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The role of the Maghreb countries in the stabilisation of the Sahel. Opportunities and challenges for the Sahel-Maghreb-Europe axis[1]

II Forum Dialogue Sahel Europe

Introduction

Following the Sahel-Europe dialogue forum held on 15-16 July, the speakers were Nizar Derdabi, former senior officer of the Royal Gendarmerie and professor at the School of Economic Warfare, Djallil Lounnas; Researcher at Al Akhawaynv University and Ahmedou Ould Abdallah Former Foreign Minister of Mauritania, moderated by Giovanni Romani, Head of NATO's MENA, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, analysed the role of the Maghreb countries in the stabilisation of the Sahel, with the opportunities and challenges that this implies for the Sahel-Maghreb-Europe axis.

The geographical proximity of these three regions defines a dynamic set of threats and opportunities but does not yet constitute an organised triangle of cooperation. However, the spread of terrorism threatens the security of the Sahel and has a direct impact on the security of neighbouring countries. The weakening of states' sovereignty and governance capacity can pave the way for threats that could affect Maghreb and European interests in the long term. For example, in recent years, the rise of terrorist attacks and illegal immigration has put increasing pressure on the Maghreb and Europe to strengthen their cooperation. Geopolitical upheavals in the Sahel make the crisis affecting Euro-Mediterranean relations in general and

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[1] This analysis is part of a series of research studies conducted by the International Security Centre on dialogue with the Sahel. Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum held in March 2021, the speakers belonging to the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum's panel of experts have deepened the themes of their conferences, analysing the shared challenges, and the opportunities for cooperation on our common challenges. This analysis was carried out by Beatriz de León Cobo, Director of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, based on the notes of the conference of the same title with the collaboration of Julie Bonin, French Army Reservist.

Euro-Maghreb relations in particular more sensitive than ever. These facts allow us to underline the importance of comprehensive and multidimensional cooperation, as well as the multilateral approach of Europe and the Maghreb in the Sahel. In the following paragraphs, the objective will be to analyse the challenges in the Sahelian territories, as well as the opportunities for cooperation through the strategic shifts undertaken by Morocco and Algeria, and finally, the lessons to be learned in order to address this situation.

The challenges

First of all, it is important to define the Maghreb. This term, which translates as 'West', is a region in North Africa corresponding to the Arab-Berber cultural area between the Mediterranean Sea, the Sahel and Egypt (not included in this area). It is made up of former Berber territories, now largely Arabised. It is located at the crossroads of the Arab world and of Mediterranean and African civilisations, and forms a geographical unit characterised culturally by the fusion of Arab-Berber elements sharing a common culture and history of peoples.

The first challenge is the recurrent diplomatic crisis between Rabat and Algiers, which hampers regional cooperation and complicates the geopolitical situation in the Sahel. Everything would be much simpler if the two major Maghreb countries, Morocco and Algeria, had good relations. However, the official narrative of the history of these two countries, which shapes not only their national identity but also their domestic and foreign policy, is fuelled by their rivalry and border disputes, dating back to their independence.

The tensions resulting from this protracted crisis situation are having a negative impact on relations between the two neighbouring countries. The resulting mutual hostility is an obstacle to the region's economic integration within the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union. Moreover, the fight against terrorism is also affected by this situation.

The Kingdom of Morocco, which cooperates mainly with its partners in terms of training, information exchange and equipment, discreetly pursues a policy of security cooperation with Mali and Mauritania. At present, its role in the fight against terrorism in the region is probably limited by Algerian pressure to keep it out of certain international meetings.

Algeria, for its part, has initiated a series of actions: the creation of the CAERT (African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism) in Algiers, the creation of a joint operational staff committee between Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger to lead the fight against AQIM in cross-border areas, the deployment of several tens of thousands of men by the National People's Army (ANP), and above all the creation of the Joint Operational Staff Committee (CCOE) with, in particular, the sharing of intelligence for the fight against terrorism as of September 2010 in Algiers (following the meeting of the heads of the intelligence services of Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger).

