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Transcript

Growing Instability in the Western Sahel: Experiences and Responses

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Camilla Toulmin:

Well, good afternoon, everybody, and welcome. My name is Camilla Toulmin and I'm the director of a research institute called the International Institute for the Environment and Development – IIED – and I'm particularly glad to have been asked to chair this session on insecurity and instability in the Western Sahel. I went out to do my fieldwork in 1980 to Mali, and I spent two years in a little mud hut up towards the Mauritanian border looking at herders and farmers, and it's been a particular sadness to me that many of the places I used to go have been firmly put off-limits. We're going to get a sense of the current situation, where it stems from, and some of the steps being taken to address that instability from our three speakers today.

The first one is Robert Fowler, who was the former UN special envoy to Niger; he has a 38-year public service career in the Canadian Foreign Service, in the department of external affairs. He was the foreign policy advisor to Prime Ministers [Pierre] Trudeau, [John] Turner, and [Brian] Mulroney; and he was Canada's longest serving ambassador to the United Nations, where he represented Canada on the Security Council in 1999 and the year 2000. More poignantly, perhaps, was that on his travels as special envoy to Niger he was captured, and he was held for 130 days as a hostage in the Sahara Desert. And, I'm extremely glad that he was set free. Not the end that a number of captives have had, and there are a certain number, five being taken most recently.

Robert will be followed by Jérôme Spinoza, who is the head of the Africa Bureau in the French Ministry of Defence, where he's in the directorate for strategic affairs. He's got extensive expertise on political and security issues, particularly in western Africa. He previously served as political advisor in the Ecole [uncertain] task force Côte d'Ivoire, and also participated in EU and OSC election monitoring there and elsewhere.

Those two will be followed by Knox Chitiyo who is at RUSI just down the road, the Royal United Services Institute. Knox will give us a set of reactions to the first two speakers. Knox has been here since 2005, and is the RUSI Africa Fellow, and established the RUSI Africa programme in 2007. Prior to that he was a senior lecturer in History and War Studies at the University of Zimbabwe, and also taught at Zimbabwe Staff College.

So, we have to keep fairly tightly to time, so I'll ask Robert Fowler to come and speak.

Robert Fowler:

Well thank you very much, Camilla and, ladies and gentlemen it's a real pleasure to be here. Thank you for your interest in what we are going to talk about, and for your interest in the Sahel region.

I thought I'd talk to you today a little bit about the experience that Camilla outlined, and then draw some conclusions about my own experience for four and a half months with al-Qaeda, and its possible influence on the region. So I have been, I retired in '06 from the Canadian public service and Foreign Service. In addition to what Camilla told you, and perhaps of some relevance to this story, I also spent nine years in our defence ministry, and, six years as our deputy minister of defence, which is equivalent to your undersecretary; and I only say that because I thought that might have been of relevance to my captors, and I have to say that it wasn't overly... which is probably good for me. So, I'm going to combine both geopolitical and geostrategic observations with more classically defence and anti-terrorist considerations.

I was accompanied in this by my friend and colleague, Louis Guay, a Canadian Foreign Service officer who had extensive experience in Africa – more recently he was our ambassador in Gabon – and he had been loaned to me as a UN employee from Canada to assist in this venture. My mandate as a UN envoy was very simple; it was simply to see if I can [sic] try and convince the Tuareg rebels and the government in Niger to sit down and talk peace; that was it. If they did that, and if they wished the UN to assist at the table, we were prepared to offer all kinds of services to facilitate those negotiations. But the basic mandate was simply to get them to agree to talk.

The rebels in question were those of what was known locally as the Second Tuareg Rebellion. There have been many Tuareg rebellions in this region of the world – which Jérôme will know better than I – this one began in February 2007, it went on 18 months; it was, by most measurements, low key. Three or four hundred people were being killed a year, but it was, basically, locking down the upper four-fifths of the third poorest country in the world. Niger has a population of fifteen or sixteen million. In addition to being the third poorest country in the world, it has the second highest rate of increase in the world. Today's population of 15 million will be 52 million in 39 years, an increase of 250 percent. Today's population; 65 percent of the population today is, in UN-speak, 'food insufficient', a.k.a. starving, and imagine what that will be when it is over 50 million. And that is partly because fate has not dealt the people of Niger a kind hand. No country in the world that I know is suffering more from climate change or global warming than

Niger, although the entire region is similarly afflicted as the Sahara runs southward.

