ISSUE BRIEF

Toward a Framework for Transatlantic Cooperation on Non-State Armed Groups

MAY 2022   LAUREN MOONEY AND PATRICK W. QUIRK

INTRODUCTION

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) pose a thorny policy dilemma for US and European officials trying to stabilize fragile states.[1] NSAGs are far from homogenous in their motivations, tactics, and structure, resulting in highly varied roles in either perpetrating or mitigating violence, with many playing a part in both.

On one side, NSAGs can create instability by using violence to advance a range of interests, from political influence and financial gain to challenging a central government's legitimacy or territorial control. Many NSAGs are directly responsible for civilian harm, including perpetrating targeted violence, persecuting, killing and committing brutal abuses against citizens.[2] There is no shortage of examples of NSAGs that fit this mold. From Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria to Katibat Macina in Mali, armed groups have wreaked havoc on the lives of civilians as well as US and European security interests.

---

1   For this paper, the authors have utilized a definition from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to conceptualize NSAGs, in keeping with the Atlantic Council's The Transatlantic Security Initiative, in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security "Rethinking Stability" project : ICRC refers to an "armed group" as "a group that is not recognized as a State but has the capacity to cause violence that is of humanitarian concern. It includes a wide range of groups with varying goals, structures, doctrines, funding sources, military capacity, and degree of territorial control." Thus, these actors can include rebel groups, militants, militias, violent extremist organizations, and criminal groups. The authors also recognize the importance of hybrid actors, which sometimes operate within the state and sometimes seek to undermine it. Other definitions include political motivations as a differentiating factor; however, this would exclude some criminal actors that are prominent in understanding the NSAG threat. For example, another definition states: "any armed group, distinct from and not operating under the control of the state or states in which it carries out military operations, and which has political, religious, and/or military objectives." See Renad Mansour, "The 'Hybrid Armed Actors' Paradox: A Neccessary Compromise?" *War on the Rocks*, January 21, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-hybrid-armed-actors-paradox-a-necessary-compromise/. See also, Annyssa Bellal, Gilles Giacca, and Stuart Casey-Maslen, "International law and armed non-state actors in Afghanistan," International Review of the Red Cross 93 (811) (March 2021): 1–33, DOI:10.1017/S1816383111000051.

2   Héloïse Ruaudel, *Armed Non State Actors and Displacement in Armed Conflict*, Geneva Call, October 2013, https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Armed-non-State-actors-and-displacement-in-armed-conflict1.pdf.

In other contexts, however, the picture is not as clear-cut. Some armed groups play a role in maintaining security and protecting citizens from other violent actors, including the state. NSAGs can also provide services, collect taxes, resolve disputes, and establish governance systems in areas where they exercise control. The pandemic has shed light on how the governing authority of NSAGs can be utilized to manage the spread of COVID-19: for example, in Myanmar, non-state armed groups established health checks and restricted travel.[3] Depending on the various roles they play in a community, such actors may be viewed as locally legitimate in the eyes of the population. NSAGs, even those with a history of using coercive power, can fill a governance gap and might be the only viable partner for the government and its international supporters trying to stabilize a conflict-affected area.

The dual nature of NSAGs poses the problem of whether, and how, the host government, the United States, and European powers should cooperate with NSAGs as part of a broader stabilization strategy. Critically, NSAGs proliferate in contexts where the social contract between the state and its citizens is broken (or nonexistent). Yet, many stabilization strategies are predicated on the assumption that NSAGs will ultimately be incorporated into political structures, which, by nature, may be corrupt and captured by elites who are more interested in holding power rather than moving toward a democratic system. This presents particular challenges for stakeholders aiming to promote sustainable peace and stability.

This policy conundrum is particularly pronounced in the Sahel.[4] Across this conflict-ridden region, a range of NSAGs—from armed groups holding political motivations and self-defense militias to violent extremist organizations (VEOs)—operate with wide license to advance their interests and have caused conflict rates to skyrocket. In 2021, the Sahel experienced a 70 percent increase in violent incidents carried out by militant Islamist groups (from 1,180 to 2,005 events), just one type of NSAG common to the region, over the previous year.[5]

But NSAGs are not a conflict-producing scourge everywhere in the Sahel. In some locales where the government—nationally or locally—is weak, corrupt, perceived as illegitimate, or all three, NSAGs often fill a governance void or, at minimum, provide essential services. Witness the Koglweogo

in Burkina Faso, which enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of local populations. These "Guardians of the Bush" formed to offset the central government's inability to quell violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and in some areas provide forms of judicial governance. To the north, in Mali, self-defense groups are common in large swathes of the country. And in Niger, the Izala movement provides security and other forms of governance. These groups are not without their problems. However, the Sahel often offers no easy options for engagement. Solutions will come with difficult trade-offs. Any stabilization approach must account for the legitimacy these groups hold and explore means for engagement, if not outright collaboration or support.

Recognizing this challenge, policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic have augmented efforts to understand how NSAGs operate and develop evidence-based approaches to mitigate risks stemming from them. They have done so to confront the NSAG problem generally and for the Sahel specifically. Despite this more concerted focus, however, Washington and its transatlantic allies must do more to enhance their approaches—alone and together.

