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Gulf Countries and the Stabilization Efforts in the Sahel

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Executive summary

◇ Despite numerous stabilization programmes launched by the international community, the security situation in the Sahel has been worsening. After the 2013 war in Mali, violent armed groups redeployed southward and perpetrated numerous atrocities in the so-called three-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. By 2021, as the international community degraded the power of jihadi movements in the Middle East such as Daesh and Al Qaeda, these organizations turned to the Sahel as the new epicentre of their global struggle. Additionally, the end of the French military operation, Barkhane, by the beginning of 2022 will significantly alter the landscape of international cooperation for the Sahel region.

◇ Terrorism in the Sahel is not simply a regional translation of global trends; it has local root causes that can be found in the economic underdevelopment of rural areas and the perception of disfranchisement of local communities. As a result, the most challenging issue for the Sahelian countries is to renew the social contract between the State and the population.

◇ Restoring this social contract will imply a diplomatic approach through reconciliation efforts with some of the armed groups. However, views on reconciliation differ deeply in the region and among Western partners.

◇ Even if mediation and reconciliation efforts were to materialize, Sahelian states would still need to defeat jihadi organizations, either because some of those will always reject negotiations or because others will be tempted to increase their attacks to get a better hand at the negotiating table. Therefore, in the short term, the struggle against violent armed groups will remain a priority

◇ In the counterterrorism domain, the two biggest

challenges are to train local forces and to counter the ideology of radical organizations. Gulf countries can help in both cases, first by supporting the military education programmes of the G5 Sahel joint force and then by promoting good practices in countering violent extremism at the community level.

◇ With regards to the governance of international aid to the Sahel region, the main challenge is to ensure first, that local actors (the Sahelian states and the community leaders) improve the socio-economic conditions on their own; and second, that multilateral actors like the G5 Sahel, the United Nations and the European Union prevent the French military withdrawal from turning into a security vacuum that would be exploited by terrorist organizations.

◇ In such a complex environment, Gulf states should first make sure that the aid recipient countries and their partnering international organizations follow the same long-term objectives -- namely economic and social development as well as the prevention of local radicalization.

◇ Gulf states can support the improvement of socio-economic conditions in the Sahel by focusing their current investments in the region on the modernization of local infrastructure. Specifically, Gulf investments could prove decisive in areas such as connectivity, education and healthcare.

◇ Gulf states could also promote their policies towards the Sahel through the GCC framework. This would facilitate their coordination with other primary players such as the EU. Putting Gulf support to the Sahel governance on the agenda of the consultations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and EU countries would allow them to discuss ways to support

the on-going programmes already supervised by the Europeans. In a similar fashion, the GCC may formalize its relations with the G5 Sahel by creating mechanisms of consultations that would also help channelling the Gulf financial contributions to the West African organization in the most efficient way.

◇ Eventually, realism should guide Gulf policies towards the stabilization of the Sahel region. One should not forget that international aid cannot on its own create stable conditions for local development. The outcome will fundamentally depend on the willingness and the ability of local stakeholders (statesmen and civil societies) to come together and restore the terms of their social contract.

The Issue

For the past decade, the Sahel region, a vast area between the Sahara and the Sudanian savanna that includes five West African countries (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad), has been facing a wide array of security challenges. In January 2013, an offensive from Islamist organizations almost brought down the Malian government and prompted France to launch a military intervention codenamed "Serval". A year later, France broadened the initial scope of its engagement in Mali to include counterterrorism missions across the whole Sahel region.

Due to the porosity of borders and the transnational nature of illicit flows in the region, West African states also decided to join forces with the creation in 2014 of the G5 Sahel. The new entity was meant as a regional organization aiming not only to secure the region but to promote economic development and good governance as well. A joint force manned with soldiers from the five member states was added in 2017.

