



TACTICS INSTITUTE
For Security & Counter Terrorism

STRATEGIA

RADICALISATION IN THE SAHEL

**FROM BRUSSELS TO ABU DHABI:
ISLAMIC MOBILISATION AND COLLIDING ANTI-TERRORISM
STRATEGIES IN THE SAHEL**

**DE BRUXELLES À ABOU DHABI:
DES STRATÉGIES ANTI- TERRORISTES EN COLLISION?**



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Contents

Contributors	3
Partner Organisations	4
FOREWORD	5
PRÉFACE	9
INTRODUCTION	14
Chapter 1: Radicalisation in the Sahel	20
The Libyan trigger	20
Sahel: The general landscape	21
The G5 Sahel and the role of international stakeholders	22
Chapter 2: Jihadi Movements in the Sahel and the Radicalisation of West Africa	29
The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM)	29
The Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS)	31
Future radicalisation trajectories	33
Burkina Faso and West Africa	35
Chapter 3: International Stakeholders to the Conflict	40
Regional Stakeholders	40
ECOWAS	40
Algeria and the Algiers Process	40
France	42
The G5 Framework and the Europeanisation of the Sahel Terrorist Threat	43
Germany	44
The UK	45
Gulf States	45
Russia	46
Discussion	47
Engagement by Proxy in the Sahel	50
SECURITY IN THE SAHEL - RECOMMENDATIONS	55
Greater international cooperation	55
New UN mandate	56
New G5 Sahel mandate	56
New strategy to starve militia networks of money and arms	57
Fresh investment strategy	57
Efforts to solve the Libyan conflict	58
Addendum	59
Burkina Faso: Interview with journalist Atiana Serge Oulon	59

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Partner Organisations



The **Tactics Institute** for Security and Counter-Terrorism is an independent, non-partisan think tank, bringing together experience in politics, counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, legal and area studies expertise. Tactics Institute identifies trends in political violence and explores institutional, security and social policy responses to the threats posed.



Strategia is a Madrid-based centre specialised on the Geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the study of the Spanish political life. Strategia works with public and corporate stakeholders to provide risk assessment and due diligence, along with customised investment and policy development advice.

FOREWORD

Seventeen times the size of France, the Sahel is a vast semi-desert area that extends from the Sahara Desert to sub-Saharan Africa establishing a buffer zone between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. It stretches from West to East, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea over an area of 3 million km², a length of 5,500 km and a depth of 500 km. The many states created within artificial borders are in their great majority the result of French decolonization: Mauritania, the north of Senegal, Mali, the extreme south of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Niger, the north of Nigeria, Chad and the Sudan.

The Sahel has become a complex area of conflicts over various causes, the interactions of which make a comprehensive peaceful solution that addresses the instability of the region particularly difficult.

However, despite constant development aid from the international community, whether through multilateral or bilateral actions, direct security support through external military interventions or indirect through foreign military assistance to the armed forces or local police, the Sahel remains a region of chronic conflicts of which no one can predict the end. Barring major changes, this region will remain a long-term theatre of military operations.

Based on a geopolitical study on the Sahel, the think tanks Strategia and Tactics Institute, propose political, economic and security solutions to stabilize the region by neutralizing the threat of Islamic radicalization.

Let us first observe the various drivers behind Islamic radicalisation in the Sahel. It is well understood regionally that this theatre of operations has almost all the characteristics necessary to prevent, within a known timeframe, the prolonging of this war waged by Islamic terrorist groups.

Economically, the Sahel region relies on agricultural resources and has low deposits of raw materials that can be exported. It is not in a position to ensure a decent life for its population by developing an industry that produces wealth and provides jobs. Of

course, uranium mines are operated in Niger and oil in Chad. Gold mines make Mali the 3rd largest gold producer in Africa. However, these resources are not sufficient for the development of a prosperous economy. Therefore, agriculture and animal farming remain essential for feeding populations. Moreover, these states have strong, traditional cultures which call into question any rapid development of their societies. More infrastructure is needed for education, health and security, as the resources for higher living standards are threatened both by climate change and by the progression of the Sahara.

Sociologically, the Sahel population is not homogeneous but riven by many local rivalries: sedentary and nomadic; Arab and black populations of many ethnicities; Christian and Muslim; previously dominant but today dominated. These ethno-religious factors leave little room for a viable Nation-State, as conventionally understood by Westerners, as a source of development and growth. In addition, decolonisation, which was admittedly peaceful, imposed borders which do not respect the geographical range of populations and do not represent natural borders.

Politically, governments of the Sahel States have suffered many upheavals. Only Senegal and Mauritania have so far shown sustained democratic stability. However, tribalism and ethnic nepotism maintain corruption, an endemic evil that discourages foreign investors if not international aid, causes despair among populations who see no improvement to their daily life and reject their rulers.

Finally, all these factors make it impossible for nation states to control the Sahel and have made the region an area of mafia insecurity for many years, whether through arms and drug trafficking, human trafficking, in particular of migrants, or by Islamist and terrorist movements. To this is added the hostage-taking of Westerners, whether for personal profit or to finance terrorist organisations.

The Sahel region is at the heart of the struggle against radical Islamism.

In addition to the many destabilising regional factors which impede Sahel states from ensuring their own development within an acceptable security context, there is also the African context and the international situation. The Sahel has become a vast

theatre of operations that is difficult to control and allows the infiltration of jihadist groups into the African continent or into Europe.

In fact, this instability and the interests of neighboring or more distant states weigh heavily on the Sahel. In the north, Algeria's proximity with Mali makes it consider itself legitimised to undertake regional action; Libya's civil war offers an outlet for trafficking to Europe. In the south, jihadist contamination is now spreading to sub-Saharan Africa: Cameroon, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire and the Central African Republic. This security context justifies the involvement of Western states, whether the United States or France, in their war against Islamist terrorism, with the European Union's measured support amounting to a euphemism for very discreet action.

However, actions to combat radicalisation which actually translate into a "war against Islamo-terrorist movements", is ideological. Despite being led by tiny terrorist minorities, their goal is no less dangerous because it aims to establish theocracies in the Sahel. An "Islamic state" allows Islamists to form a base, as in any conflict of insurrectionary nature which, as in Iraq-Syria, allows the formation, training and rehabilitation of combatants. It also makes it possible to prepare and perpetrate destabilisation in Europe, in particular targeting recruits in established Muslim populations in European cities. This threat cannot be ignored by Western states, who are striving to maintain a buffer zone by relying as much as possible on the Sahel states concerned.

This progress of Islamo-terrorist movements, if not Islamo-mafia, feeds upon the disorganisation of states, the destabilisation of governments, and economic distress. For the populations of the region the pertinent question is: can there be an improvement in people's daily lives if they are afraid and unsafe? The Sahel national armed forces alone, including the G5-Sahel, are unable to reduce the jihadist threat. It is therefore difficult for the international community to abandon these regimes to their fates.

The answer is necessarily global, implying a strategic vision associating the States of the Sahel and the international community in their various competences or means. It calls for a counter-narrative which must be based at the same time on the



improvement of socio-economic conditions, a neutralisation of jihadist and mafia networks, limiting of their control over a geographical area or natural resources, constant pressure to make them as unprofitable as possible through trafficking and other predatory actions, whether these are institutional or through these different networks.

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The proposals of this study aim to meet the objective of combating radicalisation in the Sahel, in particular through better international cooperation with these Sahel states in the political, economic and security fields while respecting their sovereignty.

The question which nevertheless arises is that of the international or regional organisation, of the state or of the structure which would be sufficiently legitimate and efficient in distributing financial and military resources in the long term in the service of a global strategy that can satisfy all regional states: the United Nations? The African Union? Economic Community of West African States? A state like France by delegation or with an international mandate over the entire Sahel region? Should the strategic approach be limited to the Sahel region or should it be extended to the Gulf of Guinea states to better respond to Islamic radicalisation? The debate remains open but the particular interests of the great powers or other states seem today to take precedence over the settlement of conflicts in the Sahel, which, dangerously, do not seem to be their priority.

PRÉFACE

Grand comme 17 fois la France, le Sahel est un vaste ensemble semi-désertique qui prolonge le désert du Sahara vers l'Afrique subsaharienne établissant une zone tampon entre l'Afrique du Nord et l'Afrique subsaharienne. Il s'étend d'Ouest en Est de l'Atlantique à la mer Rouge sur une surface de 3 millions de km², une longueur de 5 500 km et une profondeur de 500 km. Les nombreux Etats créés à partir de frontières artificielles sont issus pour leur grande majorité de la décolonisation française : Mauritanie, Nord du Sénégal, Mali, extrême-sud de l'Algérie, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nord du Nigéria, Tchad et Soudan.

Le Sahel est devenu une zone complexe de conflits aux causes diverses dont les interactions rendent particulièrement difficile une solution pacifique globale qui réponde à l'instabilité de la région.

Or, malgré une aide constante au développement provenant de la communauté internationale, que ce soit par des actions multilatérales ou bilatérales, un appui direct à la sécurité par des interventions militaires extérieures ou indirect par une assistance militaire étrangère aux forces armées ou de police locales, le Sahel demeure une zone permanente de conflits dont nul ne peut prédire la fin. Sauf changement majeur, cette région demeure un théâtre d'opération de longue durée.

A partir d'une étude géopolitique sur le Sahel, les think tanks Stractegia¹ et Tactics², proposent des solutions à la fois politiques, économiques et sécuritaires pour stabiliser la région en neutralisant la radicalisation islamiste.

¹ Stractegia est basée à Madrid et est spécialisé sur la région MENA et la politique espagnole

² Tactics est un think tank spécialisé sur les questions de sécurité et de contre-terrorisme

Constatons d'abord les différents paramètres qui favorisent au Sahel la radicalisation, en l'occurrence islamiste.

Appréhendé régionalement, ce théâtre d'opération possède toutes les caractéristiques ou presque pour empêcher dans une échéance connue le règlement de cette guerre menée par les groupes islamo-terroristes.

Economiquement, cette région aux ressources principalement agricoles dispose de faibles gisements en matières premières pouvant être exportée. Elle n'est pas en mesure d'assurer une vie décente à ses populations par le développement d'une industrie productrice de richesse et pourvoyeuse d'emplois. Certes, des mines d'uranium sont exploitées au Niger, du pétrole au Tchad. Des mines d'or font du Mali le 3^{ème} producteur d'or en Afrique. Pour autant, ces ressources ne sont pas suffisantes pour le développement d'une économie prospère. Restent surtout donc l'agriculture et l'élevage, essentiels à l'alimentation des populations. Or, elles ont une forte démographie qui remet en cause tout développement rapide de leurs sociétés. Il faut toujours plus d'infrastructures nécessaires à l'éducation, à la santé, à la sécurité d'autant que les ressources pour un « mieux-vivre » sont menacées aussi bien par les changements climatiques que par la progression du Sahara.

Sociologiquement, la population sahélienne n'est pas homogène et est parcourue par de nombreuses rivalités locales : sédentaires et nomades, peuples arabes et peuples noirs aux nombreuses ethnies, chrétiens et musulmans, peuples hier dominants aujourd'hui dominés. Ces facteurs ethnico-religieux laissent peu de place à la viabilité d'un Etat-nation comme les Etats occidentaux le conçoivent comme source de développement et de croissance. En outre, la décolonisation, qui a été certes pacifique, a imposé en revanche des frontières qui ne respectent pas les zones de répartition des peuples et ne s'appuient pas sur des frontières naturelles.

Politiquement, la gouvernance des Etats sahéliens a subi de multiples soubresauts. Seuls le Sénégal et la Mauritanie ont montré à ce jour une stabilité démocratique dans le temps. Cependant, le tribalisme et le népotisme ethnique entretiennent la

corruption, mal endémique qui décourage les investisseurs étrangers sinon les aides internationales, désespèrent les populations qui ne voient pas leur quotidien s'améliorer et rejettent les gouvernants.

Enfin tous ces facteurs rendent impossible le contrôle du Sahel par les Etats et font de cette région une zone d'insécurité mafieuse depuis de nombreuses années que ce soit par les trafics d'armes, de drogues, de trafics humains notamment de migrants, ou aujourd'hui par les mouvements islamo-terroristes. Se sont ajoutées les prises d'otages d'occidentaux que ce soit pour un motif crapuleux ou pour financer les organisations terroristes.

La région Sahélienne au cœur de la lutte contre l'islamisme radical

Outre ces nombreux facteurs régionaux de déstabilisation qui empêchent les Etats sahéliens d'assurer leur propre développement dans un contexte sécuritaire acceptable s'ajoutent le contexte africain et la situation internationale. Le Sahel est devenu ce gigantesque théâtre d'opération difficilement contrôlable qui permet l'infiltration des groupes djihadistes dans le continent africain ou vers l'Europe.

