Producing and Contesting Security in the Sahel[1]

Amy Niang, University of the Witwatersrand

The idea that the Sahel, the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea have become 'corridors of terrorism' finds a concrete articulation in recent transnational security initiatives that seek to both mutualize the burden of border control and harmonize regional security policies, in particular anti-terrorist policies. The proliferation of ant-terrorist initiatives in Africa can be seen as pointing to two important trends. Firstly, the establishment of parallel regional and transnational initiatives sponsored by either regional bodies (MNJTF) or western countries (France and G5 Sahel; the USA and the Pan-Sahel initiative and its successor, the TSCTP)[2]. The upshot of the necessary reallocation of security forces already in place is to weaken their potential for success. The Joint Force-G5S for instance has been put together in haste and it risks disrupting, if not jeopardising the multilateral operations currently underway, namely MINUSMA. Secondly, in a context whereby the target of anti-terrorist policies are not entirely clear, a series of agreements with some of the former military/militarized groups at the expense of others is bound to have significant consequences for local security and political configurations. I show for instance how increased militarised response to multifaceted instability has partly fueled violence in northern and central Mali since 2015. Beyond the specific case of Mali, which is at the heart of instability in the Sahel, this paper is interested in exploring how the various security initiatives complement or hinder the action of organisations that are seeking to build long-term strategies at the level of the region.

I take seriously a perception, and experiences of threats as they have resulted from the recent history of political instability, external intervention in the context of the Sahelian front of the War on Terror, the fact ultimately that the Sahelian region has been subjected to forms of reordering and interventionism that are in no way motivated by desire to tackle the region's deep-rooted problems. The War on Terror is a set of discourses, practices and dispositions that are deeply framed by an enduring structure of inequality between the global north and the global south, the enduring effects of colonial legacies and neocolonial frameworks, the effects of racial politics at a global level, foreign policies that are deeply bias against Islam and the capacity for Western military powers to test and experiment new technologies in a sort of deterritorialised vacuum from the perspective of International Law.

---

[1] This is meant as an extensive memo, not a full paper.

[2] According to the Office of Counterterrorism in the US State Department, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (2002) is "a State-led effort to assist Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania in detecting and responding to suspicious movement of people and goods across and within their borders through training, equipment and cooperation. Its goals support two U.S. national security interests in Africa: waging the War on Terrorism and enhancing regional peace and security." Its successor, the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) was rolled out in 2005. It pursues similar objectives with the difference that it combines a military/civilian effort to combat terrorism.

The questions that motivate the paper are the following. What are the different military strategies in the Sahel meant to stabilise? Is it terrorism? Is it violence or should we read more complex motivations behind ongoing operations? Also, what kind of security can be expected/produced out of ongoing strategies? Who are the beneficiaries of security strategies in the Sahel? At he conceptual level, the question what secure is ultimately needs to be confronted.

Tackling instability in the Sahel: the military option

Until the early 2000, there were still attempts to invest into non-militarised conflict resolution strategies. Recently however, the default approach by big powers, namely the US, France and the EU, has been to bolster the repressive capacity of Sahelian states. This means investment in military hardware, artillery, and small weapons. The increasing neglect of peace strategies has partly to do with the sheer importance of the military industry in the national security set-up, and the larger economies of big powers.[3] There is in fact a great "advocacy asymmetry" between the drive for securitisation and peacebuilding practice and this asymmetry "may be related to the fact that securitised approaches receive a much more consistent lobbying support, backed by political and commercial interests in the defense sector. In comparison, the peacebuilding field has no consistent government or private sector lobby support."[4] To take the Failed State Index which informs security and cooperation policy of the US and allies, it is an index that is prepared by militarists and people who lobby for private military contractors.[5] In addition, there is a host of research institutions and think-tanks—directly and indirectly connected to US Intelligence agencies and military apparatus—whose inflated reports on the scale of instability and the "terror threat" in Africa frames a rationale for, and is complicit to increasing American military-only engagement on the continent. These institutions include the Heritage Foundation, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Brookings Institute, the Center for International and Strategic Studies, the Atlantic Council, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, to name a few, some of which are part of the United States Military Strategists Association (USMSA).[6]

Another aspect of the militarization of the Sahel has to do with a desire of big powers, particularly France as a historical actor, to disengage from what it perceives as a burdensome responsibility. This is certainly the stated goal of the Macron administration. However, France

---

[3] In Mali, while successive peace agreements have led to rounds of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), "the lack of a robust post-military strategy including plans for defectors ….has proven to be a significant challenge as the void is often filled by violent extremist organisations and criminal networks."[3]

[4] Achim Wennmann (2015) "Peacebuilding: Evolution, Trends, Visions Retreat synthesis for the White Paper on Peacebuilding" Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, White Paper series #18

[5] JJ Messner, the director of the Fund for Peace which produces the index is a former lobbyist for the private military industry.

