

15/2020

02 March 2020

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The Spanish foreign strategy to face the threat of terrorism and irregular immigration: strengthening security in the fragile states of the Sahel

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The Spanish foreign strategy to face the threat of terrorism and irregular immigration: strengthening security in the fragile states of the Sahel

Abstract:

The phenomenon of failed states is one of the greatest challenges facing global governance. The lack of government control over their territories causes a power vacuum that is used by armed groups to destabilize the country and develop their illicit activities (terrorism, human trafficking, etc.). In recent years, Spain's strategy for tackling these threats has focused on reforming the security sector of fragile states, which has as its fundamental axis the building of capacities, especially the training of the security forces and corps of these states. This paper will analyse the specific and direct threats that fragile states pose for Spain, that is, non-state actors that use terrorism and the trafficking of immigrants as a means of achieving their objectives. Secondly, it will be detailed the military and non-military operations in which Spain participates with the aim of strengthening security in the region. Finally, the possible challenges that these operations face in order to achieve their objectives will be examined.

Keywords:

Failed states, terrorism, advanced border, irregular immigration, Spain, EUTM, Sahel, Cooperative security, non-state actors.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

The most fragile states in the world are in the Sahel area. These political realities are characterized by weak governance, marked by profound limitations in aiding, security and development to their populations. For this reason, the Sahel region, despite its demographic and economic potential, is one of the areas most affected by terrorism, migratory pressures and non-state armed groups.

The entire Sahel region is of geostrategic importance to Spain, since it is part of our advanced border as indicated in the 2017 National Security Strategy¹. Spain has part of its territory on the African continent (Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands) therefore, Mali is less than 600 km from our border. Although the Sahel has always been present in the Spanish agenda due to historical ties, it was not until the Cayucos Crisis in 2005 that Spain prioritized the region in its external action. Due to that event, the government drew up a comprehensive strategy for Africa, the Africa Plan of 2006, which places special emphasis on the symbiosis of humanitarian-economic cooperation and security sector reform. This plan prioritizes cooperation in the fight against terrorism, illicit trafficking and organized crime to strengthen democracy, peace and security in Africa².

The European Union's concern for the region began later, following the Tuareg uprising in Niger in 2007. In 2011, the EU Strategy for the Sahel was adopted, which from 2015 onwards became the Regional Action Plan for the Sahel. Since then, the presence of the European Union has increased in the region and, as the Spanish strategy, the EU strategy has also a comprehensive approach. It has four main lines of action: prevention and the fight against radicalization; youth; migration, mobility and border control; and the fight against illegal trafficking and transnational organized crime.

The 2017 National Security Strategy identifies as threats to national security, armed conflicts, terrorism and organized crime, especially related to human trafficking. Long-lasting armed conflicts generate instability and fragile states which, particularly in areas of interest to Spain such as the Sahel, provide spaces for armed groups to emerge. This means that Spain is more exposed to other threats such as organized crime and terrorism.

¹ Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional. Presidencia del Gobierno. 2017.

² Plan África 2006-2008, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación. Junio 2006.

To fight against the threats of terrorism and irregular immigration, cooperation and economic and political aid are essential for rebuilding the institutions of fragile states. Nevertheless, this article will only analyze Spain's external action in the area of security. This action is focused on strengthening security in fragile states and on providing resources and building security forces capacities. The bilateral relationship with these states is essential and that is why, apart from defense operations within the framework of NATO, the European Union and in collaboration with other countries such as France, Spain maintains a close relationship through the defense diplomacy strategy that promotes security and defense cooperation in fragile states.

Terrorism

As mentioned above, fragile states are not able to control their territories and borders, through which all kinds of illicit activities are conducted with impunity. The consequence, apart from the lack of security, is the desperation of the population as they see no way out in the national projects that were created after colonial emancipation. This hopelessness, added to the lack of security due to armed conflicts and organized crime, leads many young people to emigrate or to seek protection from non-State organizations, such as armed groups or terrorist groups.