De fait, cette instabilité et les intérêts d'Etats voisins ou lointains pèsent sur le Sahel. Au nord l'Algérie au contact du Mali s'estime légitime dans une action régionale ; la Libye en guerre civile offre un débouché pour les trafics vers l'Europe. Au sud, la contamination djihadiste s'étend désormais vers l'Afrique subsaharienne : Cameroun, Nigéria, RCI, RCA. Ce contexte sécuritaire justifie l'engagement d'Etats occidentaux que ce soit les Etats-Unis ou la France dans leur guerre contre le terrorisme islamiste, avec un soutien mesuré de l'Union européenne, doux euphémisme pour une action bien discrète.

Cependant, combattre la radicalisation qui se traduit en réalité par une guerre contre les mouvements islamo-terroristes » est idéologique. Certes, elle est conduite par d'infimes minorités terroristes. Leur objectif n'en reste pas moins dangereux car il vise la mise en place de théocraties au Sahel. Un « état islamiste » permet de constituer une base arrière comme dans tout conflit à caractère insurrectionnel qui, comme en

Irak-Syrie permet la formation, l'entraînement, la remise en condition des combattants. Il permet aussi de préparer les actions de déstabilisation pour agir en Europe notamment auprès des populations musulmanes déjà installées. Cette menace ne peut pas être ignorée par les Etats occidentaux qui s'efforcent de maintenir un cordon sanitaire en s'appuyant le plus possible sur les Etats sahéliens concernés.

Or, cette progression des mouvements islamo-terroristes sinon islamo-mafieux s'appuie sur la désorganisation des Etats, la déstabilisation des gouvernements, la détresse économique. Or, il est certain que le développement économique, le désenchantement politique favorisent la stratégie de ces mouvements mais peut-il y avoir une amélioration du quotidien des peuples si ceux-ci ont peur et ne sont pas en sécurité ? Or, les seules forces armées nationales sahéliennes y compris à travers le G5-Sahel n'arrivent pas à réduire la menace djihadiste. Il semble donc difficile pour la communauté internationale d'abandonner les régimes en place à leur destin.

La réponse est nécessairement globale, impliquant une vision stratégique associant les Etats du Sahel et la communauté internationale dans ses différentes compétences ou moyens. Elle fait appel à un contre-discours qui doit s'appuyer à la fois sur l'amélioration des conditions socio-économiques, une neutralisation des réseaux djihadistes et mafieux, la contestation de leur contrôle sur une zone géographique ou de ressources naturelles, la pression constante pour les rendre le moins rentables possibles sur les trafics et les actions de prédation qu'ils soient institutionnels ou le fait de ces différents réseaux.

Les propositions de cette étude ont pour ambition de répondre à cet objectif de combattre la radicalisation au Sahel, notamment par une meilleure coopération internationale avec ces Etats sahéliens dans les domaines politiques, économiques, sécuritaires tout en respectant leur souveraineté.

La question qui se pose néanmoins est celle de l'organisation internationale ou régionale, de l'Etat ou de la structure, qui serait suffisamment légitime, efficace, disposant de moyens financiers et militaires dans la durée au service d'une stratégie globale qui puisse satisfaire tous les Etats régionaux : l'ONU ? L'Union africaine ? La CEDEAO ? Un Etat comme la France par délégation ou avec un mandat international sur l'ensemble de la région sahélienne ? L'approche stratégique doit-elle se limiter à

la région sahélienne ou faut-il l'étendre aux Etats du Golfe de Guinée pour mieux répondre à la radicalisation islamiste ? Le débat reste ouvert mais les intérêts particuliers des grandes puissances ou d'autres Etats semblent aujourd'hui primer sur le règlement des conflits au Sahel qui ne semblent pas réellement leur priorité.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the security environment of the Western Sahel has changed. Young men, who ten years ago might have sought employment in local agricultural communities, are now just as likely to join up with their angry contemporaries to be seen, two to a motorcycle, armed with assault rifles and RPGs, racing across dry, sandy shrublands towards a government or military target. This modern image has its roots in the long-established geopolitical conditions of the Sahel region, with connections and networks into organised crime, weak institutions, ethnic divisions, international intervention, and militant religious extremism.

Poverty is entrenched in this region, which has suffered decades of state weakness and political insecurity, preventing any significant investment in national infrastructure or education. There are geographic and demographic factors that contribute to this socioeconomic stagnation.

This vast, transitional Area between the Sahara Desert to the North and the tropical savanna to the south is a mixture of dry grassland, scrub and semi-desert, stretching across a range of climatic zones from the arid in the North to the humid along the southern coastline of West Africa. The climate is hot and dry, experiencing little annual rainfall, which makes agriculture a perennial battle, not freeing up workers to boost urbanisation or service industries. Flash floods at certain times of the year can be sudden and severe, often destroying poorly-built homes and displacing families.

Although the Sahel cuts across national borders, the countries that are most closely associated with this landscape are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. The rural population density in these countries is usually sparse, with the 2020 statistics for each of these respective countries standing at 76, 13, 17, 5, 19, and 87 people per square kilometre. (By way of comparison, Egypt has 103, and Ethiopia 115)³. Urban development in the region is limited, even if increasing. Society

³ <https://www.worldometers.info/population/africa/>

is oriented towards subsistence agriculture and herding rather than industry and services.

The overall demographic makeup of the region adds to the region's volatility. Two-thirds of the population in Mali is under 24,⁴ with few opportunities for education or work. Much of the population still consists of herders moving across a semi-desert environment along long-established tracks in search of water and fertile grazing territory. These nomadic routes care little for international borders,⁵ as most of the region's rural people owe their primary loyalty to a tribe rather than a nation-state: the State is a territorial concept that is not always conducive to the style of living across the region. In Mali alone, 13 ethnic groups account for the loyalties of the rural population, with the smallest Group, the Toucouleur, consisting of as many as 231,000 people, (1% of the total population).⁶

Many of these tribes consider the existence of nation-states to be anathema, at best a hangover of European colonialism, whereas group loyalty to a common male ancestor allows an identity and unity that cannot be matched. As a result, much of the rural population will fall back on tribal loyalties when threatened by political instability or insecurity: this makes peacekeeping a difficult activity, while creating a permissive environment for cross-border trafficking in the region. When instability arises, conflict focuses on control of water supplies, transport hubs and pastures.

The State is weak. Across the Sahel, the State is rarely able to tax and spend fairly, and is not seen by its populations as a legitimate authority or an instrument of real unification that can pool resources across a territory to support development. There seems to be little collaboration among state officials, who treat localities as fiefdoms and appointments as the means to reinforcing their clientelist hold on office rather than advancing the interests of the State. This model of predatory governance sustains a negative spiral of socioeconomic decline, insecurity, and ultimately state failure.

⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>

⁵ "An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security: *Nomadism and mobility in the Sahara-Sahel*," OECD, December 19, 2014 https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/an-atlas-of-the-sahara-sahel/nomadism-and-mobility-in-the-sahara-sahel_9789264222359-9-en#page2

⁶ Rida Lyammouri, Policy Brief: "Tribal Dynamics in the Sahel," Policy Center for the New South, October 2019, PB-19/3, https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PB_19-31%20%28Lyammouri%29.pdf

Into this environment of poor communities, self-serving public officers and politicians, weak states and porous borders, criminal gangs have been thriving for decades almost as a parastate.

Until this century, the cocaine-smuggling network from South America, through Nigeria, to Morocco and into Europe, ran northwards through the Sahel, perpetuated by gangs with no fear of international boundaries, who could confidently defend themselves against weak states. Tobacco and cannabis smuggling also continue to enrich criminal networks.⁷ However, over the last thirty years, transnational criminal networks have expanded beyond substances to deal in weapons, humans, and precious metals. The value of female slaves or child soldiers to any number of regional militias increases the demand and, therefore, the risk of mass kidnap from Africa.⁸ The ongoing need for small arms and ammunition ensures that weapon-smuggling routes are constantly busy.

Militias now operate as conglomerates – kidnapping, drug-trafficking, highway banditry – resorting to murderous attacks against state security forces that stand in their way. It is a business model that also dictates continuous expansion. If the business does not grow, rival militias can threaten the Group, creating an incentive for an ever-widening circle of violence. As the labour-intensive ‘organised crime sector’ expands, organised crime and politics are often indistinguishable. For instance, local officials in Mali are known to be complicit in cocaine smuggling,⁹ while their engagement in hostage negotiation often entails personal profit.

In short, this is a region where there is no semblance of “the monopoly of violence” that defines the nation-state, no *esprit de corps* or separation of powers, and no clearly defined framework of political competition. As criminal networks increase their revenue and obtain arms, they expand their activity in ventures that require control over territory, such as artisanal gold mining, draining states of an internationally traded and taxable commodity. Illegal gold mining in the Sahel boomed after 2012

⁷ Wolfram Lacher, SWP Comments: “Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2011, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2011C01_lac_ks.pdf

⁸ “The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm,” International Crisis Group, June 29, 2015 <https://almaghibtoday.wordpress.com/2015/06/>

⁹ “Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali,” International Crisis Group, Report No. 267, Africa, December 13, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali>

when a gold vein between Sudan and Mauritania was discovered.¹⁰ Today, governments lack the military resources to efficiently, permanently regain control over illegal mines.

Islamist militias have proliferated in the Sahel over the last decade. Regional instability is associated with the “Arab Spring” of 2011 and the collapse of the Libyan regime (2011-12). Since, weapons spread from North Africa to Mali, where former Tuareg tribesmen used them to stage their own uprising. Soon, groups of jihadists carved out their sphere of influence over parts of Mali, before the State could take preventive action. France intervened in 2013, deploying an armed division group to support the Malian army against the rebels. Since 2014, Jihadi groups have capitalised on a coup d’état in neighbouring Burkina Faso to spread their influence.

Broadly speaking, what fails in the region is often “the state” as a form of territorially-founded organisation. The revolving door between an organised crime and government emboldens transnational networks to challenge state authority. Militias trading in drugs, people, arms, and gold often accumulate the resources to match and surpass military power. This dystopian security landscape is confounded by a complex diplomatic game between militias and states in shifting alliances.

Every militia builds its brand by investing in a personality cult – a celebrity terrorist such as the recently-deceased Abdulmalek Droukdel – or a global terrorist brand such as the Islamic State or Al Qaeda. Underneath these brand headings, militia groups run a well-tested operating model in which organised crime is the starting point for everything. Although their Takfiri radical discourse gives them their declared *raison d’être*, it is control over trafficking routes and their ability to conduct effective kidnapping and hijacking operations that allows them to buy weapons, ammunition, and the supplies they cannot steal from the local population.

Just as importantly, regular financial flows fund access to modern communications technology, which enables them to produce and release their propaganda. Videos released onto international social media platforms have a two-pronged effect – not

¹⁰ “Getting a Grip on Central Sahel’s Gold Rush,” Africa Portal, November 13, 2019, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/getting-grip-central-sahels-gold-rush/>

only do they spread fear but also bolster the groups' capacity to recruit soldiers and agents from the ranks of unemployed young men. Furthermore, in a region where human life is cheap, the semblance of "order" is attractive, irrespective of its ideological outlook.

In an environment where commercial and terrorist operations are often indistinguishable, the geopolitics of the Sahel comes into its own. Not only do the porous borders allow for the unchallenged movement of people, groups and cargo, but astute militias can exploit the ethnic divisions and intercommunal disputes in some districts. For instance, when Malian or the Burkinabe military forces mindlessly attack a community, militias soon step in to offer protection, gaining control over gold mines and forging alliances with prosecuted ethnic groups.¹¹ The victims become victimisers.

Local and national governments are thus unable to manage a cycle of violence. Faced with insurmountable economic odds, the geography of an area that does not allow for short-term economic improvements, everybody seeks short-term economic gain. That includes young men with little education, militias with an agenda to peddle, and politicians who seek ways to maintain their hold on power.

Into this environment are coming predatory external parties seeking to exploit regional insecurity for their own benefit. Among the international stakeholders in question are countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who purchase and "launder" artisanal gold. When mined under legally transparent conditions, gold would be a taxable commodity that could generate some of the revenue required to improve long-term economic prospects. Instead, the UAE buys cheap, illegally mined gold. Once engaged in the region, Emirati third parties can also provide weapons or money-laundering services.

