mali–, EUTM Mali and with the French-led Barkhane Operation. The Strategy recognizes that regional alliances have grown increasingly important and thus, the geographical scope of the 2021 Strategy is not limited to G5 Sahel countries –Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. EU action is to be understood in a wider context of regional and cross-border challenges including Libya, the Lake Chad Basin and the gulf of Guinea without overlooking some dynamics from Eastern African countries.

The 2021 EU Sahel Strategy is set to be "an ambitious, inclusive and flexible strategy anchored on the principle of accountability"[82]. However, under this conceptualisation G5 Sahel States hold the primary responsibility for regional stabilisation. Supposedly, this establishes a framework of mutual accountability in which EU action is part "of a partnership based on each partner's responsibility to fulfil its commitments"[83]. However, in practice, the 2021 Strategy is an exercise of

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78   Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021, *op cit*.
79   Council of the European Union. 2021b, *op cit*.
80   Ibid.
81   Ibid.
82   Ibid.
83   Ibid.

limiting responsibility through the concept of mutual accountability. It establishes the weight of regional stability on the political will of local governments while at the same time being co-owners of gains and failures. Under the 2021 Strategy, the EU highlights the need to achieve tangible results as soon as possible to address the immediate and root causes of insecurity and instability and respecting human rights and gender equality[84]. However, since the outbreak of the crisis in Mali in January 2012, as well as the so-called migration crisis that affected Europe especially in 2015, it has been manifest that the securitarian situation in the Sahel has been prioritised on the European agenda. Since the deployment of European assistance programs in the Sahel, it has not been possible to establish far-reaching institutional reforms nor to reduce significantly armed violence, which continues on a dangerous upward trend, with local security forces as protagonists[85]. Despite the strategic effort undertaken in 2021 to imbue the EU's role in the region with political nuance, the reality is that since the coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and the most recent coup in Niger in July 2023, the EU Sahel Strategy as a whole is at a strategic crossroads. All the more so given the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS, which completely redraws the region's institutional framework. Moreover, following the arrival of the Wagner Group as new security partner in the region, a thorough and strategic reassessment of both the general approach and the security dimension of the EU's involvement in the Sahel are needed. Violence continues to increase while European security forces continue to shrink. This on the one hand could imply a much-needed re-articulation and thorough reconsideration of priorities and actions that are imperative for shaping the future course of EU strategy in the Sahel, but on the other hand, it already has proven to have negative effects on the use of force and respect for human rights by local security forces. Since 2020, battles and attacks have spread to new locations in northern Mali through joint military operations between the Malian armed forces and the Wagner Group[86]. In addition, hostilities have resumed with the armed groups that signed the Algiers Agreement in 2015. Under this context, violence against civilians has increased by 38 per cent in Mali in 2023 with the main perpetrators of these attacks being JNIM (more than 180 events, 33%), Malian state forces and/or the Wagner Group (almost 160 events, 29%), and IS Sahel (almost 90 events, 15%).[87]

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84   Ibid.

85   Nsaibia, H ni. 2023, *op cit.*

86   Serwat, Ladd et al. 2023. "Moving out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World". ACLED. 33-40. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf.

87   Nsaibia, H ni. 2023, *op cit.*

Table 2. Comparative of the three main EU strategies for the Sahel

	EU Sahel Strategy 2011	Regional Action Plan (2015-2020)	EU Sahel Strategy 2021
Context	The prevailing instability in the Sahel underscored the need for strategic and comprehensive policies.	Several missions ongoing (EUCAP, EUTM, MINUSMA, etc.). Increased interest of the EU in the area after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the Brexit, and the Mediterranean refugee "crisis".	Considerable military deployment, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance have not been enough to break to cycle of intercommunal violence, terrorism and political unrest.
Key changes	It embodies the security-development nexus. Strategy conceived as a preliminary exercise to establish a precondition for development.	Update of the 2011 Strategy that includes migration for the first time. Security-centric approach focused on promoting stability after 2015 (a "pragmatic turn").	Consolidation of an "integrated/comprehensive approach" that distances from security-centric and militarised strategies.
Security	Strengthen the capacities of the security, law enforcement and rule of law sectors to fight threats and handle terrorism and organised crime in a more efficient and specialised manner.	Countering radicalization and organised crime as one of the key objectives.	"Reinforcing the fight against terrorism, armed groups, cross-border trafficking and organised crime. Supporting SSR."
Development	To help create economic opportunities for local communities and to mitigate the impact of climate change effects. Developmental objectives appear diffuse and conflated.	"Creating appropriate conditions for youth. Renewed commitment to the 2011 objectives"	"Giving a more central role to the 20230 Agenda by encouraging ""the countries of the Sahel in their efforts to achieve sustainable and inclusive development". Gender issues gain saliency"
Migration	Migration management is absent.	"Combatting illicit trafficking and organised crime. Focus on border management to tackle irregular migration."	Continuing to promote cooperation in the area of migration.
Governance	To enhance transparent and locally accountable governance and reestablishing an administrative presence of the state.	"Facilitating coordination with local institutions through a new EU Special Representative for the Sahel. Creating appropriate conditions for youth. Renewed commitment to the 2011 objectives."	"Governance receives bigger emphasis. Helping in the provision of public services, tackling corruption and human rights violations, strengthening justice and accountability mechanisms. Strengthening the multilateral system."

Source: Own elaboration from Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021; Council of the European Union. 2011, 2015, 2021b.

Problematising EU strategies in the Sahel

The following section provides an interpretative framework for what we consider to be the four aspects that negatively shape the design of European strategies in the Sahel. These aspects highlight the problem of a securitised understanding of extremely complex phenomena, such as the nature of extremist violence, the phenomenon of migratory flows and the scale and impact of the climate crisis, and the negative effects of this securitised understanding in the excessive militarisation of responses (subsections 1 and 2). A third aspect is related to the organisational dynamics of the EU and the tensions and contradictions that exist between the different EU actors that contribute to the design and implementation of policies in the Sahel (mainly the Member States and the Peace and Security Council, the EEAS, DG INTPA and the EU Delegations on the field). Finally, we analyse the room for local agency, i.e. the voice and vision of local actors, in the design of these policies, in particular through the so-called principle of local ownership, where we also find a significant gap between rhetoric and practice.

SECURITISING VIOLENCE, MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) as a troubling and damaging framework

The security culture that has characterised governance programs in the Sahel can be traced back to the spill-over narrative of global jihadi terrorism dominated by the GWOT doctrine after 9/11. By the time the Malian conflict's violence escalated in 2011-2013 and when the calls for combating tuareg rebels against government forces and also jihadist terrorists were amplified, geopolitical actors had already pre-established the "counter-terrorism culture" and the potential of the Sahel as a safe haven for Algerian jihadists of AQIM, the former Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), and combatants returning from Afghanistan[88]. Terms like "arch of instability"[89], "Sahelistan"[90] and "Africanistan"[91] have frequently circulated

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88   Malejacq, Romain, and Adam Sandor. 2020. "Sahelistan? Military Intervention and Patronage Politics in Afghanistan and Mali." Civil Wars 22 (4): 543–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/1 3698249.2020.1813405; Lewis, Aidan. 2013. "Why the Sahara Is Not the 'New Afghanistan.'" BBC News, February 1, 2013, sec. Africa. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21299153; Graham, Franklin Charles. 2011. "Abductions, Kidnappings and Killings in the Sahel and Sahara." Review of African Political Economy 38 (130): 587–604. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23145864.

89   United Nations Security Council. 2013. "Arc of Instability' across Africa, If Left Unchecked, Could Turn Continent into Launch Pad for Larger-Scale Terrorist Attacks, Security Council Told | UN Press." UNSC Department of Public Information. May 2013. https://press.un.org/en/2013/sc11004.doc.htm.

90   Laurent, Samuel. 2013. Sahelistan. Paris: ditions du Seuil.

91   Michailof, Serge. 2016. "Africanistan: Is the Sahel on the Road to Becoming Another Afghanistan?" Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development, no. 6: 174–87. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573622.

in an unproblematic and apolitical manner before and after 2011, serving as broad descriptors for the conditions and context in which international partners operate. However, GWOT terminology continues to fall short in providing a nuanced understanding of the escalating phenomenon of Islamist violence within the region. As one interviewee put it, the GWOT framework ends up being a real "burden" because it turns violence, which is complex in nature and locally expressed, into an "existential threat" for Europe, leading it to construct exceptional measures that, above all, do not capture the real nature of the violence.[92] Critical literature has pointed out that this narrative is a serious oversimplification, since jihadism in the Sahel has local roots that are also linked to historical and socio-economic factors.[93], [94] It is also important not to depoliticise and de-agengize all these actors, but rather to understand them as rational players with agendas deeply rooted in their local needs and visions.

The simplification inherent in the terminology of "terrorism" after 9/11 overlooks the intricate dynamics at play, hindering a comprehensive analysis of the complexities associated with security challenges in the Sahel and thus, formulating policies and strategies that cannot move beyond simplistic labels that limit policy options to more kinetic responses. The PSI, the TSCTI and the fixation on Al Qaeda, capacity-building and SSR on the 2011 EU Sahel Strategy are clear indications of this cognitive structure. Delving into a more detailed examination of the multifaceted factors contributing to the intensification of Islamist violence, influence and governance capabilities of violent organisations in the Sahel is necessary in order to understand the saliency and operational and political "success" that such groups are increasingly experiencing.

The need to contextualise Sahelian migration

Europe's attention to migration dynamics in the Sahel is not a recent development but has undergone intensified scrutiny[95]. The initial escalation occurred in 2011, prompted by the regional security crisis emanating from central Mali and further amplified after 2015 when Europe confronted a notable surge in arrivals through the Mediterranean. However, during the period spanning from 2016 to 2022, there was a substantial reduction in migration towards Europe through the Mediterranean[96]. This decline coincided with an increasing prevalence of stringent measures against migration and a parallel emphasis on capacity-building in

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92   Interview CE3.

93   Interview A5.

94   Mesa, Beatriz. 2022. "Los grupos armados del Sahel. Conflicto y econom a criminal en el norte de Mali". Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata.

95   European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. 2014. "Handbook to the Operational Plan Joint Maritime Operations • European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union." https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2017/feb/eu-frontex-handbook-joint-maritime-operations-censored.pdf.

96   International Organization for Migration. 2023. "Migration Flow to Europe. Arrivals". Global Data Institute. Displacement Tracking Matrix. https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals.

border control within both origin and transit countries[97]. Notably, deportations from Algeria and Libya to the Sahel escalated from 2016 onward, compelling certain individuals to opt for riskier routes to Europe[98]. The EU's approach to managing migration in and around the Sahel primarily adheres to a route-centric perspective, aiming to impede northbound mobility by intertwining security and migration policies. The prevailing discourse in Europe, conflating migrants with terrorism, reinforces a punitive approach despite a lack of concrete statistical evidence[99]. In contrast, there is a growing acknowledgment within the ageing population of the EU about the critical need for labour and the overly militarised stance on migration, clearly showing that punishing mobility in the Sahel responds to the disproportionately influential role that biassed migration narratives play in politics[100].

This has led to the establishment of a counterproductive EU framework for regulating migration in the Sahel, a framework that seems incongruent with the relatively modest numbers of migrants when compared to the broader scope of displacement within the region[101]. As complexities in potential partnerships with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger arise, there is an imperative for a renewed strategy that shifts focus towards displacement and advocates for area-based approaches.

What climate change story for the Sahel?