In the National Security Strategy of 2017, Daesh appears as the main protagonist of the terrorist threat due to its operational capacity, means and rapid expansion. In the Sahel, Daesh has two subsidiaries, the Islamic State of the Western Sahel (EIAO) and its Sahel subsidiary Islamic State of the Great Sahara (EIGS). Besides them, Boko Haram and Al Qaeda with its local Maghreb branch (AQMI) are also active in the area and since 2017 a new group, Jamaat Al Nusra Al Islam Wal Muslim (JNIM), has become popular in its first year of existence because of its propaganda dimension and the number of attacks in the three-frontier region, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger³. These attacks are used to achieve one of their main objectives: to demonstrate their presence and influence in Mali and the three-frontier region. This new terrorist group comes from the unification and alliance of several smaller terrorist organizations in the area such as Ansar ad-Din,

³ ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C. *La amenaza de los grupos yihadistas que operan en el Sahel Occidental. La estabilidad en el Sahel. Un análisis prospectivo*. D. T. 05/2018.

Macina Liberation Front, Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad, Al-Mourabitoun, Movement for the Unity of Islam (the Tawhid) in West Africa (MUYAO). Unlike Al-Qaeda or Daesh, JNIM is particularly focused against foreign forces present in Mali (EUTM-MALI, MINUSCA, G5 Sahel and France and their partners in Operation Barkhane).

Many of the previously mentioned groups take advantage of the vulnerability and marginality of certain ethnic groups such as the Peul, in the case of the Macina Liberation Front, or the Tuareg, in the case of Ansar ad-Din, to recruit followers. Terrorism masks the lack of social cohesion, presence of the central state and economic development of these countries, which is why certain groups sometimes count on the complicity of the local population on the cities they control. This explains why a few hundred people can control entire cities, as was the case in Raqqa and Mosul in Iraq.

In terms of the frequency, despite the international presence (G5 Sahel, Operation Barkhane, UN and EU missions), terrorist attacks are taking place more frequently every year.

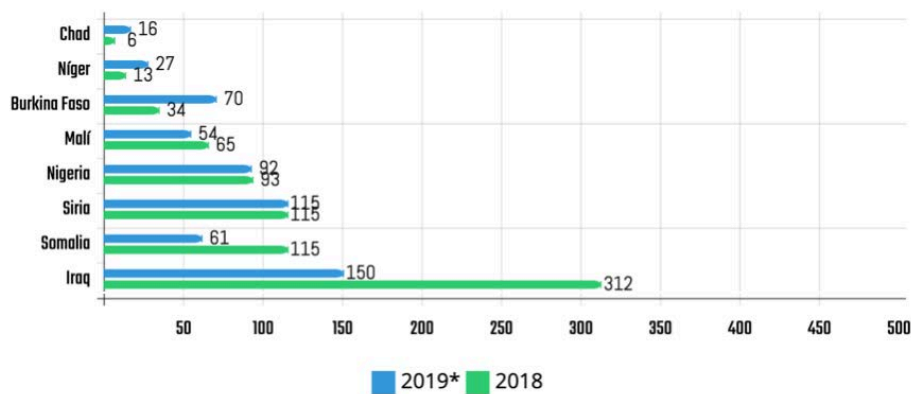


Figure 1. The data for 2019 is updated to October 1st. Source. The source of the data in the graph and the heading are taken from the International Terrorism Observatory's Biannual Report on Jihadist Activity in 2019. The data for the months of July, August and September come from the Observatory of Jihadist Attacks for the months of July, August and September 2019.

In the first six months of this year, 757 Jihadist attacks have been carried out, although only two of them were in Europe. This trend is like that of 2018, which ended with 1,571 attacks. As can be seen in the graph, in practically all the countries affected by terrorism the number of attacks has increased from one year to the next. The West African region has been most affected: in Burkina Faso, there were a total of 34 attacks last year and 70 as of 1 October 2019. As of 1 October 2019, there have already been 27 and 16 attacks respectively.

