



West African Challenges

Vulnerabilities and factors of insecurity in the Sahel

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> “Sahel nostrum” - towards concerted action

by Mr. Mehdi TAJE

Geopolitical analyst, Researcher in African studies at Irsem (Paris Military Academy)

The opinions and interpretations expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the OECD or the SWAC Secretariat.

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To contemplate discussing the strategic challenges in the Mediterranean at the present time without taking account of the geopolitics of the Sahel is simply unthinkable. The Sahel occupies a key location mid-way between the Mediterranean world and sub-Saharan Africa. A buffer zone but above all an area of contact and trade which cannot easily be controlled, the Sahel arc is fast becoming an endemic source of conflict over which the various actors have little control. There are a multitude of destabilising factors: the fragility of States in the region, internal power struggles, growing militarisation, rapid population growth, a general climate of insecurity which fuels trafficking of all kinds, and lastly various foreign interventions aimed at gaining a toe-hold in this strategic corridor and taking control of its wealth.

However, the blanket media coverage of insecurity reflected in the series of kidnapping of Westerners and burgeoning growth in drug trafficking needs to be examined, according to Mehdi Taje, “cautiously and against the background of foreign powers’ strategies”. To be more precise, the importance and actual impact of Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) need to be relativised in that, despite its pillorying by the media, the activities of AQIM may well be no more than overstated terrorism which masks the real issues at stake. “Whether the actors concerned go by the name of AQIM or that of another organisation, they are primarily seeking to profit from the chaotic conditions in the Sahel.”

Accordingly, the demonization of the security situation in the Sahel, as a kind of “new Pakistani-type tribal area” from which serious threats might emerge, is neither disinterested nor without ulterior motives. There has undoubtedly been a new upsurge in political and perhaps fundamental Islamism which needs to be analysed in the light of the historical context.

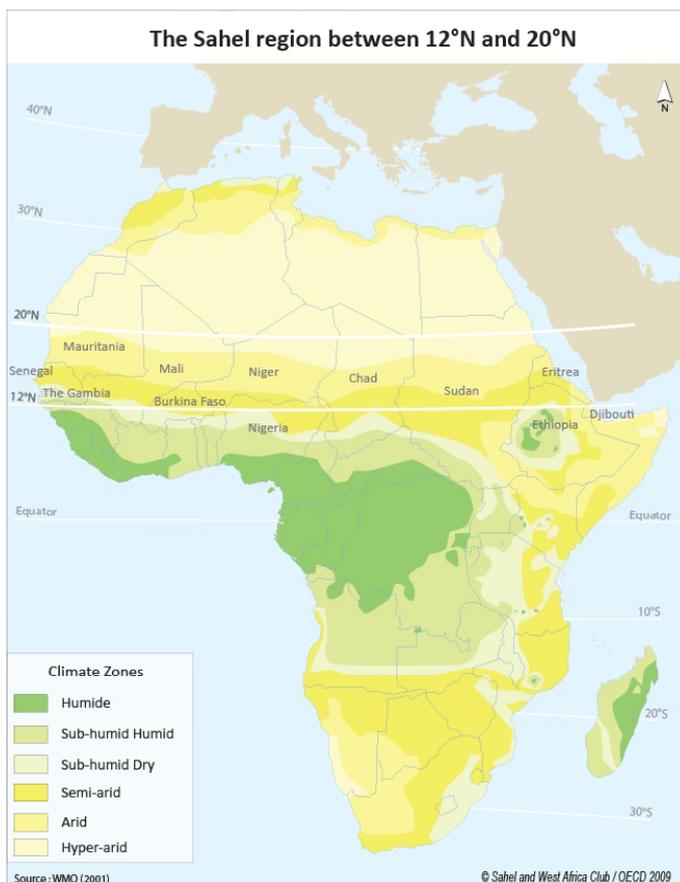
In this highly uncertain situation, the scale of the threat and benefits of good neighbourly relations call for close collaboration between the various actors in the region. The author pleads for regional co-operation and develops the idea of a “Sahel nostrum”, since above and beyond national concerns, only concerted action is capable of breaking the cycle of violence and thereby preventing insecurity from taking root.

