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COMMUNICATION ARTICLE



Saving West Africa from the rise of terrorism: Burkina Faso's 'Emergency Program for the Sahel' and the need for a multidimensional strategy

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism is on the rise in the Sahel zone. It is the effect of a multitude of factors partly stemming from global influences and partly home-made. Burkina Faso is a contemporary case of how efforts to pacify a developing region through an emergency program are undertaken both by African nations and the international community, focusing mainly on economic and military dimensions; and how a more multidimensional and transdisciplinary strategy is needed to succeed in stabilizing conflict areas such the Sahel under the sign of transition and change.

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Burkina Faso's ministers of education (background left) and homeland security (center) visiting the Sahel region in November 2017. Credit: Burkina Faso ministry of homeland security, <https://www.facebook.com/msecu/photos/pcb.1623967097642620/1623966150976048/?type=3&theater>.



The ministers of education and homeland security visiting the Sahel zone. Credit: lefaso.net 2017, <http://lefaso.net/spip.php?article80394>.

On Friday, 17 November 2017, six people were killed in an armed attack by unidentified individuals in Taouremba, 70 km from Djibo, the capital of the province of Soum in Burkina Faso's northeastern Sahel region. The region is inhabited by just 900,000 people out of the almost 20 million of the nation, making it particularly vulnerable due to its large empty spaces where terrorists can disappear easily. The terrorists attacked the market of the town, not by chance exactly in the week when the minister of homeland security Simon Compaore and the minister of education Jean Martin Coulibaly visited Djibo, Baraboulé and Diguel, centers of northern Burkina Faso which over the past years have been victims of repeated terrorist attacks. The visit was supposed to boost the morale of teachers who in October and November had to evacuate schools in these towns because of growing insecurity.

The attacks dramatically reminded the African Union that contrary to some war zones in the Middle East (such as Syria and Iraq), Islamic extremism in Africa is a problem not on the retreat, but on the rise. Burkina Faso has been living under the threat of proliferating Islamic terrorist attacks since April 2015. This threat has since become a major concern for the stability, peace and economic development not only for the northern part of the country, but also for the greater surrounding Sahel region – comprising in particular Mali and Niger – which is in the process of transforming into one main stronghold of Islamic terrorism in Africa. It is in this context that after the attacks on the capital

Ouagadougou in January 2016 and on the Sahel region in March 2017¹ just months later repeated almost identically in August 2017 with another deadly attack on the capital,² the Burkinabe government decided to set up a program called the 'Emergency Program for the Sahel' for the period 2017–20.³ In addition to measurements in the security and public defense sectors, the program aims at responding to the concerns raised by local populations on the political, economic and social levels following the turmoil stirred up by Islamic agitation which is increasingly penetrating non-urban contexts and the civil society sector, threatening particularly schools and town councils. The 'Emergency Program for the Sahel' is based on the National Plan for Economic and Social Development (PNDES) 2016–20, which is an official presidential program.⁴

The program launched on 3 August 2017. On 20 October, after two and a half months, the ministerial departments involved in the implementation met in the premises of Burkina Faso's Prime Minister Paul Kaba Thiéba to evaluate the actions, including the various difficulties.⁵ According to the Director of Territorial Development, Wilfried Martial Bassolé, progress was made in the four program components of the 'socio-economic dimension', 'administration, infrastructure and local governance', 'public security and defense' as well as with regard to 'program management and institutional support'. Concerning the – most important – socio-economic dimension destined to prevent the capillary spread of extremist individuals, ideology and culture within the Sahel zone's civil society, investments were made in the areas of education, health care, drinking water, agriculture, livestock and youth. With regard to improving administration, infrastructure and local governance, Bassolé underscored the construction of new buildings, including prefectures and prefecture residences, for the departments of Yagha, Oudalan, Seno, Soum and Lorum. With regard to public security and defense, 'in addition to the completion of the reconstruction of the police station of the municipality of Baraboulé, several other similar actions are under way', said Bassolé. The fourth component is dedicated to improve communication between the protagonists. The program is equipped with a total budget of 455 billion CFA francs (700 million euros, 835 million US-dollar), of which around 343 will be spent on the socio-economic dimensions, 4 on local governance and infrastructure, 107 on public security and defense and 1 on improving communication between the actors divided over the years 2017 until 2020, with a peak planned first for socio-economic measures (85 million for 2017, 98 for 2018, 20 for 2019 and 138 for 2020) and then for security and defense (29 million in 2018 and 76 million in 2019, respectively). Until November 2017, nearly 62 billion CFA francs were injected into the program for 2017, mostly in education, health care and agriculture.⁶

¹Roland Benedikter and Ismaila Ouedraogo, 'Violent Extremism Takes Root in Burkina Faso. Why the West Should Worry', *Foreign Affairs*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/burkina-faso/2017-04-25/violent-extremism-takes-root-burkina-faso>.