[6] See Horace Campbell, '"Beyond the fanning of US militarism in Africa" Pambazuka News

also seeks to keep, if not expand its geopolitical footprint in the Sahel at reduced costs. This policy has paradoxically led to the subjection of most development and humanitarian endeavor to the security logic. The goal is ultimately to maintain a capacity for policing the Sahel and to outsource actual operations to Sahelian countries, hence the G5 Sahel initiative. This policing is crucial to the coming scramble of the rices of the Sahel-Sahara region.

Bilateral enterprises and multilateral failings

There is a plethora of initiatives, programmes and frameworks in place in the Sahelian region. To say that the Sahel is a highly miliatarised region is an understatement. If one takes into the UN multidimentional force, MINUSMA, the French operations under Barkhane, the newly launched Joinf-force of the G5 Sahel, the national forces of Sahelian countries regularly engaged in crosss-border operations and joint-operations under Africa, there are over 30 000 troops currently committed directly and indirectly to fighting more or less 1000 "terrorists". The Multidimensional UN Mission in Mali had an original mandate to 'stablise' Mali, to protect civilians and to carry out the Algiers Peace Treaty. Increasingly, however, the 12 000 mission is turning into an counterterrotirst operation even though as a Chapter VII mission, it is not meant to combat forces if not attacked.

Operation Barkhane

Barkhane combines ongoing French Operations in Mali and Chad. Launched in 2014, it covers four countries. Barkhane falls under French postcolonial cooperation with former colonies. There are two aspects to this cooperation. On one hand, "operational (military) cooperation" towards intervention and peacekeeping and "structural cooperation" which include regular missions and capacity building designed to help African countries maintain their military establishments. There are three dimensions to the latter, namely the implantation of military bases, the RECAMP (Renforcement des capacites africaines de maintien de la paix) training programme as its flagship programme and military cooperation administered under the aegis of the Direction de la Cooperation de Securite et de Defense under French Foreign Ministry. French military base network has also been consolidated in the past few years. In addition to the permanent bases in Djibouti, Dakar and Libreville, a host of smaller bases are being established across West Africa; these include a drone operation base in Niamey, bases in Agadez and Arlit (Niger), Gao (Mali) Néma (Mauritania) and Zouar (Chad). Furthermore, there are plans to make Abidjan an important military base.

The G5 Sahel

The G5 Sahel partly seeks to carve out an area of influence for France, in order for the latter to counter American initiatives and potential future initiatives by countries such as China and Germany in the Sahel while undermining where it cannot rein in African initiatives. American

roll-out of counterterrorism initiative in the Pan-Sahel Initiative and it successor, the TransSahara Partnership constituted temporary loss of influence, or at least competing influence to France. Emmanuel Macron, the new French President's very first trip outside Europe, and the first to the continent, was to French forces stationed in Mali. French strategy on the continent, particularly in the francophone sphere of influence, has been to maintain political and economic influence at reduced cost. The centrality of the geopolitics of the Sahel for French global engagements has implications for the logic(s) of intervention and the effectiveness of governance strategies in so far the G5 Sahel effectively institutionalises a French influence now writ-large across the region. This influence has thus far been bilateral and piecemeal. Whatever France's stated motivations, its multiform interventionism in the Sahel is no recipe to lasting peace and stability in the region. Its strategies of continued, paternalistic influence and military muscling are not an answer to the region's deep-rooted problems of socio-economic development.