Climate narratives around concepts like desertification and land degradation continue to act as powerful catalysts for stigmatising Sahelian dynamics and contribute to assembling security-based knowledge frameworks around the region, increasingly correlating episodes of intercommunal and jihadist violence with environmental factors. However, while many empirical studies stress that the Sahel is greening, others indicate no trend or browning[102]. The idea that the desert is spreading in the Sahel, either due to climate aridification or to local land-use practices exists since

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97 Fakhry, Alia. 2023. "More than Borders: Effects of EU Interventions on Migration in the Sahel." Institute for Security Studies, West Africa Report, 43 . https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/more-than-borders-effects-of-eu-interventions-on-migration-in-the-sahel.

98 Ibid.

99 According to the EUROPOL report on terrorist trends 2023, in the EU, in 2022, sixteen attacks were completed, most of which were attributed to left-wing and anarchist terrorism (13), two to jihadist terrorism and one to right-wing terrorism. In 2022, four fatalities were recorded, two as a result of jihadist terrorist attacks and two as a result of a right-wing terrorist attack.

Europol. 2023. "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report." Luxemburg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/European%20Union%20Terrorism%20Situation%20and%20Trend%20report%202023.pdf.

100 Bello, Valeria. 2021. "The Spiral of Prejudice and the Securitization of Migration: The Complexity of Small Changes in the Italian Migration Networked Governance." Italian Political Science 16 (2): 58–73. https://italianpoliticalscience.com/index.php/ips/article/view/170/122.

101 Interview A3.

102 Mbow, Cheikh, Martin Brandt, Issa Ouedraogo, Jan de Leeuw, and Michael Marshall. 2015. "What Four Decades of Earth Observation Tell Us about Land Degradation in the Sahel?" Remote Sensing 7 (4): 4048–67. https://doi.org/10.3390/rs70404048.

the early periods of colonial Africa[103]. This has made assessing land degradation and quantifying its effects on land productivity both a scientific and political challenge, with little political agreement gained on the magnitude and direction of land degradation in the Sahel[104]. Climate change associated with local human impact, mostly land use change such as expansion of cultivation, agricultural intensification, overgrazing and overuse of woody vegetation is increasingly correlated with the proliferation of armed groups in the Central Sahel, especially among pastoral communities[105]. However, studies have found that links between the proliferation of armed groups and climate change are weak[106]. While it is true that there has been a loss in biodiversity and degradation trends can also be observed, there is a clearly positive trend in biomass production at Sahel scale[107].

Figure 4. Land degradation in the Sahel (2000-2020 comparison).
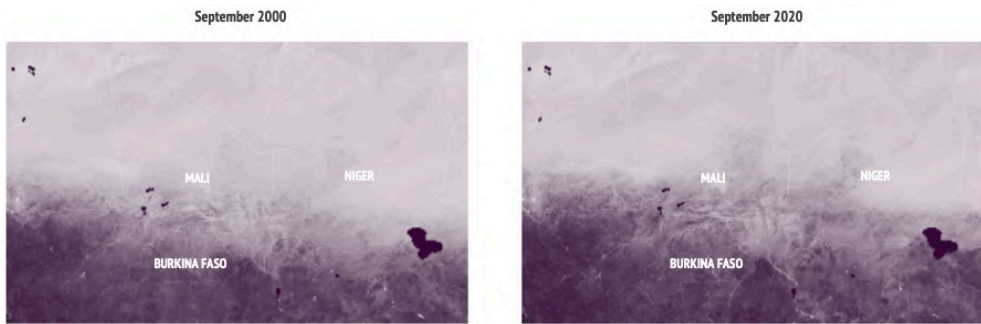
Source: *NASA Earth Observatory. 2020.* See in: Raineri, Luca. 2020. "SAHEL CLIMATE CONFLICTS?: hen (Fighting) Climate Change Fuels Terrorism." European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28786.

Factors like foreign military interventions, religious claims, and the marginalisation of pastoralist communities are deemed more important by researchers and local

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103   Benjaminsen, Tor A., and Pierre Hiernaux. 2019. "From Desiccation to Global Climate Change: A History of the Desertification Narrative in the West African Sahel, 1900–2018." Global Environment 12 (1): 206–36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26726508.

104   Gangneron, Fabrice, Caroline Pierre, Elodie Robert, Laurent Kergoat, Manuela Grippa, Fran oise Guichard, Pierre Hiernaux, and Crystele Leauthaud. 2022. "Persistence and Success of the Sahel Desertification Narrative." Regional Environmental Change 22 (4). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-022-01969-1.

105   Mbow *at al.* 2015, *op cit.*

106   Benjaminsen, Tor A. 2008. "Does Supply-Induced Scarcity Drive Violent Conflicts in the African Sahel? The Case of the Tuareg Rebellion in Northern Mali." Journal of Peace Research 45 (6): 819–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343308096158; Benjaminsen, Tor A, Koffi Alinon, Halvard Buhaug, and Jill Tove Buseth. 2012. "Does Climate Change Drive Land-Use Conflicts in the Sahel?" Journal of Peace Research 49 (1): 97–111. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311427343; Benjaminsen, Tor A., and Boubacar Ba. 2018. "Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation." The Journal of Peasant Studies 46 (1): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457.

107   Mbow *et al.* 2015, *op cit.*

experts than climate alterations[108]. In fact, scientists argue that the substantial expansion of agricultural activities has adversely affected the nomadic lifestyle of herders and the mobility of their livestock, disrupting their access to crucial pastures[109]. This obstruction arises from the encroachment of rice cultivation onto traditional livestock corridors, particularly impacting burgu[110] pastures[111]. The impediment of these corridors poses a significant challenge to the sustainable coexistence of agricultural and pastoral practices, necessitating a careful policy approach to balance the interests of both sectors and ensure the preservation of vital grazing lands. Although more closely aligned with natural resources governance than immediate security concerns, the discussions surrounding ecology within the context of the EU Sahel Strategies often underscore the integration of climate considerations into EU policies in the Sahel. While climate-related violence is widely assumed, climate-related policies have yet to be formally integrated into the mandates of any of the EU's CSDP missions. Despite recognizing the security implications of climate dynamics, the incorporation of climate security and resilience measures remains only partially realised within the broader framework of the EU's involvement in the Sahel. A comprehensive reassessment of climate change in the Sahel and further integration of climate-related considerations is imperative to align strategic objectives with enhancing the effectiveness of EU engagements in the region[112].

NEGATIVE AND UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF THE OPERATIONAL APPROACHES OF THE EU STRATEGIES

The over-militarisation of the strategy

While improving governance through a proper delivery of public services requires a longer-term approach, when faced with populations conceived of as vulnerable or threatening, policymakers and security professionals often conclude that there is a

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108   Cepero, Oriol, Sophie Desmidt, Adrien Detges, Fabien Tondel, Pia Ackern, Adrian Foong, and Jan Volkholz. 2021. "Climate Change, Development and Security in the Central Sahel." Cascades report. https://www.cascades.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Climate-Change-Development-and-Security-in-the-Central-Sahel.pdf.

109   Ibid.,p.14.

110   Historically, the transhumance movements in the Inner Niger Delta have been dictated by the increase and decrease of floodwaters, drawing as much as 40% of Mali's cattle annually for seasonal migration, including contributions from neighbouring countries. The alluvial flood plains within the Inner Niger Delta play a crucial role, hosting a nutritious aquatic grass known as bourgouti re (burgu or *Echinochloa stagnina*). These flood plains, particularly significant, reveal extensive expanses of burgu as the River Niger's flood waters recede at the conclusion of the rainy season, providing accessible and essential grazing areas for livestock.

111   Interview A2.

112   Joseph, Jonathan, and Ana E. Juncos. 2019. "A Promise Not Fulfilled: The (Non) Implementation of the Resilience Turn in EU Peacebuilding." Contemporary Security Policy 41 (2): 287–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1703082; P rez de las Heras, Beatriz. 2020. "Climate Security in the European Union's Foreign Policy: Addressing the Responsibility to Prepare for Conflict Prevention." Journal of Contemporary European Studies 28 (3): 335–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1731438.

need to prioritise "security" and to unify political and military efforts[113]. Although in the Sahel the need to put people at the heart of assistance is repeated *ad nauseum*, the fact is that the primacy of military necessity over more normative requirements sets the fight in an insurgency and counterinsurgency model of assistance. Despite the crucial role of politics in facilitating peaceful solutions and the essential nature of development and social engineering work to maintain military successes that foster strong civil-military relations, Charbonneau contends that in the Sahel region, the strengthening of security forces is seen as vital for enabling the practice of politics in itself[114]. This strengthening is seen as necessary to facilitate the Sahelian state formation and the process of nation-building. In this sense, after years of western stabilisation programmes in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Counter-Insurgency (COIN) doctrine that has traditionally been associated with military tactics and operations, has transcended its military origins in the Sahel. Derived from the colonial French military doctrine[115] and influenced by experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan[116], COIN has significantly shaped the framing and structure of political possibilities and governance practices in the region[117]. Beyond merely informing military combat techniques, counter-insurgency has evolved into a distinct form of politics in the complex landscape of the Sahel[118], characterised by what some describe as a "security traffic jam"[119]. Global governance structures, transnational elite networks, where we don't find just the EU but also African elites, have legitimised the utilisation of force in the Sahel as a governance tool[120]. This endorsement is rationalised by emphasising the essential contribution of the security apparatus to facilitating political processes. Charbonneau[121] contends that the incorporation of 'development' and 'holistic approaches' into ostensibly security-focused strategies serves to legitimise and normalise the application of force. Under this logic, the difficulty to deal with Sahelian domestic governance and socioeconomic problems has encouraged to concentrate on assisting on combat operations and capacity-building, often to the neglect of the

113   Tripodi, Christian. 2023. "Hidden hands: The failure of population-centric counterinsurgency in Afghanistan 2008-11", Journal of Strategic Studies:20-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/014023 90.2023.2169673.

114   Charbonneau, Bruno. 2021. "Counterinsurgency governance in the Sahel". International Affairs 97 (6): 1805-1823. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab182.

115   Shurkin, Michael. 2014. "France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army." Rand Corporation. October 17, 2014. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR770.html.

116   Petraeus, General David H. , and Lt. General James F. Amos. 2007. "The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual." The University of Chicago Press. http://ndl.ethernet.edu. et/bitstream/123456789/50585/1/290.pdf.

117   Charbonneau, Bruno. 2022. "The Climate of Counterinsurgency and the Future of Security in the Sahel." Environmental Science & Policy, 138 (December): 97–104. https://doi. org/10.1016/j.envsci.2022.09.021.

118   Ibid.

119   Cold-Ravnkilde, Signe Marie, and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen. 2020. "Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism." International Affairs 96 (4): 855–74. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa093.

120   Charbonneau. 2022, *op cit.*

121   Ibid.

non combat side of a proper COIN approach that is not just about combat skills to restore peace by force but also the restoration of community trust in government[122].

