The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm

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Executive Summary

The huge, sparsely populated, impoverished Sahel is affected by growing numbers of jihadi extremists and illicit activities, including arms, drugs and human trafficking, estimated to generate $3.8 billion annually. Borders are porous, government reach limited. Populations and unemployment are soaring. Within this perfect storm of actual and potential instability, criminal networks increasingly overrun Central Sahel – the Fezzan in Libya's south, Niger and the Lake Chad Basin. State authority is weak in relatively stable Niger. To the south, the radical Islamist, primarily Nigerian, Boko Haram insurgency is responsible for thousands of civilian deaths and more than a million displaced. Western and regional counter-terrorism efforts are insufficient, but neither have more integrated approaches proposed by the EU and UN borne fruit. Without holistic, sustained action against entrenched criminal networks, misrule and underdevelopment, instability is likely to spread and exacerbate radicalisation and migration.

The Sahel, a vast region stretching from Mauritania to Sudan bordering the Sahara Desert, has always had porous borders and thinly populated areas only loosely controlled by national governments. (For example, Niger is bigger than Nigeria, but its seventeen million population is a tenth the size and concentrated in its southern quarter.) But as Libya imploded and Boko Haram expanded across borders in the Lake Chad Basin, criminal networks trafficking illicit goods and humans grew by corrupting officials, forming alliances with local communities and sometimes working with jihadi groups. The region has become a key source of, and transit point for, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa trying to reach Europe. By mid-June 2015, more than 106,000 were estimated to have arrived in Europe by sea since the start of the year, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Nearly 57,000 had reached Italy, almost exclusively from Libya and after transiting countries to its south. UN officials project that between 80,000 and 120,000 migrants will pass through Niger during the year.

Western governments have primarily taken a security-oriented approach to the criminal and jihadi threats, upping their military presence and counter-terrorism operations and increasing efforts to secure Europe's southern borders. Initiatives such as the Rabat (2006) and Khartoum (2014) processes to curb illegal immigration, as well as the latest European Union (EU) plan – including refugee resettlement, but also a military operation to disrupt smugglers' networks and destroy their boats – tackle only symptoms of the Sahel's problems.

There is little prospect of stabilising the region without recognising that current policies do not address the deep sources of its instability: entrenched poverty; underdevelopment, particularly in the peripheries; and a booming youth population with little access to education or jobs and no real loyalty to the state. Many youths see migration – illegal if necessary – as their only future. Others lash out at their corrupt "secular" and "Westernised" states in hope of imposing a more morally pure, Islamist government. A huge proportion of the men, women and children crossing the Mediterranean are not coming to Europe simply to escape poverty, but also to flee deadly conflicts and repressive governments.

Heavy-handed military action and closure of political space by co-option or criminalisation of the opposition aggravate tensions. Labelling non-violent Islamists potential jihadis can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Government neglect of the peripheries, unwillingness to address local conflicts and tendency to rely on personal, at times criminal, clientelistic alliances rather than develop democratic institutions feed a growing sense of marginalisation, particularly in rural areas.

Remote, weak or even repressive central governments across the region have been supplanted by alternative forms of organisation, including traditional authorities; community-based structures; Islamist movements; and criminal networks. Outside forces, both criminal and jihadi, have particular success exploiting these ad hoc governance systems, aligning with the concerns of local powerbrokers to gain a foothold. Meanwhile, battles, sometimes very violent, for control of the lucrative smuggling routes are becoming more numerous and visible.

To counter the growing jihadi threat, international actors have deployed troops and aircraft and supported national security forces that pursue a militarised approach. Local populations, however, often view the Western military presence as driven by a desire to protect interests in the area's hydrocarbon and mineral deposits. Prioritisation of counter-terrorism and conflation of violent jihadism with other forms of political Islam are creating a backlash against regional and Western governments alike.

To reverse the Sahel's deepening instability – in particular deterioration in already precarious Niger – national governments and external actors need not only to manage the short term, but also to take a long view. This would involve committing to sustained efforts to shore-up fragile states by consistently and transparently promoting good governance and durable development, as well as to resolve existing conflicts and address their humanitarian consequences. To do so:

❑ Western policies should be reoriented to concentrate on building more inclusive and accountable governments and countering structural factors that drive marginalisation and alienation, and thus criminalisation and radicalisation.

❑ While Western governments and the EU are likely to continue their security-first approach, efforts to tackle radicalisation and criminalisation should focus on promoting accountable public administration, particularly in Niger and Nigeria. These could include encouraging creation of civilian oversight mechanisms for public institutions and supporting construction of robust, inclusive coalitions against corruption and mismanagement.

❑ Development aid should be tied not to military counter-terrorism efforts, but to measures that improve governance, limit state corruption and strengthen democratic institutions.

❑ Addressing youth unemployment through training and labour intensive infrastructure projects to link the peripheries to markets and services could significantly contribute to tackling migration.

Finally, efforts to deter migration need to be accompanied by longer-term strategies to curb unsustainable population growth, particularly in Niger, through support for women's rights to education and reproductive health.

Dakar/Brussels, 25 June 2015

The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm

I. Introduction

Often seen as a haven for armed radical groups, the Sahel is the latest new frontier in the West's counter-terrorism campaign. Though outside attention has largely been on the region stretching from Mauritania to Chad, this report concentrates on a vertical axis between southern Libya and Northern Nigeria, with a relatively stable but extremely vulnerable Niger at its centre.

The porous borders and vast desert areas where national authorities struggle to exert control mean that the stability of any one state is acutely dependent on that of its neighbours; Libya's 2011 civil war resulted in an outflow of arms and fighters that in part explains the crisis that began in Mali in 2012 and continues.[1] Attempts at a managed transition in Libya, the region's former political hegemon, have derailed, and the chaos that has engulfed it and brought it to the brink of all-out war threatens to further destabilise its neighbours.[2] Equally, the power vacuum and ethnic divisions in Libya's south are drawing in disruptive actors from other states, including Chad, Mali and Niger.

Western intelligence services consider Libya's south west (the Fezzan) and the Lake Chad Basin (spanning the borders between Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger) key centres of jihadism.[3] They are also two largely unexplored areas of potential hydrocarbon wealth in the wider resource-rich region and at the same time transit hubs for the smuggling of people and illicit goods. Between these poles is Niger, which has become an important smuggling route, due in part to its location, poverty and corroded state institutions, but also to international military operations in Mali that often force smugglers to look for new routes.

This report maps the political and security landscape, with particular focus on transregional dynamics and political economies that link criminal, radical and political groups and interests. It analyses risks, not least that posed by the rapidly growing and increasingly embittered youth population, and assesses whether current policies and actions by national, regional and wider international actors to curb extremism and radicalisation, as well as continued northward migration,[4] are relevant and effective.

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[1] For in-depth analysis of the crisis and its aftermath, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 189, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, 18 July 2012; 201, *Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful Reform*, 11 April 2013; and 210, *Mali: Reform or Relapse*, 10 January 2014.

[2] Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°157, *Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, 25 February 2015. Roland Marchal, "The Reshaping of West Africa after Muammar Qadhafi's Fall", Norwegian Peacebuilding Research Centre (NOREF), October 2012; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°180, *Africa without Qaddafi: The Case of Chad*, 21 October 2011.

[3] Crisis Group, interviews, counter-terrorism specialists, Dubai, December 2014; Dakar, January 2015. Northern Mali, also viewed as a key jihadi haven, is not part of this report.

[4] A senior Italian official said 170,000 mainly sub-Saharan African migrants reached Italy from Libya in 2014. Crisis Group interview, Rome, March 2015. By 11 June 2015, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimated that 106,705 migrants had arrived in Europe from Africa and the Middle East in the year to date and that 1,865 had died in the Mediterranean. See Tara Brian, "Eastern Mediterranean: dramatic increase in migrant flows", Migrationa: read all about it (web-

Drawing on field research in Nigeria, Niger and Libya, the report is based in particular on interviews with a wide range of interlocutors, such as government officials, politicians, military officers, businessmen, community elders and militia leaders, smugglers, migrants in transit and youths, in both main cities and peripheries, as well as experts on security and terrorism, long-time Sahel observers and policymakers in regional, Western and Gulf-state capitals.[5] Most requested anonymity due to security concerns.

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log.iom.int), 11 June 2015. Increased loss of life can largely be traced to the EU decision to discontinue the Italian rescue operation, "Mare Nostrum", and not replace it with a similar multi-national mission. Patrick Kingsley, "Record number of migrants expected to drown in Mediterranean this year", *The Guardian*, 1 April 2015.
[5] This report builds on previous Crisis Group research and reporting on Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Libya and Chad, including Africa Report N°92, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?*, 31 March 2005.

II.   Instability – An Issue of Governance?

The Sahel, one of the world's poorest regions, faces major structural challenges. Development is patchy or non-existent.[6] Its countries have an average per capita income 59 per cent that of Sub-Saharan Africa and have suffered repeated food crises (2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012), heightening the regional population's chronic vulnerability. 60 per cent of that population is presently under twenty, and with an annual growth rate of approximately 3 per cent (3.9 per cent in Niger), it is expected to reach 130.3 million in 2030 (from 75 million in 2011).[7]

Revenue, including that generated in the peripheries and border regions, tends to be concentrated in main cities and central capitals. People concentrate in limited fertile land, leaving vast arid territories sparsely populated.[8] Accelerated, uncontrolled urbanisation is eroding traditional lifestyles, as cities grow and additional rural residents move in search of jobs.[9] Nevertheless, the population remains largely rural and deeply impoverished, despite valuable natural resources, including hydrocarbons, uranium and gold, mainly in rural and border areas.[10] These subsoil riches have tended to benefit only businesses with means to explore and exploit them, as well as large patronage networks. In Niger, "predation is the generalised system of governance", a Western diplomat observed.[11]

Largely untapped, the region's vast resource wealth generates increasing interest, including from China, the U.S. and several European states (with France and Spain at the forefront).[12] International investment, particularly in infrastructure, has ena-

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[6] The Sahel is a semi-arid region between the Sahara (desert) and the savannah to the south, extending from Senegal to Sudan. The 2014 UN Development Programme (UNDP) "Human Development Index" ranked Sahel countries' indicators as follows: Niger 187 (lowest globally); Chad 184; Burkina Faso 181; Mali 176; Senegal 163; Mauritania 161; and Nigeria 152.