On previous trips, in August and September, and particularly in Europe in October, I had got the rebels to agree to sit down and talk peace with the government, but I could not get the government to agree. They were certainly adamant that peace could not occur, and to go on and on and on constitutionally mandated term and he didn't want to give up power and his army backers didn't want to either.

I have written a book about all this, it was published a month ago – unfortunately only in Canada – and in the book I make very clear that I believe, and I have all kinds of reasons to that it was actually the government of Niger, or some members in the government of Niger, who handed me to al-Qaeda. They thought that if the present Tamer [uncertain] could claim that the enemy was at the very gate of their very capital – we were taken 35km from our hotel – then, indeed, the powers that be in London, Paris, and New York, and Washington would leave him alone as he fought al-Qaeda. This was 500km further south of where al-Qaeda had ever operated before, it was on the 8 percent of the country that is green on the UN map, it is besides the largest military base, we were taken within 4km of the largest prison, and by the way it was right beside a tiny village called Karma.

So, we were grabbed, it was very slick, the whole thing took about 40 seconds, and we headed north for 56 hours or travel, 20 minutes of it were on a road of any kind. We had, in that time, in addition, about 10 hours rest, until we arrived by the Algerian border, 100km north, pretty much at the centre of the Sahara desert. The Sahara is larger than the continental United States. I figured, at one point, that I could probably walk 20km and that would only leave 980 to go. We were not abused – my wife objects strongly when I say that – but we were not tortured or beaten. It was clear to me that it would not take much to bring that on. There was one guy among our captors who would say to us, 'You know, we really would like to be cutting you up into little pieces, but unfortunately the boss won't let us. So, for the time being, we won't do that.'

The greatest asset I had is the fact that my colleague and I worked together. We hadn't known each other terribly well before this, we'd only been working together a few months, we'd joined the Foreign Service at roughly the same time, but we had each other and that was key. We had all kinds of rules about how to behave and keep hope alive. Perhaps the most bizarre one was: 'No talking about bad stuff after lunch.' And the theory there was if we

talked about all the horrible stuff that we thought might be happening we wouldn't sleep very well, and if we didn't sleep very well we would begin the spiral that only went downward. So, I would turn to Louis sort of late in the evening and say, 'Remind me to tell you about this really bad thing tomorrow morning.' And that, therefore, didn't have great affect. We had trouble keeping hope alive, we had each other to talk to about it; we spoke to each other in English hoping to be discrete. We talked to our captors in French, neither of us speaks Arabic beyond a few stock phrases, and they were not interested in teaching us Arabic.

On about day 34, Louis was where Jérôme is and I saw a captor coming where about Alex is, and he had a big book under his arm, and I said to Louis, 'Here comes Omar for a reading,' and Omar said, 'Yes,' in perfect English, 'and I hope you enjoy it more today than you did yesterday.' So, we tried to scroll back among 35 days and tried to remember what other transgressions we may have made in English. Omar spoke – this was Omar One – he spoke seven languages. In general, our captors were, compared to say the Taliban in Afghanistan, our captors were relatively well educated. The officers were Algerian; the sort-of soldiers were from every country in the region. There were 31 of them, one was only seven years old, but he was only there for a very short time. Three of them, voices hadn't broken, but they were very much soldiers, and very scary as such. They would inevitably walk over us instead of around us when we were sleeping, and generally caused us to eat more sand than rice when it came time to feed. And, I'm going to make a couple of comments about who they were and what they want.

