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KUMULATIVNI UČINKI GONIL KONFLIKTOV V REGIJI SAHEL

THE CUMULATIVE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT DRIVERS IN THE SAHEL REGION

Povzetek Članek analizira zapletene varnostne razmere v regiji Sahel ter ugotavlja vzroke in gonila conflictive v regiji. Osrednja hipoteza, na kateri temelji članek, je, da na varnostne razmere v regiji Sahel vpliva več različnih vzrokov in gonil/povzročiteljev konfliktov, ki imajo kumulativne učinke, zaradi česar je reševanje konfliktov izjemno težko. Prvi del članka opredeljuje vzroke in dejavnike konflikta ter jih razvršča v štiri glavne kategorije. V drugem delu članek prikazuje, kako se vzroki in gonila prepletajo, kar ustvarja številne učinke prelivanja v sosednje države, v sosednje regije in tudi na druge celine, zaradi česar je regija Sahel ena najbolj problematičnih regij na svetu.

Ključne besede ***Sahel, varnost, gonila konfliktov.***

Abstract This article reflects on the complex security situation in the Sahel region, identifying the causes and drivers of conflicts. The main hypothesis underlying the article is that the security situation in the Sahel region is influenced by several different causes and conflict drivers which have cumulative effects, making conflict resolution extremely difficult. The first part of the article identifies the causes and drivers of conflict and classifies them into four main categories. In the second part, the article shows how the causes and drivers are interwoven, creating multiple spillover effects, making the Sahel region one of the most problematic regions in the world.

Key words ***Sahel, security, drivers of conflicts.***

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Introduction

Although, since the end of February 2022, the attention of the international community has been focused on the war in Ukraine, Russia's military aggression, and its consequences for European and global security, and currently also on the Middle East where the conflict between Israel and the Hamas terrorist group is escalating, we must not forget or ignore the other conflict regions around the world. All the other armed conflicts have not ceased to exist with the advent of these two new ones; it is only that public and media attention has been shifted. It is therefore even more important to continue to discuss and analyse the other conflict-stricken regions in the world, and the Sahel region is undoubtedly one of them. A concerning trend can be identified in the Sahel region: the internationalization of internal armed conflicts, including civil wars. Over the past decade, the region has become fertile terrain for geopolitical competition between the great powers and for further penetration by moderate powers.

"Violent conflicts have also become more complex and protracted, involving more non-state groups and regional and international actors" (World Bank and United Nations, 2018, p V). They are increasingly linked to global challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, cyber security, and transnational organized crime (Avis, 2019, p 2). Today, conflicts have become more complex and last longer. About 2 billion people, about a third of the world's population, now live in countries affected by conflict. Violent conflicts are no longer defined by national borders (Schafer, 2018).

The main hypothesis underlying this article is that the security situation in the Sahel region is influenced by several different causes and conflict drivers[1] which have cumulative effects, making conflict resolution extremely difficult. The first part of the article identifies the causes and drivers of conflict and classifies them into four main categories: the environment as a conflict driver; economic conditions as a conflict driver; political conditions as a conflict driver; and historical/ethnic tensions as a conflict driver. In the second part the article shows how the causes and drivers are interwoven, creating multiple spillover effects and making the Sahel region one of the most problematic regions in the world.

The main purpose of this article is to raise an alert about the complex security situation in the Sahel region, and to identify the causes of the conflicts in order to be more effective in resolving them. Gaining deep knowledge of the causes of conflicts is the only way to move towards a potential successful resolution; however, in the case of the Sahel region, several other important factors, such as the spillover effects, must also be taken into consideration. The article is based on an analysis of the existing documents and academic literature on the subject.