The central role of security forces in political life in the Sahel has been strengthened by the weight (and increased lethality[123]) given to capacity building and SSR missions. Scholars note that while the premises of civilian oversight and accountability most often are part of EUTM and EUCAP, such principles have little resonance in a context where state officials are incapable or unwilling of providing a democratic framework to implement oversight and promote accountability[124]. In Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, the military has historically been closely intertwined with politics. In this sense, with the progressive deterioration of the security of civil society[125] in the region and after a decade of militarised assistance, the preexisting profound imbalances in civil-military relations and the recent coups have raised questions regarding security force assistance to fragile states more broadly[126]. An approach to governance rooted in COIN, although prioritising the population, is still subordinate to military imperatives, as conceptually its ultimate *raison d' tre* is to support military and security efforts. Consequently, the local armed forces, given their pivotal role in external backing, have emerged as principal participants in the political process. This dynamic has contributed to the militarization of politics in the Sahel and the resurgence of more authoritarian methodologies of governance in the region.

Similarly, there is a sense that the capacity to evaluate and rethink the instruments of intervention is very limited. Although the 2021 strategy indirectly acknowledges the problems of the over-militarised approach by broadening the understanding of the idea of governance[127], the proposal as a whole comes in a much more volatile context than when the first strategy was proposed in 2011 and thus forces a rethink of much more fundamental elements. As we will see later in understanding institutional dynamics, there is also a sense that technicians and experts, especially within the EEAS, are fully aware of the "conflict sensitivity" approaches that have been developed over the last 25 years through an extensive literature that has used the principle of "Do No Harm" (DNH) as the main vector guiding any external presence. In practice, however, these frameworks end up neutralised by dynamics that do not take into account the negative impacts and damages that external presence can cause. For one interviewee, the EUTM is a clear example. The mission has ended up supporting security reform processes in troops that are perceived as illegitimate by certain sectors of society, thus contributing to

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122   Galula, David. 1964. "Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice". London and New York: Frederick A. Preager. https://indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/Galula%20 David%20-%20Counterinsurgency%20Warfare.pdf.

123   COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2021/509 of 22 March 2021 Establishing a European Peace Facility, and Repealing Decision (CFSP) 2015/528. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021D0509.

124   Wil n, Nina. 2021. "Civil-Military Imbalance in the Sahel." Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, 2021. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/civil-military-imbalance-in-the-sahel/.

125   Interview CE1 & CE2.

126   Ibid.

127   Interview LEO.

the exacerbation of grievances between groups and, in turn, mistrust of European institutions.[128]

The over-dimensioning of migration-related policies

The Sahel is a strategic region for migration inasmuch as it represents a transit route for intercontinental migrations from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. However, its relevance is not only due to its geographical proximity to Europe but also because of the internal mobility dynamics. Given that 80% of African migrations occur within the continent, migration within the Sahel is equally or even more relevant than northbound routes[129]. The enormous levels of violence and accumulated socioeconomic challenges have led to massive forced displacements, being particularly high the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees in several Sahelian states[130]. In front of this migratory challenge, the European approach has been overly militarised and has often over-emphasized the importance of migration control in its policy priorities.

Figure 5. Refugees and IDPs in the Sahel G5 countries (by country of asylum)
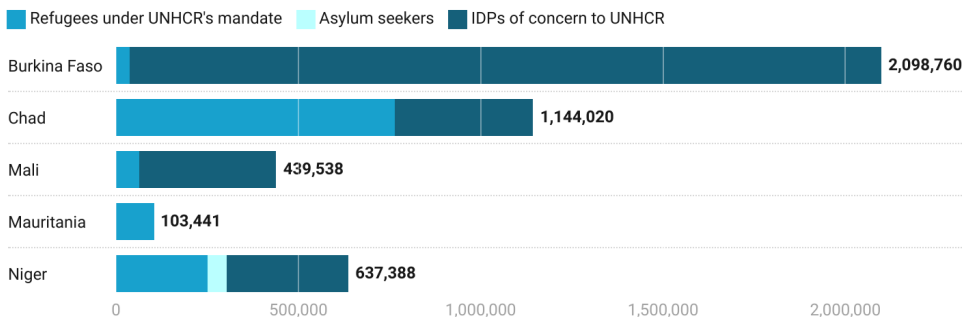
Source: UNHCR (2023) · Created with Datawrapper

Source: Own elaboration from UNHCR. 2023.

Despite the attention that migration enjoys nowadays, it would not be until the 2011 security crisis in central Mali and the upstick in irregular migration in 2015 in the so-called refugee "crisis" and the subsequent Valletta Process that migration control would become such a crucial endeavour for the EU. Since then, the EU has adopted a strategy of border externalisation that entails building capacities in transit neighbouring countries –understanding the European neighbourhood in a maximalist way– in

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128   Interview A5.

129   International Organization for Migration. 2017. "African migration to Europe: How can adequate data help improve evidence-based policymaking and reduce possible misconceptions?". IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre. Issue No. 11, November 2017. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/gmdac_data_briefing_series_issue_11.pdf.

130   According to the latest UNHCR update on the Sahel Crisis (31 January 2024) the number of IDPs is approximately 3,005,700 people while the number of refugees and asylum-seekers is 1,060,169 people. For further information see: UNHCR. 2024. "R4 SAHEL Coordination Platform for forced displacements in the Sahel". https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis.

order to stop migratory flows away from European soil. In this sense, Sahelian countries are key components in Europe's migration externalisation strategy.

The case of Niger's city Agadez embodies this strategy. Until the 2015 "crisis" Agadez was Niger's migratory transit hub. In accordance with some sources: "Despite most refugees and migrants reaching Europe are from countries other than Niger, in 2014 more than half of all migrants who arrived in Lampedusa, Italy, passed through […] Agadez"[131]. However, the hardening of European migration policies through the Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (2015-2020) drastically curved the arrivals through the Central Mediterranean route. This generated economic disruptions in Agadez and elsewhere, and as Moretti holds, "where transit migration has been one of the main sources of income and a factor of stability since the end of the Tuareg rebellions in 2009"[132]. This is an example of negative unintended consequences that have been disregarded when curving migration towards Europe. In this sense, policies addressed at limiting migration "may also increase domestic tensions in politically fragile and administratively weak states, leading to increased pressure on political and social systems that already are struggling to stay afloat"[133].

All in all, the securitization of migration has also been a feature of the pragmatic turn in EU foreign policy. It is important to note that when it comes to migration management, the EU has prioritised border control at the expense of the interest of local populations[134], [135]. Likewise, since the EU considers its partnerships with Sahelian countries pivotal as means of limiting migration, reluctance has prevailed when leveraging to attach strict governance and rule of law to foreign aid funding[136].

The EU has failed to understand migration in the Sahel as an inherent phenomenon and as an important source of livelihoods in the region[137]. By focusing on the prevention of migratory flows towards Europe, the EU has not only failed to capture the facts of life on the ground but also, by promoting this militarised approach, it has continually ignored the needs and rights of hundreds of thousands of IDPs. Regional migration is the most common type of migration in the Sahel, and its analysis from an Eurocentric perspective that understands it as a security challenge continues to ignore crucial non-security dimensions of human mobility.

On the other hand, when looking at the broader regional migratory dynamics, the EU misinterprets migration assuming that people leaving North Africa's shores transit first through Sahelian countries. However, many irregular migrants use sea routes towards Europe to escape violence, abduction and extortion in other transit countries like Libya. In this sense, it has already been argued elsewhere that "by

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131   Horv th, Sarah, and Schwab, Regine. 2023. "The Externalization of EU Borders: The Case of Agadez". PRIF Blog. https://blog.prif.org/2023/03/28/the-externalization-of-eu-borders-the-case-of-agadez/.

132   Moretti, S bastien. 2020. "Transition Migration in Niger. Stemming the Flows of Migrants, but at What Cost?" Migration and Society: Advances in Research, 3, 1-9. DOI: 10.3167/arms.2020.111406.

133   Bø s, Morten. 2020. "EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger?" Third World Quarterly, 41(1), 52-67. DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002.

134   Ioannides. 2020, *op cit.*

135   Jayasundara-Smits. 2018, *op cit.*

136   Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021, *op cit.*

137   Fakhry. 2023, *op cit.*

targeting Niger [and the Sahel countries] as the 'low-hanging fruit' of migration cooperation instead of Libya, EU-sponsored counter-smuggling policies may not achieve their goal of stopping transit migrants"[138].

Figure 6. EU initiatives addressing security and migration interests, 2016-2022
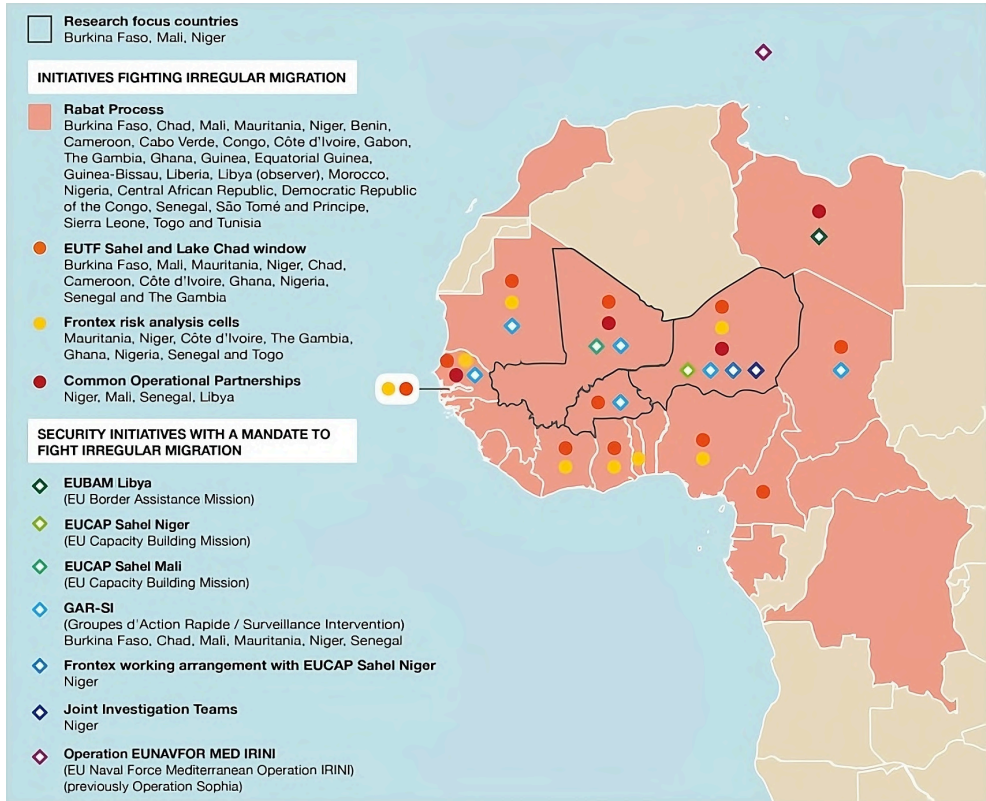
Source: Fakhry. 2023, p.7.

The management of migration has gained excessive attention from European policymakers. *Figure 6* shows the plethora of initiatives on security and migration in the Sahel as well as in other West African countries. The amount of initiatives developed responds to a sense of urgency to tackle a migration "crisis" that has fostered a decoupling from EU normative principles in favour of a more pragmatic approach[139]. Besides reducing the number of migrants that have arrived to Europe through the Mediterranean route after 2015, EU policies have "encouraged securitised policies that reinforce security interests of governments in the Sahel and undermine the capacity of regional and continental organisations to establish comprehensive migration frameworks"[140]. Hence, while the European approach to migration in the Sahel has conflated security and migration policies, and made

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138   Ibid.
139   Jayasundara-Smits. 2018, *op cit.*
140   Fakhry. 2023, *op cit.*

them a top priority, it has developed a route-based strategy aimed at halting north-bound mobility.

