

TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL REGION: AN EVOLVING THREAT ON EUROPE'S DOORSTEP

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The Arab Spring (2011) and the collapse of state power in Libya (2011) and Mali (2012) represented a critical turning point, especially for security concerns related to geopolitical issues that have returned to dominate contemporary debates on the Sahara-Sahel. A combination of bad governance and considerable economic, social and environmental disparities has fostered the growth of violent extremism, armed militancy and the proliferation of transnational crimes (contraband and trafficking) in the region, from southern Algeria and south-western Libya (Fezzan region) to Niger and the Lake Chad Basin. However, Jihadist violence is not a new phenomenon in the region. It is an effect of local problems and a “wider international environment [that has] infused it with renewed momentum” (Melly, 2016).

The emergence of several factors of instability has provoked both an implosion of some Sahelian states and a breakdown of the old status quo. The Sahel is a land of multiple crises in which numerous drivers have created the conditions for the growth of new threats in the region as a whole and its Euro-Mediterranean neighbourhood. The European Union (EU), in fact, is facing significant challenges from the Sahel, many of them linked to a triangular nexus between the security dimension, the flow of migrants and violent extremist threats.

This article will first explore the roots of instability in the region. It will then examine the causes of militancy in the region, as well as mapping the principal terrorist organisations there. Lastly, it will provide some recommendations on what policies and strategies should be developed in order to address the growing threats in the Sahel. The analysis of the context is largely based on existing academic literature and media reports on the Sahel. The data has been gathered from open-source databases, including information on militant attacks.

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Understanding the Causes of Militancy in the Sahel

The development of a Jihadist scene in the Sahel has been strongly shaped by a volatile local and regional context. The Arab geopolitical consequences of the uprisings in the Greater Maghreb and the war in Libya and Mali, which indirectly encouraged connections between political and security dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel, laid the foundations for a convergence of local and global grievances and the rise of new transnational non-state actors, particularly in northern Mali (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016). Exploiting the permeability of the region's borders, transnational armed groups filled the political vacuums existing in many areas of the Sahel, taking advantage of the deep resentment of local populations/ethnicities (such as the Tuareg, Arab tribes, Moors, Peul, Songhai and Fulani communities in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) towards central authorities.

These groups presented themselves as defenders of the local population against alleged abuses by the state. In order to reinforce the local communities' confidence in them, some Jihadist-Salafist leaders have entered marriages and kinship affiliations, gaining trust and influence in local dynamics (this is a feature of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM] Jihadists) (Canadian Security Intelligence Service-Academic Outreach, 2016). The fragmentation of local and central political authorities has enabled armed militias to undermine local governments and seize power, thus gaining a significant territorial presence (Canadian Security Intelligence Service-Academic Outreach, 2016). Moreover, terrorist groups took advantage of the inability of central governments to provide basic services and protection to local communities and to de-escalate local tensions and conflicts over access to natural resources, fuelling resentment of local communities towards the central state and increasing recruitment among them (Lacher & Steinberg, 2015).

In addition, the persistent marginalisation of neglected communities from the key formal economic sectors led to the emergence of an informal economy (in particular arms and drug smuggling, as well as contraband in basic necessities), thus indirectly contributing to the growth of Islamist extremism. Indeed, in the last few years armed groups, drug traffickers and other smugglers active across the Sahel (and particularly in northern Mali) have recruited local populations from illegal activities.

In response, local authorities and state powers have adopted a more repressive and discriminatory stance towards populations in the hinterlands that only strengthened local support for extremist groups, transforming the hinterlands/borderlands of the states into hotbeds of violent extremism (such as northern Mali, the Liptako-Gourma border regions between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso or the peripheries of the countries situated around the Lake Chad Basin) (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017). In fact, while national armies were retreating from the hinterlands and official authorities were

abandoning immense rural areas, Salafist-Jihadist groups and other non-state actors were filling the security vacuum, legitimising themselves as alternatives to state powers.

The Roots of Instability in the Sahel (1990s-2010)

The Sahel is a “semi-arid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal eastward to Sudan [, which] forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south” (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014). The Sahel is a geo-strategic territory with many structural problems, being one of the world’s poorest areas, pounded by climate change, population growth, food insecurity, corruption, crime and violent extremism. The region is often perceived as a crossroads of African instability, caught between the need for change and old unresolved issues, in which political weakness, marginalisation and violence have become the drivers of radical proselytising and the terrorist activities of some insurgent groups or Jihadist-Salafist organisations close to al-Qaeda or Islamic State (IS) (European External Action Service, 2017).

