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I give the floor to Mr. Antil, who will introduce the round table. Then I will follow the order of the agenda we received. Thank you. Mr. Antil, you have the floor.

Alain Antil

Thank you, Mr. President. I do not claim to introduce this round table, which will deal with an extremely wide range of issues. However, I will try to make a connection with what was said at yesterday's plenary session on the Sahel to illustrate a little how West Africa has changed.

The problems in northern Mali began over 10 years ago. African, European and other researchers have produced enough scientific literature by now for us to be able to step back and take a look at the big picture.

As far as the evolution of the situation in the Sahel is concerned, a few lessons can be learned about what has worked and what has not. Many countries in the Sahel have tried policies. Some have utterly failed, and others seem to be working.

I am going to summarize the scientific literature and some of the steps that have been taken. I will make six or seven observations. The first is that the conflict in the Sahel, which is spilling over into other West African states, must not be thought of in terms of international terrorism.

Obviously, the conflict has an international terrorist dimension, but it is only one in a much more complex picture. While the international aspect is present, the powerful forces driving these conflicts from the inside must not be forgotten. They are insurrections that take different forms.

One, but not the only one, is Salafi jihadism. If we look at civilian deaths over the past three or four years, we see that some self-defense militias and armed groups are responsible for many of them. That is the first thing to keep in mind.

The second thing is not to deny the internal roots of the conflicts. It is important to say this, because in the end the outside actors and state actors tend to deny them. The state actors, because this is a way to absolve themselves of their responsibilities. It is convenient to say, "It is fate, it comes from somewhere else," especially when there are reasons to say it.

It also suits the outside actors, because Barkhane certainly would not have had a mandate for anything other than fighting terrorism. If it had been collectively decided that the strife in Mali was an armed uprising against the central state, would or should the French have sent troops there? It is not at all certain.

So, everybody has an interest in defining what is happening in West Africa and the Sahel, especially through convenient definitions. This is nothing new. It has been going on for a long time. We need to take a lucid look at the weaknesses and unheard demands of some parts of the population and at the discrimination against entire regions and communities.

These frustrations can be expressed in a violent manner. Obviously, that is the last resort. There have been warning signs in some countries, and that is how what is happening in the Sahel must be understood. We cannot understand the expansion of the conflict if we do not understand this.

The third lesson is that the military-security response is indispensable – we must not be naïve – but not enough. The other part of the response is not necessarily to say “we are going to increase aid”. If we think a little about what has happened in recent decades, aid can also fuel conflict, especially if the intended beneficiaries find out that the money has lined the pockets of national and local officials.

There has been research on what people living in areas affected by violence expect from the government in Mali. The very least they expect is security forces that keep them safe and courts that hand down fair, uncontested rulings, which is unfortunately not the case in many disputes, especially land disputes in rural areas. Justice and security are essential, even more than aid and development.

The fourth point is that these security responses I just talked about must not lead to more insecurity. Some poorly calibrated military responses in the Sahel countries have actually led to increased violence in certain areas.

This aspect is extremely important because when we think we are killing terrorists in villages that effectively supply terrorists, we radicalize the situation. This is happening, for example, right now in the center of Mali. And some Sahelian countries are more successful than others. So that is not a fatality either. I am not here to preach despair.

The fifth point was mentioned yesterday but I would like to come back to it: thinking that the international community's disorganized response is solely the responsibility of the international community. Here again, this is worth thinking about, because in reality, and we all saw this at the very beginning in the first years of what is happening in Mali, if aid and wartime aid is considered income like any other, it is in a country's interest, if it wants to continue having an income, to have many sources that are not very well coordinated with each other.

I am not saying that all the Sahelian countries did that or those that thought like that still do, but it has been a problem. It has been said in the international community several times. When you look at the early 2010s, there were about 15 Sahel strategies: the World Bank, the European Union, etc. There was not even a common geographical definition of the Sahel.

But this important domestic policy aspect should not be underestimated. The more agencies there are, the less they talk to each other, and the more sources of funding we end up having. It is not in one's interest to have all this coordinated if one sees this aid as an income.

The sixth lesson is the mistake of thinking that this is a temporary crisis that will be resolved in five years. I do not think any of us believe that. However, in any case, we are experiencing a

kind of historical break of several dimensions that combine with each other. There is indeed the question of international terrorism. Nonetheless we can read these revolts as uprisings of the peripheries against the political centers. We can read them as revolts of the countryside against the cities. We can read them as uprisings of yesterday's dominated, i.e., the former servile classes, for example, which are numerous in the Sahel, who are trying to break free from political tutelage in some rural areas, and this can generate violence.

For example, you know as well as I do, or at least all those who know the Sahel know, in some areas, people of servile origin do not have access to land ownership. They remain second-class citizens. People no longer accept these situations.

This is also why some jihadist groups are successful at recruiting. Take, for example, Ansarul Islam, which emerged in Northern Burkina Faso and is linked to Katiba Macina but has its own autonomy. The first recruits were people of servile origin, and their first victims were the elites of their own community.

So, let us not reduce Sahelian problems to inter-community problems. There are also many problems within communities. This is very important, and sometimes they are even more violent.

Finally, and perhaps this point should also be pondered, even though most of the population in the Sahel is horrified by and against the violence of the Salafi jihadists, it is not at all clear that a significant part of the Sahel's population do not agree with their ultimate political goal, that is, to replace the existing political system with something based on religious lines, not just for the sake of religion, but also to have much more acceptable and less corrupt governance.