
AFRICANISTAN

IS THE SAHEL ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING ANOTHER AFGHANISTAN?

Serge Michailof

THE RECENT French intervention in Mali made obvious to the world the immense fragility of the entire Sahel zone—a sub-Saharan region covering some seven million square kilometers. This area includes 10 countries from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, but also the northern areas of some countries on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea.

The four land-locked countries of French-speaking Sahel—namely Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad—form a sub-group of still enormous proportions, covering an area of four million square kilometers, eight times the size of France. This region is the central object of my analysis, with comparisons made to Afghanistan where appropriate.

EVERYONE SHOULD BE WORRIED

Figures tend to be stubborn. If the solution to the demography vs. job-creation conundrum is not found in the coming years, this will not only be a problem for the people of the Sahel region themselves, but for the whole of Europe as well. One of the problems we face looking forward is the fact that these issues are still not garnering enough interest across much of the Old Continent: the Sahel remains under the radar.

By casting a glance at the causes of the collapse of Mali in 2013, we gradually begin to understand that even stellar economic growth is not, in and of itself, sufficient to solve all the region's problems. In particular, such growth cannot provide jobs for the masses of young people entering the job market throughout the Sahel.

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The Sahel

Mali also makes it possible for us to develop an idea of the fragility inherent in those African states that are struggling to control the physical vastness of their respective territories. Furthermore, we can see why their institutions are so dysfunctional. The accumulation of these factors—fragility and associated risks—is not just a challenge for the elites of the French-speaking Sahel, but for all of West Africa: the whole region could become destabilized if the Sahel descends into chaos.

The reason is simple: the economic links between the coastal and landlocked countries, ethnic and tribal kinship, and great fluidity when it comes to

the circulation of people throughout the entire region tie everyone together. It is hard, therefore, to imagine a stable and prosperous West Africa while the Sahel remains in crisis.

Our own elites in France and the rest of Europe should also be involved in these issues. Let us just remind ourselves that France had to launch a military intervention in order to prevent Mali's total collapse and the possible kidnapping of some 6,000 French nationals. France is now even more militarily present in the Sahel theatre, surveying an area of several million square kilometers as part of Operation Barkhane.

Are the fires still smoldering under the embers in Mali? The atmosphere in Bamako in 2016 reminds me of what it was like in Kabul in 2003 after the fall of the Taliban. Back then, we heard people say things like: “the Americans did away with the Taliban. Now to business.” Similarities here are not benign at all. There is, of course, a distance of 12,000 kilometers between the two countries in question, as well as huge geographical and cultural differences between Afghanistan and Mali.

This might lead us to believe that we are dealing with two entirely different worlds, with nothing in common. However, if we only look at the list of huge challenges that the leaders of Mali—and of the Sahel more generally—have to face, I cannot help to underline how similar they are to those found in Afghanistan.

The Sahel might be far from Afghanistan, but there are unfortunately many similarities.

DEMOGRAPHIC DEAD END

The Sahel and Afghanistan are demographically in similar situations, with populations growing at an annual rate of 3.5 percent—i.e., the populations are projected to double every 20 years or so. The demographic transition has barely begun, and the expected inertia relative to all the parameters in this domain is a major source of concern.

The combined total population of the four principal countries in French-speaking Sahel has been estimated at 67 million inhabitants. In 2050, it could range between 170 and 210 million inhabitants. It might even get close to 260 million, if the birth rate remains the same as it is today. These are unsustainable figures, and we must strive to influence the future population explosion of the Sahel countries as much as possible.

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Regardless of the course that population growth could take in the more distant future, in the next 20 years we will witness the arrival of masses of young people to the region’s already sickly labor markets: these future job seekers have practically all been born by now.

This type of phenomena provides for a far better explanation of the success of the Taliban in Afghanistan than the popular jihadi stories. The argument is straightforward: young Afghans could make the following choices—either join the flow of the ever-growing mass of unemployed entering the country’s cities and survive doing odd jobs that pay next to nothing; or start working in opium production; or seek employment with a rebel or insurgent group paying its soldiers more than the regular army does.

