**Militarism and its Limits: Sociological Insights on Security Assemblages in the Sahel**

**Abstract**

This article assesses the concepts of militarism and militarization in relation to contemporary security interventions in the Sahel, a region increasingly understood through the prisms of violence, cross-border illicit flows, and limited statehood. This region is subject to security interventions including regional French military action, EU-funded projects to prevent drug trafficking, and bilateral efforts against irregular migration. To many observers, it is experiencing an ongoing militarization. We argue that while the inextricable concepts of militarism and militarization go some way to explaining interventions’ occasional use of military violence, they are limited in their grasp of the non-martial and symbolic violence in security practices. We instead propose a focus on assemblages of (in)security to grasp the logics of symbolic and martial violence in the region as well as the heterogeneous mix of global and local actors, rationalities, and practices. Throughout, the article draws on the authors’ fieldwork in Mauritania, Senegal, and Niger, and includes two cases on efforts against the Sahel’s ‘crime-terror nexus’ and to control irregular migration through the region. The article’s contribution is to better situate debates about militarism and militarization in relation to (in)security, and to provide a more granular understanding of the Sahel’s security politics.

**Keywords:** militarism; militarization; (in)security; Sahel; intervention; assemblages

**Introduction**

The Sahel region straddling West and North Africa is heavily securitized in both discourse and practice. African and Western actors portray this space as one of crisis, uncertainty, illicit flows, and terrorism. For nearly two decades, these actors have used military interventions, capacity-building projects, regional intelligence coordination, and international policing operations, and law enforcement training to better govern (in)security in this space. The nature of policy responses to conflict, organized crime, and other security issues like irregular migration have given traction to academic and policy uses of the terms ‘militarism’ and ‘militarization’ to describe the situation in the Sahel and Africa more broadly. This article draws on contemporary debates about militarism and militarization and asks two things: first, how these concepts help us to grasp intervention activities in the Sahel’s increasingly globalized space, and second, the extent to which alternative conceptual framings like ‘(in)security’ complement or replace militarism and militarization.

Literature on militarism understands it primarily as a representational phenomenon: the term describes beliefs supportive of the efficacy and value of military influence, solutions, and perpetual preparation for war, whilst also naming the forms of societal organization these emerge from and underpin (Mann 2003; Bernazzoli and Flint 2009; Shaw 2013). Militarization, on the other hand, refers to the qualitative and quantitative expansion and absorption of these military practices, modes of social organization, and discourses (Henry and Higate 2011, 134-136; Enloe 2016, 11). We do not contest the broad thrust of these definitions. However, we find them most analytically useful when understood in relation to a spectrum of violence rooted in the concept of (in)security. Our approach adopts the view that “security claims, even the most benign, imply a struggle around the legitimacy of some ambiguous practices involving violence or control of an actor’s behaviour” (Bigo, 2016; see Côté-Boucher et. al. 2014). The conversation between militarism/militarization and (in)security is therefore best understood in relation to a continuum of violences ranging from the symbolic to the coercive, destructive, and martial — all of which imply some social struggles over both the constitution of threat(s) and legitimate responses to it (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004; Cramer 2007: 84-86).

Militarism and militarization have variable analytical utility to understand *some* of the growing intervention practices in the Sahel. We consider ‘militarism’ helpful to understand the fetishization of the state’s organized coercive capacities, and ‘militarization’ a way of grasping intervention practices’ shift towards martial violence. Our view is that ‘militarization’ does not account for the forms of symbolic violence that fall under the more elastic concept of security. The need for a lens focused on assemblages of (in)security arises from the Sahel’s complex mix of actors, rationales, and modes of deploying various types of violence. This view accounts for the texture of intervention practices in the Sahel through its sociological emphasis on competing practices and logics of security. The article draws on the authors’ original multi-sited fieldwork carried out with actors working against a ‘crime-terror nexus’ and irregular migration across the Sahel. This includes a pool of individual and common interviews carried out in Senegal, Mauritania, and Niger. Faced with practices of intervention that transcend “methodological nationalism” (see Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012: 15), our multi-sited approach blends at once the diversity of empirical subject matter as well as the rigour of triangulating multiple sources. In turn, this multi-sited ethnography provides a granular approach to assess the limits of militarism and militarization in the Sahel.

