

IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY IN THE SAHEL REGION

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Abstract

This paper examined Irregular Migration and Its Implications on Transnational Security in The Sahel Region. Irregular migration has become one of the most defining features of mobility in the Sahel region, shaped by a complex interaction of economic hardship, environmental stress, political instability, and weak state capacity. It examined the relationship between irregular migration and transnational security in the Sahel region, and how effective are the regional and international strategies in combating irregular migration in the Sahel. The paper utilized the Push-Pull Theory of Migration as the framework for analysis. It concluded that the intersection of irregular migration and transnational crime in the Sahel is inextricably linked. The migration routes that lead to the irregular settlement of the migrants, also facilitate the movement of people, weapons, and other contraband across the region's porous borders. The paper recommended that Sahelian governments should prioritize inclusive economic development and youth employment programmes in migration-prone communities to reduce the push factors that drive irregular migration and Regional cooperation through ECOWAS, the African Union, and the G5 Sahel should be strengthened, particularly in intelligence sharing, joint border management, and coordinated responses to transnational crime.

Keywords: *Irregular Migration, Ecowas, African Union, Sahel Region, Push-Pull Theory.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Economic difficulty, environmental strain, political instability, and weak state capacity have shaped irregular migration in the Sahel region... Expansion of cross-border migration has caused the Sahel in particular, and the countries of Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, to become both a region of origin and a major transit corridor for migrants traversing to Northern Africa and Europe. Migration in these countries occurs in the absence of border control, legal contracts, or administrative frameworks, and is often reinforced by border-violating informal

networks and illicit border crossers. Apart from accessing social services, the persistent cycle of poverty and unemployment in these regions, continues to drive young migrants. The recent rise of desertification and frequent droughts has resulted in increased instability and armed conflict, destroying pastoral and agricultural systems that a large portion of the Sahelian population depends on for survival. Massive cross-border population dislocation has resulted from these conflicts. The voids left by the loss of stability have caused migration routes to the Sahel to become informal and dangerous.

On a regional scale, the Sahel has a number of Transnational security threats. For example, the region has an increasing number of networks, such as terrorism, people smuggling, drug smuggling, arms trafficking, etc. Migrant flows are used by armed groups and transnational organized criminal groups for recruiter enforcement financing, and concealment, blurring the line between organized crime and human mobility. The smuggling corridors that link the Sahel region with Libya, Algeria, and the Mediterranean are of great importance for non-state actors. They operate with little regard for the law, which reduces the state's control over the region and increases the instability in the center of the region. The Sahel is facing the problem of irregular migration and, in addition, there are problems of relations between the Sahelian states themselves and problems in relations of the Sahel with the European Union. The increased militarization of borders and the imposition of migration controls have been aimed at security, but in the end have driven migration underground and increased risks for the people migrating and for the people in the regions being migrated to. The deterioration of the economy in the regions of cross-border trade and the economy that depends on trade has resulted in increasing levels of instability and has, in the end, made problems in the region of Cross-Border trade much worse.

Considering the circumstances, the need for a specific study addressing irregular migration and its impacts on transnational security in the Sahel becomes evident. Such a study is important in order to capture the complexities, moving beyond the sparse security dimensions on the intersection of migration, illicit networks, fragility, and regional dynamics. The understanding of such intersections is vital to constructing policies of greater equilibrium which address the security dimensions, whilst attending to the underlying structures of irregular migration in the Sahel.

Statement of the Problem

The irregular migration across the Sahel intersects with transnational security, as the routes through Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are used for human trafficking, arms trading and smuggling, and terrorism, which further challenges the authority of the state (Aniche, Moyo, and Nshimbi, 2021; Yusuf, 2023). These migrations are the result of a combination of reasons, including poverty, conflict, environmental stress, and ineffective migration control systems. As a result of these reasons, the international community and the regional parties involved (including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union (EU), and West African countries) have designed and implemented a series of policies and instruments, including border control funding, protocols and reintegration programs, joint patrols, and others, to contain the risks associated with these migrations (Stambøl, 2019; Frowd, 2020). Most of the research focuses on the humanitarian aspect and the challenges of governance that these systems create (Castles et al., 2009), of which there are probably many; however, most of the research on irregular migrations and organized crime and terrorism (which are largely international security problems) remains unexplored and/or undocumented.