This policy brief examines how transatlantic cooperation regarding NSAGs can be strengthened. It begins by describing the proliferation of NSAGs generally and the threat they pose to stability in the Sahel specifically. It then explores US and European policies toward engaging NSAGs, highlighting how these frameworks remain underdeveloped on both sides of the Atlantic—and pointing to opportunities for greater coordination. With this overview of the challenge in place, the brief pivots to outlining a three-part solution. The first is a set of criteria the United States and Europe can use to determine which groups are acceptable to engage—generally and as partners in stabilization specifically. This is a thorny policy dilemma but a thicket allies must work through if they are to stabilize key areas of the Sahel. The second is an approach for burden-sharing by establishing a set of common objectives for transatlantic cooperation. The third includes practical options for policy development and parameters for dealing with NSAGs generally and in the Sahel specifically.
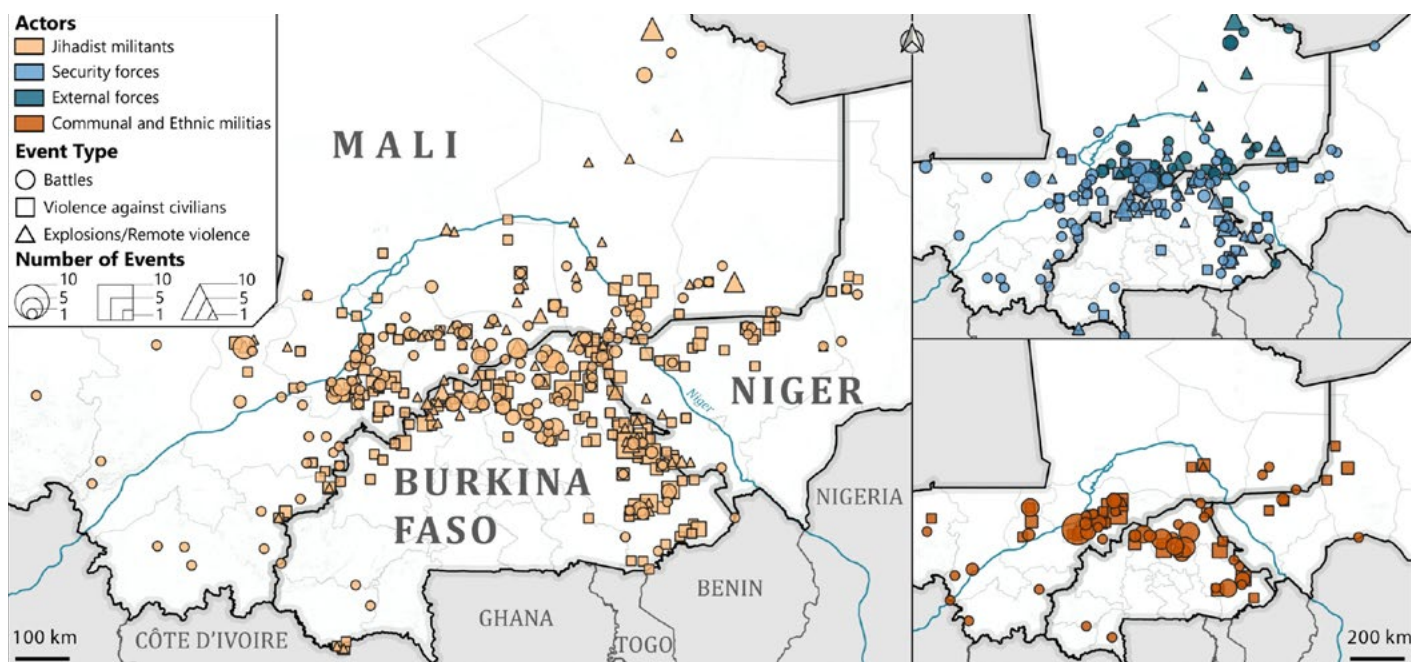
The framework is rooted in the principles of the "strategic empowerment" approach to stabilization, which involves

3   Ezequiel Heffes and Jonathan Somer, *Inviting Non-State Armed Groups to the Table*, Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, December 2020, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/odi-ec-nonstatearmedgrioups-briefingnote-dec20-proof01a.pdf.

4   The Sahel is comprised of portions of the following countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. This paper will primarily touch on Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, with implications for other countries across the Sahel.

5   "Surge in Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel Dominates Africa's Fight against Extremists," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 2022, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2022-01-surge-militant-islamist-violence-sahel-dominates-africa-fight-extremists/.

Organized Political Violence in Central Sahel (1 January 2021 - 11 June 2021)

Actors
- Jihadist militants
- Security forces
- External forces
- Communal and Ethnic militias

Event Type
- ○ Battles
- □ Violence against civilians
- △ Explosions/Remote violence

Number of Events
10 / 5 / 1

Source: ACLED. (2021). "*Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines.*" Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/

supporting local actors that exercise governing authority in a citizen-centric manner and align with U.S. values and standards.[6]

Fragile states offer no optimal solutions, but strategic empowerment is the best available option and well suited for the increasingly contested nature of stabilization. "Contested stabilization" is defined as "situations where international actors pursue their own contradictory strategic objectives in a fragile or conflict-affected state. It is the stabilization corollary to a proxy war: Actors engage in stabilization activities—diplomacy and other assistance, to empower local actors and systems they can influence—with the aim of improving their own core interests, gaining access to emerging markets or resources, antagonizing adversaries, and expanding their perceived sphere of influence."[7]

PROLIFERATION OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

Across the world, NSAGs feature prominently in the majority of armed conflicts and 66 million people live in territories governed by such actors.[8] Non-state armed actors are proliferating—44 percent of armed conflicts across the world have between three and nine opposing forces, and 22 percent have more than 10.[9] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has identified hundreds of armed groups engaging in violence and affecting humanitarian conditions—almost half of which are located in Africa.[10]

Today, several key trends shape the operations and dynamics of NSAGs. First, the evolving nature of the global conflict

---

6   Patrick W. Quirk and Jeffrey W. Meiser, "Creating a political strategy for stabilizing fragile states," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, January 28, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/28/creating-a-political-strategy-for-stabilizing-fragile-states/.

7   Patrick W. Quirk and Jason Fritz, "Contested stabilization: Competing in post-conflict spaces," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, May 26, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/26/contested-stabilization-competing-in-post-conflict-spaces/.

8   Heffes and Somer, *Inviting Non-State*.

9   Fiona Terry and Brian McQuinn, *The Roots of Restraint in War*, International Committee of the Red Cross, June 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/4352_002_The-roots-of-restraint_WEB.pdf.

10   "ICRC Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups," International Committee of the Red Cross, Position Paper, March 2021, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/why-engaging-non-state-armed-groups.

landscape creates unique challenges to dealing with the threat of NSAGs. As community-level violence has escalated, conflict is increasingly fought among non-state actors or between state and non-state actors. The world is now seeing a historic high in civil wars, with 72 countries experiencing nonstate conflict, and state violence on the rise.[11] Contributing to this trend is the increasing fragmentation and proliferation of NSAGs. While NSAGs splintering off from one another is not new, it is becoming increasingly common as conflicts become intractable.[12] This makes it difficult to understand which actors may be open to dialogue or partnerships, and which are adversarial.[13]

Second, in some contexts, conflict economies nurture the operations of NSAGs and increase incentives for such actors to continue perpetrating violence.[14] While it is not new for NSAGs to conduct illicit activities (as in Colombia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and elsewhere), the means and types of exploitative activities have greatly expanded, making it easier for NSAGs to recruit individuals and to receive funds and arms.[15]

Third, the counterterrorism agenda has shaped policy options available to deal with NSAGs.[16] The result is a growing array of legal and security measures aimed at curtailing terrorist activities, such as designating NSAGs as terrorists or including such actors on sanctions lists. In practice, however, counterterrorism legal regimes can undermine human rights and fail to distinguish between a terrorist threat and civil society activities. Moreover, they limit the activities of humanitarian and development actors that aim to help mitigate the impact of NSAGs. Such laws hamper stabilization activities, and counterterrorism operations carried out by the United States and its European partners sometimes undermine the long-term

prospects for peace and security in their attempt to consolidate short-term security gains.

Fourth, armed conflict, even if domestic, is increasingly characterized by the intervention of foreign and regional powers. Domestic armed conflicts are more frequently internationalized, which renders them even more protracted and difficult to resolve.[17] Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and the DRC, among others, all serve as examples of conflict situations where foreign actors aim to further their own political or economic interests through partners or proxies. Russia and China continue to provide an alternative model to US and European stabilization assistance, as evidenced by Russia's involvement in the Sahel and elsewhere, and China's engagement in places like Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia, among others.[18]

NSAG Trends in the Sahel

The past decade has seen devastating levels of violence and instability across the Sahel, and it is only projected to escalate. Violent attacks have increased significantly over the past year, while political instability roils the region sparking coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, as well as an attempted coup in Niger.[19] The human toll of the conflict is staggering—the number of casualties, people displaced, and human rights abuses continues to spiral. Climate change, food insecurity, resource competition, and deficient governance exacerbate violent conflict in the region.