Although the main attacks are against the civilian population and the security forces of those states, the French forces of Operation Barkhane and the EUTM-Mali mission, in which Spain is the country with the most soldiers participating, have suffered several terrorist attacks, such as those in November of 2019, when 14 French soldiers lost their lives, or in February, when the EUTM base was the target of a victimless terrorist attack.

In addition to the threat it poses to members of the security forces stationed in the region, terrorism poses a triple threat to Spain. On one hand, the presence of terrorist organizations in the Sahel causes an uncontrolled migratory flow that further destabilizes the region. On the other hand, although Spain has no economic interests in Mali or Burkina Faso, our main gas supplier is Algeria, so the spread of terrorist groups or irregular migratory flows in Algeria directly affects Spain's energy interests. The second supplier of gas is Nigeria, which is home to the two most important terrorist groups in the region: Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa.

Finally, although Europe is not the main destination of the attacks, the number of terrorist attacks in the Sahel reflects the strength of organizations such as Daesh and AQIM, which continue to recruit fighters, including Spanish citizens, and plan terrorist attacks such as those in Paris, Barcelona or London.

Organized crime: irregular immigration networks

The second direct threat to Spain is irregular immigration. From January to September of 2019 23,300 irregular immigrants arrived in Spain, 18,800 of them by sea and 4,500 by land. Although this is just over half of the same period in the previous year (43,200), it is still higher than the same period in 2017 (with 17,100 arrivals)⁴. Concerning the nationality of the immigrants, leaving aside Moroccan and Algerian immigrants, the next countries of origin are Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast and Senegal. In addition to these countries of origin, the Gambia, Mauritania and Cameroon were added to the previous year's list.

Immigrant arrivals by nationality

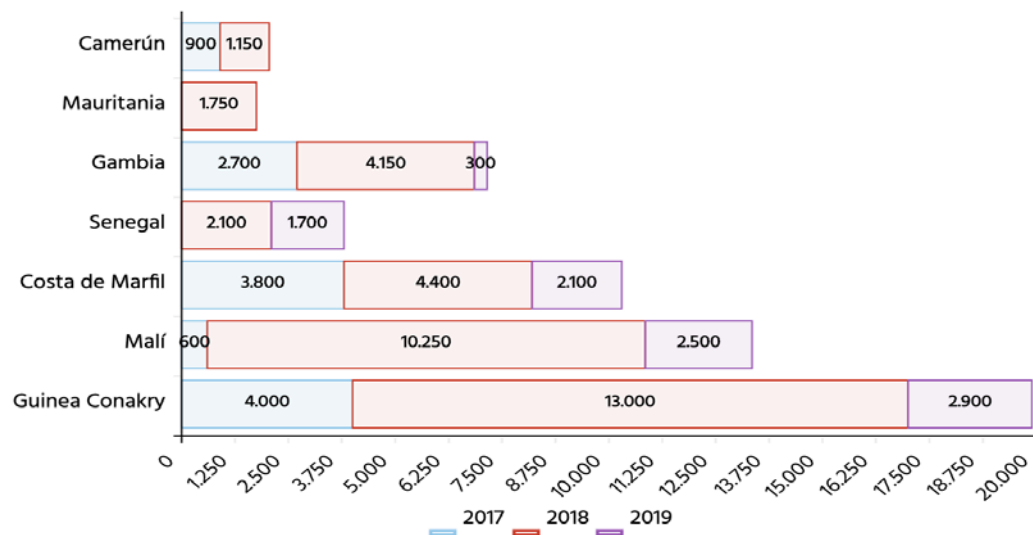


Figure 2. Number of arrivals per nationality. Source. Data from Refugee and Migrant reports: UNHCR entries to Europe (Mediterranean) for the years 2017, 2018 and 2019 Source of the map: Migration routes from West Africa to Europe. Map: historicair / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

While it is true that arrivals during the year 2019 have decreased by almost 50%, at any time the trend may change. If we look at the example of Mali, the fourth country of origin of immigrants during 2019, what is most alarming is the population growth in that country, which has a fertility rate of 6 children per woman. That would mean that Mali will double

⁴ Refugee & Migrant Arrivals to Europe in 2019 (MEDITERRANEAN) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/72161>

its population by 2035. Seventy per cent of the population is under the age of 25⁵. In a country where almost half of the population lives below the poverty line and is caught up in an unresolved conflict, Mali's youth are in a precarious situation with no clear prospects. Given this situation, these young people have, among other options, the alternative of migrating to Europe or joining an organized crime network⁶.