The deep-seated instability in the region has its roots in several issues arising in the 1990s with the experience of the Algerian civil war, when for the first time in this crisis scenario an Islamist extremist network appeared, known as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an Algerian militant armed group.¹ In the late 1990s, following internal divisions over the GIA’s strategy of attacking civilians, under the leadership of Hassan Hattab some members left the group and founded the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), a predecessor of AQIM (Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, n.d.-a). The GSPC reshaped the GIA’s strategy, proposing a new policy of targeting military and security forces. The GSPC became the main anti-government force in Algeria. In 2003, Hattab was replaced by Nabil Sahraoui and, following his death in 2004, by Abdelmalek Droukdel. By that time, the GSPC started to embrace al-Qaeda’s ideology of global Jihad. In order to contain the GSPC threat, the Algerian government and the national armed forces launched a crackdown against the group (Grobelaar & Solomon, 2015). As a result of these anti-Islamist operations, in 2005-2006, part of the GSPC faction spread over a large area of the Sahel, between southern Algeria and northern Mali, creating small *kataib* (brigades) operating in local bandit and smuggling networks (cigarettes, drugs, vehicles and arms)² (Ashour, 2013).

¹ GIA was formed in 1992-1993 when the Algerian government nullified the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) during the 1991 legislative elections. In these years, GIA began a campaign of armed attacks against the government and civilians and foreigners in Algeria. The group quickly became one of Algeria’s most radical and violent extremist organisations. For more information, see Wolf, A. (2016, January 13). Commentary. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21(2), 171-177. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629387.2016.1130929?journalCode=fnas20>

² After the fragmentation of the GSPC, several militants abandoned armed tactics and took part in the Peace and National Reconciliation process proposed by Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, which promised, beyond the activation of a legal framework, “the release of political prisoners, investigations of more than 10,000 disappearances, social reintegration, political rights, and, most importantly, civilian control of the armed forces.” For more information, see Ashour, O. (2013, January 25). The Algerian tragedy. *Brookings Institution*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-algerian-tragedy/>

In September 2006, the GSPC joined al-Qaeda and was renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In 2009, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel decided to open the Sahelian front with several brigades, entrenching the group into local societies and illegal business and supporting their political causes (such as the Tuareg secession in northern Mali).

The progressive “Sahelisation” of AQIM and the hybridisation of the Algerian fighters with local brigades created the conditions for the development of a new Salafist-Jihadist landscape in the Sahel, in which other groups emerged, such as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), recruiting members in northern Mali and Mauritania. As noted by Lacher and Steinberg, “soon Algerians were in a minority in the Saharan AQIM units” (Lacher & Steinberg, 2015, p. 75).

Jihadism: New Trajectories in the Sahel (2011-2017)

After the fall of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, several armed groups emerged in the crisis scenario of the Sahara-Sahel region. Many of them proliferated in southern Algeria, eastern Mauritania, northern Mali, south-western Niger and, in recent years, in the northern regions of Burkina Faso (Boeke, 2016). According to Raineri and Strazzari (2017), these groups are showing a “gradual resurgence and the realignment of Jihadist armed groups that have extended their operational range further south – across northwest African borders, where they interfere in and interact with already existing conflicts – and increased the challenges for regional stability” (p. 1).³ A multitude of actors operate in this complex and fragmented landscape, among which the Jihadist-Salafist groups continue to possess the lion’s share, most of them located in southern Algeria, northern Mali and south-western Niger.

AQIM (rebranded Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslim [JNIM]) remains the most prominent Sahara-Sahelian armed group and the most important terrorist organisation in the region. Since its foundations in 2006, the group headed by the emir Abdelmalek Droukdel is the pole star in the fragmented Sahelian Jihadist galaxy (Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, n.d.-b). The group is indissolubly linked to al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. According to Porter (2011), AQIM’s ideology blends local and global Salafist-Jihadist dogma with persistent references to European colonialism (especially France’s

³ To combat violence and radical ideologies, some countries in the Sahel created security architectures (i.e., Multinational Joint Task Force [MNJTF] between Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Benin, and Niger) or reinforced other mechanisms already in place (G5 Sahel), with little success. Neither the United Nations in the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) nor the military intervention of Western countries, like France in Mali (Operation Barkhane), have stopped the violence. Despite the severe setbacks caused by counterterrorism operations, the armed groups continue to strengthen their power in the Sahara-Sahel. See also, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). (2017, June). Between Jihadi-Salafism and Local Conflict: Evolving Security Threats in the Maghreb and Sahel. Retrieved from https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/170718_Maghreb_Sahel_roundtable.pdf?0GjSOBzTvAokw6nZzWqyw6dZccAG0noH

