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**Non-State Armed Actors in Sahel: Al Qaeda Associated Movements (AQAM) versus Daesh Associated Movements (DAM)**

As far as Africa is concerned, we are witnessing a shift in the polarization of Middle Eastern state of conflict coming from Syria, moving from east to west and, within the Sahel-Saharan region from north to south towards West Africa with a growing number of Non-State Armed Actors<sup>1</sup> involved. Since 2007, all these Non-State Actors (NSAs), labelled as *Al Qaeda Associates Movements (AQAM)*, have been working almost undisturbed across the Sahel, but because of the on-going competition with those who are pro-Daesh and therefore in opposition to Al Qaeda, it is no longer correct to insist on grouping them all under the same label, rather, in order to distinguish them, it is now necessary to coin a second term, that of the *Daesh Associated Movements (DAM)*, according to the following scheme:

**Al- Qaeda Associated Movements (AQAM):**

- Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) or Nusrat
- Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) aka Al Qaeda in West Africa (AQWA)
- Emirate of the Sahara
- Al-Mourabitoun
- Ansar Dine
- Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA)
- Macina Liberation Front (FLM)
- Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa (ANSARU)
- Massina Brigades<sup>2</sup>

**Daesh Associated Movements (DAM):**

- Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)
- Boko Haram or the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)

The *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)* – recognized by the Daesh in October 2016 – is an independent Al-Mourabitoun's dissident breakaway wing, based in Menaka in the Gao region (Mali), led by *Adnane Abou Walid al-Sahraoui*. The ISGS, created in May 2015, was soon after repudiated by Al-Mourabitoun's leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, condemning al-Sahraoui's pro-ISIS stance as unofficial and personal only.

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1 The US State Department maintains a list of *Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)*, including ten operating in Africa: ISIS, Boko Haram, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, al Shabaab, AQIM, Ansaru, Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Shari'a in both Libya and Tunisia.

2 The *Massina Brigades* is a central Malian group mostly staffed by Fulani herders. Another group under the sphere of influence of Nusrat seems to be *Ansarul Islam*, led by a radical Fulani Burkinabe, *Ibrahim Maalam Dicko*, who is not in favour of Al Qaeda though.

Recognized by the Daesh in 2015 – Boko Haram, or the *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, based in Maiduguri, capital of the Federal State of Borno (Nigeria), has caused nearly three million internally displaced persons and killed about 20,000 people so far. In August 2016, its previous leader, *Abubakar Sheaku*, was replaced by Daesh' headquarters in Syria with his former spokesman, *Habib Yusuf* also known as *Abou Mosab al-Barnaoui*, in that allegedly was he too inclined to indiscriminately kill Muslims, while the new goal would be to fight apostates and crusaders. Actually, the new Nigerian President, *Muhammadu Buhari*, has been able to regain American confidence in the opposition to the Islamist sect, having changed a positive approach to Washington over the previous Nigerian administration. Nevertheless, the Nigerian Armed Forces do not have enough logistics capabilities to keep control of the territories that they regained from Boko Haram over the past year and a half. If Abuja wants to “win the peace”, it is necessary to improve the communication and foster the mutual confidence between local communities and national security forces deployed over there with the goal to stem the action of Boko Haram, putting into practice a real trust-building process.

### **The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)**

In 2017, some of the main non-state armed actors active in the Sahel – the Sahara Emirate, Al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, and the Massina Brigades – merged into a single terrorist organization. This is the *Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin – JNIM)* or *Nusrat*, led by the Tuareg *Iyad Ag-Ghaly*, who swore oath of allegiance to Al Qaeda, demonstrating the strategic strengthening of Qaedism throughout the Sahel in a clear opposition to the Daesh supporters, there de facto represented only by two organizations, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and further south by the Islamic State in West Africa Province. This union was officially announced on March 2, present at the meeting respectively *Djamel Okacha* – also known as *Yahia Abou al-Hammam* – chief of the Emirate of the Sahara (a branch of AQMI), *Hamadou Kouffa*, the Fulani leader of the Macina Liberation Front, *Iyad Ag Ghali*, the Ansar Dine's leader, *Hassan al Ansari*, Al-Mourabitun's vice-president, and *Abou Abderrahmane El Sanhadji* on behalf of AQMI.

