Conflict Factsheet

Climate change and violent extremism in the Western Sahel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of conflict</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Main</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Locality</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Western Africa</td>
<td>2012 – ongoing</td>
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<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Nigeria, Niger, Chad</td>
<td>Agricultural / Pastoral Land</td>
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</tbody>
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Conflict Summary

Prominent extremist organisations, including Boko Haram, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State affiliated groups, have flourished in the last decade in the West African Sahel, with severe consequences for local communities and political stability in the region. Evidence suggests a combination of historical, social, and political factors are driving these conflicts, while there are indications the situation could be exacerbated by more frequent and severe extreme weather events such as floods and extended dry periods.
Conceptual Model

Climate Change
- More Frequent / Intense Extreme Weather Events

Environmental Change
- Increased Land Scarcity
- Land Use Change
- Livelihood Insecurity

Intermediary Mechanisms
- Reduced State Capacity and/or Legitimacy
- Anti-State Grievances

Fragility and Conflict Risks
- Weakened State
- Crime / Violence / Extremism

Social and Economic Drivers
- Economic Development
- Land Use Change

Context Factors

Low Level of Economic Development
- Political Marginalization
- Unresponsive Government

Eroded Social Contract
- History of Conflict
- Proliferation of Weapons

Agricultural / Pastoral Land
Conflict History

Prominent jihadist organisations, including Boko Haram, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State affiliated groups, have clashed with government forces in the last decade in the West African Sahel, leading to widespread suffering and worsening political instability in the region (Warner, 2017; Cooke & Sanderson, 2016). Conflicts have primarily increased between state security forces and Jihadist insurgents. However, attacks on civilians committed by militias and jihadists have also increased. Insurgent groups have used various strategies to exploit local struggles and grievances over land access and claims of government corruption to gain popular support. Furthermore the military presence of France, Estonia, UN forces and the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) with support from the UK and Canada has been used to vindicate a need to confront invasion, "re-colonisation" and exploitative government elites through jihad (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2018). After the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi, many groups gained fighters and weapons from disbanded units of the Libyan army (see Mali case).

Aggression between the governments and the insurgents led to a greater polarisation between communities as local disputes are interwoven in broader ideological and regional struggles. This is highlighted by increasing violence in most countries of the Western Sahel (UCDP, 2019) culminating with the killing of 160 Fulani Muslims in Ogossagou, Mali on the 23rd of March 2019 (Hoije, 2019). Fulani pastoralist communities are increasingly targeted by "self-defence" militias known as Dozo for alleged links to the jihadists. These groups primarily made up of the sedentary farming Dogon and Bambara communities have been blamed for extreme violence against the nomadic Fulani.

Attacks have severe consequences for local communities and political stability. Reported fatalities have increased consistently over the past three years (ACSFSS, 2019) while it is estimated 2.3 million are currently displaced in the region by a combination of factors related to violent conflict and environmental pressures (UN, 2018). Moreover, the spread of extreme violence interferes with the provision of services, such as education and health, thus aggravating socio-economic disparities between violence-affected and other regions (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016). In northern Mali for example, schools have remained inactive in some areas since attacks began to intensify in 2012 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018).

Vulnerability, marginalisation, and violent extremism

Communities in the periphery of Sahelian countries face a multitude of intertwined challenges to peace and development, leaving them often in a situation of acute vulnerability and insecurity. In northern Mali, for instance, school attendance and malnutrition rank well below the country’s average (Bakrania, 2013). Similar situations can be observed in Chad and Niger (IASC & European Commission, 2019).

Furthermore, the Western Sahel has suffered from recurring conflict, including separatist rebellions and violent clashes between communal groups, which interact with clashes between jihadists and state security forces (e.g. see case studies on insurgencies in Mali and Niger or farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel), as well as from the consequences of wars in North Africa (e.g. in Libya)(Larémont, 2013; Jalali, 2013). Those have not only caused widespread suffering but also significantly slowed socioeconomic development; partly also because state interventions in peripheral areas have often privileged short-term...
security aspects over long-term investments in infrastructure, health, and education (de Melo, 2016; Cooke & Sanderson, 2016).

Meanwhile, government neglect insecurity, and poor economic prospects can be considered driving forces of the ascendance of violence in the region. Evidence suggests people lacking economic opportunities and access to essential resources are likely to be sympathetic to armed groups who offer an income or promise more control over land (Nett & Rüttinger, 2016; King, 2014). Moreover, news reports in Mali claim that jihadist groups successfully find new recruits and followers by simply providing food (Arsenault, 2015), while militias were often encouraged by the army to tackle extremism themselves. Local communities have accused security forces of offering no protection from extreme violence (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Meanwhile, armed opposition groups have garnered support by giving out humanitarian aid, outbidding other employment options in monetary terms, or offering micro-credit and similar services (Welsh, 2012; Rowling, 2018; Boffey, 2018; CSIS, 2016: 06m00s).