and Spain's) and "apostate enemies," such as the countries of the Maghreb and Sahel. The final goal of AQIM is to implement Sharia in West Africa (Porter, 2011). In 2011-2012, AQIM and its affiliates/local partners (such as MUJAO and Ansar Eddine) played an important role in Libya and Mali, in particular during the Malian crisis (2012) and consequently in the war in the northern part of the country (2013), where AQIM has reinforced alliances with local warlords. After the outbreak of the Tuareg rebellion in Mali, AQIM forces took advantage of the internal division between Islamist and secular Tuareg in order to gain control over northern Mali in Ménaka, Tessalit, Aguelhok, Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao (Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2017a).

Since the Mali war in 2013, AQIM has created an umbrella organisation, merging its satellite groups with other Jihadist-Salafist organisations active in the Sahara-Sahel. In response to French counterterrorist operations, AQIM has been forced to take shelter in Ubari, in the Libyan Fezzan, in an area near the Algerian border, where it improved its strategies, targeting places frequented by Westerners and tourists, such as hotels, resorts, coffee-bars or restaurants, to strengthen its attractiveness to local partners (Stanford University, 2016a). The most brutal attacks took place in Mali (Radisson Blue Hotel in Bamako, November 2015), Burkina Faso (Cappuccino Café in Ouagadougou, January 2016) and Ivory Coast (Grand Bassam Resort, March 2016) (Counter Extremism Project, 2017).

Closely linked to AQIM activities is al-Mourabitoun (the sentinels), the terrorist group founded in January 2013 by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (alias Khalid Abu al-Abbas) and created by the merger of al-Mulathameen (the veiled ones), its precedent organisations, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Both groups were offshoots of AQIM in 2013. Al-Mourabitoun proposes a radical ideology founded on ultra-fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and military control of the territory. The group was one of the main perpetrators of attacks against the Tiguertourine gas facility in In Amenas (Algeria, January 2013) and Western targets in Arlit and Agadez (Niger, May 2013) (Oxford Analytica, 2016). Despite the conflicts existing within the AQIM leadership and the divisions within the group, Belmokhtar and al-Mourabitoun remained in the orbit of AQIM before their formal return to the organisation in spring 2015. Indeed, in July 2015, Belmokhtar publicly pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and asserted the merger of al-Mourabitoun with AQIM. The newly-founded group was called al-Qaeda in West Africa (AQWA), a unified Islamist entity aiming to limit the ascent of IS in the region (Joscelyn, 2015). As a result of this new alliance, the organisation conducted over 100 attacks in 2016 alone (Chivvis, 2017). In March 2017, al-Mourabitoun merged with the AQIM Sahara branch, Ansar Eddine and Macina Liberation Front to form JNIM.

Another important group operating in the region is the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The group was founded in 2010 by Ahmed el-Tilemsi and

Hamad el-Khairi, two former AQIM commanders that split from AQIM and brought many of its fighters into the new entity. The group was initially mostly composed of Algerians and Arab Jihadists, but later started recruiting fighters from all over the Sahel region. Until 2013, the group was an AQIM-affiliate based in southern Algeria, Mali and Niger (Lacher & Steinberg, 2015). MUJAO is best known for its military operations, in collaboration with AQIM, during the Malian crisis, in particular during the period 2012-2013. While a part of MUJAO merged with al-Mourabitoun, another faction formed the group known as Sons of the Islamic Sahara Movement for Justice (Stanford University, 2016b).

Ansar Eddine (Defenders of Religion) is another important player on the Jihadist scene in the Sahel. It is a Tuareg-Jihadist group, founded in 2011-2012 by Iyad ag-Ghali (nom de guerre Shayk Abu Fadl) in the framework of the crisis in northern Mali. Ag-Ghali is a central figure of this organisation and one of the top Jihadist-Salafist leaders in the region. During the 1990s, ag-Ghali led the Tuareg separatist rebellion in the Kidal region against the central government in Mali (1990-1995). After the 1996 ceasefire, ag-Ghali maintained relations with the Malian authorities and became a Malian diplomat in the 2000s. During his stay in Saudi Arabia (2005-2008), ag-Ghali converted to the Islamist cause and became an important nexus between the Tuareg and the Arab components in AQIM (Gaffey, 2016). Radically rooted in northern Mali and tied to al-Qaeda, Ansar Eddine has proclaimed the establishment of Sharia throughout Malian territory, distancing itself from the secessionist project of the nationalist Tuareg movements (Filliu, 2014). During 2015, the group expanded its network in the central and southern regions of Mali, establishing new Jihadist groups: the Macina Liberation Front and the katibat Khalid Ibn Walid (Zenn, 2015).