[7] "UNDP Support Framework for the Implementation of the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel: Towards sustainable and inclusive human development", UNDP, 13 May 2014.

[8] According to the UN, 80-90 per cent of the Sahel's workforce is active in agriculture. "Sahel Atlas of Changing Landscapes", UN Environment Programme, 2012. The European Union (EU) considers some 25 million are "ultra-poor", in need of some form of social protection and facing food insecurity following erratic rainfall in 2014. "Sahel: Food and Nutrition Crisis", European Commission Humanitarian Aide and Civil Protection department (ECHO), February 2015.

[9] Crisis Group interview, sociologist, Abuja, February 2015. Niger's under 20 per cent urbanisation is expected to increase significantly by 2050. "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights", UN Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. The unintended consequence of the Millennium Development Goals' battle against childhood mortality is a large increase in young urban or semi-urban children dreaming of social mobility. Village children are moving to the cities and often from there to migration routes.

[10] Niger is the world's fourth-ranking producer of uranium.

[11] Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2015.

[12] SOMAÏR, owned by the French nuclear company Areva and the Nigerien state, controls most of the uranium mines in Arlit, Tassa and Aouta. The China Nuclear International Uranium Company has also become a major investor in Niger's uranium mines. China's SinoU has a joint venture with Niger to extract uranium; several other companies, including from Canada, Australia and South Africa, are also prospecting. The China National Petroleum Corporation has signed an agreement with the government to extract oil at the Agadem block. "Uranium in Niger", World Nuclear Association, June 2015. In Libya, the Murzug Basin in southern Fezzan has large reserves; Spanish, French and Austrian companies hold significant stakes. "Repsol makes a new high quality oil discovery in Libya", press release, Repsol, 21 October 2013.

bled certain states to access their subsoil riches, but increased ability to exploit natural resources may make some regimes more reluctant to loosen their grip on power.[13]

A.   *Misrule*

Most residents appear frustrated by the lack of effective governance and development that perpetuates their abject poverty and extremely limited social mobility.[14] This is particularly pronounced where the government is seen as predatory, or there is little or no central state presence, but also in areas where misrule, particularly acute corruption, has contributed to preventing development and service delivery.

Libya's sparsely-populated Fezzan is deeply impoverished and economically underdeveloped despite significant natural resources, including oil. Poor education means fewer opportunities for inhabitants who struggle for admittance to training facilities, such as the Tripoli Oil Institute, that would qualify them for a sector that remains highly centralised and largely in northerners' hands. Governments since Qadhafi's fall promise decentralisation and more investment in the south, but these have not materialised. Efforts to improve the economy, such as by irrigation projects – have had scant impact on jobs.

Though Libya's south has long been a transit point for sub-Saharan African migrants and goods moving to the Mediterranean and Europe, smuggling has recently grown significantly. This is not only because the Tebu and Tuareg tribes take advantage of the deteriorating post-Qadhafi security. The General National Congress (GNC)[15] raised state subsidies for basic goods – likely due to profit potential for corrupt members – and as a result the southwards trafficking of subsidised goods (to countries where they are more expensive) flourished.[16]

Decades of state corruption and neglect have ravaged the economy in the north of Nigeria, a country whose political malfeasance and clientelism are well documented.[17] Despite significant state riches, most Nigerians today are poorer than they were at independence, and the agricultural sector is severely weakened. In the north, as in many other peripheral areas (including urban outskirts), successive governments have not provided security, economic development jobs and health care. Frustration

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[13] This is not unique to Sahel states. See Nathan Jensen and Leonard Wantcheckon, "Resource wealth and political regimes in Africa", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 37, no. 7, September 2004, pp. 816-841.

[14] Crisis Group, interviews, Niamey, February 2015, Sebha, Libya, March 2015, Djerba, Tunisia, June 2015.

[15] The GNC (elected in July 2012) is the Tripoli-based rival of the House of Representatives (elected in June 2014) in Tobruk. Both claim to be the legitimate parliament and have their own governments. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, op. cit.

[16] Subsidising goods is intended to help the poor but can also generate huge windfalls for politically protected traders who profit from the difference between the subsidised price – supported by state revenue – and the (world) price of goods that people in other countries pay. Similarly, transnational smugglers can profit by evading taxes and duties and undercutting the price that law-abiding businessmen must charge. The jihadi leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, also known as "Mr. Marlboro", for years was involved in billion-dollar cigarette smuggling. "How cigarette smuggling fuels Africa's Islamist violence", *The Guardian*, 26 January 2013.

[17] See Crisis Group Africa Report N°216, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014. In 2014, Nigeria was a poor 136th of 175 in Transparency International's ranking of "Corruption by Country/Territory: Nigeria", www.transparency.org.

and alienation from the central state are in consequence common, and many are turning to ethnic militias, separatist groups and religious movements for self-help.

The north east, Boko Haram's main field of operations, has the worst poverty rates of Nigeria's six official "zones".[18] The state education system is poorly funded and underperforming – northern states have among the lowest literacy rates in the country.[19] Millions of students are sent to Quranic schools where they are often required to beg for alms or do domestic work to pay for their upkeep.[20] State dysfunction has also undermined the judicial system, which has seen a steady decline in funding and allegations of corruption.[21] Radicalisation has been driven in part by a deep sense of injustice. Extremists, including Boko Haram, have exploited the region's endemic poverty and the marginalisation of its population to secure local support, or at least acquiescence.

Even in Niger, a relatively stable country in the Sahel along with Chad, the government has struggled to promote good governance and development. President Mahmadou Issoufou came to office in 2011, at the end of a transition back to civilian rule and promoting an ambitious "Renaissance" development plan. It encompassed long-overdue reforms for improving education and health care, creating jobs for youths, consolidating democratic institutions and stepping-up the fight against hunger, and it won support. But optimism did not last long, as the government shifted its priorities to security and the 2016 presidential election.[22]

Given Niger's location between Mali's unstable north, Libya's turbulent south and Nigeria, with its Boko Haram militants, the government is increasingly preoccupied by insecurity and growing terrorism.[23] The president cited regional insecurity and an incipient food crisis as justification when the 2012 budget was increased by 52.7 per cent, with doubled defence spending and CFA 40 billion (nearly $60 million) cuts in food security, health and education.[24] Despite government surveillance, Boko Haram

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[18] Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics showed high poverty levels in the north east and north west in 2010, "Nigerians living in poverty rise to nearly 61%", BBC (online), 13 February 2012. See also "Nigeria Unveiled: Thirty six shades of Nigeria", Renaissance Capital, 7 May 2013.

[19] "Reaching the 2015 Literacy Target, Action Plan: Nigeria", UNESCO, September 2012.

[20] Sending children to Islamic teachers is a longstanding practice, especially of fathers with many children. Many parents prefer sending their children to imams who teach them the Quran and Arabic rather than to Western-style schools they believe have "corrupting" influences.

[21] "Judgement for sale, NBA raised alarm over cash and carry verdicts, Musdapher [immediate past chief justice] reads riot act to judges", *The Sun*, 20 September 2011.

[22] Crisis Group Africa Report N°208, *Niger: Another Weak Link in the Sahel?*, 19 September 2013, pp. 2, 17-19. Crisis Group interviews, including political analysts, Niamey, February 2015. Niger has had four military coups since independence in 1960. See also a November 2013 interview with the World Bank country manager for Niger: "On the military end, the region's instability (as we've seen recently in Mali) has meant a diversion of resources we could otherwise have used for economic development. This comes at a price. Niger's authorities explain it by saying, 'instead of giving food to children to help them nutritionally, we had to buy ammunition and equip the army to defend the country's borders'". "The fastest road to reduce poverty in Niger is to invest in agriculture", World Bank, 1 November 2013.

[23] Crisis Group Report, *Niger: Another Weak Link?*, op. cit., pp. 34-45. See also Crisis Group Report, *The Boko Haram Insurgency*, op. cit.; and "ISIL accepts Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance", Al Jazeera English, 12 March 2015.

[24] "Niger increases budget by 52.7%", Reuters, 1 October 2011. The budget law was passed in April 2012 and amended in May, when the CFA 40.4 billion was transferred to defence, Hassane Boukar,

established a limited presence in the south east, particularly along the Niger-Nigeria border. At the start of 2015, after Niger declared war on Boko Haram, the group launched conventional and suicide attacks on Diffa but was repulsed and also driven out of neighbouring Nigerian towns by Chadian troops.