The routes through Mali, Niger, and Nigeria remain active for the irregular migration across the Sahel, despite the implemented strategies (Aniche, Moyo, and Nshimbi, 2021). These persistent irregular flows are the result of the interplay of the weak state of systems, lack of resources, conflict, and porous borders. Policies like ECOWAS free-movement frameworks, EU-funded border surveillance, joint patrols, and reintegration programmes aim to increase border security and reduce cross-border mobility (Stambøl, 2019; Frowd, 2020). Although there has been research on humanitarian pressures and state fragility (Castles et al., 2009), there has been little research on how effectively these strategies disrupt criminal networks and achieve sustainable regional security. It is based on this ground that this study raises the following research questions.

Research Questions

- i. What are the relationship between irregular migration and transnational security in the Sahel region?
- ii. How effective are the regional and international strategies in combating irregular migration in the Sahel?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Sahel Region

The African Sahel, a semi-arid transitional zone, stretches from the northern regions of the Sahara Desert down to the southern more fertile savanas. The Sahel is home to over 150 million people (Brachet, 2018). The Sahel spans the Atlantic Ocean in the west and the Red Sea in the east. The Sahel is home to a diverse set of countries including, but not limited to, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, and Eritrea. The Sahel is characterized by long periods of drought, and hot, dry weather. The flat terrain stretches over 5,400km and is only interrupted by a few rocky plateaus. The soil is sandy, and poor, and the vegetation is scant. The weather is extreme as there are long stretches of dry, water scarce periods,. This is only interrupted by short torrential downpours. A variety of environmental and humanitarian crises are present as a result of drought, desertification and the food shortages that the Sahel region suffers, as a result of the unpredictable and fragmented pattern of rainfall (Haas, 2007). The region's widespread economic disadvantage and extensive poverty are particularly important factors. In economic terms, the Sahel is one of the most poorly tailored regions in the world.

The region's economic activities are at high risk at climate change and environmental deterioration. (Lijn, 2017). The Sahel's major populations are involved in self-sufficient farming, ranching of cattle, and fishing. Worsening poverty, food scarcity, and malnutrition are driven by rapid population growth. The major urban centers of the Sahel, particularly Bamako (Mali), Niamey (Niger), and N'Djamena (Chad) are, as a result of rapid urbanisation, high deficiencies in employment, and insufficient basic services, are all significant impediments to economic growth and the provision of services to the people. Their living standards are further diminished (Jones, 2020).

Desertification is a result of the mingling of deforestation, overgrazing and climate change. The continuing encroachment of the Sahara Desert into arable lands and the persistent desert region's southward expansion further increases the level of vulnerability to the region (Molenaar, & Chiu, 2017). Prolonged periods of little to no rainfall lead to famines, massive displacement of people, and the loss of pastoral livestock, and the subsequent inability of peasant farmers to harvest food crops. The region is gradually transforming into a significant hub for global environmental activities; a case in point is the Great Green Wall initiative,

aiming to halt desert encroachment by establishing a belt of vegetation along the Sahel (Raineri, 2020). The primary objectives of the Great Green Wall initiative are to enhance ecosystem conservation and restoration, ecosystem improvements, and ecosystem diversity, thereby further strengthening the ecological resilience of the region.