²Jason Burke, 'Burkina Faso: At Least 18 Dead in Restaurant Attack', *The Guardian London*, World edition, August 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/14/terror-attack-restaurant-burkina-faso-many-dead>.

³Jules Kabore, 'Programme d'urgence pour le Sahel: Où en est on?', *Burkina24. L'actualité du Burkina 24h/24*, November 21, 2017, <https://burkina24.com/2017/11/21/programme-durgence-pour-le-sahel-ou-en-est-on/>.

⁴Burkina Faso National Government, *National Plan for Economic and Social Development (PNDES) 2016–2020*. Ouagadougou, October 2016, <http://www.pndes2020.com/pdf/06-en.pdf>.

⁵Gaspard Bayala, 'Programme d'urgence pour le Sahel: le gouvernement fait le point', *Sidwaya: Quotidien burkinabè d'information*, October 22, 2017, <http://www.sidwaya.bf/m-18694-programme-d-urgence-pour-le-sahel-le-gouvernement-fait-le-point.html>.

⁶Ibid.

From day one on, the difficulties encountered were many. There was the inaccessibility of construction sites because of growing insecurity, delays due to social movements which carried out demonstrations against the work of the local governors, and the abandonment of various renovation and reconstruction projects due to failures of companies. To remove these obstacles, the Strategic Orientation Council of the project advising the premier in November 2017 recommended the reinforcement of the security forces and quick measures to replace failed companies. It also proposed to accelerate the implementation of better public policies in the Sahel, including a closer cooperation with partners to increase financial support for the period 2018–19 for the benefit of water quality, sanitation and health care. The Council also advocated to maintain the easing of procurement procedures for the area until 2020, to lower taxes and to strengthen civilian–military collaboration. For the prime minister, Paul Kaba Thiéba, the objective of the program is to improve the security of people and goods in order to ensure the economic and social development of the Sahel region. ‘The northern part of our territory is under constant threat from terrorist groups. This situation is of great concern to the government,’ said the premier at the meeting recalling the urgency of the implementation of the program in order to reassure the people of the Sahel of the government’s commitment to secure their area.⁷

Apparently, the Burkinabe government is well aware that ‘contextual politics’ outside traditional party and institution politics⁸ will play a decisive role in mastering the Sahel terror threat, including the importance of psychological signals and gestures. Yet with all potential and actual improvements, measures such as the ‘Emergency program for the Sahel’ focused on improving security and life conditions may not be enough to counter the growing threat and to reverse the trend. Given that the Islamic extremists implement a multidimensional strategy of military operations on the one hand combined with the subversion of the legitimacy of local state authorities, the intimidation of critical and modern voices and the education sector, as well as the diffusion of an Islamic world-view among the population including the distortion of historic memory, a more sophisticated and multi-layered counter-strategy may be needed in the long term, based also on more extended negotiations, diplomacy and ‘cultural work’ in the broader sense. That was recognized, for example, on 2 November by Burkina Faso’s former minister of foreign affairs, Djibrill Bassolé. Addressing the perspectives of the fight against terrorism in northern Burkina Faso, Bassolé underscored that a one-sided military approach would dry up Burkina Faso’s modest budgets soon, and this would be at the expense of the much needed social and economic development of the region. ‘I would do everything for a pacific solution in Sahel in cooperation with the adjacent countries involved,’ said Bassolé.⁹

Such a strategy requires the addition of more pillars. It must comprise in particular:

- to actively address the politics of memory, both individual and collective, in the Sahel zone, including transnational initiatives;
- to work on race, ethnicity and religion as traditionally important political factors in the region;

⁷Ibid.

⁸Cf. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Oxford University Press 2006).