STAGNATING AGRICULTURE AND RURAL ECONOMY

Besides existing technical and climatic difficulties, agriculture in the Sahel is generally in a state of neglect, necessitating massive effort and investments for it to be reinvigorated. Such investments—particularly in the domain of small-scale irrigation and the recovery and protection of degraded soil—are equally lacking in the Sahel and Afghanistan. With minimal differences due to local conditions, agriculture and animal husbandry in both regions have been made vulnerable by the environmental degradation that has resulted from the following chain of events:

population growth
 ↓
 deforestation
 ↓
 arable soil becoming less fertile
 ↓
 over-exploitation of grazing areas.

Climate changes will probably make the situation even worse in the Sahel.

Taken together, all of this can induce real Malthusian crises in the Sahel and Afghanistan alike.

LACK OF HOPE FOR YOUTH

In the Sahel, as in Afghanistan, agricultural stagnation goes hand-in-hand with meager employment opportu-

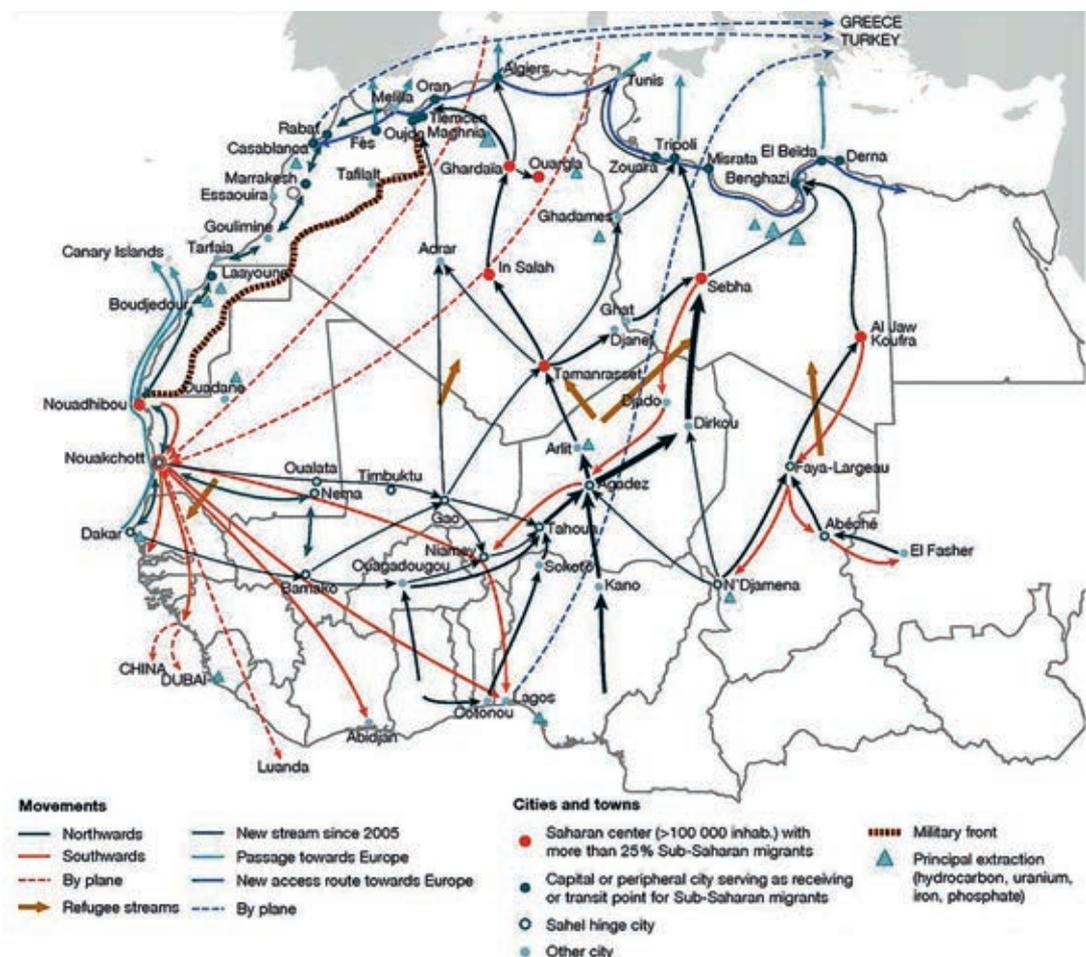
nities in service industries; no artisanal development due to the lack of electricity; no SMEs which could bring transformation to agriculture because of all the difficulties involved in moving from informal to formal structures; no industrial base; and no investment in industry in urban zones.

