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Terrorism and Other Transnational Threats in the Sahel: What Role for the EU?

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On 16 March 2010, foreign ministers from a number of Saharan and Sahel countries—Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—met in Algeria to discuss the evolving threat of al-Qaida in the region. The meeting was largely seen as a positive sign in a region where cooperation, particularly on security-related issues, has been limited by suspicion among many states, with the absence of Morocco and Tunisia from the meeting being illustrative of those tensions. This gathering in Algiers was followed by another meeting of the heads of intelligence services on 4 April.[1]

On the other side of the Mediterranean, Catherine Ashton, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, viewed the meeting as a step in the right direction. Ashton issued a statement—the first from the European Union at such a level regarding the security situation in the Sahel—emphasizing that "regional and international cooperation will be decisive in tackling the terrorist threat in this key region" and that the EU "fully supports the ongoing efforts regarding security and development in particular."[2]

Terrorism has long been considered a problem in Europe, although the EU itself has been involved in counterterrorism efforts only more recently and in a limited manner. A first wave of "Europeanization" of counterterrorism powers came in the aftermath of 9/11. Further waves followed after the Madrid and London bombings. The most surprising aspect of Ashton's reaction to the Algiers meeting is consequently not so much that she commented on the situation in the Sahel, but rather that most EU officials have hitherto not commented on it, despite the proximity of that region to European shores.

The 2003 European Security Strategy, a key document at the EU level regarding foreign and security policy, stated that terrorism "poses a growing strategic threat to the whole of Europe."[3] Seven years later, al-Qaida "remains the most significant source of threat to Europe,"[4] according to Gilles De Kerchove, EU counterterrorism coordinator, although the level of the threat varies considerably from one member state to another.

Three particular geographical areas appear predominantly on the EU counterterrorism agenda: South Asia, unsurprisingly given NATO, EU, and EU member states' efforts in Afghanistan; Yemen, especially because of the recent failed bombing attempt by Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab on 25 December 2009; and finally the Sahel, where Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is slowly expanding its operations.

It is arguably in this last area that the EU could make the most valuable contribution to regional stability and indirectly foster its own security. Due to geographical proximity, the EU and its member states cannot ignore the consequences of political instability that already spill over their own borders, whether through migration or various forms of smuggling. This brief will discuss a possible role for the EU in combating terrorism and other transnational threats in the Sahel.

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Sahel: Risks and Vulnerabilities

The Sahel is a loosely defined region that is

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increasingly seen as a hotbed of threats to Europe. De Kerchove describes it as a "zone of risk" centered around two "critical arcs": one going from Mali to Mauritania, the other spanning Guinea-Bissau to Mauritania.[5] As the Sahel sits between West Africa and North Africa, the security situation in this broader western African space is tightly entangled with dynamic threats that shift across each of the three subregions. Although there is no real center in this so-called zone of risk, with most threats appearing to be transnational and denationalized,[6] Algeria remains a key regional actor because of its history as the home of AQIM.

Historically rooted in Algeria and formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its French acronym GSPC), AQIM has since changed its name and strategy to copy al-Qaida's model. The group is not as strong and organized as its predecessors were in the 1990s,[7] but despite a steady decline in the number of Islamist fighters and a need to reorganize due to pressures from Algerian security forces, AQIM has shown a remarkable resilience. It has used al-Qaida's popularity to recruit new members; it has shifted from guerrilla tactics to terrorism and criminal activities; and it has moved south and east and across borders to escape pressures from Algerian security forces.[8]

AQIM constitutes a direct threat to European citizens and interests in the Sahel and certain more remote parts of West Africa,[9] as illustrated by the kidnappings of several EU members states' citizens in 2009 and 2010 and by the "failed" suicide bombing against the French embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on 8 August 2009, the first-ever suicide bombing in the country.