In the following years, the international community invested substantial efforts in shoring up the security architecture of the Sahel: the UN started operating a stabilization mission for Mali in April 2013 and the EU launched a training mission for Malian forces the same year, while both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union designed their own Sahel strategies¹

But despite myriad initiatives, the security situation in the Sahel kept worsening. First, the limitations of local armed forces in terms of training and resources hindered their ability to conduct decisive joint operations against armed groups. As a result, military campaigns from the G5 Sahel hardly halted the tempo of terrorist attacks. After being ousted from northern Mali in 2013, violent extreme organizations redeployed southward and perpetrated numerous atrocities in the so-called three-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. By 2021, as the international community degraded the power of jihadi movements in the Middle East such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, these groups turned to the Sahel region as the new epicentre of their global struggle.

But terrorism in the Sahel is not simply an imported product from the Middle East. It has also local root causes and can be understood as the result of years of economic underdevelopment and geographical inequalities between urban centres and rural areas in Sahelian countries. The disfranchisement (real or perceived) of local communities fuels social discontent, and sometimes leads to radicalization.

These domestic parameters undermine the ability of the international community to respond to the governance needs in the Sahel, especially when external partners find themselves caught in the middle of clashes between the indigenous communities and local governments. In most recent years, the legitimacy crisis of these governments triggered popular mobilizations calling for change. But these mobilizations also complicated the mission of addressing the terrorism challenge. The recent developments in Mali epitomize these tensions: in the spring of 2020, civilians marched in the streets of Bamako fed up with the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. The latter was then removed from office by the military in August of that year and an uncertain period of political transition followed.

In addition to the security and economic challenges already faced by Sahelian states, climate change has been a threat multiplier: local economies heavily rely on agriculture, but desertification caused by more intense droughts is affecting about 80% of the Sahel's farmland. According to various UN reports, food insecurity is an issue already impacting an estimated 33 million people in the Sahel and will exacerbate because of worsening climate conditions.²

In this context, the coming months will constitute a crucial period to prevent the region from unravelling into a security vacuum. In July 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of French Operation for the Sahel, "Barkhane". The French Armed Forces personnel are likely to have a lighter footprint of nearly half the 5,000 that existed in August 2021. These security personnel are expected to focus on countering terrorist groups in the three-border area.

While governments in the Sahel suffer from limited resources, Western partners like France face their own constraints: a lack of support from the French public and more generally, the problematic track record of Western interventions abroad such as in Afghanistan have left political leaders war weary. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has an impact on government expenditures and forces Western countries to reduce their international engagements, rather than expand them.

This also explains why France struggled to receive the support of its Western partners as much as it hoped since the launching of its operation Barkhane. Though the US provided logistical support to the French armed forces, the administration of former President Donald Trump expressed its desire to reduce the resources allocated to its African Command due to the priority conferred to the Indo-Pacific theatre. The American government under President Joe Biden has not signalled a change to

this posture.

In this perspective, the transitional phase triggered by the imminent French military withdrawal calls for a new discussion on the governance of the Sahel. What can the international community, specifically the Gulf states, do to stabilize the Sahel? For Gulf countries, security and stability in the Sahel matter for two main reasons. First, there is a significant Sahelian community residing in the Arabian Peninsula that evidences a steady flow of human migration between both regions. The UN estimates that about 3.6 million migrants in the Gulf come from Africa.³ Though precise figures are unavailable, the share of these workers coming specifically from West Africa is high, especially in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE.⁴

Second, at the strategic level, there is a direct security interest for Gulf countries in preventing the collapse of Sahelian states. The region has been the target of predatory strategies by both non-state actors and external countries. For instance, Iran has been involved in the economy of the Sahelian countries since the 1980s and maintains ties with Shia armed groups in West Africa.⁵ Furthermore, the use of the Sahel as a steppingstone for the resurgence of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and potentially new groups also represents a political, security and economic risk for Gulf countries. As GCC states work on countering both the operations and the ideology of these organizations, they have a direct interest in preventing them from exploiting a security vacuum in the Sahel. This explains why, diplomatically and economically, Gulf countries have expressed their desire to increase their role in the region. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi pledged major financial contributions to the G5 Sahel while bilateral ties with countries like Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso have been expanding through official visits and trade agreements.

