



# Non –Traditional Security Challenges in Sahel Region: An Overview

**FathimaSemeer**

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science,  
University College, Trivandrum  
E-mail: semeerfathima@gmail.com

Co-authors:

**Dr. Sandhya. S. Nair**

Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University College, Trivandrum  
Email: sachusandhya@gmail.com

**Nabeel P**

Research Scholar  
Department of Political Science  
University College, Trivandrum  
E-mail: moninabeel3@gmail.com

## Abstract

The Sahel is the Eco climatic and biogeographic realm of transition in Africa that lies between the Sudanian Savannah to the south and the Sahara to the north. Sahel region faces a myriad of non-traditional security challenges that pose threat to the well- being and human security of the region. Despite international efforts, conflicts continue in the Africa's Sahel region. New challenges like climate change, food insecurity, gender disparities and population growth become significant. This non-traditional security challenges like climate change, population explosion, food insecurity and transnational crime amplify the political instability and insurgency in the region. Therefore, comprehensive and multifaceted approach is needed to solve insurgency in the region that goes beyond the traditional notions of security. International efforts by EU and ECOWAS and World Food programme can boost resilience in Sahel by restoring land, promoting education, food security and



employment opportunities. Further, funding by global financial institutions will revitalize economic activities in the region. As the area of research is vast, this paper mainly focus on population explosion, climate change and food insecurity in the region. This paper also analyses how this non-traditional security challenges become an amplifying element for political instability and conflicts in the region.

**Keywords:** Non-traditional security, food insecurity, climate change, traditional security, Population Explosion

## Introduction

With the generalization of global issues due to globalization, there is a need to re conceptualize the notions of security. Non-traditional security began to replace the traditional notions of security which is concerned with state sovereignty. Non-traditional security view security from human perspective and include issues like climate change, infectious disease, food security, migration, drug trafficking, energy security, cyber security and many more.

The Sahel region of Africa stretches from west to east and comprises the following regions: central Chad, central and southern Sudan, the extreme north of South Sudan, Eritrea, and the extreme north of Ethiopia; the extreme south of Algeria, Niger; the extreme north of Nigeria; the extreme north of Cameroon and the Central African Republic; and the central and southern parts of Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, and northern Burkina Faso.(Reader, J; 1997) Due to its geographical location and climate, the region experiences many non-traditional security challenges like climate change, population explosion, food insecurity, poverty, and unemployment and governance deficit. As the area of research is vast, this paper mainly focus on population explosion, climate change and food insecurity in the region. This paper also analyses how this non-traditional security challenges become an amplifying element for political instability and conflicts in the region.

## Non-Traditional Security

In an era marked by rapid globalization and interconnectedness, the concept of security has evolved beyond traditional military concerns to encompass a wide array of non-traditional threats. Non- traditional security issues are challenges to the survival and well -being of peoples and states that arise primarily out of non-military sources, such as climate change, resource scarcity, infectious diseases,



natural disaster, migration, food security, drug smuggling and transnational crime. (Peter Hough, B, P;2021) From climate change and pandemics to cyberattacks and terrorism, these challenges transcend borders, affecting individuals, communities, and nations on a global scale. Addressing non-traditional security (NTS) issues requires innovative strategies, international cooperation, and a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected nature of contemporary threats.

Earlier, state and sovereignty is at the central stage of security discourse. With primacy to individual rights, non-human entities and social structures, there is a need to re conceptualize the notions of security. The logic of security was broadened beyond nation-centric security to people-centric security, from people-centric security to how people breathe and live in a society. Countries such as Canada, Japan and Norway linked security with progressive values of 1990's like human rights. (LeneHasen, Buzan,Bary; 2009) One of the most pressing NTS challenges facing the international community is climate change. The consequences of rising global temperatures, melting ice caps, and extreme weather events are already being felt worldwide. Disruptions to weather patterns, sea level rise, and changing precipitation patterns threaten food security, exacerbate resource scarcity, and contribute to the displacement of vulnerable populations. Tackling climate change requires concerted efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, transition to renewable energy sources, and implement adaptation measures to mitigate its impacts.

In addition to climate change, pandemics represent another significant NTS concern. The emergence of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and most recently, COVID-19, underscores the interconnectedness of health security in a globalized world. Rapid urbanization, increased travel, and climate change-driven environmental changes facilitate the spread of pathogens, posing grave risks to public health and economic stability. Strengthening healthcare systems, investing in disease surveillance, and enhancing international cooperation are critical to effectively combatting pandemics and preventing future outbreaks.