The article proceeds in four parts. The first section provides an overview of the literature we draw on and critique, laying out the relationship between concepts of militarism, militarization, and security. It argues that militarism and security are tightly linked even though concepts such as ‘insecurity’ capture a broader range of practices of violence. The section that follows it establishes some of the limits of militarism as a descriptor for contemporary intervention practices in the Sahel, arguing that its foundational assumption of constant war preparation is too narrow, that key actors in interventions actively struggle against militarization, and that the sociological complexity of assemblages of intervention undermines smooth movements to and from militarism/militarization. The third and fourth sections turn to the ‘crime-terror nexus’ and irregular migration respectively. In both areas, assemblages of intervention call on elements of militaristic or militarized violence but these coexist with and are constrained by practices rooted in symbolic — rather than martial — forms of violence.

**Militarism, militarization, and (in)security**

Militarism and militarization exist in a common web of meanings in relation to each other and to other concepts like security. Many of the most convincing articulations of these concepts and their political implications come from interdisciplinary research. Feminist accounts stress that militarization involves the encroaching ideological mindsets that justify and normalize military methods, necessarily occurring “through the gendered workings of power” required by war and state-making (Enloe, 1993: 246; Sjoberg and Via, 2010). Political geographers agree, and present militarism as an ideology that prioritizes military response to conflict resolution, and militarization as the multidimensional processes involved in gaining “acceptance for the use of military approaches to social problems” (Rech et al. 2015, 48). Thus, militarism has pervasive and multi-scalar qualities. It emerges in the everyday practices of nation-building and citizenship as ordinary people come to take war for granted, and view the pursuit of militaristic ideals as a normal aspect of citizenship (Flusty et al 2008; Graham 2009; Dowler 2012; Cowen and Gilbert 2008). Most importantly for our argument, these veins of scholarship lay bare the problematic binaries associated with liberal thought: assumptions about public/private realms of political activity, state/non-state actors, civilian/military spheres, and most crucially moments of either peace/war.

The sheer breadth of disciplines and perspectives contributing to work on militarism and militarization has resulted in overly broad usages of these terms. For instance, Enloe (2016) sets out a vision of militarism so expansive — defined as any relationship that justifies, prioritizes, or sustains military influences — as to make *any* practice struggle to escape the label. While such accounts capture the vulnerability of social life to military mindsets, institutions, and practices, they overestimate the smoothness of militarism and suggest that challenges to its domination are few and far between.

Arguments regarding foreign power involvement in Africa are often especially broad. Some see militarization in the EU’s funding and training of armed anti-poaching units in the DR Congo as part of broader conservation efforts (Marijnen 2017). Elsewhere, one finds dramatic claims of African states fabricating terrorist events and rebellions in league with US officials to justify increased American military involvement on the continent (Keenan 2008). Other authors unhelpfully use militarization as a placeholder to describe the involvement of foreign military agencies in development or diplomatic work (Constantinou and Opondo, 2016) without unpacking the meanings and contradictions of military actors’ engagements in non-martial practices. While we are sympathetic to the critiques the term ‘militarization’ is wielded to make, we are hesitant to see such simple claims about the implantation of martial practices and mindsets in African recipients of international intervention (see Charlton and May 1989). This is not to say that processes of militarization are not occurring in Africa or elsewhere (Kruijt and Koonings, 2013; Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2016). Rather, we argue there are competing processes that contest and contradict militaristic tendencies which are nevertheless premised and framed as ‘security.’

