

PERILOUS DESERT: INSECURITY IN THE SAHARA

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The fragile states and territories of the Sahara suffer from a “perfect storm” of afflictions—weak governance, rampant corruption, endemic poverty, ethnic and societal cleavages, and inaccessible terrain. Amid this witches’ brew, transnational crime and Islamist militant groups proliferate and flourish. Refugee flows, arms, drugs, and insurgencies regularly spill over states’ borders with devastating consequences for neighbors.

This instability presents significant challenges not just for the United States and Europe but also for the states of sub-Saharan Africa and the broader Middle East. Effective policy responses will build the capacity of the security sector while addressing the underlying sources of insecurity.

Deep Roots of Conflict in the Sahara

- The most important source of conflict in the region is the weakness of political institutions. The entrenched authoritarianism, corruption, and clientelism that emerge as a result of this weakness breed social and ethnic conflict.
- Governments have a limited capacity to monitor their borders, provide for the basic needs of citizens in outlying areas, and maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.
- Entrenched ethnic divisions and socioeconomic inequalities fuel turmoil, including insurgency in Mali as well as riots and bloody racial clashes in Mauritania and Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.
- Illicit networks flourish across the region. Members of aggrieved ethnic groups who are marginalized from political and economic resources are frequently drawn to crime, such as cross-border arms and drug smuggling.
- Tribalism and indigenous religious traditions have historically fostered a culture of tolerance in the region. But radical Salafi ideas have recently penetrated society, fomenting extremism and insecurity.
- The threat of terrorism, embodied by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), is growing in the Sahel and Sahara. The organization exploits areas of poor governance and draws recruits from the region’s disenfranchised populations. Although currently a localized problem, AQIM is attempting to expand its international profile.

Recommendations for Local Governments and the International Community

Promote lasting solutions to social inequalities. Policies should be aimed at facilitating social inclusion, political integration, and economic empowerment. They should target marginalized groups with a focus on property rights and access to resources.

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Bolster the capacity and professionalism of local security forces. The states of the Sahara need the tools to combat transnational terrorist groups and organized crime. Reforms should focus on fostering civilian oversight of the security forces and effectively prioritizing security expenditures and the allocation of resources.

Build and reinforce the rule of law. Promoting good governance and reinforcing the state's capacity are critical to improving economic conditions and building people's trust in national institutions. This requires responsible national leadership and determined international donors willing to link economic assistance to improvements in human security.

Leverage multilateral cooperation. The international community should encourage regional cooperation to share intelligence, monitor financial flows from drug trafficking, and conduct joint military operations.

Design a coherent and clear policy against the payment of ransoms. These payments fund terrorist and criminal organizations and their local intermediaries. By implementing a zero-tolerance policy toward ransom payments, the international community would help stem the growth of a veritable industry that emboldens criminal entrepreneurs and violent extremists.

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