They were the most focused group of young men that I have ever encountered in my life. I mentioned earlier, I spent some time in our defence department, and I'm sure British soldiers are not like Canadian soldiers, but Canadian soldiers tend to talk about girls and sports and cars, and all three together if they can manage it. [Laughter] And these guys would not have understood one *syllable* of that discourse, not one syllable. I never saw a woman while I was there, they were not skulking off for R&R on the weekends. They were totally committed to their jihad, they were dressed in rags, they were armed with sort of 1960s vintage Soviet weaponry, and they were anxious to die in their cause. They would say to me repeatedly, 'we fight to die, and you fight to go home to your wives and kids. Guess who is going to win.' They said, they would say, 'We're going to win some and we're going to lose some along the way, but Allah's victory will be ours, it is written, and it doesn't matter if it takes 20, or 200, or 2000 years.' So, imagine, if they'd had a sense of humour – which, I assure you, they did not – they'd

have been rolling around in the sand when they heard President Obama, precisely two years ago, say, 'And therefore we are going to surge by 30,000 in Afghanistan and in 2011 we will start to go home.' Their time frame is very different than that.

They wanted what you all know they wanted – they wanted a grand caliphate, they wanted the umar to be assembled under a group of Islamic sages, they hated with a passion the concepts of liberty and freedom and democracy, and they looked forward to expelling all westerners – western influence – from their lands, from their territory. Finally, they wanted to turn the Sahel into one vast, seething, chaotic Somalia. They said that was their objective, their brothers in al-Shabab in Somalia were achieving exactly what they wished to achieve from Nouakchott to Mogadishu, 7000km-wide of turmoil in which their jihad could grow and prosper.

They were very proud of their spreading links to Boko Haram in Nigeria, they were very proud of their strikes deep into Mauritania, they were proud of their colleagues in al-Shabab reaching into Kenya and Uganda, and they saw this as turning out just the way they hoped it would. So, I fear, that is what they will achieve, and now that they are well-equipped with both sophisticated, and enormous quantities of, Libyan weapons, their threat is much more present, I think. My captor, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, was interviewed two weeks ago in Mauritania, in which he said, 'Well, it's only natural we would have acquired those Libyan weapons.' I have to agree with him, it is only natural they would have acquired those Libyan weapons. And by weapons I'm talking about 20,000 SA-24 missiles, and the Security Council has urged the transitional council in Libya to 'get hold of those weapons'; good luck! But more seriously I'm worried about the vast quantities of heavy mortars, heavy artillery, anti-tank mines two or three of which in the back of a car with half a pound of plastic will make an awfully big mess.

So, thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[Applause]

Camilla Toulmin:

Right, before I ask Jérôme to speak, I didn't read my instructions properly, there are two things I was meant to say in addition: one is, please make sure your mobile phones are switched off, and the other is that the meeting is being held on the record, my apologies for failing to bring that to your attention.

Jérôme Spinoza:

First, my apologies for my bad English, but there was a kind of a misunderstanding with all the crew because I think here it's like in Abu Zeids katibat, you're not allowed to drink any glass of beer or wine. [Laughter] And for Frenchmen it is kind of useful to have a little drink before engaging into English. [Laughter]

Okay, so, I'll try to, well, to picture out the broader panorama than this focus on AQIM [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb], since I guess the issue goes much more beyond the simple terror threat, but it's just a question of vision, of agenda, of temporality. What happened to Ambassador Fowler, what happened to lots of hostages still abducted, to victims of terrorists – which are by the way, for most of them, local forces or people – is a deep concern for us anyway.

So, Sahel. Perhaps, just to begin with, the word; its a kind of Arabic word for shore of the Sahara, obviously, and that word went into French, but the region was also known as French Sudan, twenty or thirty years ago it still was used. So, as was mentioned, there is, more or less, the same situation you can find in Sudan or even in Chad. It's limatic and social way is more or less the same. The region is very poor, development issues are key, that's obvious; instability is on the rise, and I think the point is that without a meaningful policy, this place could, as Ambassador Fowler said, constitute a lasting safe haven for radical Islam, but not only a terrorist one. So the question is how to confirm this trend in a situation where the issue is multilateral and lots of agendas collide, interact, and not always for the best. So my thesis is essentially simple; we have to avoid dead ends, and assure non-duplication, burden sharing, and local appropriation of the problematics [sic], sorry.

