

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/02/25/remote-warfare-in-the-sahel-and-a-role-for-the-european-union/>

DELINA GOXHO, FEB 25 2021

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'The glass is half full, it's complex and we have a lot to do, but I'm convinced we are on the right track' remarked French Defence Minister Florence Parly at the Munich Security Conference on 16 February 2019. [1] She added that she believed the French military presence in the G5 Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso) will improve the security situation in the Sahel, a region which has, for some time, been a prominent theatre of intervention. In December 2012, French troops intervened in Mali to stop Islamist militants advancing on the capital Bamako, firstly through Opération Serval and then later with Opération Barkhane (as of 2014). Islamist groups had gained control over the northern part of Mali, capitalising on the instability caused by the Libyan civil war in the region. Opération Serval succeeded in its efforts to recapture territory. Opération Barkhane was then launched to provide long-term support to the wider region and prevent 'jihadist groups' from regaining control (Bacchi 2014). In the past few years, however, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have been suffering some of the deadliest attacks on record, as the area is being ravaged by tribal conflict and terror attacks (Chambas 2020).

On 3 April 2019, the Islamic State's Amaq Agency released its first video footage of an alleged attack against French forces in Mali on the border with Niger (Weiss 2019). At the 2019 Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister of Burkina Faso, Mamadou Alpha Barry, also lamented increasing instability in the region, stating that the money promised to the G5 Sahel force is yet to be disbursed.[2] France has kept about 4,500 troops and pushed for the creation of a force made up of soldiers from the G5 group to combat jihadist extremism. In addition to the lack of resources, the G5 Force's impact has also been reduced due to poor coordination amongst the five African countries (French Ministry of Defence 2019).

Remote warfare[3] conducted by Western forces is shifting its focus to the Sahel and as European states try to rely less on the US security apparatus, old legal challenges – especially those concerning armed drones and remote warfare more broadly – are emerging in new territories. This places a particular strain on local communities in the Sahel, who are kept in the dark about operations in their country. This chapter discusses the use of remote warfare in the Sahel and the problems it creates. The chapter then explores the potential avenues for peace in the region. In particular, the chapter argues why the European Union (EU) is best placed to be a peace broker in the Sahel.

Remote Warfare in the Sahel

On 17 November 2018 at around 1:00 am (Brussels time), French Defence Staff reported that Niamey air base in Niger lost contact with a Reaper drone belonging to the Barkhane force, which was returning to base. The drone crashed in a desert area and no casualties were reported (DefPost 2018). After the news broke out, the French and European public acknowledged the existence of French remote warfare in the region (see VOA Africa 2018; DefenceWeb 2018; Le Figaro 2018). As of July 2018, four French Reaper drones have joined the airbase in Niamey, in order to increase Opération Barkhane's capabilities and in 2020 six more will be joining the mission (Cole 2018). In addition, France has now armed and is using its drones, while awaiting the development of the European project

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

Eurodrone, which would also equip Italian and German forces and should be operational by 2025 (Charpentreau 2018).

In September 2017, Italy and Niger also signed an agreement to develop bilateral cooperation on security matters. It was believed that the agreement would only deal with migrant influxes, but it appears that the Italian defence company Leonardo will also benefit from the agreement, as revealed by a Freedom of Information Act in February 2019 (Labarrière 2019). This type of agreement does not need to be ratified and is not subject to parliamentary scrutiny, making it easier for the Italian Government to conduct security operations in the Sahel, without having to ask for parliamentary approval.

The Italian mission will be based in Niamey, within the US airbase and had initially been blocked by France, in a dispute with Rome over influence in the region (Negri 2018). Another aligned mission is the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali), made up of about 10,000 troops and 2,000 police officers. Finally, Germany is also stepping up its engagement in the security sector. In 2018 Burkina Faso became a partner country of the German training initiative, in order to help build capacities within the police and the gendarmerie. 'We will develop this further to embrace equipment and will provide about ten million euros to this end. We will also offer advisory services to be provided by the Bundeswehr,[4] also of the order of seven to €10 million,' pledged Angela Merkel in her visit to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso In 2019.[5] In Niamey, she stated that assistance is being provided, especially with regard to training Niger's armed forces with 'about €30 million invested recently.'[6]

The EU, as a whole, is increasing its presence in the region as well. Aside from supporting the G5 Sahel countries in political partnership and through development cooperation, the EU is also providing support for security and stability through the provision of €147 million to establish the African-led G5 Sahel Joint Force through its three Common Security and Defence Policy missions: EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali and EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali. The latter, in particular, falls within the definition of security force assistance and partner capacity building as it provides military training to Malian Armed Forces. EUTM was deployed in March 2013 with the aim of restructuring the Malian military and improving the general security sector reform in the country.