The Sahel – a grey area not easily controlled

The Sahara is often perceived as the watershed between two distinct geopolitical arenas: North Africa or “white” Africa, and black Africa. In medieval Arabic texts, the Sahel referred to the area between the Maghreb and the “bilad as sudan”, the country of the blacks. The boundary between two tectonic plates, each with its own distinctive and characteristics acquired over a long period of time, the Sahel lies at the crossroads of two warring geopolitical camps. As the border between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel ensures the transition from Mediterranean North Africa to sub-Saharan black Africa.

Europe and at a more global level Eurasia and Africa, with the Mediterranean as the connecting link, are continents joined together through co-ordinated developments that are intrinsic in their history and geography and that are characterised by strong interdependencies and closely entwined destinies. There are strong causal links between the two regions. This irrefutable fact is amplified by the impact of globalisation and the ensuing creation of unregulated areas.

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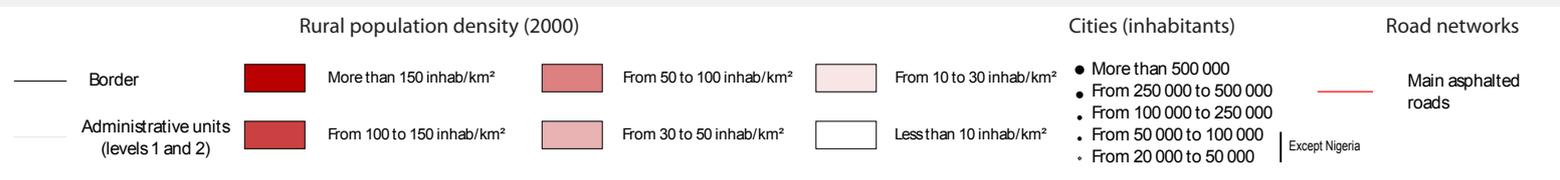
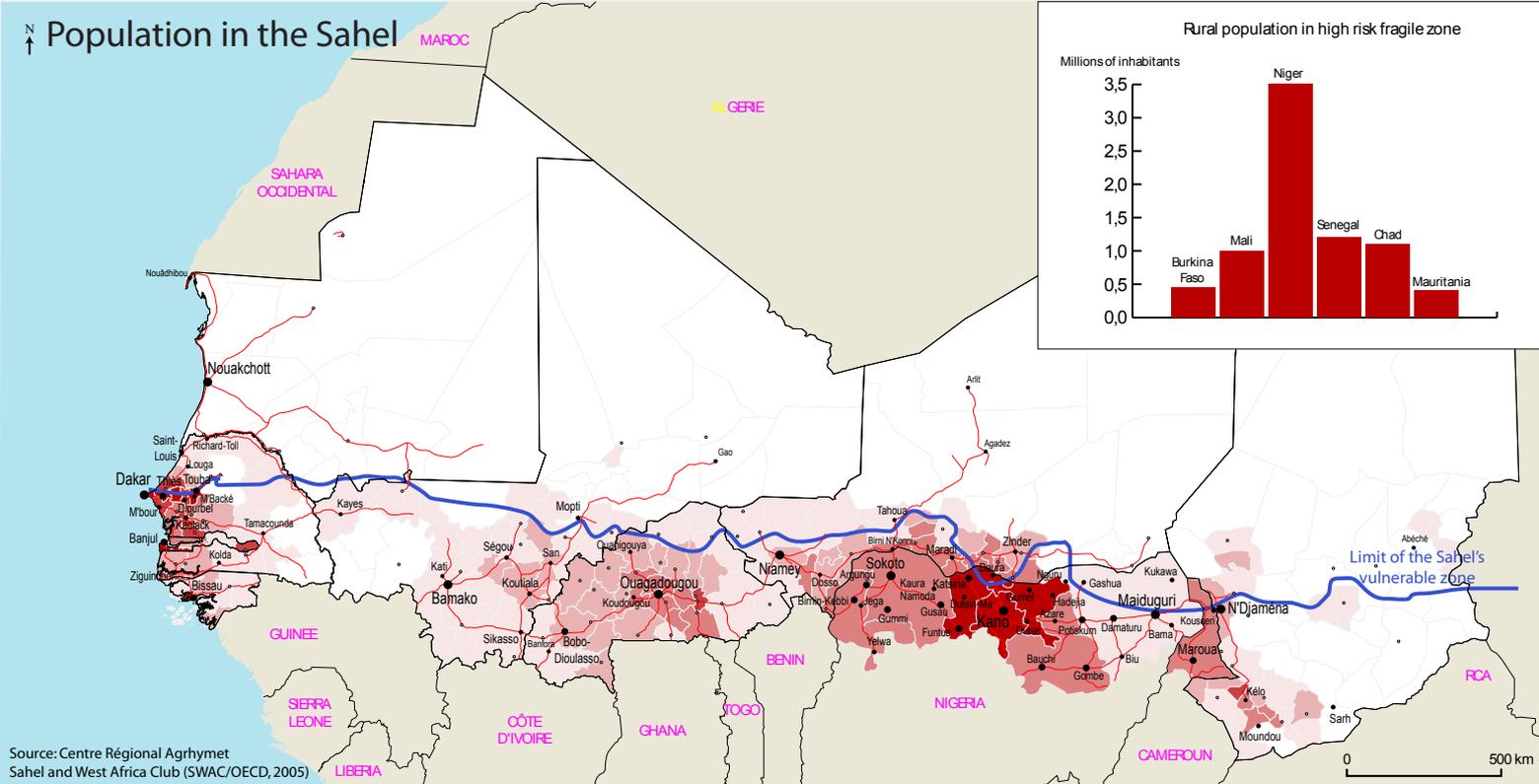
The challenges facing the Euro-Mediterranean area, whether in terms of strategy, energy, agriculture, the environment, migration, etc., do not end at the Algerian border but extend both naturally and historically into Mali and Niger, that is to say all along the Sahel arc. There is deep-rooted interaction between the Sahelian arena and the Euro-Mediterranean area, which already poses the geopolitical problem of the rightful place of the Maghreb.