On the other hand, jihadist terrorism remains one of the main challenges for the African countries of the Sahel, as its uncontrolled growth threatens not only the stability of the region but also that of the West. In order to restore security in the Sahel, it is therefore essential to analyse the causes of the spread and financing of terrorism. In this regard, until the end of 2010, the main concern of Europe, mainly southern Europe, was the fight against drug trafficking from Latin America. The actions taken by European security

services to cut off the Atlantic drug route led traffickers to divert their trafficking routes to the Sahel. Taking advantage of the weakness of institutions in these territories, this dynamic has ended up dominating and destabilising these areas. Moreover, terrorism imported from Afghanistan to the Maghreb was so devastating that the Maghreb countries pushed this threat back to their southern borders, passing it on to the Sahelian countries that were unprepared to respond to it.

The third challenge in Sahelian territory is the tribalisation of peoples. This concept of "tribalisation" is the action of tribalising, of structuring along ethnic lines. This can lead to rivalries between different communities. In this sense, long-term approaches have weakened the Sahel region since 1960 with tribalisation. Since then, the situation has deteriorated due to the increasing tribalisation of rivalries.

The regimes themselves have favoured such tribal bases, a re-tribalisation that undermines states, destroying the will of elements of the armed forces to fight for the state. This situation is a consequence of strong population growth that pushes rural populations into poorly managed and governed cities. These populations are forced to try to survive rather than live normally, while terrorist groups are an alternative to the uncertainty caused by stagnating economies. Moreover, systematic corruption that benefits from impunity is an argument terrorists use to convince people to turn away from their rulers.

The question now is how to tackle the universal and devastating phenomenon of corruption (which has greater consequences in the Sahel due to state fragility). This implies addressing the challenges of drug trafficking, re-tribalisation, terrorism, etc., while prioritising the problem of corruption. while prioritising the problem of systemic corruption and the sense of impunity that fosters terrorism.

Moreover, civilians, as well as security forces, are no longer convinced by the strategy adopted by national governments of sending in security forces to fight but are calling for well-resourced international cooperation. However, when terrorism is entrenched in the population, the situation becomes more complicated. Terrorists can accept anything but negotiation because they are convinced that they are always right. But this is not the only challenge for inter-state cooperation, as the issue of intelligence, indispensable in all areas, has become crucial after France announced the redeployment of the Barkhane mission. This raises the question of stability in the Sahel after Barkhane's departure, especially as Malian forces have lost intelligence support (France and the US only share their information with their partners; it remains to be seen whether they will continue to do so with the new Malian government and its Russian allies). From now on, the French armed forces have common interests and will act in the Sahel with the dual objective of fighting terrorism and increasing the strength of partner armies. This cooperation is also necessary in terms of air support (the Malians have acquired helicopters), which remains crucial to support the action of ground troops. An effort must therefore be made in terms of air support, especially since the Ukrainian crisis has weakened the interest and priority given to the Sahel.

Administrative barriers at borders also hamper law enforcement action. Moreover, the cumbersome nature of administrative procedures is an additional obstacle to law enforcement management and an opportunity for criminals to take advantage of it. This is therefore a problem that needs to be solved in order to make law enforcement action more effective and cooperation smoother.

Cooperation opportunities: strategic changes

To meet all these challenges, cooperation opportunities can be envisaged through the policies adopted by Morocco and Algeria, which have an important role to play in the field of cooperation with Sahel countries in the fight against the terrorist threat.

Morocco

Hostility between the two Maghreb neighbours, which dates back to 1963, the date of the Sand War, and was aggravated by the Western Sahara conflict from 1975 onwards, continues to this day because of rivalry over regional leadership. Thus, the momentum gained by Morocco's participation in the work of ECOWAS, of which it is not a member, and its privileged relations with some EU members, such as Spain and France, underline the path taken by the Kingdom to become an indispensable partner in the region's political and security equation to the detriment of Algeria. The discourse developed by Rabat is based on the need to develop cooperation between the EU and Morocco, as they face the same terrorist threats as the South, and are therefore best suited to be a reliable and effective interlocutor in the region, as well as a vector of influence for the EU.