In addition, since summer 2017, the EU launched a regionalisation process of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) action in the Sahel, in order to both combine military and civilian spheres and bring Sahel countries closer to each other on security matters.[7] Such work is part of a wider effort on the part of European states to conduct operations in the region remotely. As for the US presence, Niger Air Base 201 in Agadez (Damon, 2017), a future hub for armed drones and other aircraft, is now operational. Air Base 201, a compound of three large hangars in the middle of the desert, is twice the size of Agadez itself (Maclean and Saley 2018) and houses the US armed drone mission in Niger that currently operates out of Niamey.

The US presence in the Sahel has increased considerably in the past few years. The Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger in October 2017, where 4 US and 5 Nigerien soldiers were killed by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) fighters, has changed the appearance of US engagement in the region, unveiling the nature of US shadow war in the Sahel, much like the crash of the Barkhane Reaper drone did for Europe. From 2002, the US has been conducting training missions for local forces to equip them to fight against Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other groups such as Jam'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), ISGS, Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Islam.[8] Even though the rhetoric says that they wish to maintain a light footprint in Africa, US forces are certainly increasing their presence in the Sahel, albeit in a different way. Right after the Tongo Tongo ambush, Niger authorised US armed drone presence on its territory and the US began the construction of its drone camp in Agadez, a more central location in the region which would allow for better control over a larger swathe of territory.

The Dangers of Remote Warfare in the Sahel

The fears associated with remote warfare could be largely grouped in internal and external. Internally, there is a real or perceived lack of ownership and a rise in conspiracy theories. Externally, there is an evident lack of public scrutiny over light footprint warfare, as will be mentioned later, and the danger of blowback. These fears derive directly from

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

the hidden nature of remote warfare. The Nigerien Government has welcomed the presence of US troops, as long as they contribute to the eradication of terrorist activity in the country, but civil society in Niger appears distrustful of such a presence. A report by *The Guardian* in 2018 states that foreign military presence has had negative impacts on freedom of speech and many opposition leaders have lamented the lack of parliamentary oversight whenever foreign presence is authorised (Maclean and Saley 2018). The fear is that Niger will increasingly become a hub for geopolitical interests of great powers, which could lead to tougher treatment of dissent internally (Ibid.).

In addition, Niger spends about 21 percent of its budget on defence, which for a poor country represents a large percentage of its revenues (Bailie 2018). The securitisation of the Nigerien political sphere is viewed as a way to harness support for a government that would otherwise receive less approval. As for the legality of foreign powers presence, this does not depend on Nigerien parliamentary approval. Neither the US nor Niger are revealing the details of their cooperation. Niger's authorities state that these are not 'defence agreements', as Niger is purely a logistical hotspot. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Nigerien public are concerned. A CIA official interviewed during a visit to Niamey in July 2019 reported that whenever a strike is launched from the US' Niger Air Base 201 near Agadez, 'a CIA commander sends a WhatsApp text to his Nigerien counterpart, it is a gentlemen's agreement.' It would be hard to call this parliamentary oversight. It appears that the defence of Nigerien territory is ongoing. After the Tongo Tongo ambush in June 2018, French and US Special Forces took part in a fight against militants next to the Libyan border.

The evolution of the conflicts in the region points towards a growing reliance on the use of remote warfare tactics, such as partner capacity building and the use of drones. The paradox is evident: power players in the region are still interventionist, but unwilling to bear the human cost of deploying their own troops (Jazekovic 2017) and this remote presence in the region is perceived by local authorities and the population as neo-colonial. The US has not clarified its long-term strategic intentions, but both France and the EU have. The G5 Sahel Joint Force is considered a way of reducing French and foreign presence and allowing for stronger ownership of regional authorities of their own security. The stated intention is to replace Opération Barkhane and EU CSDP missions with the G5 Sahel Joint Force; however, there appears to be no timeline for when such an objective should be achieved, which leads inevitably to criticisms (RFI 2019).