The Joint Force G5S was launched in July, 2017 with a mandate to fight terrorism, drug trafficking and human trafficking in the Sahel. This mandate is the reformed version of a more ambitious mandate of an initial plan spelled out in February 2014. The scope included food security, climate change, good governance, the needs of human development and peace and security. France pushed insistently and urgently for the UN resolution that was finally authorised. It remains to be seen whether the JF-G5S will emerge as relevant force with a clearly defined and effective operational plan and with clear targets. The G5 model is a pay-as-you-go model of unevenly shared burdens and its operations are deployed on the basis of need.[7]

The gap to be filled is one left by the much delayed African Union Stand-by Force and the *Capacité africaine de réponse Immédiate aux crises* (CARIC) that was supposed to be a temporary mechanism for the former. Given these half-planned, failed attempts at implementing regional strategies, the G5S Sahel may seem like a fairly ambitious plan that depends to a large measure to France's desire to exercise leadership in peace and security in the Sahel. However, the G5 Sahel is to an extent a duplication of CARIC. In that regard, challenges are similar, if CARIC has more African 'ownership', funding and efficiency in the implementation and operationalization are missing. As for the G5 Sahel, despite France's keenness to spearhead this 'African' initiative, it is plagued by the same old problem of funding,

---

[7] for instance in 2016, Chadian, French and Nigerien forces launched Operation 'Michi' in bid to dismantle the logistical flux of armed groups operating across the Nigeri/Chad border or the Madama-Korizo-Zouar triangle [**ref** needed).
On October 30, the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced a pledge of $60 million in support of the G5's Joint Force's counterterrorism efforts. The announcement came days after 4 US troops were killed in Niger. As always,

especially African funding. The G5 Sahel is also and indirectly of the UN Mission in Mali, MINUSMA even though the latter's vocation is not to fight terrorism.

Two notable trends are worth mentioning. On the hand, the further internationalisation of African political and security processes. On another, the "the Africanisation of international efforts"[8] in the field of peace and security. There is no shortage of regional organisations responsible for peace and security.[9] The problem is not a dearth of institutions and initiatives devoted to peace and security—given that the problems remain the same. What is missing however is more coordination and more rationalisation of resources. An immediate and age-old problem has to do with priorities. African countries and regions find themselves 'coopted' into new initiatives that mostly reflect western security priorities in the African continent. Donors get to decide what African security priorities are, not what African populations' security priorities are.

The role of the G5 Sahel, according to its proponents, is to strengthen military partnership in transborder cooperation and its aim therefore is to organise joint security operations in transborder zones. Created in February, but formally set up in December 2014, the G5 headquarters is established in Nouakchott. The difference with Le Processus de Nouakchott established by the African Union in 2013 is that it is conceived as an evolving and adaptive process. This means, amongst other things, that ad-hockism will be prioritized over traditional institutional mechanisms and that opportunism will guide the initiative's intervention. In addition, the limited membership (5 in contrast to the 11mebershp of Nouakchott) can ensure greater flexibility and a relatively quick decision-making process. However, the latter is only possible because of the heavy-handedness of France which would not have been possible under the African Union or under ECOWAS. One can easily see how France's sponsorship of the G5S can undermine traditional regional processes or in fact takes advantage of the slow, constrained, politically murky regional processes.

The G5 Sahel in its broader framework also seeks to provide 'development' and 'good governance'. So do virtually all other external military programmes. A key result of the amalgamation of 'development' and securitisation is that development in the sense of comprehensive support structures integrated in the normal provision of social services and welfare has been drastically curtailed on account of securitisation. In summary, while the G5 Sahel holds promising prospects in tackling immediate security challenges in the Sahel, it is inevitably divesting resources and commitment to longterm efforts towards lasting peace.