So, first point, what issues are we talking about? The security problem was raised by Bob. Well, AQIM is coming from Algeria, but it is now, more or less, an autonomous branch of it, it has its own interests, it tends to go south. You have, at the same time, the Tuareg – or, I would say, the northern communities issue because there are also Arab, Berbish, which are Mauritians – and in some other places you'll also have Tubus in Niger, so how this north-south divide develops into rebellions or tensions. You also have illegal drug traffic, it is also a point where you also have main routes coming from South America going to Europe, going to Asia, of cocaine.

There is also, I mentioned, a second issue and underlying development and governance issue. There are specialists for that here, I won't elaborate on

that; the population is growing, it has scarce [access] to health, to education, there is a field open for the colonisation by a non-statal, political investors like Izala in Niger which tends to be something like a Muslim sect, which obviously doesn't cope with the rather secular – even if it is Islamic – regular state. You have also the question of exploitation of soil, of natural resources. In Mauritania the problem is less intense because it is in the desert, but in Mali, in Niger, the resources lie where you have Tuaregs, basically. So, it's the typical question of oil malediction [sic], but put in another way.

I said that it's a multilateration issue because you have, typically, two transverse security problems colliding. Like extreme left ideology in the 1970s or in the 1980s, the jihadist ideology is not national, it is international, and it has local application points, and then typically you have the situation where in every country you have a problem, but it is linked within a very broad scale. It is the same for international heavy crime, and with cocaine we have a good example for that. So you cannot tackle this issue without being together. You have also more concrete and perhaps less important issues on the political scale like migrations, like refugees et cetera, which are concerns for Maghreb, for us, et cetera. So, for me, two watchwords are 'human security' and 'good governance', for without these watchwords you cannot understand what is going on.

Second idea, I think, to have in mind is that the situation is not improving, because you have three problems. One is the influx of black African refugees from Libya. There has [sic] been a lot of economical [sic] problems due to the end of the income pay back to the country. And lots of places in northern Niger and northern Mali are full of refugees, and, well, this is, I think at the time right now, is not enough taken into the account. Now, AQIM – second idea – AQIM has benefitted, and you told it, from the plundering of Gaddafi's arsenal, weapon depots, sorry. Third idea, the Tuareg game has been reshuffled, they have weapons, they will have more weapons. But now you have people serving in former Khamis legion of Gaddafi that went back to northern Mali, they went through northern Niger. And so, you have a thousand-men strong army, [inaudible]; they will intimidate the Malian president. You have also the fact that the Tuaregs are divided among themselves, which brings it to be very complicated.

So, the second thing that leads me to say that it is not improving, you have AQIM that is continuing to benefit from a safe haven situation because when you look at who engages AQIM, you have Mauritaniens who do the job, you have Niger security folk who do the job also. The Algerians don't move out of the country even if they have the joint headquarters in Tamanrasset, which

hasn't proved to be very operational. Then you have the Malians who are quite ambiguous, and I will not elaborate on that.

Then you have the fact that AQIM delivers welfare, it does more or less like the Hamas did in the – the Hezbollah, sorry – in Lebanon, it brings in social welfare where it lives, and where the state doesn't bring in anything. So, it is kind of a state as continuation of organized crime of the Sahara, in a way. And they marry, also, with local tribes. Second problem, because I said there is a kind of north-south divide, perhaps if you look at the map you will see the south is very populous and the north is scarcely populous. In the north you have the radical Islam with AQIM; in the south where, I would say, in a rather caricature way, you have 'black people' and not Arab or Tuareg, you have also a kind of home-grown radicalism which is growing. We begin to see signs in Mali, perhaps in Niger, perhaps in Senegal, and that links also to what is happening in northern Nigeria. So, we could have, in the future, a kind of AQIM, a kind of al-Qaeda in the Islamic style linking back to the Fulani Jihad.

My last point will be what is being done... what can be done better, sorry. Well, obviously we have to act quickly; we have to act in support of local initiatives. And the problem is, to be very brief, at the time being no institutions provide a clear or an ideal base for handling. We have ECOWAS that is not functional; you don't have Mauritania nor Algeria on. CEN-SAD, the old Gaddafi structure is now dead, and if it is not dead, Algeria is not a part of it. The agencies like the UNODC and other agencies are only working on, or may only be working on sectorian approaches. Bilateral partners like American and France: everyone is focusing on every country in a diverse manner and with diverse means.