While the Sahelian arena is still that of a traditional trade route, a route for migratory flows between Africa and Europe, it also remains a grey area which escapes the regular control of neighbouring States.

When referring to the ancient Sahelian empires, medieval Arabic texts already drew a conceptual distinction between the “bilad es Sibâ” (rebellious countries) and the “bilad es Silm” (peaceful countries). Between these two extremes, there was always an area of political uncertainty. In this respect, historically, the Sahel has always been a grey area, that is to say a jigsaw of indistinct strips of land oscillating, depending upon relative positions of strength, between different stable and sedentary political centres. At present, through the creation of States brought into existence by colonisation, the imperative for borders undermines or neutralises the traditional ways in which power was exercised over these key spaces and for neighbouring peoples translates into claims over rights or way or usufruct, all of which are potential sources of conflict. This situation offers a fertile breeding ground for the penetration and development of criminal groups. More specifically, the Sahel is vulnerable by virtue of its Saharan geopolitics, which eases the erosion of borders and the mobility of individuals. The “Sahelian Sea”, mirror of the Mediterranean Sea, is an under-administered and under-defended area.

“A buffer zone but above all an area of contact and trade which cannot easily be controlled, the Sahel arc is fast becoming an endemic source of conflict over which the various actors have little control.”

The reality of the Sahel is complex and the result of interaction between new factors which lend structure to the region and the vestiges of a difficult past which still make themselves felt today. In one respect, the Sahelian stage is a microcosm of the forces shaping the African continent.