Aside from AQIM, other serious concerns, particularly based on the demonstrated capabilities and future threats posed to the subregion and to Europe by the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (known by its French acronym GICM), have been presented by analysts such as Fernando Reinares of the Elcano Institute in Madrid.[10] Linked to the al-Qaida–funded and –planned attacks in Casablanca in 2003 and the Madrid train bombings in March of the following year, the GICM was founded in the mid-1990s as a transnational entity and is believed to have operational cells outside Morocco in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain.[11]

Through their actions, groups such as AQIM and the GICM reinforce instability in a region that, as documented in a recent report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), is already destabilized by many other factors, such as drug and cigarette smuggling, human trafficking, and small arms proliferation.[12] These threats are the products of porous borders and ungoverned zones and even seem to have converged in some instances, leading to terrorist groups providing on-demand services for drug smugglers, and vice versa.[13]

The Need for a Regional Approach

A regional response to the transnationalization of these threats is not only appropriate, it is absolutely required. Considering the transnational nature of the threat of terrorism in the broader western African space, which is exacerbated by the corrosive effect of cross-border criminal activity, purely national approaches to countering the threat are inadequate. National efforts will always be confronted by the same problem: threats can relocate easily, especially in regions with porous borders such as the Sahel, leading to regional tensions and instability on top of national insecurity.

Many different actors are involved in combating transnational threats in the Sahel, including states; the African Union (AU), through its African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT); the Economic Community of West African States; the United Nations, through UNODC and the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED); INTERPOL; and the United States. As for the EU, it is slowly formulating a common approach to "support the development and security policies in the Sahel region" to address underlying conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.[14] In 2009 the EU indicated it was supporting an

exploratory mission and a Sahel-Sahara regional conference on the nexus of security and development initiated by the president of Mali. It also is considering a French proposal to establish "a regional security academy, with EU support … which will help these countries address the fundamental issue of improving their ability to secure their own territory, as well [as] improve regional coordination by developing personal contact between the countries concerned and giving them a common basis of understanding of security issues."[15]

At the pan-African level, the ACSRT, which is based in Algiers, has a mandate to facilitate implementation of the AU counterterrorism framework. For example, it has organized seminars, workshops, and other capacity-building activities for African officials, with support from the United States, European governments, and Algeria. Some of these workshops have focused specifically on North and West Africa.[16] In another illustration of the contribution of the ACSRT to regional information-sharing, it is currently developing a confidential database that would include trends in terrorist activities, as well as names of terrorists and terrorist groups submitted by focal points and subsequently analyzed by the ACSRT. The EU has funded this project to the tune of €1 million.

On the UN side, UNODC plays a prominent role in dealing with counterterrorism and has been very active in Africa. For instance, its Terrorism Prevention Branch helped the ministers of justice of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie[17] in the development and drafting of a convention on extradition and mutual legal assistance, which was adopted in May 2008.[18] The UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) also has been active through its CTED, which visited Mali in 2006 and more recently conducted a follow-up meeting as part of the CTC efforts to deepen dialogue with member states on implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1373. This focused on such areas as ratification of the international conventions and protocols on the prevention and suppression of terrorism; financial law and practice; law enforcement; and border control. CTED also has involved Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in its efforts to bring a larger group of West African states together to address the lack of technical and financial resources to implement counterterrorism obligations fully.

Another interesting initiative in the region is the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a five-year U.S. government program led by the Department of State to strengthen regional counterterrorism capabilities, enhance and institutionalize cooperation among regional security forces, promote democratic governance, discredit terrorist ideology, and reinforce bilateral military ties with the United States.[19] The countries included in the partnership are Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. Under the auspices of the TSCTP, the United States has had some success "in gathering around the same table a large number of officials from countries whose strategic and defense interests are incongruous, and to convince them to coordinate their antiterrorist operations."[20] There is some concern nonetheless that an increased U.S. presence in the region could create some local resentment and increase jihadi interest overall in the region. As discussed below, promoting capacity building through a multilateral framework such as the United Nations, rather than through bilateral initiatives championed by the United States and other external partners of the region, might avoid some of these pitfalls.

Several such obstacles exist in relation to current externally funded capacity-building programs in the region. Not all of the governments of the broader West African region share a common perception of the terrorist threat or of the best manner to respond to it. This was demonstrated recently when tensions rose between Algeria and Mali in February after Bamako swapped four AQIM members in its custody for a French hostage, under French pressure.[21] In addition, to date there has been an overemphasis on coercive measures in the countries of the Sahel and not enough attention to addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. Although counterterrorism and law

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enforcement capacities across the region are generally deficient, discourse around counterterrorism remains highly sensitive in the Sahel, as many governments continue to see this topic as a Western-imposed priority disconnected from local priorities such as disease, hunger, and poverty. This makes assistance from foreign donors difficult to render.