Groups such as Boko Haram and AQIM are also gaining ground by addressing local conflicts over access to water and land, where trust in the official legal system and the ability of the state to address such conflicts has been eroded (McGregor, 2017; Walch, 2017; Benjaminsen, 2008). In particular, pastoralist communities, who have often seen their grazing rights curtailed by large scale acquisitions, especially in Mali and Nigeria – as well as a general bias against pastoralism in national development policies - have become more inclined to the application of Sharia law in unresolved disputes (Walch, 2017; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019).

**The aggravating role of climate change**

Climate change could be compounding the above issues. As Walch (2017) explains, marginalised communities in the Western Sahel "have been left to manage the devastating impacts of climate change on their traditional livelihoods on their own [...]". This has created fertile ground for recruitment by Jihadist groups".

There is some uncertainty as to whether the Sahel is becoming wetter or drier but some have noted that both wet and dry spells are becoming more severe (Sylla et al 2016), increasing the likelihood of extreme weather events (Whiting, 2017; United Nations University, 2011).

Further east some climate models project an increase in average rainfall in the Sahel (Leverman & Schewe, 2017). This additional rainfall and the potential for large scale commercial agriculture could in turn disrupt the livelihoods of smallholders and pastoralists, making them more vulnerable to both, climate change and indoctrination by extremist groups.

[Last updated 2019-03-25]

**Resolution Efforts**

As a reaction to increasing extremist violence, international and regional actors have intensified their efforts to curb terrorism.

**Military interventions and assistance**
France's military mission Operation Barkhane, efforts by the United Nations (UN) through the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the establishment of the anti-trafficking and anti-terrorist G5 Sahel joint force have put military pressure on extremist organisations in the Western Sahel (Cooke & Toucas, 2017; Cooke & Sanderson, 2016). Often efforts are interlinked, as in the example of the troops of the G5 Sahel: The force receives financing from many Western countries, such as $60 Million by the US, and is strongly supported by France’s Operation Barkhane (Cooke & Toucas, 2017; Permanent Mission of France, 2017).

Many Western actors, including the EU focus on training and building military capacity in Sahel states instead of more extensive interventions: e.g. EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) or EU Capacity-Building Mission (EUCAP) (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016). The US has further been present with an important drone programme, which has become the target of criticism, however, after an investigation into the killing of four soldiers in Niger shed light on the extent of the programme and its operational practice (Callimachi et al., 2018; Cooke & Toucas, 2017).

So far the results of the G5 Sahel joint force are mixed (Lebovich, 2018). While funding is relatively secure and operations are focused on relevant border regions, coordination on the battlefield remains an obstacle as well as the distribution of funds and the appropriate level of force (ibid.). Moreover, concerns have been raised that further deployment of yet another military mission could contribute to a security traffic jam (International Crisis Group, 2017a). It remains to be seen how effective the joint force turns out to be in the long run as it only launched its first operation in November 2017 (Cooke & Toucas, 2017).

Mali is a focal point in the Western Sahel. The country’s challenges are central to the stability of other states in the region (International Crisis Group, 2017b), and after a peace agreement in 2015 the situation remains fragile (see analysis of the situation in northern Mali). UN Peacekeepers in Mali have been frequently targeted by jihadist groups, making MINUSMA the deadliest ongoing peacekeeping mission (Sieff, 2017). This has led to a controversial discussion of the aims and means of MINUSMA, which is an ongoing process and arguably does not contribute to the mission’s effectiveness (ibid.).

From their bases in Mali, jihadist groups have launched attacks in Niger and Burkina Faso (ibid.). As a consequence, the threat of conflicts moving into Burkina Faso has grown in recent years due to increasing military presence, and terrorist targets (Weiss, 2017). Taken together, it can be said that despite combined efforts, military solutions have not yet significantly contributed to reducing terrorist violence in the Western Sahel. On the contrary, there are even fears that an overly militarised approach has repressed necessary reforms in other areas (Lebovich, 2018). However, in absence of solutions to the persistent governance problems in the region, no long lasting peace seems plausible at this point (ibid.; International Crisis Group, 2017b).

Non-military responses to violence and extremism

There are different initiatives employed in the Sahel that aim to strengthen state capacities to counter extremism and terrorism from a non-military angle. Part of the US’s Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership consists of strengthening good governance and the rule of law. In Nigeria disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) measures have allegedly led to the surrender of more than 1,400 former Boko Haram fighters (Anyadike, 2017b). Niger also launched a deradicalisation and reintegration
programme in 2016. Yet, DDR efforts are sometimes complicated by retaliations on former fighters when they return to their communities (Anyadike, 2017b).

In recent years, the idea of negotiating with extremist groups has gained prominence (Hasseye, 2018). Proponents claim that a peace deal, similar to the one with Tuareg rebels in Mali, is feasible (see analysis of the situation in northern Mali). However, opponents of such an approach argue that extremists group are not willing to engage in any forms of negotiations and that even if they would, their positions are too extreme to engage with in the first place (ibid.).

