

PEACE AND SECURITY

# INSECURITY IN THE SAHEL

Rethinking Europe's response

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Coups, conflict and instability have increased in the Sahel. By focusing on short-term military and migration objectives, international efforts merely tackle the symptoms, not the underlying causes.



The counterterrorism paradigm has led to Europe supporting combat effectiveness despite abuses and impunity by state forces which undermine security.



The impacts of European security assistance require a rethinking and rebalancing of future programming. The EU's 2021 Sahel strategy is an opportunity to re-focus on a people-centred strategy to address structural drivers of insecurity

# INSECURITY IN THE SAHEL

## Rethinking Europe's response



European Member States urgently need to evaluate their current approaches in the Sahel, especially regarding the direct impacts on security for conflict-affected communities: lessons learnt from Afghanistan and elsewhere need to be fully integrated into future European policies and practices and to be coherent with commitments to doing no harm and contributing to peace.

Counterterrorism operations in the Sahel have fed into escalating conflictual violence, inter-communal conflicts and structural impunity, especially regarding abuses by state security forces.



The focus of the counterterrorism paradigm on combat effectiveness, rather than on the transformation of often predatory security sectors and strengthening efforts to reform security sectors, risks empowering governments that neglect their populations and exacerbating abuses by their security forces – who directly contribute to the conditions in which terrorism thrives, rather than fostering stability, security for the people and peace.



The impacts of European security assistance need to be better monitored and lessons integrated into future programming

The EU revised Sahel Strategy represents a strategic opportunity to redress these trends and dynamics through a stronger focus on people-centred security strategies which harness national civil expertise and address fundamental drivers of violent conflict.

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# INSECURITY IN THE SAHEL

Rethinking Europe's response

Over the last two years, the Sahel has witnessed five coup attempts, of which four were successful. Physical and economic security have worsened for Sahelian communities and violence has become the norm. The European leadership focus on counterterrorism and migration containment, and its preoccupation with actors such as China and Russia and more recently the Wagner group, have led to a predominant »security first« approach. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has accelerated the European rush towards military solutions, evidenced by arms exports and the »Strategic Compass«, the upcoming EU military strategy. Europe now needs to take stock of the results of this militarised politics<sup>1</sup> and the profound imbalance between civilian and security relations. The more Europe focuses on security forces without accountability, the more we encourage and embolden them. Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso are now ruled by military juntas and, as some have observed, »the Malian junta's turn to Russia and the Wagner Group is intended to shore up its domestic political position rather than to meaningfully address insecurity in the country«<sup>2</sup>.

The international response needs to rethink, rebalance and readjust. Peace, security and stability are not linear processes. The focus on security and stabilisation has caused policymakers to lose sight of the understanding that security is in fact only one ingredient of peace and development. »Fragile and divided states which fail to deliver basic services to their populations, are by their very nature prone to instability and coups«<sup>3</sup>. So too are those who do not address the underlying causes of conflict and insecurity. The unwavering optimism (in defiance of the evidence) that military counterterrorism operations will defeat the enemy and create space for stability and political solutions has contributed to strategic stubbornness<sup>4</sup>.

External military assistance and security provision are being placed in question by repeated failures. The collapse of Afghanistan's state and security forces within weeks of the US withdrawal from the country captured widespread global attention, and in Germany a parliamentary commission has been established to investigate the failures of the mission. But the problem also applies to other Western interventions in a range of contexts. From West Africa to Iraq, Somalia and Yemen, Western security engagement has failed to make people's lives more secure, to reinforce the legitimacy of state institutions, or to provide lasting stability for civilians.

Despite these failures, the European Union (EU) is expanding its commitment to »hard security« tools in order to bolster its crisis response. While the promotion of peace, democracy and human rights are still pillars of its external action, Europe is increasingly embracing heavily militarised responses to challenges beyond its borders. These militarised approaches based on the principle of »security first« focus on securing environments through the suppression of threats, which leads to a structural and institutional reliance on physical hard security tools, weaponry, and military assets, as well as providing training on combat effectiveness, counterterrorism and border management. As a result, securitisation becomes the dominant narrative: this leads to the neglect of issues such as widespread impunity and providing conflict-affected communities with approaches that tackle the root causes of violence and insecurity. Member States and the current European Commission leadership believe that tools that use the »language of power« offer them more control over security threats. However, evidence shows that these types of responses have allowed violence to escalate while also permitting repressive governments and authoritarian regimes to operate with impunity.

