FRAGILE STATES AND THE ISSUE OF FOREIGN INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAHEL

*Viktor Marsai**

EU policy on the fragile states of the Sahel – more supportive of US/NATO efforts than independent – was either a failure or mixed success for the following reasons: bad practices, limited capacities, divisive interests (or even non-interest on the part of some member states) and structural challenges. Burden sharing among member states did not work and most tried to avoid a more robust – and costly – intervention. The reluctance of some member states was the result of past experiences in former EU state-building missions and operations, as well as the constantly changing complex environment in its neighbourhood, closer and farther away.

Before 2011, European countries participated in numerous state-building missions. Nevertheless, operations were launched half-heartedly by governments, without clear interests and well-defined aims. They often lacked a real comprehensive approach, long-term strategies, and the necessary financial and human resources. These directly contributed to the failure and half-successes of the missions. After the so-called Arab Spring, fragile states in the European neighbourhood, mainly in North Africa and the Sahel, posed greater threats than ever to the old continent in the form of regional instability, which contributes to the spread and eventual spillover of violent extremism and Jihadist groups, hindering economic development and fostering irregular migration.

These challenges have started to transform the perception of both politicians and citizens about European security, but most efforts were concentrated on the eastern flank of the continent (Ukraine and the Russian threat) instead of the Sahel and North Africa.

Nevertheless, Europe is still one of the main actors, together with the African states themselves, in the struggle to cope with the challenges of violent extremism, unequal development, organised crime, overpopulation and negative effects of climate change in the Sahel. While most of these threats stem from weak states, if the EU is to improve

*External Fellow, the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade; Assistant Professor, National University of Public Service, Budapest

IEMed.

state-building in this region, it has to cope with four challenges of its own as well: bad practices and experiences, limited capacities, divisive interests, and structural challenges. However, the solution lies not in pouring more money into the system but in the re-deployment of assets, the combination and concentration of EU soft and hard power, developing clear ideas and capacities.

Comparing the available financial sources for different external EU funds (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance – IPA; European Neighbourhood Instrument – ENI; Development Cooperation Instrument – DCI, etc.), which total more than €51 billion for the period 2014-2020, the spending for Common Security and Defence Policy, including missions, is only €2.3 billion (European Commission [EC], 2017). This clearly means that the EU should provide more financial assets from the common budget not only to CSDP civilian missions but also for military operations, which, in turn, may increase the willingness of members to participate in state-building.

The example of Operation Serval proved that relatively limited assets – the annual budget of the mission was limited to €1 billion – and political determination could serve as a solid basis for a robust military intervention that can stop the collapse of a state.

Besides military deployment, the EU has to develop long-term strategies for fragile states and back these up with money, experts, capacities beyond the normative thinking and perspectives (maximum 3-5 years) of the institutions and member states.

Fragile States and the European Perspective on Security

Fragile or, in other not completely interchangeable terms, weak, failed or collapsed states have been the focus of international interest since the early 1990s. When Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner published their article in *Foreign Policy* (Helman & Ratner, 1993) perhaps neither of them considered that their topic would be still so important after more than two decades. Fragile states remain one of the main challenges of the 21st-century international system and, instead of declining, the problem has become more acute for Europe. The so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the crises in Libya and Mali, the war in Ukraine and the rise of so-called Islamic State in 2014 all posed a complex set of challenges to several countries in the European neighbourhood, contributing to the increasing number of terrorist attacks in the region, the loss of valuable economic investments and opportunities (e.g. in Libya) and the eruption of the migration crisis in 2015.

Before 2011, contrary to the official statements, European countries were arguably less affected by the problems of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East or Central Asia that stemmed from weak state capacities or the total collapse of states. The participation of European states in the interventions in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, was either driven by solidarity with the United States or were ad

hoc European decisions (e.g. the EU did not have direct interest in Afghanistan). The lack of a "grand strategy", as James Rogers called it, led to the paradoxical situation where the EU launched numerous missions to the DRC without any tangible interests, while it remained relatively passive in the Georgian crisis in 2008 that directly affected its energy security (Rogers, 2011, p. 4).

