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After the Malian crisis: security and stabilization in the Sahel region
Main findings of an expert seminar

Held on 12 March 2015 at the Azalai-Salam Hotel in Bamako, Mali

On 12 March 2015, Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit (CRU) organized a seminar in Bamako on security and stabilization issues in the Sahel region. Three years after the start of the Malian crisis, and only six days after the terrorist attack on the Bamako restaurant 'La Terrasse', the event gathered together more than 40 participants, including researchers and practitioners from six West African countries, representatives from international organizations (UN, EU), Malian civil society, journalists and local authorities.

The seminar was designed to bolster current thoughts on the best way forward for the Sahel region to achieve stabilization and, therefore, it focused mainly on the national/regional security situation and the root causes of the 2012 flare-up. In contrast to the more common understanding, researchers, and representatives of political groups and NGOs, did not give strong credence to the idea that there was widespread demand among Mali's people for improved security – which at any rate was not regarded by Malians as a priority – and they even made reference to the trope, much used by terrorists, that depicts the international community as an indirect cause of instability. Instead, they identified the lack of public services as a major obstacle to long-lasting peace and highlighted the urgent need to improve trust between the central state and peripheral regions as a first step towards enduring stability.

1. A regional continuum of instability

With regard to the question of security, a general consensus emerged on the regional dimension of the Malian conflict. As illustrated by the fall of the Libyan regime and its 'indirect' role in the fourth Tuareg uprising in Mali, there is a regional continuum of insecurity in the Sahel and, at some levels, even an international one, if the criminal trafficking issues are also taken into account. The cornerstone of this assessment is that Mali's instability cannot be solved by Bamako alone and that a regional approach is essential. In spite of the many difficulties surrounding such a project, strengthened cooperation between all the countries in the region is of fundamental importance to long-term stability. Insecurity in Mali's neighbouring countries (especially in Libya) must therefore be addressed, also as a prerequisite for peace in the Sahel region. Finally, from a long-term perspective, it must be noted that Mali's location in the geographical area affected by the regional crisis has made it a particularly important crossing point for international illicit flows. The international nature of the insecurity continuum in the Sahel has to be highlighted and, therefore, the international community needs to take into account, in the thinking process, the criminal sources in South American countries and the consumer markets in Europe. In other words, going beyond the issue of security and addressing the root causes of instability.

Since 2002, international strategies regarding the Sahel region have focused mainly on security and the fight against terrorism. By doing so, international partners have directly contributed the neglect of all non-security issues, such as local development and public services. These issues are now the main concern of populations accustomed to looking to other providers to meet their needs. Algeria and Libya have long played this role, and so have the charity organizations and all the Islamic NGOs that have been very active in the desert areas since the 1970s. Despite a very volatile security situation on the ground, northern populations have become used to dealing with a 'tolerable' level of violence, as the lack of public services and of goods appear to be their major concern (drinking water, infrastructure, supply of medicines, etc.). Participants in the Bamako seminar therefore called for a greater focus on the next stage of stabilization (economic development, in the main) rather than on the current inter-Malian peace talks. Northern populations indeed generally consider the Algiers peace talks as useless to them (they do not address their more urgent needs) and as having no direct impact on their living conditions. Beyond that, parts of the northern population are still very cautious about the central state's role in the next phase of stabilization. They see Bamako as a distant (and sometimes even foreign) weak power with no means of achieving security or development, and they fear the desire for revenge from part of the Malian defence and security forces.

2. The criminal economy overtakes that of the central state

Flourishing trafficking of all kinds, from medicines and spare parts to small arms and light weapons, drugs or petrol, has generated huge incomes that are exceeding the state's own financial capabilities. The criminal economy and illicit flows of goods have provided local populations with economic opportunities that the central state has always been unable (unwilling?) to provide them with. Traffickers and armed groups have imposed themselves as effective social

and economic providers in areas abandoned by the public sector and have succeeded in greatly surpassing the central state in the range of actions they are able to carry out and in financial strength. As a significant example, the participants recalled, traffickers could make more than 750 euros simply by providing some armed groups with useful intelligence regarding MINUSMA convoys, whereas the minimum wage in Mali is less than 50 euros a month.

3. The need for bottom-up stabilization

Beyond the need to strengthen the capacity-building of the sub-Saharan states, the stabilization challenge should also aim at revitalizing relations between the central state and the peripheral regions. Distrust within communities and between these communities and the national authorities have been identified as an important part of the current tensions. Communities' lack of involvement in the thinking process underpinning security and development strategies, urban–rural disparities, deficiencies in national public services and political exploitation of ethnic divisions (state-supported community vigilantes) are indeed key factors in the current situation of instability in the Sahel. These issues do not only affect the northern or desert regions but are shared by most of the national communities and, therefore, represent a challenge to the state's legitimacy. As the emergence of new unsafe areas in non-desert regions demonstrates (e.g. in the Mopti region in Mali), security and development problems are not limited to the far north of the Sahel. A viable stabilization process must therefore encourage, whenever possible, a direct dialogue between the central state and all its communities. Such a dialogue could foster trust between capitals and peripheral regions, and constitute a first encouraging step towards long-term stability.

This meeting was part of a series of events organized by the Conflict Research Unit on developments in the Sahel, within the framework of the Nationale Postcode Loterij *donation for the* Sahel Programme.

About the Conflict Research Unit

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organisations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations. The Sahel Programme is made possible through the generous contribution of the *Nationale Postcode Loterij*.

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