the Sahel Consortium

Consortium pour le Sahel

The Sahel and its Complexity: a Conceptual Framework for the Creation of an International Consortium for the Study of the Sahel

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LA MER EN PÉNÉTRANT DANS produira de l'énergie électrique et fertilisera LE SAHARA une partie du désert

Area of Concern

Source: Sahel countries. Retrieved on August 15, 2012 from wikipedia. The newly created state of South Sudan is not shown on this political map of the Sahel.

A research project on the Sahel is necessary and urgent. The region is getting more and more unstable, as is the risk of seeing the number of failed and failing states increase. The sources of instability are complex. They include poverty, the effects of climate change and political violence. There are growing terrorist activities in the region. Great powers' interventions tend to put emphasis on military solutions and counterinsurgency as exemplified by the creation of the US Africa Command in 2008 and France's military presence in the region. The Global War on Terror, pursued as Contingency Operation under the current US Administration, has lasted for a decade now. But peace is still elusive and development insufficient to mitigate the needs of a growing population. Counterinsurgency, by its very nature, distorts relationships among people, as it tends to create mistrust in social interactions. Thus, traditional values such as trust, negotiation and collaborative problem solving embedded local cultures are being challenged and replaced by a culture of violence. If we don't want to see the Sahel look like today's Somalia or Afghanistan, it is urgent to find a different approach to the problems of the region. This is the *raison d'être* of the Consortium for the Study of the Sahel.

The case of Afghanistan is instructive by comparison because, as in that country, civil strife in the Sahel region involves layered issues with interlocking conflicts from local grievances, regional stability, to geopolitical considerations. Moreover, both cases are characterized by the convergence of poverty, violence, and severe climate. A description of the Sahel illustrates the challenges confronting the region.

The Sahel

The Sahel is located in the northern part of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) on the African continent. ITCZ covers an area of approximately 10 degrees south and 10 degrees north of the equator. This area is being particularly impacted by climate change. The Sahel, semi-arid corridor, traverses the central-north of Africa from west to east, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It covers the northern part of Senegal, southern part of Mauritania, middle part of Mali, southern part of Algeria and Niger, middle part of Chad, southern part of Sudan, northern part of South Sudan and Eritrea, in fact making these countries look like riparian states, sharing, not an actual river, but the "shore" demarcating the transition between the Sahara desert and the savannah. There are ten countries in total sharing the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sudan, and South Sudan.

The Sahel covers about 3 million square km or 1.1 million square miles. Its population of about 50 million is predicted to double to 100 million in 2020 and to quadruple to 200 million in 2050. Meanwhile, the region experiences recurrent drought. Water is scarce. Due to a combination of drought, political instability and rising food prices, an estimated 18 million people are currently facing food insecurity. "All of these factors contribute to a cycle in which the climate worsens human conditions, and resulting

human behaviors worsen the climate."[1] Outbreaks of diseases such as dengue fever and cholera are not uncommon.
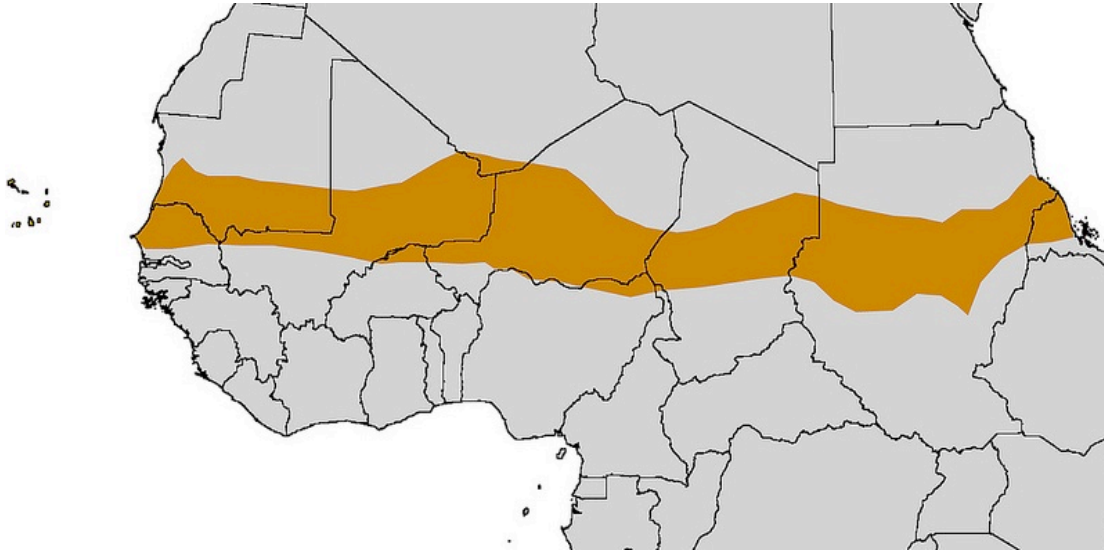
Source: The shape of the Sahel. Retrieved on November 13, 2012 from wikipedia.

