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Jihadism in the Sahel: Exploiting Local Disorders

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A Resilient Jihadist Threat

Since the ignition of the 2012 Malian crisis, violent armed movements claiming to fight in the name of Islam, known as jihadist groups, have become a major security threat for the countries of the Sahel, a region separating North and Sub-Saharan Africa comprising Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.¹ In 2017 alone, jihadist groups reportedly perpetrated 276 attacks in the region (Long War Journal, 2018). To combat this threat, Sahel states and their partners have deployed multiple military operations on the ground. Since 2013, thousands of French soldiers have been operating in the region and about 800 US soldiers are now deployed in Niger alone.² In late 2017, the regional G5-Sahel joint task force, a military cooperation of the Sahel states conceived in 2014, began counter-terrorism operations at the three-border area (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso). Despite military efforts, jihadist groups have proven resilient and even extended areas of activity, as illustrated by the 13 March 2016 jihadist attack of Grand Bassam in Ivory Coast.³

This article will go some way to showing that the resilience of jihadist groups can be partly explained by a twenty-year history of securing anchorages in the Sahel and, especially after the 2013 French military

intervention, partly owes to their implanting and exploiting of local disorders in rural marginalized areas. This strategy has proven effective and requires Sahelian states and their partners to re-evaluate current counter-terrorism strategies.

The Sahel: from Rear Base to Frontline

Jihadist implantation in the Sahel can be traced back to the end of the Algerian civil war (1991-2002), which pitted security forces against Islamist armed groups (GIA). After years of fighting, reportedly claiming the lives of 60,000 to 150,000 people, Algerian authorities implemented the 1999 'Concorde civile' that granted amnesty to thousands of GIA members. While most accepted amnesty, some militants created the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998, and continued fighting the regime (Interview, Algerian Diplomat, Niamey, 2017). Hunted by Algerian security forces, and lacking popular support, the GSPC was however in need of backing.⁴ In 2006, the group pledged allegiance to jihadist organization al-Qaeda, and was rebranded al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. While AQIM elements in Algeria remained under military pressure, some members moved to northern Sahel and concluded alliances with local communities, mostly through marriage (Ould Salem, 2014: 56-59).

For years, AQIM used the Sahel as a rear base to gather wealth, arms and local recruits (Lacher,

¹ This article focuses on central Sahel (Mali, western Niger and northern Burkina Faso), as the main area of jihadist activity in the region.

² In January 2013, at the request of the Government of Mali, France deployed 'Serval,' a 4,000-man-strong military operation against jihadist groups in northern Mali, followed in 2014 by the ongoing 3,500-man-strong 'Barkhane' operation deployed in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.

³ Vincent DUHEM. "Côte d'Ivoire : l'attentat de Grand-Bassam a majoritairement frappé des Ivoiriens," *Jeune Afrique*, 16 March 2016. www.jeuneafrique.com/310315/politique/cote-divoire-lattentat-13-mars-a-majoritairement-frappe-ivoiriens/

⁴ Georges, ABOU. "L'émir national du GSPC abattu," *Radio France Internationale*, 21 June 2004. www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/054/article_28817.asp

Steinberg, 2015: 71). This led jihadist groups to develop on a more Sahelian basis. According to Algerian security reports, out of 108 AQIM members in the Sahel identified in mid-2010, only 21 were Algerians (Lacher, Steinberg, 2015: 75). The Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), created in 2011, while including some North African members, was first led by Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, a Mauritanian Arab, and was mainly composed of combatants from the Sahel countries. While referring to Osama bin Laden as an ideological reference, MOJWA also placed emphasis on West African figures such as Usman Dan Fodio, founder of the 1804 Sokoto Caliphate, in northern Nigeria (Cristiani, 2012). However, until 2012, and despite several attacks in Mauritania, “AQIM operations in Algeria still far exceeded the type and number of operations it carried out in the Sahara-Sahel” (Roussellier, 2011: 5). Indeed, MOJWA’s first claimed operation was the kidnapping of three Westerners from a Polisario Front refugee camp in southern Algeria in October 2011 (Lacher, Steinberg, 2015: 76).