The conceptual interlinkage of militarism and (in)security runs deep; many make it explicit in their work. Eichler (2012) finds that states rely on militarized masculinity to sustain claims to provide security. Enloe maintains, “security does not have to be militarized,” and instead extols a “more human-centered notion of security” (2016: 12, 58-59). Åhäll states that “the ideology of militarism is about the reproduction of war”, but also notes that it is a “security practice” (2016: 161). Basham’s view of war and military power sees these as the “outcome of multiple, diffuse and competing forms of insecurity” (this issue). Others call for an awareness of the spatial dynamics of militarism because it increasingly “divests its ‘military-ness’ amongst a growing, global culture of ‘security’ (Rech et. al. 2015: 57). Despite skepticism towards security studies in the literature on militarism, the concept of security lingers, suggesting possibilities of a fruitful conversation between concepts if on the right terms.

We find that the concept of (in)security captures a broader range of forms of violence and control than militarism and militarization alone. While Stavrianakis and Selby (2013: 10-11) thoughtfully critique securitization theory (and security studies more broadly) for side-stepping of “the problem of militarism and militarization”, we argue that the concept of (in)security retains a greater analytical scope due to its elasticity and ambiguity. This conceptual flexibility has been central to the critical security studies project, which has sought to unearth the politics of security and demonstrate the performative effects of appeals to it (Browning and McDonald 2013). Indeed, critical approaches to security emerged partly as a critique of state-centrism and the threat that states and militaries themselves historically constitute for ordinary people (Krause and WIlliams 1997). While the logics underpinning security differ based on social and historical context, it has nevertheless become *the* “master narrative” used by political actors to shape our very conceptions of what types of violence are considered ‘legitimate’ and who gets to enact or experience them (Neocleous 2008). The full diversity of visions of security, from rationalist approaches to those shaped by critical theory or poststructuralism, all take this concept as a potent force that shapes our imaginaries and orders social relations. Security, as a tool for political mobilization, defends and constitutes some representations of threat (and particular responses to it) while sidelining others, allowing a range of actors to call upon it to justify their pool of (violent) policy responses.

Using (in)security enables us to speak about a broader range of violences than militarism and militarization can. These concepts’ performative potential is limited as “in militarization, militarism is extended, in demilitarization, it contracts” (Shaw 2013: 20). Their “register of meaning” (Huysmans 1998), therefore, remains inelastic regardless of whether militarism is defined as ideological mindsets or more sociologically as the practices that normalize preparation for war and organized political violence (Stavrianakis and Selby 2013: 5). Security, by contrast, remains open to constant actor (re)appropriation, contestation, and transformation of its core meanings, related practices, and technologies. For example, Abrahamsen (this issue) shows empirically how the increase in armed conflict, criminality and ‘disorder’ in much of the underdeveloped world following the Cold War provided an opportunity for new actors — development *and* military — to seize on security and equate it with underdevelopment to justify new types of intervention in the Global South, many of which display militarized characteristics (see Duffield 2001). The elasticity of the concept of security broadens one’s view of threats, as well as “the actors or objects that are threatened... [including]... actors and objects well beyond the military security of the territorial state,” but not to the exclusion of them either (Williams 2003: 513). It is precisely this panoply of actors, practices, logics, and technologies to which we turn next.

**The limits of militarism: assemblages of intervention in the Sahel**

Recent work on security has used the metaphor of ‘assemblage’ to capture the complexity of global transformations in security provision and intervention (see Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011; Bachmann et al., 2014). (In)security ‘assemblages’ are composed of a host of different types and sets of actors (police, military, developmental, diplomatic, informal, illicit, etc.), representing diverse scales of political action, cooperating and competing over their diverse threat framings, and appropriate security responses. This means that interventions are often too fragmented for a single direction of travel towards martial violence — militarization — to hold for long. Within this shifting, fragmented assemblage space, competing logics, practices, and materials often results in lack of cooperation between actors and the failure of their objectives. This hampers militarization without undermining *security* intervention. As one interlocutor said, “we are faced [...] with the fragmentation of intervention, and the limitation of the scale of intervention. In the end, this limits the duration of impact”. The complex and fragmented nature of these assemblages of intervention often acts as a brake on militarism and militarization yet remains firmly within the logic of (in)security politics.