Most Sahel countries experience political instability to some degree. Hundreds of thousands of Sahelians have become Internally Displaced Persons or refugees in neighboring countries. The cases that follow illustrate the vicious circle of poverty, political violence and severe climate as a multiplier.

Stories from the 1970s

Afghanistan

In 1969-72 there was a particularly severe weather in many parts of Afghanistan. The rain failed. A harsh winter followed the drought. In 1972, the food supply was critically inadequate. Central and northern Afghanistan experienced famine by the month of April. According to Christian Parenti, "The first journalist to break the story of the 1972 famine was Abdul Haq Waleh…He traveled to Chakhcharan, the small dusty capital of Ghor, and found a terrifying scene: corpses littered the street; survivors could not dig graves fast enough to keep hungry dogs at bay; scores of children had been abandoned by parents who could no longer feed them or orphaned by parents who had starved."[2] Meanwhile, King Mohammed Zahir Shah was on the coast off Naples vacationing. In public opinion, the cause of mass casualties was a combination of drought, government neglect, and the greed and corruption of officials.

[1] http://curiosity.discovery.com/question/what-is-the-sahel.
[2] Christian Parenti, *Tropics of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence.* New York: Nation Books, 2011, p. 100.

The king was deposed on July 17, 1973 by General Mohammed Daud Khan. The monarchy was abolished and replaced by a republic. Talks about recreating a greater Pashtunistan started to antagonize Pakistan. Division among the ruling elites was strong. Daud Khan was, in turn, overthrown in a military coup in April, 1978. Either to ensure stability in a neighboring country or as part of a strategy to curb a Muslim insurgency in its Central Asia republics, the Soviet Union intervened in 1979. President Afizullah Amin was killed. Babrak Karmal was then returned from refuge in the Soviet Union and made President of the newly declared Republic of Afghanistan. With this intervention, the US saw a threat to its national security interests, particularly access to oil supplies, in the region.[3] The U.S.'s first Afghan war began.[4] A similar scenario, illustrating the mutually reinforcing effects of poverty, political violence and severe climate, took place in the Horn of Africa during the same period of time, at the height of the Cold War.

The Horn of Africa

After the 1973 Yom Kippur war between Israel and Egypt, oil prices quadrupled. The global economy took a downturn. Drought, a periodic problem, returned to the Sahel. Food production was crippled. Inflation was accompanied by riots in the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. Emperor Haile Selassie was perceived as indifferent, more eager to feed his pet lions than his people. The military was sent to restore law and order. Instead, they mutinied. Chaos followed. A leftist junta took power. Later on, after a shootout, Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam emerged as the leader of the junta. The monarchy was abolished and replaced by a republic.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian landlords resisted the high-minded land reform of Haile-Mariam's governing committee or Dergue. The Dergue was itself plagued by internal divisions. The civil war that lasted from 1974 to 1991 ended with the victory of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Mengistu Haile-Mariam fled to Zimbabwe. The Dergue's Marxist regime ended. Meles Zenawi became Premier Minister until his death on August 20, 2012. As in Afghanistan, drought preceded political unrest and regime change.

In neighboring Somalia, President Siad Barre saw in Ethiopia's chaotic situation an opportunity to seize the Ogaden, an arid region of eastern Ethiopia. It was one of the regions he claimed as part of the Greater Somalia that also included Northern Kenya and Djibouti. On June 13, 1977, about 5,000 of Somalia's troops, insignia removed, crossed the border into the Ogaden. There was close collaboration between Barre's Somalia and the Western Somalia Liberation Front, already trying to liberate the Ogaden.