Therefore, regardless of the number of immigrants Spain receives one year or another, it is necessary to address the problem by thinking about the future of these young people and the lack of possibilities they will have in their countries of origin. That is, without doubt, the greatest threat to Spain and Europe.

Spain's military operations in the Sahel

After having analyzed the threats posed by an unstable Sahel, the following section will analyze Spain's participation in military operations in the region: EUTM-MALI, operations in support of France and cooperative security operations with different countries.

EUTM-MALI

The European Union's operation in Mali aims to restore stability in the country. The mandate of this mission began in 2013 and will last until May 2020. The objectives of the mission are focused on increasing and improving the operational and strategic capabilities of the Malian security forces (FaMA). During the mission, more than 14,000 FaMA military personnel have been trained. This increase in capabilities is not only a matter of training the forces but also of restoring the rule of law and the Malian government's control over its territory. Besides, this mission aims to provide operational support to the G5 Sahel to strengthen regional cooperation on immigration, trafficking and terrorism⁷.

⁵ Demographic data obtained by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Mali. CIA THE WORLD FACTBOOK. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>

⁶ DÍEZ ALCALDE, J. *G5 Sahel: debilidades y fortalezas nacionales frente a la seguridad y el desarrollo en el Sahel occidental*. La estabilidad en el Sahel. Un análisis prospectivo. D. T. 05/2018.

⁷ EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). European Union External Action. Common Security and Defense Policy.

Spain leads the mission with 200 military personnel, being the country that contributes the most to the contingent. Besides, Spain has been in command of the mission twice, the last time being from January to November 2018. Spain could have assumed command of the operation for a third time had it not been for its political situation.

Collaboration with France in military operations

Spain collaborates closely with French military operations aimed at stabilizing fragile states and fighting terrorism. Spain and France are conditioned by their geography; they share the advanced border and the threats of the Sahel are common to both countries. Although Spanish contribution is limited to logistical and transport support, the two Spanish operations in Senegal and Gabon are vital for the intra-theatre transport in the region. Spain is the largest contributor of personnel and material transport, covering 15% of the transport needs of Operation Barkhane⁸.

Support operation for Mali

The Operation of the Air Force's "Mamba" Detachment aims at supporting the transport of international actors in Mali, MINUSMA, EUCAP, EUTM and the French Operation Barkhane. To this end, 58 Spanish military personnel with the T.10 Hercules aircraft operate from the French airbase of Yoff in Dakar. Their mission is limited to the transport of equipment, material, people and refueling and they are prohibited from participating in hostilities on the front. Initially, the operation supported the French Serval missions that were derived in Barkhane⁹.

Operation Mamba also aims to support the tactical and logistical transport of international operations in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA and EUTM-Mali. The operation began in 2014 to support the French operation Sangaris. It is currently focused on supporting not only the ongoing missions in the Central African Republic but also contributes to the intra-theatre transport of Operation Barkhane. The Mamba detachment

⁸ BARKHANE: L'engagement des pays alliés et européens. Ministère des Armées. 2019. Available at: <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites2/barkhane-l-engagement-des-pays-allies-et-europeens>

⁹ VEGAS. A., GRAU, J.L. Mamba y Marfil. Revista Española de Defensa. Julio 2015. P.25

consists of 46 military personnel and the T.21 (C-295) aircraft operating from Libreville in Gabon¹⁰.

