



## SAHEL-SAHARA DIALOGUE REPORT 5<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

# Between hybrid fragilities and competing international agendas in the Sahel: What prospects for the region?

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Peace and Security Competence  
Centre Sub-Saharan Africa  
Point E, Rue de Fatick x Blvd. de l'Est  
Residence Bity Lokho, 6<sup>th</sup> floor  
P.O. Box 15 416 Dakar-Fann, Senegal

Tel.: +221 33 859 20 02  
Fax: +221 33 864 49 31  
Email: [info@fes-pscc.org](mailto:info@fes-pscc.org)  
Website: [pscc.fes.de](http://pscc.fes.de)

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# Introduction

This report outlines the substance of discussions on the multidimensional crisis that has been unfolding in the Sahel region for just over a decade, held in the framework of a conference organised by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa (FES PSCC), in Dakar, Senegal, from 14 to 15 May 2024. Bringing together some thirty stakeholders in security, research, international organisations, and civil society in the region, the conference provided a forum for dialogue and debate on the causes of the advanced and ongoing deterioration of the regional situation, based on an in-depth examination of a combination of factors identified as sources of this deterioration. These factors include the growing social, economic, and climatic vulnerabilities giving rise to resource scarcity, the rising power of jihadist movements, the structural fragility of the national governments, and a surge in organised crime.

The conference also reconsidered these various factors – through a process of exploration and questions – in the light of the successive military coups that have taken place in the region, particularly in the Central Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) and Chad, as well as in the light of the strong, ever-growing and increasingly varied presence of competing external players, mainly motivated by their voracious appetites for the immense natural resources that abound in the region and by its central geographical location from which they could undoubtedly derive major strategic advantages in a number of respects.

The conference also analysed the approaches and methods used by Sahelian states to combat terrorism and violent extremism, which are growing in scale and magnitude, particularly in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger). The virtually non-existent, or at least very limited, successes

achieved to date by the governments of countries afflicted by these phenomena have not kept them from growing worse and spreading further across the region, with all the ensuing consequences, notably the deterioration of security and humanitarian conditions. Terrorism and violent extremism are even expanding and taking root in some West African coastal states, particularly Benin and Togo. In light of the foregoing, the quality of the human, material and technical resources deployed, as well as the roles played by political and technical partners and local players, were also examined at length.

Measures were also presented with a view to setting up a permanent framework for dialogue between countries in the Sahel and the Maghreb to improve collective security and share relevant and effective experiences in terms of resilience against insecurity.

Measures suggested by the participants to remedy gaps identified in the responses to the current situation also make up a significant part of this report.

The methodology adopted for the conference consisted of organising discussions by five (05) panels on different themes, which raised the following questions:

- How can a viable dynamic of intra-Sahelian security cooperation be set in place to respond effectively to security challenges and reverse the current trend with a view to ensuring lasting stability in the region?
- What lessons have been learned from the various experiences in the Sahel and how can they be consolidated and/or ameliorated to enhance their effectiveness?
- Can the new Alliance of Sahel States (AES) provide an alternative to ECOWAS? Is it a



viable mechanism and can it succeed where others have failed?

- Can the AES work in partnership with ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel? If so, how?
- How can a cooperative dynamic be established between non-state actors and defence and security forces in the context of military transition, to effectively respond to the region's security challenges?
- What are the minimum conditions for elections to promote lasting peace and mitigate risks of conflict in situations of political

transition and/or in countries emerging from conflict?

- Given all the ongoing developments in the Sahel, the experiences of the past decade and the lessons learned, what needs to be changed, improved or consolidated for a stable, secure and prosperous Sahel region in the long term?

Discussions on these various themes highlighted a number of ideas and allowed various avenues to be explored.