Against this backdrop, the next three sections discuss the main issues behind the stabilization efforts in the region and what the Gulf countries could do in each case: the promotion of local development, the fight against violent extremism, and the governance of international cooperation.

Fostering Local Development

The Western-led interventions launched in the Sahel in the past decade not only prioritized counterterrorism as the central regional issue, but also responded with military action. The military response became, de facto, the primary response and one that addressed solely the terrorism issue. Specifically, France's Operation

Barkhane targeted terrorist groups but refrained from interfering in anything resembling communal conflicts. Likewise, when the G5 Sahel was created in 2014, the new regional organization aimed to invest on two pillars – defence and development – but due to the security demands, it was primarily the military branch that took centre stage with the creation of a joint force in 2017.

Admittedly, the momentum built by global jihadi organizations in Mali in 2013 justified such a robust military response. But from the beginning, the military approach could not solve the long-term issues facing the local states such as underdevelopment.

Countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are among the 25 poorest countries in the world and half the Sahelian population lives with less than \$1.25 per day. In the past decade, terrorist attacks grew in remote areas where local communities felt disenfranchised. This phenomenon was particularly salient in the three-border area that designates the Liptako-Gourma region overlapping the three countries. After the initial French military operation in Mali in 2013, terrorists and insurgents migrated to this region to plan their operations. Given the limited presence of state authority there, and the dire economic and social conditions of inhabitants, violent armed groups were able to grow, and sometimes recruit young combatants. Rural areas affected by the declining agriculture and a lack of national development policies were fertile grounds for jihadi organizations that could build on inter-communal tensions to enroll combatants. This was evident, for instance, in the higher presence of Fulani people among jihadi organizations.⁶

Geographical and social inequalities in the Sahel predated the crisis of the past decade but the emergence of new violent armed groups such as the Macina Liberation Front and more recently Jama'at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) exacerbated the challenge. Under such circumstances, the fight against terrorism can only address the symptoms of the regional crisis but not its origins.

In the long term, the most challenging issue for the Sahel countries is to renew the social contract between the State and the population. Doing so implies first a diplomatic approach through reconciliation efforts. African governments have already acknowledged the need to consider a dialogue with combatants who expressed a willingness to disarm in exchange for better governance. In 2020, authorities in Mali publicly stated their openness to the principle of negotiating with all armed groups without distinction. In Burkina Faso, where a third of the territory is said to be beyond the control of the central authorities, the topic of reconciliation is also

gaining traction.⁷ In past months, local state officials have been pushing for this option, though President Roch Kaboré has so far rejected the idea.

At the international level, the idea of talking to violent extremist groups has been met with cautious reactions. In 2020, French President Macron bluntly opposed it by saying: “With terrorists, we do not discuss. We fight.”⁸ Likewise, the US Special Envoy for the Sahel, Peter Pham alerted the risk that talks with these groups may “legitimize the violence they’ve carried out.”⁹

This issue is likely to remain contentious. The Algiers Peace Agreement of 2015 – a deal ending the Mali war – aimed to pave the way for reconciliation with armed groups but largely ignored those groups with ties to the global jihadi networks.¹⁰ Furthermore, political talks only work if there is a mutual agreement on their principle. For instance, if some groups like JNIM presented themselves as inclined to participate in negotiations, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara rejected such ideas. Other examples across the world may also call for caution: the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021 followed a deal agreed with the US the previous year. The end result in Kabul is unlikely to turn such an option more salient in Western or Gulf capitals.