[1] *The term 'drivers' is used as it implies the dynamic nature of the factors and processes that contribute to violent conflicts.*

1 THE SAHEL REGION AS THE SPINAL CORD OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

The Sahel region represents the spinal cord of the African continent's geopolitical body, and as such the phenomena of its security puzzle pose a real security threat to Africa. In addition, the spillover effects have become a global security nuisance, particularly for the European continent and the European Union. The Sahel security puzzle, a crisis emanating from the old-fashioned political order and risky arrangements of the region, is now not only generating a deeper and wider self-destructive momentum, but is also sending far-reaching shockwaves of hazards which severely affect the entire continental security system, as well as its spillovers affecting the whole globe. Serving as home to more than one-third of Africa's population, the Sahel is the origin of most of Africa's civil wars. The Sahel's geographic scope and the unfortunately violent and volatile realities of its component countries have made it the host of the largest international peacekeeping forces.

The Sahel region stretches from the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea coast in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. With a width of 7,034 km from Mogadishu in Somalia to Dakar in Senegal, the region includes several countries, each with its own security issues and challenges: collapsed Somalia, the small and resource-scarce Djibouti, drought-prone Ethiopia and its archenemy Eritrea, the Islamist hub of ethnically polarized Sudan, and the youngest, distraught nation of South Sudan. The Sahel belt further encompasses potentially explosive Chad, drought-stricken Niger, Burkina Faso, war-torn Mali, resource-cursed Nigeria, poor Togo and Benin, the religiously tense Cote d'Ivoire, little Gambia, and one relatively stable state, Senegal. The remainder of the states in the belt are Mauritania, a target of anti-slavery campaigners, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the two Guineas (Bissau and Conakry) (Trayo, 2018).

The Sahel can be defined as an ecozone or as a political zone. As an ecozone, the Sahel is a transnational region between the Sahara Desert in the north and the better-watered savanna in the south. As a political zone, it includes the national territories of the previously stated countries. Although each country of the Sahel region has its own security issues, and it can be analysed country by country, there are multiple and spillover effects of the whole Sahel region which present an additional challenge and a potential threat. Not only the unstable political conditions and historically driven hostilities, but also the geographical and natural characteristics of the regions must be taken into consideration when analysing the security situation of the Sahel region. Multiple factors of influence and drivers of potential conflicts in the Sahel region and their spillover effects can be identified: unstable politics, terrorism, foreign debts, environmental degradation, civil wars, food insecurity, mass displacement, porous borders, illegal migration, and drug trafficking (Trayo, 2018).

Cilliers, in his analysis of violent conflicts in Africa, claims that "Africa will remain turbulent because it is poor, young and badly governed, but also because it

is growing and dynamic", and "In the long term only much more rapid, inclusive economic development combined with good governance and developmentally oriented leadership will make Africa less vulnerable to violence and instability" (Cilliers, 2018, p 2). Although Cilliers has analysed violent conflicts on the entire African continent, his findings concerning the causes of conflicts are particularly important when analysing the Sahel region. According to Cilliers (2018), the following structural drivers can be identified*: high levels of poverty and exclusion,*[2] *regime type and regime dissonance,*[3] *youthful population,*[4] *repeat violence,*[5] *the bad-neighbourhood effect,*[6] *poor governance,*[7] *and climate change*[8].

2 CAUSES OF CONFLICTS

As mentioned above, there has been a major shift in the nature of modern conflict, from traditional symmetrical conflicts (as between armies), to increasing numbers of intra-state conflicts and asymmetric wars (as between states and militias). A similar polarization has afflicted academic debate on the root causes of war, to the extent that some strongly oppose the use of the phrase 'root causes' as they see it as inextricably linked to the idea that there is some justifiable grievance behind every outbreak of conflict (Collier, 2007). Whilst some have traditionally focused on these grievance-related drivers of conflict, such as poverty and inequality, another strand of thinking has suggested that the incidence of war is dependent on material interests instead:

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[2] *Large portions of poor people in a country often correlates with weak state capacity since limited tax revenues accrue to the government, which means that it has limited capacity and human resource capacity is generally low.*

[3] *The nature of regimes (democratic or autocratic, thin/electoral democracy or thick/liberal democracy) affects conflict vulnerability.*

[4] *Large youth bulges are robustly associated with an increased risk of conflict and high rates of criminal violence in poor countries, particularly when young people lack opportunities in terms of education, training and employment and have no sense of voice and participation. However, youth bulges appear to be more closely related to low-intensity conflict than to civil war.*