Map: "The ecologically vulnerable zone of Sahelian countries", chapter in the Regional Atlas of West Africa, Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD), April 2006.

Destabilising factors

The factors of instability and crisis in the region are interlinked in an extremely complex mix of rationales and configurations.

Political failure of States

The post-colonial States remain incapable of fully imposing their authority on all parts of their territory. In the opinion of many experts, the Sahel is an under-administered area suffering from chronically poor governance which is mortgaging its future. The vulnerability of the Sahel is the outcome of the deep-seated vulnerability of States. The inability of States to exercise their sovereign powers over the full extent of their territory is the main reason behind the increased risk of destabilisation and armed conflict. A fragile State is a potential target for the forces of anarchy.

Internal power struggles

Along the entire length of the Sahel arc, the internal geopolitics of States appears to follow a model in which a centre with political power and control over the country's wealth is opposed by marginalised peripheral areas seeking to overturn a status quo that in many cases is the outcome of colonial rule which has reversed traditional positions of strength. These internal power struggles undermine political stability, which can lead to repeated coups d'Etat.

Growing militarisation

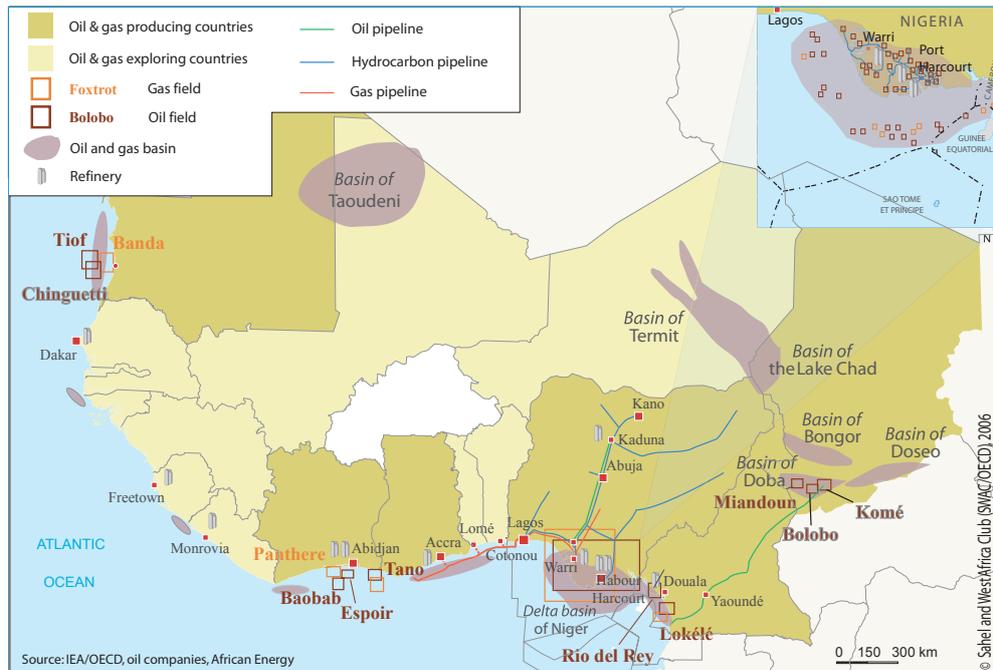
All the vectors of tension are aggravated by large inflows of money which raises hopes of immediate gains among organised armed groups; the Sahelian area is also experiencing growing militarisation, despite the ECOWAS Convention (June 2006) formally banning sales of small arms and light weapons.

Population pressure

The population of the Sahel, which is growing at an extremely fast pace, should double within the next 30 years and the region will probably have over 150 million inhabitants by 2040. This growth will undoubtedly affect human and, in particular food, security in the region. The Sahel is a region where the demographic transition started late: against such a background, unregulated population growth will have an adverse impact on fragile internal balances. This may generate a variety of risks such as increased numbers of climate refugees, as a result of global warming, moving into the towns, creation of native groupings, intra-State tensions, etc.

