



10 October, 2022

Best practices for cross-border threats in the Sahel: crime and counterterrorism¹

II Forum de Dialogue Sahel Europe

Introduction

On the 14th, 15th and 16th of July 2022, the International Security Centre of the Francisco de Vitoria University (CSI - UFV) organised the 2nd edition of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum. Several workshops, conferences and masterclasses allowed international experts to review and debate the situation and stability of the Sahel.

At the masterclass entitled "Best practices for cross-border threats: Crime and Counter-Terrorism", moderated by María Sánchez Gil Cepeda, Head of the European Commission's Foreign Policy Instruments Programme (Peace, Stability and Global Threats), Henri Gomez, Head of Operations

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

EUCAP-Niger; Hervé Flahaut, Head of Mission EUCAP Sahel Mali ; Francisco Corrales Galindo, Head of Operations GAR-SI Sahel; and Abakar Mahamat, Head of Defence Division at the G5 Sahel Executive Secretariat, analysed the projects implemented to address threats related to cross-border trafficking, organised crime and terrorism.

Border management is a sensitive issue. Between January 9th, 2022, and early July, ECOWAS borders were closed, except for basic necessities and medical products. The border with Algeria also remains formally closed since 2012. Informal flows reportedly continue with Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger; strict controls under sanctions are applied by Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. Trade continues, to a limited extent, with Mauritania and Guinea-Conakry.

Thus, whoever talks about cross-border trafficking also talks about arms trafficking, human trafficking, and drug trafficking, in addition to terrorist activities. These different groups (terrorists, criminals, etc.) have taken control of areas where the authorities have little presence. There are also various security forces whose mission is to combat these numerous threats and who, despite all the difficulties, manage to plan and conduct large-scale operations in their area of responsibility.

The experts also discussed common challenges and related issues, identifying opportunities for cooperation. The Sahel is an environment of states with fragile and changing security, on the advanced border of Europe. It is now more important than ever to promote a space for dialogue in which both regions can cooperate and propose innovative solutions.

This article reports on the context of security fragility in the region, cooperative response strategies (with reference to the EUCAP and GAR-SI missions²), and existing good practices.

1. The Sahel: A space marked by security fragility

The Sahel has traditionally been a trading area equidistant from the Mediterranean coast and the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea. Ancestral roads link these two shores, making central Mali a transit area for trade and tourism, which until the early 2000s made the cities of Timbuktu, Segou, Mopti, Gao and Djenne prosper. The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 has dragged Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso into a multidimensional crisis that underlines the fragility of these countries and in particular their difficulties in controlling their territory and common borders. The region faces a multitude of cross-border security, demographic, extremist, governance, and environmental challenges. As a result, the area is marked by significant cross-border fragility.

² EUCAP: *European Union Capacity building mission*; GAR-SI: *Groupe d'Action Rapide Surveillance Intervention au Sahel*.