[5] *Once a country has experienced large-scale violence, the chances of recurring violence are strong. In recent years, the trend towards conflict recurrence has been more common than the onset of new conflicts in the continent.*

[6] *Being situated in a conflict-ridden region is a major risk factor and countries are more likely to experience the spillover effect of instability. According to the World Development Report 2011, a country making development advances, such as Tanzania, loses an estimated 0.7% of GDP every year for each neighbour in conflict.*

[7] *At low levels of income and development, the nature of the governing elite is more important for economic growth and the achievement of positive development outcomes than the extent to which countries are democratic or authoritarian. Hence, countries that are fortunate enough to produce a developmentally oriented governing elite grow much more rapidly, particularly if this is in the form of a cohesive governing party or coterie of leadership that is clear in its pursuit of development.*

[8] *As climate change alters the nature of resource dependence, it may have consequential effects on states with large natural resource benefits. However, eventually people fight based on the mobilization of perceptions of exclusion and injustice. Africa will experience widely different effects from climate change in the coming decades, which will strain the ability of the environment to support local populations under current developmental conditions. Some areas of the continent are likely to become warmer and drier, and thus experience more frequent and severe droughts close to major population centres (e.g. Cape Town). Other parts of the continent may experience widespread drought and potentially famine without proper government intervention, or experience more extreme rains, which could also adversely affect crops and food security.*

"In other words it is greed rather than grievance which creates armed conflict" (Kett and Rowson, 2007, p 403).

Political science offers an account of conflict in terms of motive: rebellion occurs when grievances are sufficiently acute that people want to engage in violent protests. Hirshleifer (1995) provides an important refinement on the motive-opportunity dichotomy; he classifies the possible causes of conflict into preferences, opportunities, and perceptions. The introduction of perceptions allows for the possibility that both opportunities and grievances may be wrongly perceived. If the perceived opportunity for rebellion is illusory—analogous to the 'winners' curse'—unprofitability will cause collapse. By contrast, when exaggerated grievances trigger rebellion, fighting does not dispel the misperception and indeed may generate genuine grievances.

Goodhand (2003) has argued that it is both greed (opportunity for accumulation) and grievance (generated by poverty and social exclusion) that cause and perpetuate violent conflict. He also raises the important point that notions of social and human vulnerability are transient—and it is this very transience that can be a trigger factor for violent conflict. According to this line of argument, someone who has had access to wealth and who then loses it suddenly is more likely to be aggrieved than someone who never had such access in the first place. What this review and many others have shown is that researchers should resist looking for one particular explanation for the incidence of violent conflict: all wars are produced by multiple confluences of deep underlying causes and sudden triggering events (Kett and Rowson, 2007).

2.1 Economic conditions as a conflict driver in the Sahel region

One of the main questions when analysing the causes of conflict is whether poverty causes violent conflicts. Some of the world's poorest countries are riven by armed conflict, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo. "Cross-country comparisons show that conflict-related humanitarian emergencies are prevalent in those places that have experienced low or negative economic growth" (Kett and Rowson, 2007, p 403). The grind of long-term poverty weakens the ability of the state and communities to redistribute wealth in the face of economic grievance, and provokes the rich to grab the assets of the poor (Nafziger and Auvinen, 2003). Violent conflict impacts on the ability of states to function effectively, and they become trapped in a cycle of poverty, conflict and under-development, each exacerbated by the others, which in turn increases vulnerability and impedes economic growth and development.

However, this does not mean that conflicts afflict only the poorest countries, and many poor countries are not at war; shared poverty may not be a destabilizing influence. Indeed, economic growth itself can be a destabilizing factor, as wars in countries afflicted by an abundance of particular natural resources appear to show.