Statebuilding interventions in the Sahel are characterized by relations between global and local, state and non-state actors based on asymmetrical power relations and competing (often contradictory) understandings of threat. While responses to these cross-border issues remain contested, interveners position ‘(in)security’ as the diagnosis for the ills the Sahel represents, and expanding state capacity as the panacea to this situation of quotidian violent fluidity between war and peace (see Debos 2016). If security is the result of competing claims and categorisations of threats, the expansion of violent martial practices remains a distinct possibility. Yet interventions in the Sahel more often emphasize the development of routines, practices, and mentalities that place significant limits on militarization, but are nevertheless understood as contributing to security. It is true that some practices, such as rapid reaction tactical training or the organization of mobile border patrol units, rely on martial logics that justify the use of violent coercion despite originating in civilian agencies. However, others rely on more pastoral logics, like military actors’ training to evaluate the needs and well-being of refugee populations. The transboundary nature of threats makes purely militarized responses by politico-military elites either difficult or undesirable. Rather, their borderless qualities give rise to calls for new forms of *security* governance that are equally transboundary. For instance, policymakers critique over-militarized responses to drug trafficking-related violence, and instead call for for ‘comprehensive solutions’, cooperation, and coordination operating at multiple levels across West Africa (Cockayne and Williams, 2009). This produces contestation over who experiences which types of violence, how it should be meted, and by whom. Where militarization occurs, it is only one of many contested pushes and pulls.

Intervention efforts are rooted in a security logic that supports the objectives of extending the bureaucratic and infrastructural powers of Sahelian states, rather than solely their martial logics (see Sandor 2016). The utility of using ‘militarism’ to understand responses to insecurity in the Sahel, therefore, does not flow from its limited definition as the glorification of the war, but rather from its broader concern with the fetishization of state coercive power. Interveners in the Sahel are engaged in what Kraska’s view of militarism understands as the “glorification of the tools and bureaucracies that perpetuate organized state violence” (1996: 407), but the effects of their interventions on how state violence is justified and enacted are elastic and adaptable. Interventions buttress the symbolic violence of the state through capacity-building initiatives aimed at policing and justice agencies to maintain social order, whilst also calling on martial violences on the battlefield. These agencies *govern* as well as violently repress ‘non-traditional’ security threats like organized crime, irregular migration, and terrorism.

The range of international actors pursuing intervention activities in the Sahel is staggering. France, the US, EU, Interpol, UN agencies, most Western European states, Canada, Japan, Turkey, Algeria, and more, have all introduced some form of security-related programming and statebuilding activity. These interventions seek to strengthen the capacities of states’ justice and security sectors against non-traditional security concerns, through assistance on police decentralization, border security, counter-terrorism, counter transnational organized crime, peacebuilding, border community resilience, human rights, and governance and the rule of law. These forms of security cooperation are often very small-scale, with multi-year budgets often below €10 million, yet are underpinned by a conviction that small-scale interventions have a multiplier effect on states’ capacities for maintaining order. Even small projects driven by a staff of half a dozen can reshape a police agency’s entire training curriculum; one embedded ‘mentor’ in a justice or interior ministry can articulate new understandings of (in)security, shift material and symbolic resources through training projects, and impact everyday practice through changes to laws and the creation of new specialized law enforcement units.

In some cases, discourses that hint at militarized response run into the limits of what is possible in practice. Intervention activities in the Sahel are frequently underpinned by notions of ‘crisis management,’ ‘resilience,’ and ‘stability’ yet the bar for martial interventions that espouse kinetic coercive action are considered too politically and logistically difficult to be the norm. For example, France’s Operation Serval in Mali required extensive French lobbying of international  partners to accept the possibility of military intervention (Charbonneau and Sears, 2014). Even simple training for Sahelian militaries has been a delicate political and diplomatic issue for many international actors given human rights concerns and the involvement of local officers in coup d’états. Focusing solely on interventions like the annual US Flintlock exercises, or the French army’s regional counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane, both of which ostensibly premise the coercive and martial capacities of state institutions like militaries, obscures the impacts of more widespread and commonplace practices of capacity-building for state security institutions for Sahelian countries. These fetishize the coercive apparatuses of Sahelian states, but nevertheless centre on developing arrangements that redefine what is considered ‘appropriate’ means of enacting coercion in security provision.