**Climate change adaptation**

Besides immediate solutions to violence and extremism, various stakeholders in the Sahel – ranging from governments to local communities to NGOs, donor organisations and international organisations such as the African Development Bank, the World Bank, and United Nations Environment Program – collaborate on counteracting the impacts of climate change (Epule, et al, 2017). This could reduce the burden on regional governments and local communities, and hence help address the root causes of the region’s development and security challenges.

Among the measures taken in the region, income diversification was most common, followed by water harnessing and soil conservation (ibid.). Moreover, the amount of adaptation programmes has increased in the last two decades (ibid.). All Least Developed Countries in the Sahel completed their National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) between 2004 and 2010, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The programmes help to outline the most urgent needs in relation to climate change adaptation (UNFCCC, n.d.). Some of them include measures to manage migration and tackle conflict issues. For example, Burkina Faso’s NAPA entails a proposal for a regional mechanism that secures pastoral zones and prevents farmer and herder conflicts over land (UNEP, 2011). The country also started an early warning and prevention system to improve water and food security with the implementation of its NAPA (ibid.).

**Developing solar energy**

In addition, much hope is put into the instalment of off-grid solar options. In West Africa around 60% of the population do not have access to electricity. This is even more pronounced in rural areas, where 90% of energy needs are met by burning wood (SIPA, 2018). It is envisioned that developing solar energy might simultaneously champion climate change adaptation, climate change mitigation and economic development (Rowling, 2018). It is argued that solar powered applications, such as easy irrigation systems, could help farmers to adapt to a changing climate while also making sure to not contributing to further global warming (ibid.). This would in turn lead to improved living standards, as access to electricity is generally seen as a necessary source for economic development (ibid.; O’Keeffe, 2016; The World Bank, 2017). Improving off-grid energy access is increasingly seen as a security as well as a development priority. It is argued to keep children in school, to support the needs of rural populations and to create jobs where much of the most lucrative employment is with jihadist groups and illicit trade (SIPA, 2018 39:24).

**A ‘Great Green Wall’**

One project that received prominent reporting is the ‘Great Green Wall’, started by the Community of Sahel-Saharan States. It originally aimed at establishing a belt of trees stretching from Western to Eastern Africa to reverse desertification. However, in the course of the project the focus has shifted to a harmonised regional strategy for integrated natural resource management (ibid.; Laestadius, 2017).
So far the ‘Great Green Wall’ has severely lagged behind to sufficiently vitalise the area within the timeframe of the African Union’s 2063 agenda – and is going to be unable to meet its goals within the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development timeframe (Laestadius, 2017; UN, 2016). There are also concerns, the Great Green Wall could disrupt local livelihoods and thus add to existing anti-state grievances (Benjaminsen & Hierneaux, 2019). This suggests a greater need for information on the effects of both environmental change and environmental/development policies on local livelihoods and specifically a better understanding of pastoralist concerns (Johnsen et al, 2019).

However, the above reforms are overshadowed by other political priorities and have been slow overall (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016). A big push towards more effective climate change adaption and deeper institutional reforms would greatly benefit from an increase in development assistance (de Melo, 2016). Ultimately, a solution to the terrorist challenge in the Sahel, including its environmental dimension, will require the coordination and integration of strategies across sectors (peacebuilding, institutional reform, resource management, and climate change adaptation among others).

[Last updated 2019-03-25]
### Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peacekeeping</th>
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<tr>
<td>MINUSMA has deployed troops to support the G5 Sahel and French government forces. Military solutions have not yet significantly contributed to reducing terrorist violence in the Western Sahel. There are even fears that an overly militarised approach has hampered necessary reforms in other areas.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Disarmament, demobilisation &amp; reintegration</th>
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<td>In Nigeria disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) measures have allegedly led to the surrender of more than 1,400 former Boko Haram fighters. Yet, DDR efforts are sometimes complicated by retaliations on former fighters when they return to their communities.</td>
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<th>Improving state capacity &amp; legitimacy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Applicable, but not employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>More information is needed on the effects of both environmental change and environmental/development policies on local livelihoods, as is a better understanding of the concerns of vulnerable communities.</td>
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<th>Coping with uncertainty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Besides immediate solutions to violence and extremism, various stakeholders in the Sahel work on counteracting the impacts of climate change, which would reduce the burden on regional governments and local communities and help address the root causes of the region’s development and security challenges. Among the measures taken in the region, income diversification was most common, followed by water harnessing and soil conservation. All Least Developed Countries in the Sahel completed their National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) between 2004 and 2010. The programmes help to outline the most urgent needs in relation to climate change adaptation. Some of them include measures to manage migration and tackle conflict issues.</td>
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Resources and Materials

References with URL


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Further information