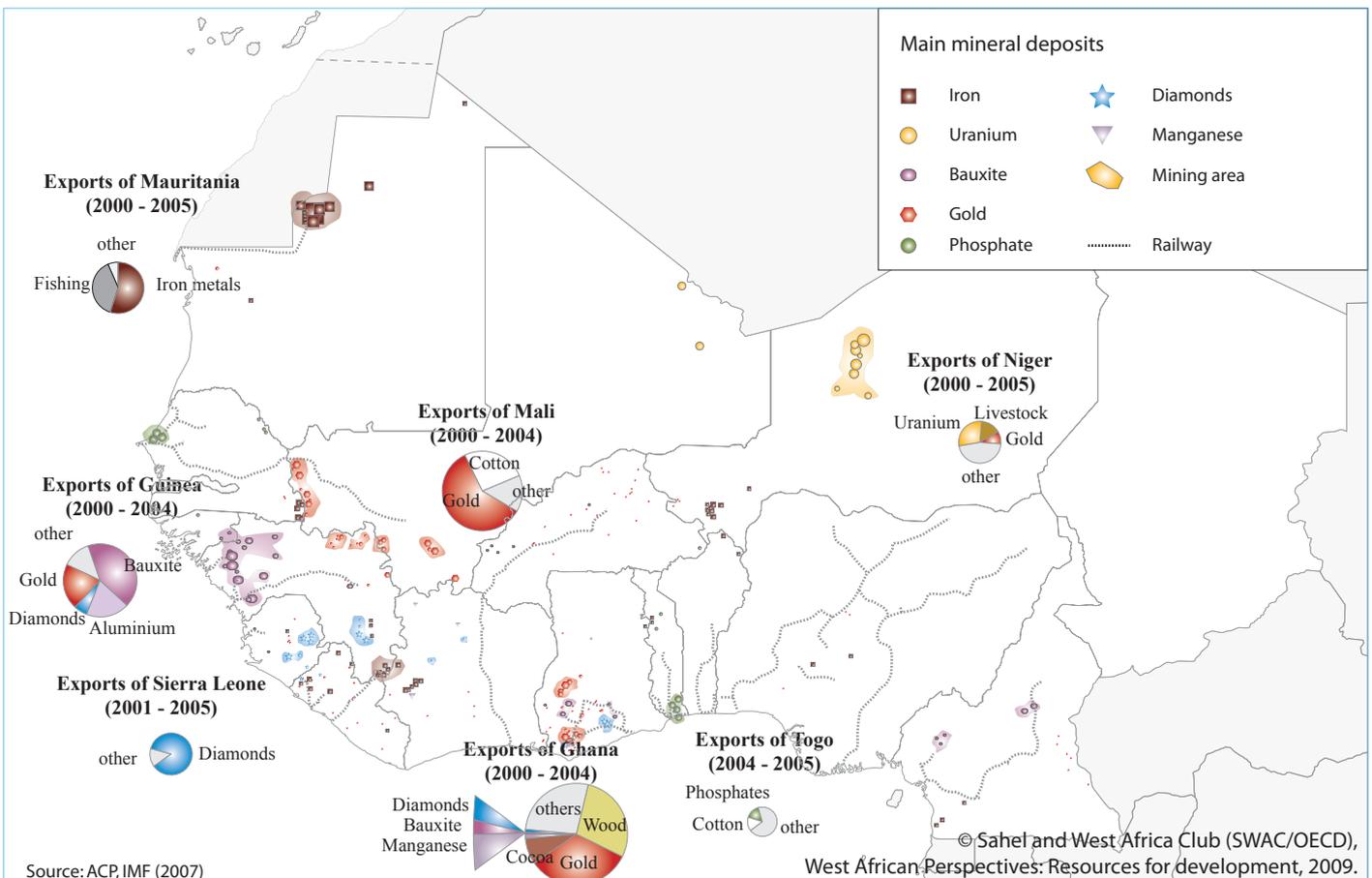
Competition for natural resources

The Sahel arc is rich in natural resources. Besides salt and gold, the region has rich deposits of oil and gas, iron, phosphates, copper, tin and uranium fuel which are attracting interest from powers who would like to gain control over them. The Sahel is therefore starting to emerge as an “energy hub” that is increasingly coveted by the major powers. The first signs of “pipeline geopolitics”, against a background of growing rivalries, are starting to emerge; and the world’s major players are gradually securing access to these previously inaccessible riches, through Sudan for consumers in Asia, through the Gulf of Guinea for consumers in America, and through the Sahara and the Maghreb for consumers in continental Europe. Against this background, strategies aimed at securing positions of power, taking control, surrounding other forces and avoiding being surrounded oneself are helping to define the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges in the Sahel area.



Climate of insecurity

Rising numbers of kidnappings combined with various types of trafficking and the growing strength of Salafist proselytising is creating a climate of insecurity, destabilising the Sahelian States. These developments are upsetting the balances between traditional brotherhoods, the persistence of irredentist dynamics and the combination of these various elements in extremely complex ways.



Terrorist threat or a strategy pursued by foreign powers?

The blanket media coverage of insecurity reflected in the series of kidnapping of Westerners and the growing tide of drug trafficking needs to be analysed with caution and set against the context of the strategies pursued by foreign powers.

Without denying the reality of these kidnappings, the importance of AQIM, this “sub-product of Al-Qaeda” which only continues to exist in the mind of certain actors more interested in profiting from it than in fighting against it, and its actual impact need to be relativised. As Alain Chouet, former director of the Intelligence Department in the French Directorate for External Security (DGSE), points out: “Any violent protester in the Muslim world, whether he is a politician or an ordinary citizen, and regardless of his motives, will quickly realise that he will have to claim to be acting on behalf of Al-Qaeda if he wishes to be taken seriously, if he wishes to invest his action with a legitimacy that is recognised by others, and if he wants to draw international attention to his action.”