Most Nigerien socio-economic conditions have changed little since Issoufou's election.[25] Government failings are particularly evident in the education sector. The quality of public schools is desperately poor: up to 80 per cent of teachers are not trained, infrastructure remains basic, and schools "neither educate nor pave the way for job opportunities".[26] Added to this is reported gender-based violence and discrimination. The state insists on education for girls, but many are said to be "constantly harassed and often sexually abused at school and on their way home, including by teachers".[27] This, together with economic difficulties, has led some 2.1 million to drop out from primary or secondary state education since 2008.[28]

While few doubt the increasing risks extremist armed groups pose, many believe emphasising the jihadi threat gives the president and his circle a convenient excuse to tighten their grip ahead of 2016 elections.[29] Certainly it has allowed them to deflect criticism of the Renaissance plan's lack of implementation and created opportunity to co-opt parts of the opposition (allegedly sometimes with financial incentives) or intimidate those who refuse to support the "anti-terror" campaign.[30] In this environment, a counter-terrorism rhetoric has grown unchecked.[31] Nigeriens who "were not at all feeling menaced by terrorism, now, brainwashed, do", a long-time political observer said.[32] The government allegedly also has a stake in shadowy networks, including criminal webs.[33] The military campaign against Boko Haram will likely

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"Le budget de la défense double!", Alternative Espaces Citoyens Niger (www.alternativeniger.org), 7 June 2012. See also, "Niger revises 2015 budget higher on defence spending", Reuters, 26 May 2015.
[25] Niger's 2010 gross national income per capita was $370; in 2013 it was $400. "Data: Niger", World Bank (data.worldbank.org).
[26] Crisis Group interview, foreign aid worker, Niamey, February 2015. In 2011, UNESCO said Niger needed to increase annual spending on primary education by about 11 per cent to 2015 to meet its "Education for All" goals. It did so in 2011-2012 but not 2012-2013. It has committed to allocate 27 per cent of internal resources to education by 2015. Local technical and financial partners have contributed $84.2 million through the Global Partnership for Education. UNICEF continues to urge more domestic education allocations.
[27] Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, reiterated by politicians, political analysts, foreign aid workers, women right's activists, Niamey, February 2015.
[28] Crisis Group, interview, foreign aid worker, Niamey, February 2015. "Programme Sectoriel de l'Education et de la Formation (PSEF), 2014-2024, strategy document, Niger Republic.
[29] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat, political analyst, foreign aid worker, civil servant, Niamey, February 2015.
[30] Crisis Group observations and interviews, Western diplomat, Nigerien politicians, journalist, political analysts, Niamey, February 2015; and telephone interviews, France, January 2015.
[31] Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Niamey, February 2015. "The political atmosphere is totally degraded", as a consequence of Issoufou's polarising anti-terror rhetoric and exclusionary tactics toward the opposition, a journalist said. Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2015. "The small bourgeois community of Niger normally may disagree over political positions during the day, but used to eat and do business together overnight: this climate is increasingly eroding". Crisis Group interview, businessman, Niamey, February 2015.
[32] Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2015.
[33] Wolfram Lacher, "Organised Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region", Carnegie Papers, September 2012.

increase the security budget, which receives far less external scrutiny than development funds.[34]

As domestic and international attention is directed toward counter-terrorism, the president appears under little pressure to justify why in 2014 Niger spent little more than half the development aid it received.[35] The government has yet to mobilise significant resources to create opportunities for increasingly malcontented youths. There is little private sector job creation.[36] Most investments tend to be either by-products of the diversion of state funds or of criminal enterprises, such as trafficking of illicit goods and humans, or dubious deals by the diaspora or regional businessmen seeking to profit from the ill-managed taxation system.[37]

Similar governance shortcomings are evident throughout the Sahel and even compounded in regions such as northern Nigeria and southern Libya, where the never strongly-implanted state has in effect ceded control of large areas to local armed groups.[38] Moving into these spaces, criminal networks – sometimes working with jihadi groups – have also gained a significant foothold.

B.   *Undeveloped Peripheries*

For decades, central governments in the region paid little attention to the peripheries. Since they often were not an immediate threat or a power base for powerful politicians, they allowed them to stagnate, while sharing in the profits of local corruption.[39] In those states that do partially redistribute resources to underdeveloped areas, this often benefits local powerbrokers and corrupt elites.[40] Too often this leads to more insecurity, elite involvement in illegal activity and, ultimately, alienation from the state that renders the areas vulnerable to insurgency and manipulation by actors who feed off and aggravate social tensions. Criminal networks may thus become power-holders, by either entering into or overpowering state institutions.[41] In the most

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[34] Parliament revised the annual budget to meet higher defence expenditure due to operations against Boko Haram. "Niger revises 2015 budget", Reuters, op. cit.

[35] It returned the rest. Crisis Group, interview, Western diplomat, Niamey, February 2015. "The army's budget has exploded, while much needed investments in the social sectors keeps stalling". Crisis Group, interview, long-time observer of Niger politics, Niamey, February 2015.

[36] Niger is ranked 168th of 189 economies for "ease of doing business", and 177th for "starting a business". "Doing Business 2015", World Bank, 2105. Any reforms are unlikely until after the 2016 elections.

[37] Crisis Group interviews, economist, political analyst, former senior government official, former civil servants and economist, Niamey, February 2015.

[38] See Crisis Group Reports, *Mali: Reform or Relapse* and *Africa without Qaddafi*, both op. cit.; also C. Raleigh and C. Dowd, "Governance and Conflict in the Sahel's 'Ungoverned Space'", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, vol. 2(2), no. 32 (July 2013).

[39] Crisis Group Reports, *The Boko Haram Insurgency*; *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, both op. cit. Crisis Group interview, sociologist, Lagos, January 2015. Resentment was expressed by inhabitants of Niger's south east (especially the Diffa area), north west (Tillabery and above) and Agadez's northern areas: Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, February 2015. Neglect was a deep cause of tension in northern Nigeria. Crisis Group interviews, Abuja, Kano, February 2015.

[40] Crisis Group interviews, civil servants working in local administrations, Niamey, February 2015. See Crisis Group Report, *Niger: Another Weak Link?*, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

[41] This is so in Niger peripheries, such as the Agadez region, Tillabery and the southern strip bordering Chad, Nigeria and Benin, where officials are present but largely viewed as tied to criminal networks. Crisis Group, interviews, Niamey, February 2015, Sebha, March 2015.

extreme cases, where state authorities are essentially absent, such as in Libya's Fezzan[42] and Nigeria's north east, groups that are often both criminal and extremist emerge from local communities and compete or collaborate to gain power monopolies.

In northern Nigeria, decades of state mismanagement fostered deep alienation. The population, traditionally prone to religious conservatism and an ethnic sense of identity, has been easily subdued by radical groups. Boko Haram, the most violent, has used weapons and intimidation to win local acquiescence but also at times introduced a collective presence and group identity that replaced the absent state.[43]

Fragile loyalty to the central state is further weakened in parts of the Central Sahel where many ethnic groups straddle borders.[44] Identities there are forged on a local rather than national level, and frequent transboundary movements reinforce the disconnect from the central state.[45]

C.   *Regional Demographics and Alienated Youths*

The demographics of Sahel states are changing, with rapid urbanisation and significant increase of young people. Niger's population grew 3.9 per cent in 2014 and is set to double within eighteen years, a trend echoed by its neighbours.[46] In 2014, it had the world's highest fertility rate: an average of nearly seven children born per woman. Mali followed with just over six and Nigeria with 5.25. Economic growth in these states is unbalanced and extremely weak.[47] All this creates a dangerous dynamic. In societies "under severe stress due to tension over reduced resources, where a process of unorganised urbanisation has been the only answer to the end of traditional lifestyles, and poverty was already the norm", the presence of a strikingly large under-eighteen population (in Niger, around 60 per cent) stretches the state's capacity to

[42] The post-Qadhafi implosion of the central state was followed by failure to rebuild and reinforce state institutions and presence. The struggle between two competing parliaments and governments after July 2014 has further eroded state authority, especially in the south. The Fezzan has seen a growth of competing criminal networks with regional connections that have created alternative-governance structures.

[43] Crisis Group Africa Report N°168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to the Conflict*, 20 December 2010. Since the early 1800s, there have been attempts to purify Islamic practices and ultimately the public sphere in northern Nigeria, as exemplified by the jihad initiated by a Fulani preacher, Shehu Usman dan Fodio, that led to the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804.

[44] Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2015. This sense of strong, if not unique local identity was expressed by people in various locales. Crisis Group interviews, Abuja and Kano, February 2015; Tripoli and Sebha, March 2015.

[45] This is the case for numerous transborder ethnic groups and identities, including in particular the Tuareg, Tebu, Kanuri, Hausa and Awlad Suleiman. Crisis Group interviews, political analysts, Niamey and Abuja, February 2015; activists, Sebha, March 2015.

[46] Data can be found at "Analyse de la situation des enfants et des femmes du Niger selon une approche basée sur l'équité et les droits humains", Town and country planning and community development ministry, Niger Republic, p. 10.

[47] Niger's GDP increase was around 3.6 per cent in 2013, down from 11.1 per cent in 2012. Nigeria's 2013 growth was 7.4 per cent, but the fall in crude oil prices and dependency on oil production (some 70 per cent of government revenues) may hamper future growth. In both countries, over 60 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, with the situation dramatically worse in the peripheries. See www.africaneconomicoutlook.org and World Bank data.

absorb tensions.[48] More than half Nigeria's population, though only some 35 per cent of Libya's, is also under eighteen.[49]

Regional youths are increasingly restless over slow economic growth, lack of job opportunities and narrow political space.[50] Dissatisfaction and disillusionment are exacerbated by readily available digital images (through smartphones and satellite television) of prosperity and development around the globe.[51] Governments are resented as unwilling or unable to provide for basic needs and aspirations.[52] Routes to active, fulfilling roles in society are closed and upward mobility almost non-existent. "No one seems capable of responding to the youths' quests for opportunities", said a man familiar with the region, "neither their families, nor the state, nor traditional community leaders".[53]

With struggling economies unable to absorb the huge population increase, jobs are scarce. This is due in part to structural factors, such as arid land, desertification, extensive and traditional agriculture and lack of factories. But it is also attributable in large part to extensive corruption; poor use of aid and revenues generated by extractive industries;[54] poor infrastructure and failure to provide technical training.[55] The result is weak belief in the state and little willingness – individually and collectively – to reinforce society and state institutions.[56]

Those with the means increasingly risk the perilous trip to Europe, from where they hope to support their families by remittances.[57] These migrants are profitable targets for smuggling networks that either collude with state institutions, as in Niger, or coalesce to destroy or replace the remaining vestiges of a collapsing state, as in

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[48] Crisis Group interview, sociologist, Lagos, January 2015. "Population census 2012", Niger.