Following this conception, EUCAP Sahel Niger's mandate was expanded in 2016 to embrace the fight against irregular migration[141] , this becoming one of the five strategic components of the mission[142].

However, it must be noted that this phenomenon is not exclusive of EU missions in the Sahel, but has become a commonality in different contexts as well[143]. For instance, long-term assistance provided through the EU Trust Fund for Africa, with more than €930 million already mobilised, has been criticised for focusing too much on the management of migratory flows not only in the Sahel but in all countries participatory to the Rabat Process[144].

The misuse and abuse of climate narratives

The neo-Malthusian narrative around the Sahel's "unsustainable" demography and natural resource management is still very much present and is increasingly being reproduced as one of the axis onto which the international political scene is paying utmost attention[145]. The idea that human population growth is the primary driver of environmental harms and population control a prerequisite to environmental protection, is experiencing a resurgence[146]. Discourses that alarm of the effects desertification, land degradation and environmental fragility have in fostering violent conflict and displacement have led foreign and maximalist interpretations to assemble a Sahelian landscape in which external and securitarian intervention is prioritised[147].

141   Council of the European Union. 2016. "EUCAP Sahel Niger: mission extended, budget agreed, mandate amended". Press release, 18 July 2016. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/18/fac-sahel-niger/.

142   European External Action Service. 2016. "The EUCAP Sahel Niger civilian mission". Common Security and Defence Policy. https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/csdp/missions-and-operations/eucap-sahel-niger/pdf/factsheet_eucap_sahel_niger_en.pdf.

143   Moln r, Anna and Vecsey, Mariann. 2022. "The EU's Missions and Operations from the Central Mediterranean to West Africa in the Context of the Migration Crisis". International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies, 15(1): 55-82. https://emuni.si/ISSN/2232-6022/15.55-82.pdf.

144   Ioannides. 2020, *op cit.*

145   Torres, Laura. 2019. "The demographic explosion in the Sahel region: its governance's new challenge". Opinion Paper IEEE 61/2019. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2019/DIEEEO61_2019LAUTOR_demografia_ENG.pdf.

146   Merchant, Emily Klancher. 2022. "Environmental Malthusianism and demography". Social studies of science, 52(4): 536–560. https://doi.org/10.1177/03063127221104929.

147   Raineri, Luca. 2020. "SAHEL CLIMATE CONFLICTS?: When (Fighting) Climate Change Fuels Terrorism." European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28786.

In the 2021 Strategy "combating desertification" is one of the core developmental goals[148]. Within climate narratives, "the desertification narrative promotes a control-oriented response"[149] and is used to justify political and legal changes based on the assumptions of damaging local practices of land exploitation[150]. In this sense, a regional desertification narrative is useful as it establishes a region-wide reality that favours region-wide intervention. This adds to the seductive idea that terrorism and climate change are interlinked, both for international policies and Sahelian state leaders[151].

The climate-desertification-conflict nexus of the EU Strategy establishes a framework to "combat climate change, conscious of its direct consequences for populations, including in terms of security"[152]. This has translated Western anxieties, mostly about climate migrants coming from the Sahel to drive away policy attention from mitigation and move it towards migration and border control[153].

It is imperative to avoid oversimplifying climate narratives and practices in policy discussions by recognizing that security challenges related to climate and ecology are intricate and rooted in complex socio-political factors. Despite the growing acknowledgment of the interconnected nature of climate change and security issues, a compartmentalised approach not only persists within the EU but also in other multilateral bodies. Departments responsible for climate change adaptation, (human) development and security often operate in silos, posing the risk of incoherent regional policies[154], [155].

For example, the G5 Sahel's Security and Development Strategy[156] outlines interventions on pastoralism, food security, climate change adaptation, and social cohesion aimed at combating insecurity. However, practical implementation reveals limited coordination among the G5 Sahel's governance, security and resilience departments. While some interventions, such as the Coll ge Sah lien de S curit (CSS), incorporate a climate focus through training on "environmental infringe-

148   Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen. 2021, *op cit*.

149   Scoones, Ian, Andrew Stirling, Dinesh Abrol, Joanes Atela, Lakshmi Charli-Joseph, Hallie Eakin, Adrian Ely, et al. 2020. "Transformations to Sustainability: Combining Structural, Systemic and Enabling Approaches." Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 42 (1): 65–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2019.12.004.

150   Davis, Diana K. 2005. "Indigenous Knowledge and the Desertification Debate: Problematising Expert Knowledge in North Africa." Geoforum 36 (4): 509–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.08.003.

151   Raineri. 2020, *op cit*.

152   Council of the European Union . 2021b, *op cit*.

153   Ribot, Jesse, Papa Faye, and Matthew D. Turner. 2020. "Climate of Anxiety in the Sahel: Emigration in Xenophobic Times." Public Culture 32 (1): 45–75. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7816293.

154   Salzinger, Ma lle, and Sophie Desmidt. 2023. "Seven Ways to Support Resilience and Crisis Responses in the Central Sahel - Mali | ReliefWeb." The Centre for Africa-Europe Relations. March 30, 2023. https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/seven-ways-support-resilience-and-crisis-responses-central-sahel.

155   Interview PLO3.

156   G5 Secretariat Permanent. 2016. "Strategie Pour Le Development et La Securit Des Pays Du G5 Sahel". https://www.g5sahel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/images_Docs_SDS_G5S_VF.pdf.

ments," these efforts remain relatively small-scale[157]. Major security interventions, like the G5 Sahel Joint Force, primarily adopt military responses and do not appear to integrate climate-related security risks. Similarly, within CSDP operations, the climate dimension is more related to the carbon footprint of the mission than to climate-violence links[158]. Notably, energy security is conspicuously absent on all EU Sahel Strategies, with no projects in the RAP 2015-2020 addressing the role of local energy production in desertification[159].

Figure 7. The interplay between harmful narratives of violence, migration and climate change in the Sahel
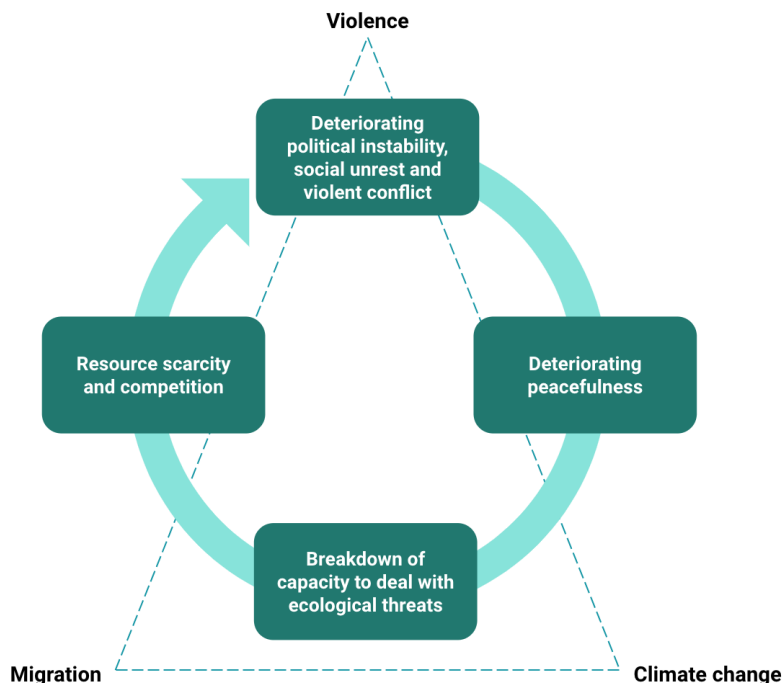
Source: Own elaboration

The multifaceted impacts of climate change on social, economic, security, development and political dynamics, spanning local to global scales, necessitate a reevaluation of the functioning of multilateral actors. Despite policy inconsistencies, there is a general consensus that climate change is a transnational phenomenon, offering a less sensitive and contested sector where cooperation is potentially more feasible than in other security domains. Given the escalating tension in traditional security sectors between the EU and its Sahelian counterparts, engaging in shared discussions about climate issues can enhance communication among multilateral

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157   Salzinger and Desmidt. 2023, *op cit.*

158   Interview A4.

159   Council of the European Union. 2015, *op cit.*

institutions and local and national actors. Existing efforts to promote knowledge sharing, joint analysis, and combined evaluations on climate security should be further supported in this regard.

INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS: INTERNAL TENSIONS AND POWER DYNAMICS SHAPING A DIFFUSE AND INCONSISTENT IMAGE

Another aspect that needs to be examined concerns the institutional dynamics within the EU. It is imperative to understand that despite the outward appearance of unity, the EU should not be perceived as a monolithic entity, but rather as a multifaceted amalgamation of perspectives and power dynamics. The extent to which it is able to articulate a coherent standpoint has a significant impact on its credibility as an institution.

In the Sahel context, this analysis is relevant because the challenges of understanding, simplifying narratives and formulating concrete strategies and policies do not arise from a single authoritative voice dictating the path to be followed. Rather, they arise from the complex interplay between different entities within the EU, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) or the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), and Member States (MS) resolving their differences in forums such as the Peace and Security Council. Within the paradigm of the pragmatic or geostrategic shift pursued by the last two Commissions to strengthen the EU's global role, the issue of security in the Sahel has become paramount.

The interviews conducted for this report reveal, as already indicated, the presence within this institutional framework of actors with a nuanced and sophisticated perspective on the potential implications of the security concept. Nevertheless, the influence of member states in shaping Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions remains crucial. A pragmatic outlook, rooted in the defence of national interests and underpinned by a desire to enhance the EU's geopolitical standing in an increasingly competitive global landscape, significantly shapes the trajectory of European strategies in the Sahel. To mitigate this bias, some argue for a supranational transformation of the CSDP, divorced from the whims of individual member states.[160] Alternatively, some highlight the fragmentation of the instruments used[161], the lack of sustainable funding and the limited effectiveness of micro-projects implemented at national level as inherent technical challenges that have a profound impact on the strategy as a whole[162].

Numerous internal dynamics of considerable importance underline the existence of tensions and contradictions inherent in the formulation of any strategy. First and foremost, these dynamics unfold within the framework of the Peace and Security Council, where member states - especially France - exert decisive influence and thus shape the overarching securitarian orientation of Sahel policy. However, tensions with the French position are well documented. For some member states,

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160   Interview A4.