JNIM's patent aim is to counteract the UN, the EU and Mali's attempt to stabilize the Sahel, trying to achieve the support of local populations specifically integrating marginalized minorities' grievances and underrepresented claims, as in the case of *Tamashek* (Tuareg) and *Fulani* (Fula People or Fulbe). The Fulani and the Tuareg have always felt discriminated by the central governments, often run by different ethnic groups, so it might be rewarding in the long run giving them prospects of redemption, although unrealistic. Historically, the Sahel has been the place of ancestral contrasts and latent tensions between Negro-African rural peoples on the one hand, and nomadic (Tuareg) or semi-nomadic (Fulani) pastoral populations on the other, whose potential exacerbation is being tactically played by Al Qaida, which is looking to widen its social and ethnic support outcomes so far considered insufficient or too much short-term, right because grounded more on opportunism rather than on any ideological affiliation. In truth, to bestow the JNIM leadership on a prominent Tamashek exponent (i.e. Ag-Ghaly) shall be the key component for an imminent Qaedist upgrading level, in this way turning to be less Sahara-oriented and much more Sahel-oriented for the long-term dominance of the region, ready to move the front line even further south, where to perpetrate attacks, as in the central Malian regions of Mopti and Segou for instance.

### **The international response: the FC-G5S, the Liptako Gourma Securitisation Force and the Alliance for the Sahel**

The growing as well as inevitable regional collaboration is the real news about the actions put in place by the African Union, the European Union, the United Nations and the States directly

concerned, to curb the spread of terrorism in the area. Unfortunately, the requisite to adequate local African capabilities accordingly collide with the timing needed.

Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria are carrying on operations against Boko Haram through the *Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)*. In Mali, the *United Nations Integrated Multidimensional Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)*<sup>3</sup> has been deployed since 2013, while France has been conducting the *Barkhane Operation* since 2014, with the aim of making the G5-Sahel States Armed Forces as autonomous as possible, in order to stabilize the region. The first official visit by the newly elected French President, *Emmanuel Macron*, was right in Mali, where he met with the 1,600 French soldiers of the Barkhane Operation in Gao, out of a total of 4,000 therein ranked.

What is more, by the end of 2014, five Sahelian nations have given birth to the *G5-Sahel (G5-S)*, namely: *Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger*<sup>4</sup>. In fact, for the next coming years, the *EU-G5-Sahel* strengthened partnership with local stakeholders is going to be the place of excellence for the Euro-African guidelines implementation as far as the regional crisis management along the Sahel is concerned.

On June 21, 2017, the UN Security Council approved via the Resolution n°2359 the *G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)*, whose operationalization could represent a medium-term exit strategy for the French troops employed in the theatre. According to it, the Security Council has welcomed the deployment of the FC-G5S throughout the territories of its contributing countries, with up to 5,000 military and police personnel, with a view to restoring peace and security in the Sahel region. In addition, the Security Council not only has urged the FC-G5S, MINUSMA and the French forces to ensure adequate coordination and exchange of information, but also has it encouraged bilateral and multilateral partners to expeditiously convene a planning conference to ensure coordination of donor assistance efforts to the FC-G5S. Due to some US<sup>5</sup> and UK objections, a reference to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter authorizing use of force was dropped.