The current approaches, and in particular their strengths, weaknesses and impacts on communities affected by conflict, need to be subjected to an independent evaluation, and the lessons learnt from Afghanistan, the Sahel and elsewhere must be fully integrated into future European policies and practices. The latter, in turn, need to be continually monitored and evaluated to ensure that learning is updated and risks can be better mitigated. European efforts to support the reform of security sectors could be enhanced by ensuring that they respond to the needs of all of the people and communities in the conflict-affected country.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/07/chads-president-lived-died-by-gun-will-country-shift-away-militarized-rule/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/civil-military-imbalance-in-the-sahel/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1368-european-security-assistance-the-search-for-stability-in-the-sahel/>; Charbonneau B (2020), »Counterinsurgency governance in the Sahel«, BulletinFrancoPaix ([https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Bulletin-FrancoPaix-vol5n1\\_eng.pdf](https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Bulletin-FrancoPaix-vol5n1_eng.pdf))

## 1 A DECADE OF SECURITISATION

The EU's global security ambitions, linking its foreign policy with domestic security concerns, have been taking shape incrementally over the past ten years. The 2016 EU Global Strategy marked a major strategic shift to more state-centred, militarised responses to instability, framing state fragility in neighbouring countries and regions as a direct threat to European citizens. Since then, the EU has adopted a raft of new security assistance instruments to train and equip foreign security forces, including Capacity Building for Security and Development (CBSD), the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa) and the European Peace Facility (EPF). At the same time, the remit of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions has expanded to include counterterrorism and the containment of «irregular» migration.

A significant amount of this new security assistance funding has been directed to the five Sahelian countries Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – to the extent that some EU officials now refer to the Sahel as a «laboratory» for the EU's new train-and-equip approach. Saferworld has recently conducted research on how the EU is using its new security assistance instruments in these countries – which together make up the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) –, analysing political drivers, risks, and impacts. This paper builds on the findings and analysis of the report, «European security assistance: the search for stability in the Sahel», and identifies specific reflections and recommendations for the EU and Member State policymakers to contribute to peace and stability and ensure a civilian and political leap forward.

### 1.1 What underlies EU current security policy trends?

EU foreign and security policy is decided through unanimous decisions by Member States. However, in recent years, two Member States in particular have been especially influential in shaping the EU's growing role as a global security actor. France has long wished for greater European backing for its ambitious overseas security interventions, seeking to balance the costs and risks of its operations and seeing the EU as a «force multiplier» for its influence. But while this has been a constant since the early 2000s, the securitisation of EU foreign policy, with increasing militarised responses to crises, has been accelerated by a strategic shift in Germany's position. With its tradition of according primacy to politics as well as reluctance to resort to military force, as well as peacebuilding and civilian crisis management,<sup>5</sup> Germany has historically pushed back against France's security and