[49] "At a glance: Nigeria"; "At a glance: Libya", UNICEF.

[50] In 2012, there were 11.1 million unemployed Nigerian youth, and youth unemployment is increasing. Tunji Akande, "Youth Unemployment in Nigeria: A Situation Analysis", Brookings, 23 September 2014. According to the Nigerien vocational training ministry, 1.5 million youths, aged thirteen to nineteen are neither in school nor employed, and more than 50,000 graduates are unemployed. "Boosting Youth Employment in Niger", World Bank, 11 June 2013. The World Bank recorded 19.6 per cent unemployment in Libya in 2013.

[51] See for example, "Young men in Senegal join migrant wave despite growing prosperity at home", *Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2015.

[52] Crisis Group interview, sociologist, Lagos, January 2015.

[53] Crisis Group interview, Abuja, February 2015.

[54] Crisis Group interviews, activist, Kano; political analyst, Niamey, February 2015. In 2014, Transparency International ranked Niger 103rd, Nigeria 136th and Libya 166th of 175 countries. "Corruption by country" (www.transparency.org).

[55] Crisis Group interviews, sociologist, Lagos, January 2015; political analyst, Abuja, February 2015; long-time Niger political observer, Niamey, February 2015; activists, Sebha, March 2015.

[56] Crisis Group interview, Nigerian journalist, Abuja, February 2015.

[57] The World Bank projected remittances to developing countries to grow by 5 per cent, reaching $435 billion, in 2014, up from 3.4 per cent in 2013, and to rise by 4.4 per cent, to $454 billion, in 2015. For Nigeria, it anticipated remittances of around $21 billion in 2014. "Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook. Special Topic: Forced Migration", 6 October 2014. In 2012, remittances to Niger were $122.36 million. Kevin Watkins and Maria Quattri, "Lost in intermediation", Overseas Development Institute, April 2014. Also, Crisis Group interviews, Lagos and Abuja, February 2015; and Niamey, February 2015. Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Rome and Milan, 2013.

southern Libya.[58] For those who cannot pay the vast smuggling networks' beneficiaries, violent crime is often an option. Criminal gangs offer youths an alternative sense of identity and a temporary way out of poverty.[59]

According to a regional political analyst, "the youths are a ticking time bomb, and addressing their distress is crucial to any response to the current regional instability".[60] Marginalisation, disenchantment and alienation are visibly illustrated by youths on the street corners of capitals, main cities and villages in the region. "I have no money, no job, no education. I cannot have a house or form a family. I don't believe in the state, I don't believe in anyone. I pray God to let me travel away, or to give me a gun to fight", lamented one in northern Nigeria.[61]

Local governments and international partners and institutions appear to recognise the demographic growth, but the extent to which they are committed to tackling it with practical measures is less clear. A politician said, "we did not see it coming, and now we don't really know what to do. The problem of youths is not something you can solve in the short term, and we don't have a long-term solution. So, I think we are just going to have to live with it".[62]

In Niger and parts of the wider region, Islamic education, both traditional and more modern, has gained increased traction.[63] Unregulated, this can lead to greater sympathy for a narrative that paints weak or failing state education as Western, useless and sinful, thus to be destroyed.[64] That dynamic of disenchantment began earlier in northern Nigeria, allowing Boko Haram to gain ground.[65]

Disillusionment with the secular state, fuelled by lack of education and jobs, can lead to radicalisation that may be channelled by Islamist organisations or even violent jihadi groups.[66] As a Nigerian analyst noted, amid temptations to respond military-first,

> it remains crucial to understand that the inability of the state to educate and offer opportunities has alienated these swathes of population from the state, and a security-based response will not address the real causes of the problems, risking aggravating the distance between the state and the people, and leaving more space for jihadi recruitment.[67]

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[58] Crisis Group interviews, Sebha, March 2015. See also "Smuggled Futures: The dangerous path of the migrant from Africa to Europe", The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime", May 2014, online.

[59] Crisis Group interviews, youths, Lagos, Kano and Niamey February 2015; activists and community elders, Sebha, March 2015. Aboubacar Souley, "Étude sur le phénomène de violence en milieu jeunes à Zinder, rapport final", Centre de Recherche Action par la Médiation Sociale (CRAMS), November 2012.

[60] Crisis Group interview, Abuja, February 2015.

[61] Crisis Group interview, Kano, February 2015.

[62] Crisis Group interview, politician, Niamey, February 2015.

[63] This also applies to those not otherwise prone to sympathising with Boko Haram propaganda in southern Niger. Crisis Group interviews, politician, government official, political analyst, Western diplomat, Niamey, February 2015.

[64] "Many youths in the south of Niger hate the state and its institutions … especially regarding education". Crisis Group interview, social worker, Niamey, February 2015. Souley, op. cit.

[65] Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Niamey, February 2015.

[66] Crisis Group interviews, youths, Abuja, Kano and Niamey, February 2015.

[67] Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Abuja, February 2015.

Reversing youth alienation is the key to curbing the region's instability, but it is a complex problem not specific to the Sahel and without easy answers. It needs to be addressed by a clear strategy with coherent, adequately resourced short-, medium- and long-term policies, a commitment currently lacking. The region's policies to promote youth employment and social inclusion lag far behind what the situation requires. As the Africa Development Bank (AfDB) noted, in many countries, the ministries responsible for youth issues are weak, poorly resourced and unable to leverage needed cross-sectoral support. Multilateral programs are also limited.[68] A 2015 UK House of Commons International Development Committee report noted that the shortage of jobs for young people is "recognised by donors, but there seems to be a lack of passion in attempts to address it".[69]

D.   *Radicalisation/Salafisation*

Since the 1990s, Muslim associations have played a growing public role in the Sahel states. Salafi organisations, which already had some basic presence, found fertile ground and grew among societies embittered by at best the perceived lack of governance, at worst the authorities' corruption and predation.[70] Often supported by funds channelled from Gulf states to Islamic charities, these movements have opened mosques and madrasas, many providing an attractive alternative to secular, state schools.[71] They have slowly but steadily gained ground, preaching against "traditional" West African Sufi Islam, portrayed as introducing "blameworthy innovation" (*bid'a)* not found in scripture (the Quran, *sunna* and *dadith*) and complacent about elites' corruption and greed.[72]

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[68] See "Accelerating the AfDB's Response to the Youth Unemployment Crisis in Africa", OSHD/ EDRE Working Paper, 2012. OSHD is the bank's human development department. EDRE is the development research department. In the countries this report covers, only two programs are known. In Niger, an ongoing multilateral program, Skills Development for Growth, started in 2013, aims to train over 12,000 beneficiaries; between 1987 and 2002 there was a National Open Apprenticeship Scheme (NOAS) in Nigeria aimed at over 700,000 youths and funded by Germany, the UK, and Sweden; however, it was widely criticised as ineffective. See Susanna Adam, "Review of the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme (Nigeria)", Network for international policies and cooperation in education and training (NORRAG), July 1993; Yusuf Alhaji Hashim, "Examining the Adequacy of National Open Apprenticeship Scheme in Training Youth for Economic Empowerment in Nigeria", *Journal of Business and Management*, vol. 16., no. 10 (October, 2014), pp. 47-52.

[69] "Jobs and Livelihoods", House of Commons, International Development Committee, 18 March 2015. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmintdev/685/685.pdf.

[70] The Salafiyya invoke the founding fathers of Islam, the "venerable ancestors" (*al-Salaf al-Salih*, whence the movement's name), notably the Prophet Mohammed and the first four "rightly-guided" caliphs – al-Rashidun – of the original Muslim community in seventh century Arabia, in order to identify the fundamental principles of Islam in their original, pristine purity. Since the late 1970s, the Salafiyya movement has been closely identified with the severe puritanism and fundamentalism, based on literalist readings of scripture, of the Wahhabi tradition in Saudi Arabia. Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, pp. 9-14. Crisis Group interview, expert on Islamist groups, Niamey, February 2015. Crisis Group Report, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel?*, op. cit., pp. 5-14. Marchal, op. cit., pp. 5-7.

[71] Crisis Group interviews, businessmen from Sahel and political analyst, Abu Dhabi, December 2014; Abuja, February 2015; and Niamey, February 2015.

[72] Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005; Reports, *The Boko Haram Insurgency*, p. 8, and *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel?*, p. 7, both op. cit.; interview, political analyst, Abuja, February 2015.

This process is not unique to the Sahel, but it is not an imported phenomenon, despite the backing some of these groups receive from within some Gulf states. It is closely linked to the incapacity and/or unwillingness of state institutions and governing elites to address longstanding grievances, underdevelopment and corruption.

The spread of fundamentalist movements and wider growth of Islamist groups appear to have many components and not necessarily be coordinated.[73] But they transcend borders, and their strands have similar objectives: to reaffirm Muslim identities, values and codes of conduct (often against "less literal" Sufism) and, by opposing the secular state, favour introduction of Sharia (Islamic law).[74] This strikes a chord in the region – especially among disillusioned youth – where traditional piety mingles with an even more potent sense of alienation stretching through rural peasantry into urban middle and upper classes.[75]

Despite the growth of Salafi movements, and while Islam increasingly influences politics, populations have only rarely embraced overt armed jihadi groups.[76] Nevertheless, there are concerns international and national actors may lump Islamist groups together with violent jihad or extremist entities, without strong evidence.[77] Failure to appreciate crucial distinctions can lose local cooperation.[78] Already, many sympathetic to Salafi movements view the presence of international "anti-terrorism" forces as a way for Western actors to access local resources, while local anti-jihadi terror policies are viewed as an attempt by national governments to silence dissent and reassert power.[79] The temptation to label non-violent Islamists as potential jihadis risks creating self-fulfilling prophecies.[80]

In Niger, this would risk chaos in one of the region's few remaining stable countries and an important Western counter-terrorism partner.[81] The growth of Islamist ideology there has merged with the parallel erosion of any real organised political opposition. With no alternative means of expressing discontent, citizens increasingly turn to Islamist groups to channel grievances. The Salafi-oriented reform movement Yan Izala organised protests in January 2015 that erupted into riots that engulfed several cities and had anti-Christian and anti-French overtones in places. Ostensibly precipitated by the president's Paris visit (with several other regional and wider international leaders) to march in solidarity with France against the terrorist attack

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[73] Sub-Saharan states with significant Christian populations are experiencing a parallel, intense growth of Christian fundamentalism.

