

- Examining the origins and evolution of the threat of Islamic extremist groups in the Sahel, which are concentrating their activities in the so-called three-border zone between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, it seems clear how much is realistically difficult to understand without the reconstruction of alliances and of militia movements active in the vast desert area. In this area, the phenomenon of jihadist insurgency is linked by a twofold cause-effect relationship to age-old ethnic and social conflicts. Without neglecting international interventions to restore security and stability in the region, which have culminated with the deployment of the Joint Force G5 Sahel.

### **The current threat and evolution of jihadist groups in the Sahel**

Instability and insecurity in the border regions of the Sahel are a long-standing phenomenon. They have their origin in the still uncertain consolidation of the security forces of the states of the region, the porosity of the borders, territorial claims based on ethnicity and the presence of active Islamic extremists groups. The situation in the crisis area is worsened at the end of 2011, after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, which resulted a huge illegal flow of weapons in the Sahel, which has fuelled insurrections and conflicts in the region<sup>1</sup>.

A progression of events, which exploded in April 2012 under the leadership of the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA), and culminated in the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali. MNLA, a few months later, secured the support of three fearful jihadist groups: al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), Ansar Eddine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Later, these jihadist movements came into conflict with the same MNLA, due to strong disagreements between the Tuareg and the Islamic radicals, after the latter had succeeded in imposing their fundamentalist religious connotation to the armed uprising.

After taking over the military operations, the extremists began to invade Southern Mali, until they threatened the capital Bamako. In January 2013, the revolt spree started the Serval operation conducted by a French-led multinational force in accordance with the Security Council resolutions 2071 of 12 October<sup>2</sup> and 2085 of 20 December 2012<sup>3</sup>.

The armed action avoided the fall of the former French colony under the Islamist yoke and ended to the offensive of the jihadist groups, but failed to eradicate from the area the contagion of violent extremism. Thus having completed the armed intervention and restored the state authority in Northern Mali, from 1 August 2014 Paris entrusted the fight against the Sahelian jihadist groups to the Barkhane operation<sup>4</sup>, which integrated Serval and Epervier<sup>5</sup>.

After more than six and a half years, the war in the north of Mali has turned into a low-intensity asymmetric conflict, during which a new dangerous insurgency has further developed along the Niger-Mali-Burkina Faso border. Right in this area, some jihadist groups, exploiting the insecurity that has characterized it for decades, have established their strongholds.

One of the most dangerous and active Islamic extremist formations in the area is the *Jama'ah Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims – JNIM/GSIM). The JNIM was established at the beginning of March 2017, under the aegis of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), to join in a single organization the main al-Qaida-linked groups active in Mali and in the

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1 Conflict Armament Research, *Investigating cross-border weapon transfers in the Sahel*, November 2016. [www.conflictarm.com/reports/investigating-cross-border-weapon-transfers-in-the-sahel/](http://www.conflictarm.com/reports/investigating-cross-border-weapon-transfers-in-the-sahel/)

2 [www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2071.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2071.php)

3 [www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2085.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2085.php)

4 Barkhane is the name of the graven dunes to form of crescent from the powerful desert winds

5 Epervier Operation was present in Chad since February 1986

Sahel desert area. Specifically, the merger involved al-Murabitun, Ansar Eddine and its affiliates of the Macina Brigade, later renamed as Macina Liberation Front<sup>6</sup>.

Al-Qaida Sahelian cell is led by a prominent figure in the Malian jihadist network: the Tuareg Iyad Ag Ghaly – nicknamed "the strategist" – who besides being Ansar Eddine leader during the war in the north of Mali, in the past having served in the ranks of the Islamic Legion of Gaddafi and fought in Lebanon alongside the PLO militants<sup>7</sup>. In addition to negotiated the release of hostages for the government of Bamako and having been one of the main protagonists of the second Tuareg uprising between 1990 and 1995<sup>8</sup>.

The alliance of the main Qaidist groups active in the region had been anticipated by the observers, as evidenced by a study carried out two months before the merger by the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), in which this possibility had been examined in detail<sup>9</sup>.

After all, the AQMI leader, Emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, had long been pursuing the objective of binding together all active militant groups in the Sahel to fulfil his ambitions to increase AQMI's limited influence on the region<sup>10</sup>. However, the unifying will of the jihadist leader is also derived from the need to formalize the ties and relations between the various armed formations, which date back to the occupation of Northern Mali. Furthermore, it is clear that Droukdel has fostered the merger in response to the progressive strengthening of the Islamic State's influence in the region, which even after its territorial losses remains a pole of attraction in international jihadism.