## I. The Sahel crisis: Overall situation

The Sahel crisis is unfolding in an international environment currently dominated by the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts, which are monopolising most of the international community's attention and resources. However, it would be wrong to dismiss it as a minor crisis, given its complexity and especially its multidimensional nature, encompassing multifaceted security, humanitarian, socio-economic, political, cultural and even religious aspects, as well as its geographical scope and its longevity – not to mention the many and varied players involved and solutions advocated for its resolution. It was repeatedly pointed out that numerous foreign influences run the risk of transforming the Sahel region into a battleground for exogenous powers – particularly the East and West – which could drag it into a proxy war reaching far beyond the regional context. These foreign influences, which are currently at work, make the Sahel region a testing ground for hegemonic and geostrategic rivalries.

The territories of the various component states of the Sahel form geographical continuities with strong ethnic ties. Weakened as the region is by both internal and external factors, terrorism and violent extremism, although on the wane in many parts of the world, are firmly rooted there. Several groups linked to international brands of terrorism, which have strong connections with each other and with organised crime, are scouring the region. Their actions bring about the destruction of thousands of human lives, as well as private and public property, with disastrous humanitarian consequences. They also undermine the democratic values for which the region was, until a few years ago, the continent's standard-bearer. In several Sahelian states, members of defence and security forces have breached the constitutional, and there has also been a marked decline in national unity, with the gradual tribalisation of the state apparatus becoming common practice. Traditional cooperation partners are being rejected in favour of

new ones, described as 'alternative partners', who often play a role in the supply of military equipment and the operational implementation of the anti-terrorist response.

While the Central Sahelian states of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – the soft underbelly of terrorism in the Sahel – share the characteristics listed above, their national contexts are not uniform. Security, socio-economic, political and humanitarian concerns differ from one country to another. For example, in terms of security, the reconfiguration of armed rebel groups and their increasingly flagrant links with terrorist groups, along with changes in their doctrines and areas of action, have created a specific context in Mali that differs greatly from those in neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. The same applies to the socio-economic, political and humanitarian situations.

Finally, for a better understanding of the crisis in the Sahel, it is useful to consider the region as a continuum of the Maghreb, since both regions share populations with their own traditions and ways of life, and also share similar challenges today.

The participants' joint assessment of the situation in the Sahel allowed them to identify a number of measures aimed at improving the overall situation. They included:

- Enhancing the visibility of the Sahelian crisis by informing and raising awareness of the dangers posed by its persistence and escalation, as well as its impact at local, regional and international levels.
- Gaining a grasp of the Sahel crisis in all its complexity, while taking account of specific national contexts and the close ties between the region and the Maghreb.
- Considering the interests of the communities and states of the Sahel and the Maghreb, as well as those of players from outside these regions.



- Reestablishing constitutional order and strengthening democratic institutions through the promotion and implementation of peaceful political processes.
- Establishing shared and decentralised governance.
- Creating and maintaining a symbiotic link between development, peace and democracy.
- Designing endogenous political models.
- Prioritising political solutions and supporting them with military operations.

## II. Dialogue and consensus-based crisis resolution

The solution to the prevailing crisis in the Sahel requires concertation between not only the Sahelian states but all African states to define the course to be taken and the tools to be implemented. To achieve lasting results, priority should be given to dialogue and consensus building through peaceful means.

Dialogue is particularly vital, given that tensions have been mounting between political players in the countries most affected by the crisis for some time. These tensions are reflected in a hardening of the rhetoric, radical stances that leave little scope for debate, intimidation and – in some cases – extra-judicial practices that undermine the necessary national cohesion in the face of a common danger.

Dialogue is urgently needed in the region, where a deterioration can be seen in relations between states, very often neighbours, which share the same challenges. Hawkish speeches and statements, and skirmishes on common borders, only exacerbate the situation and make the necessary dialogue more difficult.

Dialogue also needs to be opened up between central and local authorities and between communities, to enable each player at every level,

down to the grass roots, to play their part. Community leaders (religious, traditional, and others), women, youth and civil society organisations should not be left out of the process.