Last thing to show; it is complicated, you have also regional tensions, I mean, it is not a secret for anyone that Libya, Algeria, and Morocco have sometimes problems with each other, and that's a kind of backyard for these policies. Amongst Sahel states relations are sometimes tense, see the Malian and Mauritanian words exchanged beginning of that year.

So a pragmatic approach. I said burden sharing and non-duplication, there is also space for everyone. How can we do that? Well, France, for instance, where I come from, has tried to organize a strategy in order to have a coherent approach for Mauritania, for Mali, for Niger, which addresses more or less the same structural deficits, or needs, or – sorry, my English. At the same time it has engaged on a diplomatic basis with northern Africans, with

the European partners, with the North American partners, yes, with Canadians, but also with Americans. So also, things are organized.

In this perspective, perhaps I can end with, perhaps a little focus on two things [that] I think, are worth mentioning: it is the local initiative that was initiated by Algeria, with Mali, Niger, and Mauritania in 2009. This kind of intergovernmental approach is rather a security approach, they have created a joint headquarters in Tamanrasset; they have a joint fusion cell for intelligence in Algeria, that could be marvellous too. Perhaps it's not open enough because Morocco and Libya are not part of that, but that's another problem. The day it will become really operational, I think that could be a good thing.

Another initiative which is I think very important, is the EU Strategy for Development and Security in the Sahel [sic], which was presented earlier this year in Brussels. Unfortunately Manuel Lopez Blanco should have come today, but cannot be here because he has got the four ministers of the four states I mentioned in Brussels. But, to be brief, the EU wants also to invest in development, in rule of law, in security – but not military – but the rule of law and security... And the EU strategy has this interesting... that it is non-duplicating with member states, it is typically the global approach of the EU, which comes from the Lisbon Treaty. It tries to bridge the deficits of EU member states to invest on specific projects that will add value, and to build up this approach in close partnership with EU member states, some of them like France, Spain, the Netherlands in Mali, even Belgium, are quite present there. And with other community-run instruments, like what is done in the commission with the EDF, or also a problem that could be funded by the instrument for stability. Like, and I'll finish on that, like what you have with the initiative between Algeria and its neighbours, for the EU the problem is to be more concrete – not on the development issue, that is fine – but on the rule of law and security aspects. And I think that is the exact point discussed now in Brussels.

I'm sorry it's not very funny what I told you, it is rather technocratic, but, well, it is the state of the art, and thank you very much.

[Applause]

Camilla Toulmin:

Thank you, and now let me call Knox to act as discussant, and you've got ten minutes, Knox.

Dr Knox Chitiyo:

Thank you very much. I'd just like to thank Chatham House for offering me the opportunity to share a panel with such august speakers. I don't claim any great expertise in Sahel Sahara – I've been to the region a few times on various different things, but I think our speakers here know a great deal more about the area than I do. I'll try and summarize some of what has been said, and also perhaps give a little bit of a perspective from the wider African perspective.

To start with, Rob. I think, really, Robert said, I think he did a key speech, really grounded it in his personal experiences of what it is like to be taken captive, to be held hostage, and have that tremendous personal insecurity, and I think really, we would really commend Robert for describing a harrowing experience in a very, almost relaxed style. But I think it really gives, caps on what it is like to be captive, and also gives us some idea of who these people are, what are some of their grievances, how do they see themselves in relation to their struggle – they feel it's a completely just struggle, a jihad – completely anti-western. It raises a number of fundamental questions with regards to negotiations: if you're going to engage in, sort of, counter-terrorism, how do you go about? Is there any chance of real negotiations, or mediated, or peaceful resolution to the Sahel Sahara security situation? I think Robert's personal experience gives us a lot of insight on this.

