



Wilton Park



Report

Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sahel & North Africa

Tuesday 8 – Wednesday 9 February 2022 | WP1761V3

In association with:



With support
from:





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In association with the African Peacebuilding Network of the Social Science Research Council, New York, and the African Leadership Centre
With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York

Event Summary

For the last decade, conflict networks and insecurity challenges have permeated the North Africa and the Sahel region (NASAH). To examine and map the way forward regarding the situation in this interconnected region, the Wilton Park Africa Peacebuilding Series brought together academics, policy makers, and practitioners in a convening of ideas and voices. This Series sought to identify strategies that will ensure long-term political stability and promote the need for coordinated regional approaches and place-based policies; map and identify both conflicts and the actors and regional organizations engaged in peacebuilding across the region, to examine existing networks, capacity and effect; re-imagine frameworks for dialogue between regions on developing concerns such as climate impacts, migration, trafficking, drugs and arms sales and the transnationalism of extremist views spread across borders and to examine the changing demographics of regional populations and ensure that youth, women, and minority voices are amplified.

Key points

- Conflicts in the Sahel and North Africa are cross-border and transnational in nature, and deeply intertwined as they continue to influence each other. A regional approach to peacebuilding is crucial, which includes supporting regional connections at the informal level with youth and civil society actors, restoring the credibility of regional institutions by building trust with citizens and resolving geopolitical tensions, and identifying shared goals between countries rather than nationalistic ones.
- The weakness of the state, its loss of legitimacy and existing trust deficit with constituents is a gap that needs to be addressed. States must rebuild trust with citizens, address grievances of marginalized and peripheral communities, and strive to provide basic public services.
- External actors involved have heterogeneous and conflicting interests, threatening peace and stability in the region and diverting attention from underlying motivations in resource exploitation in a region that is already suffering acute poverty, insecurity, and impacts of climate change.

- Terrorism and migration are presented as the forefront of foreign policy interests of external actors, but in order to address these concerns, the root causes driving conflict and climate security must also be central to policy discussions.
- Youth, women, and civil society actors are pioneering movements, organizing transnationally, and demanding social and political change. There should be serious efforts to support them and incorporate them as leaders and decision-makers in negotiations and peacebuilding processes. Their successes should be documented and disseminated in order to identify key lessons that can be learned and applied in the future and elsewhere.
- As climate change continues to have catastrophic effects in the region driving insecurity and instability, climate security must be prioritized. Sensitizing local people to the issue and investing in renewable energy issues are key opportunities to mitigate effects and address challenges.

Introduction: the context

1. The West African Sahel and North Africa have historically been and continue to be extensively interconnected. Conflicts entrenched in one country are rapidly spilling over and taking cross-border manifestations; arms, ideologies, and violent groups are spreading, and expansive conflict networks developing. The internal and external dynamics of these interconnected conflict networks are becoming increasingly complex and are constantly evolving over time, posing a challenge.
2. The conflicts that have been occupying the region are irredentist and communal in nature and related to issues of decolonization, and has resulted in unprecedented militarization in the region and immense levels of violence.
3. The post-2011 Libyan crisis is critical to understanding the context of recent instability and conflict in the region. After the fall of President Muammar Ghaddafi, the country has been in perpetual turmoil. The multi-sided civil war involved several armed groups and militias competing for power, in addition to the presence of foreign troops. The conflict not only threatened long-term stability in Libya, but as terrorist groups and the trade of arms proliferated, Libya's civil war spilled over creating crises and instability in neighboring countries of the Sahel and Lake Chad areas.
4. The Lake Chad basin area (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Niger) has also been a critical hotspot of conflict and instability. With several armed groups and state actors engulfed in a web of violent conflict in the region, the Boko Haram insurgent group has maintained a strong foothold for over a decade now. The instability has impacted not only the Lake Chad countries, but has spread south to neighboring countries such as the Central African Republic, making it a top priority for other regions on the continent.
5. The crisis in Mali has also had drastic and prolific effects in the region. Consisting of several dimensions, the crisis began in the north as a Tuareg-led irredentist movement rebelling against the Malian state, and has since expanded to other parts of the country and neighboring countries.
6. The Malian crisis has also consisted of communal and intercommunal conflicts; compounded by the severe impacts of climate change, farmer-herder violence between Fulani pastoralists and Bambara and Dogon agriculturalists has driven regional instability, displacing millions of people both internally and to neighboring countries. This intercommunal violence has also been exacerbated by the exploitation of grievances by extremist groups, pervasive and complex conflict networks, and the resultant availability of weapons, among other relevant factors.