Finally, dialogue should be initiated with the parties involved in the violence, with the aim of finding a consensual, non-violent way out of the conflict. It was noted that a number of existing mechanisms and practices in the region could be used to that end.

The following measures emerged from the discussions:

- Using existing social mechanisms and practices to activate/reinforce dialogue at community and national level.
- Creating/reactivating bilateral and multilateral consultation frameworks to revive bilateral and multilateral consultations.

## III. Communication and crisis resolution

Discussions on this topic highlighted the importance of communication for a successful way out of the crisis. Firstly, it was noted that communication today is plagued by a persistent flaw: it is used as an instrument of sensationalism rather than as an analytical tool. It was also pointed out that misinformation plays an increasingly prominent role in the communication strategies deployed. The pre-eminence of images over words in these strategies, combined with the extreme popularisation of modern media, in which the internet and social networks feature prominently, make them effective tools that are skilfully used by terrorist and violent extremist groups to radicalise people and ultimately recruit followers. The fact that these groups are more adept than governments in their use of social media was also highlighted. A call was made for the adoption and implementation of sound communication strategies incorporating effective measures to

combat misinformation, capable not only of deconstructing the discourse propagated by terrorist and violent extremist groups, but also of developing and disseminating an alternative discourse, and focussing on the latest information and communication technologies, as well as the platforms most commonly used by young people as communication channels. These strategies could also be applied to awareness campaigns on the values of peace, living together, and civics and moral education.

#### IV. Democratic institutions, rule of law, minority rights and decentralisation

Democratic institutions and the rule of law are essential for putting in place a process that can lead to a way out of the crisis and stabilise the situation over the long term. Regrettably, the Sahel has clearly suffered a setback in this regard. Democracy remains unable to take root in the area because it is perceived as an imported paradigm that fails to recognise the region's specific socio-political context. In many of the countries affected by the crisis, the institutions and processes guaranteeing the democratic functioning of society have been dismantled. Military coups have taken place in all three central Sahelian states, the dates for elections to restore constitutional order remain unknown, and the scope for the expression of political and civic freedoms is shrinking by the day.

It was acknowledged that some of the region's states have solid democratic foundations. These countries remain resilient in the face of the contingent upheavals that regularly rock their national environments, while others are severely weakened by unhealthy or abusive practices that alienate their populations and are exploited by a wide range of players from inside and outside the region. Hence the importance of revising certain rules of political governance in the region.

The workshop also questioned the legitimacy of the actions of the transitional military regimes. The debatable legitimacy of the regimes themselves – often perceived as stemming from popular discontent due to governance issues in multiple areas and at multiple levels under the previous authorities – cannot justify the repeated foot-dragging that is extending transition periods indefinitely and surreptitiously changing their status from emergency governments to normal ones. The democratic health of the region could be improved by creating a relaxed climate with protagonists of the military transitions and helping them create the conditions for a return to constitutional order. To achieve this, a democratic restoration process should be implemented, leading to fair and transparent elections. Several participants felt it was important to point out that presidential and legislative elections should not be seen as a prerequisite for a return to democracy, but rather as the culmination of a reconciliation process. Reconciliation, not only between key political and social players, but also between and within communities, and with the sub-regional and international environments.

A widely shared concern regarding the growing ethnicisation of national politics was expressed several times in the course of the workshop. The practice is in itself a serious impediment to the emergence of a genuinely democratic system, as it undermines a number of rights, including non-discrimination, equal access to public resources for all citizens, accountability, and more.

Respect for and protection of minorities were also highlighted in the discussions. The importance of not generalising an individual's delinquent or criminal behaviour to their entire community, of not singling out and stigmatising certain communities, and of recognising their right to equality before the courts and before the law, as well as guaranteeing the enjoyment of their fundamental freedoms, was stressed.





