Without a stable Libya to strike migration deals with, EU is looking further south, to Niger, as a way of cutting off the trans-Saharan migration routes. However, the question is whether the EU is exchanging short-term gains for long-term stability?

Surrounded by war-torn Mali, Libya and northeastern Nigeria, Niger is perceived to be one of the more stable countries in the Sahel region. However, it has its own challenges and is not immune from the internal and external shocks that have shaken neighbouring countries in recent years. Most importantly, the balance of power between the north and south of the country is hard-fought and is sensitive to sudden changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU must reassess the long-term strategic implications of exporting European policy concerns to the volatile Sahel region.
- The EU should take seriously the political leaders of Niger’s Agadez region, who are expressing concern over the consequences of current anti-migration interventions.
- European and Danish donations to Niger must be used to push for investments in the public services, political reforms and accountability.
ruptures. So even though one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world could use the major EU funding currently being released, there is a risk that European anti-migration interventions and the increased securitization of the northern region could present a challenge to the country’s future stability.

Regional migration in West Africa is relatively painless, but travelling into North Africa, especially Libya, presents a much more dangerous situation. On the route between Niger and Libya, migrants face very different challenges, such as the extreme weather conditions in the Sahara Desert and the smuggling rings that, especially on the Libyan side of the border, have become crueler and more exploitative in recent years. Yet, for historical and geographical reasons, this corridor remains the most important channel linking sub-Saharan Africa with North Africa and connecting migrants with the smugglers and corrupt officials operating on the Libyan coast.

The vast majority of West African migrants – more than 300,000 last year alone according to the UN Migration Agency (IOM) – transit through Niger to reach Libya and the smuggling routes across the Mediterranean. This is a hard and dangerous journey through inhospitable territory into a chaotic Libya that, following some reports, claims even more lives than the subsequent sea crossing to Europe.

Consequently, the Niger–Libya route has become a cornerstone in the EU’s anti-migration efforts. As part of the EU Partnership Framework under the European Agenda for Migration, Niger is the object of a broad spectrum of EU interventions ranging from exporting border control measures to addressing the lack of job opportunities and food insecurity that are believed to be causing the increase in migration movements.

In 2016, Niger received about 140 million Euros from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa aimed at addressing migration, as well as 470 million Euros in support of development, reform and state-building efforts. Niger has also become a regular stop on the tour of countries that Western leaders visit to show their commitment to curbing migration to Europe. Germany’s Angela Merkel was in Niger last year and was received by President Issoufou. During Merkel’s visit, Issoufou stated that the current funding was not enough and that Niger needed one billion Euros to deal with migration alone. This year in Rome, Issoufou and Italy’s Prime Minister Gentiloni signed a bilateral agreement worth 50 million Euros with the aim of strengthening border controls and driving down migration numbers.

There are early signs that the migratory movements from Niger to Libya have slowed down of late, and the EU has been quick to claim its interventions a success. Nevertheless, there are reasons to be cautious. Unsurprisingly, the routes may have slipped under the radar rather than coming to a complete halt, and there are indications that the locations being monitored are now being avoided due to the increased police and military presence.

In particular, there are reasons to question the long-term consequences of the EU’s intervention in the historically volatile Agadez region. When Mali collapsed following the revolution in Libya and the return of a number of heavily armed Tuareg warriors, who declared their independence, many were looking anxiously to Niger, which has had its own share of
Tuareg rebellions, often in tandem with conflicts in Mali. Fortunately, Niger showed that it had learned lessons from its previous conflicts. The northern rebels were integrated into the political and military elites, and when other fighters returned from Libya in 2011, they too were disarmed and largely incorporated.

Niger’s successful management of the unpredictable post-Gaddafi turbulence has reinforced Europe’s belief that the Nigerien state is a strong and stable partner that has great resilience and is capable of asserting power from its capital of Niamey to the furthest reaches of the country. Yet, a more precise analysis suggests that the government in Niamey needed an alliance with the leaders of Agadez for the sake of its own stability and territorial integrity, and that it was therefore willing to allow a relatively large degree of autonomy to obtain that. This would entail turning a blind eye to the cross-border economies, including human smuggling, that are the main sources of income in the region.

Nine projects in Niger under the EU Trust Fund have currently been approved, and it is clear from their design that the communities of the Agadez region especially are of growing EU interest. Border control has been strengthened, and various counter-migration measures have been developed and implemented, assisted by EU personnel, and heavily funded by Brussels and European member states. Drivers have been arrested and vehicles confiscated, yet the jobs and opportunities that were promised to replace the border economies have yet to materialize. This has fed popular resistance to the EU-driven agenda and an increasingly uncomfortable situation for local Agadez leaders who must explain to their young people that smuggling is no longer an option, even though it may well be the only profitable business around.

European leaders must pay greater attention to political leaders in Agadez, who have for some time warned about alienation and resistance as a result of EU-funded crackdowns on cross-border economies. This is not only a question of economic and political justice for the region, but also of regional stability.

Moreover, Niger is a country under pressure on many fronts, not just from smuggling and jihadism in the vast Agadez region, but also from the Boko Haram...
insurgency in the Diffa region and al-Qaeda-linked jihadist attacks on the Malian border. Fueling grievances in the Agadez region could open up another front, which may just prove to be one too many for Niger. Yet, a more confident and assertive President Issoufou, financed by Europe, has embraced the European anti-migration agenda, at least on the face of it, and appears to be coming down harder on the Agadez region and the livelihoods of young Tuareg and Toubou minorities especially.

The response to Boko Haram’s attacks on military and civilian targets in the Diffa region by Niger’s security forces also raises concerns about the government’s strategy, or perhaps lack of strategy, when it comes to handling internal insecurity. The security forces are reported to have arbitrarily arrested and tortured innocent people while disrupting vital local economies, their repression generally undermining their legitimacy and even the legitimacy of the Nigerien state, to such an extent that Boko Haram is now recruiting in the region. If such actions were to be replicated in the Agadez region, it could lead to large-scale destabilization.

While Niger remains an important and legitimate partner in the effort to secure safer and better managed migration and in the fight against global jihad, Denmark and its European partners should also push for reforms. This would include improving public services in such areas as health, water, education, food, and security. The corruption that is hampering Niger at all levels of its public life, including the border checkpoints that are now proliferating throughout the country, should also be addressed.

Niger is, and should continue to be, an important European partner in stabilizing a deteriorating Sahel region, but current nearsighted EU anti-migration policies are not necessarily helpful to that end. Europe’s generous donations, made with a view to externalizing its own border controls, must come with a requirement to accommodate the marginalized northern regions in the current political process and to speed up the necessary reforms. In other words, the EU should not uncritically be propping up a government that some would argue is part of the country’s predicament, but should instead use its major investments in the country as leverage to obtain change and long-term stability.