The implantation of Jihadist groups in the Sahel has been a twenty-year process, which adapted to the 2013 French military intervention by exploiting rural insurgencies

This changed in 2012 when armed groups, mostly comprising Malian Tuareg and Arab fighters coming back to Mali following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya, launched an armed insurgency in January 2012 and won control of the north of Mali. Seizing this opportunity, AQIM and its local offshoots briefly backed the Malian insurgents before chasing them out of the three main northern cities, Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao, which they ruled from April 2012 to January 2013. They administered the north and parts of central Mali (Mopti region) based

on Sharia law and trained more locals in jihadist warfare (Interview, former jihadist, 2017). In January 2013, however, the French military operation Serval chased jihadists out of their urban strongholds. Despite losing fighters and control of the northern cities, jihadists managed to survive by scattering to rural Sahelian areas (Sandor, 2017: 15). On 2 February 2013, although victorious, French President François Hollande announced in the Malian capital Bamako: “the fight isn’t over”. Indeed, the Sahel had just become a new jihadist frontline.

A Rural Jihad?

In March 2018, Djamel Okacha, alias Yahya Abu al-Hamam, number two of the al-Qaeda-linked Group for the support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM),⁵ declared in an audio message that if France “succeeded in part, by distancing the mujahideen from the cities and causing them to retreat (...) the results were the opposite: French intervention led directly to the spread of the Da’wa, the numbers of mujahideen multiplied, people of religion and manhood from Fulani, Tuareg, Arab, Bambara, and Songhay tribes responded to support mujahideen and defend their land.”⁶ Despite coming from an anti-French propaganda video, this statement offers a relevant picture of the impact of the 2013 French intervention on jihadist tactics. There is no doubt that French military operations weakened jihadist groups to some extent and forced them out of towns (Foucher and Jezequel, 2017). However, it also led jihadists to pose as protectors of Sahelian populations fighting a “foreign military force supported by corrupted Sahelian governments” (Interview, former jihadist, 2017). Jihadist groups opted for “a more discreet occupation of neglected rural areas,” particularly in central Mali, northern Burkina Faso and western Niger, where they thrived by exploiting local grievances and disorders (Foucher and Jezequel, 2017).

For years, these areas have been marked by insufficient state-sponsored services (Education, Justice), under-representation at local and national po-

⁵ GSIM, created in March 2017, is led by Malian Tuareg Iyad Ag Ghali and comprises members from AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and the Katiba Macina.

⁶ Video message from Yahya Abu al-Hamam: “And With Patience, You Win” (Arabic), GSIM, 18 March 2018, <http://jihadology.net/2018/03/17/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimins-ya%E1%B8%A5ya-abu-al-hamam-and-with-patience-you-win/>

litical levels, and inter-communal tensions (Sandor, 2017). For some communities, the State and its representatives were either absent or perceived as predatory forces. Following the 2013 French intervention, in parts of central Mali previously under jihadist control, “when state security forces returned they committed abuses, particularly against nomadic Fulani and Tamasheq communities” (ICG, 2016: Executive summary). In several instances, jihadists filled a vacuum and replaced the State. In central Mali and western Niger, jihadists protected herders’ cattle from bandits, implemented various forms of Sharia-based justice, and provided youth from marginalized communities with weapons and training (ICG, 2016: 4; Interview, Fulani representatives, Niamey, December 2017). In a context of land disputes, access to military weapons was a game changer as it allowed semi-nomadic communities, such as Fulani groups who felt threatened by other groups (Tuareg and Daoussahak) that had earlier access to arms and better political representation, to protect themselves and shift local power balances. In these marginalized areas, the provision of such services led most locals to increasingly favour jihadists over state representatives.

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However, jihadist occupation of rural areas was also based on intimidation and violence against the population. In northern Burkina Faso, local jihadist group Ansarul Islam, allegedly connected to GSIM, reportedly targeted civilians accused of opposing the movement (ICG, 2017: 11). Furthermore, most locals joined jihadist groups out of pragmatic needs more than religious beliefs (ISS, 2016). While some became hard-core extremists,

many used jihadist groups to defend their communities, get back at state representatives or shift local power balances. This sometimes led the jihadist and local fighters’ agendas to clash. Jihadist leader Hamadoun Kouffa, a Fulani preacher from central Mali and head of the ‘Katiba Macina,’ complained about Nigerien combatants leaving the group to defend their home communities (Audio records accessed in 2017). Although jihadist groups managed to spawn local insurgencies, armed violence seemed to be fuelled more by local grievances than religious extremism.