Lack of funding and dubious legitimacy leaves governments with little option but to engage with the militias in some way. It might seem that the best way to do so would be to sit down and negotiate a candid ceasefire. More realistically, the power of the militias is such that secretive arrangements will be made, in which governments will

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/school-forced-fight-children-pay-price-sahel-war-200415140942329.html>

effectively permit militias to continue their operations just for the sake of maintaining some kind of regional security. In this scenario, one militia is often better than many. However, a monopoly allows militias to consolidate territorial control and regularise criminal proceeds, increasing their strength, and perpetuating the problem for future generations.

Chapter 1: Radicalisation in the Sahel

Extremism and radicalisation in the Sahel region and their possible socioeconomic and strategic consequences remain high on the European and African security agendas. Since 2012, the state of security in the Sahel has deteriorated dramatically. This situation could perhaps have been avoided if the Libyan file had been appropriately managed and contained in 2011. Indeed, it is necessary to place the insecurity that prevails in the Sahel region in the context of the Arab Spring, and consider how foreign interventions in the MENA region in the name of democracy have ended up creating further tensions rather than addressing popular grievances. The timeline alone is suggestive here: the events surrounding the Arab Spring started early 2011, while the security situation in the Sahel deteriorated from 2012 onwards.

The Libyan trigger

An unemployed university graduate living in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire; this event sparked a wave of popular unrest in Tunisia, escalating in January 2011 and leading to the collapse of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime. Riots followed in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and across the Arab world. From regime change to a failing state, there is a significant threshold to pass. As elsewhere in the region, demonstrators seeking the end of the rule of Moammar Gaddafi's regime were faced with government repression, at which point there was an opening to articulate regime demands. The United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1973 as early as February 2011, stating the need to "intensify efforts to find the solution to the crisis". In fact, resolution 1973 paved the way for NATO's involvement in Libya.

The regime gradually lost control of the situation on the ground. One of the objectives set by the UN resolution – "facilitating dialogue to lead to the political reforms necessary to find a peaceful and sustainable solution"— was thus reinterpreted as a

mandate to negotiate the unravelling of Moammar Gaddafi's power structure. The issue at hand was that the State was Gaddafi's power structure, and no institution could readily replace it. Libya lacked a strong national army, and the political vacuum that followed gave room for the emergence of "the rule of militias." Despite the initiation of an electoral process, political stakeholders had little interest in the democratic process and were not prepared to be outwitted in the succession race, even at the cost of Libya's territorial fragmentation. The result was a war that profoundly impacted the subregion.

Indeed, from the moment Gaddafi was killed in October 2011, the security situation deteriorated and was soon out of control with significant spill over implications for the whole sub-region. Over the last nine years, many radical non-state actors, such as ISIL, al-Qaida and their offshoots have gained considerable strength. Most of them are now capable of defying the states of the Sahel and their national armies.

Sahel: The general landscape

Broadly speaking, there are two primary geographical hubs of radicalisation and jihadi violence in the Sahel region today. One is the tri-border region or, more accurately, the lawless frontier between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Violence initially flared in Northern Mali in 2012 to spread throughout the tri-border region where it has become the prevailing situation and the epicentre of violence. According to the UN, casualties from terrorist attacks "have leapt five-fold since 2016, with more than 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 alone as compared to some 770 three years earlier"¹².

A second is the North-Eastern part of Nigeria, spreading through the Sahel. Nigeria's security situation is linked to Boko Haram, a jihadi organisation created in 2002. Boko Haram's initial uprising in 2009 articulated demands for a Sharia law regime in Nigeria. Today, Boko Haram's violent outreach extends to Cameroon, Niger and Chad. According to the UN, since 2009, Boko Haram is deemed responsible for approximately 30,000 deaths and three million internally displaced people in Nigeria¹³.

¹² "Unprecedented terrorist violence" in West Africa, Sahel region", UN News/OCHA, 8 January 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1054981>

¹³ Anadolu Agency, 26 March 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/chad-death-toll-from-boko-haram-attack-rises-to-98/1780951>.

The political motivation driving militia action is multidimensional and includes national and ideological objectives. It also dictates active cooperation with organised crime networks that generate the revenue required to sustain a prolonged armed campaign and to consolidate territorial control. Therefore, ethnic belonging, ideological biases, criminal motivations and religious extremism are intertwined.

Under the pressure of organised crime and unruly militias, Mali's fragile State was quick to deteriorate in 2012, struggling to reaffirm its sovereignty in vast regions contested by various religious groups and militia chieftains, where dominance is fleeting and mostly dependent on access to cash, arms, and the ability to mobilise recruits, extending their scope of action and outreach. The groups' religiously motivated radical activism has, in time, acquired a cross-border and transnational scope, spreading instability throughout the broader Sahel. Today, Burkina Faso and Niger are facing severe security challenges. Mauritania and Chad now have their own hot spots of instability. Similar concerns prevail in Ghana, Togo and Benin. From 2012 onwards, insecurity originating predominantly from Mali spread both eastwards and westwards. It is now threatening West African coastal states too.

The G5 Sahel and the role of international stakeholders

The G5 Sahel was created in 2014 as the first multinational response to the threat of non-state actors, aiming first and foremost at containing security challenges, as well as tackling structural social and economic weaknesses. Officially, the G5 initiative aims to foster regional cooperation. Its members - Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – are engaged in security cooperation schemes that are matched by several development aid initiatives. In time, this multinational African force has been matched by European troops, most notably from France and Germany. For example, the G5 is involved in operations with the French-led Operation Barkhane, aimed at the disruption of human trafficking networks as well as fighting jihadist groups in the subregion.

In its six years of operation, the G5 has faced considerable challenges. For the weaker states in the region, the war has been financially devastating. The lack of financial means and the limited experience and training of national armies make the

engagement in highly demanding asymmetrical warfare situations an uphill battle. In this context, the opening of talks between the government and rival militias in Mali in January 2020 was cautiously welcomed. The initiative of Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to engage his primary challengers, Iyad Ag Ghali (Group to Support Islam and Muslims, GSIM) and Amadou Koufa (Macina Liberation Front, MLF) was sceptically received. While the timescale, scope, and completion of such talks cannot be foreseen, Mali is not the sole determining hotspot for the region's stability. Nor does the security of the region depend solely on the GSIM or the MLF activity, no matter how consequential the two organisations are.

Indeed, the Sahel region has also experienced the emergence of new forms of radicalisation recently. The belief that the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would weaken the Islamic State or constrain the outreach of this terrorist "brand" in the region is erroneous. The same confidence prevailed during the reign of al-Qaida and the killing of Osama Ben Laden: it proved wrong. Organisations survive the death of their leaders and often retain their geographic outreach and capacity to recruit. The same can be said regarding the killing of the former head of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdelmalek Droukdel¹⁴ in June 2020: his killing will not put an end to AQIM, its threats and operations.

On a strategic level, it is more pertinent to question to what extent international stakeholders are part of the solution or the problem. The overall objective is to empower states to reaffirm their sovereignty, subduing the ideological and material infrastructure that sustains transnational terrorism. That objective requires the cooperation of two stakeholders: the EU on the one hand¹⁵ and some Gulf states on the other.

The EU is committed to helping Sahel countries to cope with their security challenges. Under the umbrella of its Common Security and Defence Policy, the EU has installed three missions in the Sahel: EUTM Mali (2013)¹⁶, a mission dedicated to the training

¹⁴ https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/abdelmalek-droukdel

¹⁵ On the role of some specific EU members in the Sahel region, see *infra*.

¹⁶ <https://eutmmali.eu/>

of the Malian armed forces; EUCAP Sahel Mali (2015)¹⁷, a consultative mission to the Malian security forces; and EUCAP Sahel Niger¹⁸ (2012), that is, a consultative mission to the Nigerien security forces.

The G5 partners appear to have a shared strategic vision and objectives. Since 2014, the EU has authorised grants for the Sahel region to the tune of €4.5 billion¹⁹, along with several armoured vehicles. However, financial assistance earmarked for non-military expenditure for the G5 Sahel region is modest even if progressively rising over time. When the G5 Sahel was created, the EU committed²⁰ to a €147 million grant to help set it up²¹. While discussing the extension of the EU mandate in Mali in March 2020, Brussels committed an additional sum of €133.7 million over four years²².

Officially, Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the UAE share the G5's objectives. Since 2017, they have pledged financial support to the G5, reflecting a broader strategy of influence in Africa, from the Horn to the Sahel. That strategy is implicit in the case of the KSA and explicit in the case of the UAE. Over the last two years, successive investigative files on behalf of Reuters have exposed the UAE's apparent engagement in gold-related business activities that have ramifications in Burkina Faso, Benin, Ghana, Niger and Togo.

For all these countries, revenue generated by the exploration of gold allegedly benefits some criminal and/or radical groups including organisations close to al-Qaida, as has been confirmed by Sahel representatives on several occasions, including at UN level.²³ In November 2019, the International Crisis Group (ICG) highlighted the extent to

¹⁷ https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eucap-sahel-mali_en

¹⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eucap-sahel-niger_en

¹⁹ European Commission, 25 February 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/g5-sahel-summit-commissioner-urpilainen-underlines-importance-continued-partnership-sahel_en

²⁰ The EU pledge seems not to have translated fully into deeds; read Nicolas Gros-Verheyde, "Combien a fourni l'Union européenne au G5 Sahel ? Qu'est-ce qui a été déboursé, payé, livré ?", Bruxelles2.eu, 29 May 2019 <https://www.bruxelles2.eu/2019/05/combien-a-fourni-lunion-europeenne-au-g5-sahel/>

²¹ "The European Union's Partnership with the G5 Sahel countries", European external Action Service, July 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_eu_g5_sahel_july-2019.pdf

²² "Mali: European Council increases military assistance to the G5 Sahel Force", EU Reporter, 23 March 2020, https://www.eureporter.co/frontpage/2020/03/23/mali-european-council-increases-military-assistance-to-the-g5-sahel-joint-force/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=1239a61c88cae1d1a8a5913c05e8d1a37ae6f0b3-1587535401-0-AUR-oSJDXYuzH_vEqR6jg4d8QP5-B_PGCEYdAW20gX_Yda74wNLxifuiFRaPm6hcPFfLR0LPKzBf6xvmt9jfrKbODproWl6gfm_JzZ17PZ-LGw7t3n7WvYvGfpyKkMo8T1urdH6WurHsK4RyaNbZuF79qxm2gck6XdCc-yx2bThhU4Zwc1fFM3bjslWBZwk7z4WoQwKMiTNRkFbh6B-eiMUA3LkFNUjol8_Zla9OJHXoVl12O9e19fvHfsbWiz0puXhu4jpeLBQTLjSbjtjAB4hl7tOGF35Xzf9bYXkyVk3qpkueIHvdKANcZ66GYofBFVwX8jsPbZMGhm8_MblWNUX30T78O4VLWmbn7S76pXMe-PJBc05OWEjuUX27kl7WADaLt_3fqXmXGsQAmvuFTjLgPz8sB7blUZhpPwAf

²³ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13810.doc.htm>

which artisanal gold is “a hugely important issue in the Sahel”. According to the ICG, artisanal production “reportedly amounts to almost half the volume of industrially produced gold: 20 to 50 tonnes per year in Mali, 10 to 30 tonnes in Burkina Faso, and 10 to 15 tonnes in Niger,” which “represents a total monetary value of between \$1.9 and \$4.5 billion per year.” Compared to the sums earmarked for financial assistance by the EU, one gets a sense of the significance of such figures. The ICG also added that “the bulk is exported to Dubai, which reports \$1.9 billion in annual gold imports from these countries (plus Togo)”²⁴.

UN trade data for 2018 revealed that “the United Arab Emirates – a global centre for gold refining and trading – has established itself as the main destination for gold from Togo, declaring imports of more than 7 tonnes (worth \$262 million)”. Such trends raise questions about the extent to which illegal activities could be conducted without the knowledge if not the consent of the Emirati authorities.

Several case studies referring to this illicit trade have been explored by the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC²⁵), an ad hoc body dedicated to combating financial and economic crimes. As highlighted in a Nigeria-focused paper published by Carnegie Endowment in March 2020²⁶, there are several examples of potential corruption involving members of government, officials and/or businessmen. In 2010, a man “connected to five Dubai properties purchased for a total of \$1.4 million” was arrested for smuggling gold from Nigeria to Dubai; in 2012, “the EFCC arrested a courier attempting to smuggle \$7 million in cash on a flight from Lagos to Dubai”. Furthermore, when it comes to the appetite to address the challenge at hand, the Carnegie Endowment report noted a reluctance by Emirati authorities to cooperate with Nigerian anticorruption agencies, not least by preventing “free access to Dubai property and other financial records or to the details of suspicious transactions.”

