

Forum: Security Council

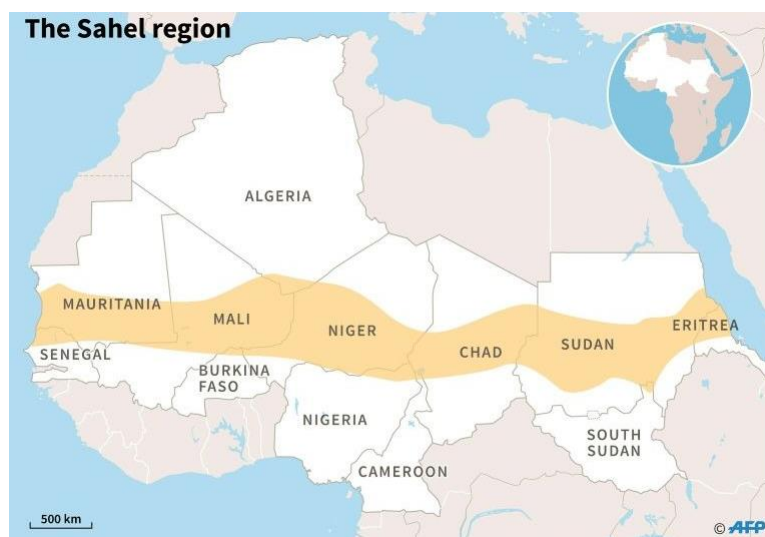
Issue: The Situation in the Sahel Region

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Introduction

The Sahel is a semi-arid region located between the Sahara desert to the north and the African Savannah to the south. It spans across Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea, with one end bordered by the Atlantic ocean and the other by the Red Sea. However, the exact borders of the region are not rigorously defined.



The Sahel region

Dwindling resource access and a dependence on subsistence farming leave millions at-risk from the deterioration of the environment. The Sahel is a melting pot of cultures, beliefs and lifestyles, and the struggle for resources has created tensions throughout the region, some escalating into violence. With governments poor and corrupt, the situation is in a downward spiral; a drought could set off violence and death throughout the region.

The key conflict lies between farmers and herders over land. Underrepresented by their governments, many herders turn to jihadists for support, often becoming recruits themselves. Porous borders leave terrorists free to roam throughout the region, instigating violence and leaving more than 4000 dead in 2019.

With regional authorities unable to stem the overwhelming situation, the international community must create innovative solutions. Peace attempts need to be bolstered and more action needs to be taken. The situation has created more than a million refugees, and refugee camps cannot sustain their people indefinitely. The conflict must be defused before irreversible environmental, economic and cultural damage occurs throughout the Sahel.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate change

Climate change is a significant change in regional atmospheric conditions over a prolonged period of time. Climate factors include temperature, rainfall and humidity patterns. It is different to global warming, but both processes affect each other.

Desertification



A section of land affected by desertification

Desertification is the process of land degradation resulting from various phenomena, most notably climatic variations, erosion and human activity. This reduces the ability of land to support vegetation and, in extreme cases, prevents vegetation from developing entirely.

Subsistence agriculture

Subsistence agriculture is when people grow food with the intent of supporting themselves and their families with it, producing little to no surplus. This can consist of growing crops (farming) and raising livestock (herding). Consequently, crop failure or livestock death can put subsistence agriculturists at risk of starvation.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

An IDP is someone that has fled their homes but remains in their home country, not crossing a border to find safety. They stay under the jurisdiction and protection of their own government, even if the government is the reason why they were forced to flee.

Jihadist

A jihadist is an islamist who believes in violence as a means to remove obstacles in order to restore God's presence on Earth and defend against infidels. They see jihad (the act of waging religious war to protect their God) as a duty to all muslims. Note they are a subset of islamists, and not all muslims are jihadists. Many muslims denounce violence and oppose the jihad movement as well.

Background Information

The struggle for resources

At the heart of the conflict in the Sahel is a struggle for resources caused by pressure from climate change. This decreases the food security of the local populace, and massively impacts the economy of countries located in the Sahel.

The changing climate

Climate change has been a major problem in the Sahel. The Sahel's temperature is rising at a rate that is one and a half times faster than the global average. The World Economic forum predicted in 2019 that, by 2050, the temperature will have risen by at least 3 degrees. This increase in temperature will come with severe consequences for the agricultural produce and vegetation in the region, with many plants unlikely to survive or, at the very least, be restricted by the increased temperature.