⁹Rédaction B24, ‘Djibrill Bassolé: «Si j’en ai l’occasion, je travaillerai pour une solution pacifique au Sahel», *Burkina24. L’actualité du Burkina 24h/24*, November 2, 2017, <https://burkina24.com/2017/11/02/djibrill-bassole-si-jen-ai-l-occasion-je-travaillerais-pour-une-solution-pacifique-au-sahel/>.

- to implement specialized working groups at the interface between trauma and resilience, as proposed by the *International Crisis Group* in an extended study on the social roots of jihadist violence in Burkina Faso's North in October 2017¹⁰;
- to include a focus on strengthening historical knowledge and evidence and raise consciousness of space, place and time among citizens, including the reactivation of local knowledge(s);
- to put a greater accent on demography policies, including population composition and urbanization;
- to make use of comparative politics by searching for best practice examples, for example in closer exchange with the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD)¹¹;
- to put a focus on technology for the sake of civil society, including schools, for example by explicitly linking up with specialized Western programs such as the *Stanford Program on Liberation Technology*¹²;
- to improve not only buildings, administration and infrastructure, but also political culture.

These 'side measures' could turn out to be as important as military actions and infrastructure building in changing the basic perception of the population to the better and thus increase the resistance of citizens. Indeed, the main problem of the Burkinabe Sahel region is the impression of growing parts of the population that 'the system doesn't change'. Since the violent clashes of October 2014 in favor of more participation and democracy with 33 persons death and hundreds injured in the capital Ouagadougou the political and social mechanisms have remained the same, as the *Burkinabe Movement for Human Rights and the Rights of Peoples* (MBDHP) manifested in a protest march on 4 November from the *Place de la Nation* in the capital's city center to the ancient *Assemblée nationale* burnt by protesters in October 2014.¹³ According to the protesters, the inability of the rulers to improve life conditions by implementing the rule of law and fight corruption could be seen in the fact that most of those who killed the protesters back in 2014 have still not be put on trial. Among the measures requested by civil society movements in November 2017 to reform the Burkinabe constitution towards more participation were the limitation of presidential mandates, the abolition of the death penalty, and better gender equality.¹⁴

Not by chance, French president Emanuel Macron's Burkina Faso visit on 28 November which came just one and a half week after the terror attacks in the North was accompanied by a grenade thrown to French troops, by stones launched to a vehicle part of the French delegation¹⁵ and by youth protests with burning barricades in the center of the capital

¹⁰International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North*. Report No. 254/Africa, October 12, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north>.

¹¹Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, <http://www.oecd.org/>.

¹²Stanford University, Program on Liberation Technology/Technology for Accountability Lab, <http://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/libtech>.

¹³*Burkina24*. *L'actualité du Burkina 24h/24*, April 11, 2017, <https://burkina24.com/2017/11/04/burkina-les-autorites-politiques-et-judiciaires-jouent-a-saute-mouton-chrysogone-zougmore/>.

¹⁴Morgane Le Cam, 'Ce que contient l'avant-projet de Constitution du Burkina Faso', *Le Monde Afrique*, novembre 11, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/17/ce-que-contient-l-avant-projet-de-constitution-du-burkina-faso_5216329_3212.html.

¹⁵Alex Duval Smith, 'France's Macron Outlines New Approach to African Policy', *BBC World*, November 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42151353>.

Ouagadougou.¹⁶ The protests confirmed the widespread unrest in the poor former French colonies, including Burkina Faso, about the perceived inability of the French partners to help eradicate corruption and malpractice in most governments and administrations of their former colonies. Yet in his programmatic speech on 28 November at the University of Ouagadougou outlining his long-awaited 'new Africa policy', Macron indirectly confirmed such perceptions by stating that 'France aims to leave its colonial past behind' and will not any longer 'tell Africa what to do'.¹⁷ Macron promised an increase in development aid and 'offered partnerships in the areas of education, renewable energies, startup companies, transportation and health'.¹⁸ Yet contrary to his intentions, many African observers interpreted his words about the new independence of Africa as retreat of the former colonial power from its responsibilities to improve the rule of law and good governance.¹⁹ At Macron's visit of the French troops in the Sahel zone in December 2017, the mood was slightly better since the president promised 'fast and decisive victories against the enemy', i.e. the Islamic extremists.²⁰ But the underlying deeper developmental problems of the area at the origin of growing fundamentalism remained once again insufficiently addressed.