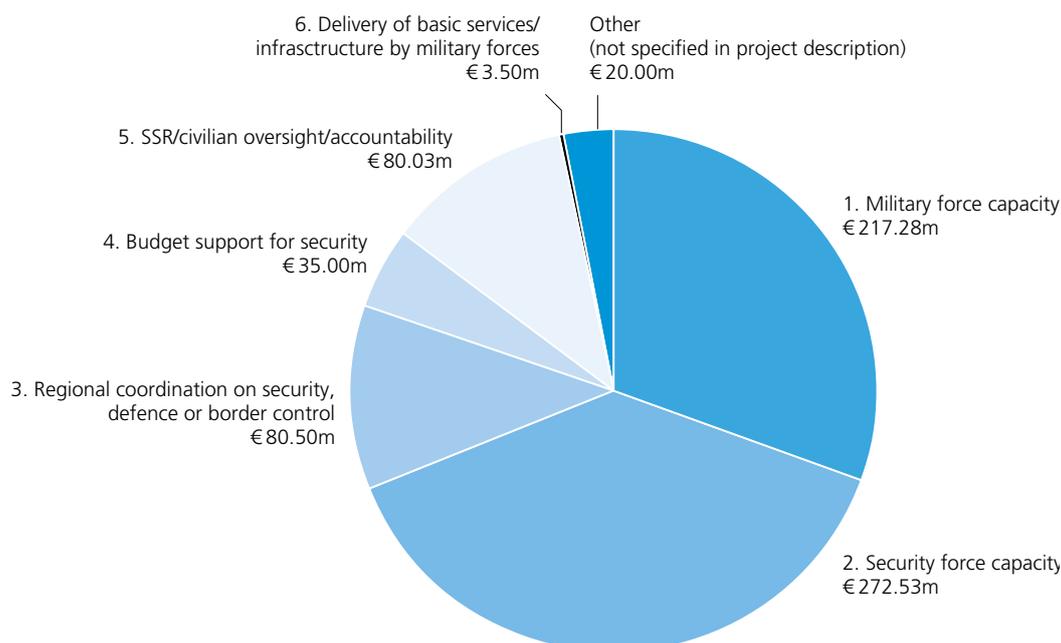
military initiatives at the EU level. However, since 2014, the German political establishment has increasingly called for Germany to accept a new global responsibility and take a stronger role in international security. This ambition could have led Germany to become more active in peacebuilding; however, the European securitisation paradigm dominated by counterterrorism and migration containment has instead resulted in an increasing adoption of new security initiatives both nationally (such as the Enable and Enhance Initiative jointly administered by the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of Defence) and at the EU level (CBSD, EPF providing training, arms and ammunition, expanding the tasks of EU CSDP missions to counterterrorism and irregular migration). This development has been compounded by growing direct defence cooperation between Germany and France. Despite traditional differences between their respective crisis management strategies, with Germany favouring more civilian and France more military responses, the approaches of the Élysée and the Chancellery have increasingly coalesced: they have formalised their security and defence industrial cooperation in the Aachen Treaty and have extended their cooperation in the Sahel.

Two main factors have underpinned the shift in Germany's position, while also influencing other Member States. Firstly, geopolitical shifts and threats – for example, the turn of the US inwards and the military ambitions of Russia and Turkey – have increased the appetite of EU Member States for European security and defence initiatives. Secondly, domestic security concerns – especially terrorism and migration – have also prompted defence cooperation and military operations that aim to defeat violent armed groups, in addition to efforts to reinforce border controls outside Europe. A prime example is the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which was launched by France following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris in order to strengthen European defence cooperation. As a result of these trends, decisions by Member States to send troops and equipment to conflict settings such as the Sahel have often been motivated more by the desire to combat armed groups, contain migration or build relations with European allies than by an ambition to address the drivers of insecurity or to protect civilians in these contexts. For example, women and girls in the Sahel experience some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, yet tackling the issue is not prioritised in international or national security strategies.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Germany has enshrined its commitments to world peace in its constitution and has historically been among the strongest supporters of peacebuilding; see Sherif et al. (2018) <https://ecdpm.org/publications/supporting-peacebuilding-change-europe/> (last accessed on 7.2.2022), as well as Federal Government of Germany guidelines on Preventing crises, resolving conflicts, building peace <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/1214246/057f794cd3593763ea556897972574fd/preventing-crisis-data.pdf> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/gbv\\_central\\_sahel\\_advocacy\\_doc\\_final\\_english.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/gbv_central_sahel_advocacy_doc_final_english.pdf) (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

Figure 1:  
Types of assistance funded as part of EU security assistance programmes (million €)



## 1.2 European security engagement in the Sahel

In 2011, the EU adopted its Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, which portrayed the weakness of Sahelian governments as a threat to European security. Since the adoption of the Sahel strategy, the EU has invested €1.4 billion<sup>7</sup> in building security and military force capacity in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

### CSDP missions<sup>8</sup>

EUTM Mali (military mission): €255 million 2014–2022

EUCAP Sahel Mali (civilian mission): €254 million 2014–2024

EUCAP Sahel Niger (civilian mission): €237 million 2012–2021

### Security assistance projects

African Peace Facility:  
€235 million support to the G5 Joint Force

EU Trust Fund for Africa: €307 million

Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace: €90 million

European Development Fund: €78 million

Counterterrorism is central to the related EU activities and interventions in the Sahel. EU capacity-building for Sahelian security and military forces has been conducted alongside French-led counterterrorism interventions. The Coalition for the Sahel has formalised a division of labour with the EU taking responsibility for building the capacities of state forces and France taking the lead on the fight against armed groups. Three EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions have been set up to strengthen the Malian and Nigerien governments' control over their territories and contain armed groups.<sup>9</sup> The EU has also been instrumental in the establishment and operationalisation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, from promoting regional cooperation on counterterrorism at its early stages to equipping troops through the African Peace Facility.

