

TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL

TEN YEARS OF INSURMOUNTABLE
CONFRONTATIONS



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Edited by
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Foreword By
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The Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS)

Terrorism in the Sahel: Ten Years of Insurmountable Confrontations

Editor: Dr. Ahmad Amal

Foreword: Dr. Khaled Okasha

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Foreword

DR. KHALED OKASHA*

In March 2012, the Ansar Al-Dine group led by Iyad Ag Ghali managed to establish control over several cities in northern Mali, opening the door to a drawn-out wave of terrorist activity that is on the verge of entering its second decade soon and is expanding to include the Sahel states and neighboring regions. Terrorism in the Sahel is not only characterized by proliferation and longevity, but it has also taken roots in communities by weaving a tangled web of relations with different actors, including local communities, tribal and ethnic leaders, and organized crime groups, in addition to a few state entities where corruption had prepared the ground for entanglement with terrorist groups.

At the moment, terrorism in the Sahel is emanating from two focal points: the first started in northern Mali before fanning out to the populous central regions and the three-country point joining Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The second point originated from the southwestern shores of Lake Chad and then to Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Furthermore, the tough geography of the Sahel, with the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannas to the south, has provided room for terrorist organizations to cross international borders and employ various safe havens.

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The current wave of terrorism in the Sahel is not the first the region has witnessed. In the 1990s, the Sahel suffered extensive damage in the wake of the Black Decade of Algeria's 1990s civil war, when terrorist groups headed south, clearly demonstrating the ease with which security threats can capitalize on the Sahel's porous borders. However, the wave that emerged with the recent outbreak of the armed rebellion in northern Mali remains the longest standing and most damaging given a regional climate that has served as a catalyst for terrorism. The Libyan crisis has had serious repercussions on the Sahel, most notably enabling the continued flow of arms to terrorist groups and the transboundary movement of combatants.

However, the spread of terrorism in the Sahel over the past decade should not be taken as an indication of inaction or an absence of anti-terrorism efforts. This period has seen the largest national, regional, and international military mobilization in the history of the Sahel states since independence. National armies have been involved in protracted confrontations with terrorist organizations, whether on their own or as part of multilateral regional arrangements backed by UN peacekeeping forces.

While these efforts have achieved some modest successes, most notably preventing terrorist organizations from taking over vast territories in the Sahel, they have failed to entirely eliminate this dire threat, particularly with terrorist groups hiding behind local communities where conducting robust security operations becomes challenging due to difficulties distinguishing between terrorists and locals.

The continued threat of terrorism in the Sahel and the lack of effective mechanisms to address it have enormous implication that go far beyond destabilizing the Sahel states and neighboring countries. This threat jeopardizes the survival of the state itself in some cases, particularly as terrorism has brought about an unprecedented wave of political turmoil, caused further deterioration of the economic situation, and created a conflict-ridden environment that undermines social cohesion.

Given the considerable significance of the terrorism issue in the Sahel and the regional and continental challenges it poses, the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies seeks to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of this phenomenon, along with an assessment of counterterrorism

endeavors over the past decade, by presenting a series of papers that explore terrorism in the Sahel. The papers included here are categorized into two sets, the first of which addresses the nature of Sahelian terrorism and its future trends by providing an in-depth explication of the concept of “contagious terrorism”, a mapping of terrorist organizations in the Sahel, a careful examination of the seeming “immunity” terrorist groups have had against counterterrorism efforts, and an exploration of the complications posed by the emerging trend of states negotiating with terrorist groups.

The second set of papers assesses counterterrorism efforts by providing interpretations for why Sahel armies have failed to confront terrorist organizations on their own, in addition to assessing the different alternatives that Sahel states have sought to strengthen their capability to counter terrorism. This includes supporting self-defense militias formed by local communities, engaging in regional security arrangements, and resorting to foreign intervention. France’s intervention experience in the Sahel is assessed through an extensive review of French official documents and testimonies on combating terrorism.

In its entirety, the second group of papers provides a thorough investigation of the overlap between domestic, national, and regional security dimensions of the terrorism issue by examining the cases of Mali and Niger. The papers approach terrorism in the Sahel from different perspectives to provide a profound, holistic reading of the difficult situation the Sahel has experienced for years and the adverse impacts that have gone far beyond Africa.

The Contagion of Terrorism and Struggling Immunity

1

DR. KHALED HANAFY ALY*

Introduction

The menace of terrorism went the rounds from one Sahel state to another over long years, morphing into some sort of contagion, spreading horizontally at the geographical level and vertically within the fabric of communities and structures of states. However, this contagion seemed symptomatic of a malady or a greater structural dilemma pertaining to the volatile immunity of the Sahel states and communities. The two poles of the Sahel society –the state and the community– suffer extreme vulnerability that –building on the idea of susceptibility that identifies the emergence of social phenomena with societies’ readiness to capitulate to them– exposes them to the perils of penetration by terrorism^[1].

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Now, more than six decades after independence, the statehood in the Sahel seems inchoate. On one hand, state institutions are performing poorly at the socio-political and administrative levels, while communities, on the other hand, are stricken by internal conflicts and trans-boundary tribal divisions, which lowered countries' immunity against threats and risks. Amid this vulnerability, Sahel's ruling regimes turned to foreign forces to assist them in weeding out roots of the contagion of terrorism. However, foreign interventions only made matters worse as has been evidenced by a series of failed foreign interventions in addressing internal conflicts, the latest of which was exemplified by Taliban's comeback to power following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In the Sahel, France launched Operation Serval, in 2013, to forestall a terrorist-Tuareg alliance from tightening its grip on northern Mali, but subsequent years showed a proliferation of armed terrorist organizations in the country, stretching to central Mali and breaking through the borders of its two neighbours Niger and Burkina Faso, the latter is increasingly becoming a target of terrorist attacks being considered their gateway for geographic expansion to the Gulf of Guinea, certain littoral states of which have already been experiencing terrorist threats over the last few years including Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo, and Ghana^[2].

Notably, this terrorist expansion took a straight geographical line toward Lake Chad (Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon) amid rising attacks by Boko Haram and its splinter, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The Sahel, which serves as a vital nexus between North Africa bloated with the Libyan crisis and sub-Saharan Africa afflicted by the growing visibility of terrorist hotbeds in the south and centre, particularly in Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Central Africa, let alone Somalia in the Horn of Africa, is now perceived as a hazardous arena for terrorist organizations.

With the virulence of the contagion of terrorism, Africa is increasingly becoming a heartland of terrorist groups' activity, particularly given the slippage of IS and Al-Qaeda in the Middle East. The terrorist menace is further aggravated by the intertwining of the terrorist threat with other perils, including irregular migration, asylum, and organized crime, all of which are issues of interest to Western powers, especially Europe and the United States, in tandem with the unfair exploitation of the region's resources, and the mingling of terrorism

with local grievances in the Sahel communities. Further, the inability to draw a dividing line between terrorist organizations and insurgent tribal movements poses an analytical challenge to the diagnosis of the phenomenon of terrorism, its dynamics, and drivers, much less effective counterterrorism strategies^[3].

The Contagion of Terrorism: Definition and Patterns

The contagion of terrorism^[4], by definition, is the infiltration of terrorist groups' extremist ideologies and violent acts into geographically proximate countries and communities that share temporal and spatial contexts and experience comparable political, developmental, security, and social crises. By disseminating their contagion of terrorism, terrorist organizations aim at reviving their ideologies beyond national boundaries, winning local backing from communities to ensure cross-border mobility, securing additional recruiting pools, and having funding and safe havens that may ease governments' military and security pressures.

In the Sahel's case, the geographical expanse, shared crises, and the divided social structures seemed to have been critical drivers for the spread of the contagion of terrorism over the past years. However, this was aided by the existence of multiple armed organizations that have convergent or divergent goals. In effect, the contagious diffusion of terrorism in the Sahel was largely associated with defections within armed groups particularly among Al-Qaeda and IS' loyalists against the backdrop of internal ideological conflicts or the construction of new alliances between terrorist organizations one another (e.g. Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa Al-Muslimin (JNIM), an alliance led by Iyad Ag Ghaly since March 2017 comprising Ansar Al-Din Front, Al-Mourabitoun, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), and Sahara branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) or between them and the insurgent movements from the Tuareg or the Fulani, two of the largest ethnic groups across that Sahel that have transnational reach as well as security, political, and developmental grievances.

Overall, there are basic patterns of the contagion of terrorism that have taken shape in the Sahel over the past eight years, and these can be detailed as below.

1. Horizontal Geographic Dispersal

Sahelian terrorist organizations have transitioned from controlling or settling in specific areas to moving around a wider geographic area, either in porous peripheral areas or on fragile territorial borders less protected by regional governments. For instance, several terrorist groups, including Ansar Al-Din, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), managed to piece themselves back together and continued their strikes in Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu the same year they lost control over North Mali following France's launch of Operation Serval in 2013. Later in 2015, a terrorist hotbed emerged in central Mali, specifically in Mopti, led by the MLF.

Further, the terrorist activity (whether of IS whose activities saw a resurgence in 2016 or pro-Al-Qaeda JNIM) drifted down from north and central Mali into the three-country point joining Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. In parallel, some terrorist organizations infiltrated into countries of the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, albeit their attacks were less intense compared to their counterparts in the Sahel. Take, for example, Ivory Coast. It was a target for terrorists in 2016 where 18 people were shot dead in a beach resort, an attack that AQIM claimed responsibility for. Likewise, in Benin, French tourists were kidnapped in May 2019. Even Ghana in the far west seemed caught in the crosshairs of terrorists where an attack on a church was foiled in June 2019. Togo, too, raised the alert status to prevent extremists' creeping through its borders^[5].

2. Vertical Infiltration into Communities

Terrorist organizations in the Sahel went to great lengths to make capital of the frustrated public outraged by the inefficient governments, development neglect, and monopoly of resources by the elites, gearing toward establishing local incubators that facilitate recruitment and mobility in the face of security pressures. This exploitation is demonstrative of the intertwining of religious and tribal factors in Sahelian terrorism, which was made clear since the outbreak of Mali's crisis and the spread of the contagion of terrorism to include other Sahel countries, rendering terrorism hybrid.

In Mali, Ansar Al-Din of local Ifoghas Tuaregs struck up an alliance with MOJWA and AQIM, resulting in terrorists' invasion of north Mali in 2012 before France intervened to disperse these groups without

eliminating them, a strategy that stirred up the spread of the contagion of terrorism. Also, in northern Mali in 2013, Al-Mourabitoun organization sprung up as a coalition between MOJWA which base its recruitment activity on Arab tribes in northern Mali and Al-Mulathameen organization which rely on Algerian, Malian, and Mauritanian militants in recruitment.

This tribal-jihadi intertwining extended to the Fulani ethnicity in central Mali, through the MLF, building on the legacy of the Massina Empire of the 19th century and the political and development marginalization they face. The Fulani harp on about the government's bias in favor of agrarian tribes (e.g. the Dogon and the Bambara). Historically, the MLF was basically a Fulani insurgent movement that had always claimed autonomy for the Macina region. In 2017, it came to be part of JNIM alliance, with the inclination of its leader's Amadou Koufa to use a blended ethnic-religious rhetoric in the face of authorities and rival tribes^[6].

Along with this the cross-border Fulani expansion in Central and West Africa, other Fulani terrorist groups made terrorist inroads into the region, including Ansar Al-Islam group in northern Burkina Faso led by Jafar Diko, as a reflection of the local grievances and in an attempt to restore the Fulani Empire dream to enforce the Sharia.

While Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups were keen on securing strong local backing in the Sahel as opposed to IS whose attacks were mostly concentrated in volatile border points between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, this didn't preclude the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) from beguiling Fulani elements to spark off domestic crises between them and the Tuareg. It is worth noting that ISGS had previously attacked pro-government civilian Tuareg militia including Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA) [Imghad Tuareg movement]^[7] and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA).

The intermingling of terrorist motivations and tribal community structures have long characterized the Sahel even before the upsurge of terrorism in northern Mali, albeit it became more contagious. For example, since its inception in north-eastern Nigeria in 2009, Boko Haram restricted recruitment to members of the Kanuri tribe of Lake Chad states who, in turn, stand against the Hausa-Fulani hegemony over northern Nigerian states beyond restoring the old boundaries of the

ancient Islamic Kanem–Bornu Empire that included areas in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad^[8].

Yet Sahelian terrorist organization went far beyond the jihadist-tribal confluence to developing domestic structures that pave the way for their infiltration into local communities, through providing services in rural areas to appeal to the population. For example, the MLF and ISGS have established “alternative forms of local governance in rural areas” aimed at settling conflicts of rural populations in areas where the state authority is undermined^[9].

3. Ties with Global Terrorism

To attain moral authority, get financial support, and, hence, gain legitimacy across the jihadist community, terrorist organizations in the Sahel jostled for linkage to global terrorism. Entrants of foreign fighters into the Sahelian terrorist organizations reinforced this trend. Initially, Al-Qaeda affiliations ruled the roost on ideologies of terrorist organizations in the Sahel, including Ansar Al-Din, Al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM. However, the rise of the IS, in 2014, in Syria and Iraq as a rival to Al-Qaeda prompted some terrorist organizations in the Sahel to pledge allegiance to it, which gave rise to fissures within these organizations^[10].

ISGS is a case in point. It was established by Abu Al-Walid As-Sahrawi (whose murder was announced by France in 2021) following his defection from Al-Mourabitoun brigade (led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and owes allegiance to Al-Qaeda). ISGS gives allegiance to IS. Since October 2016, ISGS’ attacks in the Sahel have stepped up, including most notably the attack on Tillabéri in southwestern Niger which claimed the lives of four US troops as well as four Nigerian soldiers in October 2017. Data indicates that IS’ attacks in the Sahel accounted for 42 percent of the total terrorist attacks’ fatalities in the Sahel and that 90 percent of these attacks were centred around border areas between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger^[11].

The rise of ISGS and JNIM gave rise to a dramatic escalation of violence. According to data of the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), violent attacks that involved ISGS and JNIM in the Sahel between 2017 and 2020 witnessed an exponential increase up to sevenfold, i.e. 999 up from 147 violent attacks^[12]. Likewise, Boko Haram availed itself of global terrorism transformations and pledged allegiance to IS in 2015. This brought about a cleavage within the or-

ganization causing it to be split into two factions, one led by Abu Bakr Shekau (reported killed in June 2021) and another led by Abu Musab Al-Barnawi (Nigeria announced his murder in October 2021), who IS choose over Shekau to lead ISWAP.

Meanwhile, Al-Barnawi's faction came to be known as ISWAP^[13] and it carried out intensified attacks in Niger's side of Lake Chad against military targets as opposed to Shekau's faction which makes no distinction between civilian and military targets and is operating actively in the border area between north-eastern Nigeria and Cameroon. Given the fluid frontiers of the Sahel states, a confluence of ISGS (active in Mali, and Burkina Faso and Niger) and ISWAP (active in West Africa around Chad Lake) seems possible.

Immunity Impasse: Intricate Incentives

In the socio-political domain, immunity is defined as the capability of state institutions to serve their functions fulfilling citizens' needs of security, justice, and freedom, among others, in a high-solidarity environment where trust, belonging, and respect for the "other" exist, which would promote shared resilience, flexibility, and adaptability in the face of usual or emergency risks^[14].

So, in its broader sense, immunity is the antithesis of vulnerability and susceptibility to infiltration. Sahel states show up a state of extreme vulnerability or volatile immunity, albeit of differing degrees, whether at the institutional level or in the state's relationship with insurgent communities. This prompts the spread of the contagion of terrorism which, in turn, increases aspects of vulnerability—quite revealing of the complex pattern of circular causal relationship between terrorism and its drivers. Political instability, states' limited involvement in development, weak militaries, local grievances, and competition for local resources are all factors that contribute to the proliferation of terrorism, and vice-versa. Such overlap poses security and socio-political challenges to addressing terrorism in the Sahel. Below, we review a number of the major factors that crippled Sahel's immunity and fueled terrorism in the region.

1. Façade Democracy

Since regaining independence, Sahel's ruling regimes remained firmly in the grip of a closed interest group where military, ethnic, political,

and economic interests intertwine. This forged clientelist elites who imposed tyranny and –consequently– opened the door for military coups. Even when Sahel states made the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, it was a mere “façade” not meant for stability, just a reproduction of forms of power and wealth monopolization and social and tribal injustices, yet through ballot boxes. This paved the way for resurgence of coups in the Sahel.

Examples abound. Mali, for instance, experienced five successful military coups since its independence, two of which in nine months from August 2020 to May 2021^[15]. Chad has been mired in a state of political fragility following the death of Idriss Déby after three-decade long tenure during which he failed to address the economic crises and was unable to capitalize on the country’s oil. Worse, Déby’s son taking the transitional power leaves the country wrestling with the dilemma of succession. In Burkina Faso, the re-election of President Marc Christian Kaboré for a second presidential term didn’t result in a reduction in terrorist attacks that rather surged in the north of the country, amid accusations of corruption of the ruling elite and the military.

After a long history of coups, Niger experienced its first-ever democratic transition with President Mohamed Bazoum taking over power in April 2021, following two terms of President Mohamed Issoufou. This, however, didn’t preclude a coup attempt two days before Issoufou’s inauguration. Indeed, Niger’s strategic location in the area makes it a constant target of terrorists. When it comes to terrorist risks, Niger seems caught between a rock and a hard place: ISGS and JNIM from the west along the borders with Mali and Burkina Faso and Boko Haram and ISWAP from the East along the border with Nigeria^[16].

2. Marginalization of Development

In the Sahel, political instability overlaps with the precarious living conditions and development grievances, particularly amid the dominance of centralized development models adopted since the independence of the region’s states that left peripheral regions in the Sahel suffering marginalization, poverty, and inactivity. Perhaps this explains the infiltration of the contagion of terrorism into tribal structures, the visibility of terrorist activities in security vacuums along borders where state security power attenuates, and the salience of terrorist organiza-

tions the likes of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria, Ansar Al-Islam in northern Burkina Faso, as well as many terrorist organizations in northern Mali. Moreover, the confrontation between the marginalized communities in the north and communities of the South that capture power and wealth seemed to be expanding in some Sahel states owing to demographic shifts and the development and political marginalization in some areas. Insurgencies in central Mali are a notable example of this^[17].

So, it stands to reason the relationship between the contagion of terrorism and ranking among the least developed countries, as is the case with countries like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, notwithstanding the fact that these countries have mineral resources such as oil, gold, and uranium. Nigeria is the archetype of this: it is the largest oil producer in Africa, yet the majority of its population in the north lives below the poverty line. This holds true for all Sahel states till the Gulf of Guinea, particularly Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, and Benin, albeit at differing degrees.

Worse, the domino effect works on terrorism, too. The virulence of the contagion of terrorism makes the economic crises more severe. Kidnappings of tourists by terrorist organizations bring a decline in the foreign exchange resources of these countries, undermining their ability to carry out development reforms.

3. Drought and Desertification Crises

In pastoral and agrarian societies, the impact of climate change-related phenomena such as desertification and drought further complicates marginalization and economic downturn crises. Drought and desertification in the Sahel provoked domestic disputes between farmers and pastoralists over resources due to the shrinking arable land and shortage of water resources, much less the poor response of Sahel governments to solve these crises^[18]. According to the United Nations, 80 percent of the Sahel's farmland is degraded.

In this vein, several studies correlates the environmental deterioration in central Mali with the emergence of feeders for terrorism in the region. For instance, the conflict between the Fulani pastoralists and Dogon farmers came against the background of the dwindling water resources in the Niger River, which gave rise to a wave of poverty among the Fulani. This created an atmosphere amenable to alliances

with terrorist organizations in the regions, particularly with the MLF in Mopti of central Mali.

Likewise, the expansion of Boko Haram violence from north-eastern Nigeria to Lake Chad, was, partially, driven by desertification and drought that, according to the UN, caused Lake Chad to shrink by 90 percent, which limited fishing, farming, and cattle-breeding activities in bordering countries, a situation that motivated individuals' engagement in terrorist groups in the region. Additionally, the conflict over resources brought about ethnic violence, particularly between pastoralists and farmers, whether in Mali, Niger, or Chad, as has been exemplified by the 2019 reciprocal massacres between the Fulani and Dogon in central Mali^[19].

With the escalation of terrorist attacks, and the growing conflict over local resources, the humanitarian situation in the Sahel region deteriorated. Data indicates that the number of the internally-displaced and homeless people along the Sahel borders is estimated at 5 million people whereas 29 million people are in need of food aid^[20].

4. Defective Settlements

In such fragile Sahel states, protracted social conflicts entails several complications to settlement, which feeds the contagion of terrorism. For example, while a peace accord was signed between the Malian government and armed groups six years ago, its implementation was at a snail's pace, particularly when it comes to the security reforms including disarmament and demobilizing combatants, let alone the challenge of involving the non-signatory armed parties in the peace process.

What's more, the agreement—that sought addressing Tuareg's grievances—exacerbated the social problems of other groups including the Fulani who bewailed their exclusion despite having development and political grievances as well as accusations against the government of targeting them without concern for human rights and favoring other groups over them, which led them to form armed militias to protect themselves, such as *Peule et la Restauration de la Justice* [the National Alliance for the Protection of Fulani Identity and the Restoration of Justice] and seek rapprochement with terrorist groups such as Ansar Al-Din and ISGS^[21].

5. Regional Blowbacks

The regional factors that feed the contagion of terrorism are no less severe than the domestic ones, particularly if we look at the prolonged

repercussions of the 2011 Libyan crisis on the Sahel, given Libya's border contiguity with Chad, Niger, and Sudan from the south as well as the intricacy of the ethnic and tribal composition of Libya and the Sahel states (the Tuareg and the Toubou). Indeed, the visibility of militias and terrorist organizations in Libya turned it to a guns warehouse, a passage, and a shelter to terrorists coming from the Sahel or the Middle East following IS' defeat in Syria and Iraq^[22].

Repercussions of the Libyan crisis have affected the stability of the Sahel particularly since the return of the Tuareg of the pro-Gaddafi forces to Mali in 2011, striking the crisis of terrorist groups' control over the northern region in 2012. These repercussions were exacerbated in the subsequent years amid failure of a political settlement in Libya and the split of power between western and eastern Libya since 2014. Libya seemed to be a zone for mercenaries and cross-border combatants coming from conflict areas in the Sahel. This is evident in southern Libya that is littered with armed Chadian, Nigerian, and Sudanese militias, among others, who fomented instability in the region, before the Libyan National Army (LNA) regained control of the area in early 2019. However, the LNA still suffer terrorist attacks from numerous IS' cells, as has been evidenced by the recent terrorist attack on Sabha, southwest Libya in June 2021^[23].

6. Terrorist Adaptation

Over the past years, terrorist organizations in the Sahel have built up a range of adaptive mechanisms that allowed them to promote their expansion and prolong survival, and thus, spread the contagion of terrorism. Toward achieving that, several Sahelian terrorist organizations resorted to alliances as a way to increase their capability to launch attacks and mobilize organizational resources, including JNIM, which seeks to counter the rise of IS, overcome the vulnerability of AQIM, and adapt to the increase of regional and international anti-terrorism military efforts in the region. When it comes to the financial aspect, terrorist organizations worked on strengthening their financial resources through hostage trade and trans-border organized crime activities (gunrunning, immigration, and drug trafficking)^[24].

The adoption of these adaptation strategies by terrorists brought about a shift in the pattern of terrorist operations, transitioning from defense to attacking government military bases and concentrations –

whether fixed or mobile— as well as forces of the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the French Operation Barkhane, of which 55 soldiers were killed over the past eight years. Striking examples of this type of operations include the attack on a military checkpoint north of Burkina Faso in October 2021 which claimed the lives of 14 soldiers, and the attack on a military convoy in central Mali that killed 16 soldiers^[25].

With terrorist adaptation, local communities lost confidence in the ability of governments to counter armed organizations, particularly given the multiplication of casualties and terrorist attacks in the Sahel over the past years. A report by MINUSMA in the period from April to June 2021 revealed that the number of civilians who were killed, wounded, or kidnapped amounted to 527, i.e. a 25 percent increase compared to the first quarter of 2021. Moreover, ACLED project predicts an increase in the number of terrorist attacks' casualties in the Sahel in the next period^[26], especially with the upsurge in the attacks of JNIM, ISGS, the MLC, and Ansar Al-Islam.

Confronting the Contagion of Terrorism: Challenges to Response

Just as the contagion of terrorism is the by-product of overlapping structural factors (security, political, developmental, and social), addressing it should correspondingly encompass all these factors, albeit by varying degrees. This isn't the case for Sahel states whose response strategies focus primarily on the security aspect on the premise that terrorism is basically a "politically-motivated violent action" that needs immediate response (i.e. security response) where other responses fall short for being more closely linked to "susceptibility to terrorism" and requiring longer-terms. But even the security response of Sahel states was lacking three main elements: 1) efficient government forces, 2) cooperation of local communities, and 3) coordination with regional and international forces.

Although Sahel governments bolstered their security-based approach by increasing budgets of defense and security and entering into new alliances with foreign forces to the point where the region seemed like an arena for foreign anti-terrorism military forces (e.g. French Operation Barkhane, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Takuba Task Force, the Multi-

national Joint Task Force, AFRICOM, EU training and security sector reform missions), this broad security presence failed to stop the contagion of terrorism, if hasn't exacerbated it as has been evidenced by the horizontal and vertical expansion of terrorist organizations in the region.

In many respects, this pratfall could be attributed to "strategies" used to fight terrorist organizations that focused largely on pursuing terrorist leadership or causing them to disperse geographically rather than engaging in direct confrontation with them, due to the poor training of government soldiers and foreign forces' fear of having casualties among their troops. Sahel governments' strategy is unlikely to bring success, particularly with terrorist groups' utilization of guerrilla warfare and surprise attacks.

Occasionally, targeting terrorist leadership proves ineffective particularly if terrorist organizations have flexible hierarchal leadership structures that enable them to cushion the impacts of the leadership murder without affecting operations. Besides, declarations of the murder of terrorist leaders in the Sahel are often questionable, with the tendency of terrorist organizations to refrain from declaring that, as was the case with Nigeria's announcement of the murder of Al-Barnawi^[27].

The difficulties that Sahel governments encountered in combating terrorism predisposed them to enter into agreements with civilian militias (self-defense groups), on the grounds that they are familiar with terrorist leaders, their concentration areas, and their movements within local communities. However, this step backfired, resulting in a substantial increase in tribal violence and human rights violations, in the absence of accountability to these militias.

For example, following the Malian government withdrawal from Kidal, it negotiated an agreement with GATIA in northern Mali to counter terrorism. For that purpose, GATIA mobilized loyalists of the Tuareg and the Songhai whereas the Malian army turned a blind eye to GATIA's violations. Significantly, such government-civil militia alliances gave rise to counter-civil militias in Nigeria and Burkina Faso, among others, because of government forces' bias in countering terrorism, or their corruption in some cases. Few reports revealed the involvement of some military officers in selling arms to Boko Haram^[28].