In addition to the foregoing, fair resolution of the thorny issue of conflicts between farmers and herders, cohesive policies on nomadism, and awareness-raising and education campaigns on peace and living together should be included in governments' communication strategies to ensure that the stigmatisation and discrimination of minorities are effectively addressed.

The extreme centralisation of state power in the major urban centres of Sahelian countries creates grey areas on the fringes of national territories, where government presence is barely felt, and citizens' basic needs go unsatisfied for lack of essential infrastructure. People living in those areas are denied the enjoyment of their fundamental rights, and because they are unsatisfied and out of sight of the central authorities, some become vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups, while others opt to emigrate illegally or enter the world of organised crime. Extreme centralisation is a barrier to equal access to essential services for all. Decentralisation, which has already been identified as the ideal tool for meeting this challenge, has yet to be effectively implemented, despite the entry into force of the African Union Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development, which puts forward a range of measures calibrated and tailored to suit the African context, designed to guarantee the exercise of effectively decentralised power, and capable of ensuring good governance and development at local level. The need for the region's governments to implement that instrument was acknowledged, as well as the importance of involving local communities at grassroots level more closely in drafting and decision-making processes.

## V. Justice, the fight against impunity, and protection and promotion of human rights

Unequal access to judicial services due to uneven geographical distribution, very high costs for a sizeable proportion of the population, slow proceedings and pervasive corruption are among the factors that explain why terrorist groups have been able to take root in the Sahel and remain there for so long. When the dispensation of justice by government departments is inoperative or ineffective for the reasons cited above, it is often replaced by justice provided by terrorist and violent extremist groups in the areas under their control. According to several participants, easy access to such 'alternative justice', the speed of proceedings and the immediate execution of sentences are undoubtedly among the most powerful factors drawing people to these violent groups. The central role of justice in the anti-terrorist response is therefore key. The judicial response should not be limited to coercive action applied downstream to individuals involved in terrorism, but should be positioned upstream, taking a preventive perspective by guaranteeing access for all citizens to justice that is fair, swift, incorruptible and capable of effectively combating impunity.

The reign of impunity – another shortcoming of the region's judicial systems – undermines national governments and strengthens terrorist groups, which use it as one of the cornerstones of their agendas, easily rallying behind them all the victims of abuses and other unremedied wrongs. A strong stance against impunity can prevent the slide into violence and eliminate a major source of recruitment for terrorist groups.

The protection and promotion of human rights form one of the main pillars of the counter-terrorism response and, in light of the seriousness and scale of the threat, they should be among

the key concerns of the designers and actors of the response in the Sahel region. There is no denying, however, that the human rights situation in the region is less than stellar. Involuntary disappearances, extra-judicial executions, indiscriminate use of violence, as well as restrictions on or denial of the freedoms of expression, movement, association, and worship are rife. These rights are systematically and massively violated, with complete impunity. The perpetrators of these abuses operate in broad daylight, in plain sight, without any form of retribution.

## VI. Defence and security forces, security sector reform and crisis resolution

Discussions on this topic focused mainly on the relevance of using defence and security forces in the resolution of the Sahel crisis. The idea that guns alone cannot bring an end to the crisis was regularly expressed during the conference. The prevailing responses in the region, favouring heavy military action to the detriment of non-military approaches, were criticised. However, the limitations of a military response were highlighted without calling into question its appropriateness and relevance, on grounds that it deals with only one facet of the threat. Participants stressed the need to complement military responses with non-coercive actions designed to address the causes of the outbreak and spread of violence, and to reconcile the belligerents.

The need for security sector reform was discussed at length. It should encompass not only the defence and security forces, but also the entire justice system, as shortcomings in the one also have a significant impact on the other.