[74] Crisis Group interview, expert on Islamist groups, Niamey, February 2015.

[75] Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Niamey, February 2015. This was noted in other interviews in Abu Dhabi, December 2014, and Kano and Abuja, February 2015.

[76] Crisis Group interviews, Arab and Western officials and analysts, Brussels, Rome, Paris, Algiers, November 2014-March 2015; Tuareg and Awlad Suleiman leaders, Sebha, Sharara, March 2015; political analyst, Niamey, February 2015.

[77] Crisis Group interview, government official, Niamey, February 2015; and analyst interview in another capacity, counter-terrorism expert, Abidjan, December 2013.

[78] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Dubai, December 2014; Abidjan, February 2015.

[79] Crisis Group interview, Islamic scholar, Kano, February 2015. This sentiment was expressed throughout the region. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey and Abuja, February 2015; Tripoli and Sebha, March 2015.

[80] Crisis Group, interview, political analyst, Niamey, February 2015. This phenomenon with regards to marginalised or persecuted groups is evident elsewhere. Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, 20 January 2015.

[81] Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Niamey, February 2015.

on the *Charlie Hebdo* staff, they were also motivated by social resentments and politically manipulated.[82]

The presence and influence of Boko Haram from neighbouring Nigeria has evolved in Niger. Present since at least 2003, it never became strong enough to challenge authorities in south-eastern urban centres, due in part to the government's focus on greater surveillance and a much more significant role for traditional authorities and imams, including those from other Salafi groups, to preach against its ideology. The group did benefit from a general unwillingness to aggressively confront it, so fighters periodically fled Nigerian security operations into Niger and used the poorly controlled border region to recuperate.[83] This changed with the government's early 2015 decision to join the regional offensive against the sect. Authorities also arrested hundreds of suspected members and sympathisers.[84] Despite this, Boko Haram has launched periodic attacks and suicide bombings in south-eastern Nigerien cities and towns, apparently mostly from Nigeria and uncontrolled Lake Chad islands.

In Nigeria itself, particularly in Muslim-majority northern states, for example, though the constitution prohibits political parties on religious lines, politicians frequently appeal to religious identities to mobilise supporters. Since independence, northern politicians have also called for implementation of Sharia in their provinces and in October 1999 succeeded in Zamfara state to extend the Sharia court's jurisdiction to criminal issues. Zamfara, Kano, Kebbi, Katsina, Sokoto, Yobe and Jigara states all enforce a moderate version of Sharia.

The perceived entanglement of local elites with a corrupt federal state has paved the way for radical Islamist forces to assume a leading role in "purifying the region from all the sins allegedly brought by democracy".[85] Reportedly, these Islamist groups typically have parallel economic networks, often unchecked by the authorities, with resources and capacity to give the needy jobs or charity, though precise data are hard to come by.[86] Most spectacularly, Boko Haram until recently was in effective control of fourteen of 27 local government areas in northern Borno state. In early 2015, however, the government reclaimed most of this territory, with the help of troops from neighbouring countries, though Boko Haram continues to destabilise parts of northern Nigeria and Cameroon, as well as south-eastern Chad.

Following Qadhafi's fall, there was a widespread perception that Islam – in particular a Salafi strain – was increasingly permeating Libya's politics. This was in part traceable to the government's apparent unwillingness or inability to stand up to groups that were either overtly Islamist or linked to Islamist groups and militias. The

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[82] Jama't Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat as Sunna (Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna), known as "Yan Izala" (or simply "Izala", as is more common in Nigeria), is probably the most relevant example. It started in northern Nigeria in the 1990s, then quickly expanded to Niger and the wider region. Its regional dimension also makes national-level responses more difficult. Crisis Group interviews, expert on Islamist groups, Niamey, February 2015; journalist, Abuja, February 2015. Jannik Schritt, "The 'Protests against Charlie Hebdo' in Niger: A background analysis", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2015), pp. 49-64. The presence of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita did not trigger riots in Mali.

[83] Crisis Group interviews, Boso, Diffa, Maine-Soroa and Zinder, November 2014; Nigerien official, Niamey, December 2014; analysts, London, Kano and Abuja, January 2015.

[84] See, for example, "Niger police arrest 160 suspected Boko Haram militants", CNN, 17 February 2015.

[85] Crisis Group interview, Islamic cleric, Kano, February 2015.

[86] Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Niamey, February 2015.

GNC's decision to recognise the Revolutionaries Operation Room[87] – connected to a number of groups headed by Islamist leaders – was viewed by many as evidence of an Islamist stranglehold. These perceptions were strengthened by failure to stem the destruction of Sufi shrines and sites across Libya, including in downtown Tripoli, as well as the decision not to decisively counter radical Salafi Islamist groups or militias such as Ansar al-Sharia.

The perceived Islamist dominance in the GNC acted as a lightening rod for public discontent over deteriorating security and the state's inability to provide basic services, leading to calls for its dismissal and the eventual election in June 2014 of the House of Representatives (HoR). The current HoR-GNC struggle for political and economic control has been described by many as between Islamists and anti-Islamists, though the reality is more complex. Crucially, polarisation of the main camps along ideological, ethnic and provincial lines has allowed radical Islamist groups, including in recent months Islamic State (IS), to thrive.[88]

The extent to which jihadis are active in south-western Libya is unclear. Arab and Western intelligence officials and analysts report the presence of five jihadi "training camps" in Algeria-Libya border areas and believe that al-Murabitoun, a group headed by the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, is also there.[89] They suggest the town of Obari is a jihadi hub, but residents denied this.

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[87] The Libya Revolutionaries Operation Room (LROR) is an umbrella organisation for Islamist-leaning armed groups that view themselves as the country's defenders against counter-revolutionary forces. In August 2013, it was given formal recognition by GNC President Nuri Abu Sahmein, who allocated it some 900 million Libyan dinars (then $706 million) in exchange for securing Tripoli and Benghazi. Members were involved in the October 2013 kidnapping of then-Prime Minister Ali Zeidan and in summer 2014 rallied to strike Zintani brigades in Tripoli and armed groups headed by General Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi, both considered counter-revolutionary by the LROR.
[88] Crisis Group Report, *Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, op. cit.
[89] He was reportedly killed in a U.S. airstrike in the eastern Libyan city of Ajdabiya. "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Top Islamist 'killed' in US strike", BBC, 15 June 2015.

III. Alternate Forms of Governance

In the underdeveloped peripheries of many Sahelian countries, the central state is barely present, if at all. Often daily life is regulated in an ad hoc, informal manner built around tribal or local customs. This makes it easier for jihadi or criminal networks to gain a foothold and align with local power structures, concerns and conflicts. For example, the Algerian jihadi leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar established a secure presence in the region by reportedly marrying four wives from local Arab and Tuareg communities, speaking local dialects and sharing some of his lucrative earnings (from smuggling and kidnapping Westerners) with the local people.[90] However, jihadis are but one among many groups involved in illicit activities that exploit state weakness or absence.[91]

A. *"Ungoverned Spaces"?*

The term "ungoverned spaces" is used most often in discussions of global security threats, counter-terrorism and "fragile" or "failed" states. It refers both to a geographic area and the "absence of effective state sovereignty and control".[92] However, it fails to capture the multiple, often overlapping ways in which these spaces are in fact administered, albeit often not by Westphalian state institutions.[93]

Even in peripheral areas where government presence and services are sparse or non-existent, local entities manage daily governance.[94] These tribal and community structures, however, are relatively weak, more vulnerable to penetration and sometimes overwhelmed by illicit networks. In the Central Sahel, illicit networks, local insurgents and, to a lesser extent, jihadi groups have instituted their own overlapping governance systems where the state is weak or absent. Sometimes they work side by side, as in the Fezzan; at other times, they replace local institutions. In the Libya-Chad-Niger region, criminals have allied with the Tebus to dominate cross-border human smuggling and control a significant portion of the illicit transit of goods (mostly drugs and cigarettes) into Libya, as well as the export of such subsidised items as fuel and food.[95] In north east Nigeria, Boko Haram replaced the weak local authorities with its own appointed leaders.[96]

Viewing the region as completely ungoverned may generate policies that invite a military-first approach to state shortcomings.[97] There are legitimate concerns about

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[90] "Profile: Mokhtar Belmokhtar", BBC, 15 June 2015; Andrew Black, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad's Southern Amir", Jamestown Foundation, 8 May 2009.
[91] Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, Lagos, January 2015; smuggler, Niamey, February 2015; and community elders and activists, Tripoli and Sebha, March 2015.
[92] Raleigh and Dowd, op. cit., p. 1.
[93] See Yvan Guichaoua, "Mali: the fallacy of ungoverned spaces", University of East Anglia, Dev Blog, (http://bit.ly/1b6pk1A), 12 February 2013.
[94] K. Menkhaus, "State Failure and Ungoverned Space", in Mats Berdal and Achin Wennmann (eds.), *Ending Wars, Consolidating Peace: Economic Perspectives* (Abingdon, 2010), p. 182.
[95] Crisis Group interview, military commander, Sebha, March 2015.
[96] Boko Haram dismissed local leaders as infidels. Its leader, Shekau, appointed an emir (leader) to run affairs from the local government headquarters with assistance from his field commanders and sub-commanders. Crisis Group telephone interview, resident of Bama (captured in September 2014 and retaken by Nigerian troops in March 2015), October 2014.
[97] Raleigh and Dowd, op. cit., p. 1.

security and the ability of jihadi groups to exploit the lack of state presence in under-developed peripheries, but policies should be based on a clear understanding of these regions and the root causes of their local conflicts.