Spain's participation in these missions demonstrates our country's high commitment to the stability of the region, being one of the leading countries in international missions. Furthermore, it should also be noted that, although support for France is only in the area of transport, the distances involved, and the geographical and climatic conditions of the region make the support of our country and other European forces for Operation Barkhane crucial. It is estimated that 50% of transport is carried out by European countries. Spain is the country that contributes most to the EU missions as a whole and is in all EU missions in Africa.

Cooperative Security Operations

The cooperative security activities are born from the request of some African governments to the Spanish government to train them in those capacities they lack or want to perfect, in the military field. These operations arise from the bilateral state-state relationship between our country and the states in question. To this end, the Spanish government advises and trains the armed forces of these countries so that, thanks to these capabilities, they can combat the threats they face, which are usually quite like ours: terrorism, illegal trafficking and irregular immigration. These missions, being relatively unknown to the public, are vital for strengthening diplomatic and commercial relations with these countries. To date, the governments of Cape Verde (2014), Senegal (2015), Mauritania (2016) and Tunisia (2017) are the ones with whom we have an agreement for training and capacity building. Although Spain does not have personnel permanently deployed, the teams sent are for short periods during which training activities are carried out.

The training focus on inland combat procedures with asymmetric enemies, explosives deactivation, combat sanitation, logistics, precision marksmanship, aircraft maintenance, search and rescue, facility security, and maritime security and surveillance, where Spain deploys two Navy vessels for operations. Examples of these activities are the deployment

¹⁰ Ídem. P.27

of the deep-sea patrol vessel 'Serviola' in 2019. In the four months it was with the Cape Verdean forces, it prevented the hijacking of two vessels and the sinking of a third.¹¹ It should be noted that, although cooperative security missions are carried out with one state, especially concerning maritime security, there is close cooperation with other coastal countries such as Cameroon or Ghana.

The missions in Tunisia are of interest as it is a North African country where the greatest threat is the enlistment to Daesh and the threat of attacks. No joint exercise appears publicly from this mission beyond cooperation in the field of NATO for the training of the Navy's Special Operations Unit. NATO has an interest in this post-Arab Spring country to cooperate in its security sector reform and to secure a permanent ally in North Africa. Tunisia prefers bilateral agreements with countries such as Spain, making it clear that it does not want to align with NATO. In fact, in February 2018 it rejected a NATO proposal to station personnel in a military operations center in exchange for a \$3.7 million grant¹².

Spain's non-military operations in the Sahel

Apart from these military missions, through the GAR-SI Sahel project, Spain has stood out for the training of police and national guards, which are an essential part of the internal security sector. In addition to this initiative, our country is also leading the EL KSAR, Blue Sahel and ECI-Niger projects aimed at combating human trafficking. Most of the operations that Spain carries out in the Sahel are aimed at training the State's security forces in skills that will enable them to better combat terrorism, trafficking and illegal immigration.

GAR-SI Sahel

GAR-SI Sahel units are the Rapid Action Intervention Groups in the Sahel. This project aims at training and equipping Rapid Action Units in the G-5 countries and Senegal. Inspired by the Spanish GAR, these units are better adapted to the specific security needs

¹¹ Golfo de Guinea (Diplomacia de la Defensa). Actualidad. Ministerio de Defensa. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/misiones/en_exterior/actuales/listado/diplomacia-defensa.html

¹² MARQUEZ DE LA RUBIA, F. *Seguridad cooperativa OTAN: visión mediterránea*. Documento de Análisis. 17 de julio de 2019.

of the Sahel countries. In these states, hybrid and cross-border threats makes it more difficult to differentiate between external security (defense) and internal security. Therefore, GAR-SI covers more efficiently the security demands, considering the real orography and capacities of the security forces. This project is managed by FIIAPP and financed by the European Union. Led by the Spanish Guardia Civil, together with the French Gendarmerie, the Italian Carabinieri and the Portuguese Guarda Nacional Republicana, the GAR-SI Sahel aims to provide the mechanisms for fragile states to fight irregular migration, organized crime and terrorist groups within their borders. The objective of these forces is not only the training of special teams, but one of the major objectives is to achieve real coordination and interoperability between the countries of the Sahel¹³.