Furthermore, in economic and developmental terms, the World Bank has designated all the Sahel countries, except Nigeria, as "Heavily Indebted Poor Countries"

(Trayo, 2018). This all-round chronic situation is further compounded by the reality that the Sahel region has most of the continent's refugees and internally displaced people[9]. According to the World Bank Poverty Headcount Ratio (The World Bank, 2023), large parts of the Sahelian populations live below 1.90 US dollars a day. Overall, nearly 50% of the population of the region lives in extreme poverty and, consequentially, most countries in the Sahel rank among the lowest on the Human Development Index (UNHCR Climate Risk Profile: Sahel, 2023).

Moreover, the region has become a fertile breeding ground for the seemingly ever-expanding number of radical Islamist militants[10], as well as being conducive to the proliferation of small arms[11] and international drug trafficking[12]. The Sahel region is also the sole major exporter and traditional exit corridor for the largest percentage of Africa's illegal migrants to Europe. This multi-faceted security crisis facing the Sahel region has already spilled past its boundaries and been felt by the region's neighbours, often in terrorism-related events, especially in Kenya, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Cameroon and Ghana: "It is this intricate mosaic formula that constitutes the metabolism of the Sahel security nexus" (Trayo, 2018, p 6).

2.2 The environment and natural resources as a conflict driver

Some of the drivers of conflict are related to climate shocks that cause disputes over resources, from water rights to territory, and these have become a source of instability. In 2022, hurricanes, floods and tropical storms devastated parts of the Caribbean, North America and South Asia, while drought and desertification pushed thousands

[9] *More than 4.2 million people have been displaced across the region (as of 2023); 3.7 million people are internally displaced in the region (as of 2023); and more than 10 million children in the Sahel are in dire need of humanitarian assistance (as of 2022) (UNHCR Climate Risk Profile: Sahel, 2023).*

[10] *According to Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (2022) we can observe a near doubling in violence linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel in 2021 (from 1,180 to 2,005 events), which highlights the rapidly escalating security threat in this region. The 2,005 violent events observed in the Sahel (specifically Burkina Faso, Mali, and western Niger) in 2021 represent a 70% increase over the previous year. This continues an uninterrupted escalation of violence involving militant Islamist groups in the region since 2015. While having originated and still largely centred in Mali, the propensity of this violence has now shifted to Burkina Faso, which accounts for 58% of all events in the Sahel.*

[11] *Weapons trafficking in the region benefits violent extremist groups such as al-Shabaab, Ansaroul Islam, Islamic State Sahel Province, Islamic State in Somalia, and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen. Evidence shows that the diversion of weapons from national armed forces – whether through capture on the battlefield, theft from armouries, or purchase from corrupt elements in the military – is the primary source of firearms in the Sahel countries today. Political instability, disputes between farmers and herders, unemployment, ethnic divisions, and the rise of extremist organizations are among the factors driving the spread of small arms and light weapons in the Sahel and West Africa. The rise of violent extremist groups and other armed groups precipitated the demand for small arms and light weapons in the region. While there is evidence of long-range firearms trafficking to the Sahel, including by air from France and from Turkey via Nigeria, it appears that the vast majority of firearms trafficked in the region are procured within Africa. Since 2019, Libya has become a source of supply for newly manufactured weapons. Apparently, newly produced AK-pattern assault rifles, sourced from Libya, are available on the black market in the Gao, Timbuktu and Ménaka regions of northern Mali (TOCTA Sahel, 2022, and The Africa Defence Forum, 2023a).*

[12] *Crime organizations and terrorist groups have woven a complex trafficking network moving illicit goods such as assault-style rifles, ammunition, explosives, drugs and fake medicine throughout the Sahel region. Once used for legitimate trade, the routes cross porous borders in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal (The Africa Defence Forum, 2023b).*

more towards extreme hunger in the Sahel. From the environmental perspective, the Sahel belt is classified as having cyclically hard-hitting environmental degradation records associated with drought, rapidly encroaching desertification, scarce water, and acute food insecurity. The geographical area of the Sahel is generally considered to be highly sensitive to climate change, as the local population is heavily dependent on agriculture and livestock. Recurrent droughts in the 1970s and 1980s caused severe hunger, malnutrition, disease, loss of life and massive human migration across the region (Trench at al., 2007).