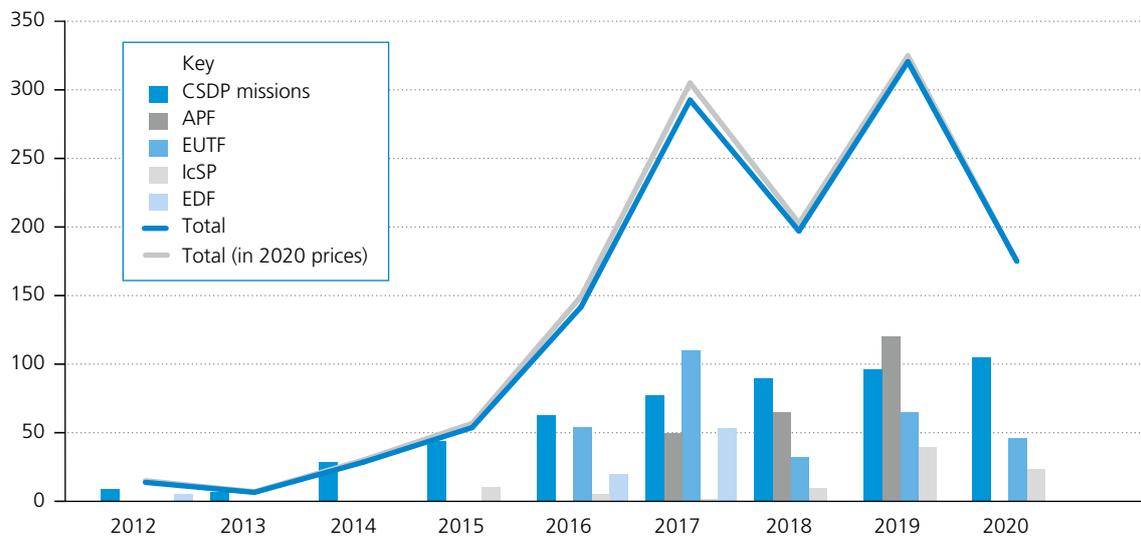
In addition, since 2015, EU Member States' aims to externalise border control and migration management have resulted in a significant increase in EU security assistance in the Sahel. The EU's CSDP missions in the Sahel have adopted new strategies for countering »irregular« migration flows. New funding has been earmarked for building the capacity of border controls and increasing the presence of security forces in border areas – and to provide Sahel states with incentives to adopt stricter border controls. However, the policies, programmes and tools of migration containment have produced mixed and counterproductive results, feed-

<sup>7</sup> €1.4 billion if budgets of CSDP missions until 2024 are included; €1.2 billion if budgets for them are only included until 2020. Moreover, since the adoption of the 2011 Sahel strategy with the aim of stabilisation in the region, the EU has also invested €3.6 billion in development aid and €1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance.

<sup>8</sup> The budgets for military CSDP missions only include shared costs covered by the EU and therefore exclude the salaries of seconded staff and other costs falling on Member States.

<sup>9</sup> EUCAP Sahel Niger was established in 2012, EUTM Mali was launched in February 2013, and EUCAP Sahel Mali was established in 2014.

Figure 2:  
Budget allocations for EU security assistance in the G5 Sahel countries per year (million €)



ing into conflicts and abuses and reinforcing the drivers of migration.<sup>10</sup>

The hard security focus was solidified by the Coalition for the Sahel, bringing French counterterror operation Barkhane and the G5 Joint forces under joint command, backed by EU efforts of both capacity building and expanding state control over the territory. Pillars Two and Three, which were initially intended to balance out the approach, have largely focused on equipping and building the capabilities of security and military forces rather than on governance and justice.

EU missions and programmes are overwhelmingly focused on building security and military forces' capabilities in fighting terrorism, strengthening borders and expanding states' presence in »ungoverned areas«. These programmes are designed and implemented on the assumption that the capacity of state security forces is a prerequisite for stabilisation and development and that, with greater operational capacity, migration will be brought under tighter control and European borders will be better protected. However, by framing their operational logic around the security-development nexus, these programmes often fail to recognise the limits of such an approach, especially when it comes to migrant communities. Since 2011, out of the €710 million worth of projects supporting security actors in the Sahel, approximately €490 million has been spent on training and equipping security forces to fight violent armed groups and on strengthening »porous« borders. In the context of the Sahel, EU security assistance to date has failed to mitigate the risks of this approach and to sufficiently balance it with

investment in behaviour change and accountability through security sector reform and civilian oversight of security forces.