7. Residual identity discontent is at the forefront of root causes fueling conflict and violence. Peripheral communities who have long been marginalized by the state are seeking alternative identities and communities, safety and support, or to seek revenge against a perceived enemy which is oftentimes the state. The failure of governments to address these unresolved grievances of those in the periphery is playing a significant role in the spread of instability.
8. A wave of attempted and successful military coups has also swept the region, as seen in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Chad, and Sudan.
9. The Western Sahara conflict has also been a source of tension in the region. The Sahrawi movement for self-determination and independence has long occupied the region, as the Moroccan state continues to occupy the region after inheriting it from Spanish colonial rule, making it a critical ongoing issue of decolonization.
10. This has resulted in tensions and cold war regional politics, particularly between Morocco and Algeria, as the latter has supported the Polisario Front, making the Western Sahara issue a bargaining chip between the two states. This not only has implications for the region, but also political and diplomatic consequences for sub-regional and regional bodies (Arab-Maghreb Union (AMU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU)). It also poses complex challenges to coordinating on addressing issues in other conflicts in the region.
11. Several interrelated factors continue to perpetually fuel these conflicts, which include: a lack of good governance and a trust deficit in the state; the inability of states to provide basic public services; a shifting population demographic and rapidly growing population in the face of increasing poverty; the effects of climate changes and increasing resource deterioration, scarcity, and competition; the rise of extremist groups and ideologies such as Islamic fundamentalism; illicit trade networks, traffickers, and criminal organizations; a new geopolitical reality with several international actors involved, renewed cold war politics, and intensified geostrategic rivalries with competing "Sahel strategies"; the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has adversely exacerbated already existing inequities and challenges.

Challenges to peacebuilding

12. The growing spread and foothold of extremist groups, Islamic fundamentalist ideology, militias, and non-state armed actors, and the complex evolving dynamics of these groups continues to pose a significant obstacle to peace in the region.
13. The cross-border, interconnected nature of the conflicts, and the way the Sahel has consequently served as a bridge facilitating the spread of crises and violence, has unfortunately served as a challenge to building stability.
14. Diplomacy has failed, and traditional means of peacebuilding as well as peace and security architectures have been weakened at the international and regional level.
15. Sub-regional, regional, and international institutions (ECOWAS, AU, UN) are increasingly losing their legitimacy due to their inability to successfully lead and implement peacebuilding processes.
16. The increasing militarization in the region and use of military force to address these issues is a critical barrier to fostering peace, as this has only driven further instability. Peace cannot be achieved when investments are being funneled into militarization rather than peace processes.
17. The embroilment of external actors and their military involvement has only exacerbated this, posing as a further challenge to peace building rather than being part of the solution to building peace. This is only compounded by rivalries and competition between foreign countries, transforming the African regions into a playing ground for their interests.

18. The failure of good governance and democratization processes by states presents a unique challenge that is continuing to fuel insecurity.
19. Issues with regional integration at the institutional level and regional tensions between countries worsens opportunities to create stability and peace.

Regional dynamics, institutions, and integration

20. The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and framework has long positioned regional and subregional institutions as the primary facilitators and maintainers of peace and peace processes. However, regional bodies and the African Union have lost their credibility and these regional frameworks and approaches to stability are increasingly being challenged and interrogated by citizens. This is concerning given that the crises are transnational in nature and deeply intertwined.
21. There is a disconnect between regional constituencies and regional structures; citizens are questioning the relevance of RECs, viewing them as unable to address issues of conflict. There is an increasing lack of trust growing amongst local people towards regional bodies, and sentiments that have likened regional structures to neo-colonial impositions. Building trust and establishing legitimacy among citizens will be key for regional organizations in working towards regional peace.
22. Citizens are searching for national approaches and solutions to addressing conflicts despite the transnational characteristics. This poses a critical concern in evaluating the role of regional bodies in peace processes, and signifies the urgency of establishing trust and relations between regional institutions and citizens. Responses to the COVID-19 exemplify this, as we witnessed a resurgence of the centrality of the state in responding to catastrophe, despite the fact that the impacts are cross-border and interconnected. There continues to be a heavy reliance on the state in addressing challenges, rather than successful regional structures and approaches.
23. While gaps exist at the formal level, subregional networks at the informal level exist and should be invested in. This includes providing support to networks of civil society groups led by citizens, building the bridge between civil societies transnationally across the region, connecting civil society groups at the policy and grassroots levels, capturing the voices of citizens, and facilitating collaboration through platforms such as forums. This can also serve to address critical inter/intra-communal conflicts.
24. Geopolitics in North Africa remain a significant challenge to regional integration and the failure to work towards stability in the Maghreb and Sahel. Tensions between Morocco and Algeria have rendered the AMU ineffective and among the weakest RECs. Addressing this challenge is vital to regional integration and ensuring stability, and the two countries have more to gain than to lose by coming together.
25. Other challenges to regional integration include the perceptions of North Africa in the Sahel. Many citizens in Sahelian countries attribute the current regional crisis of instability as coming from Libya (post-2011 Libyan crisis) and Algeria (Islamic extremist groups), perceiving the region as a source of problems rather than solutions. This has created hesitancy and fear in embracing a transnational network with the north; sensitizing local people in this regard and addressing this gap will be crucial to resolving this barrier to regional integration.

