The Sahara desert stretching between Mali and Libya is a backwater stretch of land that is largely ungoverned, unpaved and uncharted. In 2014, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the European Union’s Frontex monitored a massive movement of 40,000-80,000 people transiting through Agadez, Niger en route to Europe via Libya. The number of people passing through the city was expected to rise upwards of 150,000 in 2015. The bulk of these migrants are departing from cities in Niger, Mali and Algeria and smuggled on overcrowded 4x4 trucks, on a three-day journey across the desert. In June, IOM was discovering nearly 50 bodies a week in the desert, from trucks that failed to make the trip successfully to Libya due to weather, technical malfunctions or interception by armed groups and sub-state violence. The biggest issue faced by the humanitarian community currently is that there is a critical lack of data, mapping out the movement of migrants across the desert, mostly because in order to migrate successfully, these people require the ability to move unregulated and unmonitored. This map overlays conflict intensity zones with the Migrant Routes. GIS technology will visually map where the conflict zones are located, where the global war on terror’s interest in laying conflict intensity zones with the Migrant Routes. GIS technology will visually map out where the hotspots are located, and how this impacts vulnerable populations. The purpose of this map was to show how large the population in need is in the region, and where the sedentary needs-based communities are largely located (as compared to the mobile ones in the migrant maps).

Security Operations and Violence

This map reviews the location of security operations in the region, based on open source data. Counter violent extremism, or CVE programming, is a dovetailed initiative that combines security sector reforms, border controls, development programming and humanitarian assistance in order to mitigate the root causes of extremism in communities that are prone to sub-state violence and radicalization. CVE programs in the Sahel are largely being implemented by the European Union, with aid for programming coming from the U.S. Department of State through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership. The visualization below is intended to show how the migrant routes are juxtaposed against the CVE programs. Since a critical component of these programs is to create more resilient border security in these weak states where borders are largely porous and ostensibly irrelevant constructs to those who live there, any securing of the border, in an attempt to “contain” migration (in addition to containing terrorism), will inevitably create more vulnerabilities for an already vulnerable group of people (the irregular and forced migrants that are using these routes).

Vulnerable Populations and Aid Actors

This visual showcases the presence of refugee populations in Sahelian States (data taken from UNHCR) and locations the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance operational offices. The conflict data is again included here in order to highlight where the hotspots are located, and how this impacts vulnerable populations. The purpose of this map was to show how large the population in need is in the region, and where the sedentary needs-based communities are largely located (as compared to the mobile ones in the migrant maps).

Migrant Routes Against Conflict

The map above examines the intersection of conflict and migrant routes in the Sahel. The security and humanitarian actors (state and international) lack knowledge of the movement of migrants, non-state armed groups, and vulnerable populations in the region. And these operators are mindfully aware that there is an absence of visual and subject-matter knowledge on what is actually occurring on the ground in the Sahel desert. This is further muddled by the fact that law enforcement and government officials are mostly corrupted by the industry and complicit in participating in the smuggling of migrants across the desert; the $323 million industry represents an informal economic incentive that helps to drive this industry, and corrupt formal networks of both regular migration and border security. This inadvertently creates more security and intelligence gaps for the humanitarian and security operators due to a lack of clarity on numbers of people, transactional data and other information that is required to target terrorists and differentiate them from vulnerable migrants.

Results

These maps explore the proximity relationship between the movement of migrants across borders in the Sahel, with that of armed groups, and how this mobility is overlaid with conflict and international security and humanitarian action. There’s a significant amount of information about the informal economy that surrounds the migrant journey in this region, and more information about the movement and activities of armed groups. However little data exists about this intersection of movement. UNODC has documented the pyramidal hierarchy of the human smuggling industry in the region, and through their 2014 report, the link between terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the smuggling industry is becoming more clear. Therefore the purpose of mapping this relationship is to provide a visual for the proximity of conflict, terrorist activity and migrants, to highlight the inherent relationship between them.

Cartographer: Aneliese Bernard
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Projection: Africa_Albers_Equal_Area_Conic
Sources: Global Terrorism Database, ACLED, OCHA, UNCHR, World Bank, Humanitarian Data Exchange, UNODC, Frontex, IOM, ICRC