GAR-SI Sahel started in March 2017 and, although it was planned to last only two years, following the excellent results of the mission it has been decided to extend and increase the number of missions (from 6 to 13). Analyzing the results of each country, during the first two years, the support mission to Mauritania has already been completed and has become an autonomous unit. 167 operations have been carried out in coordination with other units, which shows that GAR-SI in Mauritania has achieved real interoperability. Due to the success of the mission, Mauritania has requested the creation of a second unit of 132 gendarmes to take charge of the south-eastern border of the country¹⁴. About the GAR-SI mission in Niger, although the unit was deployed in July of 2019, during the mentoring phase the security forces have already been able to carry out border operations with Burkina Faso. The National Gendarmerie has already formalized the demand to create a second unit of 134 gendarmes¹⁵.

As for Senegal, as is the case with Mauritania, the program was established and successfully implemented, becoming a fully operational unit with its operational base near the Mali border. Although Senegal has not requested another GAR-SI unit, in February

¹³ La Guardia Civil lidera el proyecto GAR-SI Sahel (Grupos de Acción Rápida de Vigilancia e Intervención en el Sahel). Guardia Civil, Madrid, 2016. Available at: http://www.interior.gob.es/prensa/noticias/-/asset_publisher/GHU8Ap6ztgsg/content/id/6102958

¹⁴ GAR-SI SAHEL *Document d'action Fonds Fiduciaire d'Urgence de l'Union Européenne en faveur de la stabilité et de la lutte contre les causes profondes de la migration irrégulière et du phénomène des personnes déplacées en Afrique*. EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. June 2019. European Commission p.5.

¹⁵ Idem, p.7

this year the Senegalese National Gendarmerie requested additional assistance for logistical means to increase operational capacity¹⁶. Concerning the unit in Burkina Faso, the units were deployed in Toéni in May 2019 and have been able to successfully carry out operations throughout the territory, controlling, above all, part of the most remote and insecure territory of this country. Due to their success, the country has also requested two additional units with 80 agents each¹⁷.

As for the Malian mission, although it was one of the later ones to be deployed, the Malian GAR-SI forces have achieved enough operational capacity. Moreover, if it has taken so long to set up, it has been due to the restructuring of the Malian security forces, as part of its security sector reform. Therefore, they have also requested the European Union to create 3 more forces with 155 gendarmes each¹⁸. The only mission still in a training phase is the Chad mission, the possible extension of which will depend on the initial assessment of the first one.

Blue Sahel and EL KSAR Project

The Blue Sahel Program is the continuation of a series of projects that began in 2006 with an average duration of 2 years and which aim to improve cross-border cooperation in the program's beneficiary countries: Mauritania, Cape Verde, Senegal, Mali, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau and the Gambia. To this end, under the leadership of the Guardia Civil, the security forces of the participating states are trained so that their capacities are strengthened in the fight against our common threats: organized crime and human trafficking¹⁹.

The EL KSAR project, on the other hand, is a project exclusively for Mauritania, which aims to strengthen civil aviation security, mainly at its airports, and to fight organized cross-border crime, as well as to strengthen cooperation relations with Mauritania²⁰.

¹⁶ GAR-SI SAHEL (...). EU Emergency Trust Fund For Africa. June 2019. European Commission p.8.

¹⁷ Idem p.8.

¹⁸ Idem, p. 3.

¹⁹ ESPINOSA NAVA, F. *La cooperación en África de las fuerzas de seguridad españolas*. La estabilidad en el Sahel. Un análisis prospectivo. D. T. 05/2018. P.153

²⁰ ALTUNA, S. *La contribución española actual a la lucha contra el terrorismo en el Sahel*. 2018. Real Instituto Elcano. ARI 116/2018 - 16/10/2018.

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ECI Niger

The Joint Research Team is a project funded by the European Union and managed by FIAPP, which aims to build the capacity of Niger's security forces to combat human trafficking and manage migration. The ECI-Niger is inspired by the bilateral Spain-Mauritania project, the ECI-Mauritania, which was also a monitoring unit.