Geopolitics, external actors, and security paradigms

26. The Sahel continues to be a region of key interest to world powers, with several international actors involved in the region's affairs. This includes not only Western powers who have long dominated involvement in the region, particularly France, but also Russia, China, Turkey, the Gulf states, and Israel. The involvement of several external actors with competing and varying interests adds layers of complexity to a region already entangled with several actors and conflict networks in the region. It is also important to note that, even within Europe, interests vary as several different countries in the European Union have their own Sahel strategies.
27. The Sahel has long been perceived as a traditional sphere of influence, driving world powers to use power in the region as a means to leverage their interests and bargain with each other. International actors must divert from rhetorics of competition that have transformed the continent into a playing field of their drives for global power.
28. In addition to competition for global power and influence, the interests of external actors have primarily been focused on securitization and countering terrorism, curbing migration flows, and exploitation of natural resources.
29. This has triggered discontent amongst local people and peripheral communities, as external-led securitization efforts are focused on these interests of the international actors involved, rather than the interests, needs, and aspirations of the local people. For example, mass protests were observed in Mali in January of 2021 against the strong French military presence at the time. Building sustainable peace in the region requires a shift in existing security paradigms to a more humanized approach to security that centers the visions of local people rather than the strategic and geopolitical interests of major powers.
30. However, this is not to undermine the critical importance stability in the region should be to other regions. Stability in the Sahel should be a top priority and concern for neighboring countries in North Africa and Europe.
31. In order to address the challenges of building peace, stability, and security in the region, European countries such as France must be critically aware of the multidimensionality of the Sahel/North Africa security crises, and the existing geopolitics in the Maghreb, specifically the complicated relationship between Morocco and Algeria. These North African countries are relied upon heavily as partners in Sahel strategies of France and the EU, but Morocco and Algeria have their own motivations and foreign policy interests that add unique challenges to coordinating to bolster regional security.
32. Moreover, attempts to achieve security must take into account the grievances of peripheral communities, who have long been marginalized and are vulnerable to recruitment and seeking alternative communities. The crux of this is building relations between states and the periphery, and restoring peripheral communities' trust in governance. EU policy concerns, security paradigms, and attitudes towards the Sahel and Maghreb must shift towards addressing the root causes of conflict and violent extremism and the factors driving migration.
33. In addition to center-periphery relations, climate change must be integral to the security agendas of external actors. Climate change remains a global challenge concern, and is a driving force of migration and instability in the region.

34. External powers continue to utilize militarized approaches to achieving security, which cannot sustain and will fail to build peace and stability in the region. Increased militarization from groups external actors with different ambitions (e.g. France's Operation Barkhane, Russia's Wagner Group, EU's Takuba Task Force), is only deepening crises. Peacebuilding must be emphasized; the narrative of securitization must be humanized and shifted towards the visions of security of the local populations, of women, youth, civil societies, and marginalized communities. The need to focus on human dimensions of peacebuilding and security cannot be underscored enough.
35. The narrative of Western-led securitization being focused on countering extremism and fighting violent extremism diverts attention from interests in and exploitation of natural resources. If external actors continue to see the region and the continent more broadly as a source of economic opportunity and exploitation, sustainable peace and stability cannot be achieved.
36. Security paradigms must also deconstruct long-existing, neo-colonial hierarchies that have positioned Europeans at the top as the authoritative producers and importers of peacebuilding. Paternalistic attitudes from Western powers must cease in order for these regions to work together on addressing security challenges. The people of the Sahel have long been relegated as "peace subjects," receiving imported peace from world powers; the agency, aspirations, grievances, and security visions of the local population is of critical importance.