This attitude may change over time following the 2018 ratification of bilateral legal assistance, arrest, extradition and asset recovery agreements signed by Nigeria and

²⁴ International Crisis Group, “Getting a grip on Central Sahel’s Gold Rush”, 19 November 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/282-reprendre-en-main-la-ruee-vers-lor-au-sahel-central>

²⁵ <https://efccnigeria.org/>

²⁶ Matthew Page, “Dubai Property: An Oasis for Nigeria’s Corrupt Political elites”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/19/dubai-property-oasis-for-nigeria-s-corrupt-political-elites-pub-81306>

the UAE in 2016. However, EFCC investigators doubt cooperation will improve significantly. In other terms, the UAE may have offered their full cooperation to the EFCC²⁷ in principle, but this does not suggest practical and substantial progress in the fight against crime funded by illegal gold smuggling in the Sahel and beyond.

This worrying trend means that analysts must focus more closely on the factors that perpetuate instability and insecurity in the Sahel, as non-state actors have more material resources than states at their disposal. One significant step in dealing with that challenge is containing the geographic zone of operation of, and limiting the material resources available to, terrorist groups. Otherwise, state actors, UN forces or the Sahel G5 will continue to spread their forces thinly across the vast terrain to little effect.

Terrorist groups in Mali are organised in networks that work collaboratively, all working with members of the former Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali, as well as with organised crime networks dealing in drugs, humans (for slavery) and arms dealers. The revenues and/or benefits generated by these activities allow them to secure regular supplies of weapons and ammunition (UAE) and to recruit fighters by taking them directly from families (child soldiers) that suffer from dire socioeconomic conditions. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in central Mali²⁸.

²⁷ <https://efccnigeria.org/efcc/news/3339-uae-offers-support-to-efcc>

²⁸ The difficulties that Mali is facing are not new, and many researchers had warned of them some years back already. See for example Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, Mollie Zapata, "Regions at Risk: Preventing Mass Atrocities in Mali", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Early Warning Country Report, April 2018, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Mali_Report_English_FINAL_April_2018.pdf

Table1. A typology of the main jihadi-Salafi groups active in the Sahel

Name	Geographic location (main or initial presence in the Sahel)	Leader(s)	Links with other organisations	Ideology	Estimated number of members ²⁹
The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM)	Northern Mali	Iyad Ag Ghali	Ansar al-Din, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Murabitun, Macina Liberation Front, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa	Al-Qaida affiliated. Impose Sharia Law. Drive foreign forces out of Mali.	Between 1,000 and 2,000.
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)	Liptako-Gourma border triangle (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger)	Adnane Abou Walid al-Sahrawi	Initially split from AQIM-affiliated al-Murabitun. ISIL-affiliated.	Salafism. Jihadism	Around 500.

²⁹ Estimates are based on a compilation of various sources.

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Mali	Abdelmalek Drukdel (recently executed)	Al-Qaida- affiliated.	Salafism. Jihadism.	Around 5,000.
Boko Haram	Nigeria, Niger, Chad	Abubakar Shekau	ISIL-affiliated.	Jihadism.	Between 4,000 and 20,000.

Chapter 2: Jihadi Movements in the Sahel and the Radicalisation of West Africa

Two main radical groups are active in Mali: first, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and, secondly, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The relationship between these groups and states in the region as well as international stakeholders is not straightforwardly one of foes and allies. With military and economic power that often matches or surpasses that of state actors, militias engage in an elaborate game of covert diplomacy and alliances to assert control over a territory, secure access to vital logistical support, and thwart the advancement of competing organisations. Likewise, states that cannot realise their sovereignty will seek to contain the existing threat, gain access to information or increase their influence. The logic of militia appeasement and expansion has allowed groups to expand towards West Africa, generating a threat of international significance.

The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM)

The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) consists of a coalition of pre-existing groups unified under the command of Iyad Ag Ghali. Iyad Ag Ghali was one of the signatories of the Tamanrasset ceasefire agreements (1991) that temporarily suspended the Tuareg uprising in Mali. He was then rewarded, becoming Mali's Consul to Saudi Arabia but lost his position in 2010 when he was accused of involvement in Islamic radicalism and fostering links with al-Qaida.³⁰

Iyad Ag Ghali was a member of the Tuareg rebellion from 1990 to 1996. He led the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad that he rebranded as the Popular Movement of Azawad.

³⁰ "Qui est Iyad Ag Ghaly, le djihadiste qui retient en otage la Française Sophie Pétronin?", *Le Figaro*, July 2, 2017. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2017/07/02/01003-20170702ARTFIG00159-qui-est-iyad-ag-ghaly-le-djihadiste-qui-retient-en-otage-la-francaise-sophie-petronin.php>

There is little doubt that Iyad Ag Ghali's background and ideology lean towards Takfirism. Ag Ghali was known for his religious activism from the 1970s when the movement of Ansar Eddine was created. During this period, Iyad Ag Ghali developed close relations with radical Islamist movements from the Sahel to Libya. In fact, there have been suggestions that Iyad Ag Ghali managed to develop a volatile relationship with Algerian intelligence services.³¹ His ability to engage with state and non-state actors alike, managing diverging expectations, allowed Ag Ghali to move relatively freely between Algeria, Mali, Niger and Libya creating transnational capacity.³² His movements were further facilitated by his marriage to a Tuareg woman originating from Tamanrasset, Anna Walet Bicha.³³ Iyad Ag Ghali's tumultuous relationship with the Algerian services apparently came to an abrupt end in 2012, when he refused to release Algerian diplomats captured in Gao and held as hostages in the Algerian consulate.

However, French sources claim that the relationship between the Algerians and Ag Ghali was never quite severed.³⁴ According to a diplomatic source in Algiers that spoke to us on condition of anonymity, Algeria rejects the idea of negotiating with Ag Ghali. However, there are no good options. There is limited international support for the apprehension of the veteran warlord, least of all from France. Algerian sources note that Paris maintains open channels with Iyad Ag Ghali to ensure France can negotiate for the lives of abducted Western/French citizens should the need arise. This stance has seriously undermined Franco-Algerian relations with serious strategic implications for security in the Sahel.

Although the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims is affiliated to the al-Qaida network and shares its ideology, its web of alliances is broad. GSIM partners with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but also with the Macina Katiba – led by Amadou

³¹ Seidik Abba, "Comment Alger protège le djihadiste Iyad Ag-Ghali avec l'aide de Paris," *Le Monde*, 6 October 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/06/comment-alger-protège-le-djihadiste-iyad-ag-ghali-avec-l-aide-de-paris_5009126_3212.html

³² Mondafrigue, "Mali, le pouvoir de nuisance de Iyad Ag Ghali," July 27, 2018, <https://mondafrique.com/series-dete-le-malien-iyad-ag-ghali-lagent-triple-730/>

³³ "Sahel: Iyad Ag Ghaly, l'insaisissable ennemi public n°1", *Jeune Afrique*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/540964/politique/sahel-iyad-ag-ghaly-linsaisissable-ennemi-public-n1/>

³⁴ See for instance this interview with former head of the French Directorate-General for External Security, Bernard Bajolet: "B. Bajolet : le chef jihadiste Iyad Ag Ghali "bénéficierait de certaines protections"", RFI, 8 October 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20181008-bernard-bajolet-iyad-ag-ghali-le-chef-terroriste-malien-beneficie-certaines-protec>

Koufa, Ag Ghali's right hand man – and the al-Murabitun Group, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar³⁵. Al-Murabitun is a Salafist organisation born from a fusion of fractions of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) on the one hand, and the Signatories by Blood (Signataires Par Le Sang) on the other, an organisation that defected from al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

MUJAO was founded in Gao, a region known for hosting many traditional religious schools.³⁶ Some diplomatic sources in the region suggest that the Moroccan intelligence services had facilitated the emergence of this Group. That hypothesis is possible since Gao has good relations with Casablanca as well as Moroccan religious brotherhoods in the region. Al-Murabitun³⁷ split into two factions in 2015. While Mokhtar Belmokhtar joined AQIM back then, the leader of the breakaway radical faction of the movement, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi launched an organisation called The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In time, the ISGS evolved into an affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS)

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has as a base of operations a region between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger known as Liptako-Gourma border triangle.³⁸ On the other hand, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) maintains control over vast expanses of Northern Mali. Both the ISGS and GSIM regularly launch attacks on local armed forces; in fact, the former is known to have launched attacks against American forces deployed with Africom³⁹ in Niger.

Ideologically, ISGS and the GSIM tend to be at odds with each other. Nevertheless, from time to time, they share common objectives. Malian experts suggest the two groups generally prefer to avoid carrying out operations in the same locations,

³⁵ It is not clear whether Mokhtar Belmokhtar is still alive or not today. In October 2018, former head of the French Directorate-General for External Security Bernard Bajolet suggested that Belmokhtar was dead; *ibid*.

³⁶ May Ying Welsh, "Making sense of Mali's armed groups," Al-Jazeera, January 17, 2013 <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/20131139522812326.html>
Le Monde, 23 May 2013.

³⁷ A good description of *al-Mourabitoun* can be found at <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-mourabitoun>.

³⁸ Celian Mace, "L'Etat islamique au Grand Sahara, force montante des trois frontières," *Libération*, December 12, 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2019/12/12/l-etat-islamique-au-grand-sahara-force-montante-des-trois-frontieres_1768935

³⁹ Africom, or the United States Africa Command (<https://www.africom.mil/>), is officially active since October 2008. It is "responsible for all U.S. Department of Defense operations, exercises, and security cooperation on the African continent, its island nations, and surrounding waters".

avoiding the risk of direct confrontation. But there is no indication of an alliance in the making other than precedents of tactical cooperation. In fact, there have been instances of confrontation: during the weekend of March 14, 2020, when the GSIM affiliate Katibat Ansar Eddine Macina engaged in fighting with the ISGS.⁴⁰ The incident resulted in the killing of a person very close to Lieutenant Idnan Abu Saharaoui. While the name of the man has not been released, sources suggest that the person in question was Moussa Moumouni,⁴¹ the Nigerien Chief of Staff of the Islamic State. In any case, whomever this person was, his loss appears to have had grave consequences for ISGS.

ISGS is seeking to strengthen its positions in the central and northern parts of Mali. But it is having difficulties in doing so as it needs to compete with GSIM for influence over the same territory. Besides, other organisations stand on the way, not least the Coordination of the Movements of Azawad (CMA), a secessionist rebel group that once hailed amongst its members Iyad Ag Ghali. Another group aspiring to territorial control in the region is the July 14 Platform, also known as the Algiers Platform, an armed political coalition that is supportive of the Malian government and stands behind the June 2015 peace agreement signed with the CMA.

The ISGS has thus far been unable to match the influence of Iyad Ag Ghali in Central Mali, as the militia strongman has strong ties with Mali's Tuareg and Ifoghas tribes, both of whom are "fountains" of many rebellions. Iyad Ag Ghali is aware of the significance of family links and allegiances as his power networks were cultivated through marital alliances and/or business arrangements with several CMA groups, such as the High Council for the Unity of Azawad⁴² (HCUA).

⁴⁰ "Mali : un nouvel affrontement oppose deux groupes jihadistes," *Nord Sud Journal*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.nordsudjournal.com/mali-un-nouveau-affrontement-oppose-deux-groupes-jihadistes/>

⁴¹ "Au cours de l'accrochage meurtrier entre les deux principales organisations terroristes au Mali: Le chef d'Etat-major de l'EIGS, le Nigérien Moussa Moumouni abattu," *L'Indépendant*, 17 March 2020, <https://lindependant-mali.net/2020/03/17/au-cours-de-laccrochage-meurtrier-entre-les-deux-principales-organisations-terroristes-au-mali-le-chef-detat-major-de-leigs-le-nigerien-moussa-moumouni-abattu/>

⁴² This link can also be understood from the proximity there is between Iyad Ag Ghali and some members of the High Council for the Unity of Azawad; see for instance this interview with former French ambassador to Mali Nicolas Normand : Christine H. Gueye, "Un ex-ambassadeur français au Mali éclaire les propos de Salif Keita sans les excuser", *Sputnik News*, 22 November 2019, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/afrique/201911221042473412-un-ex-ambassadeur-francais-au-mali-eclaire-les-propos-de-salif-keita-sans-les-excuser---exclusif/>

During peace negotiations in Algiers in 2013, members of the HCUA fought hard in Iyad Ag Ghali's corner, defending his interests, though they only did so from behind the scenes, without publicly declaring their alliance. Suffice to say that Iyad Ag Ghali was confident in his regional power base and refused to disarm and disband his Ansar Eddine militia, rising tension with Algiers.