During that period, in 1972, Egypt expelled Soviet troops. As Ethiopia, a former US ally until the military coup of 1974, was now ruled by a radical leftist government, the

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[3] Michael Klare, Blood and Oil: *The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum*, Metropolitan Books, 2004.
[4] Christian Parenti, ibid. p. 101.

Soviet Union, eager to maintain its influence in the region and compensate for the loss of Egypt, sought to create an alliance with socialist states in the region: South Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti, the last of which was in the process of getting its independence from France. In particular, an alliance with Yemen and Djibouti would allow the Soviets to control oil shipments that pass through the strait of Bab el-Mandeb. Local rivalry, however, spoiled the *pax sovietica*. France stationed 1,500 troops in Djibouti to guarantee that nation's independence. Aware of Cuban military presence in Ethiopia, Siad Barre expelled 4,000 Soviet military advisers from Somalia and shifted his alliance to the West, the United States in particular. Most of the Soviets advisers crossed the border to serve in the neighboring Ethiopia. Siad Barre's regime collapsed in 1991, leaving behind a cornucopia of weapons, some of which would find their way into neighboring countries. Enmity continues between Ethiopia and Somalia. So is the war in its protean forms, complicated by foreign interventions. Later, when Ethiopian troops intervened in Somalia in 2006 with US backing, al-Shaabab emerged, from a junior partner in the Union of Islamic Courts, as major player in the region.[5]

Stories Post-2000

The pattern of poverty, violence and the influence of severe climate can be observed in many Sahel countries involving local players and outside entities trapped in an interlocking conflict. The current situation in Mali and northern Nigeria are cases in point.

The Case of Mali

The creation of the Republic of Azawad in March, 2012 illustrates the phenomenon of interlocking conflict where the local (Tuareg irredentism), the regional (trans-Sahelian non-state armed groups) and the global (great powers' power play) are intermingled in an architecture of complexity.

The irredentism of the Tuaregs has deep roots in history. These nomadic Berbers also known as Tamasheks once controlled the trans-Saharan trade and shared the wealth and prestige it provided. Then, colonization came. And life changed. The Sahel is now one of the least affluent regions in the world. When the former French Sudan gained independence in 1960, it first formed the Federation of Mali with Senegal. After Senegal withdrew from the Federation of Mali, the new state retained the name of Mali. Since then, the Tuaregs organized, unsuccessfully, revolts against the central government for greater autonomy. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime recruited Malian Tuaregs to his army, thus giving Tuareg elites a way out of poverty. It was a mutually advantageous cooperation. The Tuareg elites provided military service for Gaddafi, the former Libyan strong man, while gaining military training. The experience gained during military service in Libya and the weapons brought from Libya after the demise of Gaddafi helped mount a successful take-over of northern Mali in March, 2012. The Republic of Azawad was thus created by the *Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad* (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)

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[5] Christian Parenti, ibid.

(MNLA). It might have been more difficult for the MNLA to succeed if Mali's central government in Bamako was not handicapped by an ongoing coup d'etat.
Then, regional non-state armed groups intervened. These include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (formerly the Algerian Salafist Group for Fighting and Preaching), Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith), al- Tawhid wa al-Jihad, and the *Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) (MUJAO).[6] These groups pushed the Tuaregs aside along with their national agenda. Strict application of the Sharia law has been imposed, a situation that reminds one of the era of *talibanism* in Afghanistan. These most recent changes led the Songhai, the largest ethnic group, to resist occupation and to create a number of militias south of the Azawad controlled territory. The erstwhile central government, with the help of France and the backing of the UN Security Council, is preparing a military intervention.