The US Africa Command

---

[8] "Serious Questions Remain over G5 Sahel Military Force" Commentary, Andrew Lebovitch, 16 June 2017. European Council on Foreign Relations.
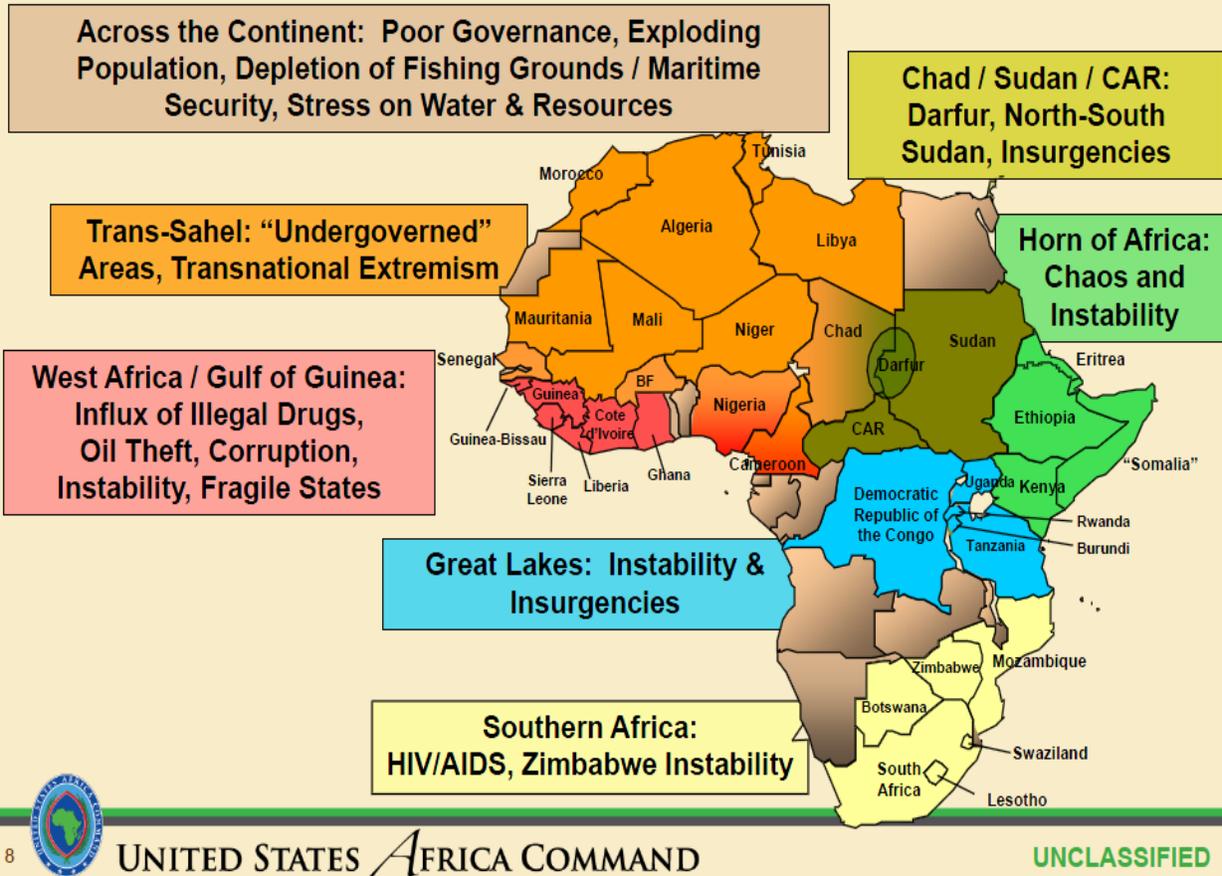[9] List the 8 or so initiatives

Given the volatile security context and the nature of the warfare strategies being deployed by non-sate actors, there is a place obviously for the international community in the Sahel but it is not clear how the model of militarisation of the peace process that is being offered by AfriCom can help address the root causes of the conflict. AfriCom has enabled the US to expand basing facilities in the Sahel and the continent more generally, in addition to surveillance and training missions through various 'partnerships' with target states. On one hand, US development aid budget has declined while military spending through the Pentagon and the State Department has increased. On another, while it is not the place of a military framework such as AfriCom to deliver development, the security-development nexus is something the military programme has embraced as part of its outreach engagement in the Sahel. The map below gives a good idea of how AfriCom sees African and hit it imagines using its military apparatus and resources to tackle a continent of Challenges.

The integration of Mali and other Sahelian states in global, particularly American counterterrorist policies through reinforcement of the repressive capacity of Sahelian states has to be understood in the context of simmering rivalry between America, France, China, Japan and other actors for commercial interest and political influence. The site of this competition over influence is not Mali or Niger alone, it is the Sahel-Sahara region as a whole. Algerian gas, Nigerien uranium (vital to French nuclear power), Chadian oil and the untapped mineral and natural resources of the Sahel and Sahara makes it a region of value to the West and a key region in a global security and economic chessboard. For the US in particular to have recently been able to strengthen its presence in Niger is significantly important in the context of postcolonial French-Africa relations. The US has developed a military base in Agadez from which drones can be launched for both surveillance and combat mission. The drone base is an addition to existing collaborative military facilities with France in Niamey under Operation Barkhane. the drone base is meant to facilitate the collation of intelligence on the surrounding areas as far as Lybia and Chad for the purpose of anti-terrorist operations. There is a dozen so-called 'cooperative security locations' across the continent in addition to dozens of multi-purpose outposts for fuel depot, military equipment, surveillance bases and other facilities across 34 African countries."[10]

---

[10] See Nick Turse, "The US Military's Best-Kept Secret" , The Nation, 17 November 2015.