The growing instability in the Sahel is attributable to a combination of poorly functioning state governance, ethnic polarization, and violent extremism, especially in some of the more affected regions. Additionally, the Islamic Maghreb Al-Qaeda (AQIM), the Islamic State (ISIL), and Boko Haram terrorist groups obstruct the situation in the Islamic Maghreb region, as they take advantage of local dissatisfaction, poverty, and the absence of local governance to extend their dominance in the areas where there is little to no governmental authority (Abrahamsen, 2018). Furthermore, transnational organized crime such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, and arms trafficking, is also present in the Sahel region, and is one of the phenomena that is deteriorating the region's instability and insecurity. All of the listed phenomena have complicated the situation in the region, which makes it more difficult to achieve stability and development. A variety of migration corridors span the Sahel, allowing the movement of migrants within the region and to Europe, where they seek opportunities to escape violence, poverty, and displacement as a result of climate change.

The instability of the region is a result of the consequences of migration related to the activities of smuggling networks (Aboneej, 2020) and human trafficking along the migration routes, especially those that pass through Niger and Libya. The routes have become more dangerous, particularly for the migrants that are vulnerable to being exploited by the smuggling networks, and the unstable conditions are exacerbated as the routes are also more difficult to navigate. The instability and insecurity mentioned above affects migrants needing protection while traveling through Niger and Libya.

Due to the Sahel's emerging geostrategic importance paired with the region's continuous instability, the international community has directed its attention to the Sahel. Multiple initiatives for peace, and security and development have been designed and implemented by the United Nations, African Union, ECOWAS, European Union, and other international stakeholders. Following the 2017 creation of the G5 Sahel (a regional partnership comprising Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania) to tackle the crises of regional security, Burkina Faso, and later Mali, became host to the most active militarised diplomacy (namely, France's Operation Barkhane) (Campbell, 2017). Since Mali's departure from the G5 Sahel

after the 2022 coup d'état, and the subsequent exits from the G5 by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023, most of the remaining G5 member states have already announced the G5 Sahel's impending dissolution (Aina, 2025).

Migration

De Haas et al. (2019) argues that migration involves moving a great distance, on a large scale, and leaving behind one's home. Alternatively, Everett (1969) describes migration as a change of residence that may be permanent or semi-permanent. However, Everett's definition does not account for distance, whether the move is voluntary or involuntary, internal or external migration, or a combination of the two. This definition is particularly problematic in the case of migration between Nigeria and the Republic of Niger or Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Niedomysl, and Fransson, (2018) describe migration as the relocation of people, which involves changing residence from one country to another for a short or long period, usually characterized by short stays and repeated moves over a relatively large distance, in order to capture economic and/or social/political/social (crime) (Adeola, 2010) opportunities. This movement is typically motivated by economic opportunities, criminal activities (such as trafficking and smuggling), or political displacements in the individual's country of origin or permanent residence.

The consequences of domestic politics, bilateral and regional partnerships, and country-specific national security strategies of countries is progressively shaping the international migration and migration politicization in Castle and Miller (2009). The effects of globalization have made the security concerns surrounding migration problematic, and in these instances, the global state of security determines what foreign and diplomatic policy actions are taken by the countries of the subregion (Humphrey, 2013). The theoretical exposition will also consider the problems stated above. The Bantu people, who are currently of Nigerian and Cameroonian descent, underwent one of the most notable migrations in global sub-Saharan Africa (Castles, Coltheart, Larsen, Jones, Saunders, and McArthur, 2009). Migration is often driven by substantial changes in Political, social, and economic dimensions. The economic aspect is the most significant consideration when analyzing sub-regional migration in West Africa, despite the presence of other dimensions. Economic analysis is often used to explain the neoclassical hypothesis that migration is the result of a transition from construction to deconstruction in the low-income and high-income regions, or, in simpler terms, movement in the business cycle. The methodologies referred to by Castles et al. (2009) are what push-pull theories are known