The links that prevail between Iyad Ag Ghali and many radical organisations are well known and documented. In May 2015, a member of an Arab Malian tribe and director of a company based in Gao warned Bamako of the emerging alliance between terrorist groups led by chieftains like Ag Ghali and rebel groups that had reverted to smuggling. A Malian journalist confirmed to us that such links persist to this day, adding that these smuggling groups will never publicly recognise their relation with Iyad Ag Ghali.

These kinds of alliances, as well as the role and the actions of these armed groups, explain why the ISGS has been able to settle down in the Liptako-Gourma border triangle. This region is remote, impoverished, lacking the stable government and military presence that would contest his authority. That weakness makes it easy for the ISGS to recruit new members and act as the ultimate guarantor of law over the region. Even when ISGS's recruiting strategy fails, they can pressure locals to fall into line.

Future radicalisation trajectories

The dissolution of the GSIM would require Iyad Ag Ghali and his close aide Amadou Koufa to agree to disband their militias. Presumably, this would presuppose guarantees about their futures, not least an amnesty. While Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) confirmed rumours of an ongoing negotiation with Iyad Ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa in January 2020, it remains unclear whether such negotiations have serious prospects of success. There are two bones of contention: the future of the French military presence in the region and the fact that some of Mali's state partners reject the idea of negotiating with terrorists. A third issue is the ability of IBK to honour any deal that would be concluded.

Therefore, the chances that the Malian president can reach an agreement with the two jihadist factions are rather slim at this stage. One of the two jihadi groups – the ISGS – is thought to be exploring an alliance or even a merger with one of Boko Haram’s offshoots, the so-called Islamist State West Africa Province (ISWAP). If confirmed, this plan would give rise to a jihadi platform with more resources and a much broader scope of operation, accentuating instability in the Sahel and undermining current and future negotiations.

The situation has continued to deteriorate over the past two years, particularly in Mali. War and violence between communities have caused hundreds of casualties and thousands of displacements. This inter-ethnic violence is intrinsically linked to political violence taking place under an extremist jihadi banner. For instance, the Dogon or Bambara people that take arms in the name of “ethnic self-defence” have been responsible for massacres against the Peuls, that is, the community to which the jihadist leader Amadou Koufa belongs. In this milieu, Amadou Koufa assumed the leadership of the Macina Katiba as a defender of the Peul community, calling on his people to take a stand against two rival tribes but also, significantly, against the Malian Army. In sum, the Peuls’ frustration has been weaponised, pushing them to join terrorist groups either through conviction or fear of retribution, in a logic that echoes the “with us or against us” rallying call.

This logic prevails not only in Mali but also in Burkina Faso, a country where a dire socioeconomic situation and weak government and military institutions create a perfect storm for jihadi groups’ outreach. At the border with Mali, the North of Burkina Faso is inhabited by a majority of Peuls, where they are similarly victimised, which means they become an easy recruitment target for the very same jihadi groups. Furthermore, the same jihadi militias blend with organised crime networks of human and drug smugglers, adding to their resources, and bolstering their operational capabilities. More fear leads to more recruits, broader geographic outreach, the incorporation of new business sectors and new resources. Meanwhile, military resources on the ground stretch their capability over a more extensive operational theatre, becoming inevitably less effective.

The northern part of Burkina Faso is under mounting pressure from the ISGS, which needs to mark its territory vis-à-vis other contenders and, therefore, will make examples of those resisting its control over the region. The increasing capacity of ISGS to recruit local people enables its operational capacity to surge rapidly, creating a formidable militia able to lead lethal attacks against rivals and the Burkinabe army in mining zones. In this scheme, external stakeholders or 'investors' in jihadism stand to gain much.

Burkina Faso and West Africa

The transformation of terrorist activity into a generalised state of violence that challenges Burkina Faso's viability as a state is a relatively recent and particularly worrying phenomenon.⁴³ Political opposition initially focused on demand for a change of government. People took to the streets in 2011 demanding fair elections and again in 2014 in reaction to President Blaise Compaoré's attempts to prolong his grip on power, introducing a constitutional amendment that would allow him to renew his mandate indefinitely. The government's grip on power loosened and eventually led to general elections of November 2015.

Rather than resolving the political deadlock, the country went down the road of violence and institutional collapse. Amid a struggle of succession among rival political factions, 2015 saw a string of terrorist-related attacks with three casualties.⁴⁴ Since 2016 the use of political violence evolved, terrorist activity scaled up, and its geographical scope widened. According to the head of the United Nations Office for Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Mohamed Ibn Chambas, between 2016 and 2019 terrorism-related casualties have surged five-fold in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The geographic epicentre has shifted eastwards from Mali to Burkina Faso and increasingly threatens West African coastal states. Looking at the situation in Burkina Faso specifically, Ibn Chambas has noted that the number of terrorism-related deaths jumped from about 80 in 2016 to over 1,800 in 2019, while the number of internally

⁴³ See also in annex our interview with journalist Atiana Serge Oulon.

⁴⁴ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015 - Burkina Faso," June 2, 2016 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57518dd132.html>

displaced people increased ten-fold to about half a million, with 25,000 leaving to seek refuge in other countries.⁴⁵

Terrorist attacks have been concentrated in regions close to northern Mali and Niger, suggestive of the militias' transnational scope of operation. Terrorist activity in the Sahel clusters around the provinces of Oudalan and Soum,⁴⁶ with sporadic outbursts in the North, South-West and the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou.⁴⁷ Since 2015, militias have targeted state institutions, including pockets of armed resistance such as military convoys and outposts, police stations and checkpoints. Militias also target mining and gold convoys. Their targeting of schools, hotels and restaurants marks terrorists' authority over social life as well as signalling their territorial reach.

The choice of these targets is telling. Jihadist groups reject national governments and seek to weaken their image by attacking the State, ultimately hoping to become the sole source of authority. To this end, violence and mass killing is a conscious choice and a propaganda technique, also referred to as "casualties-propaganda"⁴⁸, designed to create fear and thereby bolster the pool of recruits. Of course, specific attacks against schools and villages may also be analysed through the lens of ethnic retribution and sectarian killings, particularly by the previously victimised Peuls. Examples of such attacks were in the villages of Arbinda, where 62 people were killed in April 2019 and Sobame Da, where it is thought 30 were murdered in June 2019.⁴⁹

The targeting of villages has proved to be an effective recruiting strategy, as jihadi groups have stepped in to fill the power vacuum of a recruiting state, often giving people power to exact revenge against police and military officers who had previously abused their own power. By fostering sectarian tensions and by taking advantage of existing social ills, terrorist organisations have been able to fill the political power

⁴⁵ "Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region," Reliefweb, January 8, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/unprecedented-terrorist-violence-west-africa-sahel-region>

⁴⁶ 40% of the attacks between 2015 and 2018 have been carried in the Sum province, where the organization Ansarul Islam is installed, followed by Oudalan – both close to the border with Mali and Niger –, followed by Ouagadougou.

⁴⁷ Nabons Laafi Diallo, *Le terrorisme au Sahel : Dynamique de l'extrémisme violent et lutte anti-terroriste : un regard à partir du Burkina Faso*, L'Harmattan, Paris, January 2020.

⁴⁸ "Propaganda by the deed" are the violent actions by which terrorist organizations seek to prove the governmental structures weak and obtain therefore popular support to their actions.

⁴⁹ Nabons Laafi Diallo, *op. cit.*

vacuum and widen their base of support in Burkina Faso, as evidenced by a surge in recruits since 2016.⁵⁰

The attacks against mining and gold convoys can be easily understood. Terrorist organisations are in constant need of money and attacking such targets allows them to bolster their spending power. As for attacks on hotels, restaurants and diplomatic representations that prevailed in Ouagadougou between 2016 and 2018, these seem to have aimed at conflict escalation and 'branding' typical of terrorist incursions in any new territory. In January 2016, the *Taxi Brousse* bar, *Splendid* hotel and *Cappuccino* restaurant were attacked⁵¹; in August 2017, terrorists targeted the *Aziz Istanbul* restaurant⁵²; in March 2018 came the turn of the French embassy and the army's headquarters⁵³.

Terrorist organisations seek to dissuade foreign engagement, particularly baulking at any western or UN presence. Most of the attacks targeted westerners, and there is no indication that this tendency will subside: jihadist organisations are focused on dismantling national borders and ejecting any foreign, regional and/or national institutional or governmental presence that can question their grip over their newly conquered sphere of influence. The Burkinabe government, its army and police forces, as well as UN forces and the G5 Sahel, are all seen as enemies by terrorist organisations that have emerged as an alternative source of order to the established international state system.

Terrorist attacks have been carried out in Burkina Faso since 2016 by different groups. However, the protagonists of the jihadi landscape in Burkina Faso are well known: the Al-Qaida affiliated Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), and the Ansarul Islam lil-Ichad wal-Jihad group. These jihadi 'brands' have their base of operation outside Burkinabe territory, shifting as jihadi groups assimilate criminal gangs and separatist

⁵⁰ Mahamoudou Savadogo, "Comment s'explique la prolifération des groupes extrémistes au Burkina Faso ? », *The Conversation*, 5 september 2019, <https://theconversation.com/comment-sexplique-la-prolifération-des-groupes-extremistes-au-burkina-faso-122566>

⁵¹ "Burkina Faso attack: Foreigners killed at luxury hotel," BBC, January 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35332792>

⁵² Restaurant attacked by gunmen in Burkina Faso, Al-Jazeera, August 14, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/restaurant-attacked-gunmen-burkina-faso-170814001720047.html>

⁵³ "Burkina Faso attack: French embassy targeted in Ouagadougou," BBC, March 2, 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43257453>

groups, changing perceptions of order in the country. As long as the political vacuum persists and socioeconomic challenges remain unaddressed, radicalism, violence and criminality will prevail with dramatic consequences for the population.

It is unclear to what extent the government of Burkina Faso has been effective in containing the terrorist threat, be it on a regional or a national level. Adding to widespread frustration with the lack of political representation, underdevelopment and unemployment further erode state legitimacy. It would, therefore, be hard to imagine the population standing up to terrorist groups to defend their International government stakeholders who have focused less on the legitimacy of the Burkina Faso regime and more on security.

The country is primarily the recipient of military assistance, and the government is entirely invested in the success of G5 Sahel operation. In effect, this has been a shaky legitimating ground for the G5 Sahel cooperation framework and has reduced its effectiveness. For Ouagadougou, there are not many alternatives. Burkinabe forces can hardly rely on their military capability and inevitably depend on foreign military and/or security forces. For instance, the country's response to the 2018 attack on the French embassy relied on the French armed forces. This reliance on foreigners does little to bolster the image of the Burkinabe security forces in the eyes of the local population.

In its quest for efficient anti-terrorism strategies, the government of Burkina Faso did eventually seek the support of its population. In January 2020, the Burkinabe Parliament adopted a law that gave citizens the right to join a state-backed militia called "Volunteers for the Defence of the Country."⁵⁴ One could think of this development as a positive step towards a citizens' army, especially since it favours the "hiring" by the government of volunteers drafted from the countryside. Following a 14-day training period, these "volunteers"⁵⁵ are given light weaponry and logistical

⁵⁴ "Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie : Les parlementaires disent « oui » au ministre de la Défense," January 21, 2020 <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article94464>

⁵⁵ While they were not meant to be paid initially, the Burkinabe government decided early April that each of these volunteers would earn a salary of 300 euros/month: <https://www.yeclo.com/lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-au-burkina-faso/>

support. However, similar attempts to create a Citizens' Army in neighbouring Cameroon and Nigeria have had limited success.

There are two primary issues of concern. First, it is not clear that the state-backed militias rely exclusively on "volunteers," in the traditional sense of the term, meaning that the State struggles to maintain the moral high ground in the conflict. Secondly, as researcher William Assanvo puts it, Burkina Faso and its regional counterparts target the symptoms of terrorism while ignoring the "socioeconomic factors that generate insecurity."⁵⁶ As long as Burkina Faso as a state fails to address the factors that corrode social cohesion, undermine social order, delegitimise the state and fuel radicalisation, no government will be able to cope with emerging terrorist threats. The same applies to Burkina Faso's regional counterparts in the Sahel, as well as international stakeholders.

The emphasis on military approaches to dealing with terrorist threats is ineffective on its own, as evidenced by the mounting challenges faced by Burkina Faso; a second tier of socioeconomic intervention seems necessary but remains entirely absent. Instead, terror is often met with counterterror, in a tit-for-tat game of reprisals in which Burkina Faso's military forces act as militias, killing detainees suspected or accused of belonging to terrorist organisations⁵⁷ without due process. This has generated more frustration in the population, which in turn channels further support to radical militias. In a nutshell, exploring the path of economic development and justice may bring far better results in the Sahel.