On the specific topic of the defence and security forces, in addition to the doctrinal shortcomings that are at the root of their inadequacy in implementing the counter-terrorism response,

and their lack of professional and technical preparedness for asymmetric conflicts, a number of behavioural shortcomings also undermine their relations with the civilian population, underpinned by a lack of trust, which plays into the hands of terrorist and violent extremist groups. As a result, these groups are able to gain a head start in the fierce battle they wage against the defence and security forces for the 'hearts and minds' of the population, with the victor guaranteed to win the 'war'.

It was noted, however, that some countries in the region have avoided that pitfall by setting up and effectively implementing appropriate political and doctrinal frameworks for their defence and security very early on. Frameworks for dialogue and meetings between defence and security forces and the civilian population, as well as specific programmes and activities by the forces to benefit civilians, have strengthened the bonds of trust between them, creating an unmoveable barrier against the tides of terrorism and violent extremism, albeit a barrier that needs to be constantly reinforced.

In conclusion, there is a need to decolonise and decompartmentalise defence and security institutions by establishing new relationships between them and the people.

## VII. Civil society, the research community, and crisis resolution

Civil society has an essential role to play in resolving the crisis. In an environment that has been divided for many years, civil society needs to work with government and other stakeholders to raise community awareness of the dangers of perpetuating the crisis and educate communities about the values of peace and reconciliation. It should participate actively in the development and implementation of programmes for a sustainable way out of the crisis, and for the de-radicalisa-



tion and reintegration of former combatants who renounce the use of violence. According to several participants, civil society can also work at local level to initiate and implement measures aimed at tackling the underlying factors identified as root causes of the violence. The use of cultural tools such as 'joking relationships', among many others, can play a key role in the process.

To achieve this, it is vital to build relationships of trust with government and work together to dispel the misconceptions that civil society organisations are extensions of political opposition parties, and that governments are evil enemies to be brought down at all costs. Governments therefore need to devise programmes that encourage and promote disengagement and mass defection from armed groups, draining them of their human resources, in collaboration with civil society players, as they have done in the countries of the Lake Chad basin.

The research community, for its part, should participate in the development of the counter-terrorism response by producing an appropriate 'body of knowledge' for the counter-terrorism response. Documentary research and field surveys have been and continue to be used to identify the underlying causes of the crisis. Comparative analyses of the quality of the strategies, measures and programmes implemented serve to inform decisions, correct them and suggest new ones. The aim is to create a powerful synergy between government, civil society, and research, so that the response can be better calibrated and targeted. The countries of the region should take advantage of the presence of a strong civil society and a plethora of research centres in the region.

## VIII. Human security and the centrality of community actors

The situation prevailing in the Sahel calls for a far-reaching doctrinal shift, moving the focus of security from protecting national interests (territorial integrity, political and economic institutions, etc.) to the human being, the citizen. Moving forward, security should be centred on people and communities, using a multi-disciplinary and multi-actor approach, prioritising actions initiated at community level, and reflecting the real needs of the population. This approach should make it possible to 'put people at the centre of the equation', ensuring a more equitable redistribution of security, economic and social resources, among others, and, above all, directing resources to where they are most needed, as effectively as possible. If this is achieved, community actors will no longer be relegated to the sidelines, but will play key roles, identifying and assessing needs, and contributing to decision-making as well as to the development and implementation of programmes to combat terrorism and violent extremism.

It was acknowledged, however, that this much-needed transition will not be easy to achieve, particularly in view of the current situation, which is compelling national governments to step up the protection of their symbols and representations.

## IX. Regional and international cooperation to resolve the Sahel crisis

There was extensive discussion among the participants on issues relating to regional and international cooperation as the keystone of the response. While it was unanimously agreed that cooperation is required to resolve the crisis in the Sahel, it was also recognised that this cooperation needs to be rethought if the desired results are to be achieved. It is therefore imperative not only to devise the response at national level, but

also to anticipate its impact at regional level. Hence the importance of intelligence.