161   Interview A3.

162   Interview PO1.

the need to decouple European Sahel strategy from French foreign policy and influence, a pressing concern since 2014 and 2015,[163] stands out as a key challenge in this new phase. At the same time, the European External Action Service (EEAS) is seeking to counter this predominantly securitarian imprint by adopting a more analytical approach to local realities. Second, another key internal dynamic concerns the relationship between the EEAS and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), which is characterised by the need for coordination and complementarity, but also by a dynamic of tension and competition between the two entities[164] - a phenomenon common to many organisations and which leads to communication challenges within the EEAS between the units responsible for Africa and the Middle East.[165] Finally, there is a third dimension between Brussels and the EU delegations in the Sahel countries. In principle, these delegations have a perspective more in tune with local dynamics, but it is often the visions of member states that ultimately dictate policy direction.[166]

The interviews highlight an important debate about the effectiveness of delegations. According to many, their understanding of local realities often lacks depth and rootedness, serving primarily organisational interests and hindering their perception by local populations as accessible actors.[167] In addition, many delegations are plagued by excessive bureaucracy, which prevents them from gathering authentic information. Their interactions with the population tend to be limited, confined to official channels, and focused on maintaining relations with local government elites while meeting their demands.[168]

Together, these factors contribute to a confusing and inconsistent local perception of the EU, often described as 'opaque',[169] making its operations and coherence as a single entity difficult for many local actors to understand. Moreover, the proliferation of roles such as Special Representative and Regional Advisory Coordination within the complex Sahel landscape further reinforces the perception of the EU as a diffuse actor in a metaphorical 'traffic jam'.[170]

These institutional challenges are a growing obstacle to international peace and security operations, in particular because of their intrusive nature, top-down approach, and lack of local ownership and participation in strategy formulation and implementation. The Sahel is no exception to this dynamic. This has been exacerbated by the increasing range of options available to Sahelian political actors, marked by the influx of numerous global actors, particularly Russia. Their presence has contributed to the erosion of long-standing European (and Western) dominance on the African continent, fostering a trend of 'strategic polygamy' among local governments. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that the perception

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163   Baldaro, Edoardo and Francesco Strazzari. 2023. "Strategic misalignment: European security and P/CVE engagement in the Sahel". Mediterranean Politics, p.4. https://doi.org/10.1080/136 29395.2023.2289795.

164   Interview PLO1.

165   Interview PLO1.

166   Baldaro and Strazzari. 2023, *op cit*, p. 6.

167   Interviews PO1, CE1, CE2.

168   Interview PLO1.

169   European Parliament. 2024, *op cit*.

170   Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen. 2020, *op cit.*

of the EU as an actor in the region is further influenced by double standards and inconsistent positions. This is evident in cases such as the tacit support for a covert coup in Chad, while condemning and supporting sanctions against neighbouring Sahelian regimes.

LOCAL OWNERSHIP: BETWEEN RHETORIC AND PRACTICE

Over the last decade, policy debates on security and development have often been characterised by the emphasis put on local ownership, understood as the degree of control that locals have in the design and implementation of post-conflict peacebuilding reforms. The principle of "local ownership" is perceived by both international and local stakeholders as a critical aspect to ensure the sustainability and legitimacy of peacebuilding reforms.[171] With regards to the EU, it has achieved a particularly strong resonance in its policy rhetoric "because it chimed well with how the Union portrays its role in the world"[172]. Indeed, the 2016 Global Strategy is concerned with facilitating "locally owned agreements".

One of the main problems associated with this question has to do with the "polysemic" nature of the term, i.e. what each actor in a context of international intervention understands or wants to understand about what local ownership really means.[173] Amongst this conceptual conundrum, some authors argue that three conceptual approaches to local ownership have crystallised[174]. First, a top-down understanding by which local ownership is a "buy-in of domestic elites into externally designed interventions"[175]. Second, a bottom-up approach that sees ownership as indigenous authorship of reforms. Finally, a middle-ground approach that calls for a local-international consensus in which the two levels of intervention are needed for successful reforms[176]. Although these three approaches are common in the literature regarding local ownership, the EU has often favoured a top-down strategy that results in little local participation beyond local elites. This might also be due to the obstacles posed by the decision-making mechanisms of CSDP. That is, insofar as states are the primary actors in the EU foreign policy, they might be less willing to "localise" security and development strategies as they might lose control of their resources and human capital.

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171   Mateos Mart n, Oscar and Andreu Sol -Mart n. 2022. "Whose Peace? Grappling with Local Ownership in Sierra Leone". Peace and Conflict Studies, 28(2). https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol28/iss2/4/.

172   Ejdus, Filip. 2017. "'Here is your mission, now own it!' The rhetoric and practice of local ownership in EU interventions". European Security, 26(4): 461-484. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2017.1333495.

173   Mateos Mart n, Oscar. 2012. "La Construcci n de paz posb lica: an lisis de los debates cr ticos a trav s del caso de Sierra Leona". Doctoral thesis, dir. Rafael Grasa Hern ndez. Universitat Aut noma de Barcelona. https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=es&user=BYNTHIMAAAAJ&citation_for_view=BYNTHIMAAAAJ:yFnVuubrUp4C.

174   Donnais, 2009 in Ejdus. 2017, *op cit*.

175   Ejdus. 2017, *op cit*.

176   Ibid.

All in all, when these debates are applied to the latest EU Sahel Strategy (2021), the contradictions easily arise. First, the concept of "local ownership" is only mentioned once when stressing that European support to Sahel's states "cannot be fully effective unless there is strong ownership on the part of the Sahel authorities and at local and community level"[177]. In addition, this approach is clearly centred around local governmental elites and does suffer from conceptual ambiguity. The need to engage local actors at all levels of society is frequently referred to, for instance stressing that "the EU will be careful to tailor its approach to each context, taking into account the specific needs of populations, decentralised entities and states", or highlighting the need to support "processes of decentralisation and increasing public participation in local decision-making"[178], there is no explicit mention about what this actually means and how these objectives can be achieved. Local ownership, despite its rhetoric importance, is yet again built around an abstract principle with no clear definition and programmatic guidelines.

In addition, beyond the conceptual ambiguity, local ownership also faces other challenges. That is, whereas it should envision the interests of the affected populations by the foreign interventions, the 2021 Sahel Strategy shows no receptivity to Sahelian interests. The focus remains highly Euro-centric inasmuch as it is very focused in fighting terrorism and preventing migration from a militarised perspective –although the Strategy did put some effort in adopting a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach. This phenomenon is not exclusive for the 2021 Strategy but a recurrent mistake in the Sahelian interventions, and renders counterproductive outcomes. Ignoring the interests of the aid recipients into account generates a strategy that will be unfruitful as the core problems –both tangible and perceived– might not be directly addressed and thus instability will prevail.

This incongruency can be exemplified by EUCAP Sahel Mali. Following Jayasundara-Smits[179], "although the planning documents mention involving civil society in planning, its role is limited to a supporting and contributory actor to the mission, and it was excluded in terms of subjectivities –ideas, norms and visions". Moreover, actors from the North of the country were not involved in the consultation process, which can be counterproductive because the risk of producing overlapping types of security governance emerges: "exclusion of these actors and the favouring of a top-down model based on EU standards marginalised and reject the local episteme of security and make local communities passive recipients or subordinates of the external model"[180].

Furthermore, the new trends derived from the war in Ukraine show how EU interests prevail over local ones: local governments perceive the EU as only concerned about the direction of votes on Russian sanctions and see how their claims have been neglected. Furthermore, African states feel sidelined in the Strategy since migration is seen as the main priority for Europeans[181]. In this context, the EU's normative stance has been compromised by imposing the European security agenda above local demands and needs and by pressuring local elites to comply

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177   Council of the European Union. 2021, *op cit.*
178   Ibid.
179   Jayasundara-Smits. 2018, *op cit.*
180   Ibid.
181   Interview PO1.

with European priorities[182]. For instance, EUCAP Sahel Mali has drifted towards supporting migration control and border management, fighting terrorism and strengthening internal security forces[183]. In a nutshell, although the rhetoric of local ownership persists, it is deemed to be applied through a top-down conception of predetermined intervention designs.

In this sense, it is noticeable the non-existence of pre-planning and after-action surveys promoted by European organisms in order to draft more concise and effective policies in the Sahel. Therefore, there is an important disconnection between European strategies and the realities on the ground which increases due to the isolation of EU officials –as well as the staff of other international organisations and agencies– from the societies they are living in. For some interviewees, it is also important to stress that if local ownership succeeds in taking root, even in an elitist way, it is also linked to the existence of interlocutors who somehow "understand" what they have to do or are willing to do because they share some elements of the same vision, an aspect which, according to some, was represented by the figure of Bazoum in Niger[184]. In addition, the need to have a more localised view in the delegations is crucial. Although some experts assert that EU delegations have a fairly good understanding of the local dynamics and are more free than embassies to criticise states,[185] a contrasting common critique is the formation of communities of foreign workers that live in isolation from host civil societies and thus remain alienated from locals. In these communities, foreign workers relate almost exclusively to each other and live in isolated areas of capital cities. By doing so, they create a bubble of experts in peacekeeping and peacebuilding, development and humanitarian aid, that has been coined as "Peaceland"[186], and that isolates them from local populations.

Although it is difficult to assess up to what extent EU officials and delegations suffer from this, some EU officials[187] have indeed supported the claim that EU delegations need to be more engaged and more savvy of the local culture, politics and dynamics and communicate better this knowledge with Brussels to ensure that the flow of communication is not unidirectional and better policies are designed. In addition, the engagement of EU officials in delegations with local governments is often limited inasmuch as the contact depends a lot in the chiefs of delegations, who are often the only interlocutor with the government[188]. Others assert that the interaction of delegations with local populations is limited and frequently circumscribed to official channels blind beyond short-term needs related to ongoing European projects[189].

In conclusion, "local ownership" has been a standout issue for the EU in the Sahel Strategy. Although the importance it has received, its conceptual ambi-

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182   Jayasundara-Smits. 2018, *op cit.*

183   Ibid.

184   Interviews A5, CE3.

185   Interview CE3.

186   Autesserre, S verine (2014). "Peaceland: conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention". New York: Cambridge University Press.
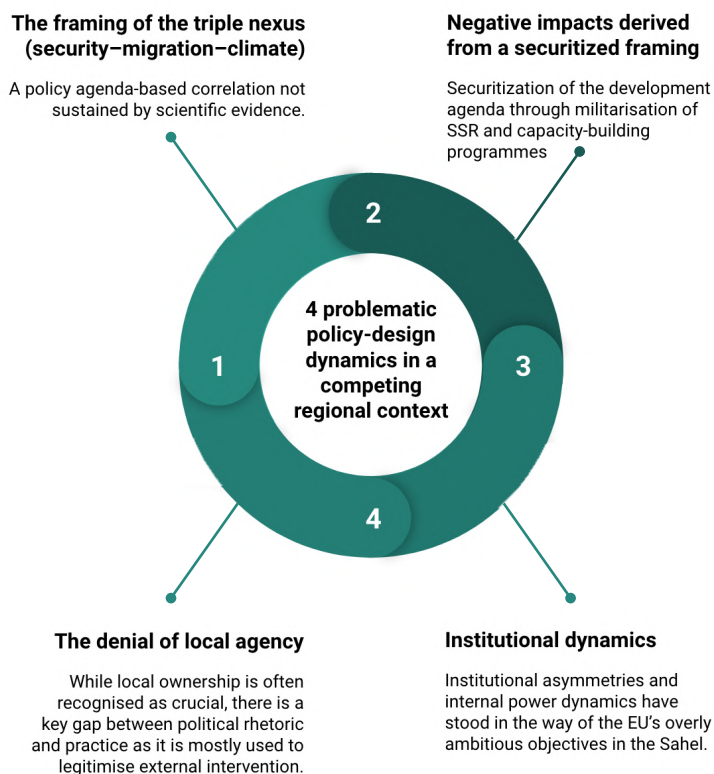
187   Interview PO1.

188   Interview CE4.

189   Interview PLO3.

guity has hampered its implementation. As such, the local ownership of the European strategies has been more a rhetorical device than a practical instrument. Nevertheless, there seems to be a broad consensus to endorse it and promote a better implementation.