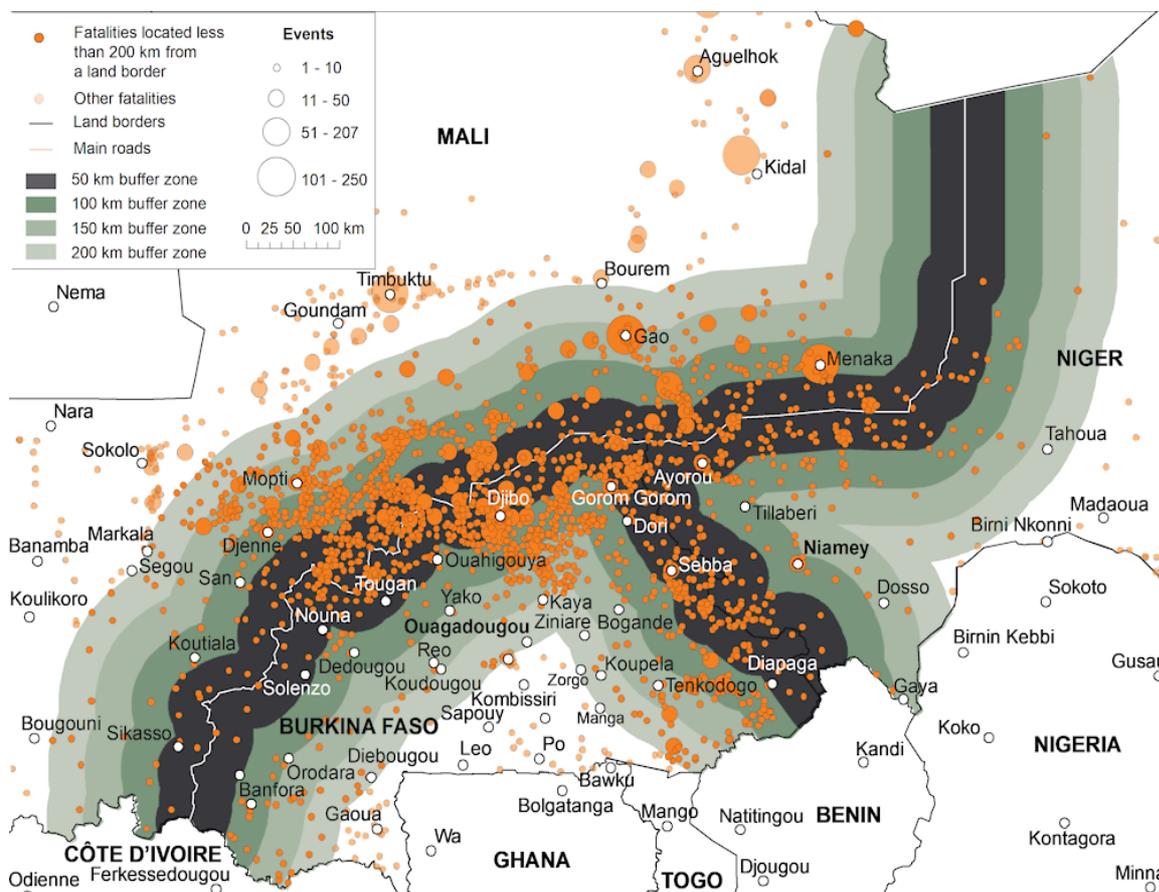


Figure 1: Map of deaths from 1997 to 2021 in the tri-border area (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso)

The first challenge is immigration and irregular migration routes to Europe. Migration through the Sahel region is a complex issue that poses significant challenges, including lack of data, weak border controls and management, humanitarian needs, variations in migration flows and human trafficking.

With 8,000 km of borders and an international airport, Mali is an example of a country whose territory is disproportionate to its population, posing many challenges for securing the territory and borders. The weakness of the civil state and corruption make it easier to obtain identity documents, in an area of free movement of people within ECOWAS, equivalent to the Schengen area. In addition to these flows, there are nomadic populations, accustomed to migrating, or spread over several countries (Fulani, Tuareg, etc.).

On the part of the internal security forces, ensuring the surveillance of Mali's vast territory is a major challenge. Out of the 19 official border posts⁴, only 13 are manned, the others having been deserted

³ This map reflects the porous nature of borders in West Africa and their use by armed groups for most of their operations. Source: OECD and Sahel and West Africa Club. Why have border areas become more violent in North and West Africa? In *Borders and Conflicts*. 2022.

⁴ On average, the distance between two border crossings is therefore 350 kilometres.

for security reasons⁵. Some are manned by forces that have no expertise in this area, and the police officers occupying these posts often come from the general service, without specialisation, because of the many transfers and changes within the forces. Moreover, the internal security forces (of which there are only 30,000 men) are globally undersized and poorly distributed, with about 40% of the force stationed in Bamako. In addition, IT tools are under-used, even though they are largely in place⁶. Another challenge is the difficulty of coordination between national, regional, and international forces. Financial and power issues create rivalries between the administrations and services involved at border posts and ministries.