Furthermore, the rise of cyber threats and transnational crime presents complex NTS challenges that require innovative responses. Cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, financial systems, and government institutions have become increasingly sophisticated and widespread. Similarly, transnational criminal networks engage in a range of illicit activities, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and cybercrime, undermining governance, stability, and the rule of law. Addressing these challenges necessitates robust cybersecurity measures,



international law enforcement cooperation, and efforts to strengthen governance and institutions.

Moreover, socio-economic vulnerabilities, humanitarian crises, and mass displacement pose significant NTS challenges that require urgent attention. Poverty, inequality, and political instability fuel conflicts, exacerbate humanitarian crises, and drive mass migration, straining resources and undermining stability. Investing in poverty alleviation, conflict prevention, and humanitarian assistance is crucial to addressing these root causes and fostering resilience in vulnerable communities.

In short, the non-traditional security challenges represent complex and interconnected threats that require collective action and innovative solutions. Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic approach that goes beyond traditional security paradigms, prioritizing prevention, resilience-building, and international cooperation. By working together, the global community can effectively tackle NTS issues and build a safer, more secure world for future generations. Non-traditional security challenges are transnational in nature and they are intertwined to each other.

### **Sahel Region: An Overview**

The Sahel is the Eco climatic and biogeographic realm of transition in Africa that lies between the Sudanian Savannah to the south and the Sahara to the north. The Sahel region of Africa stretches from west to east and comprises the following regions: central Chad, central and southern Sudan, the extreme north of South Sudan, Eritrea, and the extreme north of Ethiopia; the extreme south of Algeria, Niger; the extreme north of Nigeria; the extreme north of Cameroon and the Central African Republic; and the central and southern parts of Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, and northern Burkina Faso. The Sahel region experiences tropical semi-arid climate. It is mostly covered by grassland and savannah, with areas of woodland and shrub land. The Sahel is characterized by its unique blend of cultures, diverse ecosystems, and complex socio-political dynamics. However, due to its geographical location, Sahel region is characterized by socio-economic backwardness, poverty, unemployment, climate change, food insecurity and population explosion. Understanding the Sahel requires a nuanced appreciation of its history, geography, and the interconnected factors shaping its present-day realities.

Despite these challenges, the Sahel also holds immense potential for economic development, cultural exchange, and regional cooperation. The region boasts rich



natural resources, including minerals, oil, and renewable energy sources, which, if managed sustainably, could fuel economic growth and prosperity. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at promoting regional integration, trade, and infrastructure development offer opportunities to address common challenges and foster peace and stability.

### **Non-Traditional Security challenges in the Sahel Region**

Geographically, the Sahel serves as a transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannas to the south. Its semi-arid climate is marked by erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, and desertification, which have profound implications for agriculture, livelihoods, and food security. These environmental challenges are exacerbated by rapid population growth, unsustainable land use practices, and the impacts of climate change, placing immense strain on already vulnerable communities.

The Sahel is also characterized by a complex web of socio-political dynamics, including ethnic tensions, weak governance, and porous borders. Many countries in the region grapple with governance deficits, corruption, and political instability, which undermine state institutions and impede development efforts. Additionally, ethnic and tribal rivalries often intersect with struggles over access to resources, exacerbating social tensions and fueling conflict.

Armed conflict and insecurity further exacerbate the challenges facing the Sahel. The proliferation of armed groups, including jihadist organizations like Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), has destabilized the region, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises. These groups exploit local grievances, socioeconomic disparities, and governance failures to recruit fighters, expand their influence, and sow fear and instability.

Moreover, the Sahel's strategic location has made it a focal point for regional and international security concerns. Its proximity to North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, along with its vast, sparsely populated terrain, has made it a hub for transnational criminal networks, human trafficking, and smuggling routes. These illicit activities not only undermine regional stability but also have far-reaching implications for global security.

While it faces significant challenges, including environmental degradation, insecurity, and governance deficits, it also presents opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and sustainable development. By addressing the root causes of instability,



investing in resilience-building measures, and fostering regional cooperation, the international community can support the Sahel's efforts to build a more secure, prosperous, and resilient future. This article focuses on the important challenges in the region such as population explosion, food insecurity and climate change.

### **Population Explosion and Demographic transition**

The primary concern exacerbating the challenges faced in the Sahel region is population explosion and demographic transition. Between the years 1960 and 2020, the population of the countries within the regions experienced a substantial increase, expanding their size by a factor of four to seven. This growth can be attributed to the average annual growth rates ranging between 2.5% and 3%. The population of five Sahel countries (Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania) is likely to increase from 135 million in 2015 to 330 million in 2050.

The rapid increase in population can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the low levels of development in certain countries can be seen as a significant contributor. This is primarily due to the persistence of lineage-based production systems, which hinder economic progress and limit opportunities for individuals to improve their living conditions. Secondly, the rise in mortality rates and the presence of weak social security systems also play a role in promoting a pro-birth attitude. Lastly, weak family planning measures contribute to the sudden population growth. Inadequate access to contraception, limited awareness about family planning methods, and cultural or religious beliefs that discourage birth control can all contribute to higher birth rates.