⁵⁶ Aïssatou Diallo, "Burkina Faso : «Armer des civils ne peut qu'augmenter le risque d'exactions »", Jeune Afrique, 24 January 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/885838/politique/burkina-faso-arter-des-civils-ne-peut-quaugmenter-le-risque-dexactions/>

⁵⁷ *Human Rights Watch*, "Burkina Faso: Security Forces Allegedly Execute 31 Detainees", 20 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/20/burkina-faso-security-forces-allegedly-execute-31-detainees>

Chapter 3: International Stakeholders to the Conflict

Radicalism and terrorism constitute existential challenges for the governments of the Sahel and, increasingly, West Africa. Some of them are creating their own state-backed citizens' militias to address the challenge using force while also pooling military firepower in the G5 Sahel multinational force. Directly or by proxy, local and international actors also become parties to militia warfare, presumably because of the need to address increasingly internationalised security challenges: trafficking in drugs, people and arms, and piracy. Experience also shows that once Jihadi networks establish a solid territorial base, they can plan international operations as was the case in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, in engaging in the local militia system, all countries have a "national interest" perspective, articulated in geopolitical or economic terms.

Regional Stakeholders

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is emerging as a significant stakeholder in the Sahel, playing a direct facilitating role in Mali's first peace negotiations following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. ECOWAS encompasses most of the states embroiled in the regional militia war (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) are part of the G5 Sahel, a regional collective security platform that pools regional military capability with European military backing. Following French demands, ECOWAS is developing a more institutionalised relationship to the G5 Sahel, both financially and militarily.

Algeria and the Algiers Process

Algeria fears that the further disintegration of the security situation in the Sahel could have profound consequences over its territory and sub-region. This rationale drives the Algiers Process, a UN-backed plan that aims to foster a political solution in the Sahel, primarily through the engagement of regional stakeholders. For Algeria, the

question of how much French engagement is appropriate for the region has been present since the 1990s. Recently, the very question triggered a standoff between President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his security entourage, including General Toufik and General Hassan.

Rather than seeking outright military dominance, Algeria has engaged directly or by proxy with militias in the Sahel. During the reign of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, General Abdelkader Ait Ouarabi, known as “General Hassan,” infiltrated most rebel and/or radical groups in the Sahel,⁵⁸ installing his agents. At the same time, he succeeded in collecting the weapons of Libyan origin circulating in the region and took decisive steps to suppress extremism. Today, the former head of Algeria’s War on Terrorism is serving a five-year jail sentence on charges of “destroying documents” and “disobedience to direct orders.”

According to officials at the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Hassan was well placed to free the Algerian diplomats that had been kidnapped in Gao, but it appears Abdelaziz Bouteflika dissuaded him from doing so. To date, the reasons for the Algerian president’s attitude remain unclear.

Algeria is also involved in the Sahel via the League of the Ulemas of the Sahel (Ligue des Oulémas du Sahel), an organisation committed to fighting against religious radicalism in the region. The League was formed in Algiers in 2013 as a platform for organisations dedicated to the fight against radicalisation. Among other things, the League has published an *awareness guide* on religious radicalisation,⁵⁹ in cooperation with the Algiers-based Centre Africain d’ Etudes et de Recherches sur le Terrorisme (CAERT: African Center for Studies and Research on Terrorism), an organisation affiliated to the African Union. The Ulema League of the Sahel also works closely with the Unité de fusion et de liaison (UFL) platform, which pools together the capacity of the intelligence services of Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania against radicalisation.

⁵⁸ Jeremy Keenan, “How Terror came to Sahel”, New African, 27 December 2016, <https://newafricanmagazine.com/13714/>

⁵⁹ *Algérie Presse Service*, 6 December 2019.

France

Among EU member states, France is easily the most engaged in the Sahel, a fact that is consistent with its broader security and defence postures.⁶⁰ The G5 Sahel has just 5,000 troops an annual budget of under €500 million. It is a French initiative that has repeatedly failed to secure a UN mandate and is instead supported by the EU and the UK.

In many respects, France's engagement in the region is a logical consequence of the allied campaign to overthrow the Moammar Gaddafi regime in Libya. In 2011, then French president Nicolas Sarkozy encouraged Malian fighters to help NATO in Libya. Their support on the ground proved instrumental, but following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2012, these Songhai, Arab, Fula and Tuareg fighters crossed the border with their newly acquired weapons and military vehicles to fight a war of secession against Mali.⁶¹

It is unclear what these fighters had been promised, but France did not back their bid for independence. At the time, the late leader of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad, MNLA), Mahamadou Jeri Maiga, said that he remained committed to independence despite what he saw as French betrayal. This situation explains why these nationalist rebel groups blame France for their currently weak position and the surge of jihadism.

As the situation in northern Mali deteriorated and jihadi militias gained the upper hand, France launched "Opération Serval" aiming at push Islamists out of northern Mali. French troops set up camp in Tessalit, a Malian town located at the border with Algeria. Whoever holds Tessalit gains a military advantage as it is a strategic crossroad that allows tactical units to move throughout the tri-border region of Mali, Libya and Niger.⁶² That is why jihadi militias and Algeria have contested the town.

⁶⁰ For an overview of France's strategy and approach to Africa and to the Sahel, read Catherine Gegout, *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism*, C. Hurst and Co. Publishers Ltd, November 2017.

⁶¹ "The Regional Threat Posed by Mali's Militants", *The New Humanitarian*, 18 February 2013, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2013/02/18/regional-threat-posed-mali-s-militants>

⁶² *L'Aube*, 9 April 2015.

Economic motives were not wholly absent in French calculations. Northern Mali is rich in gold, and Niger is rich in uranium deposits. Nevertheless, there was also a sense of historical revanchism, as in 1997 Algeria had prevented France from setting up a military outpost in Tessalit. Algiers always saw the region as key to its national security and geopolitical aspirations in the Sahara. Fifteen years later, France was able to set the terms of geopolitical engagement in the region.

Since 2014, France has retained a 5000-soldier commitment to Opération Barkhane, an anti-insurgent force headquartered in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. These troops operate in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. But Mali's insurgents view this as a "neo-colonialist" force, demanding the departure of French troops.⁶³ Terrorist groups often threaten to take the battle to France. However, Paris continues to project the image of a collective security guarantor without earnestly engaging with accusations of neo-colonialism.

The G5 Framework and the Europeanisation of the Sahel Terrorist Threat

The French Sahel strategy is to envelop its military posture in the region within an "international" or "European" framework that would ameliorate the perception of neo-colonialism. In October 2019, the UN Security Council discussed the nature of UN support for G5 Sahel Joint Force. Paris drafted a resolution in June 2020 designed to provide the G5 Sahel with a UN mandate that has been consistently rebuffed by Washington.

Since 2016, the United States had favoured bilateral frameworks for the channelling of either humanitarian or military assistance into Africa and wants to avoid multilateral engagement, especially if that would entail the deployment of US troops. Washington's engagement in the region is a remnant of the Bush administrations' global response to 9/11. Washington Agadez base in the North of Niger was initially built as an observatory of terrorist activity in the Sahel and is currently used as a launchpad for drone operations. Agadez is a strategic location where African human, arms and drug

⁶³ "Pourquoi l'opinion publique malienne a une vision négative de l'opération Barkhane », The Conversation, 10 February 2020, <https://theconversation.com/pourquoi-l-opinion-publique-malienne-a-une-vision-negative-de-loperation-barkhane-130640>

trafficking caravans converge en route to Algeria and Libya.⁶⁴ While the American priority is the monitoring of terrorist groups, trafficking is not ignored.⁶⁵ However, Washington DC has been keen to avoid becoming bogged down in yet another protracted conflict.

Algeria has supported the US position. Enraged with what it regards as neo-colonial posturing, Algiers echoes Washington in defying France. From an Algerian point of view, the G5 Sahel has been created to replace and undermine CEMOC (Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint). The 2010 initiative led by Algeria brings together significant regional stakeholders – Mauritania, Niger, and Mali – and is based in the Algerian desert, in Tamanrasset. CEMOC is still active today, but its role is limited and no match for the capacity of the G5 Sahel forces. For the very reason Algiers opposes the G5 initiative, Morocco supports it. Morocco is ready to support the G5 mission precisely because it undermines Algeria's influence over the Sahel and the Sahara.

France views all regional actors with suspicion, wanting to contain Algerian strategic ambitions while remaining suspicious of Morocco's traditional role as a conduit for human and drug trafficking. Trying to engage in the region without a strategic alliance with a regional powerhouse, while trying to avoid the "neo-colonialist" label, France is attempting to "Europeanise" its role as a broker of regional collective security, eliciting the support of Germany and the UK.

Germany

Germany's presence in the Sahel stems mainly from the Franco-German axis and reflects concerns over human trafficking in the EU. Berlin is perceived as a neutral force in the region, as it does not have its own economic or security agenda. The German military force operates directly from Niamey in Niger and cooperates with its host nation, hailing it as a strategic partner for "the fight against terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration." However, Germany's Niger-based camp has a limited number of troops (40 in total) and serves to logistically supply the UN Multidimensional

⁶⁴ Emma Wallis, « Niger: Ex-smugglers complain about a downturn in business », Infomigrants, 28 November 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/21174/niger-ex-smugglers-complain-about-a-downturn-in-business>

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group, "Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger", Report N. 285/Africa, 6 January 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/285-managing-trafficking-northern-niger>

Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), that is, a 13,000-strong peacekeeping force, of which 1,000 are German.

The UK

Standing by, rather than falling behind, France, the UK has emphasised Official Development Assistance (ODA) rather than military operations in the Sahel. Since 2015, British ODA to the Sahel has exceeded €550 million. However, from 2018 the UK committed troops in support of French-led counter-terrorism operations, primarily in Mali. By June 2020, the Royal Air Force had deployed three Chinooks and 100 personnel.⁶⁶ The UK has also confirmed its willingness to support the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with 250 personnel until 2050.

Gulf States

Gulf states have increased their commitment to the Sahel over the last decade, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2017, the KSA pledged €100 million to the G5 Sahel budget, followed by another €30 million from the UAE. To date, the KSA has failed to meet its pledge towards France, presumably due to disagreements over arms deals.⁶⁷

The UAE has an interest in the G5 Sahel, but it also prefers to deal with its members at a bilateral level. In February 2020, Abu Dhabi pledged €1.8 billion to Mauritania “to fund investments and development projects.”⁶⁸ In July 2019, it agreed to a \$250 million soft loan to Mali⁶⁹ and provided the region as a whole with military aid. By January 2020, it had delivered seven armoured vehicles to Mali (out of a total of 30), 13 to Niger, seven to Mauritania, four to Chad and four to Burkina Faso⁷⁰. The UAE is

⁶⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-extends-commitment-to-fight-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel>

⁶⁷ *Jeune Afrique*, “G5 Sahel: Why are millions of dollars pledged by Saudi Arabia being withheld?”, 30 March 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/25345/g5-sahel-why-are-millions-of-dollars-pledged-by-saudi-arabia-being-withheld/>

⁶⁸ “Les Émirats arabes unis allouent 2 milliards de dollars à la Mauritanie,” *Jeuneafrique*, February 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/890424/politique/les-emirats-arabes-unis-allouent-2-milliards-de-dollars-a-la-mauritanie/>

⁶⁹ “Abu Dhabi fund agrees \$250m loan to Mali gov’t”, *Arabian Business*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/banking-finance/423189-abu-dhabi-fund-agrees-250m-loan-to-mali-govt>

⁷⁰ Guy Martin, “Mali receives armoured vehicles from the UAE, EU”, *Defence Web*, 20 January 2020, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/mali-receives-armoured-vehicles-from-the-uae-eu/>

also deeply involved in Libya, where it supports Khalifa Haftar in his war against the internationally recognised Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).

One could argue the UAE has an obvious African strategy of creating a sphere of influence on the continent, extending from the north to the Horn of Africa, inclusive of the Sahel. Military sources in Mauritania tell us that Abu Dhabi is currently negotiating with Mauritania over the idea of constructing a military airport in the North, near the Malian and Algerian borders. This project could be the reason why the Algerian minister of foreign affairs, Sabri Boukadoum, went to Mauritania⁷¹ in March 2020.⁷² Similarly, the UAE is also said to be consulting with Niger over the establishment of a military base on its soil.