Meanwhile, the objectives of migration containment have arguably influenced EU Member States' decisions to provide weapons, with several framing their material support to the G5 Sahel countries as countering »spillover effects« of insecurity in the Sahel on Europe.<sup>11</sup> The EPF has also been justified on the grounds that the effectiveness of the EU's training activities in the Sahel is undermined by its inability to equip security forces directly. However, as Saferworld research shows, a significant amount of »non-lethal« military equipment – including armoured vehicles, drones, boats, aircraft and crowd-control equipment – is already being provided by the EU's missions and instruments in the Sahel. EU Member States have also provided military equipment as donations, and between 2013 and 2019 sold arms worth over €400 million to the region.

France's efforts to Europeanise their security engagement in the Sahel have been weakened by Denmark and Sweden's decisions to withdraw from Takuba<sup>12</sup> and compounded by discussions regarding France's possible withdrawal of forces from Mali<sup>13</sup>. The withdrawal of the Nordic countries is linked to legal considerations and insecurity closer to home; France, on the other hand, is potentially reframing its engagement with similar counter-terror initiatives, including redeployments to Niger and Chad. However, some EU Member States are calling for a rethinking and rebalancing

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1217-partners-in-crime-the-impacts-of-europeas-outsourced-migration-controls-on-peace-stability-and-rights> (last accessed on 7.2.2022); <https://www.csis.org/analysis/peril-desert-irregular-migration-through-sahel> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1368-european-security-assistance-the-search-for-stability-in-the-sahel> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220128-security-in-the-sahel-is-the-takuba-task-force-still-welcome-in-mali>

<sup>13</sup> <http://apanews.net/en/news/france-mulls-definitive-troop-withdrawal-from-mali>

of the current approach and there is pressure to end the German Bundeswehr's Mali mission<sup>14</sup>.

## 2 FACTORING IN THE RISKS

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), over the past ten years, violence against civilians in the G5 Sahel countries – with the exception of Mauritania – has increased tenfold.<sup>15</sup> This prompts urgent questions about the impacts of Europe's security assistance.<sup>16</sup> The heavy-handed counterterrorism operations in the Sahel have contributed to the cycle of mutually escalating violence and have fuelled inter-communal conflicts. In the context of abuses by state forces, building their capacity seriously risks undermining security rather than improving it. In 2020, more civilians were killed by state security forces than by extremist groups in the five Sahel countries. International pressure for quick wins in counterterrorism, backed by significant resources, has pushed national military and security forces and the G5 Sahel Joint Force to be more aggressive, at the cost of civilian lives and with an increase in community violence and grievances.

The escalation of violence and instability in the region is characterised by communities being caught in a vicious circle of brutality between self-defence groups, militias, bandits, security forces and armed groups. In Sahelian communities, and particularly in Mali, lack of access to public services has severely undermined citizen–state relations; however, especially in central Mali, the absence of the state is often seen as preferable to its presence due to predatory state actors, especially security forces. This dynamic has rendered communities isolated and vulnerable and has contributed to the formation of many self-defence groups, not to mention opportunistic armed groups positioning themselves as armed guardians (rarely for ideological reasons; usually to profit from the situation). So communities have increasingly found themselves in the crosshairs between these violent competing interests. These »local self-defence groups and militias often evolve in problematic ways, and perpetrate sometimes extreme violence«<sup>17</sup>. »Malian security and defence forces have also been linked to militia groups for decades.«<sup>18</sup> Complex grievances (often historical in origin) and conflicts between communities are being neglected by

the overall »security first« militarised approaches, and in some cases are being exacerbated by them – resulting in communities increasingly being targeted on all sides.

»The mainstreaming of armed violence in the Sahel is a constantly evolving process. Political dysfunction, especially the systematic exclusion of civilians from decisions that hugely influence their lives, has played a major role in creating insecure, fragmented communities who frequently turn in on themselves, and against each other. [Moreover,] [p]redatory state actors' severe abuses are not being sufficiently confronted by leaders of international military interventions«<sup>19</sup>. While the EU trains forces in human rights, without robust systems and structures to monitor the impacts of this training and hold abusers accountable, trainings have had little impact on the worrying (and increasingly normalised) levels of violence towards civilians. »Radical groups and criminal gangs are exploiting years of short-sighted security policies that have lost the state much of its legitimacy«<sup>20</sup>.