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To sum up this section, and as *Figure 8* shows, the EU's approach to the Sahel suffers from problematic policy-design dynamics. First, the nexus between security, migration and climate has been framed in a securitized manner that entails a distanced policy agenda from scientific evidence. Second, this securitization generates negative outcomes in terms of a mostly militarised approach. Third, inter-institutional tensions and contradictions within the EU affect the Union's policy coherence and perceived legitimacy. And fourth, local agency is ignored in the practical application of European policies. These policy choices need to be understood in the broader competing regional context by which European states and the EU as a whole are losing influence in the Sahel. Hence, a redesign of the EU strategy is needed to deal with the new Sahelian realities with more appropriate means.

Figure 8. Problematic policy-design dynamics in a competing regional context

The framing of the triple nexus (security–migration–climate)

A policy agenda-based correlation not sustained by scientific evidence.

Negative impacts derived from a securitized framing

Securitization of the development agenda through militarisation of SSR and capacity-building programmes

4 problematic policy-design dynamics in a competing regional context

The denial of local agency

While local ownership is often recognised as crucial, there is a key gap between political rhetoric and practice as it is mostly used to legitimise external intervention.

Institutional dynamics

Institutional asymmetries and internal power dynamics have stood in the way of the EU's overly ambitious objectives in the Sahel.

Source: Own elaboration

A rethink of the EU's strategy in the Sahel region

T his section reassesses the persistent challenges influencing security aspirations in the region. Confronted with the imperative to mitigate the overly securitized approach that has resulted in an enlargement of EU stabilisation and security aid initiatives in the Sahel, our focus is on reconceptualizing paradigms conducive to reinterpreting the Sahel's reality. In this section we underscore the necessity for a critical and less securitized approach to address the specific dimensions outlined in the report. Firstly, we emphasise the importance of reinterpreting and incorporating locally generated knowledge, essential for comprehending genuine dynamics of the Sahel and fostering stronger ties between Sahelian and European civil societies. Secondly, we advocate for a reconsideration of the securitization framework within the security-development nexus, divorced from the Global War on Terror (GWOT) logic by appropriately addressing the nature of violence, migration patterns, and the escalating impacts of the climate crisis in the Sahel. Lastly, this section advocates for the promotion of a "transformative pragmatism" approach over a "principled pragmatism" one, less intrusive and more transactional, and aimed at leveraging added value amidst evolving international competition and changing circumstances.

BEGIN TO CONSIDER CRITICAL LOCAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

One of the core ideas underscored by critical peace and conflict studies, and particularly by decolonial scholars, is the need to recognise that knowledge production is inherently subjective and non-neutral. In this sense, the act of knowledge production takes on a political dimension in which the actors involved have the authority to define what constitutes valid knowledge and what does not.[190] This is a profoundly important starting point. Echoing the renowned discourse of Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, dominant tendencies in African contexts have historically propagated 'single stories' rooted in biased and racist constructs that simplify the understanding of reality. Crucially, these narratives not only shape but also rationalise the types of responses that are offered.

In the Sahel context, the dominant understanding among external actors has long favoured a narrative that emphasises the violence of extremist groups as either irrational or inherently linked to religious fundamentalist identities. Departing from this interpretive framework, however, numerous analyses - many of which have been reviewed and debated within the European External Action Service (EEAS) itself - argue for a more nuanced approach. This approach suggests interpreting violence, alongside other phenomena such as migration patterns or the impact of

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190   Rodr guez-Iglesias, Ana Isabel; Carles Fern ndez-Torn , Oscar Mateos Mart n and Albert Caram s-Boada. 2023. "What Truth? How Civil Society Organisations Shape the Knowledge Production of Truth Commissions". Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 17(5): 536-556. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2023.2251951.

climate change, through less deterministic and simplistic lenses. Such perspectives take into account a variety of factors, including historical legacies, socio-economic structures, grievances and micro-level dynamics. These perspectives reveal the existence of multiple agendas and motivations, not only among the leadership of armed groups, but also among the myriad of young people who support and join them.

In order to dismantle these 'dangerous narratives', to use Chimamanda Adichie's terminology, given their significant influence on the conceptualisation of militarisation strategies, it is imperative to involve local actors in the process of understanding local realities. Several interviewees stressed the importance of being wary of civil society organisations that show compliance or adapt to the frameworks sought by external actors such as the EU.[191] In this context, social movements and organisations with a critical and transformative view of reality (as evidenced by entities such as the Coalition Citoyen du Sahel),[192] as well as local universities and think tanks, emerge as crucial. It is important for the EU to adopt a more modest approach in this knowledge deconstruction endeavour, and to engage with actors who have a more sophisticated understanding rooted in local worldviews - not with the intention of instrumentalising them, but rather to genuinely grasp the underlying elements from which it can derive authentic added value, as will be argued below.

RESHAPING THE CORE ASPECTS OF THE EU STRATEGIES

The previous analysis highlights the need to reconsider the securitization framework within the security-development nexus, divorced from the GWOT logic. Consequently, this section advocates for this reconsideration by appropriately addressing the nature of violence, migration patterns, and the escalating impacts of the climate crisis in the Sahel.

To reshape the securitization framework from the conceptual domain around violence and militarization one must also start by recognising that the activities that the EU and its Member States have undertaken in the Sahel for more than a decade demonstrate the wide-ranging ambitions and commitment of Europe to improving living and governance conditions in the region. In addition to the CSDP missions, the Sahel Alliance, by 2022, has championed over 1,300 projects amounting to a substantial €28.77 billion[193]. Nevertheless, the recurrently praised security-development nexus has encountered challenges on the ground, particularly in the realm of governance. After the Niger coup in July 2023, there was widespread confusion on how European programs and international strategies in the Sahel had misinterpreted, and up to a certain point ignored, the socio-political landscape[194].

The comprehensive nature of the security-development approach has, more often than not, recurrently incurred in a dualistic logic of providing development

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191   Interview CE1, CE2, PO1.

192   Coalition Citoyenne pour le Sahel/People's Coalition for the Sahel. See: https://www.sahelpeoplescoalition.org/.

193   Alliance Sahel. 2023b. "Open Data Dashboard." 2023. https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/the-projects/.

194   Interview A5, PLO3, PO1, CE1, CE2 and closed-door seminar (10th November 2023, CIDOB, Barcelona).

aid and building state capacity. Under this premise, many of the socio-political nuances of (re)building the State in Sahelian societies have been ignored, often sidelining civil society in order to ensure cooperation at the highest levels, especially in regards to capacity building[195]. Expert analyses pertaining EUTM Mali underscore the essentiality of structural reforms for sustaining enduring positive impacts, asserting that mere capacity-building initiatives may fall short of achieving lasting benefits[196]. In 2020, the UN Security Council's expert group on Mali warned that capacity-building efforts inadvertently bolstered the technical and financial resources of unintended beneficiaries[197]. Over the years, EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel have prioritised capacity building through financial and material support over structural reforms. Consequently, while training missions have improved the operational capabilities of the local armed forces[198], inasmuch as corruption, impunity and abuses of rule of law persist in Sahelian governments and particularly security forces, it will not matter how persistent in time CSDP missions are.

Ultimately, although there is still a need to combat terrorism in the Sahel due to the increase of militant islamist groups in recent years, a pragmatic security-development approach that colludes and supports illegitimate, corrupt and/or autocratic governments that remain disconnected from the needs and realities of their populations will not solve the structural governance problems that have lasting consequences for regional political stability and in turn for Europe.

The conclusion of MINUSMA and the expulsion of French troops from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso serve as compelling indicators of military juntas trying to assert their authority within the region and especially, before their citizenry. These actions convey potent political messages invoking nationalism and sovereignty, with strong, and often unproven accusations against EU Member States, namely France due to its status as former colonial power[199]. Despite recent tensions between Sahelian military juntas and their European counterparts and considering the ethical concerns associated with military uprisings and the repercussions it has had in strategic partnerships, it is pertinent to acknowledge that while the GWOT doctrine remains influential in the Western approach to the Sahel, there is also a concurrent great power competition unfolding in the region stemming from China's pragmatic

195   Schmauder, Anna, Guillaume Sotomayor, and Delina Goxho. n.d. "Strategic Missteps: Learning from a Failed EU Sahel Strategy." Italian Institute for International Political Studies. Accessed May 11, 2023. https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy-28130.

196   Ibid.

197   United Nations. 2020. "Panel of Experts pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) ConcerningFinal Report of the Panel of Experts Established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and Renewed pursuant to Resolution 2484 (2019)." Digitallibrary. un.org, August. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3876820. Extract (p.36): "MINUSMA is aware of the risk of its air assets in Kidal facilitating the movement of gold to Bamako and has put in place a formal interdiction with subsequent controls.".

198   Baudais, Virginie, and Souleymaine Ma ga. 2022. "The European Union Training Mission in Mali: An Assessment." SIPRI. April 2022. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/bp_2204_eutm_mali.pdf.

199   Mednick, Sam . 2022. "French Accuse Russian Mercenaries of Staging Burials in Mali." AP News. April 22, 2022. https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-ouagadougou-burkina-faso-europe-africa-af0965b3bd459f90c9cf930625aa4590.

commercial diplomacy, Russia's resurgence as a security partner in Africa and the United States' relative decline.

In this sense, deciding what to do with European capacity-building and SSR training in the Sahel is not an easy task[200]. On one hand, amidst considerable critique, disengagement means a reduction in the responsibility and exposure of partner forces. On the other hand, this diminishes any potential leverage they might have exerted on local forces[201]. This ambivalent situation has already facilitated Russia to intensify collaboration with military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and more recently, Niger[202]. This does not only mean a great loss of leverage for European interests but also the introduction through the Wagner Group of tactics of terror and brutality previously not observed by partner forces. These tactics include torture, summary executions, beheadings, ejection of prisoners from aircraft and the booby-trapping of corpses[203]. Despite that over more than a decade European capacity building and SSR has been criticised in the Sahel for its inability to help rebalance civil-military relations and organically improve accountability and abuse against civilians, officers argue that there was in fact some localised progress in terms of rule of law and accountability, especially through EUCAP Sahel Niger, with some trials being held for abuses by security forces[204]. Similarly, despite its overly militarised approach, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) officials also concurred that, notwithstanding its imperfections, the ultimate objective of EUCAP Sahel is more positive than its shortcomings[205].

Notwithstanding the critiques regarding the militarization of the EU's aid in the Sahel, without the provision of such assistance, if withheld initially, it might have resulted in a higher incidence of abuses and it could have substantially allowed non-state armed groups to amplify their control over both the population and the territory in the first place. There is no straightforward solution to EU security assistance in the Sahel. On the one hand, it has proven to be too militarised. On the other, the alarming surge of jihadist demands a prioritisation of counter-terrorism. With this dilemma, European actors will have to persist in undertaking the uncomfortable challenge of evaluating the trade-offs between its value-based policies and its interest-driven approach[206].

At the other end of the restructuring of fundamental issues we find migration and mobility. European migration policies have drawn a lot of criticism and contro-

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200   For more information about SSR in the Sahel see: Venturi, Bernardo and Nana Toure. 2020. "The Great Illusion: Security Sector Reform in the Sahel". The International Spectator, 55(4): 54-68. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1835326.

201   Wil n. 2021, *op cit.*

202   Le Cam, Morgane . 2023. "Niger Chooses Russia over Europe." Le Monde, December 6, 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/12/06/niger-chooses-russia-over-europe_6318064_124.html.