Foreign military interventions in the Sahel enabled foreign forces to have the upper hand in fighting terrorism as has been the case with the Barkhane forces at a time when the French-backed G5 Sahel Joint Force

(of Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Chad) launched in July 2017 seemed of limited effectiveness. This could be largely attributed to lack of stable funding and information coordination. Now, with France's potential withdrawal of Barkhane forces announced in June 2021 and the redirection of its effort to the Takuba special task force, analysts predict a surge in terrorist violence in the region. According to what France revealed, the French troops in the Sahel will see a draw down to 2500 by 2022, down from 5000. The French declarations came amid mounting pressures on the French President Emmanuel Macron who will face a difficult electoral test next year^[29]. France's troop reduction announcement caused severe tension between France and Mali, where the latter accused Paris of deserting it and started tilting to Russia, amid news of a potential contract between Mali's transitional authority and Russia's Wagner Group as part of Mali's efforts to counter heightened threats of terrorism^[30].

Furthermore, the absence of major regional powers, such as Algeria, from the G5 Sahel Joint Force further deepened the crisis of combating terrorism. Geographically, the Algerian south is an integral part of the Sahel and through it terrorists flowed into northern Mali following the Algerian Civil War. In addition, Algeria had an essential role as a mediator in the peace process in Mali. Despite all of this, Algeria hadn't taken part in the G5 Force for refusal of deployment of its forces abroad and rejection of foreign interventions. In addition, Algeria generally favors regional security arrangements as was the case with its Joint Military Staff Committee (CEMOC) initiative in 2010.

Given the difficulties of uprooting terrorism in the Sahel, whether through regular forces or foreign interventions, calls for dialogue between governments and militants increased, a trend that Paris opposes^[31]. However, the drawdown of France's military troops may make these calls more feasible, particularly given the lack of forces' coordination with local communities, a factor that made MINUSMA force tasks more difficult and called its ability to counter terrorism into question, particularly amid the reduction of the Barkhane forces and the limits of coordination between MINUSMA, Takuba, and the Malian government^[32].

Also, there hasn't been a real fix for the development crisis in the Sahel owing to the region's vast area and its need for massive investments.

In the Nouakchott Summit of December 2018, there emerged pledges of international and regional donors to provide €2.4 billion in aid to the Sahel. This aid was supposed to help implement development projects within 3 years in the Sahel region, including for example, construction of a railway, unified airline platform, as well as projects targeting the most vulnerable border areas. However, these promises were never honored due to donors' concerns of corruption of the Sahel governments and the absence of real efforts to improve social services and education or reduce the dominance of pro-government elites who control territories, a situation that provokes tribal conflicts, let alone the dilemma of coups and political instability in the region that restrain foreign investment inflows to the Sahel.

Conclusion

If the vulnerability of the Sahel states has created a climate conducive to the spread of the contagion of terrorism in the Sahel, then the only way to mitigate the contagious effects of terrorism geographically and within communities is to build up regional and national immunity. This requires developing a collective African approach that views terrorism as part of the Sahel's social, developmental, and political crises and not a mere security threat. Developing this approach implies a need for developing democratic political systems as well as equitable socio-economic and efficient security schemes toward promoting Sahel states' ability to address threats – terrorism-related or otherwise.

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Mapping Terrorist Organizations

2

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Introduction

The momentum of terrorist activities has picked up in the past few years, in part due to the crises Sahel countries are suffering from, such as the fragile infrastructure and the poor ability to deal with the historical legacy of the pre-independence period.

It is in this crises-laden climate that terrorist groups found a fertile soil to extend their roots in the region, particularly given that there are vast regions in Sahel countries that can be described as stateless areas. Contributing to the conundrum has been Sahel states' policies and the inability of their governments to carry out their basic responsibilities, creating a never-ending series of financial and humanitarian injustices.

The Sahel's circumstances resulted in the generation of critical features that distinguish these terrorist organizations and their operations. Many, if not all, of these groups are not domestic organizations, but rather regional groups that operate in several countries in the area. They expanded their regional terrorist activities following the French military intervention in Mali in 2013.

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Although terrorist organizations in the African Sahel share many ideological grounds, such as rejecting the idea of the existing state and its institutions, and adopting a narrative based on combating Western interference in the region, the dynamics of disintegration and association (alliances and defections) have become some of the central features of the map of terrorist organizations in the Sahel, especially with the differences within the leadership structures of a number of organizations, such as Boko Haram, as well as the competition between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) for influence in the region, which intensified after the losses incurred by IS in Syria and Iraq, and the central organization's loss of its leaders there.

The study is meant to explore the map of the leading terrorist organizations in the African Sahel region, shedding light on their nature, ideological and organizational structures, operations, and objectives, in addition to the ways they interact with Al-Qaeda and IS, being the central actors in the global terrorist network at present, and how they finance their operations in the African Sahel region.

Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria and Lake Chad

Despite the fact that Boko Haram expanded its presence on the terrorist stage in 2009 following the murder of the organization's founder Mohamed Youssef, the actual emergence of the organization and the formation of its ideological structure goes back several years before 2009. The majority of estimates put the date of the launch of the organization at 2002. The organization appeared at that time as a group with a religious vision influenced by the Salafi trend, and it involved a sharp opposition to the existing reality in Nigeria and incorporated in its narratives an economic, social, and political program.

For the sake of accuracy, it should be noted that some writings describe Boko Haram as an umbrella organization that includes three groups: Ahl Al-Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad, the Ansaru organization, and the group that formed the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). In this paper, however, the name of the Boko Haram organization will be used to refer to Ahl Al-Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad, which was led by Abu Bakr Shekau until his death was announced in May 2021.

The main features of the Boko Haram organization became clear through a number of events, perhaps the most prominent of which is the so-called “Kanama phase”, where a group of individuals emerged with their visions that were separate from society. The isolationist tendencies were translated on the ground in December 2003 with the withdrawal from urban areas in the city of Maiduguri in Nigeria’s Borno State, and the concentration in rural Kanama, in the northeastern state of Yobe, Nigeria. This group named itself the Nigerian Taliban. The Nigerian authorities quickly eliminated it in 2005, especially after it had carried out a number of attacks on police stations and security institutions.

It is true that Mohamed Youssef, the founder of the Boko Haram organization, denied his connection with the Kanama movement, but the group and what it later became influenced, in one way or another, Youssef’s ideology, not to mention that many of those who remained from the Kanama movement after its elimination joined Youssef and his group, which has become more focused on presenting intellectual theses and advocating for its approach, as well as its rhetorical opposition to the authority and its institutions.

First: Ideology

Analyzing the ideological framework of Boko Haram requires referring to the organization’s founder Mohamed Youssef whose ideas shaped the organization’s way of thinking and its vision of the outside world. Youssef was a religious preacher in Maiduguri, Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria. At one point in his life, he was linked to the movement to “eliminate heresies and establish the Sunnah,” a Salafi movement that emerged in Nigeria in the late 1970s. The movement aimed at establishing an Islamic society on the same way of the predecessors, but it did not prevent its members from engaging in state institutions and regimes, including joining public schools.

The movement contributed to making Mohamed Youssef famous for his preaching and he became an important figure for the movement in Maiduguri. But over time he distanced himself from the movement and began to develop an ideology and discourse characterized by a systematic rejection of Nigerian society’s life, which he described as a secular life, and therefore, he opposed the existing education in Nigeria and considered it a Western education forbidden to Muslims.

Hence, the organization's name, Boko Haram, which means "Western education is forbidden."

Youssef's discourse included a call for the application of Islamic law, the establishment of a state based on this law, widespread criticism of the secular system, democracy and Westernization, and criticism of the deteriorating, corrupt system of government in Nigeria, as well as the inflationary consumerism, and the luxury in which the educated elite in the West live, despite the community's suffering from poverty and other problems.

Thus, the ideology of Youssef and Boko Haram crystallized around a set of concepts, such as the rejection of "Western tyrants", as he put it, represented by secularism, democracy, partisan politics, Western education, and the refusal to work in a non-Islamic government.

The ideas and vision formulated by Youssef put the Boko Haram organization in a hostile situation with the authority, Sufi currents, and many traditional religious leaders in Nigeria, especially since Youssef saw the necessity of following the leader of Al-Qaeda at the time Osama bin Laden, the Taliban movement and Sayyid Qutb, being representatives of the purest Islamic model, from his point of view. On this basis, Youssef and his assistants, Abu Bakr Shekau and Maman Nour believed that the state of Nigeria was illegitimate because it does not adhere to Sharia. Nour, who was killed in 2018, and Shekau, who died in 2021 after clashes with militants of the West Africa Province organization, shared Youssef's ideology.

In a lecture by Nour at Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque in Maiduguri in March 2009, he said that the organization "will begin jihad, because the call is not just a verbal declaration, and that whoever refrains from joining the organization will be considered an enemy who will be attacked." These ideas were also more violently present in the speech of Abu Bakr Shekau, during whose reign the organization gained its reputation as a violent and bloody movement.

Shekau portrayed the Boko Haram struggle as a jihad against Nigeria, Christianity, and the West who conspiring against the Muslim world, providing a central philosophy and justification for fighting. Perhaps the most prominent ideological contribution of Shekau, beyond the teachings and ideas of Mohamed Youssef, is his dealing with the concept of takfir. Shekau said in a speech that "whoever does not claim an infidel a disbeliever is also an infidel," and that "any Muslim who does not work

to convert an atheist to Islam, and does not try to convert the polytheists to Islam, and agrees to their way of life, is thus betraying Islam and is automatically expelled from Islam.”

Second: Organizational structure

The Maiduguri events of 2009 was a dramatic juncture in the history of Boko Haram. The Nigerian police opened fire on a group of Boko Haram members during the funeral of a member of the organization, which led to the outbreak of violence in different areas in northeastern Nigeria. Then, Nigerian security forces arrested Mohamed Youssef, who was killed during his detention.

From then on, Boko Haram ushered in a new phase of violence and terrorism against the state and society. Under the leadership of its formal leader Abu Bakr Shekau, the organization carried out operations targeting a wide spectrum of society, not limited to the state’s security institutions and services, in addition to expanding the regional nature of the organization by carrying out attacks in neighboring countries, and seeking to strengthen ties with Al-Qaeda and IS. This violent shift in the course of Boko Haram reinforced the importance of preserving the group’s organizational structure, as an attempt to maintain the organization in the midst of the pressures imposed on it. This organizational dimension increased in importance after Shekau pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in March 2015. In this context, there are major implications related to the organizational structure of Boko Haram:

1. Operational security

The organizational structure is ambiguous, especially since the group was able to confer secrecy on many of its internal affairs, including the exact composition of its organizational structure, operational planning methods, and the relationships between individual cells within the organization. This ambiguity appears, for example, in the formation of the group’s Shura Council, which rose to become the highest decision-making body in the organization. The exact number of the Shura Council members and their identities are not known. Some estimates suggest that the council comprises eight members, including the leader of the organization, while other estimates put the number at 30 members.

2. The effect of Shekau’s absence

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the organizational structure of

Boko Haram, the main feature of the group's organizational structure over the past years has been Shekau's control of the levers of power in the group and the neutralization of any parallel forces that could arise from the group's Shura Council. This hegemony posed a fundamental dilemma for the organization, because it gave way to Shekau to go to extremes in the face of any attempt to oppose him and those who refused to submit to his authority. Some sources indicated that he had killed some members of the organization who did not follow his orders. Shekau's hegemony was one of the reasons for the splits that occurred within the organization, and the exit of factions such as Ansaru and the group that later became known as ISWAP.

Shekau's absence will have a clear impact on the cohesion of the organization. After his death was announced in May 2021, when he refused to surrender and blew himself up following armed clashes with ISWAP members in the Sambisa Forest in Nigeria's Borno State that ended with the defeat of his faction. The organization will not be able to easily overcome the repercussions of Shekau's killing, despite the organization's announcement of a new leader, Bakura Modu, who came out in a video recording in June 2021 calling on the organization's members to stand their ground and continue fighting. "Teach the infidels lessons in the battlefields, so that they may know that the Imam – May God have mercy on him and make him one of the masters of the martyrs – did not leave behind girls, but rather men," Modu said in the video.

3. Decentralization of operation

The operational structure of Boko Haram is decentralized. Regional and sub-regional leaders manage operations within their responsibilities. It is possible that regional and sub-regional cells operate without knowing each other's identity. The least possible direct contact between the high command and the local cells is maintained, and the leaders of separate areas are likely to enjoy a significant degree of autonomy, as long as their actions do not conflict with the wishes and goals of the high command.

4. Organizational communications

With the development of the conflict and the expansion of terrorist attacks on the part of the organization, the former leader of the organization, Abu Bakr Shekau, grew interested in the organization's media and communication tools. The use of the Internet by the organization increased, so did the posting of videos on YouTube and the distribution

of publications. In other words, the Internet has become an important tool for the organization to carry out the tasks of propaganda for its ideology, communications among its members, psychological warfare, recruitment and training for its members, as well as collecting information and contributing to the organization's financing operations, enhancing its reputation and creating a distinct identity that has a participatory character among its members, and helps in the ongoing conflict against other terrorist organizations and splinters from Boko Haram.

5. Intensity of recruitment

There are no accurate estimates about the number of Boko Haram members. Some estimates put them at a few hundred, a few thousand, and up to 20,000. The members hail from different backgrounds, such as youth disgruntled because of social conditions, the unemployed, as well as many affiliated with Al-Majiri system in northern Nigeria. Al-Majiri is an Islamic educational system that involves children or young people staying at an early age with a religious scholar to obtain religious education and subsistence. The organization was also able to attract elements from outside Nigeria, such as Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Sudan.

The organization has resorted to enhancing its human capital through a regional alliance with some terrorist elements and groups in the vicinity of Lake Chad. Perhaps the most important example is the alliance between Boko Haram and the Bakura faction, a group of fighters led by Ibrahim Bakura, operating around the northern basin of Lake Chad. The alliance between the Bakura group and the Boko Haram organization became public in September 2019 when Boko Haram leader Abu Bakr Shekau, in a video recording, praised those he described as armed fighters in Lake Chad, and hailed them for their activism. In the same month, fighters believed to belong to the Bakura group released a video of a commander surrounded by a group of fighters near Lake Chad saluting Abu Bakr Shekau.

However, it cannot be disregarded that the killing of Abu Bakr Shekau had clear repercussions on the organization's human resources. Elements split from Boko Haram to announce they were joining ISWAP, which employed the publicity to its benefit and celebrated the move. Moreover, many reports mentioned the surrender of many Boko Haram members, after the killing of Shekau, to the Nigerian authorities. The reports were confirmed by the Nigerian army in early September

2021 when it announced that nearly 6,000 Boko Haram members had surrendered in the northeast of the country.

Third: Operations and funds

With Abu Bakr Shekau rising to the helm of Boko Haram, the movement ushered in a new phase that was characterized by increased violence, geographical expansion of terrorist attacks, and extension of targets.

However, the geographical expansion of the organization has been limited during the past years due to security pressures and the changes in the area, especially after the French military intervention in Mali, which terrorist organizations, including Boko Haram, considered an opportunity to strengthen their narratives that they are struggling against “the Christian West that conspires against any attempt to establish an Islamic regime based on Sharia.”

Although the organization has for years used the urban areas of Maiduguri, Borno State, as its main stronghold, the security pressures imposed on it, and the emergence of a number of armed civil movements against the organization pushed the group out of the urban strongholds of Maiduguri and into the countryside, concentrated mainly in the Sambisa Forest in northeastern Nigeria. In addition, the group carried out attacks in separate areas in northern Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Based on these facts, the development in the organization’s operations and geographical mobility can be tackled through:

1. Domestic operations

Boko Haram launched its terrorist attacks in the post-Youssef phase with the August 2011 attack on the United Nations building in the capital, Abuja. After this attack, the organization’s goals varied, although they were mainly concentrated in separate areas in northern Nigeria, such as Borno, Yobe, Kano, Kaduna, and Sokoto. Since the separation of the group of the West Africa Province from Boko Haram, the latter has been mainly centered in the Sambisa Forest, which allowed the organization to strengthen its attacks on southern and central Borno regions, including the city of Maiduguri, and along the border with Cameroon near the provinces of Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga.

The operations carried out by the organization were diverse in objectives. The attacks were not limited to state institutions, security services, the army and elites, but also included the headquarters of international

institutions, such as the United Nations building, churches, and schools as a symbol of Western education, and some markets and commercial centers. These attacks claimed the lives of many Muslim civilians. Perhaps this is what led to more pressure on the organization and the occurrence of internal splits in protest against the killing of many Muslims during the organization's operations.

Hence, the operations carried out by Boko Haram may have declined to an extent after the killing of Abu Bakr Shekau for many reasons, foremost of which is the preoccupation of the new leadership of the organization with countering threats from ISWAP, as well as working to confront the internal crisis in the organization. The state of internal schisms has increased, with many elements surrendering to the Nigerian authorities, and some switching their allegiance to ISWAP. Moreover, there were reports that surfaced in September about the movement of a large group of Boko Haram elements from the stronghold in northeastern Nigeria to join criminal gangs in the Rijana forests in the northwestern state of Kaduna, where they underwent arms training, kidnappings, and other guerrilla attacks.

2. Regional operations

Boko Haram adopted a regional strategy to expand in the Lake Chad region. The move is in line with its view that it is performing a moral mission to defend Islam against the West and secular governments in the region. Thus, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger became the arenas for terrorist attacks by the organization which took advantage of the porous border between Nigeria and Cameroon, and used the latter as its backyard, a safe haven, and a logistical center for support and recruitment. This was not enough for the group. It carried out operations in Cameroon, such as the kidnappings of 2014 and 2015 in northern Cameroon, and the suicide bombing that in a commercial marketplace in the city of Amshidi in November 2018.

The threat of Boko Haram emerged in Niger and Chad during the past years. The organization carried out a number of terrorist attacks, such as the attack on the town of Bosso in Niger in February 2015, which resulted in the death of 57 people. The organization also claimed responsibility for the attack of December 2020 on the village of Tomor in the region of Diffa, Niger, that killed 27 people.

Chad also witnessed a number of terrorist attacks by the organization, most notably the February 2015 attack on the village of Ngobowa, which is believed to have been executed in revenge against Chad for joining a military alliance with Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon to confront Boko Haram. On 23 March 2020, the organization carried out a complicated attack on Chadian forces stationed at the Bohoma base. The attack lasted for several hours and resulted in the killing of 98 Chadian soldiers and the injury of dozens. The attack revealed the development of the combat and intelligence capabilities of Boko Haram.

3. Funding Mechanisms

Western sources refer to the diversity of funding mechanisms for Boko Haram's activities. At one point, the organization relied on membership fees that Mohamed Youssef had set before his death, so that each member of the organization paid a sum of money to support the organization's activities. The organization was also receiving donations from some figures, entities, and foreign organizations. Over time and with the expansion of the terrorist attacks of the organization, the organization developed new mechanisms to finance its activities, foremost among which is extorting the local population in order to obtain the food supplies that the organization needs, imposing taxes on the population in exchange for protection, and stealing livestock from local shepherds and then selling them in markets through intermediaries. There were also reports of IS trading in fish along the shores of Lake Chad. The organization, in addition, has resorted to criminal activities, such as kidnapping for ransom.

Fourth: The relationship with Al-Qaeda and IS

Boko Haram's relationship with foreign organizations has always been a problematic issue. The organization that grew up locally did not hide its fascination with the experiences of other terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and its late leader Osama bin Laden. There was frequent talk of Bin Laden providing material support to Mohamed Youssef and his then-nascent movement, following two audio messages from bin Laden in 2002 calling on Nigerian Muslims to wage jihad.

It is true that the evidence of material support from Al-Qaeda for Boko Haram was not conclusive, but it revealed a possible relationship between the two groups, which was later confirmed, especially after

the killing of Mohamed Youssef in July 2009 when the former leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdel-Malek Droukdel, extended condolences to Boko Haram for the killing of its leader, and offered to “supply and supply the organization with fighters, weapons, and ammunition in order to defend Muslims in Nigeria.” In the same manner, Abu Bakr Shekau, in July 2010, sent the condolences of the mujahideen in Nigeria to the leaders of Al-Qaeda, and warned the United States that “the jihad has now begun.”

The likelihood of the relationship between Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram may have been solidified by a number of factors, the most important of which is the history of some Boko Haram members, which reveals their association with Al-Qaeda, such as Maman Nour and Khaled Al-Barnawi, who later opposed Shekau’s leadership. Furthermore, some of the operations carried out by Boko Haram appeared similar to Al-Qaeda tactics, such as the suicide bombing at the United Nations building in Abuja, in August 2011. In addition, many intelligence sources reported that Boko Haram was one of the organizations present in northern Mali after the March 2012 coup, and that it established cooperation relations with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb there.

As opposed to the unclear relationship with Al-Qaeda, the relationship of Boko Haram and IS was more obvious. In March 2015, Abu Bakr Shekau pledged his allegiance to the then IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, thus turning the Boko Haram organization into what became known as the ISWAP. This pledge of allegiance led to the establishment of an official relationship between the two organizations that allowed Boko Haram to benefit from the media capabilities of IS and to publicize the organization’s operations. In July 2015, for example, the ISWAP released a video documenting the organization’s activities against the Nigerian army, which included launching rockets and exchanging fire, and in the following month, the organization published a video entitled “Knights of Africa” documenting the attack carried out by members of the organization against the Nigerian forces, and the seizure of equipment. The recording showed a member of the organization saying, “the organization has inflicted heavy losses on the Nigerian army.”

However, this association with IS backfired on Boko Haram. Differences emerged between IS and Abu Bakr Shekau over the operational systems and attacks carried out by Boko Haram, which also produced

disagreements within Boko Haram, especially with regard to the death of high number of Muslim civilians in the attacks.

Accordingly, IS excluded Shekau in August 2016 from the leadership of the ISWAP, and Abu Musab Al-Barnawi took his place. Al-Barnawi is the son of Boko Haram founder Mohamed Youssef. Shekau, meanwhile, announced that he was still the leader of the Boko Haram organization, also known as the Ahl Al-Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad, reviving the name of the group.

This division led to an escalation of conflict and competition between Boko Haram and the ISWAP, especially since both organizations operate in geographically intersecting areas of influence. The ISWAP also tried to expand its influence in the traditional areas of influence of Boko Haram, the Shekau faction. This is the conflict that ended with the death of Shekau after armed clashes with ISWAP elements. The group celebrated Shekau's death in an audio speech by IS official spokesman Abu Hamza Al-Qurashi, in June 2021. Al-Qurashi praised the followers of the ISWAP, saying "We commend your blessed work to eradicate and bury the strife of the Kharijites, and we thank God Almighty for reconciling those who were walking in their footsteps by returning to the path of righteousness. We pray for them to be guided, to return to the community of Muslims, leaving behind them the paths of wandering, loss and temptation, and that they rally around the Imam of Muslims, the Mujahid Sheikh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi."

Boko Haram's splinter groups: ISWAP and Ansaru

The dynamics of division and disintegration is one of the key features of the evolution of Boko Haram since Abu Bakr Shekau took over. In the past few years, the group witnessed two main splinters.

The first was the exit of a group of members from the organization. These included a number of leaders, such as Khaled Al-Barnawi and Mohamed Ibrahim Jumbi who objected to the way Shekau was managing the affairs of the organization. This group formed the Ansar Al-Muslimin Fi Bilad Al-Sudan group, or what is known as the Ansaru organization.

The second split occurred after IS decided to oust Shekau and chose Abu Musab Al-Barnawi instead. Shekau came out and confirmed the

continuation of the Boko Haram organization under his leadership, without the faction affiliated to IS. It should be noted that despite the regression in recent years in the activities of Ansaru, regarded as a splinter from Boko Haram, recent field reports show the rejuvenation of the activities of the organization in several areas, such as the state of Zamfara in northwestern Nigeria.

First: Ideological differences

The ISWAP and Ansaru engaged in a number of ideological difference with the Boko Haram organization and its late leader Abu Bakr Shekau. The former two factions believed that Shekau was leading the organization with authoritarianism and rejected any opposition to his authority. There are also differences associated with the operations implemented by the organization, which did not take into account the selection and precise identification of targets, resulting in the fall of many Muslim civilian victims. The propaganda formulated by the ISWAP against Shekau described him as the owner of a deviant creed that contradicted the approach of Ahl Al-Sunnah.

The formation of the Ansaru organization was officially announced in January 2012 through leaflets distributed by the organization in Kano, northern Nigeria, in which the organization was portrayed as a “more humane” alternative to Boko Haram, targeting the Nigerian government and Christians only in the context of self-defense. In July 2012, a video clip appeared online of the group’s emir at the time, Abu Osama Al-Ansari, in which he explained that the group’s mission “is to help and defend Muslims, especially in the countries of Black Africa, to engage in advocacy work for the reform of societies, and to respond immediately to the attacks that Muslims are subjected to and exact revenge on its perpetrators.”

Abu Osama Al-Ansari is one of the controversial figures. Some believe that he is the prominent leader Khaled Al-Barnawi and that he took the name of Al-Ansari as a pseudonym. However, there are other indications that show that Abu Osama Al-Ansari is a different person. In the fourth issue of Al-Risala magazine, published in English by Al-Qaeda, an article was published by Abu Osama Al-Ansari in which he mentioned Khaled Al-Barnawi, being held by the authorities, as one of the leaders Shekau tried to kill, and he prayed to God that he be freed.

Al-Ansari added in the same recording that “the group was established to correct grievances and confront violence against Muslims who have been persecuted in Nigeria for decades,” and claimed that the Nigerian government is unwilling to defend the rights of Muslims, and that the government has a common interest with “crusader forces to fight Islam and Muslims,” so the group called on all Muslims to help it eliminate the ruling Nigerian regime.

Despite the presence of some similarities in the narratives of both Ansaru and Boko Haram, Ansaru was keen, from time to time, to prove its difference from the approach of Boko Haram. In January 2015, Al-Hidaya Media Foundation, the media arm of the Ansaru group, posted a video online entitled “God is our Master.” In the video, one of the members spoke about the group’s goals, including the implementation of Sharia. According to him, the group’s methods differ greatly from the methods of Boko Haram, that attacks mosques and crowded places, and kills Muslims indiscriminately, which is avoided by Jamaat Ansar Al-Muslimin, which fights only against the enemies of Islam.

Ansaru’s speech also promoted the crises that Boko Haram suffers from under the leadership of Abu Bakr Shekau, foremost of which is the ideological deviations (from the point of view of the Ansaru group), and Shekau’s refusal of any criticism directed at him, so that any opposition to him could lead to death. Not to mention that he undermined the role of the Shura Council, which is supposed to be the supreme authority in the organization. Therefore, Shekau made decisions unilaterally and in complete disregard to the opinion of the Shura Council.