Russia

Russia's African strategy and ambitions are also relevant. The Russian-African summit that took place in Sochi in October 2019 featured high-level representation, including the Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who officially asked for Russian assistance, at a point in time when his country has requested the disengagement of France and a broader scope for Russian involvement in the region. Moscow and Bamako are mutually bound by the terms of a bilateral defence agreement. Russia is now developing a program of military assistance in the region. In 2019, Russia delivered two helicopters as well as weapons and ammunition to assist in the fight against terrorism to the Malian army.

⁷¹ "Boukadoum reçu par le président mauritanien," APS, March 11, 2020 <http://www.aps.dz/algerie/102842-boukadoum-recu-par-le-president-mauritanien>

⁷² Another visit to Mauritania followed early June 2020: <https://www.maghrebinfo.dz/2020/06/09/sabri-boukadoum-en-visite-officielle-en-mauritanie/>

Discussion

A discussion about a future “deradicalisation” strategy in the Sahel necessitates some reflection on the structure of militias. Despite their diverse political, religious or ‘business-oriented’ outlook, militias operating in the region have a distinctive strategic brand. At the most basic level, each Group seeks to control population and territory, undermining the State. Once they successfully challenge state control over a region, they form an ‘alternative government.’ Thereon, militias extend their criminal activity either by taking over organised crime activity or by ‘rent-seeking,’ raising taxes in cash or in-kind (fuel, food, etc.). The population is part of the spoils, as militias move in to recruit adult or child soldiers and slaves. This strategy is supported by the twin pillars of terror and jihadist propaganda, ensuring “tributes” are paid on time, recruits are obedient, and troops are readily deployable.⁷³

Such tactics reflect an overall strategic framework. A motorcycle on the terrain of the Sahel allows troops to cover large swathes of territory with more than one passenger. They effectively become two-person fighting vehicles, consisting of a driver and a marksman. Therefore, the equivalent of a section attack against a military outpost might comprise of five motorbikes, each with at least one rifleman, all of whom can escape a counter-attack much faster than a military unit lumbered with pick-up trucks. Today, such units target military outposts, police stations, and villages across the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Following the January 2020 drive to form a “civilian army” in Burkina Faso, such units spearhead a drive towards recruitment in which the socioeconomic and political context appears to be as significant as the Jihadi message. Jihadism in the Sahel is as mobile as these tactical units. As long as there are countries with weak central governments and porous borders, there are opportunities for jihadists to exploit,

⁷³ There is no consensus yet among experts as for the reasons why radical organizations end up recruiting members in a rather fluid and easy way: some consider poverty and the peoples’ quest for better socioeconomic prospects as the main driver, while others prioritise the impact of Takfiri and Islamist radical discourses. A combination of both factors is probably at play, to which one may add violent coercion and the fear of “collective retribution” in case a group or an individual does not comply with demands for mobilization.

particularly in the context of the current global pandemic that has further undermined the economic and administrative capacity of all states.

To stem the growth of militias, one needs to consider and exploit the tactical vulnerabilities of such units, primarily logistical support. Without weapons, ammunition, motorcycles, fuel and money, militias cannot terrorise people and control territory. Without mobile phone reception, opportunities for propaganda are restricted. Without the compliance of a local population, they are unable to raise taxes and recruit. Furthermore, any militia that hopes to act as an alternative government must be able to provide essential services including security, water and education. Failure to provide these public goods may encourage opposition, mainly if the “opposition” is a state-endorsed self-defence militia. So, there are opportunities to be exploited in any future plan to reduce the capabilities of Sahel militias.

For the moment, the momentum is with Jihadist formations. Burkina Faso is failing as a state and militants are consolidating their control in the south and east of the country. Patterns of dispersion of terrorist activity present a destabilising threat to the West African coast. For instance, while Ghana is politically stable and has not yet experienced a serious jihadist threat, it must face an indigenous separatist movement in the east of the country and Accra has been unable to disrupt the flow of artisanal gold mining.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the country contributes troops to MINUSMA, which could trigger a tit-for-tat response from Jihadi militias. In sum, there are several reasons to expect that Ghana could be next in the list of countries targeted by Jihadi militias.

Benin appears to be in more immediate danger, particularly following controversial elections in April 2019 that triggered months of civil unrest. The country experienced its first Islamist attack in May 2019, when militants from Burkina Faso kidnapped two French nationals in the Pendjari National Park before returning to their base across the border.⁷⁵ As recently as February 2020, armed men on motorcycles attacked a police station in the Banikoara district⁷⁶, pointing to a new security threat.

⁷⁴ “Ghana’s industrial gold output rose 6% in 2019,” Reuters, May 29, 2020 <https://af.reuters.com/article/ghanaNews/idAFL8N2DB4JS>

⁷⁵ Two French tourists kidnapped, local guide killed in Benin, May 5, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190505-two-french-tourists-kidnapped-local-guide-killed-pendjari-benin-safari>

⁷⁶ “Gunmen attack Benin police post near Burkina border,” Outlook, February 9, 2020

Political instability is also an immediate danger for Côte d'Ivoire. After threatening to hold on to power indefinitely, President Alassane Ouattara finally announced that he would not seek another term in the October 2020 presidential elections. Although this announcement has relieved some tension, mass arrests and the political prosecution of the regime's political rivals means that the incumbent continues to seek control over the country's political evolution. The risk of civil unrest remains high, increasing the country's vulnerability to any groups seeking to take advantage of its instability. Attacks have taken place across the border with Burkina Faso. In May 2020, the Ivorian and Burkinabe militaries conducted joint counter-terrorist operations that led to both killings and arrests among suspected militants. In a show of defiance, GSIM militants conducted a counter-attack against a military outpost in Sikolo, killing 12 soldiers.⁷⁷

Governments further east are experiencing other insecurities, increasing their vulnerability. At the eastern end of the Sahel, Ethiopia is creating regional enemies due to the development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD); the landmark project is a source of concern for countries further down stream, such as Sudan and Egypt, whose agriculture and urban centres depend on the Nile. Tensions have not as yet escalated to military confrontation, but any insecurity in the region could be exploited by militants to spread terror and increase recruitment, particularly if they secure foreign state sponsorship.

As militancy in the Sahel region appears to be on the verge of explosive expansion, consideration must be given to the growing issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Officially, piracy off the southern coast of West Africa has increased by 200% in the last five years, although many incidents remain unreported.

For the most part, piracy is a significant challenge in the Niger Delta and off the Nigerian coast (particularly Port Harcourt), where ships are attacked, and their crews

<https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/gunmen-attack-benin-police-post-near-burkina-border/1730193>

⁷⁷ "Niger army base attack leaves 12 soldiers dead," TRT World, May 19, 2020 <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/niger-army-base-attack-leaves-12-soldiers-dead-36455>

taken hostage, brought to shore, and ransomed⁷⁸. Piracy tends to reflect onshore political instability, and it is now spreading in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin. That is already the case in Benin: in February, ten members of a crew were kidnapped 75 nautical miles south of Cotonou; in March, pirates targeted a Greek ship off Cotonou, kidnapping a single member of the crew; in April pirates attacked a Singaporean ship, kidnapping eight. Given the close relation between Jihadist and organised crime networks, it is likely that we will soon see jihadist piracy operations of the kind seen in the Horn of Africa a decade ago.

Engagement by Proxy in the Sahel

The ability of “the international community” to engage in destabilised regions is waning. The UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) works with local and regional stakeholders such as G5 Sahel, AU and ECOWAS to implement the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS).⁷⁹ UNISS has three strategic objectives that balance “hard” and the “soft” priorities: a) to foster effective governance across the region; b) to develop competent security mechanisms that can address cross-border threats, and c) to integrate and develop a long-term human development plan.⁸⁰

Without a single member of the Security Council able to play a global leadership role, it is hard to provide UN agencies and missions with the mandate and resources required to fulfil their objectives. The United States may appear to have some interest in monitoring terrorist activity and trafficking networks in northern Niger, but the current administration is unlikely to have much interest in the longer-term stability of the region. Therefore, national stakeholders dominate the scene, often with narrow and self-serving agendas.

Russia has provided military assistance to the Malian government, thereby increasing its political clout in West Africa, a region over which Moscow has little historical role or influence. China has been expanding its investment across Africa, engaging in

⁷⁸ “The Gulf of Guinea is now the world’s worst piracy hotspot,” The Economist, June 29, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/international/2019/06/29/the-gulf-of-guinea-is-now-the-worlds-worst-piracy-hotspot>

⁷⁹ <https://unowas.unmissions.org/supporting-implementation-united-nations-integrated-strategy-sahel>

⁸⁰ https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2013_354_sahel_strategy_en_0.pdf

artisanal gold-extraction, therefore allowing militias to raise capital. The UAE and the KSA seem to want access to a more significant network of Sunni loyalty and seek to play a role in illegal resource extraction. There is no indication that Moscow, Beijing, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are working towards any long-term strategy that will do anything more than increase their influence.

Empowering regional stakeholders could be a viable alternative if the region was not profoundly divided. In the first joint military operation against jihadi militias in June 2020, soldiers from Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso successfully launched a successful counter-attack against Jihadi forces, completing an operation that began in May at the 580-kilometre border between the two countries.⁸¹

Success in these “hard” operations can be measured by the number of militants killed and arrested, or the numbers of vehicles and weapons seized. But turning tactical success into a strategic victory would probably require addressing the spread of jihadist ideas, stemming the flow of militias’ funding, and curbing the tide of militant recruitment. These advances will be difficult to achieve as long as there is little investment in state-building and civilian engagement. Most external actors seem to acknowledge that an improvement in the socioeconomic situation of the region is a prerequisite to securing any long-term improvement to the security environment.

While the overall approach to the region’s security remains tactical – focusing on crisis management – reliance on European support for national military forces will be perpetuated. France feels some sort of obligation to its former colonies in Francophone West Africa and is also aware of the apparent significance of European security for the region. Regardless of whether the former colonial master is still politically credible in the region, its military remains the most effective in the EU.

Military might does not mean that French credibility does not matter. The late-twentieth-century French foreign policy of “*Françafrique*” – support for pro-French despots in former colonies – was declared a thing of the past by President Hollande.

⁸¹ Ivory Coast army joins Burkina Faso in anti-jihadist operation, Reuters, May 24, 2020
<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ivorycoast-burkina-security/ivory-coast-army-joins-burkina-faso-in-anti-jihadist-operation-idUKKBN2300QG>

However, not everyone in the region is convinced that the French presence is there to advance anything other than its economic and political agenda. Inevitably, the presence of French soldiers in the Sahel is an opportunity for militants to utilise anti-colonial rhetoric and recruit more young fighters. Even as France tries to internationalise, or at the very least Europeanise, its regional role, governments in the region have found there is less scope for negotiation with militias with French troops on the ground. Ultimately, France's polarising role dissuades regional powerhouses such as Algeria from playing a constructive role in the fight against warlords such as Iyad Ag Ghali.

Other European powers are unable to improve the perception of France on the ground as a neo-colonial power. Germany's role is generally seen as positive and relates to the concerns around human trafficking that resonates with political priorities at home and a tradition of Franco-German cooperation. The United Kingdom, for its part, provides small but increasing manpower and political support to Operation Barhane. This may just be a matter of helping out an important ally on the quiet and an attempt to demonstrate to France that in a post-Brexit environment the UK remains a security partner of consequence, willing to contribute to Europe's collective security irrespective of its EU membership status. Again, in demonstrating relevance in disrupting human, arms and drugs trafficking, the UK can substantiate the claim that it is 'leaving the EU, but not leaving Europe.' If the UK could also be seen as able to broker the engagement of important regional stakeholders such as Nigeria, this kind of engagement could be consequential. At the moment, European engagement in the region is in substance French-led rather than pan-European and is almost exclusively hard-security oriented.

The only power bloc with a strategy for the Sahel is the EU, even if French-led. The rise of the populist far-right in Europe over the last decade has threatened the political stability and coherence of the Union, led to the arrival of powerful Eurosceptic politicians such as Sebastian Kurz in Austria and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, while also influencing Brexit in the United Kingdom. The most critical issue that unites these populists is a fear of increased migration into the EU from certain regions, including

from the Sahel, a region that is now a source and transit point for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to southern Europe via the Mediterranean.

The EU approach appears to be that by increasing state control of Sahel governments, militia activity can be curtailed, and the volume of northwards migration through Africa into Europe reduced. At the same time, it allows the EU to demonstrate to the world that in an age of Brexit and international crises, the alliance between France and Germany is sufficient to underpin the emergence of the EU as a security actor of consequence. This message is increasingly significant not only vis-à-vis actors that the EU has historically dealt with as geopolitical foes, such as Russia, but also vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic partners, including the United States.