In this general context of insecurity and weak state presence at the borders, the 3rd pillar of the Sahel coalition aims to support the return or maintenance of the state on the territory, among the population, internal security being a public service. The nuance of 'maintaining' the state is necessary because, unlike in Mali, in Niger the state is represented throughout the territory. Nevertheless, the challenge here (apart from maintaining the presence of the state) is to deal with the lack of security and the difficulties of development. Thus, the support of the internal security forces is necessary in order to consolidate the confidence of the population.

In addition to the weakness of Malian forces at the border posts, the interruption of joint G5 Sahel defence operations along the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso will fuel an already acute security vacuum. "For a number of years, Mali's border area has been a favourite zone for endemic banditry and trafficking of all kinds, which disrupts the peace of the population and threatens the country's own security"⁷. This is particularly the case in the region of the three borders (Burkina Faso - Mali - Niger) known as the Liptako Gourma, which is marked by an unprecedented concentration of various security threats⁸. In addition to the security crisis, the population is suffering from an economic crisis aggravated by worrying demographic data and the inability of the state to administer these territories.

Similarly, Mali remains a hub for regional and international trafficking in drugs, arms, human beings, cultural goods, natural resources, etc. Today, in this political and security context that is still as uncertain as ever, Mali has chosen to open up its defence cooperation to other actors in a logic of diversification, notably with one of its historical partners: Russia. The interests of this power are more focused on economic issues than on the defence of the Malian population. To complete the picture, Mali has decided to leave the G5 Sahel in 2022. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the prospects for its return to this regional organisation are very slim, at least until the elections at the end of the transition period⁹.

⁵ 10 posts held by the customs, 14 by the gendarmerie, 1 by the military forces, 1 jointly by the gendarmerie and the national guard, and 3 by the customs and gendarmerie.

⁶ IT instruments include WAPIS, funded by Interpol; MIDAS, funded by IOM; and the Security Cooperation Platforms, regional mechanisms for cooperation, coordination and information exchange aimed at building capacity to combat terrorism and transnational crime, funded by UNODC.

⁷ Extract from the National Border Policy (February 2018), document of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, annex to Decree N°2018-319 of 30 March 2018.

⁸ This area is indeed prey to the actions of armed terrorist groups, increasing criminal activities, banditry, community conflicts, etc.

⁹ Remarks made on 27 June 2022 to the international community in Bamako and reiterated in August 2022.

The G5 Sahel was established in 2014 as an intergovernmental partnership between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to promote economic cooperation and security in the region. The increasing virulence of Islamist militant groups, taking advantage of the sparse population of the border areas, however, has posed a serious challenge to the G5 Sahel. In response, in 2017 it augmented its security efforts into a joint force, to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and human trafficking. This was subsequently endorsed by the African Union Peace and Security Council and the United Nations Security Council and supported by various international partners. Despite the high ambitions for this joint force, its lack of operational autonomy, in terms of intelligence, training or day-to-day conduct of operations, as well as its dependence on international actors for funding, remain major challenges. While each mobile company represents 10 million euros of funding, the planning and management of finances is subject to an exhaustive list of rules and standards, notably imposed by the European Union, one of the main donors. Thus, the operationalisation of the force is particularly time-consuming¹⁰.

2. A strategic response based on cooperation

EUCAP Sahel Niger

Niger has a population of just over 20 million, although it is larger than Spain and France combined. The security problem is complex, as it is obviously very difficult to control such a vast territory. The EUCAP Sahel Niger mission started in 2012 and, like EUCAP Mali, its sole mission is to build the capacity of internal security forces.

With 160 personnel deployed in Niamey and Agadez, two bases and sixteen European nations represented within this mission, EUCAP Niger has a mandate centred on Niger, but occasionally carries out actions in all the G5 Sahel countries, in conjunction with the coordination cell and the Regional Council. This mission is carried out in three areas: the fight against terrorism, the fight against cross-border organised crime and illegal immigration.

Thus, three types of actions allow EUCAP to fulfil a mandate which is, moreover, non-executive. In addition to training, EUCAP provides technical and strategic advice and carries out projects with bilateral support from certain countries (Germany, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic) with the aim of developing projects such as the border security strategy. In terms of training, the EUCAP mission has trained some 30,000 national police and gendarmes as well as hundreds of Nigerien trainers, while investing several million euros in the purchase of equipment.