The Case of Northern Nigeria

Boko Haram, a terrorist group resisting Westernization, has been increasingly active in Nigeria over the last three years. An article titled "A threat to the entire country" in the September 29th -October 5th, 2012 issue of *The Economist* explains the origins and grievances of the terrorist movement as mostly due to social inequality.[7] Where Boko Haram originated in the State of Borno in the north-east corner of the country, bordering the shrinking Lake Chad, "fewer than 5% of women in parts of Borno can read or write. Income per head is 50% lower than in the south, school attendance 75% lower." A religious sect led by Imam Muhammad Yusuf organized to provide food and education for free. The state government regarded this as a challenge to its legitimacy and decided to eliminate the challenge and destroy Imam Yusef's organization. Hundreds were killed, members and bystanders alike. "In one episode, security forces killed 19 motorcyclists for not wearing helmets."[8] As a result, Imam Yusef's organization went underground. It clandestinely reorganized. Then, in 2010, it remerged as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) with bigger ambitions. What began as a religious protest became an insurgency of national proportion rejecting its original purpose. Extremists in the group are pushing toward alliance with al-Qaeda, leading not only to a regionalization of security but also to a networking which has geopolitical and geostrategic implications.

Lessons from the Horn, Mali and Nigeria

On the one hand, it is not difficult to say that local groups such as those mentioned above are primarily formed as responses to local issues before getting involved in international terrorist networks. On the other hand, the internationalization of local conflict is also the result of regional and great powers' interventions. For example, al-

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[6] Amnesty International, *Mali: Civilians Bear the Brunt of the Conflict,* September 2012.
[7] *The Economist* "A threat to the entire country: Who and what is Boko Haram, the Muslim extremist group that is terrorising northern Nigeria," September 29-October 5th, 2012, pp. 51-53.
[8] Ibid. p. 51.

Shaabab became powerful after the US backed military intervention of Ethiopia to crush the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia.[9] Such intervention was a powerful recruitment opportunity for al-Shaabab inside and outside Somalia.

As in Afghanistan, in Ethiopia and Somalia, foreign interventions are based on geopolitical calculations rather than on local issues and needs, thus contributing to the intractability of the conflict.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the East-West competition has practically been replaced by a North-South struggle as primary motivation that underlies foreign interventions in the region. In that perspective, the Bush Administration saw the Sahel as a potential hotbed for international terrorism after its intervention in Afghanistan. Thus, the Pan-Sahel Initiative was created in 2002. The Initiative became Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Initiative with a larger scope in 2005. This, in turn, was absorbed into Africa Command, created in 2008 and currently based in Stuttgart, Germany, because of African countries' reluctance to house it. The two Sahel "Initiatives", given their designation, clearly indicate that the Sahel is already considered an entity in its own right in US strategic thinking. Meanwhile, increasing networking and cooperation among non-state armed groups in the region is taking place, thus building connections between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conceptual Framework

For the reasons articulated above, this research agenda goes beyond security and geostrategic considerations and embraces a more comprehensive vision of the Sahel in order to analyze the challenges that the Sahel faces as a region and recommend mitigating measures. Our approach takes the Sahel as a geographical, ecological, socio-economic and cultural system. It is regard for the Sahel as an integral entity with its own natural and social ecological system that guides this research project. Common throughout the region is the combination of poverty, violence, and the pernicious effects of climate change. Christian Parenti (2011) called the traumas that result from this combination the "catastrophic convergence" of poverty and violence in which climate change is a multiplier. Different authors, in terms of time, geography and disciplines, seem to share similar perspectives: the Brazilian physician Josué de Castro writing *The Geopolitics of Hunger* in 1952,[10] the Bangladeshi born economist Amartya Sen writing with the Belgian born and naturalized Indian economist Jean Drèze in 1991 *Hunger and Public Action,*[11] and the American Christian Parenti writing *Tropics of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* in 2010. Their analyses converge in that poverty, a permanent feature, and severe climate, a cyclical phenomenon, combine to create socio-political volatility in the absence of credible mitigating measures. These distant proximities, in terms of eras and areas, findings and ideas, provide the basis to hypothesize that the catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence and climate change aggravated by foreign intervention constitutes the main characteristics of failed and failing states in the Sahel region.

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[9] Conn M. Hallinan, 'The Crisis in Mali,' *Foreign Policy in Focus,* August 26, 2012
[10] Josué de Castro, *The Geopolitics of Hunger,* Monthly Review Press, 1952
[11] Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze, *Hunger and Public Action,* Oxford University Press, 1991

The aim of this project is to:

- De-construct the catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence and the effects of severe climate by analyzing social, political and economic conditions constructed by history, politics, policies and culture.
- Analyze local issues, international factors and/or ways the local and the global interface.
- Study the process of mitigation (or lack of it) of the catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence and severe climate locally and/or in the region.