Violent conflict across the Sahel is made up of a complex web of multidimensional dynamics—from local disputes to illicit activities to armed violence. This is reflected in the patchwork of conflict actors, which comprises a diverse array of NSAGs, including local vigilantes, self-defense groups, VEOs,

---

11 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se/.

12 Hichem Khadhraoui, "Fragmentation of armed non-State actors in protracted armed conflicts: Some practical experiences on how to ensure compliance with humanitarian norms," *International Review of the Red Cross* 101 (912) (2019): 993–1,000, doi:10.1017/S1816383119000572.

13 Ibid.

14 Sebastian von Einsiedel, Louise Bosetti, James Cockayne, Cale Salih, and Wilfred Wan, "Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict," United Nations University Center for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 10, March 2017, https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2534/OC_10-CivilWarTrendsandChangingNatureofArmedConflict-05-2017.pdf.

15 Ibid.

16 Jelena Pejic, Irénée Herbet, and Tilman Rodenhäuser, "ICRC engagement with non-State armed groups: why and how," *Humanitarian Law and Policy*, International Committee of the Red Cross, March 4, 2021, https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2021/03/04/icrc-engagement-non-state-armed-groups/.

17 William Robert Avis, *Current Trends in Violent Conflict*, K4D, Helpdesk Report, March 25, 2019, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14504/565_Trends_in_Violent_Conflict.pdf?sequence=79&isAllowed=y; and von Einsiedel et al., "Civil War Trends."

18 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Nonstate armed actors in 2022: Alive and powerful in the new geopolitics," Order from Chaos, Brookings Institution, February 1, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/01/nonstate-armed-actors-in-2022-alive-and-powerful-in-the-new-geopolitics/.

19 Henry Wilkins, "Sahel Conflict Set to Worsen in 2022: Analysts," *Voice of America*, December 31, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/sahel-conflict-set-to-worsen-in-2022-analysts-/6363145.html.

Fighters from the Tuareg separatist rebel group MNLA walk in the desert near Tabankort, February 15, 2015. Mali's government and Tuareg-led rebels resumed U.N.-sponsored peace talks in Algeria on Monday in pursuit of an accord to end uprisings by separatists seeking more self-rule for the northern region they call Azawad. February 15, 2015. Source: REUTERS/Souleymane Ag Anara

and militias. In the absence of legitimate and effective state structures, NSAGs have emerged in areas where there is little or no government presence, including in contested areas.[20] Transnational organized crime and illicit activities—such as selling stolen livestock, collecting taxes, and managing mining sites—have nurtured the operations of NSAGs in the Sahel.[21]

Generally, experts distinguish between two types of NSAGs in the Sahel: first, Tuareg rebel groups, and second, VEOs. Waves of Tuareg rebellions have occurred in cycles since Mali's independence from France in 1960, culminating in the 2012 rebellion and subsequent jihadist occupation of northern Mali in the same year.[22] In February 2022, the Malian gov-

ernment signed the Rome Agreement in Principle with the Permanent Strategic Framework (CSP), which is composed of former separatist rebels of the Coordination of Movements of Azawad.[23] The agreement aims to support peace and security in northern Mali by defining areas of collaboration between the government and the CSP. The rejection or exclusion of NSAGs from the 2015 Algiers Accord, which aimed to propose a solution to the Tuareg rebellions, instead led to mounting jihadist violence and persistent insecurity.[24]

NSAGs in the area advance a wide range of agendas—from securing independence in Mali to promoting new modes of governance to reinforcing Islamic law to driving out foreign

20   Ornella Moderan, "Proliferation of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: Evidence of State Failure?" *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, March 3, 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/proliferation-armed-non-state-actors-sahel-evidence-state-failure-29329.

21   William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga, *Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies*, December 2019, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf.

22   Harmonie Toros, *Informal Governance of Non-State Armed Groups in the Sahel*, NATO Strategic Direction South, October 2019, https://thesouthernhub.org/resources/site1/General/NSD-S%20Hub%20Publications/Informal_Governance_of_non_state_armed_groups_in_the_Sahel.pdf.

23   David Baché, "Mali: un accord trouvé entre le gouvernement et les groupes armés signataires," ("Mali: an agreement reached between the government and the signatory armed groups"), RFI, February 3, 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220203-mali-un-accord-trouv%C3%A9-entre-le-gouvernement-et-les-groupes-arm%C3%A9s-signataires https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220203-mali-un-accord-trouv%C3%A9-entre-le-gouvernement-et-les-groupes-arm%C3%A9s-signataires.

24   Marielle Harris, "Why Mali Needs a New Peace Deal," Center for International and Strategic Studies, April 15, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-mali-needs-new-peace-deal.

forces.[25] The lines between various NSAGs in the Sahel are often hazy—even between jihadist and non-jihadist groups, which have reportedly cooperated with each other and fighters frequently swap allegiances between groups. Against this backdrop, NSAGs often splinter off or unify under umbrella organizations—as was the case in 2017, when Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) merged the Sahara branch of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front, and al Murabitoun. Additionally, the complex NSAG landscape is exemplified by evolving alliances and feuds between VEOs, criminal gangs, trafficking groups, and local militias.[26] This fluid landscape results in misconceptions about the structure, motivations, and tactics of NSAGs and the status of security operations.

Violence perpetrated by NSAGs in the Sahel has escalated dramatically since 2015. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM have modified their operations to evade security pressure in the tri-state border region of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, known as Liptako-Gourma.[27] NSAG operations have spilled over borders, leading to flare-ups in neighboring Benin and Ivory Coast as attempts to quash NSAG operations drive their movement elsewhere. Although Mali remains the epicenter of the conflict, violence is primarily erupting in Burkina Faso, where 58 percent of all violent incidents in the Sahel have occurred.[28] ISGS and the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), which is part of the umbrella group JNIM, are responsible for the majority of the violence.[29]

As another core feature of the complex conflict landscape, Community-Based Armed Groups (CBAGs) have a prominent presence in the Sahel; they are defined by their close links to the community to which they provide security and protection. These actors have emerged in response to shifting power dynamics and strategies of other armed groups in the area, par-

ticularly jihadist groups. Because of their strong links to the community, they are often viewed as legitimate due to their ability to protect citizens and resolve disputes where the state is absent. For example, while recruitment efforts by Katiba Macina in Mali have increased among ethnic Fulanis, this has led to the rise of a Dogon-majority CBAG, Dan Na Ambassagou, in response.[30] Pastoral groups have also evolved by assuming security responsibilities to protect their communities from jihadist groups.[31] Understanding how CBAGs can influence—or exacerbate—responsive governance and political competition is critical for supporting stability at the local level.