This shows how the current narrow focus on stabilisation and security assistance often overlooks the complex, intertwined political and socio-economic factors underpinning people's insecurity. Since 2001, the discriminatory use of counterterror measures has targeted specific communities based on their ethnic and religious backgrounds. One of the risks of counterterrorism is feeding into existing stereotypes of specific communities such as the Fulbé and legitimising an emboldened stigmatisation that leads to violence. This has been documented by analysts such as the International Crisis Group who state that »the availability of weapons of war and the pretext of fighting jihadist groups have opened the floodgates to a level of ethnic-based violence that is without precedent in the region«.<sup>21</sup> Pursuing short-term goals of counterterror or migration containment compromises long-term approaches based on peace, rights and development. Funding has been diverted from support for security and justice (which contribute directly to human security and peace) to purely military objectives.<sup>22</sup> This fails to address the fact that, without these structural reforms, governments that neglect their populations in general, and abuses by their security forces themselves in particular, contribute to the conditions in which terrorism thrives.

In the Sahel, corruption, abuse, and neglect by states are significant drivers of conflict, alienating populations which are then more easily exploited by violent groups.<sup>23</sup> In such circumstances, expanding the state presence by strengthening security forces can be counterproductive. There is

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/pressure-grows-to-end-german-bundeswehrs-mali-mission/a-60717241#:~:text=An%20extension%20of%20the%20Bundeswehr,cause%20for%20concern%2C%20say%20experts.>

<sup>15</sup> Website of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED): [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com) (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>16</sup> It is essential that both security assistance and development programmes ensure conflict sensitive approaches, as otherwise they risk providing actors with incentives to perpetrate violence rather than contributing to peace and security, as is shown by both the examples of Sahel and Afghanistan.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1385-how-not-to-lose-the-sahel-community-perspectives-on-insecurity-and-international-interventions-in-mali-niger-and-burkina-faso>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/07/mali-dangerous-upsurge-abuse-ethnic-militias>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1385-how-not-to-lose-the-sahel-community-perspectives-on-insecurity-and-international-interventions-in-mali-niger-and-burkina-faso>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/centre-du-mali-enrayerle-nettoyage-ethnique> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nrc.no/expert-deployment/2016/2021/mali-security-action-hampers-development/> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/if-victims-become-perpetrators-violent-extremism-sahel/> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

a real risk that the EU's security partnerships in the Sahel are legitimising abusive practices by governments more focused on cementing their power and alliances than on protecting citizens and addressing their needs. The counterterrorism paradigm has led to a focus on combat effectiveness, rather than on the transformation of factionalised, often predatory security sectors and the strengthening of positive civil-military and state-society relations.

Expanding the state presence and basic services without escalating violence requires much more intensive dialogue and trust-building with local populations. However, such efforts have been side-lined under the narrow counterterrorism paradigm. As explained by Assitan Diallo, President of the Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFARD), »[s]tabilisation in Mali has meant stabilisation of a militarised status quo.« Security assistance has entrenched the primacy of military rule and of military solutions to political problems, as demonstrated by recent coups in Mali, Chad and very recently in Burkina Faso.

Arms proliferation in the Sahel fuels conflict and violence. Given the abuses committed by state forces in the G5 Sahel countries, the risk of misuse of equipment provided is high. While the EU often argues that the weapons it provides come with high standards and safeguards against diversion and misuse, this is contradicted by the evidence. Corruption and inadequate oversight have in fact made state stocks the main source of weapons for armed groups.<sup>24</sup> Due to resistance by recipient national authorities, the EU has little ability to control or track what happens to the equipment it provides once handed over.

## 2.1 Key reflections and recommendations

As the EU is forging a new path in its approach to crises and reflects on its approach to conflict prevention and stability, it should take stock of its track record and the long-term consequences of EU security assistance in the Sahel, as well as in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia. For security assistance to contribute to long-term security and conflict transformation, it needs to tackle the drivers of insecurity more effectively and make security forces more responsive to people's security needs.