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Creating 400,000 new jobs every year for the young people entering Afghanistan's job market presents a significant

challenge to a country where industry is hardly worth mentioning and agricultural output is dependent on climatic vagaries. In the Sahel, circumstances are hardly better. In Niger alone there will be 570,000 young people entering the country's job market annually 20 years from now.

Youth unemployment is therefore not only a major problem in the Sahel right now; it will be even more so in the future. The drivers of healthy economic growth over the past 20 years have essentially been the mining industry, civil engineering, the service industry, and IT. It is obvious that these sectors can only provide employment for a fraction of the future young newcomers to the job market. Development prospects for the Sahel group of countries—be it through further integration within the framework of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), or through greater participa-



Migratory Movements

Map: OECD

tion in global industrial value chains (as is the case for Ethiopia)—still remain rather limited. The reasons include their landlocked positioning, a mediocre business environment, and inordinately high production costs.

Under such circumstances, youth unemployment is now, and will be even more in the future, a real social and political time bomb. Young people from

the Sahel cannot find employment matching their aspirations (which themselves grow with increased access to education and information), cannot integrate socially, and cannot get married for lack of funds. Under such circumstances, they will become tempted to engage in illicit activities—whether trading in arms or drugs—and ultimately become easy prey for recruitment by one of the rebel groups that have amassed considerable resources.

MASSIVE MIGRATIONS

Mass migrations are inevitable in the region, both within individual countries and as a whole, increasing demographic pressures on the more dynamic areas. This was the case in Ivory Coast, where such population movements produced considerable political consequences and led to the drama of the years 1990–2000. Migrations are taking place across a very fine ethnic patchwork in the region, thus increasing the risk of tensions and conflicts. Can Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Nigeria—already wrestling with so many problems—absorb these masses of immigrants without challenges?

ETHNIC, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS DIVIDES

In Afghanistan and the Sahel alike, all the old ethnic, political, and religious divides worsened with the disappearance of complex traditional systems of mediation and conflict resolution. In the Sahel, we encounter these phenomena along the dividing lines between white and black Africa, as well as between Christian and Muslim populations. This in a situation where borders have been artificially drawn, where the same ethnic groups exist on different sides of borders, where states are recent constructs, and where efforts invested in building nations with shared values have been very limited.

Northern Sahel is thus in its own way joining globalization—albeit only in the criminal sense.

The divides also got worse with the deterioration of the environment, increased pressure on natural resources, and the long decay of the structured economy. The end result has been the splitting of communities that once lived in relative peace. Easy access to small arms makes every conflict potentially more lethal. As we all know, the Kalashnikov is more or less a household item in Afghanistan. Virtually all cattle breeding groups in the Sahel are now armed, as depicted in the outstanding Franco-Mauritanian co-produced motion picture *Timbuktu* (2014).

There are also some other regional features that we cannot ignore. The gradual penetration of Wahhabi Islam is a source of worry for local leaders, who face the development of a radical form of their religion—one that is alien to local practice.