The role that Morocco can play in the stability of the Sahel is undoubtedly to share its experience in countering violent extremism and Islamist radicalisation with its regional partners. Over the past 20 years, Morocco has initiated a strategic and diplomatic shift in its foreign policy, which now prioritises partnerships with African countries, whereas decades ago, Morocco focused more on its partnership with Arab countries and European neighbours. Several areas are included in this new strategy: political, economic and socio-cultural, but Morocco also attaches great importance to security and military partnerships. The security aspect is privileged because the Kingdom has acquired a great deal of security expertise in the fight against violent extremism and radicalisation. Since 2003, when the terrorist attack in Casablanca killed 43 people and wounded more than 100, committed by young Moroccan terrorists from the slums of this large megalopolis, Morocco has realised that the evil came directly from within its own country, particularly by looking at socio-economic factors. It therefore established a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy based on five pillars:

The first is the reform of the religious sphere, through the supervision of religious discourse and teaching (Morocco is a Sunni Malekite country that proposes a tolerant Islam). This reform aims to regain control of religious discourse in order to prevent the spread of violent discourse and the indoctrination of young believers, in particular through the creation of the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, whose objective is to train imams who will have to transmit religious discourse to the faithful and believers.

For the **second pillar of** security and legality, Morocco has equipped itself with a reinforced legal arsenal and prioritised intelligence through the creation of territorial networks by administrative agents in order to anticipate threats. In addition, a central judicial investigation office has been set up to combat both terrorist networks and organised crime (there is a link between terrorism and illicit trafficking and other illegal activities). For the fight to be effective, the national police and national intelligence services need to pool their efforts and resources: this has made it possible to facilitate the exchange of information (and avoid competition between services) and to pool all human and material resources in order to anticipate attacks.

De-radicalisation in the prison environment, which is proving to be an environment conducive to radicalisation, occupies the **third pillar**, as prisoners generally come from precarious backgrounds with a low level of education. The wave of arrests following the 2003 attacks, which affected more than 2,000 people (terrorist networks and Salafist preachers), led to the radicalisation of a large number of prisoners who were in contact with extremist detainees. The Moroccan prison administration has learned from this experience and now isolates extremist prisoners, with an intelligence effort at the penitentiary level and for the rehabilitation of these prisoners.

The **fourth pillar** is the socio-economic component. Poor and landlocked regions, generally located in Morocco's rural and arid areas, are a breeding ground for radicalisation. The Kingdom of Morocco has therefore begun to focus its efforts on human development, improving access to education for young girls in rural areas and implementing programmes to facilitate access to employment for young people.

Then, the **last axis of the** fight against terrorism, which remains a priority, is cooperation with the armed forces and security services of neighbouring and partner countries (Spain, Mauritania, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, France, etc.), through the exchange of information and joint border security and control.

However, results are present in the Moroccan strategy, but they are not necessarily a guarantee of total security because there can be no final strategy to fight terrorism, only models to follow. In the field of cooperation, Morocco welcomes foreign imams to its training institute so that partner countries benefit from the success of this institute. For example, France, after sending imams to train at this institute in Morocco among the first graduating classes, was inspired by this model to create its own structure to supervise the training of imams in order to monitor educational programmes and prevent the promotion of radical discourse in the future. In another area, the exchange of information between the Moroccan services and their foreign counterparts has made it possible to prevent several bloody attacks before they were perpetrated (the terrorist group responsible for the Bataclan attack was identified and located thanks to information provided by the Moroccan services).

Algeria
According to Algeria's new strategy in the Sahel, and according to Mr Tebboune's statements in May 2021, Algeria will not let Mali become a rear base for jihadism, and six months earlier, the government approved the constitutional reform authorising the PNA to intervene abroad. In practice, however, this does not necessarily translate into a change of strategy with respect to Algeria's strategy in Mali before 2019. Previously, Algerian policy was based on non-interventionism abroad and a political solution.

For Algeria, the Sahel directly affects its internal security, not its external security. This is because there are at least three closely related elements: the Tuareg issue, which plays an important role because it is feared that the Sahel conflict will mobilise Tuaregs in Algeria; human, drug and arms trafficking (the issue of illegal immigration is addressed from a security point of view in Algeria); and the multiplicity of terrorist groups (AQIM, JNIM, IS).