Finally, a general lack of cooperation between the various countries of the Sahel, closely linked to a pattern of mistrust, further hinders the development of a regional approach. Indeed, one analyst notes a "tendency of the ruling regimes to retain control over security issues, fearful that any regional multilateralism would jeopardize their domestic integrity and national development processes."[22] The absence of routine police cooperation and intelligence sharing are only two problems that need to be addressed in this regard.

Acting Within a UN Framework

There is only one pan-Sahelian organization: the Community of Sahel-Saharan States. It is weakly resourced and does not address security issues, perhaps precisely because of the nationalist perspectives described above. As a result, no subregional organization encompasses all the countries of the Sahel and could facilitate sustained counterterrorism cooperation.

Yet, all the countries of the Sahel, West Africa, and North Africa are members of the United Nations. The United Nations has an unparalleled legitimacy and convening power, which could allow it and the normative frameworks it has propagated to play an important role in providing support to and facilitating capacity-building assistance. In particular, the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy provides a framework for combating terrorism in a holistic and therefore politically acceptable manner.

The Strategy provides a shared framework for all regional countries to work together. A synthesis of preexisting UN counterterrorism-related resolutions, norms, and measures, it was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in September 2006.[23] It contains four pillars dealing with (1) measures to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, (2) measures to prevent and combat terrorism, (3) capacity building, and (4) measures to ensure a human rights–and rule of law–based approach to countering the threat. All in all, the Strategy encourages states to develop a broad and long-term approach to counterterrorism based on prevention and a multi-stakeholder response, rather than relying solely on bolstering existing security apparatuses.

As emphasized by the Ambassador of Nigeria to the United Nations in 2009, the Strategy offers

> a comprehensive framework for a coherent international response to terrorism [that] gives priority attention to addressing underlying conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, such as poverty, prolonged unresolved conflicts, dehumanization of victims of terrorism, ethnic, national and religious discrimination, political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization and lack of good governance … [and] emphasizes the imperative for respecting human rights and promoting the rule of law as a sine qua non to the successful combating of terrorism and the implementation of the Strategy.[24]

If the EU wishes to exert its leverage in the broader region on counterterrorism cooperation, it may therefore find the Strategy to be a useful vehicle for organizing sustained collaboration. The EU should adopt the Strategy explicitly as a normative framework underpinning counterterrorism cooperation with and in the Sahel and surrounding subregions.

In the words of EU commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, a "comprehensive approach is the key to success, together with ensuring a multilateral response, in which the United Nations must play a strong role."[25]Acting

within a UN framework by no means will constrain EU actions. On the contrary, it will provide more legitimacy to the EU and its plan of action. Indeed, promoting multilateral solutions to common problems within the UN framework is one the guiding principles of EU foreign policy, as stated in Article 21 of the Lisbon Treaty.

Legitimacy of an EU Counterterrorism Policy for the Sahel

There is a clear need for more effective and sustained international action and regional cooperation in the Sahel. The EU has an interest in stabilizing the region. As an institution with its own experiences in building multilateralism despite divergences between its members, in dealing with transnational threats, and in promoting multilateral solutions and regional integration worldwide, the EU is uniquely placed to promote a multilateral approach to the combating of transnational threats.

In many official documents, the EU has enumerated principles that would support greater EU involvement in counterterrorism beyond its internal borders. Furthermore, it has mentioned the specific instruments that could be used in such actions. The problem of the EU response to the Sahel is not one of mandate, but rather of finding sufficient political consensus among its member states regarding the nature and the extent of the response to allow it to develop and commit to such a response.

Again, the synergies between the Strategy and the European approach are notable. The EU Counterterrorism Strategy, adopted in 2005, states that the EU must "combat terrorism globally while respecting human rights" and that it can do that in part by "tackling the factors or root causes which can lead to radicalization and recruitment, in Europe and internationally."[26] This closely tracks the thinking and the language that underpins Pillars I and IV of the Strategy. The EU also clearly envisioned the possibility to resort to "harder" tools to deal with terrorism abroad, i.e., with the tools of the Common Security and Defence Policy, or more specifically with a "mixture" of instruments, including intelligence, police, judicial, military, and humanitarian means, as indicated in the 2003 European Security Strategy.[27] The Strategy also contemplates the use of such tools in Pillars II and III.