With regard to technical and strategic advice, it targets specialised units such as the counter-terrorism service, the counter-narcotics service and the technical and scientific police department of the Niger National Police. The mission also plays an advisory role for the European Union delegation in maintaining security and a coordination role for technical and financial partners.

¹⁰ It takes about two and a half years to set up a mobile company, for example.

Advisors have been sent to several ministries such as Defence, Justice, and the Interior, with the aim of accompanying these high Nigerien authorities in the design and revision of their strategy, with an emphasis on Nigerien leadership in the construction of its strategy.

Another advisory action targets the population in order to bring them closer to the internal security forces. This will make the staff of the internal security forces more aware that their professional efforts should be used for the benefit of the population as a whole, thereby strengthening their public service role.

In addition, one of the projects of this mission is the development of mobile forces. As the reinforcement of security is hampered by the insufficient human resources of the internal security forces, President Bazoum has decided to create mobile forces in order to both hold the ground and strengthen links with the population. In terms of funding, the first mobile force was financed by the United States. EUCAP financed a second force and is currently working on a third, which would be based in Tera. This force will consist of 250 police officers trained to the highest standards of human rights and rules of engagement, with financial support from Germany, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic for training, equipment, and barracks construction. The development of these mobile forces is also justified by the need for internal security forces (not the army) to hold the ground in the long term.

GAR-SI

GAR-SI is a European project in which four national gendarmeries collaborate: the Spanish Civil Guard, which leads the project, the French Gendarmerie, the Italian Carabinieri and the Portuguese National Republican Guard. It is being developed in all the G5 Sahel countries as well as in Senegal.

This project, financed by the European Union to the tune of 70 million euros, aims to train and equip specialised units and monitor them until they are fully operational. Thus, 1700 gendarmes have been trained in the 13 units already created. Both military and police officers, the gendarmes have the mission of 'community policing', but are also involved in the fight against terrorism, the fight against organised crime, border surveillance and the fight against illegal immigration. To carry out their missions, many of these units were deployed in areas where the state presence was weak, underlining their multi-purpose character. Unfortunately, in the last three years, they have already suffered 27 terrorist attacks, resulting in the death of 46 gendarmes and about 100 others, mainly in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Each unit is commanded by a unit leader and is composed of three platoons of 300 men each. There are specialised units, such as the judicial police cell, the intelligence cell, the logistical support team and, in some cases, a health team that also acts for the benefit of the population in its deployment area.

These versatile and highly effective units are always trained in human rights and gender issues so that maximum respect for human rights is guaranteed in the performance of their duties.

The implementation of synergies with other international actors (EUCAP, IOM, Red Cross, etc.) while respecting national sovereignty and local ownership, with the aim of making the gendarmerie self-

sufficient, have undoubtedly contributed to the success of the project, phase II of which has ended, and phase III is in preparation. Indeed, the results of the GAR-SI have been perceived as very satisfactory in almost all the recipient countries, five of which wish to continue.

Although the project was officially set up in 2017, the first operational units only started in 2019. Nevertheless, the results obtained are very satisfactory: weapons seized, explosives, people identified and arrested, terrorists neutralised, vehicles controlled, medical consultations (thanks to the health cells of the GAR-SI units), release of kidnapped children.

3. Best practices and lessons learned

Although there are many challenges and a long way to go, there are good practices in dealing with cross-border threats in the Sahel.

As a first step, the definition of a national border strategy provides an overall vision, both in terms of security and development, involving the whole government. In Mali, a national border strategy, based on an overall vision (economic, social, security) involving several ministries, was validated in October 2000 and an action plan for 2018-2022 was adopted, but for years they have come up against insufficient political will (security within the territory is now a priority) and above all a significant lack of means to implement them. A national strategy for Security Sector Reform was validated in the first half of 2022 and is to be implemented under the authority of the Minister of Security and Civil Protection. Despite encouraging progress, arbitration is needed between the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation and the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection for the creation of a border guard unit.