203   Nsaibia. 2023, *op cit.*

204   Interview PLO1.

205   Interview CE1 & CE2.

206   Murphy, Theodore, and Ameer Chughtai. 2023. "A Necessary Trade-Off: Why the EU Needs to Cooperate with Niger's Post-Coup Government on Counter-Terrorism." European Council on Foreign Relations, September 11, 2023. https://ecfr.eu/article/a-necessary-trade-off-why-the-eu-needs-to-cooperate-with-nigers-post-coup-government-on-counter-terrorism/.

versy. In fact, since they were put into place, the Sahel has seen a rise in insecurity and instability, increased disruptions to livelihoods and an increase in the complexity of migratory and smuggling routes and a breakdown in the social contract between the population and states[207]. European migration policies in the Sahel and elsewhere have reduced the amount of migrants reaching Europe. Nevertheless, this approach's sustainability needs to be put under review as it might have fueled domestic tensions in politically fragile and administratively weak states[208].

Resizing core issues requires revising the excessively militarised and securitized approach to migration and the general misinterpretation of mobility dynamics in the Sahel. First, a new EU strategy should focus on displacement as primarily "European investments in countering irregular migration have excluded the protracted displacement crisis unfolding in the Sahel"[209]. Focusing on displacement is crucial to tackle the succession of humanitarian, governance and security crises that have hit the region. Moreover, recognizing the challenges posed by forced displacement within and across borders in the Sahel serves to unearth the flawed protection and assistance systems for forced migrants. Indeed, immigration and refugee regimes in the region need further strengthening.

However, this evolution needs to come together with a better understanding of mobility in the Sahel as something intertwined with regional economy and transnational social dynamics. Mobility has perennially stood as a pivotal factor in sustaining life in the Sahel. The legitimacy and legal foundation for this phenomenon are conferred by the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods. Consequently, advocating for the support of people's free movement at both regional and continental levels becomes imperative to mitigate the broader-scale adverse effects of migration control. Regrettably, the member states of ECOWAS have never fully implemented the protocols, rendering the vision of free regional movement susceptible to adjustments motivated by interests seeking to impede regional migration[210]. Moreover, despite the intended assurance of free movement, the utilisation of smugglers by migrants has surged over the years[211].

On the other hand, the EU needs to promote area-based policies to deal with the needs of refugees, IDPs, migrants and host communities. This approach would aim to avoid the creation of "assistance hot spots" such as several big cities that have gained notoriety as a destination for displaced persons. All in all, focusing in area-based responses would require a paradigm shift away from route-centric policy responses that have characterised the European approach since the peak of the migration "crisis" in the Mediterranean in 2015[212].

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207   Maunganidze, Ottilia Anna. 2023. "Europe's migration deals in the Sahel must be revised". Institute for Security Studies. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/europes-migration-deals-in-the-sahel-must-be-revised.

208   Bø s. 2020, *op cit*.

209   Fakhry. 2023, *op cit*.

210   Ibid.

211   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. 2022. "Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel". Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA) – Sahel. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf

212   Fakhry. 2023, *op cit*.

All together, a new revision of EU migration policies in the Sahel should consider and acknowledge the long-lasting effects of these policies. The EU has been a crucial partner for Sahelian states in building capacities for migration control, so it needs to act accordingly to this responsibility. Indeed, "the EU has enabled partner countries to adopt tougher policies and set precedents on migration and displacement that are detrimental to the long-term objectives of enhancing regional free movement and protection of vulnerable migrants and displaced persons"[213]. This policy rhetoric has distanced the EU for its stance as a responsible normative power. Instead, the EU needs to comply with this ideational position for two reasons: first, to increase coherence within European policies and, second, to "incite states to adopt more progressive approaches to migration building on existing regional and continental frameworks"[214]. In addition, this critical introspection needs to highlight that EU migration policies have had contradictory results. For instance, while the externalisation of EU borders has reduced the arrival of migrants to European shores, it has also obstructed mobility in the region for important segments of the population such as nomadic and semi nomadic communities, besides migrants and displaced persons that use the region as a transit area. Again, this reminds us of the common critique of the misunderstanding of the phenomenon of migration in the Sahel.

Obsessing with the management of migration restricts the integrated approach that the EU Sahel strategies have been aiming at for the last years. In order to improve policies in this area, European policymakers need to envision long-term responses that aim at reducing conflicts and violence in the region and promoting protection mechanisms provided by the states. Hence, EU missions such as EUCAP Sahel Niger and Mali, which were included in the EU Migration Partnership Framework in 2016, need to reconsider their typical short-term activities focused on putting barriers to migration that have been common since the peak of the migration crisis to favour area-based approaches and focus on displacement in the Sahel, not only on migration towards Europe.

Finally, reframing the understanding of climate-related policies goes hand in hand with reshaping violence and migration as core issues for the EU in the Sahel. In spite of the coexistence of significant developmental challenges in the Sahel, competition over land and water resources continue to be critical for violence and instability. As only 2% of cropland perimeters benefit from irrigation[215], water access in the Sahel is crucial since water is a scarce resource. This scarcity is a chronic challenge for both Sahelian farmers and pastoralists as they rely on the region's rainy season, typically from June to September with monsoon-like characteristics. Additionally, while land-related issues are consistently considered among the top causes of conflict, land tenure insecurity often remains peripheral[216]. In many customary dryland governance systems, groups' possession rights of natural resources are guaranteed through customary, formal and informal land use and tenure rights. Therefore, making the

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213   Ibid.

214   Ibid.

215   Samasse, Kaboro, Niall P. Hanan, Julius Y. Anchang, and Yacouba Diallo. 2020. "A High-Resolution Cropland Map for the West African Sahel Based on High-Density Training Data, Google Earth Engine, and Locally Optimized Machine Learning" Remote Sensing, 12(9): 1436. https://doi.org/10.3390/rs12091436.

216   Ibid.

link between conflict with land tenure insecurity explicit serves as a starting point for re-engaging in discussions on meaningful changes in the dynamics of local social relationships, particularly regarding the security of resource rights within communal tenure systems[217]. By pinpointing and acknowledging tenure insecurity as an underlying cause of conflict, policymakers can establish a logical entry point for reinvigorated policy deliberations aimed at addressing the root causes of instability in the Sahel.

If governance is to be central for peace in the Sahel, assistance on governance should have a strong emphasis on land rights and safe access to natural resources, not security. The Rural Land Tenure Law enacted by Burkina Faso in 2009 stands out as one of the most innovative land reform initiatives in the region, introducing mechanisms for the formalisation and protection of both statutory and customary land rights while promoting decentralised land management[218]. Despite its forward-thinking nature, more than a decade after its adoption, the actual implementation of these reforms remains limited[219]. Similarly, Mali's Agricultural Land Law of 2017 aims to recognize and strengthen customary land rights, particularly for women, and endeavours to enhance and decentralise land management. Nevertheless, the establishment of local land committees, the key mechanism for implementing the law, is still pending in a majority of the country[220]. This mirrors the delayed formation[221] of similar committees as outlined in Niger's Rural Code[222].

Under this inefficient regulatory context, growing social tensions and inter-communal violence related to natural resource management adds to reportedly increased state atrocities against civilians in the name of counter-terrorism[223], which are only the latest and most drastic examples adding to the protracted dynamics mentioned before. The experience of abuse and mistreatment by authorities is prevalent but also by the fragmented landscape of self-defence militias that have emerged due to escalating militant islamist attacks and the need to protect their communities[224].

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217   Ibid, 28.

218   Moyenga, Paul Marie . 2015. "Land Tenure Legislation Reforms in Burkina Faso: Between Interruptions and Continuity in Public Action." FAO Land Tenure Journal 1 (15). P.79. https://www.fao.org/3/i5244te/i5244te.pdf.

219   Millenium Challenge Corporation. 2023. "Promoting Land Tenure Security in Burkina Faso." Millenium Challenge Corporation. https://assets.mcc.gov/content/uploads/evalbrief-20230022836-bfa-rural-land-gov.pdf.

220   Idris, Iffat. 2020. "Justice Systems in the Sahel." K4D Helpdesk . UK Department for International Development . https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ebd676486650c278fc64bd1/765_Justice_Systems_in_the_Sahel.pdf.

221   USAID. 2016. "Niger Country Profile:Property Rights and Resource Governance." United States Agency for International development. https://www.land-links.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/USAID_Land_Tenure_Niger_Profile.pdf.

222   Jamart, Clara. 2011. "Progress Made by Niger's Rural Code." Agter.org. March 1, 2011. https://www.agter.org/bdf/en/corpus_chemin/fiche-chemin-92.html.

223   Human Rights Watch. 2023. "Mali: New Atrocities by Malian Army, Apparent Wagner Fighters | Human Rights Watch." HRW. July 24, 2023. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/mali-new-atrocities-malian-army-apparent-wagner-fighters#:~:text=Both%20JNIM%20and%20ISGS%20have.

224   Ammour, Laurence-A da. 2020. "How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel." Africa Center for Strategic Studies. February 2020. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/how-violent-extremist-groups-exploit-intercommunal-conflicts-in-the-sahel/.

If the EU is to pursue a multi-phased approach, acting at all stages of the conflict cycle[225] and more focused on governance, it cannot fixate primarily on a government's security (i.e., regime survival) as it does not necessarily mean security for individuals[226]. If short and medium-term priorities of fighting terrorism and stopping migration flows and drug trafficking across the Mediterranean Sea overshadow long term stabilisation goals, assistance mechanisms will risk extending the reach of the executive power without political accountability, possibly protracting violence. An exclusively technical approach to stabilisation risks overlooking the inherent political aspects of governance assistance and frequently fails to adequately confront underlying socio-economic grievances. To continue to collaborate in tackling the root socio-economic causes of violence in the Sahel, governance reform needs to be structurally approached as an inherently political process.

TOWARDS "TRANSFORMATIVE PRAGMATISM"?

A third and final aspect relevant to exploring the elements that promote a distinctive EU approach to the Sahel revolves around the concept of 'transformative pragmatism'. As outlined above, this notion contrasts with what the EU has termed "principled pragmatism" in certain strategies. In essence, this approach seeks to reconcile the traditional normative nature of the EU with the emerging pragmatic or geopolitical impetus catalysed by increased global competition. The challenge, however, is to achieve this balance without compromising the credibility of the strategy and of the EU itself. Advocating principled pragmatism while pursuing a predominantly securitising approach to perceived priority issues and overtly militaristic responses only exacerbates the overarching problems of coherence, double standards and inconsistency projected by the EU in the region - a consequence of its own choices, as outlined in the previous section. One interviewee succinctly articulated this dilemma by claiming that the EU often presents itself as a value-based political actor, but behaves more like a consortium of states driven by their interests and worldviews. In addition, as one contributor to this report points out, policies based solely on the rhetoric of values prove ineffective because values are not universally shared. If the EU is to maintain a values-based approach, it must engage in cooperation, dialogue and negotiation with local organisations that are more closely aligned with these values.[227]

Additionally, amid the prevailing uncertainty about the unfolding scenarios following a series of coups d' tat in several countries, the expulsion of France or the UN mission, and the formation of new organisational alliances that exclude major actors such as the G5 Sahel or ECOWAS, there is a temptation to continue to defend the security strategy as the optimal choice and to extend the dialogue with nations beyond this sphere. Such a response, however, fails to take into account the potential lessons to be learned from the current situation, as well as the volatility

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225   European Union. 2016, *op cit,* p.28.

226   Ould-Abdallah, Ahmedou. 2017. "The Security-Development Nexus in the Sahel Sahara Region." Friends of Europe. July 18, 2017. https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/the-security-development-nexus-in-the-sahel-sahara-region/.