by. Among other things, the absence of economic or political opportunity and the lack of political will are 'push' factors, whereas the 'pull' factors are the demand for active participation in the economy and the availability of political freedom. Lierl (2020) Migration is defined as the movement of people from one location to another and is the result of a complex socio-economic and political processes that are a part of a broad array of activities and have been part of the social construction of humanity. This encompasses a wide range of movements, be they voluntary and involuntary, for short-and long-term periods, and for domestic and international purposes, and are temporarily and permanently influence by a number of interrelated factors (Castles, de Haas and Miller, 2014). Over time, and in particular during the course of history, the understanding of migration, the phenomenon of migration, and the intricate relationships of the various disciplines involved in the study of migration, and the globalization of the political and economic environments, have all been factors in shaping the knowledge of migration (Manning, and Trimmer, 2020). A central tenet of the literature on migration is the type or category of migrants. Researchers typically differentiate between internal migration and international migration. internal migration refers to the movement of people within a state, while international migration refers to the crossing of borders (Skeldon, 1997). Moreover, migration may be driven by voluntary factors such as economic opportunities, education, and family reunification, or may be involuntary as a result of war, persecution, or environmental disasters (IOM, 2020). In contemporary literature, there is some debate regarding of the oversimplification of this dichotomy, as a wide range of migratory experiences exist within a continuum of compulsion and choice (Bakewell, 2010). The migration theories and models are undamental to any study of migration. Older economic models, particularly neoclassical theory, focus first on pay differentials and labour market inequality, and view migration through the lens of individual cost-benefit analyses where the aim is to maximise income (Harris and Todaro, 1970). In contrast, the new economics of labour migration focuses on the household, suggesting a more collaborative approach to migration whereby it is a strategy to diversify income and reduce risk, especially in underdeveloped credit and insurance markets

Irregular Migration

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Security in the Sahel region

According to Dieng (2021), the uncertainty of the Sahel region has eased the establishment of various terror groups in the region. In an attempt to demand ransom or political favors to the Sahelian people and government, these organizations have employed various modes of terrorism which encompass administering deadly attacks on civilian and military targets, damaging state and private assets, and kidnapping individuals. These crimes have flourished in the border towns and the fringe regions as a result of weak state institutions, which help them to exploit people of two or more nations at the same time. Such organisations pass within a short time across the borders, taking advantage of the weak safeguards on the borders of the Sahelian States. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, the number of victims has increased five

times since 2016, and more than 4,000 people died in 2019, compared to 770 in the last three years. (Nowas, 2020). The extended reach of the "terrorist" groups in the Sahel has led to the increase in organised crime and criminal groups with access to the profit channels. The crisis has had enormous effects on lives and property of the citizens and the system of governance making the current security situation in any of these Sahel nations uncontrollable by any one nation. Security situation impacts on many spheres of everyday life and the surrounding of the Sahel countries. The most notable change is that the terrorist attacks are shifting more towards the eastern direction in place of Mali to Burkina Faso where the coastal countries in West Africa are under threat. Such security threats in the Sahel region include terrorism, non-state armed groups that are violent, droughts that are a result of climate changes, famine, political instability, corruption, and the recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Human security is an intricate concept which covers economic, food, health, environmental, personal, social as well as political aspect (United et al., 1994).

Dieng (2021) clarifies that the state of security in the Sahel region has an effect on all aspects of human security. There were about 800 cases of violence in the first 10 months of 2019. They indicate that there is rapid growth in extremist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which began to increase in number in 2017 (180 attacks). Limited groups of activism organisations, which are inspired by their loyalty to the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda, have killed a number of people, launched attacks, and committed atrocities in Burkina Faso and Mali. Since 2015, more than 2,000 people have died and nearly 1.5 million displaced because of turmoil in Burkina Faso and Mali. International Committee of the Red Cross, 2021. The overall rate of violence and protest cases in all three central states in Sahel have increased tremendously. In Burkina Faso the number of deaths reported to have been caused by political violence increased 77 per cent and in Mali the number increased 150 per cent compared with 2021. (ACLED, 2023). The only country that is still performing better compared to the neighbours is Niger. However, the problem of insurgency and the rural banditry is also significant and is widespread among many parts of the country.