But while US and European publics have taken stock of these recent developments, publicly available information within the region lags behind. The shy communication initiatives by the local government appear to be more of a result of increasing pressure on politicians to not be servient of foreign powers rather than a transparent policy choice. Journalist Ahamadou Abdoulaye Abdourahamane writes on Niamey Soir in August 2018: 'There is no independence if you are surveilled by foreign drones. We refuse this fake independence, there is no independence if our local forces cannot enter Western bases. Whatever the security threats are, military cooperation should not mean neo-colonial conquest.' [9] Journalist Seidik Abba writes 'Many Nigeriens, such as myself, feel deep sadness for having to learn what happens in their country through the New York Times. Niger is not a federal state of the United States.' [10]

The real or perceived absence of a positive economic impact is another reason why the US military presence is not deemed beneficial to the region. Many inhabitants of the Tadarass neighbourhood, the closest to the Agadez US201 base, denounce the ineffectiveness of the base. Both the noise and the dust caused by the base have made US presence in Agadez hard to accept for the local residents. In addition, military presence is not even fulfilling its main purpose, which is to provide security, as foreign presence often means that the local population will more likely be targeted and become collateral damage. Moreover, there are fears that a conflict may erupt amongst regional forces and the US or French presence.

On partner capacity building, research conducted by Oxford Research Group in Mali and Kenya in September 2018 adds to this complexity by explaining how the political vacuum in capitals leads to a disarrayed coordination of troops on the ground (Knowles and Watson 2019). In Mali, Knowles and Watson (2019, 2) note 'there were a few men scattered across the multiple international military initiatives in the country run by the EU, the UN and the French without a clear sense of how these activities – in aggregate – might lead to a sustainable improvement in the capacity of their Malian partners.' In addition, HQ too often considers personnel on the ground as less relevant in the decision-

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

making process, as the main political authority is within capital cities, which leads to a gap between those implementing strategy and those devising it. Some short-term tactics (such as preferring to train soldiers who belong to a specific ethnic group) may be quick and effective in the short term but lead to further complications in the long term in a country marred by ethnic conflict (Ibid.).

Finally, as recent research (Lyckman and Weissman 2014) shows, the use of 'light footprint war' carries several challenges which not only relate to what is mentioned above, but also to transparency and accountability. As Goldsmith and Waxman (2016, 8) point out, referring to the changes made by former President Obama, '[...] light-footprint warfare does not attract nearly the same level of congressional and especially public scrutiny as do more conventional military means.' In addition, studies on the blowback consequences of remote tactics such as drone strikes vary widely, but arguably the most complete research on such topic to date (Saeed et al. 2019) finds that 'drone strikes are followed by strongly elevated rates of suicide attacks' at least for the location and time period taken into consideration.[11] All such dangers of remote warfare worsen the internal problems previously mentioned above.

A Role for the EU

The EU is the ideal peace broker in the region, not least because of how the region is perceived by a number of relevant member states. Lebovich (2018) argues that it is in the Sahel that some EU members believe they must fight a key battle for the future of the European project, viewing the stabilisation of the region – particularly through initiatives to hamper migration and suppress terrorist threats – as key to combating populist nationalism in their respective countries (Lebovich 2018). The EU has been intensifying its efforts in the region in response to a succession of destabilising events, from the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali and subsequent terrorist occupation of the area to the migration crisis that moved across Europe from 2015 onwards (although European concern about the region has been increasing since 2008, if not earlier).

European leaders are also extremely proud that they saw the region as central much before other powers did and started deploying personnel very early on. The EU's main ambitions are non-military, despite having a training mission in Mali (EUTM), which means its role in the Sahel could be very different from that of member states. The EU supports several security initiatives: it has already provided €100 million to establish the African led G5 Sahel Joint Force which aims to improve security in the region and fight terrorist and criminal groups. As mentioned, the EU is itself a security player in the Sahel, with three Common Security and Defence Policy missions (EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, EU training mission – EUTM – in Mali). The Council extended the mandate of the EU mission EUCAP Sahel Mali to January 2021 and allocated it a budget of almost €67 million (Council of the European Union 2019b).[12]

In addition, the EU is planning to establish a fourth CSDP mission in the region in the coming years (Lebovich 2018). It also provides more than €400 million in programmes to support stability and development in the region. For example, in 2017, the EU launched a stabilisation operation in a small area of Mali, responsible for advising the Malian authorities in Mopti and Segou on governance-related issues, and supporting the planning and implementation by the Malian authorities of activities aimed at reinstating the civilian administration and basic services in the region. This team also intended to support an enhanced dialogue between the Malian authorities and the local communities (Council of the European Union 2017). However, in their drive to respond to political pressure from member states, which may be articulated in different ways, EU interventions in the region sometimes fail to adapt to conditions on the ground, potentially contributing to instability in the long run.