Shifting demographics: youth, gendered approaches, and next generation peacebuilding

37. The Sahel maintains some of the highest rapidly increasing population rates in the globe, and is among the world's youngest populations. With a large youth demographic and ever-growing youth bulge, focus on the next generation remains critical and youth must continue to be an integral part of dialogue on development, stability, and peace in the region.
38. States have failed youth in regards to access to job opportunities, provision of goods and public services, protection of citizens, and mechanisms that adequately address injustices amongst other things. The high rates of unemployment, poverty, government corruption, unresolved grievances, increasing militarization in the region, and general sentiments of discontent towards the state have made youth a particularly vulnerable group. They have become increasingly susceptible to recruitment from extremist groups and other non-state armed actors, and are at a high risk of resorting to violence and the use of force in order to change their conditions.
39. While it is critical to highlight the high risks associated with youth and acknowledge that this demographic do comprise the primary actors engaged in violence, conventional discourse tends to problematically fixate on these negative aspects, criminalizing youth and relegating them to an issue that poses as a danger and an obstacle to peacebuilding.
40. The alternative narrative that permeates common discourse posits youth in binary terms, as either "the problem" or "the solution." This paradigm fails to assess youth from a nuanced perspective, and imposes the responsibility of being the avenue for change, without considering the context in which they are operating in and the complex challenges they face.

41. Youth have proven to be an innovative, dynamic, and diverse demographic. They are struggling to make their voices heard—in spite of the structural limitations that they face—and refusing to resort to previous approaches to addressing issues and grievances, as these approaches have failed to bring about real material change for themselves and their communities.
42. Youth are among the primary actors demanding and advocating for political, economic, and social change; they are organizing revolutionary protests on a mass-level, mobilizing for collective action, and pioneering movements, as seen most notably in the events of the Arab Spring, Senegal, and Sudan.
43. One noteworthy accomplishment of youth in the capacity of conflict and peacebuilding is the ways in which they are shifting narratives epistemically. Youth are perpetuating radically different ways of understanding and discussing pertinent issues, and propelling movements that are centered on democracy, social justice, and the accountability of states. These narrative and epistemic shifts are further exemplified by how youth are diverting away from sectarian lines—which has long been a source of division and conflict—and mobilizing collectively. Another example of this is the shift in discourse beginning to be seen pertaining to the Western Sahara-Morocco conflict as an issue of decolonization and settler-colonialism.
44. Youth and women are also centering gendered approaches in the movements they are steering, prioritizing the struggle for women's rights and inclusion. Women have been at the forefront leading revolutionary protests in places like Sudan, and youth and women's groups have been demanding the contributions and voices of women be sufficiently recognized.
45. Youth and women are also creating shifts in understandings of the state, state violence and gender violence, positing them as inherently tied and deeply connected (gender-state violence). They are anchoring their movements in a new discourse that holds the state accountable and considers how women's liberation must be rooted in state structural changes. These epistemic shifts of gendering understandings of the state and positioning it within a broader patriarchal order are seen in Sudan and the aftermath of the revolution in Egypt.
46. While formal integration in the region at the institutional level has remained a challenge, youth have been at the forefront of organizing transnationally and fostering integration at the informal level. Senegal's Y'en a Marre movement inspired similar youth movements and networks in Cameroon and Burkina Faso; youth protesting in Egypt learned how to mitigate the effects of tear gas from youth in Tunisia. Youth are building alliances that transcend borders, standing in solidarity, engaging cross-nationally to learn lessons from each other, and utilizing social media to amplify these efforts. Close attention should be paid to these cross-connections made, and how RECs and the AU can support the efforts of youth in this regard, further facilitating regional integration at the societal level.
47. Youth are continuing to inspire and make an impact at the domestic/national level; the efforts and successes of youth should be properly studied and documented in order to assess what lessons can be learned for future contexts and other countries. The impact of youth movements should not be lost or forgotten in the long term purview.
48. Often excluded, women and youth must be integral to negotiation and decision-making processes. This needs to go beyond approaches that have reduced representation to essential tokenism, and requires a critical interrogation of the structural conditions at hand to ensure active representation in leadership and negotiation, and the centering of these constituencies.

