



UNPACKING THE EU'S NEW SAHEL STRATEGY



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The European Union has just released its new Sahel strategy. The strategy's focus on governance as the core problem in the region is a success. Going forward, the EU needs to fill its governance talk with meaning, especially with regard to the contribution of civil society, fighting impunity, and a more nuanced understanding of the role that security forces play.

Read the full text below.

This commentary was first published as a blogpost at PeaceLab (<https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/unpacking-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy/>)

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UNPACKING THE EU'S NEW SAHEL STRATEGY

The European Union has just released its new Sahel strategy. The strategy's focus on governance as the core problem in the region is a success. Going forward, the EU needs to fill its governance talk with meaning, especially with regard to the contribution of civil society, fighting impunity, and a more nuanced understanding of the role that security forces play.

The European Council has just adopted the EU's new Integrated Strategy (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/sahel-council-approves-conclusions-on-the-eu-s-integrated-strategy-in-the-region/>) in the Sahel. The strategy comes at a time when the situation in the region is at its worst – despite many efforts on the part of the EU and its member states. While EU policymakers have reconsidered many of their long-standing assumptions on the region, a lot is left to unpack.

Abuses and violence in the Sahel are not just a product of armed groups wreaking havoc in a number of subregions: Sahelian security forces are responsible for a large bulk of them. Human Rights Watch, the UN and others have reported over 600 unlawful killings (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/13/sahel-end-abuses-counterterrorism-operations>) committed by the security forces of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in military operations since late 2019. Most recently, Commission (CNDH) accused Chadian soldiers (https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/04/05/des-soldats-tchadiens-du-g5-sahel-responsables-de-viol-au-niger_6075601_3212.html) operating within the framework of EU-supported G5-Sahel Joint Force of raping several women in Tera, a Nigerian town in the tri-border area. French military Operation Barkhane (<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/au-mali-les-decisions-de-la-brigade-de-bounti-pour-politiques-2021-04-06>) is not deconfidentialité (privacy-policy). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

irreproachable either: the January strike in the Bounti village in Mali during a wedding ceremony killed 19 civilians, according to a recent MINUSMA investigation

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(<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210330-un-probe-finds-french-strike-in-mali-in-january-killed-19-civilians>). And now that Chadian President Déby was assassinated (https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/04/20/l-armee-tchadienne-annonce-la-mort-du-president-idriss-deby-au-pouvoir-depuis-trente-ans-des-suites-de-blessures-recues-au-combat_6077415_3212.html) in the north of the country, observers expect a surge in violence. (https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/04/21/avec-la-mort-du-president-tchadien-idriss-deby-la-france-perd-un-allie-cle-de-l-operation-barkhane-au-sahel_6077478_3212.html).

The EU has made some progress in its approach to the region: in its 2011 Strategy (https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/afrika/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf) for security and development in the Sahel, the EU advocated for a comprehensive approach of security and development – but it proved largely unsuccessful. The 2011 document and subsequent 2015 Sahel Regional Action Plan (RAP (http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA50-2015_UE-Sahel_JAMT_ENGLISH.pdf)) enabled better coordination of European civilian and military efforts, a regionalization of action and led a number of previously uninvolved European diplomats to a more nuanced understanding of the region. But the focus has been on security and development only, without a clearer *political* strategy in mind.

The newly released Integrated Strategy is an improvement on important elements including fighting impunity and working towards mutual accountability with Sahelian leaders, but has two main shortcomings: It fails to propose a vision on migration – one of the most widely criticized (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002>) areas of European external action in the region – and does not define what “governance and ownership” would mean in practice. Going forward, the EU needs to address these.

FILLING THE STRATEGY'S FOCUS ON GOVERNANCE WITH MEANING

Compared to the previous strategy, the EU's new strategic vision shifts the focus in dedicating more attention to governance. But the term is elusive and analyst Alex Thurston has recently condemned (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026>) donor's governance talk as a hollow placeholder for everything that is “someone else's problem to solve”. The EU's key task is to fill its governance talk with meaning. Three obvious areas for improvement are decentralization and mutual accountability towards civil society, fighting impunity, and providing for soldiers to help the protection of human rights.