Approach

Interdisciplinary Collaborative Research
   The approach is interdisciplinary and collaborative. The research team is made of scholars and experts of many nationalities, disciplines and professional backgrounds, from research to policy-making and from local perspectives on global affairs to global perspectives on local issues. The project particularly seeks to take advantage of the value of indigenous perspectives on local and global issues. Most importantly, it will be a collaborative work. (See Appendix B for list of participants and their areas of specialization.)

Relationship with Cornell Institute for African Development (CIAD)

   The Sahel Initiative is conceived as an integral part of CIAD activities. The Consortium works with Africanists from different continents, particularly those based in Africa and/or the Sahel region.
   1. CIAD will create an internet system to facilitate communication and discussion among Consortium members.
   2. The system will facilitate e-collaboration in a distance-neutral environment.
   3. A CIAD graduate student assistant will be assigned to help with data collection and communication with Consortium members.

   Proposed Projects

There are two studies being proposed. One is a short-term research project and the other is a longer-term project.

The Two Deltas of the Niger River (short term project)

The particularity of the Niger River is that it is the only river in the world that has two deltas, one in the Sahel known as the Inner Niger Delta and the other on the Atlantic coast in Nigeria known as the Niger Delta. Both delta regions experience socio-political instability to various degrees: the Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria and the

Inner Delta where the effects of the catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence and climate can be observed with regard to both public actions and citizens' daily lives. The goal of this project is to compare and contrast the two delta regions of the Niger River and draw lessons from their respective social and political situations. This project offers the opportunity to do comparative study of social, political and economic impacts of a man-made environmental degradation (such as oil spill in the Niger Delta region) on the one hand and nature-made severe climate (such as drought in the Inner Niger Delta region) on the other hand in the same river basin.

Of particular interest is the politics of water (hydropolitics) in a region with water scarcity. In this regard, scholars of conflict resolution will be included in order to analyze and compare the history of conflicts and mechanisms for resolving them in the two regions of the Niger River basin with particular interest in patterns of collective/collaborative decision-making.

Focus on the Sahel as a Single Entity (longer term project)

In this project, the Sahel is considered a "dry river" traversing Africa from the west coast to the east coast. The 10 countries that are part of the Sahel are considered riparian states from Senegal to the Horn sharing the same "shore." The Sahel, in this project, may also be seen as a corridor of conflict with local specificities. The concatenation of conflicts in the region includes, for example, the forgotten conflict of the Casamance in Senegal, political violence in northern Nigeria, northern Mali and Niger, Sudan, South Sudan, Chad and Somalia. A critical social and political issue that will be explored is whether it possible to move from a vision of "nation-state" to a vision of "region-state" as exemplified today by the ideal that underlies the emergence of the European Union.

Recommendations

Contributions should include lessons learned and recommendations; for example addressing the following general questions:

- Can nation- state systems be strengthened via a regional approach to social, political and economic development?
- Can conflict be better resolved when approached on a regional basis?
- Can a "Sahel identity" emerge? What is the value of such an identity?
- What are the risks of failed and failing states transforming the Sahel into a vast zone that would be similar in profile to current day Somalia?

Appendix A: Some Questions to Consider

- What makes conflict intractable in different parts of the region?
- What are the root causes of instability?
- What are the similarities and differences between countries in the region?
- Beyond individual states, can countries learn from each other's failures and successes?
- Can mechanisms such as best practices model be established?
- Is a regional, Sahel-based approach to political, social, and economic development in the region applicable?
- Particularly, what is the water situation in the region and how can it be better collectively managed?
- What is the situation with regard to food security and how can a regional approach improve it?
- How can written and unwritten rules be distinguished?
- Is there a "Sahelian culture" that can be identified? And if so, what are the characteristics?
- How can we understand and meaningfully use the language of development, culture, nation-state, and rights, particularly from a postcolonial feminist framework, within the context of Africa and specifically the Sahel?
- What is –or is there- a connection between or an effect of the Arab Spring on democratic movements or participatory efforts across the Sahel?
- What are the lessons learned from the study and recommendations for next steps?