These criticisms resonated with the ISWAP as well. The decision of IS in August 2016 revealed the change of the organization’s leadership and the selection of Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, instead of Shekau who was announced dead in October 2021, based on core contentious issues. Disagreements between Shekau and a number of the organization’s leaders were no longer limited or discussed behind closed doors, especially following the letter issued in August 2016 by late leader Maman Nour in which he sharply criticized Shekau and considered him “in violation of the Islamic morals of jihad,” and that he was “an authoritarian person who killed whoever opposed him.”

Nour also criticized Shekau’s declining efficiency in managing the movement, his inability to revive it under the military pressures it was

exposed to, and his failure to preserve the lands controlled by the organization and provide weapons and other supplies to the fighters. In addition, the nature of the attacks carried out by the organization, and the resulting number of Muslim civilian casualties, were negatively dealt with.

In this context, the commander of US forces in Africa (AFRICOM) Thomas Waldhauser stated in his testimony before the Senate in June 2016 that a group of angry Boko Haram members have splinted due to Shekau's unwillingness to amend his operational methods, in line with IS guidelines and directives. Waldhauser cited Shekau's continued use of children in suicide bombings, despite IS' ban of this matter.

Disputes between the ISWAP and the Boko Haram faction led by Shekau were revealed in an interview conducted by the IS' Al-Naba newspaper, in its 41st issue, with the leader of the ISWAP at the time, Abu Musab Al-Barnawi. Al-Barnawi mentioned, albeit indirectly, the differences he had with Abu Bakr Shekau when he stated that his organization does not blow up mosques and markets "because IS forbade targeting the Muslim public," and repudiated this act, adding that "anyone who performs this act is doing it for himself, not in the name of the caliphate." Websites in 2018 posted a book circulated about Shekau's deviant creed. The title of the book describes the Shekau faction as Kharijites. It is believed that this book was co-authored by Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, as the cover shows that it was written by two brothers, the sons of Sheikh Abi Youssef Al-Barnawi.

Second: Organizational structure

The exit of Ansaru and the ISWAP from Boko Haram resulted in the presence of a number of common features in the factions' organizational structures. There are two indications that help analyze the organizational and leadership structures of the two organizations:

The first is that the leaders of Ansaru and the ISWAP do not seem to enjoy the absolute control Shekau had in Boko Haram. The central IS leadership has the power, in one way or another, to choose the leader of the ISWAP. Perhaps this is what appeared on two occasions: when IS took a decision in August 2016 to depose Abu Bakr Shekau and put Abu Musab Al-Barnawi in his place; and in March 2019, when IS decided to overthrow Abu Musab Al-Barnawi and instead choose Abu Abdullah bin Omar Al-Barnawi, who was known as

Ba Idrissa. The organization's members were asked to obey the new leader, and some interpreted that decision with some doubts about Abu Musab Al-Barnawi's contacting with some elements linked to Al-Qaeda in Mali.

The organizational leadership remained a problematic issue in the ISWAP. Reports indicated a conflict within the organization in February and March 2020, and some indicated that this conflict led to the overthrow of Ba Idrissa, but later it became clear that Abu Musab Al-Barnawi returned to the leadership of the organization, especially following the audio recording he issued in May 2021 to the Shura Council in the organization, during which he confirmed that he was appointed as the leader of the organization again according to the directives of the IS central organization. Al-Barnawi stated that there are a number of corrective steps that will be taken and IS ordered the ISWAP "that the spoils of war should be shared with all members of the group, and that they should not be sold in the province, but rather distributed freely."

It is true that this recording was a prelude to the attack launched by Al-Barnawi on Abu Bakr Shekau, which ended with the latter's death. However, Al-Barnawi was not given the time to reap the fruits of his success in getting rid of Shekau. On 15 October 2021, the Nigerian army confirmed the killing of Al-Barnawi, and days later, on 22 October 2021, the Nigerian National Security Adviser Babajana Munguno announced the killing of Malam Baku, who had recently succeeded Abu Musab Al-Barnawi as the leader of the ISWAP.

The decline of the model of absolute control of the leadership is also evident in the structure of the Ansaru group. According to the group's charter, which was published online in January 2012, the group's emir heads the hierarchy and manages its affairs, but his authority is not absolute. His rule remains restricted by the decisions of the Shura Council, especially in crucial issues, such as violating the principles agreed upon in the charter, opening a new fighting front, concluding a truce with the enemy, or dismissing a member of the Shura Council. It cannot be overlooked that this text is an attempt by the group to avoid producing a new model of Shekau who took decisions unilaterally and put aside the role of the Shura Council.

The second indicates that the influence of Boko Haram is still present in the nature of the structures of the two organizations. The ISWAP has

an emir and a Shura Council. In addition, the chain of command in the regions affiliated to the organization work in a decentralized manner to manage the affairs of the regions. Moreover, the structure includes departments and committees to manage the affairs of the organization, such as the Hisba, armament, financing, and food supply.

The Ansaru group is made up, according to its charter, different levels. The general leadership consists of the emir at the top of the chain, emirs of regions, and committee heads, all of whom form the group's Shura Council. The work among them is consistent and integrated. The Shura Council enjoys an authority that is almost equal to that of the emir because the group works according to the binding shura.

The organizational structure supports the idea of decentralization through regional emirs and regional shura councils that help the region's emir in managing its affairs. The group's affairs are also managed through a number of committees and bodies, such as the Sharia Committee, the Military Committee, the Economic Committee, the Media and Foreign Relations Committee, the Diwans Committee, the Affairs of the Vulnerable Committee, the Judicial Committee, the Security Committee, and the Awareness, Advocacy and Scientific Research Committee.

Third: Operations and funding

Differences between the ISWAP and Ansaru on one hand and Boko Haram on the other reflected, to an extent, on the nature of attacks. The former two groups sought to avoid, as much as possible, the killing of civilian Muslims, focusing instead on carrying out attacks against state institutions, Christians, and symbols of Western powers in the region.

In this regard, it is necessary to focus on four main dimensions when analyzing the financing mechanisms and operations of the two organizations:

1. Domestic operations

Tracking the course of terrorist operations carried out by the two organizations during the past years reveals a geographic concentration in northern Nigeria. The period after the separation of ISWAP from the Abu Bakr Shekau faction witnessed the concentration of ISWAP in the northern Borno State along the border with Niger and on the outskirts of Lake Chad. But by the end of 2016 and the beginning of

2017, the organization expanded into the central regions of Borno State and neighboring Yobe State. It is also noted that the presence of the organization in northeastern Nigeria led to an increase in clashes between with the elements of Boko Haram, which also revealed the ambitions of the ISWAP to eliminate the Shekau faction and control its strongholds. Perhaps this is what the organization sought to confirm after the killing of Shekau. In July 2021, IS released a video recording showing members of the ISWAP celebrating Eid Al-Adha (Greater Bairam) in the Sambisa Forest in northeastern Nigeria, which was considered the stronghold of Abu Bakr Shekau.

The terrorist attacks carried out by Ansaru since its establishment until 2014 show that it operates mainly around northwest Nigeria, such as in Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Kano and Kogi states. Despite the state of stagnation that the organization has witnessed in recent years, many indications have emerged about its resurgence, especially after it claimed responsibility for some attacks in northwestern Nigeria. This Ansaru presence in northwest Nigeria made it gain popular support from its polarization pattern. The majority of its members are Hausa and Fulani rather than Kanuri, as is the case in Boko Haram, of Borno and Yobe descent.

Since its separation from Shekau, the ISWAP attacks have focused on Western interests, foreign workers, state institutions and security services. Many attacks were carried out on the security posts and barracks of the Nigerian forces, such as the May 2019 attack on Magumere, Borno State, which killed 10 Nigerian army soldiers. With its continuation until present, such attacks have become the subject of a great celebration by IS and its publications, foremost of which is the weekly Al-Naba newspaper. However, some of the attacks carried out by the organization were targeting some armed groups hostile to its members. For example, in June 2020, reports pointed out that the organization carried out a massive attack on the village of Velo, inhabited by livestock farmers, located in Gubio County, Borno State. The attack was implemented in retaliation for the killing of IS members by the militia tasked with protecting the village's livestock from theft. The attack left more than 50 villagers dead.

On the other hand, Ansaru's operations tend to target foreigners in the area, such as the kidnapping of a German engineer in Kano in Janu-

ary 2012, who was killed by the group in May 2012 when the Nigerian forces tried to liberate him. The organization did not lose sight of the military objectives as well. In January 2013, IS operatives ambushed a military convoy of Nigerian soldiers who were traveling from Okene, Kogi State, to Mali. The organization justified the attack by saying that “the forces were on their way to destroy the Islamic empire of Mali.” The organization warned African countries to stop “helping Western countries in their fight against Muslims.”

After a period of operational silence, in January 2020, Ansaru claimed responsibility for the attack on the procession of Prince Potiskum in Kaduna, northwest Nigeria. After this attack, in early February 2020, the Nigerian security forces announced that they had launched an attack on Ansaru in Kaduna and were able to eliminate many of its elements. In response, the organization issued a statement claiming that it had killed and wounded more than 34 Nigerian soldiers and shot down a warplane in the operation. In August 2020, the organization re-emerged to claim that it had carried out two attacks on the Nigerian army in Kaduna.

2. Regional expansion

Since the beginning of its activity, the ISWAP has been keen to consolidate its image as a regional organization operating in the Lake Chad region. This regional character was reinforced by the formation of joint forces from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon to confront the threat of the organization in the region. Hence, these forces became one of the main targets of the organization’s attacks. In addition to the organization’s attacks on military forces and targets, there is the plurality of its objectives, which may reveal a contradiction in the organization’s rhetoric about avoiding the targeting of civilians. In March 2019, the group kidnapped a number of women in the Badifa and Bosso regions of Niger. During the same month, the organization attacked several villages in Niger, which led to the death of a number of civilians. Again in the same month, the organization killed 23 Chadian soldiers in Dangdalah, near Lake Chad. In June 2019, it claimed that it had killed more than 50 members of the Niger security forces in an attack on Diffa airport and an oil refinery.

The organization also assassinated a number of Tuareg leaders in Niger and attempted to assassinate some officials in the countries of the

African Sahel. The ISWAP claimed responsibility for the attempted assassination of the Speaker of the Niger Parliament, Sene Oumarou, in June 2021 in the capital, Niamey. The Niger government said at the time that “the gunmen opened fire on the guards stationed in front of the house of the Speaker of Parliament, which led to the death of one of the guards and seriously wounding another.”

It is true that the Ansaru did not enjoy the regional momentum of ISWAP, but there was a regional dimension to Ansaru’s discourse, which emerged as an organization that has distinguished relations with Al-Qaeda and eyes focused on events in Mali.

One of the operations that revealed the territorial dimension of the organization was that which took place in May 2013, when the Movement for Unity and Jihad attacked military barracks in the Agadez region and a site for the French nuclear company Areva in Arlit. An online video was posed of one of the elements, Abu Ali Al-Nigeri, that took part in the two attacks, revealing that he is a member in the Ansaru organization. The rapprochement between the Ansaru and Al-Qaeda suggests the possibilities of regional expansion of the Ansaru, which Al-Qaeda may view as a tool to strengthen its presence in the Lake Chad region and confront the growing influence of the ISWAP there, especially after the killing of Abu Bakr Shekau.

3. The relationship with Boko Haram

Analyzing the relationship between Boko Haram and both the ISWAP and Ansaru involves so many complexities that it is difficult to assume there is a pattern of permanent conflict. The three organizations operate in an overlapping geographic area, which may lead to conflict or produce contexts for operational cooperation for purely pragmatic justifications. Some sources indicated that clashes took place between the Shekau faction and the ISWAP after their separation, and those clashes led to deaths on both camps.

However, this pattern of conflicts did not stand in the way of coexistence between the two parties and the attempt to share areas of influence in northern Nigeria, as the pattern of cooperation and coordination between Boko Haram and the ISWAP appeared in February 2018 when two groups of hostages were released in Banki region, one of which had been detained by the ISWAP, the other

by Boko Haram. It appeared that there was coordination in negotiations and the process of releasing the hostages between the two organizations.

Despite the few models of coordination between ISWAP and the Boko Haram faction of Ahl Al-Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad, conflict was the dominant pattern. The clashes between IS and Ahl Al-Sunnah ended with the murder of Abu Bakr Shekau in May 2021. IS propaganda confirmed the organization's victory over those it described as Khawarij. The group called on the elements affiliated with Shekau to join IS, welcoming those who pledged allegiance to the leader of IS.

Nonetheless, with the absence of both Shekau and Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, the relationship between the Boko Haram faction and the ISWAP may become open to many scenarios, especially since the new leader of the Boko Haram faction, Bakura Modu, came out in a video recording in June 2021, to call on the members of the organization to be steadfast and to continue the fight, pointing out that the organization is extending its hand to pledge allegiance to IS. Modu was of the belief that IS is the entity to resolve the dispute between them and Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, whom he described as a stray influence. Added to this is the weakness of the two organizations, whether in terms of the absence of historically conflicting leaders, or the loss of large numbers of Boko Haram members in armed clashes and voluntary surrenders to the Nigerian authorities.

This pattern is repeated in Ansaru's relationship with Boko Haram. Since its establishment, the Ansaru group has been keen to stay away from the areas of influence of Boko Haram in order to avoid the retaliatory attacks of the Shekau faction. However, cooperation between the two organizations was present in some cases, such as the attack carried out by the Ansaru group in November 2012 on a prison in Abuja and the release of a number of top leaders of Boko Haram, which was a move praised by Shekau. In this context, there is uncertainty about the future of Ansaru in northern Nigeria after the group's re-emergence in northwest Nigeria and its renewed activity. The group is known for its ties to Al-Qaeda, so that Al-Qaeda propaganda platforms promote the group and its operations, a matter that may anger the ISWAP, and may push it to clash with the group.

Moreover, the Ansaru may benefit from the conflict between Boko Haram and ISWAP because it distracts them from the possible expan-

sion plans of Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria, which may be motivated by Al-Qaeda plans to confront IS in the Lake Chad region. The conflict may also allow the Ansaru to attract elements that defected from the other two groups, or drive one of the two rivals, Boko Haram and the ISWAP to polarize Ansaru members to formulate a framework for cooperation and coordination to prevent the other group from making the same move.

4. Funding mechanisms

Both Ansaru and ISWAP rely on various mechanisms to fund their activities. Despite the frequent talks about Ansaru receiving material support from Al-Qaeda, kidnapping and criminal activities are its predominant funding mechanism for Ansaru. Most of the attacks carried out by the group were kidnappings of foreigners. The overlap between crime and terrorism appears in the group's work in Zamfara. The group participated in theft and kidnappings, and allied itself with bandits in a pattern that reports described as giving criminal and banditry operations a "jihadist" character, or the "Jihadization of Banditry." The mechanisms of financing the ISWAP are similar to those of Boko Haram.

The organization resorts to extorting local residents in order to obtain food supplies or even tax the population in exchange for protection, in addition to stealing livestock from local shepherds and then reselling them in markets through intermediaries, and trading in fish along the shores of Lake Chad. Although IS avoided kidnappings of civilians, ISWAP was not fully committed to this condition in light of reports that the organization was involved in kidnappings in Niger.

Ansar Al-Islam in northern Burkina Faso

Ansar Al-Islam is one of the terrorist organizations that emerged in northern Burkina Faso. It was founded by Malam Ibrahim Dicko who was involved, in one way or another, in the conflict in Mali. The group adopts the dominant discourse of terrorist organizations in the region, portraying itself as a group that seeks to defend Islam and Muslims against the ruling regimes, Western powers and Christianity in general.

First: Ideology

Ansar Al-Islam was founded at the end of 2016 by Malam Ibrahim Dicko, who belongs to the Fulani group and hails from Soum Province in northern Burkina Faso. He was educated in traditional schools in Burkina Faso and Mali, and later went on to teach in Niger. In 2009 he began preaching in a number of villages in Soum. He appointed local representatives in those villages, and preached on some radio stations. In 2012, the authorities officially recognized his Al-Irshad (Guidance) institution, strengthening his role in building mosques and schools.

These facts contributed to the strengthening of Dicko's influence and ability to mobilize the masses, especially with his call for equality between different ethnic groups. Over time, however, crises with the authority began to appear, especially when it prevented the financing of the construction of a number of mosques affiliated with the Guidance institution, as well as the exposure of extremist tendencies in Dicko's discourse.

In September 2013, the French forces arrested Dicko in northern Mali, and after he spent a period in prison in Bamako, he was released in 2015, to return to Burkina Faso. Together with his followers, he frequented Mali for military training, and he established communication with Amadou Koufa, leader of the Macina Liberation Front.

Dicko died in 2017, and his brother, Jaafar Dicko, assumed the leadership of the group, but Malam Dicko remained the main intellectual of Ansar Al-Islam, whose ideas and orientations shaped the organization's ideological framework. The organization was established with the aim of setting up an alternative system to the existing one based on Islamic Sharia. Members of the organization threatened teachers and students in northern Burkina Faso against continuing in schools that offer state curricula. This led to the closure of a number of schools.

The organization, known for its close relationship with Al-Qaeda, presents itself as an anti-Western organization in the region, while adopting its ambitions to restore the Muslim Fulani empire that was eliminated by French colonialism at the end of the 19th century.

Second: The relationship with Al-Qaeda

The conflict in Mali provided an opportunity for Malam Dicko to

establish relations with Al-Qaeda and associated groups that contributed to some degree in the development of Ansar Al-Islam. This relationship may have begun when Dicko met the leader of the Macina Liberation Front, Amadou Koufa, in Mali to become a close ally and Koufa played an important role in the establishment of Ansar Al-Islam.

Ansar Al-Islam also received operational support from a sub-group of Ansar Al-Din in carrying out the December 2016 attack in Nasumbo, Burkina Faso. With the formation of the Jamaa Nusrat Al-Islam wa Al-Muslimin (JNIM) group loyal to Al-Qaeda, as a result of the merger of the Ansar Al-Din group, the Macina Liberation Front, the Al-Mourabitoun organization, and the Emirate of the Greater Sahara, the relationship between Ansar Al-Islam and Al-Qaeda gained increasing momentum. Ansar Al-Islam received the technical know-how and capabilities to conduct improvised explosive devices attacks from the JNIM. This cooperation extended to terrorist attacks. In 2017, the JNIM claimed responsibility for six attacks in Burkina Faso. Burkinabe local reports stated that these operations were carried out with the participation of the JNIM.

As much as Ansar Al-Islam and Al-Qaeda and its affiliates share ideological affinity, there is also a common pragmatic approach. Al-Qaeda and its groups benefit from the presence of a local partner for them that can provide operational facilities within Burkina Faso as part of the organization's strategy to expand in sub-Saharan Africa. For its part, Ansar Al-Islam saw its association with Al-Qaeda as a consolidation of its terrorist reputation, not to mention the supplies and assistance that the group receives from Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, as well as the back-up it gets inside Mali through which it can prepare for operations, whether in Mali or Burkina Faso.

Third: Human resources and operations

According to some estimates, Ansar Al-Islam comprises about 200 members. This human force is made up of individuals from different ethnic groups, although the majority belong to the Fulani group. The attacks carried out by the organization vary, but they tend to focus on state institutions and symbols, as well as leaders and traditional elites. It is true that the organization has lost a lot of momentum in recent years, but this does not mean its threat is terminated. There is a possibility that the organization has joined organically with Al-Qaeda through the

JNIM. The organization returned to the fore in October 2021, when the French Barkhane Force announced the killing of the leader of the organization, Umaru Mobo Modi, on the border with Mali, in a coordinated operation with the US and Malian forces.

Barkhan Force indicated that Modi was a key leader of the Ansar Al-Islam group, directly linked to Jaafar Dicko, the emir of the group, and worked in the area of National Road 16 between Josi and Gao, and supervised the planting of improvised explosive devices.

In general, the analysis of the organization's previous terrorist attacks provides three main indications:

1. Geographical concentration

The organization is based in northern Burkina Faso, specifically in the northern province of Soum. The organization relies on a strategy of geographical ties between its presence in northern Burkina Faso and the sanctuaries it has in Mali near the border with Burkina Faso. The organization has two bases around the villages of Bolkisi and Ndaki in Mali, which allows its gunmen to launch attacks in both towns. For some time, the organization had major bases in the Fouslare Forest, in southwest Gao, near the Burkinabe Malian border, as well as in the Fhero Forest, in the province of Soum. Nevertheless, after the military forces attacked their base in the Fouslare Forest, the militants of the organization dispersed. It seems that they were redistributed in smaller cells along the northern border strip.

2. Diversity of goals

The goals of the organization's attacks vary in a way that reflects the vision and ideas of the group, which portrays itself in conflict with the existing secular authority and its associated institutions and systems, including educational institutions, as well as traditional leaders who perpetuate unfavorable conditions for the organization and its ideas. From December 2016 to March 2018, Ansar Al-Islam carried out 78 attacks in northern Burkina Faso, including against various targets, such as security services, security forces, armed civil militias, infrastructure, and the burning of administrative buildings, houses and schools for government education, as well as assaults, kidnappings and assassinations. It also targeted local sheikhs, mayors, and other influential figures.

3. Development of operations

The attacks carried out by the organization reveal a development in its operations. After the organization relied on small arms and mortars, it began using explosive devices in April 2017, which was evident in the attacks of the organization in Mali. This development was the result of receiving technical knowledge and capabilities from Al-Qaeda, in addition to obtaining more resources as a result of criminal activities.

JNIM in African Sahel

Over the past decades, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has adopted a strategy of expansion in the African Sahel region and beyond, by taking advantage of existing local injustices in the region, and exploiting the existing contexts to establish local alliances that work to bring about a semi-permanent settlement of the organization. No sooner had the situation deteriorated in Mali in 2012 than the organization called for this strategy, where the former leader of the organization Abdelmalek Droukdel saw what is happening in Mali as a “historic opportunity” for expansion and a long-term presence in the African Sahel. He also believed that this required establishing deeper relations with local groups in northern Mali, with the possibility of establishing an alliance with them.

This strategy began to bear fruit in March 2017, with the announcement of the establishment of the JNIM as a result of the merger between Ansar Al-Din, the Macina Liberation Front, the Emirate of the Greater Sahara, and the Al-Mourabitoun organizations. The figurehead of the organization was Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Al-Din group. The organization pledged allegiance to the leaders of the Al-Qaeda organization, its branch in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Emir of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda soon issued its endorsement of the newly emerging group for its expression of unity and cohesion. Over time, the JNIM became the most expressive organization of Al-Qaeda’s strategy in the Sahel region, especially with the problems faced by the AQIM in the past years, and the death of its historical leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, who was killed in June 2020 during an operation carried out by French forces northwest of the Malian city of Tassalit, on the border with Algeria.

First: Ideology

In the video recording that announced the establishment of the group in March 2017, Iyad Ag Ghali said that he believes the leaders of Al-Qaeda represent the ideal model for jihad. This means that there is a common ideological framework. Therefore, the JNIM aspired to present itself through two main axes. The first is to reject the existing regimes that do not appeal to Islamic Sharia and are allied with Western powers, and to work to transform the region to Islamic Sharia. The group tried to be devoted to this vision through its discourse. For example, the group, through its media arm Zalaqah, released a video recording entitled “Deterring Tyrants” in May 2017, through which the group attempted to legitimize its ideas by portraying the ruling regimes in the region, including Mali, as secular regimes based on man-made laws, and that the continuation of these regimes in power relies on the support of the West, not to mention that these regimes cause severe social and economic problems and persecution of Muslims.

In line with this trend, and as an expression of its rejection of the existing regimes, the group issued a recording of its then judge Abi Abd Al-Rahman Al-Senhaji in February 2018, amid preparations for the presidential elections in Mali in 2018, to undermine the idea of elections, and to demand Muslims to stay away from the election path, which to them is incompatible with Islamic Sharia and is devoted to the rule of tyrants and secularists.

The second axis of the group’s discourse focuses on trying to portray itself as a jihadist movement, fighting against colonialism and Western powers conspiring against the Islamic world. The group cited the attempt to establish Islamic Sharia in northern Mali, an experiment that was aborted by the French military in alliance with the Malian army. These narratives can always be traced back in the group’s publications. This was shown, for example, in the videos that the group published in May 2017 on its Telegram channel. The clips included the armed operations carried out by the organization against the Malian security forces, and the bombing of the airport in Timbuktu. The clips also referred to the statements of one of the military leaders of the organization, in which he asserted that “the battle in Mali is directed first and foremost against the French forces in Mali and then against the Malian army forces.”

The fight against Western forces drove the group to threaten the individuals cooperating with it. The organization released a statement on Telegram on 5 March 2018, which began by praising the armed operation that took place in the financial city of Sumbi on 27 January 2018, and then proceeded to refer to some local elements that tracked the perpetrators of the operation to determine their locations, and then help the Malian and French forces, which they described in the statement as “the Crusading occupier and the aggressor apostate.” The statement ended with warning these elements against helping the French and Malian forces. The statement also referred to the international forces MINUSMA present in Mali. The organization regards them as occupying forces that must be fought against and, therefore, celebrated the attacks carried out against them.

Second: Organizational structure

The organizational structure of the JNIM is characterized by leadership pluralism. Perhaps Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Al-Din, is the emir of the group, but this emirate is linked to other leaders in the organization, and they constitute the deputies of the emir and most importantly the Shura Council. The leaders appeared in the video announcing the establishment of the group, and these are: Al-Hassan Al-Ansari, representing the Al-Mourabitoun organization, Yahya Abu Al-Hammam and Abu Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sinhaji, representing the Sahara Emirate, and Amadou Koufa, the leader of the Macina Liberation Front.

In view of the scarcity of information available on the organizational structure of the JNIM, there are two main observations that reveal the nature of this structure. On the one hand, although the dynamics of the formation of the JNIM, as an organization merging with other groups, assume that the absence of any of the founding leaders does not translate into a decline in the representation of the organization the higher leadership levels, the absence of a number of the group’s founding leaders could weaken the organization’s structure, especially with reports that some of these leaders were killed, such as Al-Hassan Al-Ansari who was killed in February 2018, and Yahya Abu Al-Hammam, who was believed to be the first deputy of Iyad Ag Ghali, who the French forces announced his killing in February 2019. Although the French forces announced the killing of Amadou Koufa in November 2018, he appeared in March 2019 to confirm that he had not been killed. The French

Defense Minister Florence Parly announced, in November 2019, the killing of the leader In the group Abi Abd Al-Rahman Al-Senhaji in an operation by French forces in Mali in October 2019.

The second observation indicates the continuity of the operational effectiveness of the structures of the organizations integrated in the JNIM. The group benefits from the expertise and organizational structure available to Ansar Al-Din, Al-Mourabitoun, the Macina Liberation Front, and the Emirate of the Sahara. The latter gained its terrorist reputation from its direct relationship and subordination to the AQIM and Ansar Al-Din movement, which emerged in late 2011 as one of the main movements that fought in the rebellion in northern Mali. It has a Tuareg backing and adopts a decentralization strategy through a number of fighters scattered in different areas.