Hammer (2005) defines environmental degradation[13] in the Sahel using three groups of factors: ecological, internal and external. Ecological factors refer to natural processes such as rainfall variability, lowering of watercourses and sea levels, limited vegetation, and strong winds and storms. Other factors represent the internal social structure of society, which degrades the environment through its activities. These are, for example, the traditional usage of land, pastoralism, lack of land, wood as the main source of energy, lack of irrigation, population growth, political structure, and lack of young labour due to migration. The third group relates to the external factors that influence the region: the colonial past, national debt, the global economic system, export-based production, and the increased technological gap between Africa and the North (Hammer, 2005).

Rising temperatures and more extreme weather conditions pose existential challenges to semi-arid regions like the Sahel. In the Sahel, agriculture is the most important sector and provides livelihoods for most of the population (UNHCR Climate Risk Profile: Sahel, 2023). Rain-fed agriculture is vulnerable to climate change. Repeated cycles of droughts, desertification and floods make it increasingly difficult for the local population to sustain subsistence agricultural practices. Extreme weather events can lead to widespread crop failure and a reliance on food assistance programmes. Additionally, the impact of climate change is straining the relationship of herders and pastoralists, and thus also ethnic relations. For centuries, pastoralists crossed the Sahel following seasonal patterns, allowing them to feed their herds. The scarcity of water, pasture and fertile soil force people to migrate. Such displacement can lead to conflicts over land and resources between herders and farmers, which in turn further fuel displacement dynamics. Undoubtedly, in the Sahel region climate variability strongly interacts with other conflict drivers and thus can be difficult to distinguish.

2.3 Political conditions and inequalities as a conflict driver

At the heart of the conflicts in the Sahel region is a governance crisis characterized by elected officials' and some customary authorities' low levels of legitimacy; lack of state presence in rural areas; government shortcomings in delivering essential public

[13] *There are many definitions of degradation in scientific circles, but one of the most accepted remains Rasmussen's (1999), which states that degradation is "a reduction in the biological productivity of ecosystems and an acceleration of certain natural processes". Degradation can be caused by loss of biodiversity, soil erosion by water or wind, nutrient depletion and physical soil change. All these processes are interrelated and may be the result of human or climatic factors, which may be reinforced by the degradation effect.*

goods and services; unequal resource access and distribution; and deeply hierarchical customary structures influencing societal relations. These factors prompt segments of the population to turn to alternative actors, including jihadist groups. The latter expand by building local alliances and exploiting local communal conflicts. Such conflicts can revolve around intercommunal tensions or relate to intra-community disputes. Ansarul Islam built traction in Burkina Faso's Sahel region by capitalizing on local discontent at the prevailing social order in Soum province, taking aim at class hierarchy and corruption among customary authorities. Meanwhile, in Mali, following decades of recurrent conflict between Tuareg populations and central governments, continued delays in the implementation of the 2015 Algiers accord remain a source of discord between signatory armed groups and transitional Malian authorities (Armed Conflict Survey, 2022).

In addition to poverty and food insecurity, there are high levels of corruption, which are reflected in the low scores of most Sahelian countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International (UNHCR Climate Risk Profile: Sahel, 2023). Together, these factors render political instability and lack of state capacity common and, accordingly, all the countries in the region score low on the Fragile States Index (Fragile States Index 2023). Chad is especially vulnerable to conflict, followed by Mali, Niger, Cameroon, Nigeria and the Guinea. Increasingly, this vacuum is being filled by jihadist groups, who represent a threat to civilians and governments and exploit the population´s despair and frustration for recruitment. Jihadist groups also interfere in already existing inter-communal conflicts, for instance between the Fulani and the Dogon in Mali, exacerbating tensions and ethnic disputes. After the Libyan regime fell in 2011, armed uprisings in Mali increased armed conflicts which have spiralled into neighbouring countries. This complex crisis has led to massive internal and cross-border displacement of more than 4 million people in the region (UNHCR Climate Risk Profile: Sahel, 2023).