Without clear global leadership and a collaborative strategy, the separate efforts of dozens of external powers could go to waste. The United Nations is doing more than many other external bodies, by taking a long-term perspective and considering the multiple problems that are making the region so complicated. However, the UN has failed to provide leadership for both security and state-building initiatives that bring on board all stakeholders. For instance, it seems that the one thing missing from the 'soft' international efforts in the region is diplomatic engagement with third party actors that continue to have a detrimental impact on the security environment.

The arrests of Chinese nationals involved in illegal mining in Ghana served as a stark demonstration that the appeal of such mining is international, and that the legal protections for Sahel states are insufficient to defend against this destructive foreign interference. The involvement of KSA and the UAE in money laundering and the movement of artisanal gold in the region, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, can only serve to keep militant groups armed and ambitious. Nevertheless, there appear to have been no diplomatic attempts so far to curtail this activity by powerful Gulf state interests, despite their close alliances with most Western governments. Other nations that are also allies of the West with interests in illegal gold mining include India, Turkey and Switzerland: all three of these could surely be leant on by the UN to change their approach to the region or increase legal protections for the reduction of militancy.

Efforts need to be made by global leaders and influencers to ensure that Sahel governments and those involved in the purchase of Sahel gold can improve regulations around both the mining and trade of gold. At the same time, rather than focusing on combat operations that engage directly with militants, external combatants might be better utilised defending existing mine sites and using force and reconnaissance capabilities to deter illegal sites from opening and operating.

Instead of focusing on the territory dominated by the militias, as happened in the Libyan civil war, external stakeholders would do better to eradicate networks that sustain militias with money and weapons. A good starting point would be the external involvement in artisanal gold mining, which would ultimately starve groups of their ability to execute both the tactics and strategies that they employ for the sake of their jihad.

SECURITY IN THE SAHEL - RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no easy way to reverse the situation in the Sahel and help return the region to stability. Chaos and territorial fragmentation are entrenched, regional governments are weak, a crisis of political leadership prevails, extremist armed groups are proliferating, and populations live in fear and poverty. A situation such as this cannot be resolved overnight, but some courses of action, if conducted quickly and efficiently, could go a long way to improving the situation.

Greater international cooperation

More cooperation and interaction is required between international governments and those of the G5-Sahel, so that all regional players can better understand the challenges and difficulties faced on the ground. External governments are primarily directing security-orientated missions in the region: there needs to be better cooperation among local partners. The G5-Sahel naturally deals with the governments of the Sahel at an institutional level, but its operations seem to depend on ideas that are planned in France⁸².

Sahel governments are uncomfortable criticising France, which pays for security infrastructure. However, if France insisted on closer cooperation with the Sahel governments, and if it took into consideration their real priorities and needs, critical issues could then be addressed more effectively. Additionally, France might benefit from increased sympathy among populations in the Sahel, which would improve its prospects for being backed further by international counterparts, partners and potential co-sponsors.

⁸² When the road map for the G5-Sahel had last been announced in Pau (France) in January 2020, many voices in the Sahel (civil society, researchers, activists, platforms of demonstrators...) criticized fiercely France, accusing it of interference and of attempting to put the subregion under their own "trusteeship": Sophie Douce, Paul Lorgerie, "G5 Sahel : Le sommet de Pau n'a pas fait taire les critiques au Burkina et au Mali", *Le Monde*, 14th of January 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/01/14/sahel-le-sommet-de-pau-n-a-pas-fait-taire-les-critiques-au-burkina-et-au-mali_6025849_3212.html

New UN mandate

The peacekeeping and development mission of the United Nations is critical: if conducted carefully, efficiently and effectively, it would allow regional tensions to be defused. However, the mission needs better support at the financial and the diplomatic levels for the UN to be able to take effective action in this regard. Its success will depend not only on the support of the wider international community but on the leadership and influence that can be demonstrated by the most powerful actors in the region, particularly France.

The role of France in the Sahel is critical both financially and militarily, but the nation's unpopularity as a former colonial power has increased tensions across the region. A new UN mandate is needed to allow for more extensive international involvement, reducing the visible presence of French diplomats and military personnel to create an atmosphere that will encourage other security stakeholders to contribute with both development and security resources.

New G5 Sahel mandate

The G5-Sahel is the key organisation for efficient security operations in the Sahel, but it needs to improve considerably. When the organisation last met in June 2020, participants highlighted their differences rather than moving to cooperate better⁸³. At the same time, it needs more financial support: the security-focused objectives of the organisation are necessary, but they need more international financial, military and logistical backing to be able to adapt effectively to the nature of the challenges faced.

A new G5 Sahel mandate, recognised internationally, would help to discourage cooperation between corrupt state officials and armed militias, whilst encouraging a greater sense of national unity, potentially even to the extent that a nation-state will ultimately be afforded more loyalty than a local militia or Jihadist Group. As in Afghanistan, the mandate should evolve to include the mission of supporting military forces in the region to develop structured, accountable, disciplined, and well-equipped armed forces, able to respond to specific tactical challenges.

⁸³ Antoine Malo, "Sahel : dans les coulisses du huis-clos tendu du G5 de Nouakchott," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 3rd of July 2020, <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/sahel-dans-les-coulisses-du-huis-clos-tendu-du-g5-de-nouakchott-3979047>

New strategy to starve militia networks of money and arms

The international community, along with regional governments, must adopt a fresh strategy to break the cycle of terrorism and recruitment that relies so much on organised criminal activities and allows militias to make financial gains and recruit new operators. The international community must be prepared to confidently shine a light on the complicity of international actors in these activities, rather than allowing them to continue covertly. This should include a clear position vis-à-vis China, KSA and the UAE, ensuring that international engagement is part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Trafficking (specifically in humans, weapons, ammunition and drugs), as well as piracy and highway robbery, can be disrupted with international conditionality clauses on loans, military deals, debt relief and foreign aid to those governments in the region who can be shown to be involved in the trafficking network by nature of their driving demand for illegal products.

At the same time, the regional imposition of an internationally-recognised value chain in gold mining and trading would ensure transparency and accountability in the industry and prevent militias from profiting from artisanal mining or the theft of gold from sites.

Fresh investment strategy

Investing in infrastructure, development and education projects, as well as in socioeconomic projects and employment opportunities, is the first condition to increasing the legitimate power of the State, the engagement of the population and the security of the region. By offering alternative prospects to a frustrated population, and by dedicating a part of the funds that are poured into the region to better and more concrete socioeconomic projects, actors seeking to improve regional security will pave the way to a longer-term strategy for peace more fruitful than the current security-orientated one. If some Western nations are prepared to commit the lives of their soldiers to the security of the region, then they should, with a full understanding of the role of Sahelian insecurity in wider global insecurity and terrorism. That would require investing in infrastructure projects to improve transport, healthcare, power,

sanitation, all of which spread jobs and wealth, once the influence of corrupt officials is negated.

Efforts to solve the Libyan conflict

An internationally-sponsored resolution to this conflict would allow a legitimate government to secure Libya's borders and reduce (if not prevent) the movement of weapons, ammunition and jihadists south into the Sahel; and the movement of drugs, slaves and migrants north towards Europe. Whilst a wholesale cessation of these movements would be unlikely, stemming the tide would improve prospects considerably. As there currently appears to be a window of opportunity for the resolution of the conflict, halting General Haftar's latest advance while discouraging proxy engagement by KSA, the UAE, Russia, and Turkey, allowing the Government of National Accord to bring an end to the civil war and begin to develop its internationally-recognised authority.

Addendum

By Lyès Menacer

Burkina Faso: *Interview with journalist Atiana Serge Oulon*

LM. The situation in the North of Burkina Faso has seriously degraded during the last few months. How do you explain that?

SO. The North of Burkina Faso cannot be read independently from what prevails in the rest of the country, where many armed groups are still active today. This specific situation can be explained in part by the existence of communitarian tensions: they prevailed way before terrorist groups started acting. The Burkinabe minister of human rights published a study on Burkina Faso's conflicts that shows well how ethnic conflicts dominate in the central part of the country. It is those conflicts that end up fueling the rest of Burkina Faso's problems. All terrorist groups did was to take opportunity of these pre-existing conflicts to develop their attacks in turn. But it is with the attack on the village of Yirgou in January 2019, where between 49 and 210 people were killed, that the country came to its turning point. Since then, we witnessed an additional complication of the situation in the North: violent attacks perpetrated by the Koglweogo Group of Auto-Defence had a negative impact on the situation in the country in general. Actions of revenge based on inter-communitarian grievances prevail alongside terrorist actions.

LM. To what extent is the Islamic State deployed in the region? And could we say that violence in the North can be explained by a convergence between terrorist and criminal groups?

SO. The Islamic State is present in the Sahel and in the east of Burkina Faso, but its real zone of influence is located between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. That said, the Islamic State could also be trying to target areas in the north. The Islamic State also has relations with the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) as well as

with other armed groups: they help each other, and they act jointly together in many criminal actions. In fact, we know quite well that many groups act in the north in a way that is organised; but we do not always know the exact activities that they are responsible for. And when they develop criminal activities, they always do so after having been given a green light by professional criminal groups. There are some individuals with known criminal records that have pledged allegiance to terrorist groups; others put themselves at the disposition of terrorist groups because they know that these organisations have strong military capacities. This kind of allegiance then allows those individuals to carry on their criminal acts while being at the service of terrorist organisations that take advantage of their skills to try to expand to new regions⁸⁴.

LM. Is this cooperation between criminals and terrorist groups explicit in the case of Burkina Faso?

SO. Yes. The nature of the situation that prevails in Burkina Faso facilitates cooperation between criminals and terrorists. There are many examples of this: attacks against financial institutions, as happened in the case of a bank in the south west; attacks on shops in the North; and even the actions of highway bandits in the Cascades region, where many vehicles have been stolen and passengers have been robbed. This is why this mix between criminality and terrorism is something real.

LM. Burkina Faso is, like many other countries of the Sahel and of West Africa, is known for its religious tolerance. What is it then that can explain the rise of violence within the country? To put it another way, why do the people that join these organisations do so: for ideological, security, socioeconomic reasons?

SO. The society as a whole suffers such bad trends. There are many examples of Burkinabe citizens who came back from abroad after having been radicalised, claiming that they want to wage jihad. Some of these people have lived before in Mali, where they learnt the Qur'an. Others have studied in Egypt. The crisis in neighboring Mali in

⁸⁴ For an overview of the complex landscape of jihadism in the Sahel, read Wassim Nasr, "ISIS in Africa: The end of the 'Sahel exception'", Center for Global Policy, 2nd of June 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>

2012, and the fact that the situation clearly worsened since then, also encouraged some Burkinabes to join some terrorist organisations. This is when they became more fanatic, more radicalised, and they decided then to come back to Burkina Faso and to wage jihad.

But there are also other factors that lead to extremism: poverty, marginalisation, and the lack of social perspective. Religion is nothing more than a detonator. And in front of such a situation, where so many radicalised Burkinabes live within society, the struggle ends up being very complicated, and the solution cannot be military only.

LM. There is a lack of means in terms of fight against terrorism, but the countries of the region are still determined to move forward. Can we bet on the middle run on a potential amelioration of the situation in Burkina Faso, in Mali as well as in the rest of the Sahel countries?

SO. While there's life, there's hope. The thousands of Internally Displaced Persons that we have hope sincerely that the situation gets better soon so that they can go back to their hometowns. Security forces have developed positive actions that have succeeded, to a certain extent at least, into bringing back stability to some places. They have been working hard on dismantling plots in the capital city, Ouagadougou. It has been two years now since the capital was last attacked, on March 2 2018, though this does not mean that nobody has tried to develop further attacks in the meantime. The action of the army has enabled calm and security to come back to the province of Nahouri, where a terrorist group has been dismantled. There are several other similar operations that have been conducted, and all of this is good news. But we have to remain cautious, and to continue developing every possible effort due to both the nature of the threat and the fact that it is widespread. This is a considerable challenge that will continue in the medium to long run.

LM. The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and the Islamist State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have been fighting each other recently. Abou Walid Adnane al-Sahraoui, the leader of ISWAP, even lost one of his close collaborators.

Does this put an end to any possibility for these two organisations to work with each other in the future?

SO. One could expect that these two organisations will engage in this kind of fight. Terrorist groups are born, grow up and become stronger thanks to synergies and cooperation, but also by entering into rivalry with each other. If the GSIM and ISWAP fought each other, first and foremost because they had common sources of supply. Add to this that there are further factors to divide them: internal treachery; the way these organisations deal with their human, financial and material means; the divergent religious readings they happen to have of jihad. There is no doubt that these divisions had to come.



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