Another issue corresponding to the population of Sahel region is youth bulge. Youth bulge in Sahel is mainly due to low infant mortality rate and high fertility rate. In the ten countries of Sahel, the average fertility is four, according to UNDP population fund report. Young people aged 15-34 years accounted for one-third of the population. In 2055, the working age group will be 67% of the population in Ethiopia. It has many political and social implications. Governance system in the Sahel region could not cater the needs of growing youth population. Sahel's labour market could not absorb new workers. As a result, people will force to survive by means of joining illicit networks.

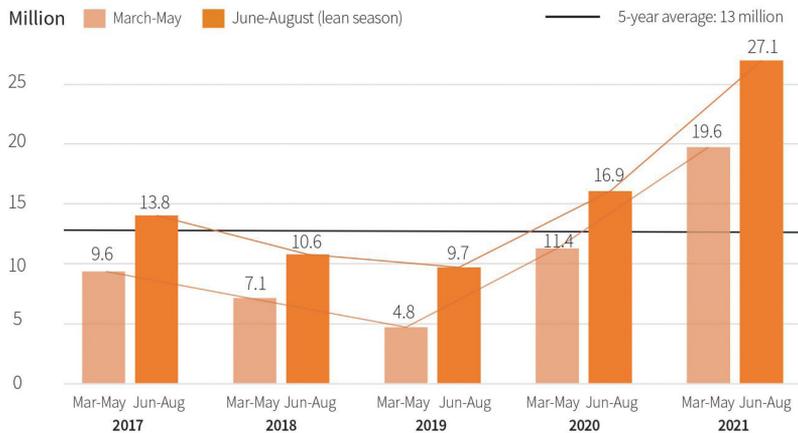
The region experiences a significant rise in political instability due to the presence of a substantial population under the age of 30 who lack education, employment opportunities, and social standing. There are also disparities in the working age population. Due to high fertile rate and double discrimination, women





## FOOD AND NUTRITION TRENDS IN THE SAHEL & WEST AFRICA

Number of people in “Crisis” or worse situation, 2017-21



**Note:** Comparison over time indicates a general trend but should be used with caution as regional coverage and methodology may vary significantly.

**Source:** Cadre harmonisé analysis, 2017-21, March data. **Figure:** © SWAC/OECD

Extract: RPCA (2021), Sahel and West Africa: Food and nutrition situation 2021, April 2021.

Food insecurity in the Sahel region is a result of the confluence of protracted conflict, climate change, and global crises. A significant decline in food production observed due to record level shortfall of rain, comparable to a major dry period in 2011. As more than 80% of people in the Sahel region depend on agriculture, it severely affected the food security of the region. Difficult access to fertilizer exacerbates the production decline as only 40% of the fertilizer needs could be met in the region this year.

Recurring conflicts in the region also have direct impact on food security in the region. The non-state armed groups began targeting the resources and sources of income of civilians. They engage in activities like looting and destroying crops, stealing livestock and extorting money from the vulnerable communities. Disruption of markets by the terrorist groups makes food inaccessible. Migration due to conflicts makes people no longer able to access their land for agriculture and pastoralism. In the northern regions of Burkina Faso, a significant loss of cultivated land, ranging from 30% to 50%, has been experienced due to prevailing insecurity. This has resulted in a concerning water crisis at the national level within Burkina Faso. The destruction of water points has further exacerbated the situation,



leaving communities in dire need. In certain areas, individuals endure the arduous task of waiting in line for up to 72 hours, solely to gain access to boreholes. Consequently, their lives have become entirely centered on the pursuit of water, highlighting the critical importance of addressing this pressing issue.

Global issues like financial crisis, natural disasters and Russia- Ukraine war also have significant impact on food security. The conflict in Ukraine has resulted in significant fluctuations in the prices of food crops. Cyclone Freddy in 2023 resulted in 30% hike in prices of food staples such as Maize, thereby worsening the nutritional security in the region.

Food insecure individuals are increasingly susceptible to fundamentalism and acts of insurgency. In the region, women and children face a double discrimination due to their gender and socio-economic vulnerability. Women are compelled to endure long waits and journeys to collect water, often sacrificing their own nutritional needs to provide for multiple children.