Meanwhile, the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have limited capacity—and political will—to end violence, sometimes enabling abuses perpetrated by ethnic militias and security services, as well as the expansion of extremist operations and recruitment efforts. This has resulted in more than 600 deaths at the hands of the security forces of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger since late 2019.[32] Malian officials have backed the establishment of ethnic militias, fueling cyclical farmer-herder violence.[33] At the same time, Burkinabè security forces have carried out counterterrorism operations that are implicated in human rights violations, killings, and abuses.[34] Such incidents are counterproductive in curbing the terrorist threat, and instead fuel grievances that lead individuals to join extremist groups in the first place.

US AND EUROPEAN POLICY AND APPROACHES TO NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

This section describes the core elements of extant US and European policy approaches to NSAGs. It focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches generally—and as they pertain to the Sahel specifically. It also examines

25 "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel," European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed February 2022, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/european_union#menuarea.

26 Toros, *Informal Governance*.

27 Héni Nsaibia and Jules Duhamel, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines," Armed Conflict Event and Location Data, June 17, 2021, https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/.

28 "Surge in Militant Islamist Violence," Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

29 Ibid.

30 Rida Lyammouri, Jakana Thomas, and Lauren Van Metre, "Community-Based Armed Groups: A Problem or Solution?" United States Institute of Peace, February 22, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/02/community-based-armed-groups-problem-or-solution.

31 Ibid.

32 "Sahel: End Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations," Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/13/sahel-end-abuses-counterterrorism-operations#.

33 Judd Devermont, *Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel, CSIS Briefs, Center for International and Strategic Studies*, December 6, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/politics-heart-crisis-sahel.

34 Ibid.

areas of commonality, to identify potential for greater collaboration and a transatlantic approach, as well as areas of divergence.

Engaging NSAGs is not new. Oftentimes, it is born of necessity to access conflict-affected areas and carry out security operations to end violence. For example, in Mali, France partnered with militias to counter ISGS along the Mali-Niger border.[35] Additionally, humanitarian organizations like ICRC must negotiate safe access to populations living in areas controlled by NSAGs in order to deliver assistance and promote respect for international humanitarian law.[36]

US and European governments have primarily prioritized a securitized response to NSAGs—in the Sahel and globally. To carry out tactical operations and help stabilize conflict-affected regions using military force, the United States and Europe have partnered with local militias for counterterrorism purposes. The United States and Europe have also listed NSAGs as terrorists and sanctioned certain NSAGs to hold such actors accountable—to varying degrees of success.

However, there are a range of nonmilitary approaches that aim to engage NSAGs through political and diplomatic means. Additional methods include dialogue, trainings, public diplomacy, and media statements.[37] Such approaches can be useful in building confidence for demobilization and strengthening civilian protection.

Engagement with NSAGs can lead to several different outcomes; strategies must be tailored to the local context and adapted to the range of actors in a conflict to be effective. While the following strategies are not mutually exclusive, they represent some of the most common goals and approaches that the international community has employed to deal with NSAGs:[38]

INTEGRATION: In this situation, the ideal result would be for NSAGs to be slowly integrated into the political realm. This would entail tacitly or explicitly enforcing power-sharing agreements between the state and NSAGs. For example, this could involve establishing arrangements where NSAG decisions are subject to approval by the state, or where NSAG justice forums are placed under government authority.[39] The underlying assumption is that certain NSAGs have legitimate grievances that could be channeled through democratic means.

COORDINATION: Like the "integration" strategy, this approach aims to identify areas where non-state governing authority is permissible under the law, with the ultimate goal of allocating certain responsibilities to NSAGs—after demobilization—and others to state actors.

REPRESSION: This strategy focuses on applying pressure on NSAGs to deter, eliminate, or marginalize them, especially when such actors represent an existential threat to the state. Repression can be effective to counter weak actors that have little grassroots support, particularly in situations where the state is already strong. However, it involves significant violence and thus may potentially feed cycles of retaliation.

CONSTRUCTIVISM OR HARMONIZATION: The goal of this method is to hold NSAGs accountable by supporting normative change and rule of law. This is a long-term process that involves encouraging respect for human rights and changes to the actors' policies, objectives, and tactics.

These strategies are often deployed concomitantly, but also sometimes clash. For example, in Afghanistan, the US government attempted to partner, coordinate, or integrate informal justice systems with state structures in order to reduce the legitimacy of the Taliban, but such efforts sought to coopt

---

35   Brian Katz, *"Imperfect Proxies: The Pros and Perils of Partnering with Non-State Actors for CT," CSIS Briefs, Center for International and Strategic Studies*, January 29, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/imperfect-proxies-pros-and-perils-partnering-non-state-actors-ct.

36   "ICRC Engagement," International Committee of the Red Cross.

37   "Armed Non-State Actors: Current Trends & Future Challenges," DCAF (Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance) and Geneva Call, DCAF Horizon 2015 Working Paper No. 5, 2015, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/144858/ANSA_Final.pdf.

38   Claudia Hoffman and Ulrich Schneckener, "Engaging non-state armed actors in state and peace-building: options and strategies," *International Review of the Red Cross* 93 (883) (September 2011): 603–621, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/review/2011/irrc-883-schneckener.pdf.

39   Geoffrey Swenson, "Why U.S. Efforts to Promote the Rule of Law in Afghanistan Failed," *International Security* 42 (1) (Summer 2017): 114–151, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00285.

non-state actors and groups for US counterinsurgency strategy without being responsive to the conflict landscape.[40] Research suggests that some of the core reasons why US-funded assistance failed were the low demand for state governance and engagement with non-state actors that lacked the will to respect human rights and the rule of law.[41]

One: US and European Policy and Approaches—NSAGs in General

While there are a range of political tools available to deal with NSAGs, US and European strategy and initiatives primarily coalesce around three lines of effort: first, partnering with or providing security assistance to NSAGs with the goal of stabilizing conflict-affected contexts; second, negotiating with NSAGs toward a peace agreement; and third, utilizing counterterrorism measures, such as designating NSAGs as terrorist organizations. Priority is also given to supporting defection and disengagement of fighters through analysis and foreign assistance. This is encapsulated in the US and UK governments' Assessment Framework on this topic, which outlines conditions to encourage disengagement and key areas of analysis, such as actors, structural capacities, and programmatic provisions.[42]

However, no existing transatlantic policy framework outlines a comprehensive approach to identifying, selecting, and engaging NSAGs through political means. On the US side, the 2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, originally called for in the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA), has "reduc[ing] the destabilizing impact of nonstate armed actors" as a key objective.[43] However, the document provides few details on how it will accomplish this aim. The United States has not issued further guidance on how to engage NSAGs, aside from

adhering to existing legal parameters. The European Union (EU) does not have a policy for how and when member states can engage NSAGs, generally and as part of stabilization operations particularly.

To achieve various short-term security gains, and despite the lack of formal policy guidance, transatlantic governments have been increasingly willing to partner with NSAGs—although these efforts are sometimes viewed as controversial. The United States, France, and the United Kingdom have worked with tens of thousands of NSAGs to counter terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.[44] In addition to partnering with militias in the Sahel, France has also engaged directly with Hezbollah and Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces to manage crisis situations.[45] In Somalia, as the leads for security operations, the United Kingdom and Germany have exhibited an increased willingness to offer financial support to militia.[46] In Syria, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland, and Sweden reportedly began joint training of the Peshmerga to counter the Islamic State.[47] While there is no shortage of partnerships between transatlantic governments and NSAGs, such engagements tend to be one-off or short-term with governments withdrawing support after the situation has stabilized.