And, when he says they are the most focused group of young men, again, that raises a lot of interesting questions. If the hostage takers are that focused where they are not interested in anything else other than the immediate situation, the immediate struggle, does the same apply to the forces that are reined against them? Can the same be said for the government forces and so on and so forth? Are they in the same ballpark? I think Robert has raised a fundamental question, and this is something that has been raised a number of times: how committed actually are the government and other forces in the Sahel Sahara to the struggle against AQIM and other insurgent groups? So, I think that is a very, very important point.

And the point you raised about them wanting to turn the region, to turn the Sahel Sahara into something similar to Somalia, again is very sobering, and certainly food for thought. You point out that they are now well equipped with weapons from Libya, in fact both speakers raised this, and again this is something which is very, very troubling. It's not as if the region didn't have a [incoherent] or weapons already, but with now the Libyan situation it is going

to be incredibly difficult to have any kind of arms control, trying to find out where the weapons are, what is happening to them. And, as you pointed out they are likely to have a heavy calibre weapon as well, which may change the type of warfare which is being, or going to be waged, or it will certainly allow the insurgents to develop their capacities and move from small insurgent groups, highly mobile warfare perhaps, to a more traditional warfare, or go between both types of warfare. So I think Robert has done us a great service by melding his personal experiences with a wider kind of perception of the threats and challenges which are now faced by the region, and they are very severe threats and challenges.

Jérôme gave us an excellent overview in a very short space of time. It was very un-sentimental, very to the point. And you did talk about the issues, you gave us some insights into the various groups, it's not just about AQIM, there are a number of insurgent groups, [inaudible] the Tuareg. And so, we're talking about both AQIM, we're talking about a transnational group, and we're talking about linkages between the various groups.

You talked about the refugees, and migration, also an issue, and I think that's an important point, it's not simply about security and guns and weapons, there is wider issues as well with regards to the Sahel Sahara, that is environmental issues, refugees, the fall of the Gaddafi regime. The transformation of Libya has meant that a lot of migrant workers have returned home, and that the stoppage of remittances is itself now going to be an issue in the region – it will effect the economies in the Sahel Sahara, perhaps quite profoundly, and that may, in turn, impact on the security situation. So that is an important point. You raised the point about what can be done and you were very forthright about the necessity for burden sharing, and what France is trying to do. Algeria has come in as well to try and organize some kind of joint approach, because, really, if there is going to be any kind of success in counter-terrorism it will have to be through some kind of multilateral joint approaches. The EU has also brought in its approaches on development, because, of course, development is a corner stone, is one of the corner stones, in terms of dealing with insurgency.

I think from – if I may range a little bit further – I think from a wider African perspective, the Sahel Sahara is one of the issues which, I think, perhaps needs a little bit more prioritisation in terms of the wider African security standpoint. We tend to obsess a great deal with the Horn of Africa, with east Africa, to some lesser extent, perhaps, southern Africa as well; but certainly I think Sahel Sahara is a major, major security issue. And it is likely that is going to become a transnational issue, which may, we may have a major

security issue that stretches from Mali/Mauritania all the way, perhaps, to Somalia if we have joined-up transnational insurgent groups: al-Shabab, Boku Haram, and the Sahel Sahara groups. So, there is the potential here of perhaps the joining up either formerly or informally of various groups.

I think one of the things that perhaps may come up in the questions and answers is, really, who are these people and what really are their grievances, what is driving them? Perhaps to try and fill in, which our speakers have touched on, but one of the ways of trying to develop a strategy is we need to understand: Who are these groups? What is it that they want? And, I think that is an essential issue, because we often have a very hollowed out picture of who the insurgents are, and I think we really need to understand who they are and what their grievances are. Whether there will be a comprehensive approach in terms of counter-terrorism, it remains to be seen, and if so, how would that actually operate?

Personally, I think things have improved in terms of the Sahel Sahara since the Algiers conference in 2010, where, that was kind of a low point. I think the region is now groping towards a more integrated approach, but I think there still needs to be a lot to be done [sic] in terms of having some agreements on ransoms and so on and so forth. But I think our speakers have, in a very short space of time, touched upon a number of which we will hopefully elaborate on in the Q&A. Thank you.