The first result of this alliance is having negatively influenced the security situation in the area, as the cooperation of the forces has resulted in an increase of their activities. This materialized in the realization of numerous and repeated attacks on large scale, such as the one hit on 18 June 2017 at "Le Campement Kangaba" resort, near the popular tourist location of Dougourakoro, on the eastern outskirts of Mali's capital, Bamako.

Another high-profile attack is that of 14 August 2017 in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, where the JNIM militiamen stormed the café-restaurant "Aziz Istanbul", killing 19 people, including numerous foreigners. The attack that marks the JNIM quality change is that of last 2 March against two symbolic objectives in the heart of Burkina political power: the army headquarters and French embassy in Ouagadougou, struck separately shortly time distance.

Then, on 14 April 2018, JNIM's militiamen attacked the UN MINUSMA Headquarters in Timbuktu Airport, known as the "Super Camp". An action launched in broad daylight and with tactics much more sophisticated, than those previously used to hit other Malian military bases.

An escalation of violence carefully examined in a recent report by the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWA), which warns of the risk that armed extremist groups are strengthening their links in the region with a view to extending their influence beyond the areas in which they are already active<sup>11</sup>. The UNOWA alert is widely reflected in the recent attacks, which have bloodied the region carried out with increasingly sophisticated tactics, often using the IED (Improvised Explosive Device).

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6 M. Zerrouky, *Les groupes djihadistes s'unissent au Sahel*, in «Le Monde International», 4 March 2017. [www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/03/04/les-groupes-djihadistes-s-unissent-au-sahel\\_5089337\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/03/04/les-groupes-djihadistes-s-unissent-au-sahel_5089337_3210.html)

7 Iyad Ag Ghali, *l'introuvable chef djihadiste au Sahel*, in «Le Journal du Dimanche», 1 March 2018. [www.lejdd.fr/international/afrique/iyad-ag-ghali-lintrouvable-chef-djihadiste-au-sahel-3585203](http://www.lejdd.fr/international/afrique/iyad-ag-ghali-lintrouvable-chef-djihadiste-au-sahel-3585203)

8 Ibidem

9 M. Mémier, *Aqmi et al-Mourabitoun Le djihad sahélien réunié?*, Etudes de l'Ifri, Programme Afrique, January 2017. [www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/der.memier\\_aqmi-al-mourabitoun\\_fr\\_2017.compressed\\_0.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/der.memier_aqmi-al-mourabitoun_fr_2017.compressed_0.pdf)

10 H. Nsaibia, *Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger*, in «Jihadology», 27 March 2017. <https://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger/>

11 United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel*, 29 June 2018. <https://bit.ly/2CizNY7>

The complex scenario has been examined in another study published at the beginning of October by Critical Threats (CT), a geopolitical analysis project of the American Enterprise Institute based in Washington DC. The report explains how the French and US forces counterterrorism operation has failed to prevent the proliferation of the Salafi movement in this part of Africa<sup>12</sup>. According to the CT project, in the so-called zone of the three borders of the Sahel, between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, there is a statement of the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS). A statement confirmed by the fact that in the first nine months of the 2018 French military operations mainly focused on this group<sup>13</sup>.

The *wilayat* (province) of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara was formed in May 2015, when its leader Adnan Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi (former co-founder of MUJAO during the Northern Mali conflict) pledged alliance to ISIS, recognized only at the end of October 2016. The extent of the threat became more evident after the Tongo Tongo ambush occurred on 4 October 2017, when ISGS militants attacked Nigerien and US soldiers near the village of Tongo Tongo in southwestern Niger, about twenty kilometres from the Mali border.

Five Nigerian soldiers and four Americans, including two green berets, lost their lives in the deadly attack. The death of the American military has triggered an intense debate in Washington about the role of the US military presence in Niger. In addition to inducing the Pentagon to review the rules of engagement and reduce the number of missions, in which American consultants support local troops in areas considered at risk of attacks<sup>14</sup>.

The al-Sahrawi group has managed to increase its influence in the area by adopting the sectarian inclusion strategy of intervening in ethnic conflicts, to recruit proselytes among marginalized communities. As was the case with the Fulani that the ISGS managed to enlist in its ranks, accepting its claims and exploiting the ethnic tensions, which at the local level opposed from long time this ethnicity to the Tuareg<sup>15</sup>.

In recent months, the extremist group has also extended its activities to kidnappings, such as that of the German humanitarian operator Jörg Lange, kidnapped in April 2018 in Niger, near the village of Ayrou, by Fulani militiamen armed group of 'ISGS. It is important to note that with this abduction the Sahelian branch of Islamic State has introduced a change in its modus operandi, primarily focused on armed incursions and attacks, while kidnappings were the prerogative of the al-Qaeda-linked groups.