Excessive media coverage allows Al-Qaeda to become a “rallying point” and to “metamorphose”, adds Jean-Pierre Filiu, Professor at the School of Political Science in Paris, expert for Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Studies. There is a real Islamist political dispute which could degenerate into Islamist violence due to unresolved and pent-up political and economic frustrations (notion of “blocked societies”). However, this phenomenon may conceal all kinds of possible manipulation. “There is no reason to believe that Osama Bin Laden is enthroned at the top of a pyramidal organisation, pulling the strings on a regiment of puppets and personally overseeing every tiny little ambush, either in the Sahel or anywhere else for that matter.”¹

AQIM would therefore appear to be a case of the tree hiding the wood; exaggerated terrorism which casts a veil over the real challenges and threats.

“Whether the actors concerned go by the name of AQIM or that of another organisation, they are primarily seeking to profit from the chaotic conditions in the Sahel.”

¹ Vincent HUGÉUX, L’Afrique en face : dix clichés à l’épreuve des faits. Paris, Armand Colin, May 2010, page 54.

In some respects it is in the interest of foreign powers to demonise the security situation in the Sahel. Without denying the existence of a few elements claiming to act as Jihadist terrorists, the portrayal by Westerners of the Sahel as a sort of “new Pakistani-type tribal area” from which serious threats could emerge is neither disinterested nor without ulterior motives.

Three spheres of influence

Business

This type of fragility attracts a variety of actors who join forces with local actors in order to profit from the chaotic conditions: this is what can be described as the criminalisation of economic actors leading to financial criminality. This may well have a lasting impact on the balances between Sahelian societies and on the seizure of power by criminal actors living off illegal rents. In this way economic criminalisation often tips over into political criminalisation.