Europe, its politicians and its citizens got used to the wealth, stability and security of the post-Cold War decades and forgot that these values were not given but required efforts and sometimes sacrifices (Friedman, 2015). This "peace dividend" created the lack of political will to launch long-term and costly stabilisation missions, and significantly contributed to the decay of European military capacities (Csiki, 2014, p. 1).

The crises in North Africa, Syria and Ukraine dramatically changed the European security environment: the Fragile States Index 2017 shows the scores of European neighbourhood countries and their neighbours in the Sahel (see Sudan, South Sudan, Libya or Chad) and reflect a significant decline in many cases (Libya, Mali). It shows that the EU is bordered by a belt of unstable nations. All nations of the Sahel are in the "alert" category in the index (Fragile States Index, 2017, pp. 4-5).

The changing political environment transformed the perception of security not only among politicians but also among societies. Both the EU's and NATO's member states recognised the need for change in defence spending. After decades of cuts, austerity measures and unfruitful demands by the United States for burden-sharing, most European NATO member countries increased their defence spending and, at the Warsaw Summit in the summer of 2016, the alliance agreed to create one of the most robust rapid-reaction forces in its history (National Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], 2016).

Paradoxically, no such breakthrough occurred on the European Union level. It is too early to say what impact the Permanent Structure Cooperation (PESCO), established in December 2017, will have. (PESCO is likely to contribute mainly to the development of new capabilities, and not really the cost of deployments.) Except for the last two or three years, Africa received only slight attention in the area of state-building from most EU members and the Union as a whole. As developments in North Africa, the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa have spillover effects on the whole Euro-Mediterranean region, the regional challenges should be addressed at the EU level as well. However, the EU has no plan for more robust military interventions as is evident in the new Global Strategy (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2016). This stems partly from the paradoxical situation where the two – the EU and NATO – have 22 common members but the member states do not have double capacities. And while NATO seems determined to contain the eastern threats that endanger some of its members (the Baltic states), the EU has a much more limited capacity, intention and (sometimes) interest in intervening in the crises of its

IEMed.

southern neighbourhood, which demand more complex approaches and in which conventional military force plays only a marginal role.

Nevertheless, the EU launched only a few and limited operations and remained mostly inactive for reasons that stemmed not from a lack of knowledge about the phenomena and the region but from bad practices and experiences, limited capacities, divisive interests and forces that can be defined as structural challenges.

In the Trap of the Past – Bad Practices and Experiences

Failed and unsuccessful missions have determined thinking about state-building operations, leading many to conclude that stabilisation missions only contribute to deepening anarchy (Clapham, 2017, p. 151). This approach is adopted in the new global strategy of the EU that explicitly rules out a more robust intervention (e.g. peace-keeping missions) to stabilise states (EEAS, 2016, pp. 28-31).

After dozens of international interventions – from Somalia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Sudan, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya – and hundreds of general and country-specific monographs and articles (see, for instance, Rotberg, 2003; Ghani & Lockhart, 2008; Chandler, 2010; Ndulo & Grieco, 2010; Egnel et al., 2010; Clapham, 2017), a relatively clear theoretical picture of "fragile states" and their close relative "state-building" emerged. Analyses and field experiences provided a wide spectrum of theoretical knowledge about the historical, cultural and social reasons why states fail and what the best solutions are. Following the failures of the first interventions after the Cold War era, in which missions were driven mainly by optimism instead of interests (as the case of UN interventions in Somalia demonstrated in 1992-95 [Rutherford, 2008]), foreign actors developed a more comprehensive list of best practices for state-building, combining military and civilian aspects of stabilisation, development assistance and promotion of good governance. This comprehensive approach requires a clear exit strategy, driven by local actors, thus changing the usual top-down approach into a bottom-up one. Strategic documents of the United Nations (Brahimi, 2007), NATO (NATO, 2010) and the EU (European Council, 2003) all underlined the importance of taking a comprehensive approach as a key to successful state-building.