Putting the political constraints aside, mediation and reconciliation efforts can only work in the longer term if they are supported by concurrent policies to create the conditions for better economic and social development in these regions. There are already international efforts going in this direction. For instance, the Sahel Alliance, created by European states in 2017, is already investing 17 billion euros in six sectors deemed essential – education, agriculture, energy, state services, governance, and homeland security.¹¹

This is an objective that Gulf states can support by focusing their own investments in the Sahel on the modernization of infrastructure. The GCC members are already active in the economic development of the Sahel. For instance, Dubai has been hosting the Africa Global Business Forum since 2013 and positioned itself as a hub for global companies investing on the continent. Kuwait’s Fund for Arab Economic Development provides about 40 loans to West African countries (amounting to \$21.7 million in 2021), including each of the G5 Sahel members.¹² Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund launched in 2020 an initiative of 200 million euros targeting the development of the Sahel region in partnership with the French Development Agency.¹³

In recent years, bilateral ties have been expanding too. For example, in early 2020, the UAE announced a \$2 billion investment package to Mauritania. Given the

fact that this amount roughly equals 40% of the African country’s GDP, it could decisively help Nouakchott’s modernization efforts.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in Burkina Faso, the Khalifa Fund for Business Development is allocating \$10 million for a programme to support youth employment with the creation of 50,000 new jobs.¹⁵

Gulf investments in the region could prove decisive in several areas. To start with, connectivity across rural areas in the Sahel is likely to be one of the big challenges for the development of these regions. Etisalat, the Emirati telecommunications company, is already operating inside the five Sahel countries. But infrastructure and consumer access to internet remain low in the Sahel. Consequently, the modernization of these networks by Gulf companies could help decrease the sense of geographical inequalities.

Other domains where Gulf states could play a major role in local development include education and health services. In the first case, the Sahelian states have some of the most limited capacities in the world. In Chad, 62% children are not attending school and in Niger, it is about 50%. Gulf partners could support the education programmes in the Sahel by earmarking a portion of their aid packages to the construction and/or modernization of local school structures and personnel.

The lack of qualified teachers also hinders the development of these countries and calls for a greater emphasis on their training. In this context, the biggest Gulf universities (such as King Abdulaziz University, Qatar University or Khalifa University) could also design specific scholarship programmes enrolling promising students from the Sahel countries to help them build their future elites.

Finally, in the healthcare sector, West African countries suffer from limited state resources. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated this situation: poor testing capacities and low vaccination rates mean that Sahelian countries are unlikely to exit the crisis anytime soon. It is telling that, as of August 2021, Mauritania was the most advanced country among the Sahelian states in the vaccination process with 0.46% of its population fully vaccinated. Given the growing role of Gulf states in the global vaccination campaign, be it through the Hope Consortium, the Emirates airline vaccination hub, or the Dubai Vaccine Logistics Alliance, they could also help accelerate the pace of distribution of vaccine doses to these countries. They could also help establish testing centres inside these countries to improve their tracing capabilities.

All in all, Gulf states could decisively support the socio-economic development of Sahelian communities.

Obviously, the effectiveness of these investments would be dependent on the outcome of reconciliation efforts between governments and local communities in the first place. In the medium to long run socio-economic improvements could enable Sahelian states to build the new foundations of their social contracts with their populations.

Fighting Violent Extremism

Prioritizing local development does not mean that addressing the security threats in the Sahel should take a backseat. Even if mediation and reconciliation efforts were to materialize soon, Sahelian states still need the ability to defeat jihadi organizations, either because some of those will always reject negotiations or because others will be tempted to increase their attacks to get a better hand at the negotiating table.

Therefore, in the short term, the struggle against violent armed groups must remain a priority. In this specific domain, the two biggest challenges are training local forces and countering the ideology of radical organizations. Gulf countries can help in both cases, first by supporting the military education programmes of the G5 Sahel joint force and then by promoting good practices in countering violent extremism at the community level.

Gulf states have already contributed to the establishment of the G5 Sahel. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged major donations, \$100 million and \$30 million respectively, to help build the organization's joint force.¹⁶ The joint force, headquartered in Bamako, aims to gather soldiers from all G5 member states. Its future effectiveness is crucial in coordinating the response to terrorist attacks, especially in the border areas.

