

Insight

# The Maghreb-Sahel security complex: the necessity of a cross-regional approach to peacemaking

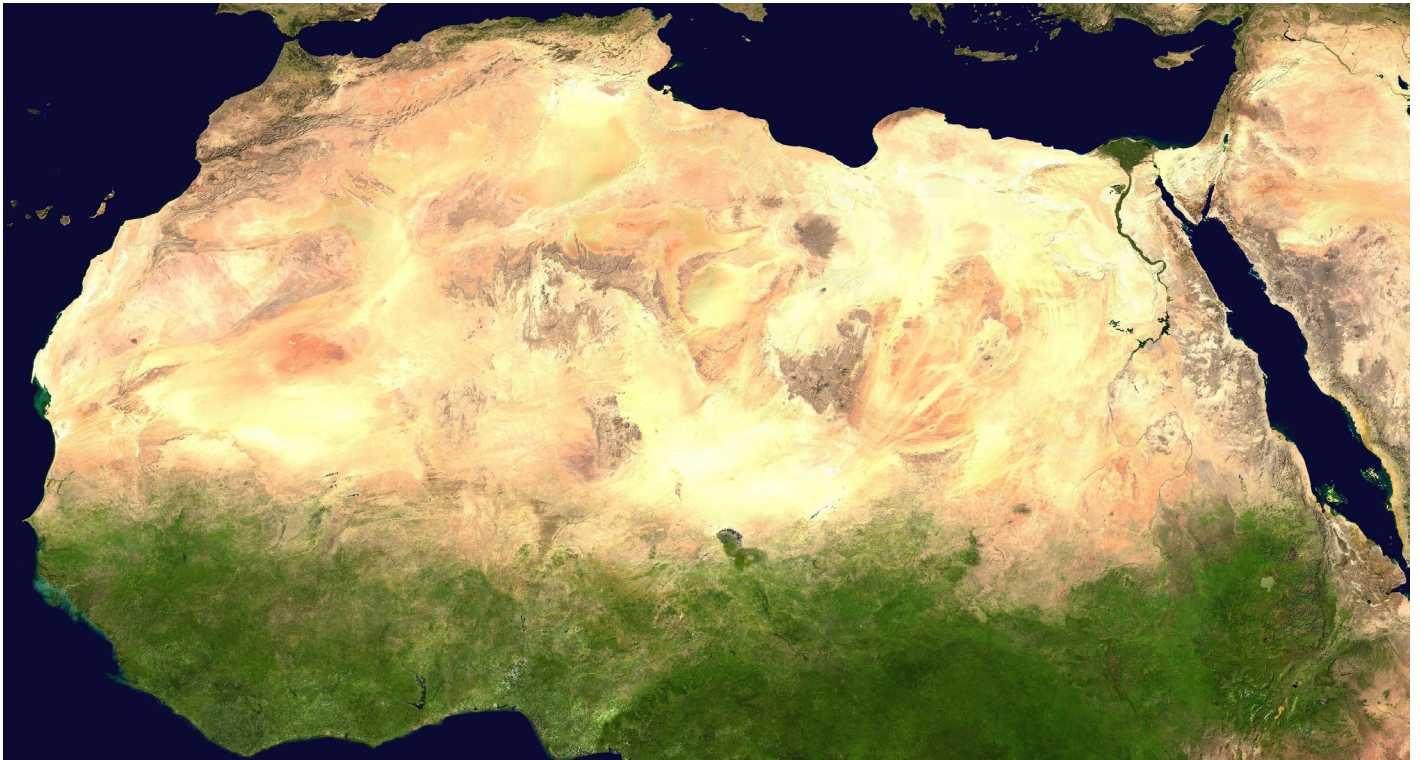
## IN SHORT

The connectivity between the Sahel and the Maghreb may be one key to stability in the Sahelo-Saharan space, but its role remains largely overlooked in peacemaking. Despite forming a regional security complex shaped by intertwined political, security, and socio-economic dynamics, many stakeholders and regional and international actors continue to approach this space through fragmented, disconnected frameworks. Since 2023, CMI has adopted a cross-regional lens encompassing the two regions, with a view to overcoming siloed approaches to peace and security. Regional developments in recent years have illustrated the need for support actors to review analytical frameworks and approaches to peace, security and stability in this space.