Nevertheless, in many cases theory was either poorly put into practice or not even considered. Stabilisation missions from Africa to Afghanistan lacked the elements of a comprehensive (or, in the new EU term, integrated [EEAS, 2016]) approach, yet all added to the present EU concept and attitude. The failures and mistakes have helped to develop understanding of the core of the problems and have come to be reflected in the global strategy. Although each mission has its own historical and political background, in most cases three basic mistakes can be identified.

Operations such as Afghanistan, Iraq and later Operation Serval in Mali were dominated by military elements that had limited knowledge of, experience with, or interest in development aid. The states where operations were launched lacked good governance, decent public administration, social services and job opportunities. Moreover, they were often affected by climate change. Although the importance of development, the improvement of living conditions and the involvement of locals in state-building were frequently emphasised, the investments and achievements in those fields were modest in comparison to the military efforts. Unequal spending – which was manifest, for example, in Afghanistan, where the US spent on its military mission around 40 times what the donor countries spent on state-building and reconstruction ("Afghanistan Promised $16bn in Development Aid," 2012; "Has NATO's ISAF Mission in Afghanistan Failed?", 2013) – could also be observed in the case of Operation Serval and Barkhane in the Sahel, where France spent billions of euros on a military mission to mitigate the symptoms, whereas development assistance to Mali to cope with the social and economic challenges that fuelled the armed violence was very limited (EC, 2018). It also has to be noted that the use of military power was sometimes inadequate. The EU sent advisers and peacekeepers into states where the situation was not stable enough to conduct such activities (DRC, Libya, CAR, Mali).

In another typically EU-conformist activity, NGOs and supranational organisations were bound to/tried to work in countries under the rule of Jihadists (Northern Mali, Somalia) or other rebels (South Sudan), which thus clearly lacked any prospect for stabilisation. Their humanitarian work sometimes even contributed to the anarchy (e.g., in Somalia, Clapham, 2017, p. 151). In Mali, although NGOs saved thousands, paradoxically their activity also contributed to the prolongation of the conflict because their aid supply to the population in rebel-held areas helped to further keep the MNLA in power (Pulitzer Center, 2015).

In many cases, the decision to start a mission came without any clear analyses or exit strategy. As James Rogers wrote in 2011, "the European Union should focus less on disjointed 'crisis management' operations and more on the quiet and covert expansion of its political and economic power into geographic locations of particular significance" (Rogers, 2011, p. 4). Therefore, while the perception of the early 2000s was that the US used too much power in its foreign policy, the EU and European countries used too little, even in situations that directly endangered their interests.

Last but not least, local ownership was applied only as a sugar-coating for foreign interventions. In most cases, the "local" politicians selected to lead the state-building efforts had good relations with international institutions but lacked the support of indigenous groups, leading to their lack of ownership. It was well seen in the case of Northern Mali, where many Tuareg groups were left out of the political dialogue with Bamako.

IEMed.

All of these failures could be avoided by detailed planning, clear strategies and long-term thinking. However, this is unimaginable without the reform of the structural-institutional weaknesses (lack of permanent HQ, common funding for more dimensions of deployment, such as personal costs, more authorities for EEAS) of the EU and its member states.

There are numerous examples, from Sierra Leone to Rwanda, where a balance between development and military engagement, foreign contributions and local ownership occurred. But such practices require sound foundations. The assumption that society is ready to organise a credible election within 10 months of deposing a dictator of 42 years as happened in Libya is more than optimistic and has – so far – proved to be wishful thinking. Therefore, when developing "strategies" much more attention has to be paid to the culture, history and geopolitics of the conflict.

Lack of Capacities?

The second reason for the inactivity of the EU is a lack of capacities. The intervention in Libya in 2011 demonstrated the shortcomings of European military assets indispensable for modern operations: surveillance (AWACs), air-to-air refuelling, strategic airlift and precision weapons (smart/guided bombs and cruise missiles). Therefore, Operation Unified Protector was conducted in the NATO-framework and with the military support of the United States.