Hence, July the 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017, leaders of the G5 Sahel officially launched the new *G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)*, in the presence of French President Macron. This followed a meeting, February the 6<sup>th</sup> 2017, in which the G5 Sahel Heads of State announced that a new force would be set up to fight terrorism in the sub-region. It is worth noting that such an announcement followed the creation of the *Liptako Gourma Securitisation Force*<sup>6</sup> to combat instability in this border region, created by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in late January that has now been integrated into the G5 Sahel Joint Force. With the endorsement of the *African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC)*, the FC-G5S's mandate is therefore to: *combat terrorism and drug trafficking; contribute to the restoration of state authority and the return of displaced persons and refugees; facilitate humanitarian operations and the delivery of aid to affected populations; contribute to the implementation of development strategies in the G5 Sahel region*. The former Chief of Staff of the Army of Mali, General *Didier Dakouo*, is in command of the FC-G5S. The Force Member States personnel (both military and police components) shall be deployed along the Mali–Mauritania border and across the Liptako Gourma region, also known with the expression of the “Three Borders Area”. As a matter of fact, along the Niger–Mali border the threat consists mainly of *Ansar Dine* and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, while the *Macina Liberation Front* and *Ansarul Islam* are active along the Mali–Burkina Faso border.

3 With Resolution n° 2364 (2017), the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of MINUSMA for one year, reinforcing it with three new tasks: to support the Armed Forces of Mali, to support the G5 Sahel forces and participate in 2018 general elections.

4 See: <http://www.g5sahel.org/>

5 The US provides about a quarter of the UN peacekeeping budget of 7.1 billion Euros and wants to cut its contributions, so the final resolution left open the issue of funding of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

6 The *Liptako-Gourma* is a homogeneous cross-border region of some 370 000 km<sup>2</sup> that is becoming a new sanctuary for terrorist groups. It is situated between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; and the Niger–Chad border.

By the way, the *Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma Region (ALG)*<sup>7</sup> – commonly known as the *Liptako-Gourma Authority* – is an Organization created on 3 December 1970 in Ouagadougou by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The ALG aims to promote and develop the local natural resources made up of mineral, energy, hydraulic and agro-pastoral assets in a regional framework for an integrated development. ALG pursues four specific objectives: food security, regional organization, environmental protection and social development.

### The Liptako-Gourma Region



The FC-G5S headquarters is strategically located in Sévaré, near Mopti (central Mali). The area of operations of the Joint Force will cover three zones of the G5 Sahel, three borders sectors (also called “fuseaux”): *Sector West*, which will cover the border between Mauritania and Mali; *Sector Centre*, in the “Three Borders Area”, in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso; *Sector East*, covering the border between Niger and Chad. The *G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)* will be divided into seven battalions of 650 servicemen each: Two battalions (one Malian, one Mauritanian) will be deployed in the Sector West; Three (one Malian, one Burkinabe, one Nigerien) will be deployed in the Sector Centre; Two (one Nigerien, one Chadian) in the Sector East. FC-G5S’s preliminary budget for one year is of 423 million Euros. The European Union has already allocated fifty million Euros for the G5-S to be delivered through the *African Peace Facility (APF)*.

July 13, in Paris, the German Chancellor, *Angela Merkel*, and the French President, *Emmanuel Macron*, have presented the *Alliance for the Sahel*<sup>8</sup> joint initiative, in order to counterbalance the mere security aspect with the equally essential long-term development one. The overall objective is to stabilise the Sahel in cooperation with the European Union – Federica Mogherini was present – the World Bank, the African Development Bank (AfDB), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Berlin and Paris have established a five-year timetable, identifying these priority sectors: poverty eradication; developing of rural areas; youth education and employment; improvement of energy infrastructure; governance strengthening. Furthermore, Germany and France are likely to provide significant support in both operational and training commitment.