Cooperation should be based on shared values of democracy and respect for human rights, without in any way imposing values on the other party that clash with those commonly accepted in its society. It should also be founded on mutual respect between partners, honouring commitments made, and a shared desire to work together to rebuild a stable and peaceful environment in West Africa, and more particularly in the Sahel. Cooperation should take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust, particularly between neighbouring countries – which generally share security and humanitarian challenges – but also with countries in the Maghreb and Europe.

The escalation and increasing complexity of the crisis have led to an ‘accelerated militarisation’, which unfortunately leaves little room for preventive action, although it is equally important as coercive action in dealing with the crisis. The accelerated militarisation of the response can also be viewed as a root cause of the suspension of constitutional order and the appearance of non-traditional (military) players at the forefront of the political scene, as well as the growing presence of new security partners.

The most striking development in this context is the weakening of the regional cooperation organisation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), following the announcement that three of its members, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, were set to leave the organisation and join a new body called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Participants suggested that realistic options should be considered, taking account of the new circumstances, to ensure that regional cooperation was not undermined. The various initiatives (G5 Sahel, AES) should be seen as collaborative mechanisms that complement, rather than compete with, ECOWAS as a sub-regional organisation.

Political polarisation to the detriment of technical cooperation, an increasingly tangible reality in the central Sahel, was also identified as one of the pitfalls threatening cooperation between countries within the region and beyond.

There are many cooperation mechanisms in the region. They include bilateral mechanisms like Operation Serval (Mali-France), which subsequently became Operation Takuba; regional mechanisms such as the Nouakchott Process, G5 Sahel, Accra Initiative, and the Multinational Joint Task Force; continental mechanisms such as MISAHÉL; and international mechanisms, such as MINUSMA. Some have ceased to exist, while others are barely surviving and struggle to go on. Among the shortcomings behind their lack of success – the strategies they have put in place have, for the most part, failed to achieve their stated objectives – the lack of coordination was repeatedly mentioned, both at strategic level (for want of a common platform capable of harmonising and integrating the actions of different mechanisms operating in the same environment), and at operational level, particularly with regard to operational planning, steering of operations, and pooling of resources. The lack of independent funding has also been identified as one of the main causes of these failures. As the saying goes, ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’ and, indeed, according to the participants, these mechanisms have been unable to maintain a consistent and continuous course of action due to their dependence on external funding over which they lack control. This put them in an uncertain position from the start, plying a course dictated by objectives unconnected with those of their respective organisations. It also explains the relative success of the Multinational Joint Task Force, with its own budget that is self-generated and self-managed, which has scored a number of victories in recent years against terrorist and violent extremist groups in the Lake Chad Basin, where the situation is apparently improving, unlike in the Central Sahel or the coastal states of West Africa.



## Conclusion

Although, in the eyes of the international community, it has been overshadowed as a security concern by the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts, the situation in the Sahel remains a major crisis, not only because of its complexity and longevity, but also due to the size of the geographical area affected, its rapid development, the number of parties to the conflict, and its regional and international implications.

To understand the crisis, it is important to place it in its geographical, physical, human, historical, socio-economic and political context, and to unravel the geostrategic and economic forces behind it.

Reinstating constitutional order and strengthening democratic institutions will be key to the design and implementation of a firm and appropriate response to terrorism and violent extremism in the region. To achieve this, both formal and informal processes should be implemented with a view to reducing escalation and avoiding further complications.

Far-reaching reforms of security policy and doctrine are urgently needed. Excessive militarisation of the response will not bring lasting solutions. A multi-dimensional response, taking account of all factors identified as underlying causes, would appear to be the best way to end the crisis for good.

Regional and international cooperation need to be strengthened to improve the response to the crisis. However, cooperation must be underpinned by mutual respect and shared values. A critical look should be taken at the relevance of the existing mechanisms, and strategic and operational coordination between and within the mechanisms should be strengthened. It is also important to recognise the new dynamics of regional cooperation and make them part of the equation of regional and international cooperation, rather than excluding them.