France, on the other hand, did not hesitate to act alone to stop the rise of a new Islamist bastion in Mali. They deployed a force equivalent to a brigade to stabilise the north of the country. Operation Serval was successful in many aspects: it managed to stop the Islamist offensive towards the south, caused significant casualties to them and avoided the collapse of the Mali government. Although in the long term it also has negative effects (radicalisation of youth in the north, alienating some Tuareg groups), comparing it with the possible consequences of non-action – the total disintegration of the Malian state and the strengthening power of Jihadists –, the French intervention was necessary and useful. Although non-European countries provided some assets (strategic airlift), Mali demonstrated that a European power could act quickly and effectively. The three and a half-month deployment of Serval cost approximately € 205 million (Svitak, 2013), which is an acceptable amount of money considering it stabilised a state.

Unity – And Increased Common Funding

Common action requires common thinking and interests. In a supranational organisation with 28 members, the consensus is often an impossible mission. There are two ways ahead.

The first is the development of an EU "grand strategy" (Rogers, 2011) that defines the thematic and geopolitical interests of the member states, backed by a common budget.

IEMed.

The rapidly changing security environment of the EU makes it almost impossible to follow the process properly. On many occasions, member states simply do not follow guidelines they previously accepted (see the Sahel Strategy of the EU in 2011, which was hardly implemented [EEAS, 2011]). The new global strategy of the EU could be a good step in this direction but the document is very far from Rogers' concept: it is too general again. Therefore, there are regular attempts at this with only partial successes. Most countries do not want to contribute to expensive military operations for "European interest" if the crisis does not affect their security directly. A bigger contribution to CSDP operations – even if they are military ones, which could invoke legal changes – from the common budget can mitigate this problem.

The second option is a "coalition of the willing" where it is defined who the contributing nations are and with which assets the EU as a whole will support the mission. Operation Serval showed that relatively low amounts of money could result in significant success. This option requires increased common funding too but it could enhance the willingness of nations to join because contributions will be more balanced.

Both options suppose the establishment of a common fund to finance CSDP operations for a more extended term. The available financial sources for different external EU funds totalled more than €51 billion in 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2013). Spending for Common Security and Defence Policy, including civilian missions, is extremely low: only €2.3 billion (European Parliament, 2016). Development assistance is vital but so is a secure environment.

In the previous budget period (2007-2013) the European Union spent more than €42 billion on external projects but the success of these is modest at the most. The challenges posed by the collapse of Libya, the turmoil in the Arab world, the crisis in Ukraine or the rise of Islamic State proved much more overwhelming and needed the coordination and cooperation of more than one actor. The EU as a unified actor remained inactive in the case of Libya, and Mali was saved only by a determined French intervention, mainly because most EU nations did not see either conflict as a threat to Europe.

If member countries do not want to sacrifice more money for intervention, a simple re-deployment of the common budget from the ENI, DCI or IPA could secure the necessary financing. Two Serval-type deployments would mean €14 billion per budget period, or €2 billion annually. It would be a huge cut for developing states but could significantly increase the likelihood of a European military deployment in fragile and failed states. The current initiatives of the Union are similar to this concept but they provide too much for development and acquisition and too little for operations (EC, 2017).

IEMed.

Structural Challenges

However, military deployment is not enough. European countries have to avoid the failures and half-successes of previous military interventions. These stemmed from imbalances between the military and the development components, and a lack of long-term strategies, knowledge and centralised leadership, the misinterpretation of local dynamics and the inadequate understanding of local ownership.

EU experiences in development assistance in general and its linkages with other actors and NGOs provide a good basis for an integrated approach. But each conflict is unique. The practice of rotating diplomats or experts in the EU mission every three or four years is therefore unsustainable; solving crises in Mali or Somalia requires a deeper understanding of those countries, and especially of the local dynamics.

The current practice is that all important decisions are made in the EU member states or the PSC in Brussels, far from the crisis. Greater involvement of experts on the ground, at least in the preparation phases, is a must. The same is true for local actors; it is important to listen to their voices. Missions and operations have political advisers, but linkages between executives and scholars who have been dealing with the specific conflict for decades are weak or non-existent. The EU should form a "pool of experts" that can help local ambassadors and officers on the ground.

IEMed.