The very *appearance* of militarization is something global and local security actors in the Sahel work strategically and sincerely to avoid, through the reaffirmation of practices that reinforce civilian control and symbolic forms of state violence. In March 2016, a month before presidential elections, the Nigerien government asked the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission to provide the country’s internal security forces with riot control equipment and training. Mission officials refused and reiterated their mandate to only strengthen Niger’s security institutions in the fight against terrorism and organized crime. The mission perceives anything that leans towards militarized forms of ‘regime security’ (see Hills, 2000) as worthy of strict resistance in the name of protecting the civilian and technical nature of its capacity-building interventions. Assistance leaning towards the martial — training in battle tactics or the provision of lethal equipment — is limited and accompanied by managerial and technocratic practices emphasizing the legitimacy of civilian and bureaucratic control. In Mali, one of the European Union Military Training Mission’s (EUTM) ongoing projects is the installation and development of a centralized human resources system for the Malian army, which EUTM staff view as necessary for the country’s long-term security. Similarly, the EU’s Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) is considered by EU staff working in the Sahel as a bridge between the EU’s foreign relations, development, and humanitarian efforts. In the world of security cooperation specifically, officials in European Union delegations — distinct from those at CSDP missions — strongly emphasize the distinction between *sécurité intérieure* and *défense*. Even though the logic of ‘interior’ security assistance emerges from internationalized police practice, tendencies to fully ‘merge’ police and military activities are tempered. The emphasis officials place on where assistance *doesn’t* end up testifies to a resistance to visible support to militarization.

**Governing the ‘crime-terror nexus’**

Examining the so-called ‘crime-terror nexus’ in the Sahel highlights the limits of militarism as a concept and practice in this assemblage of intervention. International actors converged around the proposition that Sahelian armed groups had developed extensive links with actors in the international drug trade. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in December 2012, “several hundred heavily armed individuals are connected to the traffic of hostages and drugs… If we leave them alone, it is the entirety of Africa, West and East, and Europe that are threatened… we must act” (Barluet 2012). Within weeks, the French military had intervened in Mali to drive out Islamist insurgents that had advanced to the centre of the country. By August 2014, the Serval intervention was regionalized - ‘Opération Barkhane’ - to include military counter-terrorism operations in all of the G5 Sahel countries. The counter-terrorism activities of the French are supported by US military logistical cooperation which includes drone surveillance, in addition to bilateral military cooperation with Canadian and European troops to train and equip the Malian and Nigerien militaries. These trends indicate a rise of militarization in the Sahel. Indeed, French troops have argued that their role in the Sahel is to ‘mow the lawn’ - to hunt down and kill terrorists, highlighting mindsets that sponsor recourse to violent coercive action.