The Al-Mourabitoun organization also has long experience in the African Sahel region, especially in Mali. The organization emerged in 2013 as a result of the merger of the Al-Multhimin Brigade and the Jamaat Al-Tawhid wa Al-Jihad in West Africa. The Macina Liberation Front, which is seen as a branch of Ansar Al-Dine, has enjoyed an important position in the map of terrorist organizations in Mali since its establishment in 2015 by Amadou Koufa, who sought to open a new front in the Mopti region in central Mali. The front is based mainly on the Fulani group, and it adopts a decentralizing strategy in its operations through its fighters who are deployed in scattered centers across central Mali. These capabilities possessed by the constituent organizations of the JNIM add to the group's balance, whether at the decentralized operational level and the attacks carried out in a wider geographical scope, or at the level of the group's human resources. The group always celebrated its inclusion of fighters from different ethnicities, such as the Tuareg, Arabs, and Fulani. Such diversity makes the group better able to understand and interact with existing social and economic dynamics and the potential to penetrate ethnic communities.

Third: Operations and funding

The JNIM is mainly concentrated in north Mali, carrying out attacks in the center of the country. However, its activities extend to neighboring countries, especially Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso. The group deals with the region as a whole as an operational arena to carry out

its attacks, and justifies this by the French presence in the region and the cooperation of the countries of the region with it. Moreover, the group is taking advantage of its relations with some of the organizations in the region to coordinate operation, such as cooperating with Ansar Al-Islam in carrying out terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso. The objectives of the operations carried out by the organization vary, including targeting foreign forces, military forces of the region's governments, some local militias backed by regular forces, as well as targeting some foreign citizens and kidnapping them for ransom in exchange for their release. These patterns appeared a few days after the establishment of the group. In March 2017, the group attacked the Polikisi military base in central Mali, near the Burkina Faso border, killing 11 Malian soldiers.

Also in March 2017, the group became involved in confrontations with a militia affiliated with Bambara farmers in central Mali, and justified these confrontations saying that the militia was supported by the Malian army. In June 2017, it attacked a resort outside Bamako where a number of Westerners were staying, and took some hostages who were liberated after the intervention of the United Nations, French, and Malian forces. Perhaps the most prominent attack carried out by the organization outside Mali was in March 2018, when the group claimed responsibility for the terrorist attacks that targeted the city of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, on 2 March 2018, which included the attack on the French embassy. In its statement published on Telegram, the group said that the attacks were in response to the French raids on northern Mali, which led to the killing of a number of leaders.

The JNIM relied on a multiple sources to finance its activities in a strategy similar to that of other terrorist organizations in the region, although the group's financing tends to focus on criminal activities and kidnapping foreigners for ransom. This type of financing necessitated the group's use of its propaganda tools. For example, in January 2018, the group released an online video of the Colombian nun Gloria Cecilia Narvaez who was kidnapped by elements of the organization in February 2017 in southern Mali, with Narvaez calling on Pope Francis to intervene to release her.

In March 2018, the group released through its media arm Al-Izza a video titled "Save Old Sophie," in reference to the acronym SOS, of French Sophie Petronin lying in a tent with her medicines beside her, indicating a deterioration in her health. Petronin was kidnapped in the

city of Gao in northern Mali in December 2016 by members of the Al-Mourabitoun organization before its merger with the JNIM. Petronin's release in October 2020 raised many questions about the nature of the deal that was led to her release. Some reports indicated that her release, along with that of Malian politician Ismail Cissé and two Italian hostages, took place as part of an exchange deal between the leader of the JNIM Iyad Ag Ghali and the French and Malian authorities, as a result of which 207 terrorists were released and a sum of money paid.

It cannot be ignored that the group's association with the AQIM had reflected on the group's financing strategy, whether by resorting to criminal activities or obtaining some material support from the AQIM. Over the past years, the organization has relied on criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom, illegal trafficking, and theft. This made some describe the organization as the richest of all Al-Qaeda affiliates. Estimates of the money held by the AQIM varied. There is an Algerian official estimate that the organization obtained approximately \$130 million from drug smuggling and ransom operations from 2007 to 2010. The United Nations estimated the organization's annual budget at \$15 million in 2014. Regardless of the accuracy of the estimates, it is certain that the organization has sufficient capacity to generate the necessary income to continue its activities, as well as to support organizations loyal to it, such as the JNIM.

Fourth: Hybrid tactics

In 2021, the JNIM started to increasingly rely on a hybrid tactic that attempts to surpass the idea of an armed "terrorist" organization, and to present an image of the group as a political actor that can negotiate with other parties. This tactic was linked to four main dimensions, the first of which is to confirm the organization's ability to administer the areas under its control, and by extension, to compensate for the decline of the central authority in these areas and to perform some of its functions.

For example, on 21 July 2021, the group issued a statement saying that it had initiated a security campaign aimed at purging Mali's Kidal region from criminals and bandits. The statement indicated that the campaign succeeded in eliminating one of the criminals involved in crimes of murder, robbery, and corruption. The group stressed that "the campaign will continue until security and peace prevail in the hearts of the people," urging all people to participate in the campaign.

On the other hand, the JNIM sought to present a positive image of

itself, denying its involvement in some terrorist attacks that tarnish its reputation. Perhaps this is what became evident from the group's statement number 173 issued on 8 June 2021, in which it denied its involvement in the implementation of the attack that took place in Burkina Faso, which led to the death of more than 130 people. The statement said, "The group denounces these heinous acts that have nothing to do with the Muslims' approach to jihad and fighting in the cause of God, which was only legislated to defend the weak people."

Interestingly, the statement was the subject of heated controversy between IS and Al-Qaeda, and may also confirm the intensity of the conflict between them. After this statement, IS released issue 292 of Al-Naba newspaper, which included an attack on Al-Qaeda, suggesting sharp divisions within it. An Al-Naba report titled "Al-Qaeda evades from adopting its operations," it pointed out that "there are sharp differences within the ranks of Al-Qaeda that led to armed clashes between its groups in the Masina area, after the militia leadership refused to claim responsibility for a number of attacks carried out by its groups in Burkina Faso, including the attack on Saturday 24 Shawwal on a site of the apostate militia called Self-Defence and houses in the village of Salhan in the Siba region. The attack left more than 160 people dead, including a number of children and women." The report added: "Al-Qaeda militia did not claim this attack, but rather quickly denied its connection with it! In addition, it tried to accuse the soldiers of the Caliphate of killing children and women, which is not what the Mujahideen seek even in their fight against these apostate militias."

On a third level, the dynamics of the conflict between Al-Qaeda and IS had an impact on the movements of the JNIM. During the past years, the relationship between the two organizations was not consistent, witnessing fluctuations between conflict and coordination. Several reports indicated that there have been meetings that took place between the leaders of the organizations supporting Al-Qaeda and the ISWAP since late 2017, which concerned operational coordination and defining the spheres of influence of each organization. In this context, some reports indicate that the two organizations coordinate some operations between them through the exchange of intelligence information or logistical assistance. A good example of this is the attacks on military sites in Koutoujo, Burkina Faso, August 2019.

However, the relationship between the two organizations began to take a new turn, dominated mostly by conflict. Indications of a sharp conflict between them have emerged since mid-2019, with small-scale clashes between the two organizations, which led to a crisis meeting between the leaders of the two organizations in September 2019. The meeting was held with the aim of demarcating regional borders and clarifying the prohibited areas, but it seems that the meeting did not conclude in an agreement, but rather increased tensions. According to some estimates in September 2020, at least 300 fighters of the two organizations were killed in clashes between them since July 2019, not to mention the extension of the conflict between them to target some field leaders, which exacerbated the tensions between them.

These conflicts reflect on the map of terrorist alliances in the region since they will drive each organization to search for elements and groups loyal to it that will help it in its struggle against the others and secure additional human resources that will enable it to compensate for the elements it loses in the conflict. Here, the JNIM seeks to have a social incubator, or at least avoid tarnishing its image with bloody attacks in which civilians are killed, allowing it to strengthen its presence in the region at the expense of the ISWAP and IS in the Greater Sahara, which IS' central organization announced its merger with ISWAP in March 2019.

The fourth and final dimension is related to the political negotiations the JNIM announced. In March 2020, the group announced its readiness to negotiate with the Malian government, but on the condition that the French and United Nations forces leave. This proposal was an attempt by the group to emphasize its break from IS, as revealed by the release of the French hostage Sophie Petronin in October 2020 along with the Malian politician Ismail Cissé, and two Italian hostages, in a swap deal with the leader of the JNIM Iyad Ag Ghaly. This indicates the existence of channels of communication between the French and Malian authorities and the group, which enhances the option of political negotiation.

In addition, there are the regional transformations that the Middle East witnessed after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The group's negotiating discourse gained more momentum and it tried to exploit this matter in order to expand its presence in the African Sahel region, and maybe replicate the experience of the Afghan Taliban move-

ment. Perhaps this is what was revealed by the joint statement issued by the group and the AQIM on 23 August 2021 to congratulate the Afghan people on the American withdrawal and to stress the importance of jihad in getting rid of “the gendarmerie of dependence and backwardness and access to leadership and progress.”

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

The circumstances of the emergence of the Islamic State in the Great Sahara as one of IS’ provinces reflect the dynamics of competition with Al-Qaeda and the resulting shift in organizational loyalties of terrorist players. The first signs were revealed in May 2015 when Adnan Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, the then leader of Al-Mourabitoun organization, pledged allegiance to former IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and announced that the pledge was issued by the Al-Mourabitoun organization as a whole.

This pledge of allegiance angered the prominent leader in the organization with a historical relationship with Al-Qaeda, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who confirmed that the pledge of allegiance to Al-Sahrawi is an individual decision, and that no one could speak on behalf of the organization. An internal crisis occurred between the pro-Qaeda faction led by Belmokhtar and the other faction that supports IS. Subsequently, Al-Sahrawi defected with his group, declaring the Islamic State in Mali, which later became known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

First: Alliance with IS

Although Al-Sahrawi announced his pledge of allegiance to the leader of IS, the latter was not quick to accept this pledge, given his belief that the Al-Sahrawi organization does not have sufficient resources to carry out effective attacks that strengthen IS’ balance in the African Sahel region. However, after the departure of Al-Sahrawi and the faction supporting him from the Al-Mourabitoun organization, he sought to prove his worth by carrying out a number of terrorist attacks, perhaps the most important of which were in late 2016 in the border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The group carried out three attacks in September and October, in Burkina Faso, and in Niger in October 2016, when the organization tried to storm the high-security Kotokali prison in Niamey.

These attacks prompted IS' central command to pay more attention to Al-Sahrawi's faction, or what became known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and it seemed that it could be relied upon as an ally that contributes to strengthening IS' presence in the African Sahel. In October 2016, the organization demonstrated the affiliation of Al-Sahrawi and his group to the central IS organization. Al-Naba newspaper, issued by IS, published in its 53rd issue a news article entitled "The Al-Mourabitoun Brigade pledges allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful." The article stated that the Al-Mourabitoun Brigade operating in northern Mali and Niger had pledged allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State and joined the organization.

Al-Sahrawi relied on similar narratives to those of other terrorist movements in the region, saying his group seeks to implement Islamic Sharia and confront the ruling secular regimes and their institutions and the colonial Western powers that conspire against Muslims. This appeared, for example, in his pledge of allegiance to IS when he justified the pledge by seeking "unity behind the caliphate state in the face of the global crusade attack targeting Islam and Muslims." This imaginary struggling character of Al-Sahrawi and his organization was supported by the central IS organization and its propaganda, such as in Al-Naba's issue 175. The newspaper devoted two pages to a report on the situation in what it called the Great Sahara region and depicted the conflict, from the point of view of the organization, as well as an exposure to the role played by the "Islamic State soldiers" there.

Noted in this report is that it sought to dismantle the conflict in the region at various levels that begin by invoking the narrative of the Islamic identity that is threatened by the Western colonial "crusader" powers, the ruling secular regimes, and allied armed movements, specifically the Imghad Tuareg and Khalas Azawad movements. The report then turns to the role played by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in confronting these forces. A number of attacks carried out by the organization were referred to, such as the Tongo Tongo ambush attack in Niger in October 2017, which led to the killing of US and Nigerien soldiers, and the attack on French forces near the town of Akabar in Mali in March 2019.

The report reflects IS' interest in Al-Sahrawi organization as a tool through which it can expand in the African coast after losing its lands in Syria and Iraq and to consolidate its competitive edge against Al-Qae-

da, especially after the emergence of the JNIM as a unified movement operating under the umbrella of Al-Qaeda. This was confirmed by IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in the video of April 2019 when he mentioned Adnan Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, called on God to protect him, and demanded that he intensify his attacks against France and its allies in order to avenge what happened in Syria and Iraq.

Second: Leadership and manpower

Perhaps there is not much information available about the internal dynamics of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the nature of its organizational structure, but Al-Sahrawi was the most important element in these dynamics before it was announced that he had been killed in an operation by the French forces in September 2021. Al-Sahrawi relied on a number of leaders in managing the activities of the organization, the most important of whom is Abu Bakr Chabouri, whose name appears on the US terrorist lists. Reports indicate that Chabouri led the attack on National Guard soldiers in Niger in November 2016.

Doundoun Cheffou is also one of the spearheads of the organization. He is believed he was responsible for the Tongo Tongo ambush attack in Niger in October 2017, which resulted in the death of a number of American soldiers. There are some unconfirmed reports that spoke of his arrest in 2018. Abdul-Hakim Al-Sahrawi was also presented as one of the important leaders in the organization, but it was reported that he died of illness in May 2021. Sado Idrissa Tambora is also one prominent figure. He hails from Tamboura, Burkina Faso's Soum province.

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara relies on a majority of Fulani fighters along with elements of the Tuareg and Arabs. Estimates vary about the organization's manpower, although the most common estimates stated that the organization in July 2018 comprised about 425 fighters, 300 of whom joined Al-Sahrawi directly. This manpower was strengthened after the Salah Al-Din Brigade, led by Sultan Ould Badi, joined the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in addition to a group of Fulani fighters that defected from the Macina Liberation Front and joined IS in February 2018. Although Sultan Ould Badi was arrested in August 2018 by the Algerian forces, there are no indications of the separation of the Salah Al-Din Brigade from IS. Some reports also mentioned that there have been terrorist elements who defected in the past

years from the JNIM and joined the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, especially after the massive operations carried out by the organization, such as the attack on the Inates military base in Niger in December 2019.

It should be noted that the state of ambiguity about the organization's structure and leadership has increased in recent years as a result of two main factors. The first is the IS announcement of merging of the ISWAP and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in March 2019. The operations carried out by the two groups became included in the IS propaganda under the activities of the ISWAP, which raised many questions about the activities of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. However, some see this merger as a formal move that did not affect the activities of the Al-Sahrawi faction.

The second factor has to do with the organization's loss of its leader Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi in September 2021 in an operation by the French forces. Doubts were cast on the future of the organization, especially with the campaign led by France and the Sahel countries against the group, which is considered the largest terrorist threat in the region. It also appeared that the organization did not resolve the issue of the leadership transition promptly.

Third: Operations and funding

Like other terrorist organizations operating in the Sahel, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara relies on criminal activities as a major source of funding. These activities include kidnapping for ransom, theft, extortion of some local communities under the pretext of protection, and smuggling of materials, such as cigarettes and drugs.

The terrorist operations carried out by the organization it is widespread geographically in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The organization is active in the regions of Menaka and Gao in northern Mali, the Tillaberi region in Niger, in addition to the Oudalan province in Burkina Faso. This territorial expansion based on the weakness of the borders between the three countries and the possibility of their penetration gave the organization the ability to carry out various attacks with different tactics, including the use of mortars, heavy machine guns, trucks loaded with explosives and suicide operations.

The organization's operations target the military and police forc-

es in the countries in which they are active, such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, as well as French, US, and international forces in the region. The organization also engages in armed confrontations with the armed movements in Mali allied with the Malian and French forces, which US calls the Awakening Forces, specifically the Imghad Tuareg and Khalas Azawad movements. The organization relies in confronting these movements on collective armed confrontations, and the assassinations of leaders.

Fourth: The relationship with Al-Qaeda

The course of the relationship between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and Al-Qaeda and its affiliate organizations reveals the changing patterns of the relationship between the two sides, making it difficult to assume a single pattern for this relationship. At some point, this relationship evoked the pattern of direct conflict, especially after Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi announced his allegiance to IS leader. Mokhtar Belmokhtar announced his rejection of this pledge of allegiance, then a conflict broke out within the Al-Mourabitoun group, between the faction of Mokhtar Belmokhtar and the Al-Sahrawi faction. At that time, some sources indicated that Belmokhtar's group tried to assassinate Al-Sahrawi, and there were reports of armed clashes between Belmokhtar's group and Al-Sahrawi's faction in Gao in mid-2015.

It is true that the pattern of conflict can be reinforced by the organizational rivalry between Al-Qaeda and IS, as well as the participation in the operational areas, but the pattern of coexistence, and in some cases cooperation, also appeared in the relationship between the two parties, especially with the ethnic and tribal overlap between the two organizations, not to mention the external pressures imposed on terrorist organizations. These pressures could constitute a starting point for coordination between the two organizations, which was demonstrated, for example, in February 2019 when a coordinated campaign by the JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara targeted the Imghad Tuareg and Khalas Azawad movements in the regions of Gao and Menaka in Mali.

However, it cannot be overruled that conflict is likely to be the dominant pattern in the relationship between the two organizations in the near term because of the clashing discourse. Al-Qaeda elements view

IS and its proxies, such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, as a bloody organization that does not adhere to a correct religious belief. On the other hand, IS elements describe Al-Qaeda as delusionary, and sometimes even describe some Al-Qaeda leaders as apostates. Before his death, Al-Sahrawi described in an interview with the IS newspaper *Al-Naba* the leader of the JNIM Iyad Ag Ghali as “the apostate who is following in the footsteps of the apostate Malian government,” and added “In Burkina Faso, the apostate Al-Qaeda organization volunteered to wage a simultaneous war against the soldiers of the Caliphate, ignoring its differences and wars with the Christian and pagan militias, to plunge thousands of Fulani tribesmen into a war against the Mujahideen under the pretext that they are Kharijites.”

It is also possible that the absence of Al-Sahrawi from the leadership of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara is a motive for JNIM to double its pressure on the organization’s elements to weaken their influence. However, there will still be room for caution in dealing with this scenario, because the increasing talk about the JNIM’s willingness to negotiate with the Malian government may have a negative impact on the group’s internal cohesion, especially as it gives IS and its branch in the Greater Sahara the opportunity to promote its anti-Qaeda rhetoric, which it describes as “giving up jihad in exchange for political gains,” as did the Afghan Taliban movement, which may eventually lead to the movement of some elements from the JNIM group to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. Moreover, IS may seek to devise new mechanisms of partnership and networking between its elements in the ISWAP and Greater Sahara. Perhaps this supports the capabilities of the two organizations in the stage following the loss of the historical leaders Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi and Abu Musab Al-Barnawi.

Conclusion

The map of terrorist organizations active in the African Sahel reveals a deeply intertwined scene, which has become increasingly complex over time through a successive series of mergers and defections resulting from the loose organizational structure of many of these entities as well as the deeply rooted tensions resulting from the ideological differences.

Despite the importance of eliminating a number of senior leaders of various terrorist organizations in the Sahel, especially in 2021, this fac-

tor alone does not really mean that terrorism is declining in the region after it had gained a greater ability to spread in more geographical arenas and build broader and deeper links with the social components and the criminal organizations active in them.

The map of terrorist organizations in the Sahel will remain subject to more changes in the near future due to the developments taking place in Libya to the north and the depths of Africa to the south. This, in turn, may pose more challenges to efforts to combat terrorism in the troubled African Sahel region.

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Challenges of Deterring Terrorism

3

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Introduction

The practice of ‘deterrence’ is as old as the emergence of Balance of Power systems. Such systems have been premised on the inevitability of conflict that is not only dictated by the relative national interests of states, but primarily stems from one state’s attempt to increase their national power at the expense of other states. The *Theory of Deterrence*, at that stage, was described as conventional, as distinct from *Nuclear Deterrence*. Compared to the era of conventional weapons, ‘deterrence’ has acquired a deeper meaning in the shadow of nuclear weapons, where the nuclear strategy was based on *Mutual Nuclear Deterrence*. With the international security environment becoming more complex in a uni-polar world, there were many claims to reconsider ‘deterrence’, extending its theoretical framework to include new threats, first and foremost,

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the threat of terrorism under the so-called concept of *Detering Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs)*.

In light of this, the study in hand is divided into three main sections; the first analyses different definitions of ‘deterrence’, along with its assumptions and main requirements; the second discusses the concept of *Detering VNSAs*, taking into consideration its limitations; and the third gives a special focus on the *African Sahel Region* as a case study to interpret the reasons of deterrence failure in achieving its objectives to counter terrorism, in addition to the particularity of this region as a nurturing environments for some major terrorist organizations.

Deterrence: Definition, Assumptions and Requirements

Deterrence is interlinked to the ‘threat of conventional force’ in order to exert the required influence on adversaries, thus to achieve intended and specific ends that other political instruments have failed to accomplish. In this respect, General André Beaufre defines deterrence as the act of “preventing an adversary state from taking the decision to take up arms, or more generally, preventing them from responding to a specific situation, and that is by taking some measures and actions that pose them to a sufficient threat. The result, sought by posing such threat, is psychological”¹.

From this definition, it is hence clear that ‘deterrence’ is used as a policy and method within the strategic framework. As a policy, it is the act of conveying a specific stance or intention to the adversary so that they refrain from initiating a particular action. Despite the widespread fame of Beaufre’s definition, it limits ‘deterrence’ only to the use of military force to exert a desired influence, while it has a broader definition as defined by Paul Huth and Bruce Russett; it is an attempt by decision-makers in one state to compel other decision makers in another state to respond to their demands².

Deterrence rests on two main pillars; one is tangible and the other intangible. The first entails securing all capacity requirements to have an unquestionable ability to punish; while the other includes a psychological dimension that purposefully exert a psychological influence on the adversary by persuading them of the benefit of complying with the deterrer’s demands, otherwise the adversary would receive unbearable

punishment. In fact, an adversary would decide to refrain from acting when they recognize the cost of potential risks. Thus, deterrence entails calculations and rational balancing that compare possible rewards or utilities to potential paid or endured losses from initiating any action that does not constitute consent or acquiescence by the deterrer. Therefore, deterrence is, first and foremost, an action that targets adversaries' minds, not actions, by influencing their perception to refrain from proceeding with their intended actions. It is also where the *threat of force* is an integral and indispensable part to exert the desired influence on adversaries³.

Some may define deterrence as "preventing, by threat, an entity or party from initiating a certain action or behavior". But although this definition limits deterrence to owning physical capacities in order to control others and impose one's will on them (i.e. *the diplomatic use of power*), it did not refer to other soft methods of threat. There should be a special focus on threat as a language that requires mutual understanding between the *deterrer* and the *deterree*, through 'realization' that is a dual responsibility secured by direct and indirect communication to understand deterrent messages.

Accordingly, it can be said that deterrence instruments are various and different; they range from *implying* to *expressing* to the other party that a specific stance or activity is dissatisfactory, and that a move to stop them is quite possible. The first party, by stepping on their tangible and intangible capacities, is able to use or threaten force to exert optimum psychological influence on the other party (to be deterred), thus put them in a compelling situation to refrain from initiating a specific action. This means that deterrence does not have to only depend on military force. Thus, as defined by Glenn Snyder, deterrence is "the negative aspect of political power; it is the power to dissuade as opposed to the power to coerce or compel. One deters another party from doing something by the implicit or explicit threat of applying some sanction if the forbidden act is performed, or by the promise of a reward if the act is not performed."

Given that deterrence is a relation established between two parties, it thus helps avert the potential risks of war by putting forces and weapons on standby at quantitative and qualitative levels, and in a persuasive way to the adversary that the cost they incur outweighs any other gains they seek. Likely, it is the same meaning represented by those who define deterrence as "the act of preventing parties from resorting to force

to achieve their purposes”, “the art of not using force, despite taking the decision to use their weapons”, or “preventing them from initiating an action or a reaction toward a specific situation”⁴. From the above, we can say that the tangible capacity is not enough despite its crucial importance. Psychological dimensions, that can exert influence on the other party, are assuming more importance and they also carry a higher degree of credibility that drives this party to respond⁵.

It can also be stated that deterrence posits that the state is a rational actor who use calculations of gains and losses during clashes. If the anticipated gains (or losses) are more than that of the expected utility for military conflict, states will be deterred from initiating any aggressive actions to counter their adversaries. Therefore, the predominant approach to theorizing about deterrence has entailed the use of rational choice and game-theoretic models of decision making; it posits that state leaders compare the expected utility of using force with the losses incurred, and they select the option with greater expected utility. The Rational Deterrence Theory focuses on how military threats can reduce the attacker’s expected utility for using force by persuading the attacker that the outcome of a military confrontation will be both costly and unsuccessful⁶.

In other words, theories of rational choice assume that the main objective is to maximize the expected utility. But rational-choice theorists recognize that utility can be calculated differently by different rational actors. An actor may recognize the expected risks; however, they would initiate the action they want. From this point, the theory of deterrence is based on rational-choice theories, within which one can predict the rational strategic behavior⁷. The theory has depended on some assumptions on rationality and how different actors would respond to strategic or security situations. Questions were raised concerning the meaning and context of rationality, where some have argued that “deterrence may not always operate as predicted by traditional theory, because there are varied cultural understandings of what constitutes a rational or irrational act”⁸.

In addition, the theory posits that deterrence applies among nation states⁹. This assumption derives from the fact that nation states, in the current world order, are the main actors in international relations, for being rational and bureaucratic entities that monopolize the use of military force. They are legitimate entities that can initiate a war, sign international conventions, and take rational decisions to preserve their national

interests. But, what about non-state actors? What about failed states that do not follow the good rational model in their decision making?

No doubt that deterrence is claimed to preserve peace and the status-quo, prevent hostile actions, and avert conflict escalation. However, as a prerequisite for efficiency, deterrence requires informing the adversary, unequivocally, that there is insistence on bringing them to punishment and retaliation in case of their non-compliance with what they are asked to comply with or accept. They shall also understand the loss they risk by initiating a war, which would be more fatal than any utility they pursue. All this lies at the core of deterrence theory as a whole. From this point, it becomes important to hold back threats by credibility, meaning that the attacker finds it insufficient to give a clear evident on their insistence on translating such threat into a tangible and effective action, under the pressure of the unbearable provocation they encounter. But, this shall be accompanied by a precise assessment of the fatal losses to the adversary if the threat turned into reality. Without that, credibility will be in question¹⁰.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that a successful deterrence requires menacing what the *deterree* is known to value highly, which thus requires understanding the enemy culturally, as well as have some grasp of their political and strategic situation—as they are likely to view it. It is also necessary to be able to execute one's threats, carry through on the menaces that one utters, and rather push the enemy to believe this capability. The enemy might believe this threat, but decide to start a war or to implement the military instrument¹¹. Deterrence requirements can be, generally, summed up as follows:

- **Have a retaliatory capacity;** i.e. the ability to revenge and cause harm to adversaries to the maximum extent they could conceive. It is the capacity to inflict both tangible and intangible harm that qualifies its owner to menace.
- **Resolve to use this retaliatory capacity.** Without any hesitation or failure and under different circumstances and situations, an adversary shall be intimidated in a way that influences their convictions, thus distract them from their own will to refrain from any policies or decisions that are inconsistent with the attacker's will.
- **Have the capacity to harm an adversary,** unrivalled to any other advantage, and that is by pre-emptively striking first.
- **Have the capacity to punish an adversary.** If the defender did not respond to the attacker's will, the first should expect unbearable punishment¹².