2.4 History as a conflict driver in the Sahel region

In many conflicts in the Sahel region, historical factors must also be highlighted and analysed as conflict drivers.

A study by Bricman (2018) showed that in Niger, Sudan and Mali resource management has been assigned to local leaders throughout history. These traditional resource management systems have undergone significant changes in political systems over the past fifty years, which have attempted to introduce new policies and ideology. "Traditional systems of resource management are still deeply rooted in people[14], so it is not surprising that changes in social systems and the exercise of control over tribal territories create group cohesion, a sense of marginalization and, in many instances, tension between tribes and state actors" (Bricman, 2018, p 73). In addition, the aforementioned countries have a very violent historical background, so it can be argued that the threshold for entering into conflicts is at a low level.

[14] *Especially in communities where people experience tribe as the broadest form of social organization.*

3 DISCUSSION: AN INTERTWINING OF CAUSES CREATING DEADLY CONDITIONS

Analysis of the security situation in the Sahel region is extremely complex due to the large number of actors, causes and drivers having multiple effects, overlapping and influencing each other. It is therefore impossible to identify single causes of conflicts, as each conflict can be analysed from the historical, political, environmental and several other perspectives.

In the cases of Mauritania and Senegal, large-scale ethnic conflict in 1989 between the two countries was triggered by competition for water and pasture[15] (GSDRC, 2014). Hostilities between different groups reached a critical point when a confrontation between farmers and ranchers resulted in casualties. Strong group cohesion created two strategic groups, which entered ethnic conflict due to entrenched racism in society. Ethnic unrest occurred across large areas of both countries, with the worst fighting occurring in the two state capitals. In this case, a dispute over resources was the catalyst for a large-scale ethnic conflict rooted in discrimination (Bricman, 2018).

In the case of the Lake Chad area, water degradation has fuelled competition between groups of farmers and herders, killing up to 2,000 people annually (Nnamdi et al., 2022). "The root of the conflict lies in the forced southern migration, due to drought, of herdsmen from their traditional grazing grounds, mostly in North-East Nigeria. As the lake shrank, large numbers of herders had to search for alternative pastures and sources of water for their cattle leading to encroachment on settlement and farmlands in the North Central and Southern states of Nigeria" (Nnamdi et al., 2022, p 442). Water and land are merely a catalyst for social effects that ultimately lead to conflicts (Bricman, 2018).

In the late 1980s, a diplomatic conflict arose between Niger and Nigeria in the Komadugu-Yobe region. The use of water in the upper watercourses originating from Lake Chad created shortages in the lower reaches of the rivers. The most likely reason why water shortages fuelled violence in one case, and a diplomatic dispute in the other, is the drastic reduction of water in Lake Chad (Hall, 2009). The perception of countries that there is not enough water for their needs is most likely to have created conflict rather than cooperation. In the lake region, the lack of water, land and jobs has also contributed to the spread of Islamic extremists in the south of the lake, who have claimed up to 10,000 lives since 2005. The lack of resources and livelihoods most likely encouraged residents to organize and join violent strategic groups in order to ensure their survival (Bricman, 2018).

Burkina Faso's state institutions estimate that up to 4,000 cases of conflict between farmers and herders have occurred in the country. In Burkina Faso the degradation

[15] *Due to the degradation of both resources by climate change combined with human factors.*

of natural resources, combined with state agrarian policies (which sought to legislate and distribute resource scarcity), created conflicts between herders and pastoralists. Due to the clumsily created agrarian and pastoral zones, the two groups began to compete for the same land, leading to conflicts. In addition to these factors, conflicts also arise between migrants (from urban centres) and indigenous populations (from marginalized zones), who have different views on natural resources (FAO, 2021). Here too, social factors rather than resources directly were responsible for the conflicts (Bricman, 2018).