However, the logics at play in Opération Barkhane suggest it negotiates the crime-terror nexus by limiting the scope of violent intervention, and attempting to pair it with humanitarian work (see Gilbert 2015). Barkhane officials do not view military action as the appropriate response to *all* suspicious flows, but carefully select moments of coercive violence. The geographical scope of its interventions is limited to northern, desert regions of the Sahel, though this has expanded recently to the central regions of Mali in response to new armed groups. The mission has avoided intervention in Niger’s southeastern Diffa region, home to Boko Haram’s crossborder incursions, which suggests that arguments about a total militarization of the Sahel are wide of the mark. While Barkhane remains a militarized intervention, its coercive practices are often contradictory and fused with development work such as digging wells and providing medical assistance to northern populations (Ministère de la Défense, 2016). The mission’s practices lie at various points along the spectrum of coercive to symbolic violence, as the French military justifies development-like practices as enhancing the security of nomadic populations who would otherwise support — or suffer at the hands of — armed jihadist groups. Barkhane’s legal officials also verify the well-being of suspects they have arrested for ties to such groups, or networks trafficking weapons once these are turned over to Malian and Nigerien authorities. They then work with specialized prosecutors in follow-up legal investigations, suggesting the need to pursue and support practices of social control instead of militarization. Barkhane’s willingness to project coercive practices is also restrained by local economic dynamics. While surveilling borderzones like the Salvador Pass connecting Algeria, Niger, and Libya, Barkhane does not impede migrants on their northward travels. It rarely intervenes to arrest drug traffickers (and even rely on some for their operations) — even though many international actors consider this necessary for European security.  On closer examination, Opération Barkhane’s objectives include and at times combine martial practices with practices of social control and policing in its stabilization efforts to reinforce the Sahel’s security (see Bachmann, 2014).

Instead of pursuing militarized responses to the crime-terror nexus, capacity-builders stress bureaucratization, procedural efficiency, community involvement, and civilian control of the region’s security institutions. Civilian security capacity-building missions like EUCAP Sahel in Niger and Mali are justified as crucial components of the EU’s actions against “instability in the Sahel and the cross-border nature of the security threats” by offering “natural synergies and complementarities” with longer term security and development efforts. With over 30 security experts in Niger alone, and a significantly larger budget than other capacity-building efforts, EUCAP Sahel’s impact comes from its ability to foster novel practices that blur policing and military rationales and responsibilities, and rescale security practices and institutions. The mission has instigated the development of specialized regional security coordination units known as *‘Postes de commandements mixtes*’. These joint command units combine elements from intelligence services, law enforcement agencies, and military units, placing them in direct communication with regional governors and councils to respond to “crisis events” like the armed attacks in Arlit, Agadez, and Niamey’s prison in 2013. Most of these command posts were furnished with communications equipment by international actors like EUCAP Sahel, who also provided vehicles and refurbished offices. EUCAP and Nigerien officials justify these activities under the rationale of expanding the capacity of the state to respond to insecurity, thereby fetishizing its coercive apparatuses. Yet these interventions are coupled with large scale of training activities for the country’s security and justice actors, which stress the limits of acceptable use of coercive violence. The EUCAP mission has trained over 7,000 Nigerien justice and security officials alone. This highlights the dominant logic of the mission: the mitigation of risks and dangers of organized crime and terrorism by enhancing Niger’s stabilization capacities. This is achieved through bureaucratic activities like conducting training workshops to teach legal procedures, or by developing the security agencies’ human resources practices. EUCAP Sahel officials are very sensitive to how their assistance is used, and keep capacity-building training premised on the need to place limits on the coercive and violent capacities of security agencies. While they insist that any tool or technique could theoretically militarize Niger’s security practices (especially as its counter-terrorism units are trained in tactical entry and counter-insurgency) their training and communication with Nigerien security actors pushes against solely pursuing violent coercion in response to security concerns. Instead, the pedagogical approach stresses procedural, regularized, and technocratic methods sensitive to risks and uncertainties, founded on rationales of social control and support of the symbolic violence and order-maintenance of the Nigerien state; (in)security rather than militarism.