Overall, the fallacies in improving the domestic perception of Burkinabe (and greater Sahel zone) democracy will hardly be eradicated by the start of the military offensive of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Chad in cooperation with France) (*Opération Barkhane*) to liberate the Sahel zone from jihadism on 1 November²¹ and 2 November.²² While in essence successful, an example of European engagement in Africa and formally supported by the United Nations,²³ the alliance between the former French colonies and France remains a 'complicated union'²⁴ that has to be supported by democratic reforms. Otherwise, the Africa–EU summit on 29 November in Abidjan in Burkina Faso's neighbor Togo with Macron and Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel in the first row to 'reorder Europe's Africa policy'²⁵ will have once again produced just empty words in the perception of many West Africans.

¹⁶ABC News, *Latest Grenade Hits Burkina Faso French Visit*, November 28, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/latest-grenade-hits-burkina-faso-french-visit-51427226>.

¹⁷Gregory Viscusi and Simon Gongo, 'Macron Says He Aims to Leave France's Colonial Past in Africa Behind', *Bloomberg News*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-28/macron-tells-african-crowd-he-aims-to-leave-colonial-past-behind>.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Oumar Ba, 'Should Africans Care for Emmanuel Macron's "Africa Speech" in Ouagadougou?', *Africasacountry*, November 29, 2017, <http://africasacountry.com/2017/11/should-africans-care-for-emmanuel-macrons-africa-speech-in-ouagadougou/>.

²⁰Reuters, 'France ready to strengthen force in Sahel fighting Islamists', December 23, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-sahel/macron-france-ready-to-strengthen-force-in-sahel-fighting-islamists-idUSKBN1EH0JX?il=0>.

²¹Jeune Africa and AFP, 'La force antijihadiste du G5 Sahel lance ses premières opérations', *Jene Africa*, novembre 1, 2017, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/488849/politique/la-force-anti-jihadiste-du-g5-sahel-lance-ses-premieres-operations/>.

²²France24, *Reportage: première déploiement des forces maliennes du G5 Sahel*, novembre 3, 2017, <http://www.france24.com/fr/video/20171103-reportage-premier-deploiement-forces-maliennes-g5-sahel>.

²³Rémy Ourdan, 'Antonio Guterres au chevet d'un monde déstabilisé', *Le Monde Afrique*, novembre 14, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/14/antonio-guterres-au-chevet-d-un-monde-destabilise_5214525_3212.html.

²⁴Christophe Châtelot, 'Au Sahel, une union compliquée', *Le Monde Afrique*, novembre 15, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/15/au-sahel-une-union-compliquee_5215243_3212.html.

²⁵Ralf Schuler and Victoria Bräuner, 'Obwohl Jenseits von Afrika die Hütte brennt ... Das will Merkel beim Afrika-Gipfel tun', *Bild Zeitung*, November 28, 2017, <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/angela-merkel/in-afrika-trotz-groko-zoff-54005736.bild.html>.

What is the perspective? In a moment when Burkina Faso celebrated, on 20 November, 27 years of industrialization in Africa,²⁶ the Sahel zone remains widely excluded from structural progress, and its people remain among the poorest of the poor. Poverty is the main source and breeding ground for extremism, as president Blaise Compaoré conceded in November. If Burkina Faso does not manage it to better fight poverty, inequality and their roots in poor education, religious fundamentalism may take over, putting the nation in clear and present danger 'to lose its North',²⁷ although the president has excluded this publicly.

The outlook is mixed. The 'Emergency Program for the Sahel' has brought significant progress on different fields, most important in consciousness-building. Yet without a more multidimensional effort, the North of Burkina Faso, and subsequently the nation and larger parts of the West African region which holds some of the poorest countries on earth, may be entrapped in continuing upheaval and insecurity, threatening to destabilize the region and to further worsen the African-European refugee and migration crisis.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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²⁶Nicole Ouédraogo, 'Industrialisation de l'Afrique: Et si on luttait d'abord contre la concurrence déloyale?', *Lefaso.net*, novembre 20, 2017, <http://lefaso.net/spip.php?article80534>.

²⁷Oui Koeta, 'Le Burkina perd le Nord: «C'est excessif», selon Roch Kaboré', *Burkina24. L'actualité du Burkina 24h/24*, May 11, 2017, <https://burkina24.com/2017/11/05/le-burkina-perd-le-nord-cest-excessif-selon-roch-kabore/>.