These interventions also risk creating overly convoluted and flimsy bureaucracies both because of strategic gaps and simply because of a large presence of uncoordinated actors. The G5 Sahel force risks becoming another security architecture, which could further exacerbate the situation in the region (Schnabel 2019). As such, the EU should instead focus on a civilian rather than military component, in order to build trust with the local population and gather much needed data. The EU must also contend with member states' competing interests and overlapping missions and contributions, from France's Operation Barkhane to the recent Italian deployment – coupled with a growing US remote presence.

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

As mentioned, the EU is better suited to be a presence on the ground compared to other foreign forces because of local perceptions. Niger's government has recognised EUCAP Sahel Niger's value (Lebovich 2018) and gradually adapted to the mission, also increasing its participation. This shift in attitude could be seen following the onset of the European migration crisis, which showed local governments that European interest in the region was heavily dependent on the emergency and prompted demands from authoritarian regimes in the region. Elites in partner countries such as Niger show that they have learned how to use European demands to their own advantage (Koch et al 2018).

As for European remote warfare in the region and the related issue of much needed regulation changes in Brussels, the new European Defence Fund (coupled with the European Peace Facility) represents an opportunity to have a positive impact in the region. One example of this could be the acquisition and use of armed drones. Since the EU Defence Fund will not be a competence of member states[13] – such as Italy and France who are already, or will at some point, deploy armed drones in the region, but on EU prerogative – Brussels should focus on regulating how such missions are conducted by establishing an EU Common Policy[14] on armed drones. In this way, the EU could have a say on how such a weapon is deployed, in order not to fall for the US trap of endless remote warfare.

Moreover, the EU's integrated strategy for the Sahel centres on the idea that security, development, and governance are strongly intertwined. This does not mean that the Security-Development Nexus (whose four pillars are youth, fight against radicalisation, migration and illicit trafficking[15]) is a perfect instrument. Local civil society groups have voiced concerns around the way topics such as countering violent extremism (CVE) are treated by international actors.[16] Despite all this, though, it is undeniable that the EU strategy for the Sahel[17] presents several positive, innovative ideas for securing troubled areas, where a military approach is not deemed to be sufficient in itself to securing the region.

The European Council allowed for the establishment of a regional coordination cell (RCC) based within the European Conference on Antennas and Propagation (EUCAP) Sahel Mali (Council of the European Union 2019a). This cell includes a network of internal security and defence experts, deployed in Mali but also in EU delegations in other G5 Sahel countries. The RCC command and control structure (now renamed RACC, Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell) has recently been strengthened through an increase in the numbers of CSDP experts and moved from Bamako to Nouakchott (Ibid.). The RACC supports, through strategic advice, the G5 Sahel structures and countries, and the objective of the cell's activities will be to strengthen the G5 Sahel regional and national capacities, particularly to support the operationalisation of the G5 Sahel joint force military and police components. EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger will be able to conduct targeted activities of strategic advice and training in other G5 Sahel countries. The European Council envisages that in the medium to long term, the coordination hub's function will be transferred from Brussels to the structures of the G5 Sahel. The coordination hub is a mechanism which has operated under the responsibility of the EU military staff since November 2017 and which provides an overview of the needs of the military G5 joint force together with the potential offers of military support from EU member states and from other donors. In other words, it is a forum which allows the matching of offers to needs.

However, in order to avoid all issues mentioned above, the EU should make sure that it establishes clear processes that would not only be beneficial to its mission, but which could also aid other foreign and regional presences. Its new focus on security and defence and its renewed interest in the Sahel are good incentives to take up more responsibility for all foreign forces operating in the region. This is clearly hard to accomplish, as security interests are not so easily negotiable, but the EU has much to offer. In order to avoid duplicating efforts, creating larger and uncooperative architectures and being perceived merely as a self-interested foreign force by the local population, the EU must ensure cooperation not just amongst its different missions in the region, but also amongst all other security actors.

In addition, it should offer a clearly demarcated and large civilian component to its missions and make sure that governance and development represent a much wider part of its agenda, starting from nudging towards a security sector reform that is more aligned with good governance and democratic principles. This is undoubtedly extremely hard as it involves negotiation and compromise with partner governments, which do not want EU interference in their internal affairs. However, given what it provides in terms of resources from development and training and its positive

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

reputation with local communities, the EU has more leverage than it gives itself credit for and could push for best practices and positive reform.