However, as reported in an interview by the Colonel Patrick Steiger, spokesperson for the French Armed Forces General Staff, the Barkhane Counter-Terrorism Force operations have significantly reduced the ISGS capabilities offensive<sup>16</sup>. Colonel Steiger recalls the recent elimination of one of his main leaders, Mohamed Ag Almouner, who was killed on August 27 during a Barkhane airstrike. In addition to the surrender to the Algerian authorities of the Emir Sultan Ould Bady, who with his Salahadin Brigade had left al-Qaida to join the ISGS.

The High Official believes that the loss of two long-time jihadists like Almouner and Bady constitutes a hard-hit for the ISGS command structure, which will significantly affect its offensive capacity in the area on the border between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where it exercises greater control.

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12 E. Estelle, *ISIS Affiliate Expands in the Sahel*, in «Critical Threats», 5 October 2018. [www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/isis-affiliate-expands-in-the-sahel](http://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/isis-affiliate-expands-in-the-sahel)

13 Ibidem

14 T. Gibbons-Neff, E. Schmitt, *U.S. Commandos in Africa Are Told to Avoid Combat Missions or 'Do Not Go'*, in «New York Times», 9 May 2018. [www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/us/politics/special-forces-africa-niger-combat-missions.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/us/politics/special-forces-africa-niger-combat-missions.html)

15 C. Meynial, *Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré: «Les djihadistes utilisent la fragilité des bergers peuls»*, in «Le Point Afrique», 12 July 2017. <https://bit.ly/2kD4m48>

16 *Sahel: selon Barkhane, le groupe EIGS est en voie d'affaiblissement*, in «Rfi Afrique», 31 August 2018. <https://bit.ly/2J6FCJS>

However, the road to eradicate the threat of the al-Sahrawi group is still on the rise, especially if we take into account the popular support it enjoys in northern Mali and its contribution to the escalation of the jihadist insurgency in Burkina Faso. While the persistent conditions of conflict, which have already allowed the extremist movement to assert itself in Mali, could further strengthen it.

For a more in-depth analysis of the context under examination, we cannot omit to mention another very active Salafist group in Burkina Faso: Ansarul Islam, founded in December 2016 by the Islamic preacher Fulani, Malam Ibrahim Dicko. The founder of AI was once considered very close to the jihadist leader Amadou Koufa, who before joining the chain of command of the GSIM was at the top of the Macina Liberation Front. Dicko was killed in a Barkhane raid in June 2017 and after his death his brother Jafar, who decided to align the group with al-Qaida, took the leadership of Ansarul Islam. A decision contrary to the Ibrahim's positioning, which before his death had criticized his mentor Amadou Koufa for supporting the JNIM, rather than the local faction of the Islamic State<sup>17</sup>.

A varied scenario of jihadist alliances and ethnic oppositions implies the search for not only military solutions, such as the possibility of dialogue with extremist groups examined in a study published at the end of September on the OECD West African Papers<sup>18</sup>. The discussion elaborated by the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida questioned the possibility of starting negotiations with the leaders of the jihadist movements, as happened during the conflict in Mali with the aforementioned Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa. The study notes that the attempt at dialogue has not wavered because of ideological factors, but because of logistical problems and deep divisions within the authority of Bamako. Moreover, while noting that in the current phase the effort to establish some form of negotiation has very high probability of failing, the analysis underlines the importance of making further attempts in any way<sup>19</sup>.

As part of the military solution to the fight against insurgency, it should be noted that the transnational nature of the jihadist threat and the difficulty of many states in stemming it, have highlighted the importance of regional and international cooperation. This necessity resulted in the establishment of a joint military force called G5 Sahel (FC-G5S), formed by five African countries: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad, who in the first phase can count on the support of France's Operation Barkhane. The multilateral initiative, launched in February 2017, and fully operational in March 2018, at the beginning of its mandate has been recognized by Resolution 2359 of 21 June 2017<sup>20</sup> and Resolution n. 2391 of 8 December 2017<sup>21</sup>, unanimously adopted by the United Nations Security Council to support the fight against terrorism, arms-trafficking, drugs and human beings in the region.

In an attempt of repressing the jihadist insurgency, European Union, France, United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have allocated substantial sums to subsidize the G5 Sahel. However, the financial problems have not yet been completely resolved and to ensure greater economic coverage, the FC-G5S should secure financial support from the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Besides the creation of a financing mechanism and administrative management to ensure the release and efficient use of contributions.