Aside from the temperature, various other aspects of the Sahelian climate have become more extreme in recent years. While the average rainfall in the region has remained around the same, the rainfall has become more sporadic: between 1970 and 1993, there were 20 years of severe droughts, and researchers estimate the frequency of droughts has continued to increase. Due to

these extreme weather conditions, the UN has estimated that climate change has already affected around 80 percent of agricultural areas in the region.

Deforestation and desertification

Compounding onto the climate problem is the related issue of deforestation. Deforestation occurs mostly as a result of human activity in the Sahel, unlike other areas, and the average rate of deforestation in Sahelian countries is significantly higher than the global average of 0.8%. The main causes of deforestation are to harvest the trees for fuel and clear ground for farming. Trees are a very important source of fuel in Africa. Rural populations often cut down trees to harvest firewood for sustenance purposes. It is estimated over 90% of the country's population uses firewood and heating and it accounts for 52% of energy resources in the Sahel. Farmers also burn down forests to clear ground for farming. The ashes from the burnt trees are used as a natural fertilizer, enriching the soil for a limited amount of time. It is estimated these two processes account for the majority of deforestation occurring. While deforestation may be beneficial to communities in the short-term, the long-term effects are obviously devastating. As trees are not often replanted, this will cause a decrease in the vegetation in the area. People will run out of trees to cut down near them, so they will travel farther and farther out in search of trees to sustain themselves. This causes permanent damage to large sections of the forest, decreasing habitats for animals and future resources.

But most importantly is deforestation's role in the desertification of the Sahel. Trees help hold the soil together, keeping nutrients in the ground. When trees are uprooted or cut down, the soil loses its structure and form. The topsoil, the soil near or at the surface of the ground, is eroded away naturally by harsh winds or heavy rains, but this can be accelerated by overgrazing and ploughing. As this section of the soil contains most of the seedlings and nutrients - the top two meters of soil in drylands store approximately 32% of the total carbon held in soils, the remaining ground loses most of its ability to support vegetation and gradually, the land will transform into a barren desert, incapable of supporting life. The hardening of soil, increased forest fires, changes in the surface albedo, increases of atmospheric dust and excessive extraction of groundwater can further accelerate the process.

The financial impacts of deforestation and desertification are significant. For example, in Niger, environmental degradation costs are equivalent to around 11% of its GDP. Deforestation is certainly not a sustainable process, and future generations will have to bear the impact of their ancestors' destruction of the environment. Finally, deforestation and desertification threatens to breach the natural wall of vegetation separating the Sahara from the savannah to the south. If

this wall is breached on a large scale, there will be severe impacts for the environment, climate and society that will reverberate throughout the world.

Food insecurity

These environmental impacts are felt the hardest by the farmers and herders. In the Sahel, the majority of the workforce is employed in agriculture: the primary sector accounts for up to 45% of the GDP of countries in the region. Throughout the belt, up to 50 million people are nomads and depend on their cattle flocks for food. Increased desertification makes it harder for these people to find grass for their flocks to graze: they often now have to migrate much earlier and for longer to find suitable grazing land. Droughts have ruined many herdsmen, forcing them to find other ways to sustain themselves and often turning to farmers for work.

Farmers are being no less devastated by the environmental challenges, however. The desertification of land significantly reduces their harvest yields. Around 80% of the Sahel's farmland is estimated to be degraded by the UN. The loss of topsoil and nutrients forces farmers to pay for expensive fertilisers in order to produce plants. However, these can salinize and acidify the soil, further compounding onto the problem. Desertification and violence often force farmers to leave their farms in search of more habitable areas, further decreasing food production.

Declining food production, coupled with restricted access to roads and markets due to violence, worsen the food insecurity problem in the Sahel. More than 33 million people have been declared as food insecure, and malnutrition threatens more than 1.4 million children. The belt has suffered several major food crises in the modern era, more recently a shortage in 2012, where sporadic rainfall and decreases in humidity significantly impacted crop yields, creating food shortages that affected more than 7 million people.

The economic status in the Sahel

These problems are not helped at all by the Sahel's economic status: countries in the Sahel rank amongst the world's poorest. Amongst the 9 countries the Sahel spans across, all but 2 of them rank in the bottom 25 countries according to the Human Development Index, and therefore are obviously in no position to address these root environmental problems without outside assistance. The Sahel is highly underdeveloped, with the majority of its GDP coming from primary sector activities that lack mechanization and modern practices. Poor administration, depreciation of local currencies, inflation and migration only compound onto this economic problem which must be solved.