By August 2021, the G5 joint force had conducted 25 operations targeting terrorist groups in three years.¹⁷ But despite these preliminary achievements, the challenges facing the joint force remain significant. The coordination required between and among unequal national militaries – most of them having only modest experience in interoperability – means foreign partners have to help strengthen both their equipment and training.

The international community is already engaged in this endeavour. The UN MINUSMA started to support political transition and national reconciliation in Mali in April 2013. It initially focused on training Malian armed forces but in recent years, its mandate has been broadened to include the other neighbouring countries.

It represents one of the most expensive and most dangerous missions of the UN with a mandate for up to 13,289 soldiers and 1,920 policemen to be deployed in support of Malian forces.

European armed forces are also advising their Sahelian counterparts either through the EU Training Mission or the French-led Takuba Task Force. Established in 2013, the EU training mission to Mali aids local security forces. While its initial mandate focused on Malian forces, it was broadened in 2020 by the EU Council to include the other G5 Sahel countries, in particular Burkina Faso and Niger. Moreover, the EU secured a budget of 133.7 million euros for a four-year phase, thus doubling the previous annual budget.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Task Force Takuba is steadily increasing its activities. Led by France, this initiative focuses on counter-terrorism training and involves several European countries (Estonia, Sweden, Italy, Czech Republic, and Germany). The US also expressed its support to the task force by providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, as well as air refuelling and air lifting capabilities.

The need for improving military readiness is also the reason why the G5 Sahel created in 2018 its own military education structure with the foundation of the G5 Sahel Defense College located in Nouakchott. Funding was provided by France, Germany and the EU while the US National Defense University signed a cooperation partnership. A year later, a first cohort of 36 higher ranking officers from the five member states attended its annual course that was a mix of security studies and operational training. For decision-makers in the region as well as their Western partners, the school is seen as a vehicle to foster a common strategic culture.

Interestingly, the institution defines itself as the “first transnational war school in the world”. According to officials involved in its creation, it is “a school for the Sahelians looking at their own issues with their own thinking”.¹⁹ The logic is that through a common learning experience, the officers from the G5 nations will be better able to work together on the battlefield. Moreover, the new college provides for the education and the training of officers from the Sahelian armed forces that lack the experience and the resources required for national professional military education.

In the Gulf, military education initiatives have also been growing in past years and represent a domain where further cooperation with Sahelian partners could be explored. In 2020, Saudi Arabia started sending six officers to attend the annual course of the G5 Sahel Defense College, a decision evidencing the growing

interest of the Kingdom for the region's security developments. In fact, the G5 Sahel Defense College is located next to the Mauritanian Staff and Command College, on a brand-new military base constructed thanks to the financial support of the UAE. As a gesture of appreciation, the base was named the Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Military College.

Building on these ties, Gulf states could support the education of the G5 Joint Force in various ways. Increased attendance from Gulf officers to the annual course of the G5 Sahel College would consolidate military-to-military ties. It would also allow GCC soldiers to better grasp the cultural specificities of the Sahel and its security challenges. Field trips to Gulf capitals for G5 officers could be organized to get the future Sahelian military decision-makers exposed to the policy community in the Arabian Peninsula. Finally, as the GCC currently builds its own Gulf Defense Academy with a similar purpose to the one of the G5 Sahel Defense College, cooperation on academic activities between both institutions could also help foster a strategic dialogue between both regional organizations.

If Gulf countries can support the G5 Joint Force through these different initiatives, they can also help counter terrorism in the Sahel at the cultural level. As mentioned earlier, the response to the Sahelian security challenges cannot solely be based on a military response and in the context of reconciliation efforts, a critical task involves countering the radicalization of potential recruits and ensuring the reintegration of former combatants.