Additionally, in 2015, the spillover of high-level members from some Sahara-Sahelian Jihadist groups prompted the rise of new organisations allegedly linked to the Islamic State. One group is called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and led by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former spokesman of al-Mourabitoun and a close collaborator of Belmokhtar. In October 2016, IS news agency Amaq published a statement accepting the allegiance of a group known as Katibat al-Mourabitoun under al-Sahrawi leadership, rebranding its name in ISGS (Heras, 2015). Sahrawi's faction operates in eastern Mali, near the Liptako-Gourma tri-state border area (Nsaibia, 2017). According to the Pentagon, in October 2017 the al-Sahrawi' katibat was responsible for an ambush against a small team of US Special Forces in Niger, near the country's borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, killing four US soldiers (US Department of Defense, 2017).

If the establishment of a Sahara branch of IS represents a direct challenge to al-Qaeda in West Africa, the establishment of Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) denotes AQIM's attempt to unify the Islamist front to implement Sharia law in the region. The new entity remains tied to Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda (Weiss, 2017). JNIM mainly

operates in Mali and the Sahel under the umbrella of AQIM. Since the second half of 2017, JNIM has claimed a long series of attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger against local police stations, Sahelian troops and international peacekeepers' military bases. The leader of this new alliance is Iyad ag-Ghali, founder and former militant of Ansar Eddine and key figure in the Malian crisis. According to ag-Ghali's declarations in April 2017, JNIM's goal is to merge and reinforce the presence of armed groups in the region in order to set up a stronger organisation committed to developing a Salafist-Jihadist policy of "Sahelisation" (Ghanem Yazbeck, 2017b), restoring the old project of "Sahelistan" or "Islamic Legion" in the region. However, it is undeniable that the presence of two unified Jihadist entities in direct competition (the newly-founded JNIM and the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara) poses a major threat to stability in West Africa, undermining the peace process in northern Mali, and can undermine the stability of the whole Euro-Mediterranean region (Ghanem Yazbeck, 2017c).

Sahara-Sahel: What Strategy?

From a European perspective, the persistent weakness of North Africa's governance system opened a highway for security threats from the Sahel region to easily reach European borders (Gowan, 2017). In order to defeat Jihadist-Salafist terrorism and to stabilise North Africa and the Sahel, it is necessary to further develop and implement a comprehensive strategy, involving different actors, with the objective of addressing the critical issues that have been affecting the Sahara-Sahel region (International Crisis Group, 2017b).

On a military level, the central authorities of Sahelian states should make a distinction between nomads, rebels, criminals and Jihadists in order to develop targeted strategies of containment (Canadian Security Intelligence Service-Academic Outreach, 2016).

Secondly, they should reform their national security and police apparatus to guarantee efficiency, professionalism and competence in carrying out their duties (Ghanem Yazbeck, 2017c). Lastly, intelligence sharing and increased security coordination and cooperation should also be promoted. An example of a coordinated regional response is the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (also known as G5 Sahel joint force, FC-G5S), including Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. Launched in February 2017, this regional partnership, which consists of 5,000 troops from the G5 Sahel states, was authorised by the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) (April 2017) and strengthened by the adoption of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2359 (June 2017) (Cooke, Toucas, & Heger, 2017). G5 Sahel joint force aims at fighting terrorism, organised crime and smuggling through enhanced cooperation among national armed forces and surveillance of rural areas. On their side, France and other European countries (especially Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy) have pledged broader support for security and stabilisation in the Sahel during the G5 Sahel summit in Celle-Saint-Cloud (13 December 2017).

In the political dimension, it is necessary to act on two levels: national and regional. Regarding the first, Sahelian governments should adopt comprehensive social, educational, political and economic reforms in order to ensure inclusive access to services and resources, institutionalise good governance and improve civil-military relations as well as to promote decentralisation, thus anchoring democracy on the regional and local levels (Tull, 2017). Central governments should also open channels of communication and dialogue with all the social, political and local actors, including tribal marginalised groups in rural areas, which might lead to building a new social contract between the authority and the communities. The EU could provide technical and tactical support in several dimensions (politics, economy, justice and security sector) to Sahelian authorities, encouraging accountability and good governance (Lebovich, 2017).

On the regional level, Sahelian countries should strengthen their capabilities to cooperate to reduce dependence on international aid. Finally, Sahelian leaders should strengthen the role sub-regional or regional civilian bodies play in crisis management mechanisms and mediation in recurrent African conflicts (Institute for Security Studies, 2017).

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