Energy hub

Large multinational companies, the “majors” and the cartels pursue their own strategic interests. They have the means to bribe and ensnare people, own a private army, and arm rebellions and dissident movements, etc. Their capacity for action is extremely large and significant. Furthermore, States are often their accomplices. As a result, the terrorist threat is blown up out of proportion and deliberately exaggerated, thereby allowing rival States to take control of the wealth and position themselves economically and militarily in this strategic corridor between the Atlantic ocean and the Red Sea. Such States weigh heavily on geopolitical and energy balances in the Maghreb and West Africa.

Local mafia networks

Local mafia networks often adopt Al-Qaeda-style rhetoric so that no-one realises exactly who they are. There are many forms of trafficking, ranging from weapons, vehicles, cigarettes, medicinal drugs, and there has been a meteoric increase in drug traffic (cocaine from the West and heroin from the East, which has transformed the Sahel belt into a veritable “narco-hub”), etc. Despite recent media exposure, these types of trafficking have existed for very many years. They are merely an additional destabilising factor in the Sahelian jigsaw.

A new upsurge in political Islam

The Sahel arena currently seems to be in the throes of a new upsurge in political, and perhaps even fundamentalist, Islam which may well weaken precarious balances and allow Islamist violence to develop.

Within the Sunni world, a spreading reform movement modelled on the Hanbalite, and in many cases the neo-Wahhabi, schools is currently denouncing the Malechite Sunni Islam of the traditional black Islamic brotherhoods. Against this background, all the major sources of radical Islam are progressively trying to position themselves within the Sahel countries, by drawing attention to their spiritual and historical legitimacy. Furthermore, these new forces, while transnational in nature, are led by the States sponsoring radical Islamism (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and Sudan) and they interact with native Islamic forces, and the brotherhoods, according to the specific traditions of each country. These forces are merely a contemporary manifestation of the battle which the Western powers have been waging with rival civilisations for centuries. Today, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar, etc., are trying to regain the economic and political positions they occupied before the advent of European colonisation, and thereby to reduce the influence of the Western powers.

Periodically, when orthodox Muslims considered that the Islam practised by Islamised populations was unsuitable, or even deviant (because it was tainted by the rites of animist origin which made Islam of the Sufi brotherhoods practised in these regions so original and distinctive), they would launch a jihad.

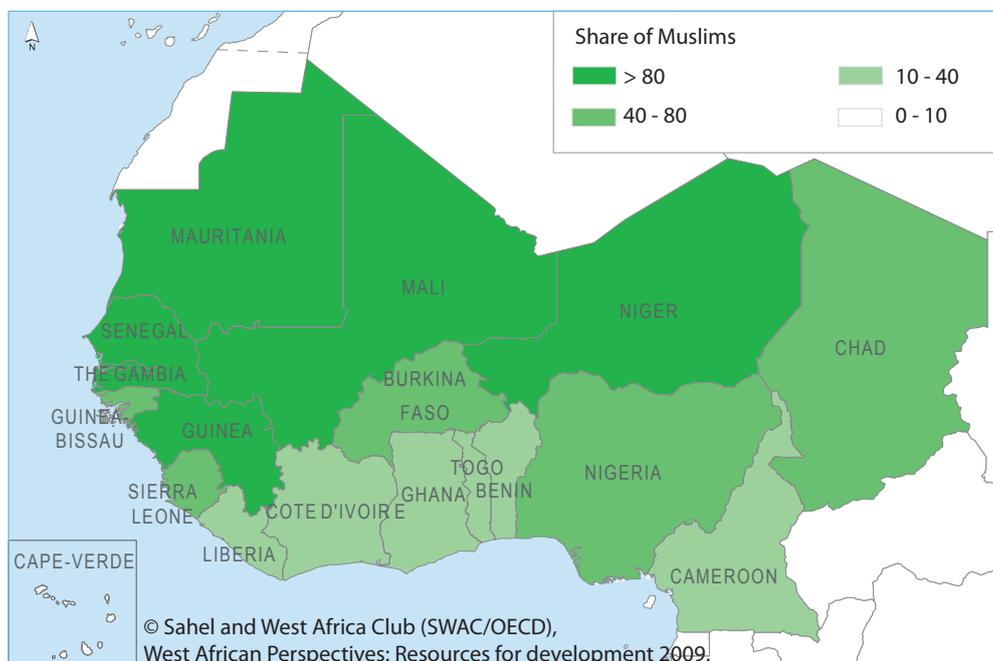
“In reality, such upsurges in radical Islam are a longstanding phenomenon which has marked the history of the Sahel down through the centuries.”