Addressing climate change

49. The Sahel remains severely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. There has been an increase in droughts and erosion of land, yielding crop failures and making water resources limited in a region that is already gravely poverty-stricken, and where a majority of the population is dependent on natural resources, livestock, and arable land. The resulting food insecurity caused by climate change is exacerbated by the region's rapid population growth, adding layers of complexity to existing issues that have yet to be resolved.
50. Tensions over the limited natural resources are increasing, driving intercommunal violence and conflicts between farmers and herders.
51. The impacts of climate change are a contributing factor of rebellions and the fueling of violence, and cannot be divorced from conversations on conflict and terrorism in the region more broadly. The nexus between the environment and security must be emphasized, and the usage of a climate-security framework is critical to assessing stability in the region.
52. The growing presence of international actors further complicates this issue, as external countries are exploiting already limited resources.
53. The drastic impacts of climate change in the region are driving climate refugees migrating to North Africa and undertaking the arduous journey via the Mediterranean to Europe, making it an utmost regional and policy concern. Understanding and addressing climate security must be integral to dialogue and decision-making on issues on migration.
54. Food insecurity and resource scarcities caused by climate change have also resulted in internal displacement and cross-border displacement across the West African Sahel and North Africa region. The increasing scale of lands that have suffered the impacts of climate change, coupled with the expanding violent conflict networks and extremist groups taking over, has meant that there are fewer safe spaces for displaced people to migrate to.
55. The scarcity of safe and habitable land has resulted in different peoples and communities, who have very different lifestyles and approaches, being forced to live and work together. Peacebuilding approaches should focus on helping to identify commonalities between peoples, build trust, and inclusiveness in order to facilitate cooperation and peaceful coexistence.
56. The notorious effects of climate change are an indicator of the need for strengthened regional dialogue and cooperation, a Sahel-North Africa strategy and partnership dedicated to addressing these challenges and mitigating its effects, and a common African agenda on climate security ahead of COP27 conversations.
57. Mitigating the effects of climate change should be seen as a key opportunity to invest in renewable energy resources.
58. State-society relations will be critical to addressing the impacts of climate change. Governments must play an integral role in providing security and investments in renewable energy resources, which will have a multiplier effect on societal issues such as helping to alleviate stressors driving violence and conflict. Investments from the private sector will also be vital.
59. Sensitizing local people and communities to climate change remains critical across the region, and must be prioritized to successfully address challenges posed by the environment. This includes equipping them with the critical knowledge, support, and skills needed to understand and address the challenges.

60. The work of the Climate Commission for the Sahel Region proved to be impactful in Niger, and has been identified as a key institution that can continue to help address the effects of climate change in the region, and the provision of resources and funding to support their efforts will be crucial.
61. The Great Green Wall (GGW) initiative, a project launched by the African Union (AU) in 2007 with the aims of restoring the Sahel's degraded landscape, sequestering carbon, and creating green jobs, was identified as another key area to invest in.

Concluding remarks

62. Epistemic shifts in the way Africa's geography is understood need to be made to reflect trans-Saharan realities. The narrative of the interconnectedness of North Africa and the Sahel as a geopolitically constructed region needs to be made, reflecting the historical and contemporary realities of how the Sahel has served as a bridge rather than a barrier for ideas, goods, commerce, migration, and unfortunately, conflict.
63. Regionalization remains of critical importance, although there are critiques of formal regional structures. Regional organizations are failing due to the different nationalistic goals of each government, making it challenging to form unified regional objectives. States should compare the interests and objectives of neighboring countries identifying how they can come together before creating regional coalitions and organizations.
64. There are several various internal and external actors involved in the region, all with varying different interests, ideologies, and aims. We need to address the differences of these diverse internal actors to better understand the context, and external actors must be confronted about the cacophony they are creating and contributing to.
65. Historically, North Africa and the Sahel have been approached as regions for "pacification" since colonial times, influencing the geostrategies implemented today. The narrative has been centered around the need to pacify uprising and rebellion particularly through the use of military force, rather than viewing it from a people-centric approach as a region with diverse cultures, peoples, economies, societies, etc.
66. The documentation of successes is vital in steps moving forward in regards to peacebuilding. Youth, women, civil society actors, and trans-national organizing at the informal level continue to achieve progress where there is much to be learned from. The marketing and dissemination of these successes, the ideas that fueled them and the knowledge it was rooted in, are integral to helping propel future successes.

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