Since all these conditions and requirements serve as solid foundations and main pillars of any deterrence policy, it is true that successful deterrence is a result of interaction between the retaliatory capacity and the genuine intention to execute threats and turn them into punishment, in addition to the adversary's conviction and their response to deterrent threats. In terms of functionality, these foundations form an integrated unit where the absence or weakness of one factor negatively affects the efficiency of deterrence. Therefore, we can sum up the above by saying that deterrence takes advantage of others' fears to accomplish given ends¹³, and its effectiveness is increased if the adversary recognizes the red lines that will lead to the execution of a deterrent threat, which will require good communication between adversaries¹⁴.

Deterring Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs)

Does the *Theory of Deterrence* apply to non-state actors who resort to violence? Can deterrence succeed in countering conventional and nuclear terrorism? Why has it emerged as a prominent strategy to counter terrorism? Does using the military force to deter these threats lead to the emergence of new threats of international terrorism? And does this mean that deterrence has nothing to offer as part of a broader strategy to prevent terrorism? Is it possible to penetrate the black boxes of those actors to explore their background knowledge, methods of decision making, and their perspective for deterrent messages?

Some previous questions can find answers through recent research conducted on deterring terrorism. As part of contemporary debates on deterrence and terrorism, many experts have focused their studies on how to deter VNSAs—with less focus on whether deterrence is appropriate in the first place. Contemporary realistic theorists attempted to 'update' or 'modify' deterrence, relying on its same classical conceptual underpinnings, in order to study cross-border terrorist threats, with the recognition that they are not homogenous¹⁵. There have been also increasing accounts of deterring terrorism and terrorist organizations right after the 9/11 attacks. Most studies have questioned such assertions—by former U.S. President George Bush, former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and former U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, as well as other military and political leaders—that terrorism and terrorists are undeterrable, and thus researchers began to question the validity of this.

Hence, scientists and scholars tried to figure out how to reapply the logic and theory of 'deterrence' in order to provide practical visions and lessons for understanding and countering recent challenges and threats, and to envision futuristic security scenarios. However, having numerous actors and vast fields and objectives, deterrence has expanded in terms of meaning and purpose. Such expansion has become necessary in a way that allowed the theory to academically develop; however, studying deterrence has become more complicated. It is while expanding the definition and applications of 'deterrence' that the concept itself can be disturbed, if causal relations are mixed to an extent that complicates practices of deterrence¹⁶.

This took modifying deterrence in order to counter terrorism since conventional deterrence methods cannot counter terrorists and non-state hostile groups. In addition, unidentified actors cannot be menaced by retaliatory response, and to face non-rational adversaries, a multifaceted model shall be built to identify threats and counter them effectively¹⁷.

It is important to emphasize that there is no consensus among literatures regarding the efficiency of deterrence in countering VNSAs. One approach would consider that deterrence can be applied to those actors, while another would question this possibility. If the first approach split into three sub-approaches, each of them could be seen as an approximation to how to apply deterrence. The first approach advocates indirect deterrence; i.e. to pressure third parties who facilitate terrorism rather than terrorist operatives themselves. The second calls for renewed appreciation for the concept of 'deterrence by denial', while the third advocates expanding the scope of the concept of 'deterrence' and exploring new sources that are non-military in nature, such as *deterrence by delegitimization*¹⁸.

The first approach, in all, recognizes that terrorist activities are just a beginning; they shape the upcoming generation of global terrorism. Now that terrorist groups have become more powerful and pervasive than before, to an extent that affects not only the identity and values of communities, but also the statehood and sovereignty of states—particularly given the collapse of national armies in some Middle East states¹⁹. That being the case, such threats shall be countered before they escalate. On the other hand, some would see that those actors are seeking to create a form of *parallel or alternative government*—if it can be called that—so

that they could exert control over local populations without launching any major terrorist attacks against the Western States. And if so, no military interventions would achieve real benefits in security terms; they might even be counterproductive²⁰.

In the framework of the second approach, literatures refer to a lack of clarity in the 'deterrence theory' in regard to the nature of actors and the cases that could apply. The theory, at first, posits that two parties are in conflict, with one seeking to take actions unfavorable to the other party. However, apart from these main assumptions, the theory gives only few details about application, leaving policy makers uncertain about the appropriate deterrence strategies to be implemented. Some scholars have highlighted this deficiency; Alexander George and Richard Smoke, for example, say that "deterrence theory itself does not offer criteria for identifying when deterrence policy shall be applied in foreign policy"²¹. Similarly, Robert Jervis noted 'a lack of evidence and well-grounded arguments about the bounds on the theory and the conditions under which it applies'²².

The problematic lies in the fact that any attempt to apply deterrence on inapplicable cases, is likely to be counterproductive and the cost may increase as well. Such faith in the importance and universality of deterrence can enhance the deterrer's false sense of complacency and hope. Decision makers may think that as long as strategies have been properly implemented, they shall yield the desired results. This belief in the power of one party to achieve successful deterrence, on their own, ignores the interactive nature of conflict as well as the essential characteristics of the adversary. Thus, it is important to determine whether the deterrence strategies used to counter VNSAs are successful, and accordingly there would be a need to get a rough estimate of their appropriateness, at first. The question of whether deterring those actors is possible, shall be preceded by the question of whether deterrence is the appropriate choice in the first place.

No doubt that the difficulty of terrorism prevention makes deterrence strategies appealing for good reasons; but this does not mean that deterrence shall be applied without further analysis²³. For example, U.S. efforts to counter terrorism were not based on deterrence as a strategy. In recent years, the U.S. government has started integrating deterrence into its war on global terrorism. Scholars began studying how some terrorist acts can be deterred, but they could not reach yet any approximation, or a broad-based approach, to deterrence²⁴.

To settle the previous argument, the applicability of deterrence theory on those actors must be asked in detail. As stated earlier, first and foremost, deterrence targets the adversary's will, not actions; it exerts an influence on their convictions, persuading them to refrain from proceeding with their intended actions. At that moment, menacing to cause unbearable losses becomes an indispensable complement to exert a psychological influence on the adversary. However, the researcher finds this meaning inapplicable at the level of VNSAs owing to the difficulty of influencing the will of members of these groups; they are willing to sacrifice their lives to implement their own objectives—or the objectives of the actor to whom they belong, being guided by systematic mobilizations and ideological orientations that are difficult to be influenced. Thus, what nature of intolerable losses that can deter VNSAs, including terrorist organizations, lone wolves and black widows? If sacrificing their own lives is an acceptable loss to achieving their goals, nothing could deter them because nothing is more precious than lives and souls.

Therefore, principles on which the assumptions of deterrence theory were based—such as gain and loss analysis, the model of rational actor, and state endeavors to maximize gains and reduce incurred losses—are inapplicable to this type of deterrence. Given that these assumptions were found to correspond to the behavior of nation states, their applicability on different actors cannot be taken for granted without further studies and analysis. The way these actors think, take decisions, perceive risks and establish objectives, stands as impenetrable 'black boxes'. And even if this happened, the matter would continue to be relative, differing from one actor to another and from one organization to another. Potential deterring policies and strategies shall be affected by the implications of this fact, where no one model can be developed for all actors, as a whole, without taking differences into consideration. Accordingly, different models shall be built for each actor separately, even if this seemed difficult, but not impossible.

Similarly, the say that deterrence rests on two main pillars—one is tangible securing all capacity requirements to have an unquestionable ability to punish, and the other intangible—is inapplicable to this type of deterrence. That is because the massive use of military power, in spite of its importance, stands helpless in face of terrorist organizations, which is evidenced by the U.S. wars on Afghanistan, Iraq and terrorism, as well as the international coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Perhaps their common ground is represented over the

long-term period taken by each of them to achieve their objectives. Regular armies stand helpless in face of guerrilla warfare, rugged mountain landscapes where terrorist organizations find their refuge, as well as the exploitation of social media and technological progress by these terrorist organizations.

Being the first of deterrence theory assumptions, rationality shall be given a special focus where scholars argue that non-rational terrorists are ready to incur any cost, including death, and it would be difficult to identify potential attack locations. For those and other reasons, it was believed that threat of retaliation, by its nature, would not gain any credibility, and hence it is insufficient to deter terrorist acts. In fact, the applicability of this condition on non-state actors is controversial, with no unanimous consensus among researchers. Some literatures concluded that terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda for example, follow the rational logic based on calculations of cost, revenue and value maximization, and hence there is opportunity to deter them²⁵. However, other literatures found that while using nuclear power by states is becoming less likely to occur, possibilities of its usage by non-state actors increase. As predicted, it is a matter of time until a major crisis or catastrophe occurs, caused by them. A psychological turn in terrorists' performance has been observed by researchers, ranging from their willingness to inflict harm to having a powerful urge to destruct everything and cause the biggest possible losses²⁶.

As previously mentioned, deterrence theory also posits the capacity to convey, or to show at least, a deterring message, followed by good communication between the deterrer and the deterree to clarify the lines that shall not be crossed. That is something that cannot be applied to VNSAs, particularly with the variety of their structures, values and methods of communication. Therefore, the main characteristics of each individual actor, as well as their impact on deterrence shall be studied separately, given that some characteristics—such as the difficulty to identify the actor's identity and location, and what they value—might prevent the application of deterrence. Not to mention the difficulty of identifying their locations accurately while targeting those actors or their will; their geographic dispersion and distribution over several headquarters, states and hideouts undermine the possibility to deter them. Having thousands of trained terrorists spread over South and North America, Africa, and the Middle East²⁷, this geographic dispersion requires a long-term, multi-pronged war and deterrence strategy.

Deterring Terrorism in the African Sahel: Decline of Effectiveness

The African Sahel region constitutes a security dilemma, almost intractable by the conventional security strategies and approaches. In this context, this paper aims to determine the reasons behind failure of the deterrence strategy followed to counter terrorism in this region. It is where terrorist groups have successfully crossed their base location in Mali, spreading over arid zones in the Sahel, south to the desert in Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo, leaving the region with two hotspots of terrorism. The first includes Mali and its immediate neighborhood, as well as Burkina Faso and Niger in the Western Sahel, where al-Qaeda is active in the Islamic Maghreb from the one hand, while some affiliated groups with al-Qaeda have pledged allegiance to ISIS in recent years, on the other hand. The second comprises the Chad Basin, including Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon²⁸. Such repeated attacks since March 2016 in Ouagadougou, Capital of Burkina Faso, and other cities in West Africa, evidence the difficulty of deterring terrorism, whether by constructing international coalitions, using military force, or initiating a war on states that harbor terrorist groups. Terrorists of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, or of any other armed organizations and groups, have nothing to lose, even their lives, while defending their religious and ideological motives that view suicide as an acceptable, but necessary, act, thus promote terrorism as a 'lifestyle'. In other words, the exposure of these groups to heavy losses does not result in members refraining from joining them, and this can be clearly understood from the privileges given by terrorist organizations of all types, such as position, power, recruitment, psychological rewards, etc.

Deterrence may not be the ideal choice to confront terrorist organizations in the African Sahel region, since deterrence and eradication do not fit together. This was represented in France's aim to eradicate roots of terrorist organizations; however, its failure has pushed it forward to attempt deterring them. Following the escalation of intensity and frequency of security risks in the Sahel region in 2013, France aimed to confirm its military presence in the region, launching some military initiatives to fight terrorism. The most notably was Operation Serval launched by the UN resolution No. 2085 in the north of Mali in January 2013, and it was later replaced by Operation Barkhane in August 2014 to offer logistical

support to the armed forces of five Sahel countries, that currently exceed 5,000 soldiers. This means targeting active terrorist organizations on the one hand, and developing capacities of the region's armies to take over the initiative to fight terrorism on the other hand²⁹.

Moreover, destroying or eradicating any terrorist organization will not necessarily result in the elimination of the phenomenon of terrorism, given the difference between the two. Without addressing the underlying reasons behind that phenomenon, and fighting thoughts and behaviors that nourish terrorism, terrorist organizations cannot be deterred. Terrorism also includes several groups with different tools, and without a unified leadership in some cases³⁰. Terrorism experience in the African Sahel region demonstrates the proliferation of terrorist groups, militias and armed gangs in the region's countries, and also the plurality of tactics used including brutal gun attacks, roadside bombings and holding of hostages. This means that terrorist groups have managed through time to acquire high technical capacity and efficiency³¹, in front of which the most prominent weapon for countering terrorism: the military force stands helpless.

It is difficult to determine and evaluate the objectives and ideologies of terrorist organizations in the African Sahel region due to their heterogeneous nature. They comprise distinct factions with different political and ideological objectives. Groups such as Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab) and Boko Haram for example, have witnessed internal disputes among its factions with respect to the goals to be achieved, particularly whether to focus on the Western States or not. The state of uncertainty about the ideological composition of VNSAs hampers the ability of foreign states, allied states and UN efforts to adapt their collective response toward what they face³².

The effectiveness of deterrence differs according to the nature of the actor *to be deterred*. Given the variety of terrorist organizations proliferating in the region, with different motives and objectives, it is difficult to develop one approach to deter them, which implies that they can deter states and not the opposite. It could be argued that terrorist organizations in the Sahel region have managed to deter France and not the opposite. This can be seen through a set of prominent evidences, on top of which are the possible reduction of the French military presence in Sahel and termination of *Operation Barkhane* in the first quarter of 2022 on the one hand; the change in French military tactics on the second hand; and the

suspension of mutual military operations with Mali in last June, before their resumption lately in June 2021—as a punitive measure against the new transitional authority in light of the last Malian coup d'état in May 2020—on the third hand.

Calculations by French decision makers are radically different than those by terrorist organizations. If French President Emmanuel Macron took into consideration human and financial costs caused by the French military presence *on the one hand*, public pressures condemning the fall of dozens of French soldiers in the attacks by armed extremists against local populations in Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, *on the second hand*, and his willingness to preserve his international image and popularity at home *on the third hand*; terrorist organizations in the Sahel region would not be bound to any of these considerations and constraints to which the rational decision maker abides as previously posited by the deterrence theory. If sacrificing the lives of terrorists is an acceptable loss to achieve their objectives, nothing would deter them; the success of any deterrence strategy shall be dependent on the objective of those actors and their calculations, which makes it useless for designing a strategy to defeat them³³.

Another important reason behind the inefficiency of deterrence to counter terrorism in the Sahel region is *complex structural networks*—which nurture terrorism and provide terrorists with money, weapons and training according to a horizontal hierarchy of leading parties, groups of supporters and followers, as well as contact persons and supporting flow channels. That is by terrorists' exploitation of the communications revolution dynamics to serve their bloody goals³⁴. It can be stated that drying up financing sources for terrorism would deter any terrorist act. But despite of the precautionary measures taken by all countries of the world in this regard, terrorist organizations have managed to secure their financial needs, depending on their own resources apart from the global banking system. And in spite of all attempts to cut off supplies for terrorists, they are still showered with such supplies through several internal and external sources, such as non-profit organizations, counterfeit currencies, drugs, and not mention money laundering³⁵.

One additional reason for the failure of deterrence to counter terrorism in the Sahel region is the plurality of deterrers and deterrees. Deterrence theory is based on a relationship established between two parties only: the deterrer and the deterree; the first is always one sovereign state, while the latter can be a terrorist organization, a resistance movement, or an armed

group in particular, etc. However, the theory of deterrence did not tackle the plurality of deterrees who should be deterred at the same time, unlike the scene in the Western Sahel region. The groups of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), ISIS in the Sahara Desert, and Ansar al-Islam (AAI), have worked together at different times and for various reasons. One reason is the 'coexistence between these groups' for having shared objectives, history and ethnic ties, which creates a unique space for jihad, thus requires good understanding of the nature of each terrorist group, followed by designing a distinct model to counter and deter each at the same time. Hence, this implies developing a new model for deterrence, other than common models, to particularly fit with the nature of Sahel which is considered a nurturing environment for terrorist organizations as a result of weakness of government systems, lack of security, and conflict escalation inside tribal communities.

This is further complicated by the plurality of deterrers in the African Sahel region. In Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, there no less than ten organizations that fight terrorism, namely Barkhane Force, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), G5 Sahel, and the national armies of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania. Of course, there are no talks about a state or a leadership in particular, which creates further obstacles to coordination and accurate identification of desired goals. And a result of failed efforts to deter terrorism in the African Sahel Region, foreign intelligence agencies warn of the potential success of al-Qaeda and ISIS in establishing 'Caliphate States in Africa' without any coordinated international efforts to counter terrorism.

In conclusion, the conviction of terrorist organizations in the Sahel region that 'the result of military confrontation would be costly and unsuccessful' will not deter them or their terrorist attacks. At best, it could only freeze their activities or blockade their financial supplies, pushing them forward toward a 'strategic latency' that might end with their repositioning. Failure of the deterrence strategy to counter terrorism may confirm the previously concluded result that points out the primary importance to deconstruct the narratives of terrorists and propagate religious moderate values, among other things.

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Complexities of Negotiating with Terrorist Organizations

4

DINA OSAMA LOTFY*

Introduction

The Sahel has been afflicted by one of the longest multi-dimensional crises in Africa. The recent resurgence of terrorist groups' activities has laid bare the extreme vulnerability of Sahel states, proving elusive their ability to further counter terrorist organizations depending on their own capacities and driving them, at times, to enter into negotiations with terrorist groups.

Despite the differences between Sahel states and Afghanistan, the outcome of the US-Taliban negotiations making for Taliban's grip on power in Afghanistan sets off alarm for Sahel states. In effect, Sahel governments have a long tradition of negotiating with terrorist organizations and this trend is seemingly on the rise. Recently, Mali's transitional

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government unveiled its willingness to engage in unconditional dialogue with all the Malians. Concomitantly, the French president expressed France's readiness to pursue talks with jihadist groups in the Sahel, unlinked to Al-Qaeda and IS^[1]. Yet, in response, Jama'a Nusrat Al-Islam wa Al-Muslimin (JNIM), a major active militant organization in the region, declared its readiness to open dialogue with the Malian government provided that the French troops pull out^[2].

Historically, negotiations between Sahel states and terrorist organizations have been largely characterized by being merely tactical, geared towards defusing existing crises, usually hostage-related crises in which captives are freed in exchange for the release of prisoners of terrorist organizations. However, the precedent that the Taliban set –which may be a forerunner of future developments– raises serious questions about the potential for negotiations in the African Sahel to evolve to take on a political coloration, resulting in granting members of terrorist organizations amnesty or giving some of these organizations legitimacy to operate as political organizations in exchange for their cessation of fire and renouncing armed action.

The complex reality of negotiations between Sahel governments and terrorist organizations brings up a number of questions about the upshot of previous negotiations between the two parties, the potential for negotiations to evolve in the future, and the considerable complexities that get in the way of negotiations. This paper gives answers to all of these questions by providing an in-depth review of literature on negotiating with terrorist organizations and then applying this to Sahel states.

Negotiating with Terrorists: Alternatives and Phases

The long negotiation experience between the Sahel governments and terrorist organizations provided rich material that contributed to developing a growing body of balanced academic literature on the phenomenon, proposing negotiation alternatives for governments and elaborating on phases of negotiation and difficulties of negotiating with terrorist organizations.

1. Alternatives to Negotiation

Negotiations with terrorist groups are consistently uneven. Of the

two negotiating parties, there is a recognized government that strives to ensure full compliance to international laws and norms and, conversely, there is a terrorist organization that flouts the international law. Given this negotiating context and the nature of terrorist groups, governments need to possess diverse negotiation techniques that go far beyond conventional diplomacy. Oftentimes, negotiations with terrorism are initiated in critical times under crisis conditions, e.g. civilian hostages, and in such cases the slightest mistakes may lead to dire consequences. By definition, terrorism involves using violence or threatening violence against civilians as direct targets, a goal that terrorists realize by using a number of tactical means, including assassination, car bombing, suicide bombing, kidnapping, hostage-taking, and extortion^[3].

In addressing emerging terrorist acts, governments are usually inclined to “no-negotiation” as a means to deter terrorists from continuing their activity by proving it futile. However, the growth and spread of terrorist groups and their protracted existence in the Sahel may oblige governments to consider negotiating with terrorism. Faced with this option, governments are presented with numerous alternatives which can be categorized based on four criteria detailed as below.

▪ **Criterion 1: Publicity**

Secret negotiations are governments’ most common and preferred alternative to public negotiations. A key advantage of secret negotiations is keeping negotiators away from the direct influence of the media and public opinion. However, when there is no way to cover-up the incident(s) that necessitated negotiations, governments may take recourse to public negotiations. In addition to leveling the playing field between governments and terrorists, allowing parties to achieve a greater sense of purpose, public negotiations also ensure providing a favorable environment for the exchange of benefits so that each party achieves some of its objectives^[4].

▪ **Criterion 2: Immediacy**

The exceptional circumstances that give rise to negotiations between governments and terrorist organizations may preclude direct negotiations. In cases where terrorists seize hostages or take control of critical locations and ask for exchanging captives for detained members of their organization, money, logistical assistance, or maybe political demands such as recognition and revocation of the terrorist designation of the

organization, immediate negotiation alternative may be in the interests of both parties. Yet, governments may opt for deferred negotiation alternative in cases when ready-to-die terrorists make crises and try to project an image of their actions as being strictly punitive and non-negotiable. In such circumstances, governments need to create negotiable issues which may include trying to convince terrorists that they can serve their cause better by staying alive and refraining from killing the hostages. To ameliorate their political losses, governments generally favor deferring negotiations with terrorists until the public opinion is made ready^[5].

■ Criterion 3: Protraction

Negotiations between governments and terrorist organizations may be short-term ending in addressing an emergency crisis, or may extend for years through successive rounds of negotiations. In reality, perennial terrorism has a direct impact on the nature of the negotiation process. A distinction must be made here between sporadic and permanent terrorism. Sporadic terrorism causes only temporary damage while permanent terrorism can turn into an ongoing insurgency, particularly if it is concentrated in a specific geographic scale. While tactical negotiations to free hostages or ensure the withdrawal of terrorists from a specific geographical area have high potential for success with sporadic terrorism, permanent terrorism presents bigger challenges to the negotiation process, where terrorists step up their demands in an attempt to take advantage of their relatively superior power position, which drives governments to go for the multi-stage protracted negotiation alternative^[6].

■ Criterion 4: Purpose

Governments' negotiations with terrorist organizations are not necessarily aimed at reaching an agreement. Frequently, governments are forced to adopt the negotiation alternative as a stall tactic to end an existing crisis until they work their way around to a new security operation against terrorist organizations. The alternative of negotiation to end a crisis or prepare for an assault gives governments the chance to gather information about terrorists, including information about their numbers, gear, mindset, and morale. Further, governments may also use this alternative as a way to drain terrorists or put them off their stride before attacking them in cases when governments have things under control.

In essence, this alternative makes negotiation merely a means not an end in itself as it may not give rise to any kind of agreement between parties. Conversely, negotiation to reach a comprehensive settlement is usually governments' last resort adopted only as and when deemed necessary, such as in cases when their incompetence in settling the confrontation in their favor is proved^[7].

2. Phases of Negotiation

Procedurally, the entire negotiation process can be broken down into three phases, each of which has its distinctive goals and rationale and is approached differently through employing several tools that fit purpose. These phases are detailed as below^[8]:

■ Phase 1: Pre-Negotiation

Pre-negotiations take place to prepare parties for negotiations and usually involve talks between parties toward formulating a negotiated agreement and identifying the main issues to be on the table. As each party calls into question the intent of the other, a state of uncertainty would prevail in this stage even when talks are planned carefully. In the pre-negotiation phase, channels of communication are established and negotiation teams are formed. No discussion of the substance of negotiations is required in this stage; rather, greater attention should be given to the negotiation terms.

■ Phase 2: Bargaining

In this stage, the negotiating parties agree on a list of issues to be negotiated. This is usually a long-drawn-out phase given the wide cleavage that usually exists between parties. In such a setting, time is of essence, working against terrorists at first then to their advantage as pressures from the public opinion increase, with them expecting authorities to make absolute gains. The bargaining stage offers an opportunity to construct a future scenario for a possible agreement. Creativity, credibility, and commitment are all critical tools to notch up success in this complex stage. During this phase, terrorists' demands are mostly temporal, but may later go further to include political demands, depending on the relative bargaining power of the negotiating parties^[9]. Table 1 shows examples of demands that terrorists may negotiate.

Table (1): Examples of demands of terrorist organizations in negotiations with governments

Temporal Demands	Political Demands
▪ Payment of ransom ▪ Provision of weapons, food, equipment, technology, or information, or release of incarcerated terrorists, political prisoners, or dissenters ▪ Release of imprisoned supporters or sympathizers of terrorism ▪ Provision of access to the media to promote their cause ▪ Provision of transportation to another location	▪ Granting political asylum ▪ Granting amnesty within the host country ▪ Promising a fair trial ▪ Departure of international forces ▪ Recognition and political consolidation through: ▪ Regional or local autonomy ▪ Transformation into a recognized political entity (party)

▪ **Phase 3: Implementation (Honoring Obligations)**

In this stage, the negotiating parties complete the negotiation process by honoring their obligations under the negotiated agreement. The success in this stage –and, consequently, of negotiations– is dependent on the availability of a minimum degree of trust between the two parties, a mission that mediators may play a cardinal role in. It is an “either-or” situation where all sorts of tricks may be played against the other party to reduce the cost of concessions. For example, governments may meet the ransom with counterfeit money or hand over expired supplies and drugs while terrorists may kill hostages. Such practices may result in deadlocked negotiations for years.

**Negotiating with Terrorist Organizations:
Theoretical issues**

Negotiating with terrorists poses numerous complications that should be carefully considered by governments to ensure maximum negotiation advantage. These complexities are identified as follows:

1. Legitimacy

The idea of rejecting negotiations with terrorists is usually driven by

the argument that such a step would legitimize terrorist organizations or the terrorist act in general. This argument assumes that governments' negotiations with terrorists will not only legitimize terrorists within the state but within the wider community as well, which might become far riskier in the long term^[10]. However, there is a body of literature that suggests that the mere decision of negotiating doesn't mean legitimizing or accepting the act of that party. What governments accept when negotiating with terrorists is the humanitarian cause, served through protecting the lives of hostages and those kidnapped or ending terrorists' dominance over inhabited geographical areas. With that understanding, negotiating with terrorists does not suggest any implicit or explicit acceptance of the terrorist organization itself^[11].