Existing EU policies – such as the Strategic Framework to Support Security Sector Reform, the Concept on Protection of Civilians (PoC) in EU-led Military Operations, the EU Stabilisation Concept and the Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security, the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises, as well as the German Government's guidelines on preventing crises, resolving conflicts and

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org/resources/publications/1368-european-security-assistance-the-search-for-stability-in-the-sahel> (last accessed on 7.2.2022); Jouve A (2020) « Sahel: d'où viennent les armes et les munitions? » RFI, 9 April; <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

building peace – all emphasise the need for human security, conflict and context sensitivity, inclusive political settlements, accountable security institutions and strengthening civil society to prevent conflict and contribute to peace and security. However, current militarised approaches do not tackle structural violence against citizens, including endemic gender-based violence,<sup>25</sup> especially in military cultures where gender considerations are often little more than afterthoughts. The pervasiveness of gender-based violence across the Sahel requires far more robust, integrated approaches to begin addressing these inequalities, including in national and international military institutions themselves.

## 2.2 A civilian leap forward

The EU's revised Sahel strategy speaks of a »civilian and political leap forwards«. This should focus less on state-centred stabilisation and more on civil society and community engagement, including with women-led and women's rights organisations, as the basis for a people-centred peacebuilding strategy which addresses longer-term structural drivers of insecurity – such as severe inequalities and weak, corrupt governance – and engages with communities on how to implement it.

The available evidence shows that the continued focus on counterterrorism, migration containment, and boosting the combat capacity of state forces has led to rising civilian deaths and public pushback against the European presence.<sup>26</sup> Narrowly focused security responses risk exacerbating violence and harm to civilians and undermining the EU's reputation and its objectives of peace and stability.

Rather than assuming that more military and security assistance will deliver better results, the EU should urgently consider how to adjust the logic of its response through increased engagement with affected populations and by balancing security assistance with investments in accountability and civil society participation in both decision-making and evaluations. It is fundamental that European responses to crisis and insecurity should contribute to peace and stability rather than risking doing harm. The recent failures of international counterterrorism responses in both the Sahel and Afghanistan demonstrate the urgent need for reflection and a rebalancing of the EU's approach.

To tackle the drivers of insecurity in the Sahel and beyond, the EU should consider the following adjustments:

<sup>25</sup> The Sahel has the highest recorded rates of GBV in the world: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/gbv\\_central\\_sahel\\_advocacy\\_doc\\_final\\_english.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/gbv_central_sahel_advocacy_doc_final_english.pdf) (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

<sup>26</sup> Website of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED): <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard> (last accessed on 7.2.2022); Traoré D. (2021), »The Sahel: »In 2020, more civilians were killed by security forces than extremist groups«, FIDH (originally published in Le Monde), 26 February; <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/the-sahel-in-2020-more-civilians-were-killed-by-the-security-forces> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

### Learning and review:

- Ensure that the implementation of EU policies – such as the EU-wide strategic framework to support security sector reform (SSR), the Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security, and the Concepts on Stabilisation and the Protection of Civilians – reflect the commitments to conflict sensitivity, human security, gender equality, inclusive political settlements, accountable security institutions, and civil society strengthening. The effective implementation of these comprehensive policies would represent a crucial step towards promoting more democratic and transparent security governance, and would contribute to the transformation of security sectors into more effective and accountable public services.
  - Develop more robust review processes for EU and EU Member States' security assistance that scrutinise the broader long-term impacts and implications of the state-centric stabilisation approach, and integrate the resulting lessons into future programming.
  - Ensure that Member States learn from past experience to confront the risks and problematic track record of short-term, heavily securitised approaches to managing their immediate concerns about terrorism and migration. Mandate regular internal learning exercises that draw on gender-balanced evidence and testimony from affected populations and civil society to critically examine harmful counterterrorism and countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) programming and assess its impact on peace, rights, gender equality, and locally managed development.
  - Challenge the narrow and divisive public/media narrative which perpetuates the idea that security threats require security responses. This requires EU political leaders, individually and collectively, to communicate more effectively to the public the need for patient, comprehensive strategies to address drivers of conflict more effectively than problematic »war-on-terror« or migration containment methodologies.
- Engage with the »R« of SSR and ensure that support for security institutions contributes to their legitimacy, accountability, and ability to respond to the security needs of the people, including women and marginalised people.
  - Make the needs of people and communities the primary goal of military and security forces and incorporate dialogue, mediation, human rights monitoring, and conflict- and gender-sensitive development support to ensure that people's voices are heard.
  - Build these priorities into all stages – planning, design, implementation and evaluation – of security assistance programming, basing it on robust and regular participatory analysis of conflict, peace, gender, and other power dynamics and community security and justice needs. Make use of existing tools and expertise, including the gender analysis of conflict toolkit and the gender-sensitive conflict analysis methodology. Ensure that programmes can be adapted, suspended, or ended based on regular monitoring and evaluation, and that CSDP missions and other security initiatives have an exit strategy.
  - Scale up support for community security and trust-building initiatives and structures. Support community security initiatives that identify and respond to local perceptions of security by working through both formal and informal systems.<sup>27</sup> Combine gender-sensitive political economy analysis and inclusive security assessments to establish the basis for community security. While recognising the trade-offs and institutional constraints faced by the EU in encouraging G5 Sahel partners to be more inclusive and engage more actively with civil society, it is important for the EU to support efforts to build trust between the state and its citizens, including women, with the aim of genuinely addressing the drivers of conflict and not simply expecting populations to accept counterterrorism measures.
  - Increase funding for community-led peacebuilding. This should include supporting administrative infrastructure and governance initiatives aimed at addressing inequalities and ensuring that populations have fair and equitable access to natural resources.
  - Apply a conflict-sensitive lens throughout the programme cycle to assess whether assistance contributes to locally owned peace and addresses drivers of conflict, rather than doing harm, and adjust programmes that are failing these tests.