For 15 years, the Algerian approach has focused on the political solution, i.e. a national solution to terrorism through an inclusive dialogue involving all parties, i.e. the various Malian factions and the Malian government, and the satisfaction, through this dialogue, of the legitimate demands of the local populations. The idea is to separate the terrorist groups from the local populations. Algeria is pursuing a strategy inspired by the one that was implemented against AQIM in Algeria and which led to the elimination of the terrorist group in Algeria. Secondly, Algeria believes it is possible to engage in dialogue with JNIM to make it renounce violence, again based on the Algerian strategy of the 2000s. However, Algiers considers it impossible to cooperate with the Islamic State, which must be eradicated. The political solution led, for example, to the Algiers Agreement in 2015. Moreover, it focuses on non-interventionism (while intercepting terrorist movements at the borders). Finally, Algerian fighters in the Sahel can surrender to the Algerian authorities and benefit from national reconciliation measures.

Overall, from 2013 onwards, Algiers entered an internal political crisis that prevented it from effectively playing its role as mediator. From 2020 onwards, President Tebboune decided to re-engage Algeria in Mali and reshuffled the government in 2020 with profiles favourable to external intervention. However, in 2021, the president recomposed the government again with officials who wanted to return to the original political solution. Since then, Algeria has concluded an energy partnership with Italy and a strategic partnership with Niger, followed by a strong rapprochement with Bamako to 'liquidate the Algerian component of JNIM'. Negotiations are unclear, but discussions are in place.

Lessons learnt

Safeguarding Maghreb and European interests obviously requires close cooperation in the Sahara-Sahel region, both in the short and long term (fight against poverty, implementation of structural reforms for effective and sustainable development, promotion of stability and good governance).

The multinational nature of the Sahel crisis and its consequences, both at the Sahel-Saharan level and at the Maghreb and European levels, call for frank cooperation that, in addition to working to resolve the Sahel crisis, prevents instability from spreading throughout the region. This would pose a threat to the Maghreb countries, which play an important role in Europe's energy supply and in controlling migratory flows to the old continent.

However, this cooperation can only be effective if the Sahel countries, in coordination with Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria and the EU, put in place a sustainable economic recovery plan that effectively responds to the expectations of the middle classes and young people, while avoiding the famous "elite capture".

These actions will also find an additional source of motivation in the natural and human resources that are proving to be important assets of the Sahel, whose prosperity would be beneficial for a North Africa that is moving towards a large trade zone that will require a global vision of sustainable development and prosperity with its southern neighbours, or for a Europe for which this geo-strategic zone appears to be vital.

The EU, in addition to Morocco, Algeria and Egypt (and why not Nigeria), should take advantage of this dynamic, in coordination with the Sahelian countries and in consultation with the populations, to launch a real economic recovery plan with investment, with the aforementioned pillars and an inclusive approach.

Morocco has a strong cultural and political influence, based on historical links dating back to the Middle Ages, and a growing economic interest, with public and private investment. Algeria has extensive borders with many of the Sahel countries, and Europe has a strong influence. However, the Sahel is not simply a region to be helped, but an area of opportunity with potential to be developed, with natural and human resources to be exploited. This translates into real assets, especially for Europe, which seeks to fluidify and combine assets and efforts in order to meet the challenges on both sides. The response must be targeted and coordinated action to reinforce stability, increase government presence, foster development and reduce terrorist groups. Ultimately, the best solution remains domestic reform and international cooperation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Finally, it is important to note that the fight against transnational criminal networks, which are increasingly well organised and established in all territories, necessarily requires effective cooperation between law enforcement agencies and the exchange of information in a framework of partnership and mutual trust.

- Recommendation 1: Strengthen the fight against the financing of terrorism and transnational crime, improve cooperation against organised crime and trafficking in human beings.

- Recommendation 2: Intensify the fight against corruption and collaboration with public authorities in the region to strengthen the judiciary and security services.

- Recommendation 3: Improve the level of national education and increase the rate of schooling and vocational training for young people.

- Recommendation 4: Develop cooperation on common threats, especially in terms of information exchange.

- Recommendation 5: Build resilience and lay the foundations for inclusive economic, social and political development to improve living conditions and reduce humanitarian needs.