For more than 20 years, funds provided by foundations from the Gulf have made it possible to spread teachings and build mosques dedicated to the Wahhabi cause, which rings extreme to many. It is similar to the role played by the madrass in Pakistan in indoctrinating Afghan youth before their return to Afghanistan to join the ranks of Taliban insurgents. This is a topic that is well-covered in the famous book by Ahmed

Rashid entitled *Descent in Chaos: the United-States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (2008).

TRANSITION TO A TRAFFICKING ECONOMY

As in Afghanistan, the economy of the Sahel is increasingly based on the illicit trade and trafficking of mostly Latin American cocaine destined for the European market. With time, this trafficking was supplemented with the “hostage business,” both via the spectacular, if risky, hostage-taking of Europeans, as well as the holding for ransom of notable local individuals—a great specialty of Boko Haram. Northern Sahel is thus in its own way joining globalization—albeit only in the criminal sense.

WEAK OR NON-EXISTING STATES IN REMOTE AREAS

The spectacular comeback of the Taliban in Afghanistan is linked to a weak state apparatus—that is to say, to the fact that the authorities in Kabul have effectively abandoned vast areas of the country. This has enabled the emergence of lawless zones, where all types of trafficking activities have emerged. The gendarmerie and judicial authorities are understaffed, underpaid, and worryingly inefficient;

this makes them easily penetrable by well-organized human and drugs trafficking networks. In these areas, the lack of legal and physical safety is felt directly. The local population suffers either from the absence of the state or from its predatory face: the state

is there only to collect taxes, and its officials are corrupt.

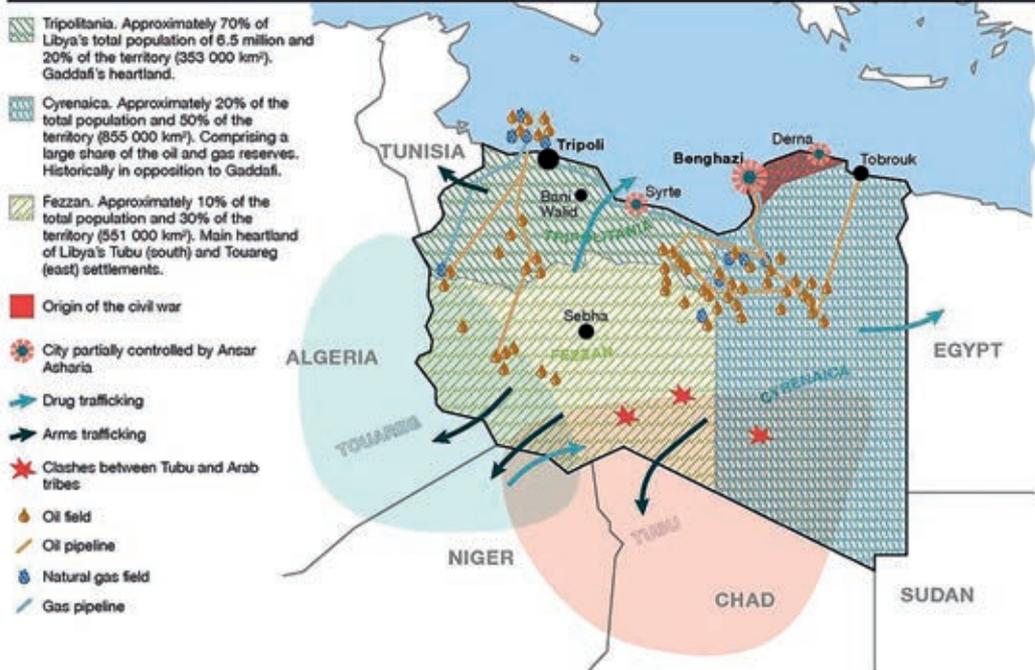
Similarities in this respect between Afghanistan and the Sahel—where the authorities

have mostly given up the up-country—are striking.

We all witnessed the collapse of the army of Mali in the face of a jihadist offensive and its repeated failures in the Kidal region. The Chadian army is well equipped and war seasoned, but the government’s budget is suffering from a massive drop in oil-derived income. The small armed forces of Niger are still ill-equipped but the command structure is good. Despite that, it is not capable of taking on the disparate threats emerging across the country. Niger gives particular cause for concern because the country is endangered from many sides.