Deradicalization efforts of the G5 have received less media attention than the build-up of its joint force. However, several programmes have been launched in recent years. A Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremists was created by the Executive Secretariat of the G5 Sahel in January 2016. Since then, workshops and training courses on radicalization have been organized with European organizations as well as the UN Office of Counterterrorism. In 2020, a twenty-page handbook titled "Lexicon of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Area of the G5 Sahel" was published to build a common intellectual framework on the ways to assess and address the radicalization phenomenon.²⁰

Despite the importance conferred to the prevention of radicalization, Sahelian states have only been able to mobilize limited resources to this mission. Chad opened for the first time a deradicalization centre in 2018.²¹ Niger also launched several programmes that was attended by 240 former jihadi fighters. A radio channel named Radio Jeunesse Sahel has been designed to counter the extremist rhetoric in several languages such

as Bambara, French, Fula, and Arabic.

When it comes to the reintegration of former jihadi combatants, both the G5 and the national institutions of its member states could benefit from greater cooperation with Gulf programmes such as the Mohammad bin Nayef Counselling and Care Center in Saudi Arabia or the Abu Dhabi-based Hedayah. The Saudi initiative in the field of deradicalization started in 2004 and has been instrumental in stemming the terrorist waves experienced by the Kingdom in the 2000s. On the other hand, Hedayah has been designed as an international platform building expertise to counter violent extremism. Specifically, it developed national strategies and action plans that could be adapted to the Sahelian context and help the nascent programmes in the region.

Additionally, the joint UAE-US Sawab Center aiming to counter online terrorist propaganda could also play a major role in preventing the spread of extremist ideologies in the region. The organization already initiated in March 2021 a campaign on social networks targeting African audiences. Named "Africa Against Extremism", the five-day campaign included videos to promote African resilience against violent armed groups.²² As violent organizations try to build momentum amid the political crises facing Sahelian states, such campaigns would be crucial to avoid a new wave of radicalisation.

In this context, Gulf countries possess a cultural experience in fighting radical religious speeches that is likely to be perceived more positively by West African countries than the European former colonial powers. Additionally, the GCC states have the structures to support Sahelian countries in this campaign. Consultations between the G5 Sahel and Gulf deradicalization centres could then be encouraged and cooperation frameworks (i.e., outreach programmes of Gulf centres in the Sahel) could be designed. Finally, in the longer term, investing on deradicalization programmes could help de-emphasizing the military response and sustain the reconciliation efforts.

Gulf States Navigating the Maze of International Aid to the Sahel

The Sahel may suffer from a wide array of security challenges, but it does not lack international partners. For years now, international organizations like the UN, the EU, ECOWAS, the African Union and Western partners such as France, the US and Germany have been involved in one way or another in supporting the

governance of the area.²³ Moreover, countries like China, Russia and Turkey may keep their distance with Western security programmes, but they have also become major investors in the local economy while building ties with the Sahelian military apparatuses.²⁴

In this context, Gulf support to the Sahel does not appear isolated and the issue is less about attracting international support than about building a coherent architecture for its governance. Over the years, the multiplicity of stakeholders and initiatives created an ecosystem without much cohesion. The funding of initiatives follows the priorities of the donors and can disappear in the hands of local middlemen. This environment increases the risk of conflicting agendas and priorities, as well as unnecessary redundancies and wastage of resources. Consequently, Gulf support to the Sahel will be effective if the donors find a way to navigate through this maze of international programmes.

In this context, the end of the French military operation Barkhane by the beginning of 2022 will alter the landscape of international cooperation for the Sahel region. The French withdrawal will have implications for existing multilateral initiatives, starting with those of the UN. As mentioned earlier, the UN mission to Mali, MINUSMA, plays a major role in strengthening the state capacities of Mali. However, MINUSMA is exposed to several developments affecting its work. The announced closure of several French military bases inside Mali (in Kidal, Tessalit and Timbuktu) may have an impact on the security of the MINUSMA personnel as this means that the French forces will leave UN troops to secure the area.