International intervention against Boko Haram in Niger operates in the gap between non-intervention and militarized counterinsurgency, and highlights the limits of militarism by falling back onto practices of social control and policing. French security liaisons and EUCAP Sahel officials insist that armed jihadist group tactics challenge visions of where social control practices end and counterinsurgency/militarized coercive violence begin. Thus, international and Nigerien responses to insurgent violence along Niger’s southern border does not always entail martial practices. Niger’s army, for one, has adapted its use of military violence to accommodate and pursue civilian forms of law enforcement, requesting aid from interveners to learn how to do so. Since December 2014, when Boko Haram activities increased significantly, international actors such as EUCAP Sahel Niger have been petitioned by state authorities to provide ‘*judiciarised’* training for Niger’s military in addition to its internal security institutions (police, gendarmerie, national guard, and customs), requiring an alteration to the EUCAP Sahel’s mission mandate. Such training includes workshops on securing crime scenes, investigating timelines of terrorist events, how to conduct and write a police report, and other practices more akin to criminal investigation and social control - not coercive response. The treatment of former Boko-Haram fighters seeking amnesty has shifted towards policing-style practices and procedures bordering on pastoral care of these formerly ‘radicalized’ individuals. Similarly, in addition to providing tactical training and the like, the annual multi-national US Flintlock exercises — held in Niger in 2014 — have provided significant training in humanitarian techniques like medical evacuation and refugee support. The Nigerien army is neither a law enforcement nor humanitarian agency yet it is faced with a situation in which martial violence is not always appropriate: it must interrogate and arrest suspects in Diffa, maintain the procedural practices that counterterrorism investigations require, and provide medical and relief support to internally displaced people. The response to violent insurgency in Niger illustrates how military practice, in the face of competing logics of security, is not always premised on martial forms of violence.

**Managing irregular migration**

Similar to relations of intervention against the crime-terror nexus, thinking with ‘assemblages of (in)security’ in the field of migration control shows how militarism and militarization only partially account for the logics underlying intervention practices. Stopping irregular migration has been high on the security agenda of many Sahel states since the mid-2000s. European measures to dissuade mobility now reach far further beyond its borders. While border control has been a security priority in African states long before the ‘war on terror’ (see Miles 2005), international interventions in this area have multiplied as Western concerns about terrorism and irregular migration have risen. Often led by the EU and its member states, as well as international organizations like the IOM, interventions to stem irregular migration have been most prominent in states deemed of ‘origin’ and ‘transit’ such as Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, and Niger.

The mix of actors involved in migration control interventions is heavily civilianized — a mix that complicates any singular overall movement towards militarization of border control. This is evident in the types of staffing and expertise selected: the IOM’s staff are primarily technical experts while those in the EUCAP Sahel mission — despite a greater prevalence of military or law enforcement backgrounds — are equally adamant about the primacy of civilian approaches rooted in the reinforcement of symbolic rather than martial violence. They, much like the police liaison officers within the Sahelien embassies of their member states, effectively act as ‘security diplomats’ whose primary capital is expert, technical, and technological. Second, border control projects themselves often have contradictory practical outcomes. For instance, the GIZ’s *Police Programme Africa* in Mauritania funded the construction of some of the country’s border posts along the border with Senegal, yet the project also trained Mauritania’s national police to de-militarize their interactions with populations and adopt a human rights-conscious model of policing. The very methods of intervention also follow the development industry more than they do the military: workshops, targets, follow-ups, and classroom training on border management (see Frowd, 2014) take far greater prominence than the preparation for or glorification of state violence.

That is not to say that those who point to the “militarization of border regions” in places like the Libya-Niger border (Brachet, 2016: 287) are wrong. Much of eastern Mauritania, for instance, is an exclusively military zone partly for border control reasons, and north-eastern Niger is heavily militarized in response to smuggling and trafficking (including of migrants). In both cases, the application of martial, coercive violence is frequent. Indeed, the EU’s mooted responses to migrant smuggling further north in Libya have included bombing smugglers’ boats along the coast. However, militarization is far from the only logic at play. Yet away from these martial practices, responses to irregular migration increasingly operate indirectly through the reinforcement of intervened state ‘capacity’. This reinforcement is not a specifically martial set of practices, yet aims to enhance coercive capacities in response to cross-border threats. The EU’s Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), contributes to border security in Niger through reinforcement of the *chaîne pénale* — the “penal chain” going from investigations to prosecution — indicating practices of social control, but also through the rebuilding of border posts in the Diffa region bordering Nigeria that is heavily militarized due to Boko Haram activity. There is military involvement in this project but only due to the institutional setup of the Nigerien security sector, in which the national guard and gendarmerie fall under the ministry of defence. Beyond this, IOM training modules in Niger and elsewhere in Africa typically target the security forces, yet one of IOM Niger’s hallmark pedagogical tools is a curriculum giving security forces a baseline understanding of the history of migration in their country. This is also the case with the 2015 Spain-Niger cooperation accord on the repression of ‘illicit flows’, through which investigation capacity of the Nigerien security forces is prioritized, with no donations of equipment planned. While the focus on state policing capacity suggests a militaristic fixation on the strong state, in practice these projects’ content is curtailed by restrictions on how money can be spent as well as by security attachés’ own limited roles as interior ministry-to-ministry liaisons.