The Nexus between Irregular Migration and Transnational Security

The issue of irregular migration and transnational security is multifaceted and it argues the movement of persons across borders against the backdrop of security, governance and stability in the world. It also refers to the cross-border movement of people in violation of domestic and international regulations, usually as a result of extreme adversity such as war, poverty, political

and social unrest, and the negative impacts of the environment. It is also of a transnational character in extreme situations such as organized crime, terrorism, trafficking in persons, and arms smuggling. The irregular migrating of peoples with the absence of adequate legal framework within host countries, leaves migrants fleeing extreme situations to cross borders into countries of greater stability which in large part increase the social and security burdens of both transit and receiving countries. It becomes more complex when migration occurs beyond the threshold of host countries capabilities (Maunganidze, 2023). In the Sahel, for example, persistent state of war, lack of state control, and deteriorating economies force many people to move irregularly thereby increasing regional instability and the absence of control and security. While this movement often represents a means of survival for individuals, it complicates the already fragile political and security dynamics of the region.

Implication of Irregular Migration on Transnational Security in the Sahel Region

The dialectic of irregular migration and transnational security raises issues for countries, global actors, and individuals, and understanding these issues is necessary for effective policy and action outcomes. This paper focuses on relevant issues backed by available literature. Irregular migration has an impact on state security and state sovereignty. Losing control over borders means losing some degree of state sovereignty. States lose some civil liberties by implementing migration control policies, which are also referred to as the securitization of migration (Andreas, 2003). Irregular migration is likely to increase the financial burden of states, both as a result of the more active border securitization and immigration control, as well as adjustment of integration (Boswell, 2007).

Protocols to Curb Irregular Migration in the Sahel region

The Sahel Alliance is an International collaboration designed to target the large scale development and security challenges of the Sahel region of Africa. It was officially established on 13 July 2017 as a result of the Inauguration of the Coalition by the French, the Germans and the European Union along the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Coalition was set to curb the region's growth of all three - the rate and degree of poverty and insecurity, as well as the persistent growth of indiscriminate migration, violent extremism and humanitarian catastrophe.

Currently The Sahel Alliance is composed of 13 combined countries and institutions. The rest of the countries, apart from France, Germany and The European Union, who are the main

pioneers and sponsors of the coalition, the other sponsor countries include: Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Denmark, along with Sweden and Norway. They also partner with the World Bank and the African Development Bank. The collaboration with all the combined development partners is to help them align and focus their development support to the most predominant five countries of the Sahel region: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The key purpose of the Sahel Alliance is to help the countries of the Sahel to reach their set development targets by providing the region with the required support.

It strives to improve the effectiveness of the allocation of aid, avoid duplication, and ensure that the arrows of development priority initiatives are targeted at the most at risk and most left behind areas. Unlike military coalitions, the Alliance does not carry out security operations, but rather, in collaboration with the regional and global security frameworks, addresses the root causes of instability and irregular migration (Alliance Sahel, 2025). The Sahel Alliance focuses its activities on six priority areas: education and youth employment; agriculture and food security; energy and climate; decentralisation and basic services; and governance and internal security. These areas are critical to achieving sustainable peace and economic opportunities in the region. By focusing on youth employment and education, the Alliance tackles the pull factors that encourage young people to migrate or become easy targets for extremist recruitment.

Effectiveness of Protocols to Curb Irregular migration in the Sahel Region

The constant shifting of the execution, coverage, and regional dynamics of the Sahel Alliance, the African Union, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, and the UNDP efforts shows the intricacy and variation of the impacts of the different approaches to the Sahel region and the varying effectiveness of the approaches used to mitigate irregular migration in the region. These different protocols have..., Here in this case, we are interested in the specific assessment of the Sahel Alliance (2017) which, in partnership with the Sahelian countries, international organizations, and development partners, is meant to address the primary drivers of instability and irregular migration by integrating development, strengthening governance, and fostering regional collaboration, thus, addressing, to an extent, the regional violence and migration phenomenon.).