The Malian political crisis triggered by the military coup of August 2020 also puts the mission in a delicate position to promote good governance. This is compounded by the fact that the biggest contributor to MINUSMA is Chad which had deployed 1,425 soldiers in July 2021. Like Mali, Chad is also experiencing a political transition since the death of its president Idriss Deby Itno in April 2021 and replaced by his son Mahamat Idriss Deby. In the midst of this change, Chad decided the removal of 600 soldiers previously assigned to the G5 Sahel joint force.²⁵ There is no sign yet that this could be followed by a similar decision regarding the Chadian contribution to MINUSMA but it definitely reflects the increased pressures on the UN mission.

European support, either through EUTMMali or the Takuba Task Force, is facing similar challenges. Though the EU committed itself to increasing its training mission till 2024, its member states have been expressing doubts about the reliability of Sahelian partners – especially considering the recent local political crises in Mali and Chad – and the feasibility of the mission overall.

Added to these reservations, the Afghanistan factor is likely to shape European policy discussions on the Sahel. The calamitous withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 is sending a sobering message in Western capitals on the ability of American and European forces to conduct state-building missions abroad.

In this context, the main challenge for the governance of the Sahel is to ensure first, that local actors (the Sahelian states and the community leaders) improve the socio-economic conditions on their own; and second, that multilateral actors like the G5 Sahel, the UN and the EU prevent the French military withdrawal from turning the region into a security vacuum that would be exploited by terrorist organizations.

This complex environment forces Gulf states, like other contributors, to navigate through the uncertain waters of international aid to the Sahel region. It would be unrealistic though to recommend a unified chain of command to channel this international support. Neither the UN nor the African Union have the technical ability to centralize this process. Other actors like the EU do not have the sufficient legitimacy while the G5 Sahel is too young an organization to carry on with such a complex mission. Furthermore, creating a new supranational body would only add another confusing institutional layer. Eventually, security issues like those faced by the Sahelian countries call for flexible, ad hoc arrangements rather than fixed ones.

In this milieu, Gulf states should first make sure that the aid recipient countries and their partnering international organizations follow the same long-term objectives – namely economic and social development as well as the prevention of local radicalization. They could also call on the UN Security Council (UNSC) to guarantee that MINUSMA does not suffer from political contingencies and preserves its ability to exercise its mandate. This could be put on the agenda of the UAE as it joins the UNSC as a non-permanent member for the 2022-2023 term.

At the institutional level, Gulf states could also promote their policies towards the Sahel through the GCC framework. This would, for instance, facilitate their coordination with other primary players such as the EU, which frequently sends diplomatic delegations to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait. Putting Gulf support to the Sahel governance on the agenda of the GCC-EU consultations would indeed allow them to discuss ways to support the on-going programmes already supervised by the Europeans.²⁶ It would prevent the redundancies that can usually emerge when defining projects on a bilateral basis. In a similar fashion, the GCC

may formalize its relations with the G5 Sahel by creating mechanisms of consultations (e.g. strategic dialogue, clearing house) that could also help channel the Gulf financial contributions to the West African organization in the most efficient way.

Conclusion

For more than a decade, socio-economic development in the Sahel region has been undermined by a constellation of security challenges that could only be addressed thanks to the support of the international community. However, as Western partners reduce their commitments abroad, especially the French military withdrawal from the Sahel in 2022, there is a major risk of West Africa falling into political chaos. Maintaining and improving multilateral initiatives, be it in the development or the security fields, will be crucial to avert this scenario.

In this context, Gulf states have the means to play a significant role in support of international aid delivered to the Sahel, both in the economic and military domains. But realism should guide these policies: one should not forget that international aid cannot on its own create stable conditions for the local development. As mentioned before, the outcome will fundamentally depend on the willingness and the ability of local stakeholders (statesmen and civil society) to come together and restore the terms of their social contract.

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