Rising tensions and jihadism

While it may seem like dwindling resources are the root cause of the problem, resource production has actually increased overall in many areas of the Sahel, such as central Mali. The real struggle in the Sahel is for control of these resources. This has created tensions between communities which persist across borders such as the conflict between farmers and herders, political instability, conflicts arising from refugees and migrants, and most recently, COVID 19.

Farmers vs. herders

The need for suitable land and grass for grazing has triggered violent conflicts between farmers and nomads across the Sahel; when herders come too early or stay for extended periods of time, tension builds up between them and the farmers, with violence likely to ensue. And yet, many herders have no choice but to fight it out with the farmers: they would be unable to feed their flocks otherwise and would lose their main source of income.

In addition, the decimation of flocks as a result of droughts and desertification has forced many herders to seek jobs from farmers. Dependent on them for food and a livelihood, this creates internal angst among many herder-turned-farmer communities, as they are often discriminated against and mistreated, furthering the tension between the two groups.

Government policies often benefit farmers over herders which leads frustrated pastoralists to turn elsewhere for support. Often this comes in the form of jihadist groups, who reflect the anti-government sentiments of the herders. This, compounded with the limited livelihood opportunities available, makes these nomadic communities easy targets of jihadist groups for recruitment.

The issue with introducing new resources, aiming to support the local population, is also attracting a different demographic of people to migrate into the area. For example, in central Mali a project dug new wells, unlocking new sources of water to support livestock farming. However, these wells also attracted farmers into the region. The number of farmers grew over time, and they began asserting their rights over the land surrounding the wells, which were officially owned by herders, creating tensions between the two groups.

In Burkina Faso, rice production was increased through a development project. However, this project attracted non-native farmers into the region from different ethnic groups. As a result, herders were pushed off their lands to make way for more farms without anything in return, mounting tension between them and the immigrant farmers.

Political instability

In both examples, the inability of the government to step in and resolve such disputes contributed significantly to the outbreak of violence. Many groups have felt underrepresented by the government, and have therefore looked elsewhere for support. The lack of a strong government presence has allowed communities to challenge the law anyway: there is no one stopping them from doing so, and this issue must be addressed. As much as support must be provided to local populations facing shortages, Sahelian governments also need mediators who can arbitrate the various disagreements regarding access to and distribution of resources in rural areas.

However, local governments by themselves cannot do much about this, due to the continuous instability in the region as a whole. During Niger's 50 years of independence, the country has seen 2 armed rebellions, 4 coups, and 7 different governments. The military coup of March 2012 in Mali ended 20 years of democracy. The support of numerous armed militias in the region has done nothing to help stability, and only increases the complexity of the region's political problems. Foreign governments must ensure any intervention they make into the situation is coordinated with the local government and will decrease instability, not increase it.

A major contributor and beneficiary of the unstable political climate is the porous borders of countries in the region. These allow merchants and herders to move freely between countries, but also have massively aided traffickers and criminals. The UN has estimated illicit flows across the Sahel have amounted to around \$3.8 billion annually. Rebellions and militias in one country normally spread across borders, such as when violence from Mali spilled into Burkina Faso and Niger in 2013.

Refugees and migrants



A UNHCR camp in the Sahel

As the frequency of conflict is increasing, with violence becoming normal in many areas of the Sahel, many families are forced to repeatedly flee and migrate to new places. Throughout the Sahel, there were over a million refugees and IDPs as of 2019, many of which are supported by UNHCR camps. However, these camps are subject to attack, and it is hard for refugees to find jobs in them. A major concern is the increasing vulnerability of migrating families: each time they migrate, they lose social bonds with others and need to familiarize themselves with a different situation, making it harder for them to survive.

To escape the continuous conflict, many have attempted to seek refuge in European countries. According to the UNHCR in 2018, 116647 refugees arrived in Europe from the Mediterranean, with over 2000 losing their lives attempting to do so. This has been an uncomfortable realization for many Europeans, and most European countries are still addressing the symptoms by using resources to increase border patrols and stop migration, without much support to stem the conflicts causing the migrants to migrate. The mass migration has caused a regional issue to truly become a global one, and the effects of the Sahelian crisis are being felt by all countries.

COVID-19

As the rest of the world struggles to recover from COVID-19, it only adds another problem onto the existing ones being faced by the Sahel. Jihad and terrorist groups have used the pandemic to reposition themselves across borders and create calculated strikes against targets across the Sahel. With government resources preoccupied with the medical crisis, these actions are not being met with enough force and are allowing the terrorist groups to strengthen their foothold in the region.

