

The Sahel - A region outside state control



On the old trade routes through the Sahara, where caravans used to trade in salt and other coveted goods, a lively human, arms and drug trade by criminal gangs is

flourishing today.

THE SAHEL ZONE - THE POORHOUSE OF AFRICA

The Sahel countries are the former French colonies of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. They are among the poorest countries in the world and at the same time have an extremely high population growth rate.

The ever-expanding Sahara covers much of the national territory. The land used by cattle breeders and farmers is affected by climate change and increasingly frequent droughts. The region is rich in mineral resources but poorly developed. To find an income, young people go to neighbouring countries, try to reach Europe or join one of the countless jihadist or criminal groups.

A CULTURE WAR

The deeper causes for the emergence of militant Islamism go back to French colonial policy. Traditional political and social structures were replaced by European ones and French culture became the culture of the elites. The majority of the muslim population felt culturally uprooted and economically exploited. Militant Islamism offered a self-confident identity and an alternative to a failed model of development. Jihadist groups emerged not only in the Sahel, but also in northern Nigeria with the Boko Haram movement and elsewhere. These militant groups got financial and military support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran and other Muslim countries, institutions and individuals. They developed their own criminal business model to finance themselves through kidnappings, bank robberies and involvement in cross-Saharan smuggling of arms, drugs and in human trafficking.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

NATO's intervention in Libya after the assassination of the dictator Ghaddafi in 2011 plunged the country into chaos and destabilised the entire region. Ghaddafi's huge arsenals of arms were looted and sold to jihadist and criminal gangs in many countries. Thousands of Tuaregs, who were mercenaries in Ghaddafi's service, conquered large parts of northern Mali and allied

themselves with Islamist militias close to Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS). A series of military coups in both countries added to the chaos.

Neither France's military involvement nor the 10,000 blue helmets of the UN mission MINUSMA, in which 1,000 soldiers of the Bundeswehr also participate, were able to stop the destabilisation of the region.

A ZONE OUTSIDE STATE CONTROL

These developments have created a space that is largely outside any control by governments. There the state is not seen as a positive actor providing services, security, education or health care, but rather as another bandit exploiting the people. In the absence of any state control, jihadist and criminal groups have a free hand. Various illegal goods are smuggled along the old and new trade routes, including

- Weapons for militant Islamist groups, fighting ethnic groups and criminal gangs;
- Drugs, such as cocaine, which are a multi-million dollar business;
- Migrants and refugees who are abused and exploited on their way to Europe.
- Counterfeit medicines and much more.

A HUMANITARIAN DESASTER

At the beginning of 2023, about 2.7 million people were displaced in the Sahel, 18 million are dependent on food aid. More than 10,000 schools and health centres have had to close.

The EU and the federal governments are focusing on cooperation with the relatively stable governments in Niger and Mauritania. At the same time, they are providing humanitarian aid to internal refugees and investing in traditional development projects in the hope of creating better local living opportunities for the younger generation and encouraging them to stay at home.

“If nothing is done, the effects of terrorism, violent extremism, and organized crime will be felt far beyond the region and the African continent...We must rethink our collective approach and show creativity, going beyond existing efforts.”

António Guterres, UN-Generalsekretär

Quellen: [DW](#), [UN.org](#), [Spiegel](#)