The Sahel Alliance has been instrumental in the completion of vital infrastructure projects of regional significance. These projects include the construction of roads, schools, clinics, and

water supply systems. Improving roads and other infrastructure and access services greatly facilitates economic activity and economic interconnection. The provision of economic services and the improvement of roads enhances trade, improves the mobility of the people, and stimulates the economic activities of the population and the employment opportunities.

The implications of irregular migration in the regional security of the Sahel

The Sahel is affected by irregular migration, which poses unique challenges to the security of the region. In the Sahel, Idrissa (2023) notes that migrants, weapons, and extremist groups take advantage of the region's open borders and weak state authority to worsen the region's insecurity. Likewise, Lacher (2020) notes that the migration routes that terrorists and smugglers exploit intersect, challenging the distinction between legitimate mobility and criminal enterprise. In addition, the International Crisis Group (2021) notes that irregular migration increases social and political frictions, undermines the already weak institutions, and fosters inter-state distrust. Therefore, irregular migration is, in the first instance, a security problem, and only secondarily a humanitarian concern.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Push-Pull Theory of Migration

This research utilized the Push-Pull Theory of Migration as the framework for analysis. The theory was first constructed by Everett S. Lee in 1966 in the paper "A Theory of Migration". Although the concept of drivers of migration existed before Lee's formal description, Lee's work is still the most definitive in shaping the theoretical explanation of the reasons for the movement of people and groups from one place to another. Lee was building from Ravenstein's writings in the late 19th century, which described patterns and regularities in migration, termed the "Laws of Migration". Ravenstein's work was also described and constructed into a more theoretical framework by Lee, who described and structured the variables into four key elements that constitute the factors of the place of origin, the place of destination, the obstacles of interposition, and the personal factors that motivate the individual to migrate.

Movement is described by the Push-Pull Theory as a consequence of origin push factors and destination pull factors. In relation to political changes, particularly coups, the framework explains how both internal and external factors simultaneously act in defining the reasons and rationales for a military takeover of a system of government. It is the explaining power of the

theory that justifies the study in analyzing military coups as a phenomenon of domestic failures and systemic possibilities. It relates political economy variables like elite competition for resources, state weakness, and external dependencies with the decision-making of the military. It situates coups, not as unilateral plunder of the state, but as a consequence of specific socio-economic and geo-political configurations. As such, the use of Push-Pull Theory in this instance is appropriate as it encapsulates the complexity of this scenario. It is useful in explaining not only the occurrence of military coups in the subregion but persisting and recurring military coups in the subregion. It connects local, and regional, and international configurations, which makes it suitable for understanding the contemporary coups in West Africa.

4. CONCLUSION

The intersection of irregular migration and transnational crime in the Sahel is inextricably linked. The migration routes that lead to the irregular settlement of the migrants, also facilitate the movement of people, weapons, and other contraband across the region's porous borders. The same structural conditions of irregular migration, i.e., the persistence of poverty, weak state control, and insecurity, also provide fertile ground for transnational organized crime and terrorism. The initiatives taken regionally and internationally to bolster border control, the integration of surveillance systems, and the strengthening of operational capacities in some of these areas have not been very effective.

Numerous interventions prioritize the preservation of the status quo and external securitization over more comprehensive and thorough approaches. This leads to the removal of migration routes and the continuation of structural instability within the region.

Recommendations

- a. Sahelian governments should prioritize inclusive economic development and youth employment programmes in migration-prone communities to reduce the push factors that drive irregular migration.
- b. Regional cooperation through ECOWAS, the African Union, and the G5 Sahel should be strengthened, particularly in intelligence sharing, joint border management, and coordinated responses to transnational crime.

- c. International partners should balance security-focused interventions with investments in governance reforms, climate resilience, and social services to address the structural drivers of insecurity.
- d. Migration governance frameworks should emphasize human security by protecting migrants' rights and integrating community-based approaches that involve local actors in border and security management.

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