For Official Use Only   UNCLASSIFIED

A Continent of Challenges

Across the Continent: Poor Governance, Exploding Population, Depletion of Fishing Grounds / Maritime Security, Stress on Water & Resources

Chad / Sudan / CAR: Darfur, North-South Sudan, Insurgencies

Trans-Sahel: "Undergoverned" Areas, Transnational Extremism

Horn of Africa: Chaos and Instability

West Africa / Gulf of Guinea: Influx of Illegal Drugs, Oil Theft, Corruption, Instability, Fragile States

Great Lakes: Instability & Insurgencies

Southern Africa: HIV/AIDS, Zimbabwe Instability

UNITED STATES AFRICA COMMAND   UNCLASSIFIED

Security for whom?

None of the so-called new and bold ongoing security initiatives (G5 Sahel; MNJTF) addresses the question of human security beyond mere discourse. The very normativity, thus, of human security has to be both contested and problematized in the context of the various missions operating in the Sahel. For by and large, state and external resources are being redirected into counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts at the national, regional and global levels. A crucial task is thus to understand how recent initiatives constitute at once ambiguous attempts to enforce various aspects of 2006 UN Strategy of Counter-Terrorism, the 1999 AU Convention and the 2013 ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy and a unidimentional approach to security informed by a logic of repression. The discourse of saving and protecting performs the role of 'humanitarian governance' in the absence of concerted strategic action meant to remove threats and not to protect the security interests of external actors.

I wish to argue that an all-militaristic approach to security is partly responsible for the erosion of structures of resilience in the Sahel. In fact, militarisation has to be seen as a source of threat for Sahelian populations. However, neither security, nor threats to security are examined from the perspective of the populations that are supposed to be the beneficiaries or the target, of security initiatives. Militarisation-based security is untenable. Neither is militarisation. It breeds on one hand a culture of war and encourages warring as a mode of redistribution. However, rarely is redistribution about justice and equality. Since 2015, political instability has spread from the North to the Centre and South of Mali. The new parameters of violence involve the radicalisation of groups that have previously resorted to violence only in a sporadic manner.

The rise of vigilante and 'self-defense' groups are part of the very tendency—to use the tools and the tactics of violent militant groups. There are two consequences to this. Firstly, a culture of resolving conflict through violence rather than through "positive peace" which capitalises on factors that foster resilience peaceful coexistence. Secondly, the use of violence to stake claims and as a means to getting interest-groups to the negotiating table. By and large, the scope and scale of violence have expanded whilst the motivations for violent struggle remain very local and they often have to do with questions of access and use of natural resources and questions of identity and recognition. In all this, the dominant counterinsurgency/counterterrrorist modes reveal a blanket policy instrument that does not allow a nuanced understanding of how the different groups that are party to a conflict are related, the shifting alliances that preclude a clear demarcation between 'friends' and 'foes', 'rebels' and terrorists'. Once conflicts end, these different groups are forced to cohabit again as neighbours. The chart below shows the complex and shifting nature of alliances amongst various groups involved in the conflict in Mali. I have been tracking the dynamics of alliance-making in northern and central Mali for the past couple of years and the picture keep changing so much so that it is difficult to demarcate 'terrorists' from 'insurgents' and 'allies' etc. obviously, these categories themselves are always contingent. What it allows me to do is to contrast the story of militarisation and securitisation presented above with the actual security context in Mali.

Resurgence of Violence in the North; new violence in the South

Pro-Bamako Groups	Anti-Bamako Groups	Anti-Bamako Groups with Radical Agenda
Ganda Koi ; *Ganda Lassalizo; Bouctou*	The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad MNLA)	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI)
National Movement for the Liberation of North Mali (Ganda IZO)	Le Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad (MSA)	The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA)

The Imghad Tuareg Self-defense Group and allies (GATIA)	Haut Conseil pour l'Unicite de l'Azawad(HCUA)	Ansar Deen
Mouvment Populaire pour le Salut de l'Azawad (MPSA, MAA splinter)	La Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance2 (CMFPR2)	Al Murabitun (The Sentinels)
Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie (MDP)	Coalition of the People of Azawad (CPA)	Katiba Macina (Ansar Deen)
Forces de libération du Nord (FLN)	The Islamic movement of Azawad (MIA)	Front de Liberation du Macina (FLM)
Azawad Popular Front (FPA)	The Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA, formerly FLNA)	Dogon and Donso militia ???
The Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA2)		Dewral Pulaku
La Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance2 (CMFPR1: FLN, IZO, Koi, *Ganda Lassalizo, Bouctou*))	The Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (platforme CMA : MNLA, HCUA, MAA)	Alliance Nationale pour la Sauvegarde de l'Identité Peule et la Restauration de la Justice (ANSIRPJ)

The deterioration of traditional frameworks of conflict resolution over land and similar question means that in places where traditional authorities were involved in solving disputes, the latter are now dealt with using weapons and violence. The recognition of state actors is informed by the fact that they can be at once initiators of violence and instability and key actors in the peacebulidng process.