Another extremely promising good practice is the creation in 2019 of the anti-smuggling brigade (Brigade de répression du trafic des migrants et de la traite des êtres humains- BRTMTEH). EUCAP Sahel Mali has organised numerous training sessions for the BRTMTEH on investigation procedures, shadowing, document fraud and regulations. The mission also plans to support the development of its branches in the provinces, which would allow the activities of this brigade to be multiplied to make it more effective. A police unit with a national vocation, its main role is to fight against illegal immigration networks. On the Malian side, it is the main focus of the joint operational partnership between Mali, Spain and France, financed by the European Emergency Trust Fund.

Then, the third good practice is the work on document fraud. The training provided by EUCAP Sahel Mali and the French Embassy has reduced the number of forged documents identified coming from Bamako airport to the European Union by 60%. The work on the air border is a success with very positive results, despite the significant changes in personnel that may have occurred a few weeks ago at the airport.

As far as training is concerned, a defence college has been set up with the support of partners, hoping to be able to plan with the outgoing officers and being 100% integrated, to conduct operations together and to have the same language against terrorism.

On the other hand, the strategies and the implementation of the tools and legal arsenals allowing the units of the different missions to deploy in their respective territories and to plan the conduct of operations for the benefit of the joint force, are also, of course, to be maintained. However, the more time passes, the more the security stakes increase, and the more adaptability is required.

Finally, the G5 Sahel states have not put aside the notion of intelligence sharing. It was initiated with the establishment of this security cooperation platform and there is therefore good internal practice in this area. In addition, there is currently an initiative to create another intelligence centre for the joint force.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Poor border management in the Sahel region has become a danger to international peace and security, as well as to the border regions. The rise of violent non-state actors and terrorist groups, as well as the development of organised crime (illicit trafficking in arms, drugs and human beings), and irregular migration, overwhelm and undermine state capacity, especially in the border regions. This hinders proper and sustainable human development, highlighting the imperative for improved border management. These illegal activities feed existing state fragilities.

Although improving border management in the Sahel is seen as a vital and urgent priority, the challenges to achieving this are multiple and daunting, especially as the regional nature of many of the challenges requires a cross-border/multi-country approach. Despite the many challenges, there is cooperation and some good practice in dealing with cross-border threats.

Several recommendations are emerging in this area.

- Efforts must be made to identify and address the root causes of cross-border threats, while working to strengthen cooperation.
- The conceptualisation and perception of border actions need to change. One view of the border defines it as the limit of the state, where one's jurisdiction ends and another's begins. This has long been the prevailing perception. However, there is a second, more pragmatic view based on the idea that the border creates a common problem, which must be addressed in a common way. Trade is important, but cross-border security issues and border management should not be limited to linear trade.
- Moreover, good border management starts before the borders. Indeed, the fight against trafficking is a judicial issue, which therefore presupposes sufficiently solid police intelligence systems (collection, processing, analysis, communication), functional police systems and exchanges between magistrates. Consequently, there is a whole functional chain of actors to be put in place to be effective. However, the failure of one of these levels will make it difficult for the whole chain to achieve results.

- Diversified responses are needed. In this sense, it is necessary to strengthen the coordination between emerging forces already mentioned and to take into account the multitude of actors and decision-making centres involved (security forces, ministries, government, civil society, United Nations, etc.). In addition, the strengthening of relational links between local and cross-border authorities and communities requires the implementation of permanent meetings and encounters in order to create a climate of trust and collaboration. At local level, the role of governors must be reaffirmed, and administrations must be deployed throughout the territory in Mali for example¹¹.
- Finally, it is fundamental to support the needs on the ground, as the security forces lack technical skills, are poorly equipped and require infrastructure. Just as it is important to support cooperation missions (EUCAP and GAR-SI) to ensure their continuity and sustainability, it is also essential to strengthen the national sovereignty of these countries and the capacities of their institutions so that they are able to adapt to changing situations and trends. This also requires improved communication between the local population and the internal security forces.

¹¹ Currently, the territorial administration is only present in about 20% of the northern and central regions.