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7 On January 24, in Niamey, the second Extraordinary Conference of ALG Heads of State decided to bring together their respective intelligence and military capabilities. The Liptako Gourma Securitisation Force’s operational headquarters is going to be based in Niamey (Niger). See: <http://liptakogourma.org/>

8 See: [https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/DE/\\_Anlagen/2017/07/2017-07-13-abschlusserklaerung-d-f-ministerrat.pdf;jsessionid=BCD359A3189D70A6B99ADD78F72B1E15.s7t1?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=4](https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2017/07/2017-07-13-abschlusserklaerung-d-f-ministerrat.pdf;jsessionid=BCD359A3189D70A6B99ADD78F72B1E15.s7t1?_blob=publicationFile&v=4)

Paris is about to support G5 battalions through the creation of operational commitment preparation centres in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, whereas Germany shall be financing the equipment of the *G5 Defence College* in Nouakchott (Mauritania) as well as supporting some G5 Liaison Officers training sessions within the framework of the *Peacekeeping School* in Bamako (Mali).

### **Analysis, assessments and forecasts**

Terrorism today kills more in Africa than in the Middle East. Over fifty percent of Africans are Muslims and traditionally very tolerant, so not permeable by any fundamentalism. Nonetheless, both Qaedists and Pro-Daesh terrorists are using new tactics to achieve their strategic goal: to win support of local populations, radicalizing the most marginalized, and speculating on their claims, thus ultimately weakening the region. In Europe, the Franco-German axis is pushing for the stabilization of the Sahel. In order to overcome not only the battles of military operations conducted in Africa in terms of counter-terrorism, but also and above all to win the war against radicalization and spread of conflict on the African Continent, it is necessary to persuade local peoples and communities that the international community and the other stakeholders do have the intention to lay the foundations for a comprehensive and definitive development. In order to restore effective and efficient statehood in all Sahelian countries' territories, even in the most disregarded ones, it is urgent to prevent terrorist organizations to be seen as credible alternatives in terms of sovereignty to the nation-state authorities, especially where for decades central government's lack of interest have on purpose or unintentionally left behind some very specific social or ethnic groups.

The persistence of the low-intensity state of conflict across the Sahara and Sahel regions is also due to the asymmetry of the measures adopted by the international community, still preferring the hard-power aspect, without fully balancing it with the more global development-oriented one (i.e. soft-power) that can be found in initiatives such as: preventive diplomacy, poverty reduction, public services, health, education and training, agriculture, job creation, infrastructure, long-term trade and investment.

In addition, the absence of involvement in the FC-G5S of the two regional powers – *Algeria* for North Africa and *Nigeria* for West Africa – suggests that, it will take time to assess the effectiveness of the G5-Sahel's force, despite the somewhat dominant position of Chad as a regional security provider, increasingly turned to by the international community in regards of the many crises occurred between the Sahel and Central Africa.

After France and Germany, Italy too is reorganizing its external action towards Africa. The projection of the Italian foreign policy is in fact increasingly being oriented towards Sub-Saharan Africa in general and the Sahel in particular, where two new embassies are being opened: in *Niger* and in *Guinea*<sup>9</sup>. After the summit held in Paris at the end of August among *Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Libya* and *Chad*, it is likely that Rome will soon fund the G5-Sahel; the Deputy Foreign Minister, *Mario Giro*, believes that Italy could decide to support the G5-S above all in terms of training of the African forces involved. From the point of view of development assistance, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) has already funded by means of budget support fifty million Euros to Niger, five million to Burkina Faso, five to Mauritania and ten to Chad, whose President, *Idriss Déby Itno*, went on official visit to Italy. On 26 July at Palazzo Chigi, the Italian Defence Minister, *Roberta Pinotti*, and the Chadian National Defence Delegate, General *Bichara Issa Djadallah* signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement in the presence of the Italian Prime Minister, *Paolo Gentiloni*, as well as the Chadian President.

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9 Indeed, *Marco Prencipe* is the first Italian Ambassador in Niger. The opening of the Italian mission in Niamey was decided by the Council of Ministers in October 2016, which has also decreed the establishment of another Italian Delegation in Africa, specifically in Conakry, Guinea.