2. Credibility

The lack of credibility is another issue that precludes success of negotiations with terrorists. Governments don't trust terrorists as credible negotiating partners and perceive them as reneges. Evidence from previous experiences amply showed terrorists' wheeling and dealing and their prevarication on the numbers of hostages and their health status, to mention only a few^[12]. In such a setting, no government will accept negotiating with terrorists unless they make sure terrorists care about establishing a reputation for trustworthiness^[13].

Yet, there is no way for governments to make sure terrorists have interest in maintaining a reputation for trustworthiness, particularly given the fact that terrorist groups are largely impermanent aimed at achieving timely goals. This makes governments reluctant to negotiate with them^[14].

3. The Disparate Ideologies of Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist groups vary widely in terms of their goals and ideologies. For example, a group of terrorists may accept negotiations in pursuit of financial benefits, release of imprisoned terrorists, or even for propaganda purposes to show, to the public, as in a more powerful position. Those are known as contingent terrorists^[15]. In contrast, there is a group that considers any form of negotiations as a betrayal of their *raison d'être*. For them, death is the only way to fulfil their goal. They see death as a prized goal^[16]. Those are called "nihilistic or absolute terrorists". Suicide terrorists—who fail to change their reality by any means but violence—

fall into the second category. They see death as a form of self-realization. Yet, even among absolutes, crucial differences do exist. For instance, there are total absolutes who have nothing to negotiate about and conditional absolutes who may accept negotiation but their negotiation goals are usually too broad or extreme to be negotiated^[17].

The categories of absolute and contingent terrorists may intertwine. Meaning absolute terrorists may show readiness to negotiate some issues. So, the challenge for governments is to turn total absolutes into conditional absolutes and move them towards lowering their ceiling^[18].

4. The Internal Cohesion of Terrorist Organizations

The extent of internal cohesion of a terrorist organization is another crucial factor in determining the possibility of negotiating with this organization. While terrorists try to present the picture of belonging to disciplined cohesive groups, their surrounding environment makes it impossible to maintain a strict system of commandment. Commonly, terrorist organizations have a decentralized structure. Thus, governments should be aware that a terrorist leadership may accept negotiations, but may at the same time prove unable to call its combatants to heel or oblige them to accept what has been agreed upon^[19]. That said, fractious groups may be an easier target of negotiations, by capitalizing on the existing divisions and isolating the nihilist factions^[20].

5. Timing of Negotiations

Negotiating with terrorist groups becomes easier when terrorists find the conflict draining, particularly if they are rivaling another terrorist organization in the same geographical area. Occasionally, terrorist groups may opt to dialogue as a tactic to alleviate the pressure bearing down on them and re-arm. So, governments should be aware that negotiations may not benefit the situation on the ground over the short-term^[21]. For negotiations to fit their purpose, it would be better for governments to voice their desire for negotiation only when terrorists surrender and announce a permanent cessation of violence, to avoid plunging into a new cycle of violence by developing a broad consensus among terrorists on renouncing violence^[22].

A change of the leadership of a terrorist organization may cause negotiations to become increasingly intractable. Leadership changes would mean a disintegrated organization that is difficult to deal with, with

each wing pursuing divergent, or may be conflicting, goals. So, disintegration may result in more violence in the short run^[23]. Collectively, all of these factors assist governments' in identifying the optimal timing to initiate negotiations with terrorist organizations.

6. Intermediaries

Governments do not usually negotiate directly with terrorists at the outset. Instead, trusted intermediaries are used so that parties avoid direct confrontation^[24]. Intermediation is a favored option for terrorists too. Typically, an intermediary would be a local third party that is suffering consequences of the deteriorating situation due to the clashes between the government forces and terrorists^[25]. This could include traditional leaders, religious or tribal leaders, local businessmen, or even former extremists. Insider mediation is considered more effective than outside mediation facilitated by international or regional organizations. Evidence revealed that 40 percent of outside mediation has faced considerable difficulties or was unsuccessful^[26]. A side from "legitimate" intermediaries trusted by the government, terrorists may seek the mediation of members of organized crime groups or local affiliates of terrorist organizations^[27].

Mediator's impartiality can make or break the negotiations. However, impartiality does not mean disinterest of mediators. Interest mediators increase the likelihood of a successful mediation as they are usually motivated by the direct benefits they can gain and consequently work to overcome obstacles standing in the way of negotiating^[28].

Sahel Governments-Terrorist Organizations Negotiation Track

For long years, most Sahel governments adopted a "no-negotiation" policy towards terrorist groups. In 2015, when asked if he was agreeable to negotiating with jihadist movements, former Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta shut the door on that saying: "Iyad Ag Ghaly managed, in the past, to deceive several former officials capitalizing on toleration with him [...] It will never be my case, I never had to deal with him^[29]. However, complexities that faced counter-terrorism operations on the ground ultimately led a number of Sahel governments to open up on various alternatives to negotiate with terrorist organizations.

1. A Paradigm Shift in Sahel Governments' Position on Negotiating with Terrorist Organizations

Early on, the prevailing logic in Sahel states established a refusal of dialogue and negotiation with terrorist groups, on the premise that sitting around a table with terrorists would give them legitimacy and push more individuals to join terrorist groups. Yet, several indications ran counter to this approach, calling into question the ability of Sahel states to soldier on at no-negotiation. This brought about a shift in Sahel states' stance on negotiating with terrorists leading several former Sahel leaders to enter into dialogue with jihadist groups. For instance, Blaise Compaoré, former President of Burkina Faso, facilitated the free passage of terrorist groups and separatists linked to terrorists in northern Mali in exchange for secession of attacks within Burkina Faso. Several reports also indicated that former Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré and former Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, had already engaged in agreements with terrorist organizations to keep the terrorist activity away from their lands^[30].

Further, there has been supporting evidence that channels of communication were established between Sahel governments and terrorist organizations, as has been evidenced by the Mauritanian authorities release of Sanda Ould Bouamama, former spokesman for the Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Al-Din brought in under an international arrest warrant in 2015 as well as the IS' decision not include Mauritania in the so-called Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP)^[31].

While the initial positions of Sahel states on negotiation with terrorists lacked clarity, negotiations of foreign and regional governments, let alone humanitarian organizations, with terrorists in the Sahel directed towards releasing of hostages and getting access to vulnerable populations hold good^[32].

Over time, public row escalated over the viability of the "no-negotiation" policy adopted by Sahel governments. In 2020, before overthrown, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta publicly admitted that his government had engaged with Iyad Ag Ghali (a prominent Tuareg figure and leader of Ansar Al-Din) and with Amadou Koufa (emir of the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), a group of Fulani fighters allied with Ansar Al-Din, under the banner of JNIM), adding that "speaking with jihadists and fighting terrorism are not inconsistent," stacking

up against the US negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which marked an about-turn on the issue^[33].

2. The Malian Government-JNIM 2020 Back-Channel Negotiations

Negotiations conducted between the Malian government and JNIM between March and October 2020 offers an interesting case study, given the relatively large returns terrorists get from negotiations and the many hiccups that get in the way of negotiations. Based on what have been reported in international and national resources^[34], phases of negotiations are identified as follows:

■ Phase 1: Pre-negotiation

Pre-negotiations were initiated by a businessman of Malian descent who had close ties with the opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé kidnapped in March 2020. Amid an adverse electoral climate and given its desire to release Cissé for political gains, the Malian government was amenable to the idea of negotiation. The Malian Prime Minister was charged with searching for a trusted mediator.

At that time, the Mauritanian businessman Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi –known for his considerable expertise in negotiating kidnappers– had been already approached by the source close to Cissé to serve as a mediator. Ten years ago, Chafi had previously been engaged in several negotiations to free Western hostages in the Sahel region.

Chafi declined the mission, citing maintaining a low profile but he suggested a name, namely Chérif Ould At-Taher. At-taher denied himself any logistical assistance from the Malian government, citing lack of full confidence in the Malian government. Yet, he asked to be accompanied by Colonel Mamadou Lamine Konaré, the then-Advisor to the Prime Minister on intelligence matters. President Keita and the Prime Minister approved his request. This was shrouded in secrecy to prevent the Direction générale de la sécurité d'État (DGSE) from informing the French authorities of the negotiations.

The dialogue was, then, under way. In the desert towards Kidal of northern Mali was held the first meeting of at-Taher and Colonel Konaré with a JNIM negotiator, namely Sedane Ag Hita, JNIM leader in Kidal. The two negotiators came back with a confirmation of Cissé

being in the hands of JNIM after being presented to a video of Cissé alive. This was sufficient enough to assure the Malian government to move forward to the second phase of negotiation.

■ Phase 2 - Bargaining

Bargaining started with the negotiators receiving a handwritten paper with JNIM's demands to release Cissé, namely paying a ransom of €2 million and releasing 30 MLF combatants. The Malian government didn't hesitate to accept JNIM demands, particularly liberating Cissé has become a popular demand in Mali and President Keita wanted to improve his political status.

■ Phase 3: Internationalization and Implementation

The agreement was supposed to be implemented as planned. However, France's intervention derailed negotiations. News of the success of negotiations came to the attention of Moussa Diawara, head of the Malian DGSE, who bemoaned bypassing him and demanded that the DGSE manage the issue. The French authorities, too, knew about the negotiations. To avoid a public crisis in Paris, the French ambassador in Bamako held a meeting with the Malian Prime Minister and asked directly that the government raise the stakes in its negotiations with JNIM to include the release of the French humanitarian worker Sophie Pétronin. The Malian government gave in to the French pressure and halted negotiations with JNIM although they were within striking distance of success.

The French intervention stymied the first round of negotiations and France started handling the hostage file from behind the scene, particularly after the file was entrusted to Moussa Diawara, head of the Malian DGSE. Diawara was asked to cast the negotiation net wide to include the release of the French humanitarian worker Sophie Pétronin as well as the two Italian hostages Nicola Chiacchio and Pier Luigi Maccali. In many respects, the French intervention further complicated the second round of negotiations. For instance, in the case of the French and Italian hostages, the Malian government entrusted mediation to new intermediaries, i.e. ex-radical Ag Bibi, deputy of Kidal for over a year as a mediator in the case of Pétronin and Nigerian Mohamed Akwete in the case of the two Italian hostages.

The French intervention also resulted in a change in JNIM's dealing with the issue. Realizing that it is France that manages the negotiations

and that western hostages are brought to the negotiation table, JNIM escalated their demands and demanded a ransom of €10 million from each side, i.e. a total of €30, as well as the release of 180 of JNIM combatants imprisoned in Mali, up from 30 combatants in the first round of negotiations. Later, JNIM raised the stakes asking for additional releases.

Just before the agreement was implemented, Malian President Keita was toppled. However, the transfer of political power didn't sabotage negotiations. In October 2020, the transitional government in Mali released 204 jihadists in exchange for releasing the four hostages, i.e. Soumaïla Cissé, the French hostage, and the two Italian hostages³⁵. This was a winning deal for JNIM: it restored a select group of its combatants and numerous Al-Qaeda leaders in addition to obtaining an amount of €30 million. This portends a meteoric rise of JNIM, a group that has northern and central Mali as its strongholds.

The Future of Negotiations between Sahel Governments and Terrorist Organizations

In view of the challenges in negotiating with terrorism and in consideration of the experience of Sahel states in this respect, an assessment of the upshot of negotiations between Sahel governments and terrorist organizations becomes necessary towards horizon scanning of these negotiations. Below, we review a number of indicators that give insight into Sahel states' negotiations with terrorists.

1. The Conflicting Positions of Sahel Governments

While many Sahel governments have become open to various alternatives when it comes to talking with terrorist groups, some governments still take a hard-and-fast position on "no-negotiation". Yet, largely, there has been a marked tendency towards dialogue and negotiation with terrorist organizations in most Sahel states, which indicates that public—rather than back-channel—negotiations have become the mainstream when dealing with terrorist groups following the increasing losses of national and international forces in their all-out war against terrorism. In Mali, for instance, the authorities strive to open new channels of communication with jihadist groups. To that end, in February 2021, the transitional government constituted a body to enter into negotiations with Al-Qaeda-linked organizations represented by JNIM. Earlier in 2017 and 2019, two reconciliation congresses were held where a num-

ber of prominent figures put forward suggestions of speaking with Iyad Ag Ghaly and Amadou Koufa^[36].

To bestow a measure of legitimacy on the authorities' negotiations with terrorist groups, negotiations were introduced nationwide. In March 2021, a one-month ceasefire agreement was concluded between an MLF fighting group and Dozo hunters of the Dogon people in central Mali. Negotiations leading to the agreement had the blessing and support of the Malian government. The agreement was the subject of great controversy in Mali, practically after the Malian authorities conceded a large part of its prerogatives in exchange for the ceasefire^[37].

In Burkina Faso, Prime Minister Christophe Dabrié expressed, in February 2021, readiness of the Burkina Faso government to enter into negotiations with active terrorist organizations operating in the country since 2015. This statement retracted previous statements by President Roch-Marc Kaboré, in which he ruled out any negotiation with terrorists^[38].

Niger, in contrast, stands out against any dialogue with terrorist groups as has been demonstrated by the declaration of President Mahamadou Issoufou in 2018 of Niger's dismissive attitude toward negotiating with Boko Haram, a position that is the exact opposite of that of Nigeria that initiated negotiations with this terrorist group the same year^[39]. France, too, was reticent about negotiating with terrorism. In November 2020, French President Macron announced France's refusal to conduct any negotiations with terrorists in the Sahel, particularly in Mali; however, only a month later, in December 2020, he declared that negotiations with jihadist groups in Sahel could be possible provided that Al-Qaeda and IS aren't involved^[40].

These differing positions preclude developing a unified regional position on negotiating with terrorist organizations, allowing terrorists to play on contradictions in the positions of Sahel governments in a manner that promotes their bargaining position, whether by making additional gains from governments that went along with negotiation or pressuring dissenting governments.

2. Replicating the Experience of Full-fledged Negotiations with JNIM

Mutual mistrust has long been a chief impediment to successful ne-

gotiation between governments and terrorist groups. In the Sahel, however, replicating the experience of “full-fledged” negotiation that ends up with binding parties to their commitments allowed a measure of confidence to be built up between negotiating governments and JNIM in particular. The 2020 successful negotiations between Mali’s transitional government and JNIM signaled JNIM’s strive for establishing a trustworthy reputation. Additionally, the pervasive influence of JNIM in the Sahel is indicative of the group’s ability to continue to exist long into the future, which may prod Sahel governments into pursuing dialogue with JNIM.

Still, JNIM-oriented abductions and renewed fighting persisted which puts the group’s credibility in dispute. For instance, French journalist Olivier Dubois posted a video on social media in which he said he was kidnapped by JNIM, on April 8 2021, calling on the French authorities to work for his release^[41]. Also, to secure a ceasefire before November 2020 elections, the government of Burkina Faso negotiated an agreement with JNIM under which the government released 100 prisoners detained on accusations of having links to the jihadists. However, fighting renewed in 2021, suggesting the ceasefire was provisional rather than sustained^[42].

It is noteworthy, however, that JNIM’s commitment to establish its credibility by adhering to the terms of its tactical negotiations –that don’t go beyond a provisional ceasefire or hostage swap– intimates the group’s strive to strategically develop negotiations toward achieving major gains, such as amnesty or recognition as a legitimate political organization.

3. The Exclusive Involvement of Specific Terrorist Organizations in Negotiations

The terrorist organizations in the Sahel are an exemplar of the heterogeneous nature of terrorist organizations that have largely similar tools yet disparate goals and objectives. On the one hand, some of these organizations proved able to take a pragmatic approach prompting them to enter into negotiations with governments on conditions that guarantees them significant gains, yet on the other hand, other organizations recognized violence against civilians and official forces as their only choice and voice, impeding their engagement in any successful negotiations.

Among terrorist organizations in the Sahel, JNIM was more amenable to dialogue and negotiation. JNIM uses terrorism and negotiation with governments as a tool not an end goal. They are more akin to “contingent terrorists” where they employ kidnapping and hostage-taking to establish a bargaining position and enter into negotiations with governments. In contrast, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) tend to execute hostages there and then as has been the case with the six French aid workers, their guide, and driver who were executed by IS in Niger in August 2020^[43]. They are more akin to “absolute terrorists”. Unlike IS, in similar situations, JNIM would negotiate with the government for a ransom or release of its imprisoned members.

Yet JNIM had an additional motivation to rush to negotiations with Sahel governments, namely its growing conflict with ISGS which raged significantly after ideological differences and rivalry gave rise to a string of defections and hostilities between them. Between 2019 and 2020, more than seventy fighters from IS and JNIM were killed in over a hundred armed clashes between them in separate areas of the Sahel^[44]. On the other side, the growing division between JNIM and the local IS branch was also driver for Sahel governments to follow the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, at least temporarily, particularly given IS’ escalating violence against civilians as has been demonstrated by the violent clashes in the Gao region in northeastern Mali and the three-country point joining Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger^[45].

While the conflict between branches of Al-Qaeda and IS in the Sahel offered consequential assistance for launching negotiations between Sahel governments and JNIM, it is unlikely to establish a comprehensive settlement of terrorism in the Sahel through negotiations. Any future negotiations have no prospects of bringing tangible progress on the ground unless all active terrorist organizations are involved. In such fluid contexts, division in the positions of terrorist organizations can result in developing a new wave of terrorism where the organizations that reject negotiation outbid groups that accepted negotiations, resulting in divisions at the individual level rather than the organization level, to see individual combatants quit pragmatic organizations to join extremist ones, a situation that would render negotiations devoid of any real impact on reducing terrorism in the region.

4. Mixed Impacts of the Weak Internal Cohesion of Terrorist Organizations in the Sahel

The Sahel's vast area and multi-ethnic components created a complex reality that did not allow for the emergence of a coherent centralized terrorist organization in the region. This decentralized nature of terrorist organizations in the Sahel has had mixed impacts on their negotiations with governments, serving as a catalyst for success at times and a dampener at other times.

Take, JNIM, for example –it was formed in 2017 from the integration of a number of jihadist groups, including Ansar Al-Din Front, MLF, Al-Mourabitoun, and the Sahara branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Comprising a combination of Arab and African components, the group was capable of building up a network of trusted supporters and followers across the Sahel. While JNIM elements pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda leadership hardly has any operational role but rather serves as a source of ideological inspiration and a symbolic reference to affiliated organizations in the African Sahel^[46].

This situation enabled regional governments and supportive international forces to sort out leaders of JNIM subsidiary organizations into pro-negotiation leaders, such as Iyad Ag Ghaly and Amadou Koufa, and others who should be disposed of such as Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi, neutralized by the French forces in August 2021, Yahya Abu al-Hammam, the second-most-senior leader after Iyad Ag Ghali killed by the French forces in February 2019, and Bah Ag Musa killed in November 2020^[47]. Indeed, these neutralizations predisposed Ag Ghali towards reconciliation with the Malian authorities where he found himself trapped between the Malian army, Sahel states forces, the French forces, the International forces, and the Tuareg Self-Defense Group^[48].

But then on the other side, the diminished internal cohesion of JNIM further complicated the negotiation process, given the dilemma posed by foreign fighters. In its dialogue with terrorist organizations, the transitional government in Mali draws a distinction between groups dominated by local elements, such as Ansar Al-Din and MLF, and groups dominated by foreign elements, such as Al-Mourabitoun and AQIM, towards the reintegration of local militants in rehabilitation programs while excluding the extremist foreign militants^[49]. Owing to procedural difficulties in making a distinction between local and foreign militants,

negotiations are made increasingly risky and complex.

Overall, the future of Sahel governments' negotiations with terrorist organizations hinges on the extent of governments' success in availing themselves of the decline of the internal cohesion of terrorist organizations while avoiding the negative repercussions of this trait that is seemingly set to grow in the future leaving terrorist organizations in the region severely fragmented and divided.

5. Timing of Negotiations and Predominance of a “Balance of Weakness”

Timing is an influential factor on the outcomes of negotiations. Imbalances of power between governments and terrorist organizations increase the likelihood of launching successful negotiations. In contrast, a balance of power between the two sides would dissuade them from entering into negotiation, with each side willing to put the chances of compelling the other party to the test through conflict mechanisms. At the current point in time, there is a prevalent state of a “balance of weakness” between Sahel governments and terrorist organizations, which provides fertile ground for negotiation, with each side seeking to reduce their losses as much as possible.

When it comes to the domestic situation of Sahel states, political turmoil prevails. Chad and Mali experience lagging political transitions. In August 2020, former Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown, to be succeeded by Bah Ndao as an interim president and a government chaired by Prime Minister Mukhtar Wan, who both were ousted in May 2021^[50]. In Chad, despite the success of former Chadian President Idriss Déby in securing a sixth presidential term, he died the week following the elections upon clashes with rebels belonging to the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), which gave rise to launching a transitional period under Deby's son, Gen. Mohamed Idriss Deby^[51].

The security and military landscape in the Sahel is no less turbulent. In June 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron announced ending Operation Barkhane and reducing the French military presence in the Sahel region, so that France will be involved in the region under a broader multilateral framework^[52]. In addition to terrorist groups, several Sahel states face the threat of rebel separatist groups. For example,

Tuareg rebel groups operate actively in northern Mali. Although the group signed the Algiers Agreement in 2015, the slow implementation of provisions of the Agreement may give rise to armed conflict again, let alone the armed conflicts between the Fulani pastoralists and Dogon farmers due to problems of desertification and environmental degradation^[53].

In addition, terrorist organizations in the Sahel suffer serious repercussions of the imbalance of their leadership structure following the killing of a number of senior field commanders in recent months as well as the attrition arising from multi confrontations among terrorist organizations one another, between them and national, regional and international counter-terrorism forces, as well as between them and militias formed by local communities to protect their villages from the threat of terrorism.

6. The Critical Role of Intermediaries

Intermediaries play a leading role in turning negotiations between governments and terrorist organizations around, particularly in early phases of negotiation. In the Sahel, mediators proved a great capacity for making hostage crisis negotiations a success, increasing the potential for them to continue to play more advanced roles in the future.

Insider mediators have been instrumental in mediation between the Sahel governments and terrorist organizations. The settling of terrorist groups' in fixed geographical areas in the Sahel provided social incubators that enabled terrorist groups to establish alternative administrative systems substituting the state in these local communities, including systems for service delivery, tax collecting, land administration, maintaining justice and public order^[54], a situation that needs to be settled in the future.

As such, insider mediators are likely to play a critical role in any future developments. There have been suggestions for opening dialogue between Malian religious leaders and insider mediators close to JNIM to find ways for settlement. One of the options proposed was to involve Mahmoud Dicko, one of most influential actors in Malian politics who contacted with Iyad Ag Ghali when Ansar Al-Din occupied northern Mali, and then in 2015 and 2016, to explore avenues for dialogue^[55]. This trend suggests the possibility of signing agreements upon local ini-

tatives under a bottom-up approach to dialogue that may help fill the gaps that may be left by state-led efforts^[56].

Conclusion

There seems to be real opportunities for progress in negotiations between Sahel governments and JNIM. Potentially, an agreement with JNIM could be negotiated for collaboration in fighting ISGS, which could open the door for comprehensive negotiations between the two sides. Sahel governments may work on moving absolute terrorists to contingent ones and will probably continue negotiations towards dividing JNIM, capitalizing on the ethnic divisions within it.

Given the difficulties imposed by France's potential withdrawal from the region, Sahel governments will probably take recourse to negotiation, particularly through insider mediators. However, negotiations are not likely to go beyond being a tool for ending hostage-taking crises or securing a provisional ceasefire in some areas, building on community—rather than political—arrangements. Perhaps this trend is reinforced by the absence of unanimity among Sahel governments on the negotiation alternative as well as the exclusive nature of negotiations being restricted to a limited number of terrorist organizations.

Eventually, negotiations between Sahel governments and terrorist organizations have become a *fait accompli* and are deemed to grow in the future. With regard to Sahel states, the question is no longer whether governments shall opt to negotiate with terrorist organizations or not, but rather how to manage negotiations the right way.

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Integrated Interpretations of National Armies’ Crisis

5

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Introduction

African Sahel countries have for a long time been seeking foreign support to bolster their national armies to curb the spread of terrorism, especially after the outbreak of its latest and most dangerous wave in 2012. This opened the door for French and US interference that was followed by the involvement of European powers, and later a Russian presence under the pretext of financial support to counter terrorism.

The internationalization of the fight against terrorism in the region is a direct result of the inability of the national armies of Sahel countries to confront – unilaterally or collectively – the challenges terrorism has imposed, threatening the security and stability of the region.

Despite the huge efforts Sahel armies have exerted to combat terrorism in the past decade, they incurred enormous human and material losses. The scene in the Sahel reveals the multi-dimensional incapacity

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that these armies suffer from in the face of terrorism. Terrorist organizations have enjoyed many comparative advantages, on top of which is the numerical superiority over some of the armies of the countries of the region. Former Chadian President Idriss Deby estimated the number of Boko Haram fighters in the southwest of Lake Chad at more than 20,000. Meanwhile, some countries, such as Niger, have less than 10,000 soldiers in their armies⁽¹⁾.

Terrorist organizations operating in the African Sahel have revealed their ability to employ advanced technology in launching their attacks, in line with the capabilities of national armies and sometimes even surpassing them. In November 2018 the former Nigerian Army Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Tukur Yusuf Buratai, announced that Boko Haram fighters were increasingly flying drones that observe the defensive positions of counter-terrorism forces. This was confirmed by field reports regarding the emergence of qualitative developments in Boko Haram's use of drones the capabilities of which exceed those used by the Nigerian counter-terrorism forces, which means Boko Haram has qualitative advantage in one of the most dangerous battlefields⁽²⁾.

Moreover, the national armies of Sahel countries have become primary targets of terrorist organizations. A number of major terrorist operations targeted the bases and camps of armies. These operations intensified starting the second half of 2019. On 30 September 2019 two army camps in the regions of Polikisi and Mondoro were attacked, leaving 41 people dead and 20 missing. In early November 2019 the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara launched an attack on an army camp in the city of Menaka, leaving 54 Malian soldiers dead. On 20 November 2019 the Islamic State (IS) announced a new operation after a number of its fighters clashed with a joint patrol from Mali and Niger near the city of Tabancourt in the Gao border region. The attack left 30 soldiers. On 10 December 2019 the Niger army was subjected to the worst attack in the history of its confrontations with terrorism when an army base in Inates was attacked by dozens of IS fighters using heavy weapons and booby-trapped vehicles. More than 70 Niger soldiers were killed and the terrorists overran the camp, which resulted in the looting of large quantities of ammunition and military vehicles. On 23 March 2020 the largest terrorist attack in the history of Chad occurred in terms of the number of victims. The five-hour operation on a military base on the Bohoma Peninsula in the Lake Chad region left more than 100 army officers and soldiers dead⁽³⁾.