The collapse of Libya is the greatest threat to Niger: the jihadists from Mali retreated there after France’s 2013 intervention. These jihadists are carrying

When can we expect to see the legitimate security spending of fragile states start becoming eligible for development aid?



Map: OECD

The risk of Libyan explosion

out raids in northern Niger, Mauritania, and Mali, and are building relations with the Libyan branch of the Islamic State. The country's northwestern frontier is endangered by the Mujao, which is based in the Malian region of Gao. There is a real gold rush in the northeast, transforming the region of Djado into a zone of lawlessness. And finally, Boko Haram represents a major treat to the entire southeast of the country. Under such circumstances, the few well-trained and well-equipped battalions of Niger's army are constantly transferred from one end of that immense country to the other, due to the onset of whatever is seen as the most acute emergency—with no time to rest and recover.

BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS

Maintaining armed forces is expensive, and each of these countries has the army its respective budgets can afford. Faced with security emergencies, officials in these countries are forced to reduce their economic and social development budgets to cover extraordinary military costs. The defense budget in Niger is already 4 percent of GDP, more than the amount spent on agriculture in the early years of the third millennium. Military spending has been increased two-and-a-half times since the year 2009, and is still not sufficient to respond to all external threats. Therefore, all countries in the region are faced

with budgetary constraints and are not able to confront security threats adequately without cutting down on the necessary spending for social and economic development.

The budgetary conundrum clearly illustrates the need for foreign funding the moment an economically underdeveloped country with no natural mineral or oil resources is faced with a major security threat. In order to fight such a threat, it is not sufficient to undertake expensive military operations, but rather it is also necessary to maintain infrastructure (roads, energy supply, administrative facilities, etc.) in vast and remote undeveloped and underpopulated areas. It is also necessary to recruit, train, and deploy human resources and an administrative infrastructure capable of ensuring the rule of law, security and good governance *in situ*.

The situation in the Sahel is certainly less dire than in Afghanistan. However, recent research by the World Bank concerning Niger shows that this country is unable to sustain the growth of security spending at the rate it has been forced to keep until now, with said spending in absolute terms remaining insufficient. It would be surprising to find that Mali—or even Chad—is in

a better situation, bearing in mind the recent drop in the price of oil.

DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY

The whole world is in agreement that development is not possible without security. But as long as the development aid criteria defined by the famous development committee of the OECD does not include security spending, international donors are choosing

to steer clear. When can we expect to see the legitimate security spending of fragile states start becoming eligible for development aid?

It is necessary for the international community to cover the security costs of the Sahel states. Let us remind ourselves that the stabilization of

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the entire region cannot depend solely on foreign military assets. Is it conceivable to occupy five million square kilometers, if we include Mauritania, with only the 3,500 personnel deployed as part of Operation Barkhane? Western forces in Afghanistan numbering 150,000 could not control a territory of 600,000 square kilometers, encountering the same difficulties faced by the 120,000 Soviet troops that only managed to control urban centers during Moscow's ten-year occupation that began in 1979.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that America's refusal to finance the Afghan army until the arrival of General David Petraeus, as well as Washington's lukewarm attempts to reform Afghanistan's police force—which enabled it to function as a mafia operation for far too long—have resulted in an armed force with weak operational capacity. The bottom line is that the war in Afghanistan is practically lost. To avoid a repeat of such serious mistakes, it is therefore urgent to consolidate and reform the entire state apparatus of the Sahel countries: the army, gendarmerie, territorial administration, and judiciary—to name just the essential sectors.

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As a first measure, the European Union or a group of international donors should urgently undertake the financing of the regional security costs in these countries. This is the only way to avoid jeopardizing essential development efforts—especially in the rural sector—covered by a deteriorating security situation. This financing should not to be limited, as it is now, to covering training costs and providing some assets. It is necessary to pay wages, reform the management of human resources, and equip all military units fully.