## ii. **Climate Change**

As the Sahel location represents a vast arid region between the Sahara desert to the North and a more fertile region to the south, it is going through weather extremes. The Sahel region is experiencing the worst drought in over forty years. Desertification in the region is exacerbated by the population boom in the region as the population ought to double in the region in between 2010 to 2045. Environmental issues compounded by the lack of socio-economic policy environment are expected to reduce the water supply in the future. For example, in Cameroon water shortage lead some fishers to divert water from streams through ditch canals to raise fish. But canals cross the pastoral plains, leads to conflict between fishers and herders. These environmental pressures and conflicts create fertile ground for radicalization by way of armed movements and Islamic insurgents. Climate induced conflicts also lead to food insecurity, humanitarian crisis, displacement and migration. The change in weather patterns deteriorated soil fertility, thereby threatening food security. One in two people in the Central African Republic suffers from starvation. Women and children are the most affected by climate change and humanitarian crisis. Southern parts of the Sahel, closer to the equator, may have more favorable conditions for agriculture and livelihoods compared to the northern, arid regions. Climate



change further compounds these challenges, with some areas experiencing more severe impacts, such as desertification and erratic rainfall, which disproportionately affect certain communities.

## Conclusion

The non-traditional security challenges faced by Sahel region presents a complex and multifaceted set of issues that demand a comprehensive approach. The interconnectedness of factors such as climate change, poverty, unemployment, food insecurity and transnational crimes require concreted efforts from governance systems. The non-traditional security issues become the root cause or amplifying element for traditional security issues like Islamic insurgency, political instability and conflicts in the region. Furthermore, due to the malleable nature of borders within the region, any political instability or insurgency occurring in one country will inevitably have a spillover effect on the neighboring nations.

The issues in the Sahel region also have regional and sectional disparities. The effect of climate change and natural disasters vary from region to region due to geographic location and economic stability. Economic imbalances are also prominent, with some regions benefiting more from natural resources or economic activities, while others face persistent poverty and limited economic opportunities. Unequal distribution of infrastructure and public services, including education and healthcare facilities, exacerbates these disparities, leading to a cycle of underdevelopment in certain areas. Additionally, issues related to ethnicity and cultural differences can contribute to social divides, further widening regional gaps. Gender disparities are also evident in the Sahel region. Women and children are burdened for the task of providing for basic needs. They also suffer the most from natural disasters and the impact of climate change.

Addressing non-traditional security issues in Sahel needed a multifaceted approach. Investments on Human development indicators such as health, education, employment opportunities are essential. Along with it steps must be taken to reduce environmental degradation and to reduce the impact of climate change. In order to solve the national security issues, steps must be taken to solve the root cause of the issue, that is, the non-traditional security challenges.

From Islamic insurgency to conflicts due to climate change, the Sahel region becomes the world's most warfare-ridden region. Global efforts by the UN, EU, and ECOWAS can boost resilience in the Sahel by restoring land and promoting education, food security, and employment opportunities. Further, Funding from



global financial institutions will revitalize economic activities in the region. In essence, the Sahel region is in need of a vibrant civil society and democratic values for a stable and non-violent democratic transition.

## References

1. Reader, J. (1997). *Africa: A Biography of the Continent*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
2. Peter Hough, B. P. (2021). *International Security Studies: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge.
3. Buzan, Barry & Lene Hansen (2009), "Widening and Deepening Security", in Barry Buzan, & Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. United Nations. Population Division. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. World Population, Prospects 2019.
5. Statement by Mr Abdalla Hamdok (2017), Acting Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), to the Executive Council of the African Union.
6. Goldstone J. A., (2002). Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict, *Journal of international affairs*, Fall 2002, vol. 56, no. 1
7. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (1996). World Food Summit.
8. Office for the Coordination of humanitarian affairs. Gendered Drivers, Risks and Impacts of Food Insecurity in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. 15 March 2022
9. World Bank. (2023, January 4). Enhancing Food and Nutrition Security in the Sahel and Horn of Africa.
10. Regional Centre for the Promotion of Rural Actors (RPCA). (2021, April). Sahel and West Africa: Food and Nutrition Situation.
11. Nassah, H., Dagher, L., Chatoui, H., Tounsi, A., Khoulaïd, F., Fakir, Y., Erraki, S., & Khabba, S. (2022). Climate Change Impact on Agricultural Production in the Sahel Region. In *Home Nutrition and Human Health* (pp. xx-xx). Springer
12. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2016). Conflicts in the Sahel Region: The Development Costs and Consequences Conflict in the Sahel Region and the Developmental Consequences.
13. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2019). Understanding the Sahel through its History, Geography and Socio-Demographic and Security Challenges (Working Paper).
14. World Food Programme. (March 22, 2022). Food Prices Skyrocket as Cost of Cyclone Freddy Becomes Evident in Malawi.
15. World Weather Attribution. (2022). Food Crisis in Sahel. Retrieved from <https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/food-crisis-in-central-sahel-in-2022-driven-by-chronic-vulnerability-with-uncertain-role-of-climate-change/>