Implanting in rural areas nevertheless permitted jihadists to blend with the local population. Jihadist groups adapted to an increased military presence and developed guerrilla-based tactics such as the use of improvised explosive devices (IED) against security forces’ patrols in northern and central Mali.⁷ Furthermore, jihadists benefitted from a pool of local combatants that could be used to launch asymmetrical attacks against security forces. The 4 October 2017 attack in western Niger, claimed by the Islamic State branch in the Sahel (ISGS), which killed four US and five Nigerien soldiers, was reportedly led by dozens of local Fulani combatants (Cherbib and Jezequel, 2017).

Beyond Military-Focused Strategies

Jihadists’ implantation in rural areas has rendered military operations difficult as “it has become complicated to distinguish civilians from terrorists” (Interview, Nigerien security officer, Niamey, 2017). Due to a history of neglect from central states, national and international security forces tend to be perceived as an invading force by some rural populations. Upcoming operations of the G5-Sahel force in western Niger prompted rumours that “the G5 is coming to kill the Fulani” (Interview, Fulani representatives, Niamey, December 2017). Rumours aside, military operations have been tainted with reports of human rights abuses. In Mali, the United Nations reported 288 alleged cases of human rights violations “attributable to state actors” between January 2016 and June 2017, including in ‘counter-

⁷ “Explosive device kills UN peacekeepers in Mali,” *Al Jazeera*, 26 October 2017. www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/explosive-device-kills-peacekeepers-mali-171026190900158.html

terrorism' operations by Malian security forces (MINUSMA and OHCHR, 2018: 1).

Moreover, Sahel states and their international partners increasingly rely on ethnic based armed groups to proxy the fight against jihadist groups.⁸ In July 2017, Nigerien authorities reportedly allowed two Malian armed groups, the Tuareg, Imghad and Allied Armed Group (GATIA), a militia formed by Tuareg fighters, and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), a mostly Daoussahak armed group, to lead operations in western Niger (Cherbib and Jezequel, 2017). However, the use of ethnic militia to proxy counter-terrorism tended to prove counter-productive. Indeed, local sources have accused the GATIA and the MSA of killing dozens of Fulani civilians under the cover of counter-terrorism.

To limit jihadist groups' ability to recruit from marginalized communities and implant in rural areas, Sahelian states should work at restoring capacities to deliver services and peacefully manage local conflicts

Targeted communities were reportedly defended by jihadist groups, which, in return, saw an increase in recruitment into their ranks (Interviews, Fulani representatives, Nigerien security officer, Niamey, December 2017). While producing some limited results, counter-terrorism strategies implemented so far appear to have rather fed jihadist propaganda and recruitment.

Conclusion

The implantation of Jihadist groups in the Sahel has been a twenty-year process, which adapted to the 2013 French military intervention by exploiting rural insurgencies. Overall, this strategy allowed groups

to blend with the local population, find new recruits and fight security forces through guerrilla tactics. So far, Sahel states and their partners have been unable to sustainably neutralize these groups, and instead jihadist recruitment has improved and the level of armed violence has increased. In order to break what amounts to a vicious cycle of military operations feeding local jihadist insurgencies, Sahelian states and their partners should consider alternative options. There is a need to tackle the root causes of armed violence in rural areas, often more connected to socio-economic grievances, inter-communal tensions and a loss of faith in the State rather than violent extremism. To limit jihadist groups' ability to recruit from marginalized communities and implant in rural areas, Sahelian states should work at restoring capacities to deliver services and peacefully manage local conflicts.

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⁸ "Mali : la force Barkhane annonce avoir neutralisé 60 jihadistes en un mois" (French), *Radio France Internationale*, 15 March 2018. www.rfi.fr/africque/20180315-mali-barkhane-annonce-avoir-neutralise-60-jihadistes-mois

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