## Authors

CMI Maghreb-Sahel team

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The Sahelo-Saharan space and its neighbourhood. Photo: NASA

Supporting enhanced connectivity dynamics in the Sahelo-Saharan space will be a driving force for peace and stability. This constitutes the basic premise on which CMI has facilitated a space for senior experts and think tanks from Maghreb and Sahel countries to explore dialogue and cooperation avenues in the Sahelo-Saharan space. Realising this potential requires reviewing frameworks, enhancing understanding and, above all, engaging in dialogue.

The geographic continuity between the Maghreb and the Sahel has fostered deep historical, economic, cultural, and socio-political linkages, nurturing interdependence among states and societies across the Sahelo-Saharan space. Yet these two regions have long been portrayed and treated in isolation from one another across academic, policy and cooperation spheres, a legacy of colonial and post-colonial framings that do not reflect the dense and deep linkages.

### Challenges and peacemaking frameworks

Through a peace and security prism, the continuum implies that challenges and threats, as well as opportunities and effective responses, are interconnected. An overview of the multiple, interdependent layers of conflict in the broader region reinforces the idea that cross-regional analysis and engagement are necessary. At this juncture, geopolitical and geoeconomic stakes significantly affect the stability and peace ecosystem in the Sahelo-Saharan space, with far reaching ramifications for the political and conflict spheres of regional countries. A number of global actors have intensified their partnerships in the region, advancing their

global positioning and securing their interests, whilst others have been recalibrating their engagement. The medium to long-term effects of this reconfiguration on stability are not yet clear. This makes it even more timely and essential to collectively take stock of the regions' conflict dynamics, assess emerging trends, and reflect on the implications for peace and stability efforts. At the same time, many countries in the Maghreb-Sahel still experience internal socio-political, economic, and security instability following their post-independence development trajectories, with wider repercussions for the region and other parts of the world. Pastoral and interethnic disputes continue to intersect with violent extremism and organised crime, combined with governance and inclusion challenges. Together they form complex conflict systems domestically and across borders. Intra-regionally, the Maghreb continues to be marked by interstate rivalries and limited integration. In the Sahel, the security situation is fuelled by transborder dynamics intersecting with internal conflict drivers and patterns. In the wider regions, across the Mediterranean and West Africa, tensions over interests and agendas at times strain good neighbourly relations, although some cooperation continues, including on shared security concerns and threats. The interregional Maghreb-Sahel relations are also characterised by recurring incidents and tensions, particularly around security and cross-border challenges. Accordingly, conflict dynamics that affect West and North Africa require coordination of initiatives and policymaking, assessment of existing relevant regional and continental instruments and, importantly, enhancement of dialogue between the concerned national, regional and international actors. Yet, so

far, there are no functioning political cooperation platforms that comprise all the Maghreb and Sahel states. Thus, many potential gains from interregional cooperation remain out of reach.

### Lessons

Retrospectively, conflict resolution and stabilisation initiatives in the Sahelo-Saharan space have made little progress in achieving the intended results, as has become increasingly evident. On the one hand, governance challenges have hindered the ability of nationally-led efforts to durably address the root causes of crises. On the other hand, the multiplication of externally-driven strategies for the Sahel has posed serious challenges for – necessary – Sahelian-owned solutions and coordination. Additionally, a focus on hard security has proven insufficient for advancing sustainable solutions to the region's crises. Furthermore, countries that have traditionally played a mediation role in this space have seen their regional relations fluctuate.

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**The connectivity between the Maghreb and the Sahel provides an avenue to engage in renewed analysis and dialogue.**

Arguably, the geographic scope of the various strategies has also affected the effectiveness of their proposed development and security interventions. They have failed to sufficiently account for the wider region's shifting dynamics and threats, as well as the significant web of social, cultural and economic networks spanning the Maghreb and the Sahel states. The limited effectiveness of peacemaking frameworks, along with lessons from years of mixed results in security-focused efforts, invites actors committed to the welfare of populations to review and reset, listen, engage in dialogue and explore overlooked levers and alternative pathways. In this regard, the connectivity between the Maghreb and the Sahel provides an avenue to engage in renewed analysis and dialogue.