This enterprise is feasible from the financial point of view. It costs about

\$15 million per year to train, equip, and pay for a battalion in the Sahel. Let me just remind you that the eleventh European Development Fund for the period of 2014 to 2020 amounts to some €30 billion.

The reasons I advocate for this sort of financial engagement are threefold: (i) it is infinitely cheaper than a direct military intervention, which would otherwise soon become inevitable and lead us into a *cul-de-sac*; (ii) ensuring the security of this vast area is of regional and global benefit and thus justifies cost-sharing; and (iii) it is the only viable way to provide for the security of this region and avoid the “Afghanization” of the Sahel.

The hurdles are many: the inertia of the Brussels-based EU administration, which plans its activities and engagements in line with the best practices of the old Soviet Union from the Gosplan epoch. Complaints are also likely to come from lawyers and politicians saying that aid is not and should not be about financing defense. A counterargument is easy to provide here: if the budgetary lines accepted by the IMF incorporate the required security expenditures, donors by increasing their funding of development expenditures may finally end up funding these security expenditures indirectly.

Considering the stakes, the arguments against financing armed forces in the Sahel countries are all meager, at best. This is especially true if European heads of state and government become fully aware of the scope of the threat to Europe if a region of seven million square kilometers—which will have 150 million inhabitants 10 years from now—is allowed to slide into chaos and destabilize all of West Africa. In the Sahel, we are facing a possible Syrian scenario, magnified tenfold.

At present, when the Islamic State in Libya represents a real geopolitical threat, it is not possible for France and other European countries to continue with their aid policy in all these countries (and one should add Tunisia to that list) based only on good wishes and their public opinion impact. From now on, it has to be based on sound geopolitical analysis and a healthy appreciation of the direct interests of the countries concerned.

CAUSE TO DESPAIR?

Listing all the problems that the Sahel countries are facing should not drive us to despair. Instead, it should cause alarm bells to ring in all the countries of the region, throughout West Africa, France, and the rest of the European Union—for all are directly

affected. The issue here is the common interest of the Sahel countries and France, as well as the European Union. This is not a matter of charity.

If these problems are not well managed, they could impact heavily on the security of France and Europe, leading

to a flood of refugees of yet unseen proportions hitting much of the Old Continent, the Hexagon in particular.

The situation is serious enough in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan,

Libya, Afghanistan, and Central Africa. We do not need to add to that list five or six French-speaking countries from the Sahel. Their collapse would probably have a domino effect on coastal states like Nigeria and Ivory Coast. Much can be done in the immediate future to delay the negative consequences and start addressing the main issues.

Influencing demographic trends is certainly not easy, but it is possible. Strengthening the governing structures is equally difficult, yet also possible. Giving a new impetus to providing for farmer-oriented agriculture means that preventing further soil deterioration and desertification is also possible. Managing urban growth of 5 to 6 percent annually is doable.

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The prime responsibility for achieving all of this lies in the hands of the elites of these countries. Nonetheless, the scope of the challenges and problems is such that the chances of success remain slim without substantial support from abroad—and by this I mean financial, technical, political, and even at times, military.

We have learned from our experience over the past 30 years that the situation with international aid is far from ideal in post-conflict countries and those with badly structured administrations. Afghanistan, where it failed so blatantly, provides an unsettling argument against continuing the same inefficient

practices in the Sahel. We can learn from the Afghan experience that a poorly planned intervention and badly directed aid can easily become part of the problem instead of the solution.

A proper analysis of the failure not only of the aid effort but of the whole operation in Afghanistan is in order. It ended with a practically complete withdrawal in 2015—without achieving any of the strategic objectives aimed at restoring peace in the country. This analysis should help us define a more efficient strategy for the Sahel. It is a case definitely worth analyzing and rethinking—for the sake of the Sahel, no less than for our own sake. ●

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