Enforcing counterterrorism measures, including terrorist listing and sanctions, is another core approach frequently employed by the United States and some European countries as a way to deal with adversarial NSAGs. Although these measures are applied to terrorist organizations, overreaching counterterrorism laws continue to shape—and oftentimes warp—the policy options for dealing with evolving security challenges. The United States, for example, has placed broad legal restrictions on providing material support to Foreign Terrorist

40 Swenson, "Why U.S. Efforts." See also Lauren Mooney, Caitlin Dearing Scott, Isabella Mekker, Katharine Petrich, Prakhar Sharma, and Geoffrey MacDonald, *Field Guide for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Programming in Conflict-Affected Contexts*, International Republican Institute, December 2021 https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/iri-conflict-field_guide-120221.pdf.

41 Geoffrey, "Why U.S. Efforts."

42 Julien Bastrup-Birk, Nisha Iswaran, and Karin L. Johnston, *A Pathway to Defections: An Assessment Framework for Processing Defectors and Disengaged Fighters*, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, US Department of State and Stabilisation Unit, UK Government, November 2018, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Pathway-to-Defections-US-UK.pdf.

43 Teresa Welsh, "Global Fragility Strategy could drive system reform if implemented properly, OECD says," *Inside Development*, Devex, December 8, 2020, https://www.devex.com/news/global-fragility-strategy-could-drive-system-reform-if-implemented-properly-oecd-says-98726; and U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, US Department of State, 2020, https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/.

44 Erica Gaston, "Practical Challenges and Hybrid Hypocrisy: Legal and Policy Dilemmas with the Hybrid Moniker," *War on the Rocks*, January 25, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/practical-challenges-and-hybrid-hypocrisy-legal-and-policy-dilemmas-with-the-hybrid-moniker/.

45 Ibid.

46 Adam Day, Vanda Felbab-Brown, and Fanar Haddad, *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace : How militias and paramilitary groups shape post-conflict transitions*, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2020, https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/3895/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf.

47 *Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 158, May 12, 2015, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf.

French President Emmanuel Macron, flanked by Ghana's President Nana Afuko Addo, Senegal's President Macky Sall, and European Council President Charles Michel, holds a joint press conference on France's engagement in the Sahel region, at the Elysee Palace, in Paris, France, February 17, 2022. Source: EPA-EFE/IAN LANGSDON/Pool via REUTERS

Organizations (FTOs), which can sometimes undermine a wide range of stabilization activities, including Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs and inclusive peace processes.[48]

Beyond these core lines of effort, US and European governments have often been reluctant to engage with NSAGs in order to avoid potentially antagonizing a partner government or legitimizing violent actors and the human rights abuses they commit. Transatlantic democratic principles are predicated on strengthening state monopoly on force and functioning institutions. Engaging NSAGs—and bypassing government authorities—runs counter to such principles.

However, the evolving conflict landscape reflects the reality that all actors do not fit neatly into the expectations and structures of traditional notions of governance—creating a false dichotomy between the state and informal actors.[49] These conceptions fail to respond to current political and governance trends in the Sahel.

Two: US and European Policy and Approaches—NSAGs in the Sahel

A bevy of strategies—implemented by the United Nations and countries from Denmark to France—attempt to address the complex political and security dynamics in the Sahel. France remains the lead for the counterterrorism operation in the region under its Opération Barkhane, having been heavily involved in Mali since the Tuareg and jihadist uprising there in 2012.

The transatlantic approach to the Sahel has included assisting and training partner militaries. Maintaining a substantial presence in the Sahel, US and European governments have dedicated significant amounts of funding to counterterrorism in the Sahel and provide security assistance to the G5 Sahel joint force. The United States has provided intelligence and logistical support to France's security operation, and supports the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership to provide security assistance in the region.

48   Megan Corrado, Kay Guinane, Gabe Murphy, and Liz Hume, *Preventing Peace: How "Material Support" Laws Undermine Peacebuilding*, Alliance for Peacebuilding and Charity & Security Network, July 2021, https://charityandsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Preventing-Peace-How-Material-Support-Laws-Undermine-Peacebuilding.pdf.

49   Gaston, "Practical Challenges and Hybrid Hypocrisy."

France has objected to political engagement with jihadist NSAGs, despite a degree of popular support among some Malians who want to convene dialogues.[50] Additionally, France will reduce the number of its troops in Mali from 5,000 to about 2,500 by 2023.[51] France is adapting its operational footprint in the Sahel by relocating its troops to Niger, continuing operations in Burkina Faso, and maintaining its presence in Chad.[52] Experts posit that this will create a security vacuum amidst an already tenuous conflict situation.[53]

Unfortunately, US and European strategies for the Sahel are widely criticized as ineffective, having resulted in civilian casualties, corruption, and human rights abuses.[54] NSAGs have skillfully navigated the conflict landscape and continue to exploit community grievances and tensions.[55]

Although democracy and governance have begun to feature prominently in high-level discussions[56] and the 2021 EU strategic priorities for the Sahel,[57] whether this translates into tangible action is yet to be seen. While countering terrorism and carrying out security operations may have neutralized leaders or certain targets of armed groups, such efforts fail to bring about lasting peace. The underlying assumption is that reducing the threat from NSAGs will help provide an opportunity to improve responsive governance and address structural issues, but there is rarely a connection between the two.[58]

TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION ON NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

This section describes the beginnings of a common approach—or at least division of labor—between the United States and Europe on NSAGs.

It describes a three-pillar framework for transatlantic cooperation on this issue: (1) shared criteria to determine whether (and which) NSAGs to engage; (2) developing common objectives and devising a division of labor; and (3) devising country-specific approaches and ensuring seamless coordination. The final part of this section applies this framework to the Sahel to put forth policy options for the United States and Europe.

Pillar One: Criteria for Engaging NSAGs

The United States and leading European capitals have legal frameworks to prevent officials from engaging with NSAGs. What they do not have, however, is a framework—alone or together—for deciding which NSAGs are viable partners for stabilization and which offer no prospect for such partnership.

The framework for selecting viable partners and engaging with them should be rooted in a strategic empowerment

50 Neil Munshi, "How France lost Mali: failure to quell jihadi threat opens door to Russia," *Financial Times*, December 22, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/5153ca21-bdbc-4c65-b058-cecf184e2ad1.

51 John Irish and David Lewis, "Analysis: Leaving Mali would not be easy as French military feels the heat," Reuters, February 10, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/leaving-mali-would-not-be-easy-french-military-feels-heat-2022-02-10/.

52 Oumar Ba and Ousmane Diallo, "What to make of the French exit from Mali?" Al Jazeera, March 3, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/3/3/what-to-make-of-the-french-exit-from-mali.