Notably, the EU and UN approaches each advocate holistic responses. Another paper endorsed by the European Council explains that,

> [i]n response to crises, the Union can mobilise a vast range of both civilian and military means and instruments, thus giving it an overall crisis-management and conflict-prevention capability in support of the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This facilitates a comprehensive approach to prevent the occurrence of failed state, to restore order and civil government, to deal with humanitarian crises and prevent regional conflicts. By responding effectively to such multifaceted situations, the EU already makes a considerable contribution to long[-] term actions for the prevention of terrorism.[28]

Clearly, the EU is well positioned to operationalize the thinking that runs not only through its own policy documents on counterterrorism, but also through the Strategy.

This operationalization could and should occur not only within Europe, but also in its externally oriented policies and programming. In the Stockholm Program, a 5-year plan aimed at creating an area of "freedom, security and justice" in Europe, "[t]he European Council emphasizes the importance of the external dimension of the EU's policy in the area of freedom, security and justice and underlines the need for the increased integration of these policies into the general policies of the European Union.… [I]nternal and external security are inseparable."[29]

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Where better to put this policy into practice than in Africa? The 2007 Africa-EU Strategic Partnership specifically mentions the fight against terrorism, drugs, and organized crime as a key area of cooperation between the EU and the AU, notably through the exchange of information, law enforcement and institutional capacity-building, and judicial cooperation.[30] Clearly, the EU is well positioned to promote Strategy implementation in western Africa and the Sahel.

Some Recommendations to the EU

The EU is already active in the Sahel region as a development actor, but it is still largely absent as a security enabler. Among its limited contributions to the improvement of the security situation in the region are its financial support to the ACSRT and UNODC. Some funds are available specifically for counterterrorism in the Sahel under the so-called instrument of stability, but there is no agreement on how to spend the money.[31] In part, this may be due to different views among EU member states on whether and how any EU security assistance presence should be organized. Also, it surely will be a challenge for the EU to act as a security enabler in the region, not the least because it is unclear how and with whom the EU should cooperate as well as the fact that the unstable or nondemocratic nature of some regimes in the region make it difficult for the EU to cooperate directly with them. Nevertheless, the EU could clearly add value in a number of areas, notwithstanding such uncertainties.

First, the EU should take steps to identify the transnational dynamics of the threats in the region more clearly and acknowledge the link that exists between the region's stability and European security in a broad sense. Much existing analysis of these threats is based on a weak and often jealously guarded evidence base. This undermines effective counterterrorism cooperation by making it more difficult for states and publics in western Africa and the Sahel and in Europe to develop a common understanding of the problem and of the remedial steps that might be required. Some areas that seem to require particular attention include the role of diaspora communities from the region based in Europe, the relationship between criminal activity and terrorist activity in the Sahel and beyond, and the relationship between European internal and external security vis-à-vis the Sahel.

Second, the EU should identify the key actors present in the region with whom it could cooperate in order to strengthen local capabilities and enhance regional stability, ranging from local governments and states to international organizations and civil society. The challenges in the Sahel are tremendous, but the means and actors available are limited. Therefore, the need for a coherent and cohesive international response is all the greater.

Third, the EU should act within and support the UN framework, not only following the core Strategy principles, but also cooperating directly with key UN structures such as CTED and UNODC and nontraditional counterterrorism actors such as the UN Development Programme and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Such an approach might help foster a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism that includes not only preventive measures, but also measures to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and respect of human rights. Above all, the EU should avoid an overemphasis on support to the security apparatus in the region.

Finally, the EU and the United States should cooperate more than they currently do in the Sahel, as emphasized during the Toledo informal meeting of ministers of justice and home affairs in January.[32] Notably, after that event some EU officials expressed regret that the final declaration did not refer directly to the Strategy.[33] As both transatlantic partners have strategic interests in the region and figure as major development and security actors, a close transatlantic cooperation in this region could make a difference. This may be the last benefit of organizing EU action within a UN framework, that it serves to bring European and U.S. approaches closer together. That can only be positive.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

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Notes

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