The ECI is led by the National Police which has 3 team members. In addition, there are 3 other members of the French National Police and 12 members of the Nigerian Police working alongside the Nigerian Special Investigation Division. This division within the Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (DST) is responsible for combating trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants and false documentation.

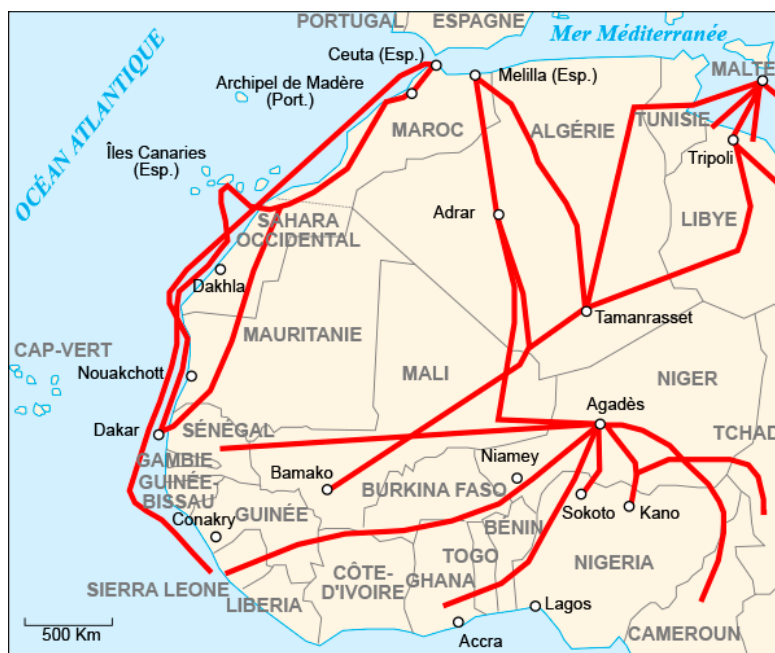


Figura 3. Mapa rutas migraciones. Fuente del mapa:

Migration routes from West Africa to Europe. Map: historicair / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Niger has been one of the most important transit countries for human trafficking networks on two main routes: Algeria-Morocco and Libya. Until the project was launched in December 2016, there were 70,000 migratory crossings between Libya and Niger in May of that year. One year later, with the project already underway, the number of crossings fell to 1,500²¹. Although the program ended in December 2019, considering the results obtained, it has been renewed for another three years.

²¹ ECI-NIGER *Document d'action Fonds Fiduciaire d'Urgence de l'Union Européenne en faveur de la stabilité et de la lutte contre les causes profondes de la migration irrégulière et du phénomène des personnes déplacées en Afrique*. EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. June 2019. European Commission p.5.

Up to July of 2019, 183 operations concerning human trafficking have been carried out, 59 criminal organizations have been dismantled, among them one of the most important networks of trafficking for sexual exploitation towards Europe²².

Challenges of the Spanish external action in the Sahel

Spain's military and police cooperation actions in the Sahel show Spain's commitment to restoring security in the Sahel. That commitment reflects the concern about the degradation of stability in a region that, as mentioned above, is growing demographically and deteriorating climatically and economically. Therefore, the threats that Spain now faces do not seem to be going away naturally.

Seven years have already passed since the arrival of the EUTM and MINUSMA forces in Mali, and the French arrival with Operation Serval and then Barkhane. In these seven years, the security situation has deteriorated and that is why countries like France are questioning their presence, or at least their strategy in the region.

The Sahel itself presents specific challenges that must be taken into account for the correct and satisfactory development of our external action. The transposition of the western nation-state security sector model must be done taking into account the particularities of a young African state, in the process of formation, with diffuse and permeable borders of enormous distances, lack of social cohesion and traditional governance structures parallel to those of the state. Therefore, it is crucial to adapt this model, considering the region's specificities and counting on the security sector's leading actors. This includes not only capacity building and the provision of means, but also the training of good governors and the inclusion of local actors in all their diversity.