B. *Criminal Networks: a Matter of Connivance?*

Criminal networks are using the Sahel's porous borders and weak governance to traffic licit (eg, cigarettes, subsidised oil and food from Libya, and vehicle parts) and illicit (eg, arms, drugs and people) goods. The same convoys may transport both, and the distinction between smuggling and trafficking is little understood by local traders.[98] In Niger, now a key transit country, there is a deepening connection between the governing class and those who control its criminal activities and smuggling routes. State institutions have been eroded by collusion with criminal networks.[99] The north east is now a main corridor for smuggling and illicit trade between Sub-Saharan and North Africa and on to Europe.[100]

In contrast to southern Libya, Niger's state institutions, though weak in many instances, exert a degree of control in peripheral areas. On the road connecting the central hub of Agadez (Niger's largest northern city) to the northernmost town of Madama, there is visible state and military presence, but smuggling of humans and trafficking (licit and illicit) dominate.[101] State representatives can earn much more than their salaries by turning a blind eye, and many have little incentive to curb transnational crime; some reportedly are deeply involved.[102]

Southern Niger, bordering Nigeria, is a major transit route for goods from Nigeria, Benin and other Gulf of Guinea states, as well as for agricultural and livestock products moving south.[103] The government has a significant presence, with local officials

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[98] Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Tripoli, March 2015.

[99] Crisis Group interviews, political analysts, politician, long-time observer of Niger politics, journalist, Niamey, Abuja, February 2015. The problem is not unique to Niger; Wolfram Lacher, "Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel", Commission on the Impact of Drug Trafficking on Security, Governance and Development in West Africa, August 2013.

[100] The French army says it seized 1.5 tons of drugs and a weapons cache from a militants convoy in the north-eastern Niger desert. "Sahara desert gun battle yields drugs haul, says France", BBC, 19 May 2015. "Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment", UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), February 2013. On 12 May, Niger passed a law against the smuggling of migrants in the Agadez.

[101] Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Niamey, February 2015; smuggler, Tripoli, March 2015. "The role of organized crime in the smuggling of migrants from West Africa to the European Union", UNODC, 2011.

[102] Crisis Group interviews, civil servants, politician, political analyst, journalists, political analysts, Niamey, February 2015. "Both migrants and academic researchers have alleged that Government officials from Agadez northward openly and routinely solicit bribes. … Many sub-Saharan migrants who have stayed in North Africa give accounts of beatings, imprisonment and bribe-taking by police officers and complicity between officials and smugglers to the point that migrants may even be 'sold' from one to the other. … The relationship between irregular migrants, local businesspeople and officialdom has become so entrenched as to take on a strategic dimension". "The role of organized crime", UNODC, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

[103] Crisis Group interviews, former civil servants, Niamey, February 2015. It has the majority of the country's fertile land, and unlike the north, it is densely populated. There is also a thriving fisheries trade between the Lake Chad Basin and the Komadougou Yobé River that runs along the eastern portion of the border.

in several districts and security and customs officers at the border.[104] It is, however, difficult to control the border and tax import-export activity, to some extent because customs officials circumvent normal administrative and legal procedures.[105] By colluding with criminals to avoid duties, officials can also become involved with major transnational smuggling networks.[106] These dynamics demonstrate how the state loses ground to criminal networks in the peripheries, but the networks' reach may extend to the centre if left unchecked.[107]

Transnational criminal networks have also gained a strong foothold in Libya's Fezzan. After Qadhafi, they replaced state-controlled patronage networks and became a key source of power and economic enterprise, including local jobs. Alliances were disrupted and scores settled as a struggle over lucrative smuggling routes revived.[108] No one network has yet been able to dominate, so criminals and affiliated tribal groups have allied with various militias in the north and armed groups and tribal actors in the wider Sahel.[109] The Tebus, with strong kinship links throughout the Libya-Chad-Niger region, dominate cross-border human smuggling and control a significant portion of the illicit transit of goods (mostly drugs and cigarettes) into Libya, as well as the export of such subsidised items as fuel and food.[110] They paint the rival Tuaregs as jihadis and themselves as anti-jihadi, though their main motivation appears to be control of territory, resources, businesses and smuggling routes. They also appear to have cross-border support from Chadian fighters, allegedly with some Chad authorities' covert aid.[111]

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[104] Crisis Group interviews, businessman, army officer, Niamey, February 2015.

[105] Crisis Group observations, interview, ex-civil servant, Niamey, February 2015.

[106] Crisis Group interviews, civil servant, aid worker, political analyst and Western diplomat, Niamey, February 2015. For a detailed investigation into the smuggling network in Niger, see "Insight – Graft stalls Niger's bid to end migrant route to Europe", Reuters, 19 June 2015.

[107] Criminal enterprises have allegedly been able to launder money, due to control of Nigerien levers of power. Crisis Group interviews, civil servants, Niamey, February 2015.

[108] Tuareg and Tebus were allied for decades in southern Libya. After Qadhafi, there was more room for businesses and interests along the smuggling routes. This led to the end of the alliance and their repositioning vis-à-vis other groups, like the Awlad Suleiman and the Qaddafah, and shifting alliances with groups in the north, like the Misrata and Zintan Brigades, to control smuggling routes. Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tripoli, and Sebha, March 2015.

[109] The majority of Tuareg and Awlad Suleiman (an Arab tribe) leaders have allied with the Misrata-led militias that dominate the north west and the Tripoli-based parliament and government; most Tebu leaders have aligned with Zintan and other militias that support the internationally- recognised Tobruk-based parliament. The motives are diverse: eg, personal ties with senior figures of the two blocks and the prospect of economic and military gains against local rivals.

[110] Crisis Group interview, military commander, Sebha, March 2015. The central role of Tebus in human smuggling has been reinforced by their community leaders, as well as by smugglers, community elders, businessmen and militiamen. Crisis Group interviews, Libya, March 2015.

[111] Crisis Group interviews, Sebha, Sharara and Tripoli, March 2015. Similar allegations were made in Niamey, February 2015. Libyan Tebus deny there are Chadian fighters in their ranks or that Chad authorities in any way collude with them. Crisis Group phone interview, Tebu activist, Dubai, March 2015. An analyst said Chad authorities want to stem the flow of Chadian youths to southern Libya, "because they were worried Chadians joining armed groups in Libya could in the long run pose a threat to [them]". Crisis Group phone interview, March 2015.

C.   *The New Caravan Routes*

The long-distance caravan trade, moving goods between the Mediterranean and West Africa, was the lifeblood of the Sahel but slowly collapsed in the nineteenth century, hampered by the creation of national boundaries and easier access to West African ports. The routes survived, however, used in part for transiting illicit and licit goods.[112] Prolonged conflicts and the loss of Qadhafi's Libya as regional hegemon, able to exert a degree of control over the criminal networks, have allowed the illicit trade to flourish. Battles for their control are increasingly visible.

Most migrants, fleeing war or repression and sometimes desiring more freedom, social mobility and employment, pay for transport to illegally cross borders and reach the Mediterranean's southern shores. Criminal networks have the skills and contacts to quickly turn the exodus into a highly lucrative business.[113] The routes are not dominated by a specific group; nor are they exclusive to large transnational criminal networks. Rather, as an admitted smuggler observed, "almost everyone in the region smuggles".[114] The goods include drugs (cocaine, hashish, heroin and methamphetamines), contraband cigarettes and Sub-Saharan and Sahelian migrants travelling to Libya and on to Europe, as well as Libyan-subsidised fuel and food, vehicles and spare parts and weapons going south.[115] Often no distinction is made locally between licit and illicit goods.[116]

Jihadi groups operate along these routes, at times benefiting from financial arrangements with local criminals by providing security for valuable convoys.[117] However, contrary to frequent depictions, the jihadi role in the criminal enterprises so far appears limited. More striking is the role of criminal networks aligned with local governing elites and the self-serving declarations by local groups that they act on behalf of counter-terrorism (the Tebu are a clear example). It is primarily these groups, profiting from official corruption and the absence of state institutions, that undermine attempts to strengthen the state and its services in these peripheral areas.

The money cross-border smuggling generates can quickly corrode any will among local power-holders to reverse the situation, increasing obstacles to state building or reinforcement of crumbling institutions in these areas.[118] It is more profitable for both crime bosses and local kingpins to maintain informal governance systems that allow local communities to survive but not prosper.[119]

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[112] Lacher, "Organised Crime", op. cit. For background, see Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2012).

[113] For an example of how politics, criminality and migration mingle, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°100, *Eritrea: Ending The Exodus?*, 8 August 2014, pp. 6-8.

[114] Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Tripoli, March 2015; Lacher, "Organised Crime", op. cit.

[115] Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli and Sebha, March 2015. This information was confirmed in interviews with smugglers, businessmen and former civil servants posted in northern Niger and Niamey, and businessmen in Abuja and Kano, February 2015.

[116] Crisis Group interview, community elder, Sebha, March 2015; Lacher, "Organised Crime", op. cit., p. 4.

[117] Crisis Group interviews, businessman from the region, Dubai, December 2014; businessman, Niamey, February 2015; and smuggler, Tripoli, March 2015.

[118] Crisis Group interview, businessman, Niamey, February 2015; community elder, Sebha, March 2015.

[119] "As long as the Arabs continue to fight each other, it is good for us. We can continue to consolidate our base. We know that once the Arab tribes stop fighting each other, then they will be united in fighting us". Crisis Group interview, Tebu militia leader, Tunis, February 2015.