The EU should also have in mind a clear time frame, and different and complementary objectives throughout all phases, with a particular attention to the initial and final moments. This would avoid mistakes such as the creation of other divisive community fractures, as is the case with UK forces, [18] and lack of lessons learned due to not clearly established reporting mechanisms both internally and to Brussels. Finally, the EU should have a positive communication role, not just amongst the different institutional and military actors in the region, but also with the local communities and civil society actors. The EU can be more effective compared to other actors given its connections to member states' missions, its lack of colonial and neo-colonial reputation and its resources.

Conclusion

The Sahel is experiencing a hardening of the security situation due to criminal and terrorist threats and both resources and personnel are pouring in from certain European member states, the UN and the US. Far from creating stability, this risks further exacerbating present tensions and is negatively perceived by local communities. The EU missions and EU funds could be beneficial in avoiding mistakes due to poor management and coordination amongst local and foreign forces. The EU should understand its leverage and use it to the advantage of the two key words born in the crest of the G5 security alliance: security and development.

Notes

[1] Opening speech of the Munich Security Conference, Retrieved from <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/salle-de-presse/dossiers-de-presse/discours-de-florence-parly-en-ouverture-de-la-munich-security-conference>

[2] The entire discussion can be found here https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-search/s_video/parallel-panel-discussion-security-in-the-sahel-traffick-jam/s_filter/video/s_term/Panel%20Discussion%20The%20Syrian%20Conflict%3A%20Strategy%20or%20Tragedy%3F%20Conference%20Hall/

[3] By remote warfare, I mean the definition given by Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson in *Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned in Contemporary Theatres* (Oxford Research Group, June 2018): 'a form of intervention which takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and air strikes from above, with Special Forces, intelligence agencies, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground.'

[4] This refers to German Armed Forces

[5] Retrieved from German Federal Government website <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/stepping-up-cooperation-with-the-sahel-region-1605870>

[6] Ibid.

[7] See European External Action Service Factsheet on G5 Sahel : https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_eu_g5_sahel_0.pdf

[8] For a map of armed groups in the region, see Lebovich (2019) https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/sahel_mapping

[9] Loosely translated from French. Retrieved from <http://www.niameysoir.com/abdoul-ecrivain-du-sahel-lindependance-dans-la-negation-de-la-dependance-il-ny-a-pas-dindependance-sous-la-surveillance-des-drones-des-forces-militaires-etrangees/>

[10] Loosely translated from French. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/abbaseidik/status/1039449240303493121?s=20>

Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

[11] The authors (Saeed et al. 2019) test whether there are elevated rates of suicide bombing activity in Pakistan during 30-day time periods immediately following drone strikes. To do so they use the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) drone strike database, which spans from 2004 to 2017 and covers 430 strikes in Pakistan.

[12] See European Council page on EUCAP Sahel Mali : <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/02/21/eucap-sahel-mali-mission-extended-until-14-january-2021-budget-of-67-million-adopted/>

[13] This means that how the Fund is used will be decided upon by the European Commission (and the budget by the European Parliament) without needing to consult with member states. This is the first time in the history of the European Union that a budget for defence is an EU Commission prerogative, see my piece on the European Defence Fund: Goxho (2019), *European defence fund and European drones: mirroring US practice?*, Global Affairs

[14] Which could look like the one proposed by Dorsey, June 2017.

[15] EU Special Representative Losada's interview can be viewed at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/eu-security-strategy-sahel-focused-security-development-nexus/>

[16] Concerns on such matters were shared during our trip to Niamey in July 2019 chiefly by the *Reseau d'Appui Aux Initiatives Locales* (RAIL) and the *Collectif des Organisations de Defense de Droit de l'Homme* (CODDH).

[17] The European Union strategy for the Sahel can be found here: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_eu_g5_sahel_july-2019.pdf

[18] Knowles and Watson (2019) note in 'Improving the UK offer in Africa: Lessons from military partnerships on the continent': '[In Mali] one example is the ethnic composition of the force, which is skewed towards those from the south of the country. Accelerating the growth of an unrepresentative force in the context of ongoing conflicts between different ethnicities in Mali could be extremely detrimental to long-term security.'

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Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

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Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union

Written by Delina Goxho

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