The emergence of alternative political identities based on 'identity' framed in various ways, a geopolitical assessment of risks and survival, and often articulated in opposition to state rule experienced as oppressive forces. In this context, one must engage with shifting identities and their implications for analysing security as a state, process and pursuit that means different things to different socio-political constituencies.[11] In this context, the security of one entity (typically the state) can easily be conceptualised as the source of insecurity for another entity (non-state such as subsidiary bodies and the broader population).

---

[11] John Agnew (1994) "The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumption of International Relations Theory" Review of International Political Economy, 1(1): 62 (pp53-80).

In fact, some of the consequences of a policy framework that is focused on the state security apparatus have resulted in deliberate strategies by Sahelian countries to go after specific groups. Moreover counterterrorism becomes a mode that trumps the necessity to respond to deep inequality and political marginalisation, thus to neglect deep-rooted questions of resource distribution, political exclusion and the sort of factors that feed into a predictable cycle of insurgency, instability and retaliation.

There were reports of summary executions of suspected mujahideen and rebels by Malian security forces on several occasions following the 2012 disastrous campaign and the French rescue mission. In fact, trust has been broken between Malian security forces and populations of the North and Centre and this is a major issue in the Malian conflict.

Contrary to what many commentators seem to suggest, the space of violence in the Sahel is more integrated that they are ready to admit. This space is defined by both international and external dynamics whose distinct effects are increasingly difficult to disentangle. This space of violence is defined by social destructuring and political disintegration due to a number of things. One key consequence of the deterioration of the space of livelihood is the (desire for) mass emigration to the West. This phenomenon has come to constitute an existential threat in Western Europe to the point that prescribed strategies and solutions—the buttressing of the repressive capabilities of states concerned, the provision of humanitarian aid, the elaboration of regional security alliances, the exploitation of natural resources, the meddling in domestic electoral and political processes—seem to amount to great confusion.

What of human security?

What is lost in broader discussions about security, peace and order, containment and securitisation is the dignity of human subjects. What is security from the perspective of Sahelian populations is largely absent and their vision of security and order often is often not taken into account. The thing, human security has ceased being the referent object of intervention given the all-militarist approach to complex conflicts. Securitisation and militarisation have turned security governance into geopolitical strategies that are mobilised to 'contain' violence rather than help tackle the structural causes of violence. in the specific context of Mali, the multiplication of militant and extremist violent groups since 2012 ultimately has to be seen as a result of an all-militarist approach.

However, non-militaristic measures of containment of threat have not been less problematic. Europe has exported its migration crisis to North and North-West Africa by using a combination of development aid, repatriation funding, deliberate disruption and sabotage of humanitarian missions, and the EU-Africa Fund. The latter is complemented by development 'compacts' that tie aid, trade and other conditions to African countries' capacity to help stem the flow of

unwanted migrants to Europe. In doing so, some European initiatives have merely worsen an already fragile security situation in the region whilst consolidating the repressive capacity of partner states with questionable commitment to transparent governance.[12]

Conclusion

The War on terror as a policy and intervention structure is informed by a belief in racial and civilizational struggle i.e. the West against Islam/the Sahel-Sahara region as a no-man's land). Hegemonic political and military power has heavily informed not just American, but increasingly French and European engagement in the Sahel. As a result, the most common approach to political instability in the Sahel has been, and remains, counterinsurgency/counterterrorism approach even to security questions that have little to do with "terrorism' and have much to do with local struggles for identity and recognition, socio-political inclusion and exclusion, and access to resources. The binary understanding of "terrorists" as producers of insecurity and of interveners as producers of security can be deceptive. By and large, "the discourse of terror enables a redefinition of the space of violence in which bold intervention and rearrangement of everyday relations can take place and be governed in relation to terror, a space that presupposes new knowledge and new practices."[13]

---

[12] the outsource of tehEU bordermanagement to North African states is the object of ongoing joint investigation by four European newspapers, namely Le Monde, El Pais,
[13] Talal Asad On Suicide Bombing, 2007: 28