53 "France, European allies announce military withdrawal from Mali," Al Jazeera, February 17, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/17/france-allies-announce-military-withdrawal-from-mali.

54 Kamissa Camara, "It Is Time to Rethink U.S. Strategy in the Sahel," United States Institute of Peace, April 15, 2021, https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/it-time-rethink-us-strategy-sahel.

55 Marielle Harris, *Rethinking Crisis Responses in the Sahel, CSIS Briefs, Center for Strategic and International Studies*, December 22, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/rethinking-crisis-responses-sahel.

56 "The 3rd Annual Sahel Summit," January 13, 2022, https://www.csis.org/events/3rd-annual-sahel-summit.

57 Eric Pichon and Mathilde Betant-Rasmussen, "New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel: Addressing regional challenges through better governance," European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, PE 696.161 — July 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161_EN.pdf.

58 Harris, *Rethinking Crisis Responses*.

Soldiers participate in the opening ceremony of Flintlock 2015, an exercise organized by the US military in Ndjamena February 16, 2015. The "Flintlock" manoeuvres unfold as Chad and four neighbouring states prepare a taskforce to take on Boko Haram, the biggest security threat to Africa's top energy producer Nigeria and an increasing concern to countries bordering it. February 16, 2015. Source: REUTERS/Emmanuel Braun

approach that one of us has detailed in other writing.[59] This approach suggests that the United States and its European allies use the following four criteria to determine which NSAGs to engage and collaborate with as stabilization partners.

The first criteria is that NSAGs have legitimacy—their community must accept the group as an appropriate regime and plausible governing authority for the specified area.[60] Legitimacy, however, is difficult to measure and varies by context. Legitimacy and governance are mutually reinforcing—governing effectively and fairly can lead to increased legitimacy, while a lack of legitimacy leads to backlash or low demand for policy development, input, and implementation.[61] It is often understood through three main groupings: first, the procedures and structures by which an actor enacts policies; second, the ability of the actor to deliver on core outcomes relevant to the community, including dispute resolution and

protection; and third, the extent to which the actor's political values and agenda resonate with the local community.[62] To inform these selections, the United States and Europe should use extant approaches to assess and measure legitimacy.[63]

The second criteria is that groups must have the ability to govern—that is, the ability to translate their coercive power into identifying and addressing the local population's needs. Groups must be able to offer the following services, among others: security, governance of public goods, and dispute resolution. To determine whether groups have this capacity, the United States and Europe should look for evidence of the NSAG providing education or healthcare or organizing coalitions for peace.

Third, NSAGs must have deep connections to the local community and, therefore, be less prone to fragmentation. NSAGs should be internally cohesive. Deep connections and internal

59 Patrick W. Quirk and Prakhar Sharma, "How the United States can select and work with nonstate armed actors as stabilization partners," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, April 13, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/13/how-the-united-states-can-select-and-work-with-nonstate-armed-actors-as-stabilization-partners/.

60 Sukanya Podder, "Understanding the Legitimacy of Armed Groups: A Relational Perspective," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28 (4-5) (2017): 686–708, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1322333.

61 Lauren Mooney, Caitlin Dearing Scott, Isabella Mekker, Katharine Petrich, and Prakhar Sharma, *Conflict, Governance and Legitimacy Assessment Framework*, International Republican Institute, December 2021, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/iri-conflict-governance-framework-120221.pdf.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

cohesion make for NSAGs that have staying power as partners and are able to provide services and be responsive to local needs.

Finally, groups should rely on—and have proven ability to gather—local taxation and support. Such groups are likely to demonstrate greater state building potential than those that rely on external remittances or sale of precious metals, weapons, or drugs.[64] At the same time, NSAGs must have a demonstrated willingness to use these rents for the broader public good.

The United States and the EU should formalize guidance for their diplomats and aid practitioners on which NSAGs meet the aforementioned criteria, and, therefore, can be engaged.

Pillar Two: Approach to Burden-Sharing

To maximize the probability for effectiveness, the United States and Europe must agree on a set of common objectives in engaging NSAGs. In the Sahelian context, this objective will likely be to find ways to prevent a recurrence of violence and promote stability.

Defining the rules of engagement is critical to solidifying a successful multilateral approach. While it may not always be possible to build consensus on a long-term country strategy for dealing with certain NSAGs, it is important to establish intermediate goals for engagement. Because the global conflict landscape—especially in areas characterized by numerous NSAGs—is constantly evolving, such a strategy must allow for flexibility in the approach, tools, and interim outcomes.

To date, the transatlantic approach to NSAGs has typically entailed tactical cooperation—establishing a common objective will allow partner governments to consider whether certain NSAGs can be institutionalized or integrated into the political realm. In line with the strategies described in section 3 of this brief, the United States and Europe should establish a political objective that defines whether NSAG engagement would:

1. Aim to integrate the group into the political realm;

2. Establish coordination between the governing authority of state actors and NSAGs;

3. Apply pressure to weaken certain groups;

4. Harmonize NSAG policies and standards to be compliant with international law and respect for human rights; or

5. A combination of these or other options.

As part of this transatlantic effort, the United States and Europe should coordinate international action based on the expertise and assistance provided by each national or regional actor. This effort should be based on collaboration and designating leads for diplomatic efforts, instead of separately engaging key stakeholders. Importantly, establishing these objectives and outlining the contours of burden-sharing should be built on in-depth consultations with local actors, such as civil society, youth groups, and religious leaders. The United States and Europe would benefit from exchanging best practices with local actors and introducing joint structures for sharing information about conflict dynamics. Overall, the United States and Europe must support local stabilization efforts instead of imposing an external approach.

Pillar Three: Approach to In-Country Collaboration

Stabilization is defined as a political endeavor to create the conditions to enable locally legitimate actors to prevent a recurrence of violence. The United States and its European allies no longer view stabilization as a technocratic exercise in state building. They work with and through local partners, providing support—whether via diplomacy or foreign assistance—necessary for them to govern and thereby ensure the locality, or country, does not relapse into violence.

Once the United States and Europe have agreed to a division of labor, the broad contours of an approach, and determined which actors are viable partners, several policy options are available to guide their collaboration with chosen NSAGs.

First, they must expand analytical capacity and research to determine how these groups have earned and maintain legitimacy. Have these groups provided governance to local populations, before transitioning to a formal political party? Do they enjoy legitimacy for other reasons? How do their levels of legitimacy compare to that of the state? The United States, for example, already maps and assesses NSAGs in

---

64   Sukanya Podder, "Non-State Armed Groups and Stability: Reconsidering Legitimacy and Inclusion," *Contemporary Security Policy* 34 (1) (2013): 16–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2013.771029.

places like Iraq and Venezuela to help mitigate and manage their destabilizing impact.[65] However, these approaches should be scaled and tailored to determine the sources and scope of NSAG legitimacy.