In Mali, water degradation in the Niger Delta has created conflicts between farmers and pastoralists. According to Malian institutions, 820 cases of conflict between farmers, livestock breeders and fishermen have been recorded in the delta area. The conflicts are the result of competition between different groups for the same land and water. Here, the conflicts arose due to the use of pastoral lands by farmers, which were traditionally owned by livestock farmers. In this case, too, there was group cohesion and the formation of strategic actors, but the situation is complicated by other factors, such as an ill-considered agrarian policy that increasingly marginalizes groups (giving priority to farmers) and a political vacuum that allows the inhabitants of the region to resolve disputes independently. Here, too, the lack of resources fuelled tension between different subsistence groups, which were fundamentally rooted in traditional livelihoods (Bricman, 2018).

Cases in Sudan also testify to the effects of a lack of resources in the emergence of conflicts. Sudan represents the most devastated area in the Sahel, so resources play a significant role in creating conflicts. In Sudan, especially in the Darfur area, up to 51 large-scale conflicts between different ethnic groups related to natural resources have developed in the past (UCDP, 2023). Competition for limited resources and different livelihoods create a sense of marginalization and promote group cohesion. This leads to the formation of strategic actors who are ready to use violence. The causes of marginalization are rooted mainly in the traditional management of resources (some groups dominate and manage the resources of other groups) and different livelihoods (farmers and livestock breeders). In addition to the direct competition for limited resources (degraded by droughts, war and other factors), it is also necessary to mention the Sudanese agrarian policy, which, due to the privileging of certain groups (mainly stationary farmers), has further triggered the marginalization of groups. Farmers in some areas of Sudan enjoy privileges, so other groups feel marginalized, which causes tension and conflict. Thus, since 1988, nearly 15,000 people have been killed in Sudan (including Darfur and South Sudan) due to conflicts that have an environmental dimension. In addition, for many years Sudan has been involved in an interstate conflict with South Sudan, and in conflicts taking place for power in the country. These conflicts do not have an environmental dimension, yet they create a socio-political environment that multiplies the effects of conflicts at the local level (degradation of the environment, weak political institutions, quantity of weapons) (Bricman, 2018).

In Niger, too, conflicts are linked to a lack of water and arable land, and to two ways of making a living. In Niger, conflicts arise due to the expansion of farmers into the pastoral areas of livestock farmers. This creates tensions between the two livelihood groups, fosters group cohesion, forms strategic actors, and triggers conflict. Another type of conflict occurs between migrants and the indigenous population of Niger. The indigenous population blames the migrants for the degradation of resources, and this creates intergroup tensions leading to conflict (Bricman, 2018).

In addition to internal causes and conflicts, external factors influencing the security situation in the Sahel region also appear. The Sahel region is greatly dependent on food imports and is disproportionately affected by the global food crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Heightened food insecurity could prompt further displacement, raise poverty rates, and aggravate competition for resources, leading to worsening intercommunal conflict and social unrest. Besides this, the Sahel region has become a playground for world powers. "At the beginning of 2022 the Sahel (and Mali in particular) increasingly became a battlefield for informational warfare waged on social media, with France and Russia "fighting" for political influence in the region. In February 2022, reports emerged that a network of Facebook pages in Mali promoting pro-Russian and anti-French narratives had coordinated support for the Wagner Group and the junta's postponement of elections" (Armed Conflict Survey, 2022). In April 2022, France accused Russian private military contractors of staging a war crime in Mali in an attempt to frame French forces. As a consequence, France has decided to pull French troops out of Mali after nine years, leaving open space for others to step in and take over, adding more tensions and complexities to already a very difficult and complex security situation in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that the Sahel region is facing a complex security situation fuelled by several different causes and conflict drivers. These drivers are interwoven, creating multiple and spillover effects and making conflict resolution extremely difficult. The internationalization of internal armed conflicts, including civil wars, has only added to the complexity of the situation. It is crucial to identify the root causes of conflicts in the Sahel region and take effective measures to resolve them. The spillover effects of the Sahel's security puzzle not only pose a real security threat to Africa, but also affect the whole world, making it a global security nuisance. The Sahel region is the spinal cord of the African continent's geopolitical body, and its stability and security are essential for the overall security of Africa and the world.

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