### Shifts

The profound socio-political mutations in the Sahelo-Saharan space, coupled with the reconfiguration of conflict responses, alliances, and partnerships in the region carry significant implications. Advancing stability across the space

will require core conflict drivers in all Maghreb and Sahel countries to be sustainably addressed, while also ensuring effective cross-regional conflict resolution frameworks. As an example, progress in Libya's state-building efforts will be one key piece of the puzzle for advancing regional stability. While acknowledging the challenges, this Insight highlights some dynamics that could be leveraged to support more effective peacemaking approaches. In recent years, the peacemaking and stabilisation crisis in the Sahel has led many external actors to shift their efforts towards the southern fringe of the Sahel, namely the coastal states of West Africa, where security risks are also mounting. While previously overlooked, the role of northern states of the Sahelo-Saharan space has nevertheless received growing attention in expert communities, as evidenced by the rising production of papers focused on Maghreb-Sahel in relation to security, as well as in policymaking circles. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of relations among states within the Sahelo-Saharan space, as well as with external actors, opens new dynamics that can be harnessed for peacemaking. The security cooperation promoted by the Central Sahel states through the establishment of the Alliance des États du Sahel illustrates a growing practical emphasis on endogenous forms of cooperation. Another example is the diversification of partnerships by Maghreb and Sahel countries, amid the rebalancing of global power structures. The shifting dynamics between US, China and Russia create both opportunities and challenges, including in terms of agency in international fora, whilst the region has to navigate increased interest from multiple external actors. The effectiveness of peacemaking efforts will depend on the ability to acknowledge and adapt to these ongoing changes and new dynamics.

### Opportunities

Notwithstanding the intra-regional and interregional challenges, the Sahel and the Maghreb share longstanding and multifaceted ties that may underpin stronger regional cooperation which is conducive to long-term stability and shared prosperity. Several sectoral projects already build on and amplify the positive connectivity of the Maghreb and the Sahel (for instance on energy and in academia), whilst support to most sectors with strong transborder dimensions could be further developed (e.g. cultural promotion, climate resilience). The prospects for renewed interstate relations in West Africa and the Mediterranean, more broadly, could also offer a basis for advancing stability in this shared Sahelo-Saharan space. Supporting intra-regional and interregional integration will be key, should Maghreb-Sahel states signal their readiness. External partners, such as the European Union with its renewed approach to the Sahel and its Pact for the Mediterranean, can be instrumental in bolstering these constructive dynamics with stabilising potential.

Caution should be exercised, however, so as not to transpose imbalanced forms of cooperation and integration. Instead, equitable and mutually beneficial triangulation between Maghreb, Sahel and third parties should be promoted.

In conclusion, it is necessary to overcome siloed approaches to peace and security in the Sahelo-Saharan space. The evident interlinkages of challenges and interests require dialogue for building mutual understanding, delineating mutual interests and exploring solutions and avenues to advance peacemaking for the benefit of the populations

of the Sahelo-Saharan space. In this vein, experts and think tanks from these regions also play a significant role in producing analysis and nourishing relevant debates for policymaking, stimulating positive connectivity, and sharing experience and good practices between North and West Africa.

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<sup>1)</sup> One notable paper in 2009 (in International Affairs), two in 2017 (Policy Center for the New South and European Council on Foreign Relations) vs. at least seven in 2025 (EUISS, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Doha Institute, Forum Transregionale Studien, Carnegie, Stimson Centre).

## CONCLUSIONS /

- The lessons learnt from peacemaking efforts in the Sahelo-Saharan space over the past decade call for alternative approaches.
- Compartmentalised approaches to the Sahel and the Maghreb result from obsolete interpretive frameworks and divisive logics which are not conducive for peace efforts in a space with deeply intertwined conflict dynamics.
- The multidimensional connectivity of the Maghreb and Sahel regions presents numerous challenges but also carries the potential to act as a catalyst for peace.
- Analytical frameworks, engagement and response mechanisms with a peace and security lens should be de-siloed and co-constructed collaboratively across stakeholders.
- Support actors should support not only intra-Maghreb and intra-Sahel integration respectively, but also Maghreb-Sahel integration for the benefit of the populations of the Sahelo-Saharan space.
- Triangulated cooperation between Maghreb, Sahel and other regions such as Europe should be grounded in genuine trilateral partnerships based on equal footing and shared benefits.
- Engaging in dialogue and building mutual understanding should always serve as the starting point.
- Attention should be given to endogenous and inclusive efforts that are transborder in nature and support peacemaking.