For example, “*The Almoravid movement (from Murabit or the men of Ribat), which originated in a meeting between a warlord, Yahya ibn Ibrahim, and a religious leader, Abdallah ibn Yasin, based on the Sanhaja Berber confederation, denounced the Islam, considered to be heretical, practised by the Berber tribes which had opened up the first trans-Saharan routes between the Maghreb and Sudan, and launched a jihad.*”¹ Accordingly, in 1054 the Almoravids seized possession of Aoudaghost, the main trading outpost of the Ghanaian empire. Under the pretext of a holy war, the Almoravids pursued other political and economic objectives; their aims was to take control first of the gold towns and routes, and then of the riches of the Ghanaian empire.

In view of the above, the resurgence of radical Islamism in the Sahel needs to be analysed with caution since it could be the outcome of a mix of diffuse, complex and unspoken factors (i.e. it might simply be the tip of the iceberg). More specifically, there are long-standing safeguards in place which have withstood the test of time in that African Islam secretes its own antidotes to extremism. “*It is hard to imagine, for example, the Caliphs of the Senegalese Muslim brotherhoods sending their faithful out to martyrdom. In March 2010, Muslim scholars created a moderate Islamic Forum in West Africa.*”²

1 Bernard NANTET, Dictionnaire de l'Afrique. Paris, Larousse Collection inextenso, 2008, page 18.

2 Vincent HUGEUX, idem, page.55.



“Sahel nostrum” – towards concerted action

Against this extremely uncertain background, the scale of the threat and a sense of good strategic neighbourhood call for close collaboration between the various actors in the region. To co-ordinate their information and their means of fighting, concerted action is essential in order to break the cycle of violence and avoid insecurity taking root. Exchanges of information and a common perception of the threats could make it possible to dispense with strategies which for the time being do not converge. On the contrary, they move in opposite direction or cancel each other out due to the pursuit of strategic interests.

The measures to combat terrorism that have been taken during the past six months underestimate the importance of these underlying factors and make it thus more difficult to develop a collective security response. The joint military base which was set up by four Sahelian countries (Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) in Tamanrasset on 21 April 2010 excludes three North African States. The isolated initiative, led by France and Mauritania, on 22 July 2010 against an AQMI

camp in Mali, or the Bamako meeting¹ on 6 and 7 August 2010 which brought together six Sub-Saharan States, without any participation of Maghreb countries, are just a few examples that illustrate the lack of co-ordination and trust which profoundly divides these neighbouring countries of the Sahel ocean. The common threat, however, calls for a systematic, concerted and inclusive action.

In terms of strategic reflection on the region's future, co-operation is essential for the security and development in the Sahel. Regional integration, and in particular the development of a common market, could help forge a “Sahel nostrum” (by analogy with the Romans’ “Mare nostrum”).

¹ The Bamako meeting brought together the heads of the security intelligence services of six African countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal) on the topic of “*Security in the Sahlo-Saharan area*”. It aimed at developing a co-ordinated response to combat AQMI.

For further reading

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- Papers on the Maghreb and Sahel: <http://www.realpolitik.tv/> et <http://www.realpolitik.tv/equipe/mehdi-taje/presse>

Useful links

- <http://sahel-intelligence.com>
- <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org>
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- <http://www.globalsecurity.org>
- <http://africacenter.org>