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F. DECENTRALIZATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY TOWARDS CIVIL SOCIETY

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The new Integrated Strategy mentions a need to be attentive to inputs from civil society and local authorities. This is indeed relevant: taking into account the stances of local civil society amount to nothing if priorities are not mirrored in financing. Civil society organizations in the region tend to lament the difficulties associated with obtaining funding from the EU in a way that is direct and sustainable. Many organizations in the Sahel receive support from foundations and a few member states. Whenever they get funding from the EU, this happens through other organizations who act as intermediaries – retaining part of the money, setting priorities and exerting decision-making authority.

If the EU wishes to stay true to its new strategy and honor both its decentralization principles and attention to civil society, it needs to simplify access to resources for smaller organizations based outside of Sahelian capitals. Mutual accountability, as emphasized in the strategy, is also key with regard to funds provided to Sahelian governments – and should include not just accountability between Sahelian leaders and European donors, but also between leaders and their citizens. The EU could exercise political pressure for a more transparent system of accountability in Sahelian countries, which accounts for how funds are spent.

2. FIGHTING IMPUNITY AND BUILDING TRUST

The strategy also emphasizes the importance of consolidating a credible judicial system and fighting against impunity within armed forces, which would lead to more trust between armed forces and population. Trust-building and a healthy relationship between civil and military constituencies is indeed paramount to achieving greater stability, as highlighted by analysts (https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/01/14/la-crise-au-sahel-est-revelatrice-de-l-obsolence-des-instruments-de-la-cooperation-internationale-selon-la-politologue-niagale-bagayoko_6066228_3210.html) working on not just West Africa, but globally (<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/peace/rule-of-law--justice--security-and-human-rights/access-to-justice.html>).

A successful example is the Niamey V project (<https://www.usip.org/blog/2021/01/amid-sahels-crises-community-niger-builds-peace>) in Niger, which brought together armed forces and the population of the Niamey V district. The EU and its member states should encourage and sustain projects of this sort. And they can only be successful if security officials and citizens are asked to communicate with one another about their concerns and plans, and if each constituency is held responsible for their actions by a robust and impartial judicial system.

While the new Integrated Strategy mentions the fight against impunity, human rights violations and corruption, this must translate into financial support for those sectors of society and public administration most involved in the justice component. The EU must demand that an impartial legal presence all across the territory tackles inter-communal

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violence. It should treat training and support for Sahelian officials in the judicial sector, including on human rights, as vital as the training and support of Sahelian military forces.

3. PROVIDING FOR SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS

Ensuring the protection of civilians on the part of armed forces is a necessary condition for any security intervention, as the civil society platform People's Coalition for the Sahel (<https://www.sahelpeoplescoalition.org/>) emphasized. As of 2018, the EU has advocated for and funded the adoption of a compliance framework (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/G5-Sahel.aspx>) on human rights and protection of civilians by the G5 Joint Force and a mechanism for the identification, monitoring, and analysis of damage to civilians (MISAD) through its partners.

But holding security actors accountable for abuse and violence should not mean disregarding more profound reasons that may have led some to commit abuses in the first place. Painting armed forces as the sole responsible for the lack of security in the region, either because they are unable to protect or because they themselves commit abuses, is ludicrous: in many instances (<https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/099960-000-A/mali-une-armee-dans-le-collimateur/>), soldiers were sent to fight armed groups without the necessary equipment and any guarantees that, should they perish, their families would be protected. So the EU should demand from Sahelian governments that soldiers are not just well-trained in protecting civilians, but also well-fed, well-equipped (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy-28130>) and paid on time.

PUTTING THE EU'S SAHEL STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE

Not least thanks to the political work of the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-securityand-stability-sahel/2352460>)), the EU is on a path to improve their engagement in the region. The new Integrated Strategy's attention to governance shows that the EU seems to be increasingly aware of the political implications of its policy choices and more nuanced thinking about the Sahel seems to have finally reached Brussels. Going forward, the Union needs to present a vision on migration, fill its interpretation of governance with substance rather than falling into the "hollowness of governance talk", and make sure its efforts are not to be offset by lethal equipment provided to partner countries under the incoming European Peace Facility (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/46285/european-peace-facility-investing-peace-and-security_en).

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