227   Interview PO2.

and parallels with processes experienced by other states in the region, such as Togo, Senegal or Côte d'Ivoire.

Transformative pragmatism is based on the notion of recognising and embracing the novel circumstances that shape the current landscape, most notably an environment characterised by a plethora of options for engagement with local actors. The current juncture, marked by the delineation of the boundaries of European strategy and a shift in the regional context, underlines at least two principles central to the concept of transformative pragmatism. First, it entails adopting a different attitude - one that is less rigid and more transactional, capable of adapting to evolving circumstances, such as the emergence of new actors such as military juntas, while at the same time engaging in deliberations on dilemmas and drawing red lines. This disposition depends on promoting greater autonomy for the EU as an actor, less dependent on the interests of member states and more rooted in the expertise of internal bodies such as the EEAS, but fundamentally in dialogue with the insights and perspectives of local actors, especially those with a social and intellectual orientation, such as universities, think tanks and grassroots organisations. Second, transformative pragmatism transcends a securitarian approach and adopts a less intrusive stance, inclined towards forging strategic partnerships on issues that pose collective challenges, such as the impact of the climate crisis, and oriented towards maximising added value in the face of intensifying competition. The overall aim of this transformative pragmatism is to develop a strategy that is more legitimised by local actors, more coherent and more sustainable in the long term.

Similarly, the International Crisis Group[228] argues that the EU should adopt a more "modest" and "realistic" approach to the prevailing context. In line with this stance, it proposes three additional guidelines to complement those outlined above: firstly, the exploration of non-military means to address insecurity; secondly, a recalibration of long-term policies to address structural issues, including the provision of essential services and combating climate change; and finally, the imperative to protect the most vulnerable civilian populations.

Within the paradigm of geopolitical realism that pervades many governmental institutions, including the EU, some of these proposals may be seen as idealistic. However, over the course of more than 13 years, the adoption of increasingly militarised strategies has only served to exacerbate the prevailing volatility and foster a pervasive sense of bewilderment and perplexity in Brussels, especially after the coup that deposed President Bazoum in 2023. Transformative pragmatism does not pretend to offer a concrete blueprint; rather, it represents the seeds of a distinct approach to understanding, deliberating and engaging in contexts characterised by immense social, human and political complexity.

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228   International Crisis Group. 2024. "Reorienting Europe´s Approach in the Sahel". Watch List 2024 for the EU. 30 January 2024. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/reorienting-europes-approach-in-the-sahel.

Conclusions

The Sahel region remains of great importance to European interests. The formulation of three distinct strategies (2011, 2015 and 2021) to address escalating security concerns in the region underscores the growing recognition of the Sahel's strategic importance and the need for effective European intervention. However, the EU, with its multiple interests and agendas, struggles to effectively represent and address the complexities of the Sahel's environmental, political, cultural and social dynamics.

This challenge is exemplified by the problem of a securitised understanding of highly complex phenomena such as extremist violence, migration patterns and the scale and impact of the climate crisis. This approach has led to an overemphasis on militarised responses, as evidenced by the ambitious but often disjointed nature of European strategies. Conflicting perspectives among member states and EU institutions, set in an increasingly pragmatic context, hinder coherent action. Moreover, internal organisational dynamics within the EU, coupled with tensions and contradictions between different EU actors involved in policy formulation and implementation in the Sahel, limit local agency in policy-making beyond elite circles.

This report serves as a reflexive exercise to address the persistent challenges that shape security aspirations in the region, and aims to mitigate the overly securitised approach that has expanded and ultimately stalled EU stabilisation and security assistance efforts in the Sahel. By reconceptualising paradigms and reinterpreting the reality of the Sahel, the report argues for a critical and less securitised EU approach to the region's specific challenges. Central to this approach is the incorporation of locally generated knowledge promotion through the lens of 'transformative pragmatism'.

Annexes

ANNEX 1. MAP OF THE SAHEL

Source*: Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2024.* See: https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahel

ANNEX 2. INTERVIEWS

The research team has conducted 17 interviews to draft this report. These interviews were intentionally addressed towards different actors of the policy-design process, such as academics, civilian experts and policy and political officers from the European External Action Service. The identities of the interviewees have been intentionally safeguarded to comply with the confidentiality standards agreed upon. Therefore, when citing interviewees, they can only be identified by an acronym of their role, be it academic (A), ambassador (AMB), civilian expert (CE), law enforcement officer (LEO), politica officer (PLO) and policy officer (PO). The following table references all 17 interviews with their respective coding, institutional affiliation, location and date when the interview took place.

ID	Interviewee	Institutional affiliation	Location	Date
A1	Academic	Scuola Superiore Sant'anna di Pisa	Barcelona	9/11/23
A2	Academic	Norwegian University of Life Sciences	Barcelona	8/11/23
A3	Academic	Egmont Institute	Brussels	18/10/23
A4	Academic	Bristol University	Barcelona	30/10/23
A5	Academic	Universit Libre de Bruxelles	Brussels	17/10/23
AMB	Ambassador	European External Action Service	Brussels	16/10/23
CE1	Civilian expert	Oxfam Brussels	Brussels	17/10/23
CE2	Civilian expert	Oxfam Brussels	Brussels	17/10/23
CE3	Civilian expert	International Crisis Group	Barcelona	19/10/23
CE4	Civilian expert	International Crisis Group	Barcelona	26/10/23
LEO	Law enforcement officer	Integrated Strategic Planning for CSDP and Stabilisation (EEAS)	Brussels	17/10/23
PLO1	Political officer	European External action Service (Mali and Mauritania)	Brussels	24/10/23
PLO2	Political Officer	EEAS (Sahel)	Brussels	18/10/23
PLO3	Political Officer	Political officer for the Sahel (EEAS)	Brussels	18/10/23
PO1	Policy officer	Foreign Policy Instruments (EEAS)	Brussels	18/10/23
PO2	Policy officer	ECDPM	Brussels	20/10/23
PO3	Policy officer	EEAS (migration)	Brussels	16/10/23

ANNEX 3. PROGRAM OF THE SEMINAR 'WHAT ROLE FOR THE EU IN THE SAHEL?' (10/9/2023)

Venue: CIDOB (C/Elisabets, 12)

9.30-9.45.- Welcome remarks
Anna Ayuso, CIDOB Senior Researcher.
Oscar Mateos, GLOBALCODES Lead Researcher.
Jordi Sol , MEP Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance

9.45-11.30.- First round table: "The EU in the Sahel: assessing the problems and inconsistencies of the past ten years' strategy"
Speaker: Bernardo Venturi, IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali.

11.30-12- Coffee break

12-13.45.- Second round table: "Security and political dilemmas in the Sahel: what role for external actors?"
Speaker: Beatriz Mesa, Universit Internationale de Rabat (UIR) and Universit Gaston Berger (UGB, Senegal).

13.45- 15.15- Lunch

15.15-16.45.- Plenary session: "Rethinking the EU's strategy in the Sahel"

16.45-17. Closing remarks

Bernardo Venturi is Associate Fellow at IAI, where he focuses on Africa, civilian crisis management, EU external relations, peacebuilding and development. He is also Head of Research and Policy and co-founder of the Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) and Adjunct Professor at the University of Bologna. He has 20 years of experience as a scholar and a practitioner, publishing extensively on peacebuilding, security, African affairs and European Union foreign policy. Bernardo has published extensively on governance and security in the Sahel, with a special focus on European engagement in the region. Bernardo has also consulted for several regional and international organizations including the European Commission, EEAS, European Parliament, IGAD, OSCE, the Italian MFA and several international NGOs and platforms and he lectures in several MA courses and international training programmes. Bernardo obtained his PhD in 2009 from the University of Bologna, where he also held a post-doctoral research fellowship.

Featured publications:
- Venturi, Bernardo. (2022). The EU's Diplomatic Engagement in the Sahel, IAI.
- Venturi, Bernardo. (2020).The Great Illusion: Security Sector Reform in the Sahel, The International Spectator.
- Venturi, Bernardo. (2019). An EU Integrated Approach in the Sahel: The Role for Governance, IAI/NDI
- Venturi, Bernardo. (2017). The EU and the Sahel: A Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security–Migration–Development Nexus, IAI.
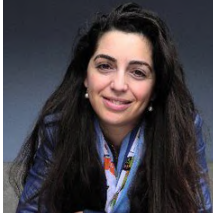
Beatriz Mesa holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Grenoble Alpes, France (2017), with a doctoral thesis on "the transformative role of armed secessionist and jihadist groups in organized crime actors in the Sahel". She is currently an affiliated lecturer and researcher at the International University of Rabat (UIR) in the Department of Political Science and International Relations. She combines her teaching activity with her work as a correspondent for Cadena Cope and collaborations with other media for North Africa and the Sahel based in Rabat. She is also a lecturer at the Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, and a scientific member of the CSG laboratory of the UIR and the Laboratory for the Analysis of Society and Power (LASPAD) in Senegal. She has carried out research since 2007 in the countries of North Africa, West Africa and the Sahel, in particular Mauritania, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger and Guinea focusing on geopolitics in Africa, critical security, conflicts, peacekeeping operations, terrorism, political violence, organized crime, borders and immigration.

Featured publications:
- Mesa, Beatriz (2023). Le Sahel, th tre des rivalit s maghr bines (Maroc, l'Alg rie et Libye), Akfar Ideas.
- Mesa, Beatriz (2022). Los grupos armados del Sahel. Conflicto y econom a criminal en el norte de Mali, La Catarata.
- Mesa, Beatriz (2020). L' volution de la violence au Sahel (2001-2020), une approche conomique, Revue Afrique(s) en mouvement, nº3.
- Mesa, Beatriz (2018). Natural resources at the center of geopolitics in Sahel, Journal of Social Science Benem rita Autonomous University of Puebla.

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- Beatriz Mesa, *Affiliated lecturer and researcher, University of Rabat*
- Anna Ayuso, *Senior Researcher, CIDOB.*
- Oriol Puig, *Sub-Saharan Africa Technician, Ministry for Foreign Action and European Union, Departamento de Acci n Exterior y Uni n Europea, Government of Catalonia.*
- Jose Luis Gonzalez Garcia, *Deputy Director General for bilateral relations with Sub-Saharan African countries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation.*
- Moussa Bourekba, *Senior Researcher, CIDOB.*
- Helena Vicente, *Responsible for European Projects, Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation, Government of Catalonia.*
- Diego Muro, *Full Professor, University of St. Andrews.*
- Gabriel Garroum, *Post-doc Researcher, IBEI*
- Andrea Noferini, *Educational Director and Professor, CEI International Affairs*
- Guillem Farr s, *Lecturer, Open University of Catalonia.*
- Lourdes Benavides, *Head of Programm West Africa, Oxfam Interm n.*
- Javier Renteria, *Organizer and predoc researcher, GLOBALCODES.*
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- Oscar Mateos, *Organizer and Principal Researcher,GLOBALCODES.*
- Andrea Daza, *Researcher and Associate Professor, GLOBALCODES.*
- Mercè Kirchner, Researcher and *Professor, GLOBALCODES.*
- Noemi Morell, *Cordinator, Casa de Mali.*
- Jorge Piñera, *Research Officer of the EuroMeSCo Project, IEMed.*
- Andrea Chamorro, *Researcher, Fundación Alternativas.*
- Gaetano Giancaspro*, Researcher, Bologna University*
- Núria Fernandez*, coordination and participation technician, Department of Development and Cooperation, Government of Catalonia.*

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