References

AFGHANISTAN PROMISED $16BN IN DEVELOPMENT AID. (2012). *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/08/afghanistan-donors-16bn-development-aid

BRAHIMI, L. (2007). State building in crisis and post-conflict countries. 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government Building Trust in Government. Retrieved from http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/UNPAN026305.pdf

BUZAN, B., WAEVOR, O., & DE WILDE, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis.* London: Lynne Rienner.

CHANDLER, D. (2010). *International state building. The rise of post-liberal governance.* London-New York: Routledge.

CLAPHAM, C. (2017). *The Horn of Africa. State formation and decay.* London: Hurst and Company.

CSIKI, T. (2014). Az Európai Tanács közös biztonság- és védelempolitikai csúcstalálkozójának háttere és eredményének értékelése [Evaluating the background and results of the European Council's Joint Security and Defense Policy Summit]. *SVKK Elemzések,* 1. Retrieved from: http://nit.uni-nke.hu/downloads/Elemzesek/2014/SVKK_Elemzesek_2014_1.pdf

EGNELL, R., HALDEN, P., BOAS, M., GRISSOM, A., JONES, L. & MAC GINTY, R. (2010, September). Critical approaches and new methods in state building. *Conflict, Security and Development,* 10 (4).

EUROPEAN COMMISSION. (2013). The Multiannual Financial Framework: The external action financing instruments. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-1134_en.htm

EUROPEAN COMMISSION. (2017). A European Defence Fund: €5.5 billion per year to boost Europe's defence capabilities. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1508_en.htm

EUROPEAN COMMISSION. (2018). Mali. International Cooperation and Development. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/countries/mali_en

IEMed.

EUROPEAN COUNCIL. (2003). European Security Strategy – A secure Europe in a better world. *Council of the European Union.* Retrieved from https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world

EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE. (2011). Strategy for security and development in the Sahel. Retrieved from http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf

EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE. (2016). Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. Retrieved from http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. (2016). How the EU budget is spent. Retrieved from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/579065/EPRS_BRI%282016 29579065_EN.pdf

FRAGILE STATES INDEX. (2017). Fragile States Index 2017. Retrieved from http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/2017/05/14/fragile-states-index-2017-annual-report/951171705 -fragile-states-index-annual-report-2017/

FRIEDMAN, G. (2015). *Flashpoints. The emerging crisis in Europe.* New York: Doubleday.

GHANI, A., & LOCKHART, C. (2008). *Fixing failed states: A framework for rebuilding a fractured world.* Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.

HAS NATO'S ISAF MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN FAILED? (2013). DW. Retrieved from http://www.dw.com/en/has-natos-isaf-mission-in-afghanistan-failed/a-17162801

HELMAN, G. B., & RATNER, S. R. (1993). Saving failed states. *Foreign Policy,* 89, 3-20.

NATIONAL ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION. (2010). Strategic Concept. Active engagement, modern defence. Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf

NATIONAL ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION. (2016). Warsaw Summit Communiqué. Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm

NDULO, M., & GRIECO, M. (EDS.). (2010). *Failed and failing states. The challenges to African reconstruction.* Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

IEMed.

PULITZER CENTER. (2015). Rebels, food supplies and the nature of aid work in Northern Mali. Retrieved from https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/rebels-food-supplies-and-nature-aid-work-northern-mali

ROGERS, J. (2011). A new geography of European power? Egmont Paper, 42. Retrieved from http://aei.pitt.edu/29740/1/ep42.pdf

ROTBERG, R. I. (Ed.). (2003). When states failed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

RUTHERFORD, K. (2008). *Humanitarianism under fire. The US and the UN intervention in Somalia.* Sterling (US): Kumarian Press.

SVITAK, A. (2013). The cost of the French mission in Mali: Operation Serval. Retrieved from http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/the-cost-of-the-french-mission-in-mali-operation-serval

TÁLAS, P., GAZDIK, G., TÜRKE, A. I., VARGA, G. & MOLNÁR, F. (2011, April). A líbiai beavatkozás motivációi és nemzetközi megítélése [Motivation and international judgment of the Libyan intervention. Nation and Security]. *Nemzet és Biztonság,* 3, 65-84.