Second, as a core principle of any NSAG policy framework, the United States and Europe need to truly prioritize advancing democracy and rights-based governance over countering terrorism.[66] Counterterrorism laws and regulations create a chilling effect for development and diplomatic efforts across the globe. To address this, in the United States this means reforming counterterrorism laws to provide exceptions for development actors to fully and effectively implement countering violent extremism programs, convene dialogue, and facilitate DDR with former fighters and other relevant stakeholders, like family members.[67]

DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE. In line with its view on stabilization, the United States and Europe should approach engagement with NSAGs as a political endeavor, not as a tactical operation or a technocratic exercise. Centering governance in its approach to NSAGs will involve not only advancing democracy by strengthening the state, but also supporting informal actors to govern effectively. This could include engagement that expands opportunities for NSAGs to productively and peacefully engage local communities as well as adopt human rights-based norms. It could also entail ensuring they have the time and space to hear citizens' concerns and grievances and help resolve them. These principles should be enshrined in future transatlantic engagement by devising policy guidance or a strategic framework on NSAGs. The GFA is a good place to start, as it calls for the implementation of a long-term strategy for U.S. engagement in priority fragile or conflict-affected contexts, but GFA initiatives need to take a nuanced look at the roles of and options for dealing with NSAGs.

Importantly, the US and European approach to NSAGs should incorporate the consideration that governance at the subnational level highly varies within a context, not only in the range of actors that exercise governing authority, but also their levels of legitimacy and effectiveness. Engaging the central government alone, especially where elites lack a commitment to democracy and peace, is insufficient in mitigating conflict. In some instances, subnational governance settings provide a critical opportunity for citizens to influence government decision-making and enforce accountability.[68] Traditional power structures and subnational governance actors should be aligned and incorporated into US and European stabilization strategy and local stabilization efforts. Local norms, values, and leaders must be linked with local government.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT. In situations where direct engagement is deemed sensitive but could yield positive results, the United States and Europe can support development actors and local communities to engage NSAGs. Locally led dialogue with NSAGs is also critical for identifying opportunities for stabilization and influencing the behavior of NSAGs by reducing the incentives for violence, encouraging moderation, and laying the basis for defection and disengagement. It can also help monitor changes in tactics, structure, and motivations of NSAGs; for example, Geneva Call supports religious leaders and community elders to build trust and influence NSAG behavior.[69] Additionally, by directly communicating with armed groups, communities in northern Uganda, Colombia, Northern Ireland, and Syria gained an understanding of such groups' priorities and composition.[70] Adopting an inclusive approach to dialogue is critical given the importance of ensuring that no actors are sidelined or marginalized from issues of peace and security.[71]

Yet, international partners must avoid instrumentalizing local communities for security objectives—instead they should support preexisting structures and methods. US and European governments should consult local communities to ensure their policies are responsive to the communities' needs and avoid undermining subnational initiatives aimed at withstanding and mitigating violence. Additionally, the United States and Europe should be careful not to legitimize NSAGs at the expense of the central government's standing in the long term. Working

65   Security Sector Stabilization, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, US Department of State, https://www.state.gov/about-us-bureau-of-conflict-and-stabilization-operations/security-sector-stabilization-2/.

66   Patrick W. Quirk and Lauren Mooney, "Want global stability? Modify the U.S. approach to dealing with nonstate armed actors," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, January 15, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/want-global-stability-modify-the-u-s-approach-to-dealing-with-nonstate-armed-actors/.

67   Corrado et al. *Preventing Peace*.

68   Mooney et al., *Field Guide for Democracy*.

69   Khadhraoui, "Fragmentation of armed non-State actors."

70   Sophie Haspeslagh and Zahbia Yousuf, eds. *Local engagement with armed groups in the midst of violence*, Accord Insight, Conciliation Resources, May 2015, https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Local_engagement_with_armed_groups_in_the_midst_of_violence_Accord_Insight_2.pdf.

71   Khadhraoui, "Fragmentation of armed non-State actors."

with and through NSAGs is viable in the short term to stabilize conflict—however, it is not a strategy for long-term development, unless NSAGs morph into a representative body, like a political party.

HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION. Through foreign assistance, the United States and Europe should identify concrete milestones and incentives to encourage normative shifts among NSAGs. This includes not only bolstering local efforts to encourage the adoption of policies and codes of conduct that respect the rule of law and human rights, but also supporting activities that prevent human rights violations, investigate allegations of such violations, and hold perpetrators accountable.[72] Previously, NSAGs have benefited from international support when they demonstrate a commitment to human rights and international humanitarian law.[73]

Ending impunity for human rights violations does not only involve NSAGs, but state actors as well. The United States and Europe should be prepared to use significant carrots and sticks, through diplomacy, to constrain or change the behavior of both NSAGs and elites who orchestrate violence—at the top and at the subnational level.

In support of guiding NSAGs toward political transformations, the United States and Europe can build on previous programmatic successes. Although not entirely conventional, governments and funders have supported new political parties that have transitioned from armed groups. For example, the Swedish Olof Palme International Center has led exchange programs among the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, Palestinian Fatah, Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Swedish Social Democrat Party aimed at promoting accountability and rights-based governance.[74] Similarly, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines created a capacity development structure aimed at providing trainings to its members on public administration and diplomacy, which received funding from the Philippine, Australian, and Japanese governments as well as the Asia Foundation.[75]

Implications for Transatlantic Engagement in the Sahel

To date, the United States and Europe have largely used security and counterterrorism measures to defeat NSAGs, whether VEOs or other armed groups that challenge the central government's monopoly on violence in the Sahel. To guard against VEO spread and associated instability, counterterrorism will remain a core aspect of any approach to extremist and terrorist NSAGs in the Sahel.

The approach to non-extremist/terrorist NSAGs is much more complex, particularly in cases where armed groups have filled a governance vacuum left by an incompetent, weak, or corrupt central government. In these cases, the ideal approach would be to replace these NSAG governance systems with those of the central government. This is in keeping with the international community's respect for sovereignty and the rights of individual states to govern within their territorial borders. This is not a viable approach in large areas of the Sahel, unfortunately, where central governments lack the will or ability to fill the gap. The question then becomes: How should the United States and Europe approach the problem set?

Drawing on pillar three laid out in this report, the United States and Europe should prioritize democracy and governance over countering terrorism. Deficient governance is often cited as a core issue that undermines security in the region—and was identified in the EU's integrated strategy for the Sahel.[76] Although widely lauded by experts, supporting governance is often referenced in a nebulous way without outlining specific strategy or policy implications. Supporting responsive governance is often in reference to restoring trust between the state and citizens. However, the United States and Europe should rethink their goals for advancing democracy and governance in the Sahel by acknowledging the vital role played by informal actors in exercising governing authority.

Defining the goals and long-term strategy in the Sahel will involve adopting a nuanced approach that is tailored toward

---

72 United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, Joint Statement by independent United Nations human rights experts on human rights responsibilities of armed non-State actors, press release, February 25, 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26797&LangID=E.