The virus has been most devastating to IDPs and other refugees in the area. Refugee camps host tens of thousands, making social distancing and other mitigation protocols unfeasible and impossible. Many camps lack the necessary funding to obtain testing, and with such a high population density, the effectiveness of such testing is questionable at best: people come into contact with many others on a daily basis, and contact tracing is both impractical and ineffective.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Mali

At the center of the Sahelian crisis is Mali. It is a regional epicenter for jihadists and terrorists, and has had continuous outbreaks of violence since 2011. Even with interventions by Chad, UN Peacekeepers and the G5 group for Sahel, the situation has continued to deteriorate, impacting both

militants and civilians. In 2018, there were at least 882 civilian fatalities, 7 times more than during the country's civil war and between January and May 2019 more than 133000 were forced to flee their homes. A weak government, poverty and lack of job opportunities have all contributed to the increased presence of militias and jihadists, and the country serves as a major base of operations from which these groups can venture into other countries and base attacks from. The first UN-supported mission into Mali was the AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission to Mali) in 2013, which then transitioned into operation MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) and this mission has continued to operate in Mali since then.

Burkina Faso



A Koglweogo patrol

Burkina Faso is one of the major recipients of violence from the Malian crisis, with the first attacks on the country occurring 3 years after the outbreak of the crisis. The country has witnessed a sharp increase in militant attacks over the past few years, with 399 events recorded in 2019 leading to 1800 fatalities. Aside from physical injuries, the conflict has also left other wounds on the country. Since 2016, around 2300 schools have been closed nationwide, affecting 325245 pupils. Despite several military operations, the situation is still uncertain and extrajudicial arrests and executions have only weakened the trust between civilians and the state. The government's support to some armed groups (especially the Koglweogo, a local militia often working in cooperation with the police) clearly indicates the inability of the state to resolve the situation by themselves.

Niger

Niger is at the center of most of the crisis zones in the Sahel and, therefore, faces most of the challenges in the region. The country's military is involved in both the Mali and Libyan borders, but the deteriorating situation in Mali has directly destabilized the Niger as well. The country's economy has

become progressively more informal and associated with crime, especially in rural areas. The growing influence of militant groups has also weakened the relationship between communities and the government, and the arrival of refugees has only complicated matters, as tensions over resource acquisition and distribution are overloading the government. In 2018, the number of protests and riots tripled, and a new tax law, coupled with inflation, sparked waves of dissent. Only making matters worse are the increases in food insecurity, which now affects over a million people.

Sudan



Members of the Janjaweed militia

Sudan is most notoriously known for its Darfur region, where a conflict that started in 2003 continues to this day. Tensions arose between the government and civilians regarding discrimination of the bureaucracy against non-Arabs, leading to the government committing mass genocide against Darfurians, often with the support of the Janjaweed - government funded Arab militias. A UN peacekeeping mission unsuccessfully attempted to stem conflict after the Sudanese government blocked the access of troops to cities they were attacking. An ICC warrant was issued for Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, which was delayed until 2019, but conflict has still continued after his removal. In 2019, there were at least 25 incidents in the region which led to the deaths of 37 people and abductions and rapes of others, and no permanent solution to resolve the conflict has been proposed. The conflict has also left over 2 million people displaced as of 2018, and 3 million more have been affected somewhat by the conflict. The UN deployed operation UNAMID (United Nations-African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur) to protect civilians, and this mission has also continued to the present.

Chad

Chad is sandwiched between Niger and Sudan, and consequently shares problems found in both neighboring countries, but to a slightly lesser extent. While the country has seen relatively less civil

unrest and attacks that its neighbors, Chad has a long history of being involved in regional military operations, but these actions have increased the country's exposure to terrorism. A significant problem for Chad is hosting refugees fleeing into its borders: the influx of people has increased tensions over resource control and disrupted the lives of the local populace. Without international support, it is unlikely the country can continue to support these refugees. Chad has been stuck in a recession since 2015, due to the constant environment of conflict and falling oil prices, forcing the government to cut back on its spending on education, welfare programs and other social services while increasing taxes on most goods. This has impacted the lives of the poorest the most, and has conjured civil unrest within the country.

Nigeria

Farmer-herder violence has also seen a recent uptick in Nigeria, with fluctuations aligned with climate seasonality and the electoral cycles of the country. Issues involving control over land and grazing pastures, frustration with elitist manipulation and extremism have all instigated violent disputes, and pastoralists have confronted government forces with increased frequency. While the country is in a slightly better position to deal with these internal conflicts than its neighbors due to its developmental progress, outside intervention may be necessary to stop the escalation of tensions and violence.