IV. **Policy Responses**

A.   *Global Interests in the Central Sahel*

Global interest in the Sahel is rising. Mineral wealth, weak or non-existent state presence and the existence of both criminal networks and jihadi groups with transnational connections increasingly draw attention from the West and Gulf states, particularly Qatar. Europe is also extremely concerned about the massive increase in illegal immigration from Africa and the Middle East.[120]

In April 2015, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) announced a joint pilot project with the European Commission (EC) and Italy to deter migrants en route to Europe. Italy, leading the project, will deploy "roaming teams of experts … along known migratory routes in Niger to intercept them before they reach the North African coast and Europe". According to an EC official, the project, expected to launch in the summer, would first create "reception centres in Niger … in order to facilitate the screening and voluntary return operations of migrants as well as the identification of persons in need of protection".[121]

The UN and EU have launched a variety of Sahel-based initiatives. Since 2011, the latter has been implementing – with little success – a Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, based on the assumption that "development and security are mutually supportive and that the issues faced in the Sahel require a regional answer".[122] The UN's Integrated Strategy for the Sahel includes humanitarian and development programs and a "Group of Five for the Sahel" bringing together regional leaders to establish an organisation for development and security.[123] But these strategies receive little attention on the ground and are dismissed by local and inter-

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[120] As of 11 June, 56,986 migrants had landed in Italy in 2015. In the Central Mediterranean, (departing from Libya), Eritreans are the dominant nationality, with the share of Syrians dropping. West African countries featured in the top five countries of origin, although in far lower numbers. In 2014, arrivals of Malians, Nigerians and Gambians together were less than half those of Syrians and Eritreans. 76 per cent of those reaching Italy in 2014 were from Syria, Eritrea, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Somalia. Eritreans are by far the largest share of arrivals (23 per cent) so far in 2015. Brian, "Eastern Mediterranean: dramatic increase in migrant flows", op. cit. See also, "What's behind the surge in refugees crossing the Mediterranean sea", *The New York Times*, 21 May 2015.
[121] "Expert teams in Niger to steer migrants home", EU Observer, 21 April 2015.
[122] The EU initiative focuses on 1) development, good governance and internal conflict resolution; 2) politics and diplomacy; 3) security and rule of law; and 4) countering violent extremism. In 2013, the EU created a Special Representative for the Sahel and pledged for 2014-2020 some €5 billion in bilateral aid, including €1.15 billion for regional programs. In March 2014, it extended the strategy to Burkina Faso and Chad, while intensifying activities in Mali, Mauritania and Niger and recognising the strong link to stability in Libya. Within that strategy, it created a civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission in Niger, with a €9.2 million budget for 2014-2015, aimed at improving security forces to fight terrorism and organised crime; and deployed two CSDP missions in Mali: military training, and civilian to advise and train the police, gendarmerie and national guard. On 13 May, the EU announced a scaling up of its capacity-building program, the "EUCAP Sahel Niger" civilian mission, to support the authorities in preventing irregular immigration and combatting associated crimes. It also aids local anti-corruption efforts in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali with funds from the eleventh European Development Fund (EDF) and the Instrument contributing to Peace and Stability (IcSP) to build rule of law and fight corruption.
[123] "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Sahel region", UN Security Council, S/2013/354, 14 June 2013.

national observers as at best "lovely [but], ineffective pieces of paper".[124] Their implementation should be reinforced and preferably expanded, with a greater presence in the field and more consultation with local communities.

Military interventions by France and, to a lesser degree, the U.S. have sought to stem a growing jihadi threat.[125] When Islamist groups seized Mali's north in 2012, a rapid, well-prepared French deployment (Operation Serval) in January 2013 halted the offensive and expelled al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) forces.[126] In 2014, France launched Operation Barkhane, with a 3,000-strong counter-terrorism force headquartered in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, and troops in Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Mauritania. Serval was a short-term mission; Barkhane, though with no civilian or state-building component, is anticipated to remain for much longer and may evolve into a permanent security arrangement.[127]

The U.S. has been less prominent, but the region is one of its main counter-terrorism concerns. In 2005, it established the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), led by the U.S. State Department, to enhance regional governments' capacity to combat rising extremism.[128] Following the September 2012 attack on its consulate in Benghazi, Washington dedicated some 800 marines in southern Spain, an airbase in Sicily and drone bases in Agadez and N'Djamena to its crisis response force.[129]

As the Western military presence has increased, so too has the local belief that it is tied to growing interest in the region's uranium, gold and hydrocarbon wealth, as well as the arms trade.[130] France's history in the region, including its sometimes difficult relationship with Algeria, the kidnapping of its nationals and March 2015 shootings at a popular expat bar in Bamako (a Frenchman, Belgian and three Malians were reportedly killed) go some way to explaining its posture.[131] But France also has other involvements, not least with Nigerien uranium mines that provide 30 per cent of its nuclear energy needs and are targets of growing international competition, including from China.[132] Likewise, the Sahel offers opportunities for arms deals

[124] Crisis Group, interviews, political analysts, Niamey, Abuja, Paris, March-April 2015.

[125] Jihadi groups active in the wider Sahel include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), an AQIM splinter group that announced itself in October 2011; both could potentially seek to ally with IS, as Boko Haram appears to have done.

[126] On Mali's 2012-2013 crisis, see Crisis Group Reports, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, and *Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful Reform*, both op. cit.

[127] Richard Reeve and Zoë Pelter, "From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-Terrorism Operations in the Sahel-Sahara", Oxford Research Group, August 2014.

[128] See Lesley Anne Warner, "The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership: Building Partner Capacity to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism", CNA Corporation, March 2014.

[129] Reeve and Pelter, "From New Frontier to New Normal", op. cit.

[130] Crisis Group, interview, government official, Niamey, February 2015. This belief was repeated in numerous interviews, including analyst, Dubai, December 2014; political analyst, Abuja, February 2015; politician, Niamey, February 2015; and activists and community elders, Tripoli and Sebha, March 2015.

[131] Crisis Group interview, security expert working on French and U.S. interventions in Sahel-Sahara, London, 4 March 2015. Algeria views French Sahel policy with some suspicion, though it collaborated with Operation Serval. France's actions in regard to Qadhafi's overthrow are seen as irresponsible. Algerian officials say France allowed pro-Qadhafi Tuaregs to escape with their weapons, with consequences for northern Mali, and opposed further military operations in southern Mali that some French officials urged in 2014. Crisis Group interview, Algiers, December 2014.

[132] Reeve and Pelter, "From New Frontier to New Normal", op. cit.

to European and, increasingly, Asian states, such as France's highly lucrative sale of fighter jets.[133]

Suspicions of a hidden agenda fuel hostility toward the West that is exacerbated by continued, uncritical Western support (including financial) for governments that have, in the eyes of some locals, lost legitimacy. Western governments have given support to Niger, viewing it as both an island of stability and another potential weak link in the Sahel. In addition to funding its counter-terrorism efforts, they have increasingly linked their Nigerien development initiatives with their wider regional security concerns.[134]

The suspicion surrounding foreign interest merges in some quarters with anxiety about Chad.[135] Libya and Nigeria have contentious histories with N'djamena and are wary of its ambitions.[136] Its significant increase in oil production since 2003 has allowed President Idris Déby to build one of the Sahel's largest, best trained and equipped militaries. Wariness has been reinforced by Chad's January 2015 intervention (reportedly at Nigeria's request) against Boko Haram.[137] It is also alleged that Chad tacitly encourages the Tebus, who have strained relations with Déby and cross-border community ties, to go into resource-rich southern Libya.[138] Nevertheless, the U.S. and France reward Chad with significant support as a key counter-terrorism partner and staging base.[139]

European states also have an interest in curbing migration. European Union (EU) and African partners launched the "Rabat Process" in 2006 and the "Khartoum Pro-

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[133] Crisis Group interview, security expert, London, 4 March 2015.

[134] Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Niamey, February 2015; also Crisis Group Report, *Niger: Another Weak Link?*, op. cit.

[135] In 2014, Chad was 155th of 175 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (online). It has oil but, as noted, is very low on UNDP's development index.

[136] When the Libya crisis began in 2011, President Déby, who had a close relationship with Qadhafi, defended him by accusing the rebels of Islamist ties. The presence of Chad fighters among Qadhafi's troops deepened hostility to Déby among the rebels. Since January 2015, Chadian troops have targeted Boko Haram in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria.

[137] Crisis Group interviews, Dubai, December 2014; political analyst, Abuja, February 2015. President Déby is referred to in some circles as a "pompier pyromane" ("pyromaniac fireman"). Philippe Duval, "Idriss Déby, Pompier Pyromane", *MondAfrique*, 25 January 2015. This reflects a suspicion that he destabilises neighbours, so as to then use Chad's comparative military strength to gain international acclaim and support, as well as a degree of leverage. Critics also believe his wider ambition is to become Qadhafi's successor as the new leader of the Sahel.

[138] Chad's northern Tibesti region, an area difficult to control, is neglected by N'Djamena and traditionally hostile to Déby; since 2011, arms and Chadian nationals (Tebu but also other ethnicities) reportedly cross into southern Libya in increasing numbers seeking land and financial gain, allegedly with N'Djamena's tacit encouragement. Crisis Group interviews, community elders, Sebha, March 2015. For more on the dynamics, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°78, *Chad's North West: The Next High Risk Area?*, 17 February 2011. In its own view, N'Djamena favours a stable Libya and has tried to broker a deal among its factions. Crisis Group interview, October 2014.