While most intervention actors are keen to insist that funding lines and mandates prohibit arms trading or military cooperation, there is still a considerable blurring of civilian, intelligence, and military institutions in migration management. Spanish security cooperation in the Sahel has been rising steadily since the summer of 2006, when irregular migration to the Canary Islands peaked. New types of joint security practice emerged from that time: joint patrols with Mauritanian and Senegalese navies and gendarmeries, intelligence sharing, and the detachment of Guardia Civil officers and patrol boats to both countries. Spanish police cooperation with Mauritania has seen a detachment of Guardia Civil officers posted to the northern city of Nouadhibou to prevent migration journeys by boat. This cooperation apparatus appears martial at first glance — it includes a helicopter and boats for patrols — yet exists to *police* this Spanish-African border space, including saving migrants from dying at sea. This logic of an externalized European border was also reflected in the EU-funded West Sahel project, implemented by Spain’s Guardia Civil, which provided night vision goggles and 4x4 vehicles to the Mauritanian police and gendarmerie. We may be misled, however, if we take the fact that the Guardia Civil “has a military structure and is equipped with a considerable amount of military-style armoury” (Lutterbeck, 2004: 49) as an indicator of *militarization* of their intervention along West Africa’s coast. Gendarmeries like the Guardia Civil do straddle the internal/external divide typical of contemporary (in)security politics, yet the  militarized aesthetic of their approach to migration on the high seas, should not detract from the essentially civilian-style coercion that structures their practices of control at a distance (from command centres) and at altitude (from patrol helicopters). A lens attuned to the broader politics of (in)security helps us to go beyond seeing militarism and militarization as singular processes deduced from the nature of institutions involved, towards a focus on the logics through which their violence is enacted.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this article, we have argued that although militarism and militarization provide some help to analyze elements of contemporary intervention in the Sahel, they do not provide a complete picture of these practices. Drawing on definitions from across the social sciences, we have identified some promising conceptual flexibility within these terms, but also their lack in accounting for non-martial practices. In response to this lacuna, our article draws on the sociological insights of an (in)security lens to show the limits of these concepts. We find that these concepts do help to understand some of the logics underpinning capacity-building practices targeting states’ coercive capacities, as well as the blurring of policing and military functions in many Sahelian states. However, we have also found a preponderance of limits to the utility of militarism and militarization: the terms remain inelastic in their performativity; they underestimate the extent to which global and local actors avoid militarization; and overlook the complex bundles of actors and competing practices that sustain but also push back against militarism and militarization. All actors within this assemblage of intervention, however, cleave to security as the necessary missing element in the Sahel, regardless of their provenance, institutional home, or other social science categorization.

Our research of the ‘crime-terror’ nexus, and efforts against irregular migration, both crucial components of the Sahel’s assemblage of intervention, demonstrates how competing practices can take on coercive and martial logics akin to militarism, or conversely logics and techniques of social control and symbolic violence couched in the imaginary of state order - sometimes simultaneously and in seemingly contradictory fashion.

In short, we consider militarism and militarization to be subsumed under (in)security yet lack the latter’s elasticity and political adaptability to shape imaginaries of (un)appropriate forms of violence. They, therefore, are limited in their explanatory power: (in)security explains *how* militarism and militarization happen in practice and how they attain their political force. It also captures the competing ideas and processes that constrain them.

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