### A people-centred approach:

- Prioritise human security over a narrow, short-term approach to state/national security that prioritises an external stabilisation agenda. Broaden the understanding of security from a narrow counterterror and state-capacity focus to encompass issues such as access to water, basic services, and economic opportunities for all, including women. Prioritise resource mobilisation to Pillar Four (development) of the Coalition for the Sahel's Plan.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/806-community-security-handbook> (last accessed on 7.2.2022).

- Support locally led peacebuilding initiatives, including those led by women and women’s rights organisations, and existing formal and informal mechanisms for conflict resolution and accountability.
- Promote gender equality in all peacebuilding initiatives, ensure that women participate meaningfully, and monitor the impacts of their participation.
- Provide long-term, core and flexible funding to local civil society organisations, especially women-led and women’s rights organisations, so that they can work on local priorities and engage with them, independently of the government, on SSR and governance reform processes when such processes are undertaken.
- Strengthen risk assessments and prohibitions regarding the provision of military equipment (for example under the EPF), to ensure that
  - no transfers of items on the EU’s common military list, whether organised bilaterally between a Member State and a member of the G5 Sahel or via the EPF, will be permitted unless the EU has full confidence that this will not lead to any of the negative consequences set out in the EU Common Position 2008/944/CFSP;<sup>28</sup> including (but not limited to) risk of diversion or of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law;
  - EU Member States do not authorise a transfer of military equipment (either bilaterally or through the EPF) where there is a clear risk that it may breach one or more of the EU’s arms export criteria, unless sufficient mitigation efforts are possible, for example by improving physical security and stockpile management programmes, gender-sensitive human rights observance, and through robust monitoring of security force behaviour, post-export verification, and tracking of arms and violations;
  - the donation of any equipment on the EU’s Common Military List is contingent on the recipient country accepting meaningful post-export inspection obligations.

**Strengthen safeguards, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability:**

- Foster a culture of transparency, accountability, and performance management. Make a genuine commitment to monitoring, evaluation, and learning on an ongoing basis:
- Develop operational guidelines for regular in-depth assessments of missions and projects (including their impact to date and future risks, incorporating conflict- and gender-sensitive analysis), on the understanding that these missions and projects are typically taking place in fraught and potentially fast-moving environments and therefore require repeated review.
- Report on both what works and what doesn’t, and involve communities in monitoring results and adapting programmes.
- Ensure transparency by encouraging, supporting, and building parliamentary and public oversight into European security assistance and SSR efforts.
- Lead by example on accountability by ensuring that EU security missions and projects contain stringent safeguards, whistleblowing mechanisms, and robust frameworks for follow-up after incidents (including sexual exploitation, harassment, and abuse). Safe, meaningful, context-specific, and gender-sensitive whistleblowing structures must be available, including officials and military and security personnel from the EU, its Member States, and recipient states, local and international civil society organisations, and local populations.

<sup>28</sup> As amended by Council Decision (CFSP) 2019/1560.

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