Hence, this study seeks to explore the different approaches that have been proposed to explain the inability of the national armies in the Sahel countries to confront terrorist organizations, by adopting the logic of integration, not contradiction, between these interpretations, each of which explains one of the dimensions of the shortcomings that affect the performance of these armies, and which was manifested in their disorder in the battlefield, their loss of the support of local communities in some areas, as well as their perpetual need for foreign support.

Ethnic prejudices

Sahel states are a typical case of ethnic armies. Since the times of colonialism and the establishment of modern regular armies for the first time, the prevailing trend in most of the countries of the region has been to rely on a specific group, or on a limited number of groups to join the army, which was characterized by a largely homogeneous ethnic composition, in contrast to the pluralistic nature of society. Ethnic homogeneity was on the rise among the middle and higher military leadership ranks, which were dominated by almost exclusive ethnic affiliations. In the early phase following independence, the Sahel states, much like other African countries, continued to form armed forces based on a predominant ethnic identity to address the issue of military loyalty to the political leadership by resorting to solid social ties that guarantee the unity of interests of the political and military elites by virtue of belonging to an ethnic origin and one geographic area⁽⁴⁾.

This phenomenon increased over time, turning into a pattern. For example, the years of Chadian President Idriss Deby's rule from 1990 to 2021 witnessed a consolidation of the position of the Zaghawa group, that inhabits the eastern center of the country and from which the president hails, despite the fact that it constitutes less than five percent of the country's population. This situation may remain after Mohamed Idriss Deby assuming the presidency of the Transitional Military Council after the death of his father.

In light of the limited number the Zaghawa residents, Idriss Déby relied on a relatively broader alliance to fill military posts that included, beside his group, both the Hadjarai inhabitants, living in Sara in the center of the country, and inhabitants of Guéra, in the south, the largest group in Chad, with its people making up 25 percent of the population⁽⁵⁾.

This alliance implies the limited representation of many groups, at the forefront of which are the two main Tebu groups residing in the north of the country, Teda and Daza. This marginalization was the natural outcome of the Tebu being the main supporters of former President Hussein Habré, who ruled the country between 1982 and 1990 before he was overthrown by Idriss Deby. What made it difficult to assimilate Habré's supporters into the military establishment after Deby took over was the armed conflicts that took place in 1992 between the Chadian armed forces and the Movement for Reform, from which Idriss Deby emerged victorious with French support in a phenomenon that was repeated over the years of his rule before he was killed in April 2021⁽⁶⁾.

In Niger, French colonialism established the domination of military posts by the southwestern Zarma and Songhai groups. This allowed the people of the two groups to maintain control of the military establishment since the country's independence in 1960 until the early 1990s, despite the fact that the two groups in the southwest together constitute about a quarter of the country's population⁽⁷⁾.

In addition to the heavy representation of the Zarma and Songhai groups, one of the problems of ethnic prejudice in the composition of the military since its inception has been the traditionally limited presence of the Tuareg people inhabiting the northern desert regions of the country, which constitutes more than 10 percent of the population, making it the largest Tuareg group in all the countries in which it is spread, including Libya, Algeria, and Chad. However, in recent years, subsequent Niger governments have taken more advanced measures to include some Tuareg elements in the military structure, but the Fulani group, which makes up about seven percent of the country's population, is still not proportionately represented⁽⁸⁾.

The case in Mali is not much different. Adopting almost the same pattern, the army excluded the northern Tuareg and Arab groups, making this region a hotbed for an endless series of armed rebellions on an ethnic basis that began in 1963, creating increased difficulty in expanding in the inclusion of northern elements into the Malian military establishment⁽⁹⁾.

In Burkina Faso, the French preference for the inclusion of the Mossi community, the country's largest group in the armed forces since its establishment, created a pattern that continued throughout the post-in-

dependence period, which resulted in a limited representation of many other groups, prime among which is the Fulani, the second largest group in Burkina Faso⁽¹⁰⁾.

It is not much different in Mauritania, where the failed coup attempt in October 1987, which was carried out by a number of officers of southern origin, gave way for a wide campaign led by former President Muawiya Ould Taya, which resulted in an almost complete domination of the Arab /Berber component over the structure of the military institution, which began with the arrest of 50 soldiers, in addition to the former Minister of Interior, Colonel Anne Amadou Baba Lee. This attempt was accompanied by the activity of the Forces de Libération Africaines de Mauritanie (FLAM) which issued in April 1986 the petition of the oppressed, or *Le Manifeste du Négro-Mauritanien Opprimé*⁽¹¹⁾.

Hence, Sahel countries share the pattern of ethnic armies to varying degrees based on historical experience and nature of prevailing ethnic composition. In any case, this phenomenon has negatively impacted counter-terrorism operations in the region in the past 10 years. The negative effects of this phenomenon have taken two tracks in obstructing counter-terrorism operations. The first is the consolidation of ethnic hostility between the groups controlling the military and local groups in the circles where terrorism is spread, so that army members are always seen as strangers or even occupiers who seek to consolidate their hegemony by force. This is what many terrorist organizations have exploited extensively in their media subjects. The second path is represented in imposing restrictions on the implementation of large-scale military operations in the areas to which the dominant group belongs within the military institution due to kinship and multiple social ties.

Fragmentation of leadership structure

Sahel armies suffer from the fragmentation of the command structure due to the multiplicity of independent and semi-autonomous units within the armed forces, represented by the elite forces, special forces, and military entities concerned with maintaining internal security.

The Garde Nationale du Mali plays an important part in protecting internal security. This made it at the forefront of the Malian forces that dealt with the multiple Tuareg rebellions in the northern provinces, be-

fore national guard turned into a tool for absorbing former rebels into the official military structure without posing a threat to the stability of governance in the capital, Bamako⁽¹²⁾.

With the intensification of the terrorist challenge, the Battalion Autonome des Forces Spéciales (BAFS) was formed to become a unit of the most qualified and armed elite forces, and by extension the most capable to overcome the terrorist challenge on the ground, especially as these elements were granted priority in joining the joint training programs organized by Mali's partners from developed countries, such as France and the United States. Although the BAFS is affiliated to the Malian Armed Forces, it enjoys a great deal of independence from the command structure, which qualified the commander of the battalion, Asimi Gueta, to lead the moves that ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020 before he ousted the transitional president, Bah Ndao, in May 2021⁽¹³⁾.

In Niger, the National Guard played an active role in preserving domestic security while maintaining a semi-autonomous structure, especially with its administrative subordination to the Minister of Internal Security and not to the Minister of Defense. However, the forces remain subject to the oversight of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in terms of their field work. The forces were initially established before independence under the name of the Bedouin Guard, to be transformed after independence into the Republican Guard Forces until it was restructured in 1997 to be renamed the Intervention and Security Forces and the National Guard Authority in 2010⁽¹⁴⁾.

It is not any different in Chad. Law 24 of July 1994 approved the establishment of the Chadian National and Bedouin Guard as a unit affiliated to the armed forces and tasked with maintaining internal security, protecting government authorities and property, supporting the police forces, and participating in military operations during wartime. In 2021 the National Guard launched a campaign to recruit young people between 18 and 25 years old, to qualify 1,000 new members in one year through an intensive training program held at the Mossorow Training Center. In cooperation with France, a new training center for the National Guard was established in Mandjura in June 2014⁽¹⁵⁾, but the most prominent manifestation of the parallel forces in Chad is embodied by the elite group, the Presidential Security Forces, which has

been led by Mohamed Idriss Deby since 2012 to play a notable role in the fight against terrorism in Chad and the entire Sahel region. In 2013 Mohamed Déby contributed to leading the Chadian participation in the restoration of the regions of northern Mali. He commanded 1,000 elite forces, and the forces played a key role in confronting the repeated attacks launched by the fighters of rebel organizations in northern Chad. This intense involvement of the presidential security forces contributed to enhancing the chances of Mohamed Idriss Deby assuming the presidency of the Transitional Military Council to succeed his father after his death in April 2021⁽¹⁶⁾.

In Burkina Faso, the Régiment de sécurité présidentielle played a central role since its founding in 1995 until its dissolution in 2015, being one of the most important military decision-makers in the country and one of the closest to former President Blaise Compaore. Even after the fall of the president in 2014 elements of the Régiment de sécurité présidentielle led a coup attempt in September 2015 that sought to overthrow the transitional government headed by Michel Kafando before domestic and foreign pressures contributed to pushing General Gilbert Diendere to retreat, especially after the government issued a decision to dissolve the Régiment de sécurité présidentielle⁽¹⁷⁾.

In Mauritania, the policies of former President Maaouya Ould Taya resulted in the transformation of the Presidential Guard into a very powerful and influential military unit, which allowed its leader, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in 2008 to intervene to overthrow President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellah. The move prompted President Mohamed Ould El Ghazouani to take an early decision to change the leadership of the Presidential Guard and return the former president to the political scene, in a clear indication of the importance of this position and its impact on the military and political levels⁽¹⁸⁾.

The semi-independent status of some of the most prepared and trained units of the armed forces negatively affects the ability of the Sahel countries to combat terrorism in more than one way. The multiplicity of military structures entrusted with combating terrorism greatly complicates the coordination process between them on the ground, further reducing their efficiency in dealing with the terrorist challenge, and makes deployment and raids more time-consuming. This is in addition to what this pluralism imposes on the potential discrepancies in the gen-

eral approach to combating terrorism in the absence of clear strategies and decisive rules of engagement in many Sahel countries that depend, to a large extent, on international forces in counter-terrorism operations. The existing pluralism in the structure of military institutions in Sahel states has also proven its ability to disrupt the fragile stability within the military institution, as well as at the national political level. Many of the elite forces in the Sahel countries are taking the initiative to intervene in many political crises, due to their relative independence from the leadership of the armed forces, which may be conceived as a superior status over the rest of the other units, as seen in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad.

Deployment of auxiliary and parallel armies

The proliferation of terrorist organizations in Sahel countries poses serious challenges to their armies in light of the difficult terrain and the presence of terrorists among the local population in many areas. With the expansion of terrorist activities, self-defense militias appeared in many Sahel countries as a natural response on the part of the communities most affected by the operations of terrorist organizations. What is remarkable, however, is that these entities soon enjoyed official recognition by many Sahel governments and were functionally integrated in the operational plans drawn up by the armed forces and the official security forces, turning from a spontaneous reaction to what resembles auxiliary and sometimes parallel armies.

The phenomenon of self-defense militias began to spread in the African Sahel steadily since 2021. In Mali, the government supported the Ganda Izo militia affiliated to the Songhai group against the Tuareg rebellion in the regions of Gao and Timbuktu. The self-defense militias has been supporting the Tuareg Imghad tribe since 2014 and the Movement for the Rescue of Azawad of the Tuareg Dawsahak tribe since 2017 in order to put pressure on terrorist militias, especially the Ansar Al-Din group, which is basically the Ifogas Tuareg tribe⁽¹⁹⁾.

The Bambara group, one of the largest ethnic groups in Mali, also got involved in this practice by forming its armed entity, Dozo Hunters, which is mainly comprised of a group of young men armed with firearms and traditional weapons, in an attempt to revive the group's traditions of hunting and protection by conducting organized patrols to counter possible attacks by terrorist organizations. Similarly, the Dogon

group formed a similar armed militia called Dan Na Ambassagou, which was established at the end of 2016⁽²⁰⁾.

Encouraging the self-defense militias in Mali to coordinate work with the armed forces and turn into what is similar to an auxiliary force is the ethnic character of terrorism, especially after the conflict moved from the desert north of Mali to the densely populated Mopti region in the center of the country, where the Macina Liberation Front led by Amadou Koufa began to transform the conflict into a complex confrontation in which ideological and ethnic factors combine. The organization, whose elements are predominantly Fulani, began targeting the rural groups of the Dogon and Bambara, in a manner that boosted the desire of the people of these groups to organize their efforts to confront the attacks of the supporters of Amadou Koufa. This was achieved through the transformation from armed groups, which are predominantly unorganized, to paramilitary groups. In November 2018 more than 30 armed groups of Dogon and Bambara hunters declared their union into a command structure to transform the self-defense militia from its spontaneous, disorganized state to a highly complex and disciplined paramilitary organization⁽²¹⁾.

The self-defense groups of the Bambara and Dogon communities launched a series of successive attacks on the areas of concentration of the Fulani group since mid-2018, starting in June by raiding Kumaga village, leaving more than 20 people dead. About two months later, the self-defense groups launched another attack on a village adjacent to the city of Bankas, rendering 30 people dead. In early 2019, the attack on Cologon left about the same number of people dead. In March 2019 the villages of Ogasago and Lingara witnessed one of the largest attacks targeting the Fulani, with a death toll exceeding 130⁽²²⁾.

The repeated attacks by self-defense groups against Fulani villages, claiming that their inhabitants provided safe haven to the Macina Liberation Front fighters, led the Fulani to adopt the same approach. In mid-2018 a Fulani self-defense group appeared under the name of the Alliance pour le Salut du Sahel. Amid this charged atmosphere, the armed group issued a statement denying any association with terrorist organizations, limiting its field of work to protecting the Fulani villages from attacks, be they committed by the self-defense militias of the Bambara and Dogon or by terrorist organizations⁽²³⁾.

This contributed to the confusion of counter-terrorism operations to a large extent in light of the intensification of ethnic polarization through the formation of self-defense militias and the involvement of all ethnic groups in their formation, which created a space for functional integration between some of these militias and some terrorist organizations. For example, another self-defense group was established bearing the name Tolebe Fighters, being related to one of the Fulani sub-groups. Links were exposed between some of its members and Ansar Al-Islam group, led by Ibrahim Malam Dicko who hails from Tolebe⁽²⁴⁾.

The situation in the African Sahel is indicative of the complex challenges posed by the presence of self-defense militias that may put in danger counter-terrorism operations. On one hand, these organizations inflame ethnic tensions and add a more profound dimension to terrorism in the region. This may complicate the issue of confronting terrorism and attempts to dismantle its root causes. On the other hand, these groups showed very limited professionalism and discipline, which may make their participation in some operations a negative factor that may stand in the way of their success. Meanwhile, the participation of these groups raised the moral and political costs borne by the armed and security forces of Sahel countries in light of their systematic resort to extreme violence in dealing with societies they accuse of sponsoring terrorism and protecting terrorists.

Structural fragility of military capabilities

Sahel armies suffer from chronic weakness at the level of armaments and military equipment, a matter that could not be addressed immediately in response to the growing challenges posed by terrorism. What makes it more difficult to achieve a rapid development in the military capabilities of the Sahel states is their low military spending, which is less than three percent of GDP annually in Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso, and less than 3.5 percent of GDP in Chad and Mali. Although these figures exceed the global average of 2.3 percent in light of the steady decline in the ratio of military spending to GDP in developed countries, they are clearly lower than the neighboring countries concerned with combating terrorism in the same regional context, where the ratio of military spending to GDP in Algeria is 6.7 percent and 4.3 percent in Morocco. This problem is exacerbated by the limited military spending of Sahel countries in light of their low GDP. According

to 2019 estimates, military spending in Mali amounted to \$727 million, in Burkina Faso \$361 million, \$206 million in Chad, and \$176 million in Niger⁽²⁵⁾.

Regarding the number of soldiers in Sahel armies, the region does not have the advantage of manpower. According to World Bank estimates for 2018, the Chadian army is the largest among all Sahel countries. It includes 33,000 military personnel, including the auxiliary forces. In second place are the Mauritanian and Malian armies, with about 21,000 military personnel each, then the Burkina Faso army, which comprises slightly more than 11,000 while the Niger army is the smallest with 10,000. This situation contributes to giving terrorist organizations a comparative advantage in terms of numerical superiority in some confrontations, which makes the task of combating terrorism very difficult for the armed forces of Sahel states⁽²⁶⁾.

This dysfunctional situation has prompted Sahel governments to review plans to recruit new personnel to enhance the size of their armies. In November 2020 Nigerien Defense Minister Issoufou Katambe announced before parliament the intention of the Niger army to increase the number of its elements to 50,000 within five years⁽²⁷⁾. In September 2021 Chadian Defense Minister General Daoud Yaya Ibrahim announced in a session before the transitional legislative authority that the army had taken a decision to double its size to include more than 60,000 elements by the end of 2022. The process began with the development of training systems to absorb the increasing number of soldiers and the upgrade of the content of the raining programs to become more adapted to the nature of the terrorist challenge on the other hand⁽²⁸⁾.

The manifestations of the structural weakness of Sahel armies are not limited to indicators of recruitment, armament, and spending. They are also embodied in the weak organizational and bureaucratic capacities. Terrorism would not have spread in the Sahel region without terrorist organizations receiving support or facilitation from some members of the military establishment through a mechanism of corruption that provides a link of interest between two parties that are supposed to be in a state of armed confrontation⁽²⁹⁾.

From a macro perspective, the countries of the African Sahel are some of the highest corrupt in the world, according to Transparency International's annual index, which defines corruption as "the misuse

of public power for private gain. In 2020 all Sahel countries ranked low among the countries of the world in corruption. Chad ranked 160 out of 183 countries covered by the index, while Mauritania ranked 134th, Mali 129th, Niger 123rd, while Burkina Faso was the least corrupt in the region, coming at the 86th place⁽³⁰⁾.

The Sahel region has known the emergence of a strong link between terrorist organizations and some members of the military and security institutions who supported their activities in various ways, such as turning a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons for the benefit of terrorist organizations, or selling weapons and military equipment to these groups, in what became known as the leaking of national arms stocks. This phenomenon is complemented by the inefficient allocation of foreign aid directed to combating terrorism, which resulted in the subjection of this aid to repeated reviews. These conditions have made security and military facilities easy targets for many terrorist organizations, from which they have seized large quantities of weapons, enhancing their ability to confront the armies⁽³¹⁾.

The growing activity of terrorist groups in the Sahel has been accompanied by the emergence of a prominent current of security analyses based in their interpretation of the continuous flow of weapons on the terrorists of the African Sahel on the term “border corruption”. There are many causes for this phenomenon, such as the division of the vast area of the region into a limited number of large countries and the desert nature of the region that makes it impossible to fully control movement on the borders.

In light of the extreme poverty Sahel countries suffer from, the low wages in the military and security institutions are a motive for their members to resort to corrupt practices, which is complemented by the high demand by smuggling networks that take the region as a major place for human and drug smuggling, and a large market for the sale of arms and goods⁽³²⁾.

Reliance on foreign support

Since the outbreak of the terrorist wave in the African Sahel in 2012, France has played the major role in supporting regional countries in confronting terrorist organizations on the various fighting fronts. France was involved early on in counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel region,

launching Operation Serval in January 2013 before it was developed in 2014 to the broader Operation Barkhane, in which it employed more sophisticated capabilities. The operation is still ongoing. By the end of 2020, the number of French forces in the Sahel region was estimated at about 5,100 military elements, the largest figure since France started deploying troops in the Sahel. France began to review its strategy in the Sahel in 2021⁽³³⁾.

French efforts to combat terrorism in the Sahel region are proceeding in parallel tracks. France relies on an extensive pattern of military deployment in a wide area of the African Sahel, starting from Chad in the east to Senegal in the west. French forces are stationed in two main bases in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, and in Gao, the largest city in northern Mali. French forces are also deployed in a number of advanced bases, including in Chad's Faya-Largeau and Abeche in Niamey, the capital of Niger, in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, and in Tessalit in the far north of Mali, near the border with Algeria, and in the far west of the African Sahel region, in the city of Mauritanian Atar. This wide deployment gave the French more control than all the other forces in the region, including the national ones. In return, however, it limited the intensity of French operations and exposed them to a pattern of excessive spread across the vast territory of the Sahel⁽³⁴⁾.

France oversees a number of field, logistical, and financial support programs for counter-terrorism operations carried out by the national forces of the Group of Five Sahel countries Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, which were formed under French auspices in 2014 and which officially launched their joint forces in 2017 with direct French support, especially after holding the La Celle Saint-Cloud conference in December of the same year to mobilize international support for the forces of the five Sahel countries. Some sources estimate the economic burden incurred by France to deploy its forces in the African Sahel as part of Operation Barkhane at more than \$1 billion annually. In its final year, after its total costs were limited to less than \$700 million in 2019. Faced with this challenge, France sought to earn financial support for its counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel, which did not achieve much success in light of the reluctance of many partners to provide financial support on a regular basis and according to the sums expected by France⁽³⁵⁾.

France also assumed from an early stage the responsibility of coordinating work with European forces that provide various forms of support to French forces, such as strategic air support, intelligence support provided by British forces, and operational support provided by the special forces of a number of European countries within the framework of the Takuba Force launched In July 2020 with direct assistance from the Czech and Swedish special forces. This is in addition to benefiting from US support in the areas of military intelligence and surveillance via drones, and the provision of air-to-air refueling for French combat aircraft⁽³⁶⁾.

Regarding the important military support the US provides to Sahel countries, this was embodied by a set of various programs, the most prominent of which is the Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). This is a program funded and supervised by the US defense and state departments as well as the US Agency for International Development (USAID). It was launched in 2005 as a form of institutional development for the Pan Sahel Initiative which was implemented between 2002 and 2004 as part of the US Global War on Terror following the attacks of 11 September 2001. The program comprises the Sahel countries of Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Senegal, as well as a number of countries in the northern and southern areas of the region that partially intersect with the Sahel, such as Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Nigeria, and Cameroon. The program entails providing these countries with military equipment and training for the elements involved in combating terrorism, as well as institutional support for the armed forces, police, border guards and the judiciary. The program benefits from the presence of the USAID in directing economic and development support to provide sustainable support for counter-terrorism operations in the most dangerous areas⁽³⁷⁾.

In addition, the US departments of defense and state are involved in implementing the Security Governance Initiative (SCI) which supports the management, oversight, accountability, and sustainability of multiple institutions concerned with security at the national level in partner countries. The initiative was first implemented in 2015 in Mali and Niger. Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Nigeria have been receiving US support since 2014 in the context of expanding the scope of the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF) which is jointly managed and implemented by the US departments of defense and state to pro-

vide military logistical assistance, such as equipment and transportation, as well as training programs to enhance the ability of partner countries to confront internal security risks, including efforts to combat terrorism, maintain peace, and secure borders. The US also provides assistance through peacekeeping forces already deployed in Mali, which exceeds the support of international forces, and constitutes the provision of technical and training assistance to the countries hosting these forces to enhance their ability to respond to security crises⁽³⁸⁾.

This situation makes the armies of the Sahel countries vulnerable to any change in the pattern and sum of military aid provided by foreign partners. The repercussions of this will show in the near term after French President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane in June 2021. Macron's statement comes after a qualitative decline in the US field engagement in the efforts to combat terrorism in the Sahel amid the urgent need for continuous military support that would enable the armies of the Sahel countries to confront terrorism. This issue was given a political dimension after increasing indications of possible Russian involvement in the region through the growing relations with the transitional authorities in Mali, which complicates the issue and only serves the interests of terrorist organizations that will exploit the turmoil in the process of supplying the armies of the Sahel countries with the required military aid.

Conclusion

Sahel armies exerted enormous efforts on the frontlines to curb the spread of terrorism in the region. The results of the decade-old confrontations, however, drew attention to the need to examine the reasons for the inability of Sahel national armies to effectively confront terrorism. In this regard, social, historical, military and political interpretations are all intertwined. As a result of the correctness of the premises of all these approaches to the multiplicity of defects in the performance of the national armies of the Sahel states, it becomes logical to adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates all of these explanations for the inability of the national armies in the region to confront terrorism with the required efficiency over a period of 10 years.

Among the explanations put forward for the inability of the national armies in the Sahel to confront terrorism is the fact that these armies

were formed under French colonialism. This has greatly affected their societal roots and linked them to one ethnic group rather than another, given the continued reliance on ethnic segregation in recruitment and promotion processes. These ethnic prejudices hindered the advancement of armies in some areas and allowed the provision of safe havens and social incubators for terrorist organizations in other areas⁽³⁹⁾.

Another approach is to assess the reality of the military institution, which lacks professionalism in light of the fragmentation of their leadership structure and the absence of military discipline and institutional culture. This is in addition to the fact that Sahel armies rely on a heterogeneous group of parallel and auxiliary armies that are difficult to control. These problems have hindered the efficiency of counter-terrorism operations on the ground, despite the advanced level of commitment to confronting terrorism shown by the armies of the Sahel countries since the spread of terrorism in the region.

The relationships between Sahel countries and international powers also provide another approach to explaining the inability of the national armies to effectively confront terrorism, in light of the dependence of Sahel armies on foreign parties to fill in the funding, armament, and training gaps. This reduces their ability to win major confrontations, such as the one with terrorist organizations, and makes the effectiveness of their activities dependent on the foreign support they receive⁽⁴⁰⁾.

The challenges Sahel's national armies face does not mean they have been defeated in front of terrorist organizations and that the need arises to search for alternative approaches to direct confrontation. There is a necessity, nonetheless, for Sahel countries and their supporting parties to look for the root causes for the inability of the region to win the war against terrorism. For them to eliminate terrorism in the Sahel, the national army have to assume their natural position, leading field movements on the ground in the most dangerous areas of the region, which are gaining additional importance at present in light of the escalating wave of withdrawal by the most militarily involved international powers in the region.

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The Gordian Knot of Self-Defense Militias

6

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Introduction

The Sahel has been stricken by several insurmountable conflicts that have rocked its security and stability, and a confluence of factors has exacerbated the vulnerable security situation there. On the one hand, numerous terrorist and jihadist organizations have managed to consolidate their foothold in several Sahel states; on the other hand, insurgent movements have made the Sahel's territorial integrity hang in the balance, let alone the inter-communal conflicts that are of an ethnic nature and are fought over power, wealth, and resources. Amid this volatile security situation, non-state armed organizations came out as key actors at every level of these conflicts, challenging governments' monopoly on violence and giving rise to security, political, economic, and environmental crises. Self-defense militias, otherwise known as community protection groups, come at the top of these non-state armed actors. Initially, these groups were driven by their desire to provide protection

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to local communities given the major threats these communities faced, particularly amid the growing erosion of the Sahel states' capability to provide security and protection to their citizens. Yet, these groups later made an about-turn.

A close look at the map of self-defense militias in the Sahel would reveal they are widely dispersed, with practically every Sahel state having one form of self-defense militia or another. Although some of these militias managed in the short term to achieve their core purpose, i.e. warding off threats facing local communities, their presence spawned dilemmas that brought about further deterioration of the security situation instead of ameliorating it.

This paper addresses the ramifications of the presence of self-defense militias in the Sahel, with an emphasis on cases in Mali and Burkina Faso, by disentangling three key issues: the historical context of the emergence of these militias, their basic characteristics and their relationship with the state and local communities, and finally, the security, political, and economic dilemmas they create.

