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The United States recently revealed the names of three "Islamic State leaders" who planned and directed the ambush in Niger, which killed four U.S. Special Forces troops last October. The incident raised pointed questions about what the U.S. military is doing there. But it should also raise questions about the longer-term peace and stability of the region itself.

Plenty of internal factors cloud the region's future, which need to be addressed directly. But there is little evidence to connect the self-described Islamic State of the Greater Sahara, which claimed responsibility for the attack, with ISIS in the Middle East. It hardly needs a terrorist incursion from outside the region to explain why Niger and its neighbors are under threat.

People living at the heart of West Africa's Sahel region — Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad — belong to ancient, resilient cultures, but they face unprecedented challenges. Climatologists predict that climate change will make survival in an already hot places almost impossible.

The region has the most spectacular demographic growth in the whole of human history. In Niger women average seven children and the population will more than triple by 2050. This unparalleled growth not only overwhelms possible improvements in education and health, it puts the stability and future of the country at much higher risk.

The 9/11 Commission called “a large steadily increasing population of young men without any reasonable expectation of suitable or steady employment (are) a sure prescription for social turbulence.” This is doubly true of Francophone West Africa where nearly half the population is under 15. Francophone African Chad spend an even larger proportion of their GDP on defense than does the USA, but they are so poor and their territory so vast that they will be unable to prevent escalating attacks like the Niger ambush without external aid.

There are achievable ways of ameliorating the dire problems facing the region, but they require urgent, large-scale action, including slowing population growth. Two powerful levers on demography that also uphold human rights are girls' education and family planning.

After 10 years of patient work in a polygamous Hausa society in northern Nigeria, the Centre for Girl-Child Education, colleagues of ours who conduct operations research in partnership with the University of California, Berkeley, developed an approach that raised girls' secondary school enrollment from 4 to 82 percent, according to the organization. The same rural communities saw girls' mean age of marriage rise from 14.9 to 17.5 – a small jump in years, but a major leap in adolescent maturation.

Girls with some secondary school education tend to start families later and access contraception, resulting in smaller families. While there is widespread desire for large families in parts of Africa, there is also an unmet need for family planning: the number of women who want to avoid a pregnancy, but who are not using a modern method of contraception, is still much too high.

In Burkina Faso, for example, abortion is heavily restricted, making it unsafe. Each year, more than 100,000 women there are sufficiently desperate that they risk their lives to end their pregnancy. Family planning worthy of the name should serve their needs. It consists of giving women what they need and want, not telling them what to do.

Today's sad migration across the Mediterranean (with more than 3,000 drownings last year), may look like a trickle compared to the vast wave of migrants that could be coming from Africa in a few decades' time. Embedded in such migration will be extremists.

Humanitarian institutions and the security community will need to work together in new ways to prevent a predictable crisis.

Already, the annual cost of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali is about one billion dollars and the price tag for France's Operation Barkhane is nearly as high. But the costs of Sahel countries becoming failed states, which is likely in a business-as-usual scenario, would be incalculably higher. Compared with the cost of putting boots on the ground, the cost of "upstream" solutions like family planning and girls' education is small.

For better or worse, the future of the Sahel depends in part on external aid. The international community can and should offer family planning aid to these governments. Many of them already have ambitious targets for contraception because they understand the demographic imperative of doing so for development. International family planning assistance has catalyzed smaller families through improved access to voluntary family planning in South Korea, Thailand, Mexico, Brazil and many other countries. The Trump administration, however, is hostile to international family planning assistance. Its proposed budget for next year calls for a 50 percent cut in funding.

When the Taliban fell in Afghanistan in 2001 there was a brief window of opportunity when much could have been done to slow population growth, raise the status of women, and trigger genuine development. Now it may be too late. In the Sahel, a business-as-usual scenario would create conditions for a humanitarian disaster across the whole of the region to take shape by mid-century.

We're learning more about how American troops died in Niger, but we should be asking a more fundamental question: How can we address what's causing the ills of Niger and the Sahel directly so more U.S. troops don't die there? What "upstream," preventive measures can be taken now to slow population growth, uphold women's rights and promote peace in the region in decades to come? Finding the answers and acting on them is in the best interest of people in the Sahel region, the United States and around the world.

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