Finally, the emergence of armed groups from countries such as Mali or Niger is due, among other causes, to the marginalization of sectors of the population that are not reflected in the national project. Many young people see joining armed groups as one of the only professional alternatives, so one of the greatest challenges is to stop making the business of armed groups lucrative; in other words, to disassociate violence from

²² "España y Níger refuerzan la lucha contra las redes de tráfico y trata de personas en las fronteras". *Europa Press*. 2019. Available at: <https://www.europapress.es/epsocial/migracion/noticia-espana-niger-refuerzan-lucha-contra-redes-trafico-trata-personas-fronteras-20190712161234.html>

economic benefits. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) initiatives are trying to address this problem, but due to a lack of means, funding and political will, many of the efforts are not producing results. Cooperation with regional powers such as Morocco and Algeria and with the G5 Sahel alliance is crucial to achieving a lasting solution with the actors involved.

Furthermore, it is crucial to make the distinction between armed groups and terrorist organizations, which local governments often fail to do, using the capacities and support of foreign forces for their political agenda, passing them as counterterrorist's operations. Terrorist groups and irregular immigration routes are usually not in places where the state is present; they are usually in the most remote places, controlled by non-state groups. Coordination with such non-state actors, such as the Tuareg in northern Mali, is therefore essential (GATIA, CMA, Platform). Ownership of security sector reform by local actors is the best way to ensure its duration and help integration processes of these countries, providing them with economic and military aid beyond the capital and its surroundings.

Conclusions and prospects

Having analyzed the threats and Spain's external action to face them in the Sahel, it is worth highlighting our country's high commitment to the area. The priorities of this strategy are capacity building, coordination and interoperability of forces in fragile states, unlike the strategies of other countries such as France that directly combat terrorism in the region. All training missions focus on ensuring coordination between local and regional law enforcement agencies and security forces. Given that threats to security and stability are cross-border, this is a very appropriate strategy that is adapted to the specificities of the Sahel area. The Sahel is also extremely important for Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, as their security depends on the stability of the area. Therefore, bilateral relations of defense diplomacy and cooperative security must remain a priority. Spain and the European Union should prioritize a closer relation with North Africa countries as they are crucial actors of support and change in the region.

On the other hand, despite the effectiveness of Spanish operations, it is necessary to continue and expand our action in the Sahel, taking into account the strategic importance of the region and the consequences of an unstable Sahel for our interests. Therefore, the commitment must be long-term but taking into account that, once their capacities are formed, it is up to the states to continue with the reform of the security sector and apply the knowledge acquired. To this end, a clear evaluation of the objectives of Spanish operations is crucial to determine their effectiveness.

Assessing the results of operations aimed at combating irregular immigration, projects such as GAR-SI, ECI-Niger, Blue Sahel and EL KSAR, can be cautiously classified as successful considering the number of arrivals by the western Mediterranean route. Even so, it is necessary to continue cooperating in these areas as the trend may change from one year to the next and this year's drop in irregular immigration has other causes such as agreements with transit countries like Morocco.

However, as far as the fight against terrorism is concerned, the strategy of the European Union and Spain does not seem to be sufficient, as there are more attacks and more terrorist groups in the Sahel this year than last year and the year before. Furthermore, the international contingents of the UN, the European Union and those involved in Operation Barkhane have been targeted by these terrorist organizations. This alarming situation indicates the possibility that the operations carried out by foreign missions are used by terrorists as propaganda to recruit new fighters. This has been the strategy of JNIM terrorist group. Furthermore, another consequence of the presence of foreign forces is retaliation against the civilian population by terrorist groups.

As already mentioned, support for security sector reform in fragile states is essential for rebuilding the necessary capacities and resources for their development. If this process is not accompanied by social, political and economic development, the chances of conflict re-emerging are high. Accompanying states in the fulfilment of their signed peace agreements, in the respect for human rights and a demilitarized political transition, is one of the fundamental tasks that Spain and the European Union should ensure if they wish to continue to be effectively involved in training the armed arms of states.

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