73 Veronique Dudouet, Katrin Planta, and Hans-Joachim Giessmann, *The Political Transformation of Armed and Banned Groups: Lessons Learned and Implications for International Support*, Berghof Foundation, 2016, https://berghof-foundation.org/library/the-political-transformation-of-armed-and-banned-groups-lessons-learned-and-implications-for-international-support.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Council of the European Union, Sahel: Council approves conclusions on the EU's integrated strategy in the region, press release, April 19, 2021, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/sahel-council-approves-conclusions-on-the-eu-s-integrated-strategy-in-the-region/.

the complex web of NSAGs in the region. Applying the selection criteria and defining a common objective, as outlined above, the transatlantic community must identify and analyze the structure and motivations of the most prominent NSAGs and adopt a targeted approach toward each group, with an eye toward defining intermediate solutions which must be integrated into a longer-term approach to address the cause of fragility, and thus conflict, in these places.

HARMONIZATION With the goal of supporting normative change and political transformation, the United States and Europe should increase investment in foreign assistance aimed at supporting democracy, governance, and peacebuilding. Given that deficient governance is at the heart of the crisis, it is imperative to bolster locally led solutions to open nonviolent avenues for grievance redress and dispute resolution.

This must also include supporting grassroots efforts that aim to hold state and NSAGs accountable for human rights abuses, and encouraging the adoption of policies and procedures that center human security and are responsive to citizens' concerns. Dialogue, led by local communities, could be complementary to this approach in order to raise awareness of human rights standards and identify specific benchmarks for political reform. Religious leaders and other local actors can provide input on whether such discussions would yield results and could be scaled or elevated to the government level.[77] Some community engagement has already been useful in reducing violence, such as in Djibo, Burkina Faso.[78] In Ségou, Mali, negotiations between jihadist groups and communities resulted in a temporary cease-fire in March 2021.[79] Although complex and risky, limited engagement could lead to short-term cessations in violence and open the door for long-term peace. The United States and Europe must support ongoing political dialogues at the grassroots level and ensure the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, youth, women, and traditional leaders.

The United States and Europe should also lead diplomatic engagement with elites to influence and mitigate predatory behavior as well as produce public statements denouncing such actions.[80] The transatlantic approach to NSAGs has failed in large part because it supports state actors that are part of the problem—where sometimes militaries kill as many, or more, civilians than NSAGs.[81] In many instances around the world, the central government has been captured by elites that siphon off public funds for personal gain, or have low levels of legitimacy due to the involvement of foreign actors. In such cases, integrating NSAGs or other traditional or informal actors into the political system may decrease their legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Thus, it is critical to address the political dimension of the conflict and the role of the government in these dynamics. This involves supporting local efforts to assess and act upon allegations of human rights abuses committed by state actors.

ACCEPTANCE AND GRADUAL INCORPORATION INTO THE STATE Concurrent to harmonizing NSAG policies with human rights standards, this approach involves pushing the central government to accept NSAG informal governance and, in some cases, support it, with the aim of, over time, incorporating these NSAGs into formal state institutions. Such an approach could allow the Sahelian governments to better address NSAG concerns and grievances that resonate with the local population.

There should be clear communication from the government to NSAGs of the former's intent to gradually integrate NSAG governance structures into the central government.

In practice, this approach would involve using diplomacy and foreign assistance to reinforce the groups' legitimacy while also providing avenues and support for them to transition into the formal state apparatus. This would also entail equipping them with the skills and capacity to exercise responsive governance and inclusive decision-making.

However, these efforts must be closely tailored to each prominent NSAG in order to avoid legitimizing NSAGs that are responsible for civilian harm and abuse. Emphasis should be placed on groups that receive support and are legitimate in the eyes of the local population.[82] This

---

77   *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, International Crisis Group, Report No. 299, February 1, 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/299-course-correction-sahel-stabilisation-strategy.

78   Mucahid Durmaz, "Sahel countries negotiate with armed groups despite French opposition," *Middle East Eye*, March 6, 2021, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sahel-negotiate-armed-groups-french-opposition

79   *The Sahel: What Needs to Change. Towards A New People-Centred Approach. Recommendations by the People's Coalition for the Sahel*, People's Coalition for the Sahel, April 2021, https://www.sahelpeoplescoalition.org/report-sahel-what-must-change.

80   Camara, "It Is Time to Rethink."

81   Anna Schmauder, "Strategic Missteps: Learning from a Failed EU Sahel Strategy," Cligendael (Netherlands Institute of International Relations), November 9, 2020, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy.

82   Toros, *Informal Governance*.

approach should be built on an in-depth analysis of the structure, motivations, and informal governance of the various NSAGs, relying on the attitudes and behaviors of local stakeholders.

CONCLUSION—LOOKING FORWARD

Stabilizing the Sahel will require a long-term vision and concerted effort. Sahelian actors—from civil society to government to local leaders to regional organizations—should take the lead on addressing the root causes of conflict and restoring trust, with the United States and Europe in a supporting role.

In so doing, the United States and Europe should rethink their understanding of NSAGs and formulate policy guidance for dealing with them. Political inclusion is key to supporting sustainable peace. Any effective stabilization strategy should adopt an inclusive approach to account for all key actors in a conflict, including NSAGs, in order to incorporate the legitimacy of such groups and identify areas for de-escalation and demobilization. Washington and its transatlantic allies must do more to tackle this issue directly and address the factors that lead to the emergence of NSAGs in the first place—exclusionary politics and deficient governance.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lauren Mooney is the Senior Specialist for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization (CPS) at the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to advancing democracy and governance worldwide. In her current role, she provides technical assistance, promotes thought leadership and leads global programs that strengthen democratic governance and promote peace. At IRI, Lauren led a year-long research endeavor which aimed to gather evidence-based lessons on democracy and governance in fragile settings. Additionally, she has provided technical assistance to democracy and governance programs in over 15 countries, including by examining variations in local legitimacy related to conflict dynamics in Kenya and Bangladesh; promoting social cohesion in Uganda and Colombia; and supporting peaceful transitions in Guinea and Colombia. Prior to joining IRI, Lauren was a program manager and research associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where she analyzed issues such as human rights, security, gender and closing civic space. Lauren has published extensively in *Just Security, the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, CSIS, The Hill,* and *Devex*, among other outlets.

Patrick Quirk serves as Senior Director for Strategy, Research, and the Center for Global Impact at the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to advancing democracy and governance worldwide. Concurrent to serving at IRI, Dr. Quirk is a Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University. From 2019-2021, he was a Nonresident Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program of the Brookings Institution. Before joining IRI, Dr. Quirk served on the U.S. Secretary of State's Policy Planning staff in the Department of State as the lead advisor for fragile states, conflict and stabilization, and foreign assistance. Prior to Policy Planning, he served in State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) as Senior Advisor for Policy and Strategy. In this capacity, he was the chief political scientist for and a lead author of the 2018 U.S. Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR). During his government service, Dr. Quirk received several Superior and Meritorious Honor Awards. Prior to joining the Department of State, he was a Research Fellow at the German Marshall Fund as well as designed and implemented conflict prevention and democracy strengthening foreign assistance interventions overseas. His analysis has appeared in *The American Interest, American Purpose, Just Security, Foreign Policy, the Financial Times, The National Interest, NPR*, and *Real Clear Defense*, among other outlets.

Dr. Quirk earned a B.A. in History from Bates College and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Johns Hopkins University.

Atlantic Council