The new G5 Sahel Joint Force commander is Mauritanian General Hanena Ould Sidi, who has replaced Malian General Didier Dacko last July. The Counter-Terrorism Force is made up of five thousand officers, including soldiers and police personnel, most of which are deployed in the three

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17 A. Mc Gregor, *Islamist Insurgency in Burkina Faso: A Profile of Malam Ibrahim Dicko*, in «Aberfoyle International Security», 17 aprile 2017. [www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=3908](http://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=3908)

18 A. Turston, *Political settlements with jihadists in Algeria and the Sahel*, in West African Papers n. 18, OECD Publishing, October 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1787/24142026>

19 Ibidem

20 [www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2359.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2359.php)

21 [www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2391.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sres2391.php)

FC-G5S logistic bases: one near Nema, along the border between Mali and Mauritania, one in the Liptako-Gourma area near the border between Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, a third one in Wour, in the north of Chad, along the border with Niger.

The FC-G5S complements the mandates of MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane, adopting a more comprehensive approach to address the security challenge in the region. It is important to underline that although Barkhane led the early stages of multilateral force intervention, the Joint Force's mandate is more extensive than that of the French mission. This is because the FC-G5S through joint operations takes on terrorism and transnational organized crime. In addition to including assistance during humanitarian operations, activities for the development of the area and the restoration of state authority.

In this regard, a recent study by the International Crisis Group has shown that the success or failure of the multinational force will depend largely on its coordination with the military operations, already in place since 2013<sup>22</sup>. Predictably, the counter-terrorism task force has encountered some difficulties in stopping the offensive of jihadist groups. The same that on 29 June attacked G5 Sahel headquarters, in the town of Sevaré, central Mali. The action against the military post was claimed by the JNIM, which employed four terrorists aboard a vehicle loaded with explosives, killing three soldiers. It was also in consequence of this attack that the new commander Sidi decided to transfer the headquarters to Mali's capital Bamako from the central town of Severe.

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

As can be seen from the elaborate, there is still much work to be done before the call and threat of violent extremism are finally suppressed in the Sahel. So far, the governments of the region have predominantly opposed the phenomenon through military force. Without engaging vigorously to address the main factors that encourage the recruitment of young Africans into armed groups, such as poverty, marginalization, corruption, unemployment and inadequacy of primary services. Moreover, the simultaneous presence in the Sahel of the Islamic State and of al-Qaida raises the level of risk of attacks. A level exacerbated by the competition between the two groups. Which thanks to heavy armaments and experienced fighters, could succeed in further extending their influence in the region coming to threaten the communities of the entire Sahel.

The facts have shown that, despite having registered successes, the only military approach is not sufficient to eradicate the threat. While the resilience capacity demonstrated by the various jihadist formations requires constant attention also on the part of Western countries. They are also directly threatened, as evidenced by the recent social media announcements that call the *mujaheddin* to gather, inviting them to strike Western interests on the Sahel territory. Regard to tacking into consideration the fact that the threat that extremist groups represent towards the West in the last ten years has become increasingly looming. As demonstrated by a recent study that emerges, that in the last five years the number of terrorist actions against Western interests in Africa has tripled compared to the previous five years<sup>23</sup>.

Western partners will therefore have to continue to support the local Armed Forces in the long run. Moreover, they will have to do it by perfecting their training and enhancing military equipment and apparatuses, in order to ensure a more effective fight against the growing jihadist threat. One of the primary expectations is that the G5-Sahel Force can quickly improve the overall security situation.

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22 International Crisis Group, Africa Report n. 258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017. <https://bit.ly/2JeSGeU>

23 Foundation for Defense of Democracies, D. Gartenstein-Ross, J. Zenn, S. Sheafer, Sandro Bejdic, *Evolving Terror: The Development of Jihadist Operations Targeting Western Interests in Africa*, February 2018. <https://bit.ly/2GYscx0>

Thus allowing MINUSMA to best fulfill its peacekeeping mandate, which is however limited to Mali alone. After all, it was precisely the evident difficulty of international forces in halting the action of the jihadist groups to induce the G5 Sahel countries to call for a more central role in the fight against terrorism.

Overall, the one described is a constantly evolving scenario characterized by the worsening of ethnic opposition and the onset of extremist groups, which are becoming increasingly worrying in Sahel. In this particular context, the only military intervention can make the jihadists fall back, but it is not enough to solve a problem that is rooted in the poverty and distrust of a multitude of marginalized young Africans. Young people that should be supported by structural reforms and massive investments in education and social services, especially in rural areas, where it is easier to give in to the call of violent extremism. A task that the governments of African countries and their Western partners will have to live up to. Otherwise, it will be difficult to leave room for optimistic forecasts for the future of the Sahel.