France



French soldiers participating in Operation Serval

France has been massively involved in regional operations in the Sahel, assisting its former colonies in their efforts to expel terrorism. It first launched operation Serval in Mali in 2013 at the request of the Malian government for military support, with the aim to remove insurgents from the north of Mali. This was a relative success, and follow-up operation Barkhane was launched in 2014 to combat violence across the entire Sahel. French military involvement in the region still continues to this day.

G5 Sahel (G5-S)

Created in 2017, the G5 Sahel force aims to respond to the increasing influence of armed militant groups and the worsening regional situation. The group includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. It carried out its first operation in 2017, and has access to 5000 soldiers at full employment. The force is gaining financial and material support, which are being used to equip and train combatants. Aside from combating terrorism, the group also aims to encourage sustainable development in the region, creating economic development and new job opportunities.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
February 26th, 2003	The war in Darfur begins, beginning more than 15 years of armed conflict between the government and rebel groups.
July 31st, 2007	The UNAMID is established, aiming to protect civilians and contributing to the security of the Darfur region.
October 23rd, 2011	The Libyan civil war ends. Insurgent troops are freed up from the conflict and migrate into northern Mali.
March 22nd, 2012	A military coup ousts the incumbent president of Mali one month ahead of scheduled elections, ending 20 years of democracy.
January 11th, 2013	France begins Operation Serval, intervening militarily in the deteriorating situation in Mali.
April 25th, 2013	Operation MINUSMA is established in Mali to support political processes in the country and ensure the safety of civilians.
August 1st, 2014	Operation Serval is replaced by Operation Barkhane, expanding French military operations over the Sahel.
July 2nd, 2017	The G5-S is officially created and launches the cross-border joint force in Bamako.
November 2017	The G5-S carries out its first regional operation together with the armies of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.
April 11th, 2019	Omar Al-Bashir, the president of Sudan, is ousted and arrested following popular protests.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- 31 July 2007, (S/RES/1769)

- 12 October 2012, **(S/RES/2071)**
- 20 December 2012, **(S/RES/2085)**
- 25 April 2013, **(S/RES/2100)**
- The agreement for peace and reconciliation in Mali, 24 July 2014

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

On the security side, there have certainly been numerous attempts throughout the region to quell violence: UNAMID in Darfur, AFISMA/MINUSMA and Serval in Mali and Barkhane throughout the region. While these operations have had significant impacts on terrorist groups and managed to decrease certain threats in the region, they were unable to truly extinguish the militants, who simply moved across borders and regrouped.

On the economic side, the World Bank has launched a series of initiatives to support both pastors and farmers in the Sahel, such as the Regional Sahel Pastoralism Support Project, the Regional Investment Program for Livestock and Pastoral Development in Coastal Countries, and the initiative for Pastoralism and Stability in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. However, these initiatives haven't managed to create the desired impact on communities, and need to be significantly ramped up.

On the environmental side, there are several initiatives attempting to combat desertification, most notably the Great Green Wall, a project aiming to construct a vegetation barrier across the Sahel. However, these initiatives have mixed results. Many areas of the proposed wall are uninhabited, and so there was no one to care for the trees after they were planted; an estimated 80% of them have since died. But initiatives aimed at teaching local communities how to sustainably harvest and preserve the resources around them have met much more success, and have helped re-green large areas of the Sahel.

Possible Solutions

Firstly, conflict must be quelled. This is obviously easier said than done. Solutions that governments and the militants will both agree to must be created, and compromises need to be made. While it may seem improbable terrorists will agree to any deal, if real changes can be seen in the proposals, it may cause some dissent within their ranks and reduce the power of the rebels.

Another option is giving the herders a voice in the government. Many of them are easy recruits for terrorists because they feel they are being ignored by the government, and so they must be given

access to grazing areas and allowed to move to said areas. Elites must be restricted from deploying personal militias to further their own agendas, and elections must be kept as democratic as possible.

Stable and sustainable economic growth must also be achieved in the Sahel, opening job opportunities and giving the people, especially in rural areas, a livelihood and job security. A fair and trusted judicial system to resolve disputes over resources must also be created and the government must have ample power to enforce the decisions made by it.

Finally, steps must be taken to prepare the region for further impacts of climate change. On one hand, efforts should be made to rejuvenate the ecosystem, helping preserve and expand existing vegetation. But on the other hand, the community must make an effort to adapt to the changing circumstances. While it is necessary to preserve the culture of the region and many may be unwilling to sacrifice their herds or farms, steps must be taken to industrialize the region and introduce machinery, reducing the risk of economic recession due to a dry spell or drought. Only through the modernization of the Sahelian economy can true stability in the region be achieved.

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