[139] Chad, the primary base for Operation Barkhane, has a long history of French military support and training as well as aid, including via Operations Manta (1983) and Epervier (1986). It takes a leading role in the TSCTP and in the last decade has been a U.S. "war on terror" partner, receiving significant aid and military training and equipment. Crisis Group interviews, Abuja, February 2015; and Sebha, March 2015. "US support for Chad may destabilise the Sahel", Al Jazeera, 6 March 2015; Pieter D. Wezeman, "Arms flows to the conflict in Chad", Stockholm International Peace Research Intitute (SIPRI) background paper, August 2009, p. 6.

cess" in 2014, both designed to curb illegal immigration.[140] While the emphasis is on increased border patrols, funds are simultaneously sent to major migrant countries in the hope development will reduce the migration impulse. Neither process adequately addresses the root causes of migration, which is spurred by not only scant job opportunities, but also lack of social mobility and, at times, of political freedom. The efficacy of giving aid without requiring recipients to fundamentally change the policies that drive migration is questionable.[141]

In May 2015, the EU began a new security-oriented policy to curb migration, including seizing and destroying boats involved in smuggling migrants. This has now been formalised with the launch of "EUNAVFOR Med", on 22 June 2015, to patrol the Mediterranean and gather information on and monitor smuggling networks, with the aim of deterring migration.[142] However, some member states appear to view it also as a convenient umbrella for future counter-terrorism action in Libya.[143]

Western states are not the only foreign actors to provoke suspicions. The Gulf states, notably Qatar, are increasingly important in the region. Gulf money is used for investment but reportedly also, often via charities and Islamic NGOs, to fund construction of mosques and madrasas.[144] The largesse may polarise local power-holders and members of the ruling class between those who support Islam's growing role in politics and those who seek to preserve a purely secular state. In the context of Islamic radicalisation, international observers worry that especially Qatari support for a large network of Islamist-leaning proxies may result in some significant sums reaching extremist groups. Partially in recognition of this, the ruling family has taken steps to increase oversight of Qatar's charities, including creation of a charities regulator.[145]

B. *Counterproductive and Unbalanced Responses*

Greater support is needed for a sustained process to tackle criminality, corruption and state weakness. The UN and EU Sahel strategies have not been effectively implemented, and the most visible international tools to combat insecurity, as argued above, are overly military. Operation Barkhane and its Serval predecessor have had some success in disrupting Islamist extremists in Mali but can no more end the regional jihadi threat alone than policing can curb migration alone. Securitisation of the region and poorly regulated financial support for unpopular governments risk

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[140] The Rabat and Khartoum processes' full names are, respectively, the Euro-African Conference on Migration and Development and the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative.

[141] Crisis Group interviews, youths and political analyst, Niamey, February 2015. For fairly recent migrant numbers, see "Smuggled Futures: The Dangerous Path of the Migrant from Africa to Europe", The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, May 2014.

[142] "Statement by High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini on the Council decision to launch the naval operation EUNAVFOR Med", press release, EU, 22 June 2015.

[143] On 18 May 2015, the European Council approved establishment of EU military operation EUNAVFOR Med, under the command of an Italian admiral. "Council establishes EU naval operation to disrupt human smugglers in the Mediterranean", press release, European Council. Crisis Group interview, Italian government official, Rome, May 2015.

[144] Crisis Group interviews and observations, Niamey, February 2015.

[145] Crisis Group interview, Gulf security and foreign policy expert, London, 4 March 2015. "Qatar Regulates Charities as U.S. Urges to Stop Terror Funding", Bloomberg, 16 September 2014. Much controversy surrounding Qatar is tied to Gulf Cooperation Council politics and the dispute over Qatar's (recently dialled-back) support for political Islam, often erroneously conflated with extremism.

exacerbating trends that feed the rise not only of jihadi groups but also of transnational criminal networks and migration.

Overemphasis on counter-terrorism operations and the perceived jihadi threat is diverting crucial attention and resources from the underlying causes of instability and can exacerbate them, as it tends to require reliance on flawed central and local elites. The counter-terrorism narrative is deceptively convenient, allowing a quick, visible response and permitting those in authority in the region to divert attention from their own corruption and governance failures, while enhancing international support for their regimes. However, the West's current military efforts are likely to prove ineffective and may well prompt local backlash.

C.   *A Holistic Approach*

The security approach urgently needs balancing by political measures that address the causes and effects of state instability: bad governance, poverty, local conflicts over resources, corruption, youth unemployment and alienated peripheries. Much depends on the political will of regional leaders to approach these holistically. International influence should be leveraged to encourage this by, for example, tying development aid to implementation of an anti-corruption strategy that includes formation of authoritative, well-resourced civil society oversight mechanisms and simple, measurable indicators. Support should also be given to building cross-society coalitions against mismanagement and pressure applied to involve regional governments in national anti-corruption strategies. Monitoring might be combined with local programs to name and shame corrupt politicians.

The greatest responsibility lies with national governments in the region. Attempts to stem rapid population growth are essential to address rising instability, radicalisation, poverty and food crisis. Improving women's status by making girls' education a national priority, enforcing laws that prohibit child marriage and upholding women's reproductive rights would go a long way. This would likely be controversial in the patriarchal societies, but without deep social reform that dramatically cuts birth rates, demographics risk swiftly overwhelming other attempts to ensure stability. In the short to medium term, programs to create jobs for disaffected young people and technical and vocational training to qualify them for employment in emerging sectors should be another priority.

Such prescriptions do not lend themselves to short timeframes, but sustainable stability is achievable only by promoting the rule of law and tackling entrenched corruption, entwined political and criminal interests and the widespread trafficking and smuggling networks that traverse the region.

V.   **Conclusion**

The Central Sahel's trajectory is worrying. Violence is set to continue, if not escalate, against the backdrop of a huge spike in numbers of impoverished youth. Deep disenchantment with national governments and competition over access to power and shrinking resources cause localised tensions to escalate to a national, then regional level. Those conflicts that have gained a jihadi dimension have done so only gradually, and even then as only one element among many.

Exaggerating the jihadi threat gives governments an excuse to minimise their own failures, securitise policies and further shrink political space. By co-opting parts of the opposition and labelling as "anti-peace elements" those who do not share their threat analysis, the governing elites leave much of the population without a legitimate means of expressing disagreement. It should not be ignored that many, particularly disenchanted and alienated youths, see political Islam as the solution. The failure of governments to differentiate between Islamism and violent jihadism and the resulting criminalisation of the former risk further stoking radicalisation.

The effort of international partners to shore up regimes that have lost much legitimacy is not a viable long-term policy. They should visibly and consistently demand good governance and promote development. Failure to heed genuine aspirations for meaningful employment and social mobility, coupled with continued support for old, often compromised, leaders risks rendering the West an enemy in the eyes of many. International partners must rethink and overhaul their approach if they are to contribute to a dangerous region's lasting peace and security.

Dakar/Brussels, 25 June 2015

Appendix A: Map of Migratory Routes Through the Central Sahel
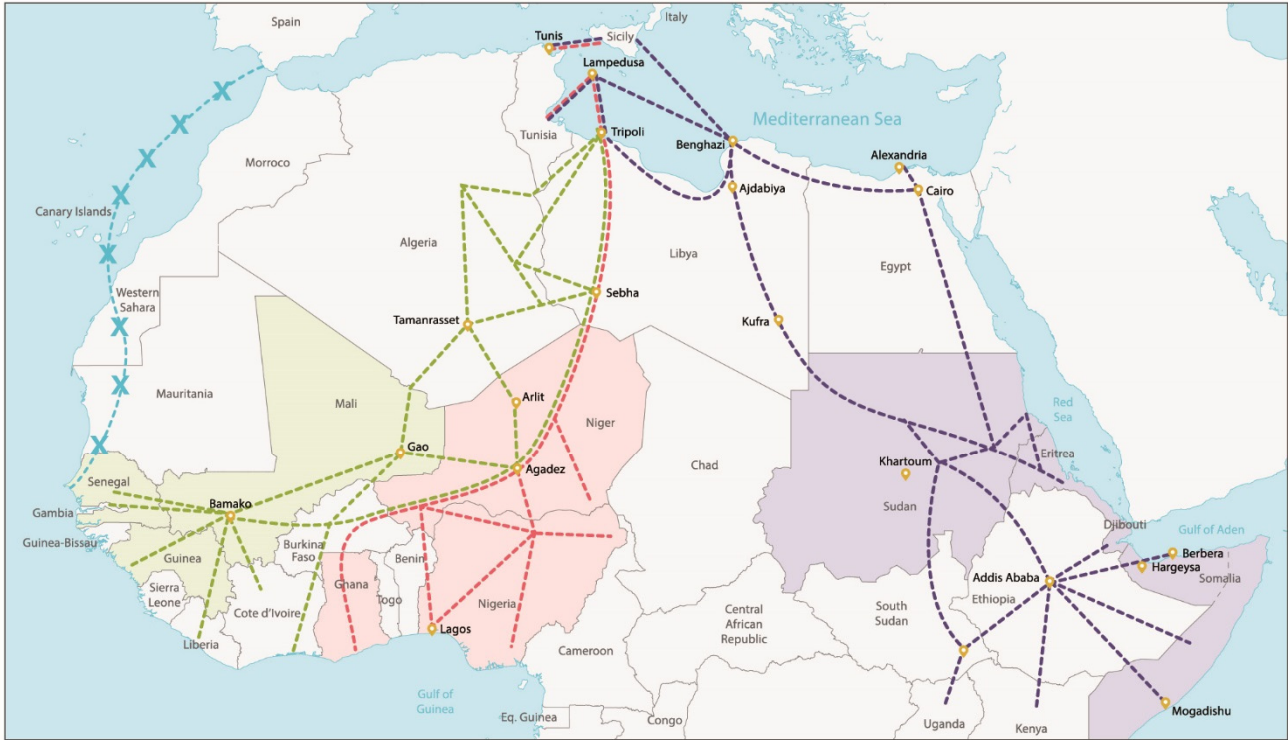
- - - - - Western Route - Main sources countries (shaded): Senegal, Guinea, Mali

- - - - - Central Route - Main sources countries (shaded): Nigeria, Ghana, Niger

- - - - - Eastern Route - Main sources countries (shaded): Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan (Darfur)

--X-- Coastal Route to Spain (closed off)

Source: *Smuggled Futures*, published by The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2014. Reproduced with permission.