Origins and Historical Context

The number of self-defense militias saw an upsurge in the years following the 2012 Crisis in Mali, yet their history dates back to the early 1990s concomitantly with the Tuareg rebellion. At the time, the Malian government needed to urge communal militias to support government forces to capitalize on their familiarity with the region's geography and local dynamics. The goals of the state at the time converged with those of the local communities of the Songhai, Fulani, and Bozo, who were becoming increasingly critical of the Tuareg and refused to recognize them as representatives of the northern region's various ethnic groups. Numerous self-defense militias were formed during this period, most notably the Ganda Koy militia (literally meaning "Lords of the Land" in Songhai). Basically, Ganda Koy was formed by the Songhai with the aim of repelling the attacks of the Tuareg and Arabs (known in Mali as "the Whites") against the long-established and semi-nomadic groups of the Songhai and Fulani, causing the conflict to acquire a racial-ethnic dimension. Ganda Koy benefited from indirect support from the state that took many forms, including weapons and funds for fighters. By providing such support, the state was able to intervene in the conflict

without implicating the military. In 1996, Ganda Koy was dissolved and its combatants were integrated into the Malian forces and granted amnesty. However, in 2009, Ganda Koy was revived in what came to be known as the Ganda Iso militia (meaning “Sons of the Land” in Songhai). Ganda Iso aimed to provide self-defense for the Songhai community by deterring other communal militias¹.

However, repercussions of the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 brought about a paradigm shift in the self-defense militias’ map in Mali. Failing to confront the Tuareg rebels, the Malian state resorted to resurrecting Ganda Koy and putting Ganda Iso to use to reinforce government forces. Once again, the goals of the state converged with those of the local communities, particularly the Songhai, who sided with Mali’s territorial integrity². In addition to reviving old militias, new militias were created, including Dan Na Ambassagou (meaning “Hunters who Trust in God” in Dogon), a Dogon ethnic militia, Donso, a Bambara ethnic militia, and the Sékou Bolly militia, named after its founder who is a Malian entrepreneur. All of these militias have taken to defending their ethnic groups and enforcing the law in their zones of control, in addition to assisting the Malian army in facing Tuareg rebels and jihadist groups³. What’s more, inter-militia alliances were forged with the aim of mounting attacks on the Tuareg and terrorist groups in the north to restore areas controlled by them⁴.

The map of Mali’s self-defense militias is further complicated by the Arab and Tuareg militias that rejected the secession of northern Mali and the establishment of the Azawad state. Fearful of the political violence they might face from ethnic groups rejecting Tuareg separatism, the Tuareg established their own militia, Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA)⁵. The establishment of GATIA revealed the diverse motives behind self-defense groups. In addition to providing protection, local communities sought to be represented in the peace negotiations with the Malian government. If engaged in the peace negotiations, these groups shall share peace dividends with other armed groups. Besides, ethnic groups can use self-defense militias as leverage to benefit from the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs.

GATIA is a case in point. Its founders have stated that the group aims to protect the Arabs and Tuareg who oppose separatists, and that it is neither one of the movements that took up arms against the gov-

ernment nor calls for federalism, independence, or secession from Mali. Declarations from its officials have revealed a desire for a seat in the ongoing negotiations between the government and armed groups. Recently, GATIA's secretary-general questioned why only armed groups have been given a seat at the negotiation table⁶.

The same goes for self-defense groups set up by the Fulani in central Mali. After being shut out of the peace talks that took place in Algeria between June 2014 and February 2015, and due to their limited representation in the 2013 Ouagadougou Political Agreement (OPA) and the 2015 Bamako Peace Agreement (BPA) compared to other armed groups, there has been a shared sense among the Fulani that peace is being built without them, or maybe against them. They came to be convinced that taking up arms is the only way to bring grievances into the spotlight. This gave rise to calls for establishing self-defense militias.⁷ Against this setting, the Fulani's strive to get the state's support in forming self-defense militias becomes understandable. In Macina, for example, the Fulani leaders continued their efforts to raise funds, mobilize, recruit young people, and raise awareness of the importance of self-defense militias among the elite in Bamako. In May 2015, a delegation of tribal leaders headed to Bamako to convince the authorities of the importance of self-defense militias and their envisioned security role⁸.

In Niger, the government in Niamey resorted to setting up local self-defense militias, after its reliance on ethnic militias proved a failure, causing further exacerbation of the fragile security situation⁹. In Burkina Faso, the government took a similar path where it mobilized and recruited citizens to join volunteer militias to defend the land.

On the whole, local communities' motives for forming self-defense groups have varied considerably: some of them have emerged just to fill the security vacuum given the failure of state forces to provide security for them, while others were driven by the desire to rally political support and gain access to more funds from the DDR programs. While these differing motives do not necessarily reflect conflicting considerations, they definitely reflect divergent understandings of what domestic security is and how it can be achieved¹⁰.

Fundamental Characteristics

Self-defense groups in the Sahel vary widely in terms of their relationship with the state on the one hand and with local communities on the other. As regards the relationship with the state, a distinction can be made between two basic patterns. The first is the state-established self-defense militia, set up by the state with a view to maximize its own strength in the face of security threats, whether from Jihadist or rebel groups. This pattern prevails in several African regions that suffer security vulnerability, including the Sahel¹¹. The second pattern is the militias that emerged out of community-based initiatives but quickly received state backing through a variety of channels, including training, salaries, integration into formal security forces, etc. Nevertheless, state support may be direct and overt at times, or tacit at others, with both governments and militias denying it for certain reasons.

A typical example of state-established self-defense militias is the *Volontaires de défense de la Patrie* (VDP, or Homeland Defense Volunteers in English) in Burkina Faso. VDP came into existence in 2020, and was created on the back of existing self-defense groups in Burkina Faso such as the *Koglweog*. The VDP's close association with the state has been evidenced in statements by Burkinabé President Roch Kaboré, who gave his blessing to its establishment and described it as an "inclusive force" for components of Burkinabé society, confirming the right of every region, ethnicity, and religious denomination to have their own self-defense militias. However, the VDP's closer connection with the state is reflected in the recruitment and mobilization system. On paper, any Burkinabé citizen can apply to become a VDP member, but in reality, the recruitment process is mediated by the Committee for Village Development (CVD), village chiefs or the municipal administration (depending on the local political geography). The role of local authorities is to ensure that VDP members are deemed to be trustworthy by the community, and thus worthy of protecting their village. The decree regulating the VDP stipulates that being a retired member of the security forces or a member of local security initiatives can be an asset to VDP recruitment¹².

On the other side, there exist the militias that have emerged out of community-based initiatives to defend local communities against jihadist groups, rebels, or rival local communities. These come under

different labels, including that of “vigilantes”¹³. In Nigeria, for example, self-defense militias and vigilante groups are widespread. Examples of these groups include youth organizations that have been involved in fighting Boko Haram as community police forces. Weary of Boko Haram attacks, these youths were motivated to form a joint civilian task force to defend their communities. Nigeria’s local communities have long suffered from the poor response of security forces to their requests for assistance against Boko Haram attacks, and even when they have responded, they have treated the locals violently. Northern Nigeria abounds in this type of self-defense group, particularly in Borno State, where Yan Boko vigilante groups, each comprising 500 vigilantes, track Boko Haram elements¹⁴.

Additionally, other actors may step in to create or support self-defense militias. For example, many militias have been formed with backing from local businessmen whose goals align with those of the state. An exemplar of these militias is found in Northern Mali, where Arab merchants in Timbuktu and Gao have formed this kind of militia to protect their commercial interests. This received a positive response from the government, which equally endeavored to mobilize Arab leaders to fight insurgents¹⁵. In the Niger Delta, traditional leaders, local political elites, and multinational corporations have been involved in arming youth and self-defense groups, not only to provide security in the region, but also to consolidate their authority and power bases in these communities¹⁶.

Notably, the relationship between governments and community militias takes various forms. In some cases, it is close and obtrusive, with elements of the national army commanding these militia groups, as is the case with the self-defense militias funded by Malian businessmen like Dina Ould Daya and Omar Ould Ahmed, which are led by elements of the Malian Armed Forces (MAF)¹⁷. Conversely, there are cases where both the government and militias keep the relationship secret and continue to deny it. GATIA is the embodiment of this kind of relationship. Some argue that such denial aims to affirm the autonomous nature of the militias, which would guarantee them a seat at the negotiating table, a goal that would be practically unattainable if they are found, even distantly, to be tied to the government¹⁸.

This brings us to the second characteristic of self-defense militias: ethnicity. Self-defense militias are closely associated with ethnic groups. To return to the example of the VDP, we find that the recruitment process is restricted to the long-established groups that maintain relationships that qualify them to join these militias. If we add this to the fact that the vast majority of the VDP membership are former members of the Koglweogo self-defense militia, consisting of the Mossi and Gurma people, the predominantly ethnic character of this militia becomes apparent¹⁹. In other words, self-defense militias came to be widely seen as a manifestation of the hegemony of certain ethnicities over others. The Fulani, in contrast, rarely join these self-defense militias. Even the relatively few Fulani who join these militia are often elites or sedentary members rather than pastoralists²⁰.

If anything, the recruitment process dominated by local authorities is indicative of the discrimination the state has long practiced against pastoral communities and Bedouins, whose nomadic lifestyle has prevented them from forming connections with the village or regional authorities who would have facilitated their joining self-defense militias. This has made them less likely to be well-integrated and trusted enough to be picked by community leaders to be part of the VDP. In many respects, this marginalization seemed to be a replication of their underrepresentation in state systems that favor the Mossi ethnicity and marginalize pastoralist communities²¹.

Similarly, in Mali, Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso have been associated with the Songhai ethnicity, while the Donso militia was associated with the Bambara ethnicity²². In Niger, Arab and Tuareg self-defense militias were formed to confront the Fulani-affiliated terrorists²³. This ethnic homogeneity of self-defense militias has reinforced the ethnic identity of these militias.

Political, Security, and Economic Dilemmas

While self-defense militias emerged primarily to mitigate the impact of the Sahel's security crisis by filling the vacuum left by Sahel states, they had several undesired repercussions that undermined the already vulnerable security situation. These negative repercussions could be attributed to the militias' deviation from their goal and the state's failure to oversee these militias and regulate their conduct. In this section, we

will review the security, political, social, and economic implications to which self-defense militias have given rise.

The first implication is the rising level of violence among communities where self-defense militias operate. While self-defense militias were created primarily to bring about greater security to local communities, this has backfired. On one side, the rise of self-defense militias has contested the influence of armed terrorist organizations, which has provoked more violence from the latter in an attempt to impose their writ on local communities and villages where they operate. In Burkina Faso, for instance, the mobilization of self-defense groups was met with more violence and attacks from terrorist groups, engulfing these communities in a continuum of violence and counter-violence²⁴.

Furthermore, the ethnic nature of self-defense militias has provoked ethnic violence, with several self-defense militias engaging in assaults against other ethnicities, irrespective of whether they pose a security threat. Statistics speak volumes of this inter-ethnic violence. In Burkina Faso, for example, statistics indicate that 89 percent of VDP attacks in 2020 were mounted against Fulani civilians, with instances of arbitrary arrests, executions, torture, and rape being reported. In Niger, too, self-defense groups targeted the Fulani over perceptions associating them with terrorist groups²⁵.

This ethnic character of self-defense militias has perpetuated ethnic divides, given the political socialization process that takes place during recruitment, mobilization, and training. For example, in trainings, there is no shortage of elements that promote ethnic identity and deepen animosity towards other ethnicities. This trend has gone so far that, not surprisingly, several self-defense militias in northern Mali no longer see terrorist organizations as an enemy to be confronted. Rather, their principal enemy is the Tuareg, who are striving to establish an Azawad State on territories that were once held by the Mali, Songhai, and Ghana Empires. This anti-Tuareg rhetoric evokes the past enslavement of black Africans, which deepens racial and ethnic divisions between the components of Malian society²⁶. Terrorist groups have played on these emotions and capitalized on the ethnic tensions between these groups and the Tuareg. In some cases, they have gone further and provided militias with weapons. Seemingly, these strategies have paid off, as evidenced by the substantial numbers of Ganda Koy members joining the ranks of jihadist groups²⁷.

Aside from the political/ethnic aspect, conflict over resources has not been absent from the scene. Numerous self-defense militias have diverted from their main goal and engaged in disputes with other groups over wealth and resources, cashing on the notion of waging a war on terrorism to carry out vicious attacks against other communities that serve no purpose other than controlling resources and fertile lands²⁸.

While the implications of self-defense militias' activities are predominantly of a political and security nature, they are not without economic and environmental implications. Several studies have revealed the serious environmental impacts of armed militias in the Sahel²⁹, where overfishing and other environmental crimes have been recorded, which poses a threat to peace and security by undermining the rule of law, engaging in organized crime, and funding non-state actors. The engagement of self-defense militias in these illegal activities has been reflected in international reports that estimate the annual income of these militias in central Africa at \$4–12 billion. However, this figure does not take into account other illegal activities, including poaching, mining, and deforestation for coal production. This environmental threat was realized by the United Nations, which in 2014 deemed illegal poaching a threat to regional security³⁰.

These high revenues are perhaps attributable to the militias' control of a large part of the supply chain of these resources, particularly ivory. Gun ownership and having control over large areas of forests have enabled these militias to do over-fishing themselves, or, in some cases, assign the mission to other parties. Additionally, the militias' control transportation through cross-border networks, which facilitates these illegal activities³¹. It is worth noting that the militias' links to organized crime groups are often accepted by the state, which makes it difficult to end these practices unless the underlying issues that allowed the state to be implicated in organized crime activities are addressed³².

Additionally, a strategic dilemma posed by state-backed self-defense militias pertains to their destiny following the conclusion of conflicts with jihadists or rebels. In later stages, the state will need to recover its legitimate monopoly on violence. Re-attaining this exclusive role requires the state to disarm the militias and reintegrate its combatants into the government forces, a situation to which the militias will mostly respond violently. Having enjoyed the merits of gun ownership and

bringing local communities under their thumb by providing security and defense services, these militias are not likely to renounce these benefits and will resist the state's demobilization efforts. Here, mediators can play a vital role. In September 2018, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) engaged in successful mediation on behalf of the national authorities of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and managed to facilitate a ceasefire agreement with armed border militias. However, when the Malian government sought to dissolve the Dan Na Ambassadors self-defense militia in implementation of the agreement signed by HD, the militia threatened to target the state if dissolved or disarmed, demanding the government provide guarantees before any disarmament initiatives are proposed³³.

In practice, two key factors make it difficult to control these militias and bring them under the state's authority. The first of these factors is the hierarchy of these militias and the way they operate. While these militias have established a strong presence on the ground, they lack a powerful centralized leadership. So, they tend to respond to local dynamics rather than to a clearly structured hierarchy. Second, these groups have no clear political agenda. This renders negotiations with them – whether geared towards dissolution or disarmament – challenging³⁴.

At the political level, self-defense militias have had a significant effect on the balance of power, as they have been positioned politically to bolster the influence of pro-state militias or undermine the influence of ones less favorable to the authorities. In Mali, several militias have enjoyed the exclusive support of the Malian government, which has had considerable repercussions on the security situation in northern and central Mali. The state support given to specific militias at the expense of others gave these militias legitimacy, causing the local balance of power to tilt in their favor. As such, merely belonging to a specific community or an ethnic group came to be systematically interpreted on the local security scene as signifying opposition to, or support of, the state³⁵. For instance, in Mali, the Donso militias were considered legitimate simply because they assisted the MAF. So, since the state is perceived as supporting the communities protected by the Donsos, then other communities that mobilize against the Donsos are presumed to be a “new de facto opposition to the state”³⁶.

However, legitimacy has not come only from alliance with the government. The 2015 Peace Accord assigned security roles to armed

groups, which granted them legitimacy. Such legitimacy was regarded as a *carte blanche* for the militias to commit more violations against civilians. Hence, armed actors came to operate publicly instead of concealing their identities. This new situation has led communities to develop self-defense strategies that were evidenced by the proliferation of community armed groups in central Mali³⁷.

Conclusion

Self-defense militias are a pervasive phenomenon in most African countries whose institutions suffer structural weakness that precludes the full performance of their functions, particularly those pertaining to citizen security. The Sahel is the embodiment of this phenomenon. Given the structural vulnerability of their institutions and considering the various threats that face their local communities, Sahel states have resorted to self-defense militias as an instrument to bring security to local communities. However, the results on the ground were disappointing. On one level, the historical context of these militias gave rise to patterns of “militia-state” relations that strengthened the influence of the militias over governments. On another level, ethnic identity heavily characterized these militias, which made them conflict-fueling rather than being a catalyst for restoring security and stability to these communities.

Any approach to regulate the conduct of self-defense militias has to simultaneously address three dilemmas: the diversion of these militias from their original goals; the imbalance between achieving security and the state’s restoration of its monopoly on force; and the future of these militias in the post-conflict era.

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Joint Regional Counterterrorism Efforts

7

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Introduction

The African Sahel region¹ is one of the regions that suffers most from the growing threats of transnational terrorism in Africa. This was pointed out by the Global Terrorism Index 2020, which listed Boko Haram as the second most dangerous and bloodiest terrorist group in the world, and the first in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019². Furthermore, it also pointed out that the states of the region were majorly affected by the terrorist acts and activities. Over the last five years, Nigeria has ranked third globally for countries most affected by terrorism, with Mali and Burkina Faso ranking 11th and 12th respectively, and Niger and Chad in the 24th and 34th positions respectively. Mauritania – according to the index – is the country least affected among the countries of the region, where it came in the 135th place³.

According to World Bank figures from 2019, the growing phenomenon of terrorism is linked to various structural difficulties, one of which is high poverty rates, which affect between 30 and 40 percent

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of the population⁴. Another explanation could be the region's slowing economic development, which now stands at -0.9 percent in Chad, -1.6 percent in Mali, -1.5 percent in Mauritania, 0.2 percent in Burkina Faso, and 1.5 percent in Niger, according to World Bank 2020 statistics⁵. In addition, the region's states are ranked among the 10 lowest in the world on to the Human Development Index 2020, with the exception of Mauritania, which is 157th. Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso are ranked 187, 184, and 182 respectively⁶. Additionally, their rankings on the Fragile States Index 2021 have risen. Chad and Nigeria, for example, are placed seventh and 12th in the world, respectively, out of a total of 179 countries⁷.

Terrorism's roots in this region can be traced back to the 1990s, particularly in Algeria, when the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria developed during the country's civil conflict. As a result of internal schisms over the strategy of attacking civilians, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat was created independently in 1998. It was then renamed Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and announced its affiliation with Al-Qaeda in 2006. This was followed by the creation of other terrorist groups in the region. Most notably, Boko Haram, formerly known as the Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad, emerged in 2002 and remained active on the operational level after the murder of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Also, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa emerged in 2010.

Following the fall of former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi's regime in February 2011, the number of terrorist groups in this region increased significantly, primarily in southern Algeria, eastern Mauritania, northern Mali, and southwestern Niger. This was exacerbated by internal instability in Mali following the outbreak of the civil conflict there, which involved a Tuareg rebellion in the north and a military coup in March 2012. Other groups that sprang up in the region include Ansar Dine, which appeared in 2011, Al-Mourabitoun in January 2013, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in 2015, and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims⁸.

Collaborative regional efforts to counter terrorist threats have been taking shape, at least since the mid-2010s, and have assumed various forms. Some occurred at the multilateral institutional level, within the framework of regional economic groupings, while others occurred

through an anti-terrorism alliance of regional states. This study aims to cover regional counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel.

Counterterrorism Efforts in the Sahel

The objective of this aspect of the study is to highlight the actual reality of the various multilateral frameworks or initiatives by African States in the Sahel region that they have initiated and implemented to address the threats and risks associated with transnational terrorist groups. This is as follows:

1. Multinational taskforce to combat Boko Haram

Boko Haram began its terrorist operations against the central government of Nigeria after the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009. The group's new leader, Abubakar Shekau, declared jihad against the government and the US in 2010⁹. Although the group has concentrated and intensified its operations in northeastern Nigeria, since 2014 it has carried out terrorist attacks in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger¹⁰. The group has been ranked as the second most dangerous and bloody group in the world, and the first in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019, according to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index¹¹.

In March 2014, the Ministers of Defense and the Chad Basin Commission in Yaoundé adopted a resolution on the establishment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram and achieve peace and security in the region. This was in response to the deteriorating security situation in the Lake Chad region, Boko Haram's control over northwestern Nigeria, and the increasing spread of violence in Nigeria's regional neighbors¹².

This force actually formed on the basis of a decision by the Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State and Governments of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), held in Niamey, Niger, on 7 October 2014¹³. Its deployment time limit of 12 months was issued by the African Peace and Security Council, which recommended a total of approximately 7,500 military, police and civilian personnel. The force was deployed on 29 January 2015, and its numerical strength gradually increased to about 10,000. As part of the meeting of the African Peace and Security Council held on 3 March 2015, it rose again to about 11,150, which was within the framework of the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff of the States of the Commission

participating in this force in August 2015. The total strength of the Force currently stands at approximately 10,000 military personnel¹⁴.

The force's origins date back to 1994, when Nigeria established it to eliminate transnational crime in the Lake Chad basin and to facilitate free movement across the northeastern border of Nigeria. Although the force was initially constituted primarily of Nigerian army soldiers, it functioned in liaison and collaboration with the security agencies of member states of the LCBC¹⁵, and its forces were located in the Nigerian town of Baga in the state of Borno. By 1998, this force had expanded into a multinational force, with troops from Chad joining. The force was mandated at this point to address common transnational security challenges in the Lake Chad Basin. The establishment of the force had resulted in a relative improvement in the security situation in the region, until 2009, when Boko Haram appeared on the scene and led to a renewed deterioration of the security situation¹⁶.

Since its official launch in 2014, the force has included the member states of the Lake Chad Commission (Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon), as well as Benin as a non-member state. Nigeria contributes the bulk of this force and has been given leadership. Its headquarters is located in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena. The force's operational domain encompasses four main sectors: Mora in Cameroon, Baga-Sola in Chad, Baga in Nigeria, and Diffa in southwestern Niger. Furthermore, the force operates under the direct leadership and authority of the Heads of State and Governments of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and the African Union – as a strategic and technical partner in cooperation with the Executive Secretariat of the Commission – and is contributing to increasing the effectiveness of its operations.

The mandate given to the force was to undertake several key tasks, including creating a secure environment in areas affected by Boko Haram and other terrorist groups, facilitating the implementation of stabilization programs by participating states, including the full restoration of state authority, the return of refugees and displaced persons, facilitating humanitarian operations, and distributing assistance to the population in areas affected by Boko Haram activity. This is in addition to preventing any arms supplies to the group, as well as carrying out certain operations in the human rights, information, media and intelligence fields¹⁷.

This joint force works in close coordination and cooperation with

some international partners at the strategic and technical levels, primarily the UK, France, and the US, through what is known as the Coordination and Communication Center. Moreover, it works in partnership with some international organizations, including the UN, the European Union, and the African Union¹⁸.

The Lake Chad Basin Commission has endorsed the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience (RSS), as part of improving regional capacities to tackle the Boko Haram threat in affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin States. This was included in the framework of the Commission's 30 August 2018 Ministerial Council, which was approved by the African Union Peace and Security Council, and it aimed to provide a comprehensive regional approach to addressing the root causes of limited development and the spread of violent extremism and conflict in the Lake Chad region.

The strategy focuses on eight target regions in four member countries, including three Nigerian states (Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa), the Niger city of Diffa, two Chadian provinces (Lake Chad and Hadjer-Lamis), and Cameroon's northern and far northern regions. Additionally, it is based on nine main strategic pillars, and defines the broad perspective of the strategy's objectives, which are represented in: political cooperation, security and human rights, disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of Boko Haram-affiliated individuals, humanitarian assistance, governance and social contract, socio-economic recovery and environmental sustainability, education, learning and skills, prevention of violent extremism and peace-building, as well as empowerment and inclusion of women and youth. Although the responsibility for implementing this strategy rests with the Commission, it is the outcome of extensive consultations by the experts of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the African Union Commission and relevant United Nations agencies and programs¹⁹.

The Regional Stabilization Facility (RSF) was established on the sidelines of the Lake Chad Basin Governor's Second Forum, which was held in Niger on 18 July 2019 in order to facilitate the implementation of the strategy. The facility is considered a funding mechanism based on the mobilization of an estimated \$100 million to support intervention activities in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. It has been developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the support of some international institutions, like the European Union,

African Development Bank, as well as countries including Germany, Sweden, Britain and the Netherlands.

This facility is based on four main pillars of intervention: governance and the social contract, socio-economic recovery and environmental sustainability, prevention of violent extremism and peace-building, and empowerment and inclusion of women and youth. This facility is divided into two types of components, the first being to achieve stability within 18 months, which is part of some targeted areas (enhancing community security and safety, restoring basic infrastructure and providing basic services, and providing job opportunities for families in affected communities). The second is to strengthen the capacity of the Lake Chad Basin Commission to implement the strategy, strengthen transnational cooperation and coordination, and assist in the development of regional action plans and coordination mechanisms²⁰.

2. G5: Joint force in the Sahel

The Joint Force of the Sahel States (Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel, FC-G5S) was officially launched on 2 July 2017 by the five Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) during the Sahel Countries Summit in Bamako, Mali. The force was established to tackle the region's escalating terrorist threats, and was given a mandate by the African Union Peace and Security Council in a resolution passed on 13 April 2017 for a duration of 12 months²¹. The mandate has been renewed multiple times, most recently on 13 July for a 12-month period²². At meeting number 7979 on 21 June 2017, the Security Council also approved resolution 2359 on the deployment of such a force to the territories of the Sahel states to combat terrorism and transnational crime²³. Additionally, the Council, at the initiative of France, adopted resolution 2391 on 8 December 2017 on providing operational and logistical support to the Common Force of the Five Sahel States through the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)²⁴.

The Sahel States of Africa's joint force consists of 5,000 soldiers divided into seven battalions and distributed across three sectors: the western sector (Mali and Mauritania), the central sector (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), and the eastern sector (Chad and Niger). Furthermore, follow-up centers no more than 50 kilometers apart have been established along the international borders of the region's states to monitor national

troops carrying out joint operations or pursuing objectives beyond the borders of states²⁵. The tasks and specialties of this force are combating transnational terrorism, crime and human trafficking, contributing in the implementation of a development strategy in the Sahel region, as well as playing a part in the restoration of refugees and displaced persons²⁶. The headquarters of this force is in Mali, specifically in the city of Sévaré in central Mali, and are led by General Didier Dakco, the former Chief of Staff of the Mali Armed Forces, with three other sub-commands: the first is in the Liptako-Gourma border area between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, the second is in the border area between Mali and Mauritania, and the third is in the border area between Niger and Chad²⁷.

In this context, it should be noted that the force is a member of the Group of Five Sahel States, an international cooperation framework comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The permanent headquarters of the Secretariat of the Assembly is located in Nouakchott²⁸. The organizational structure of the five Sahel States consists of: the Conference of Heads of State, which establishes strategic directions and options, the Ministerial Council responsible for implementing the policy of the Group of Five (G-5), which is determined by the Conference of Heads of State, the Permanent Secretariat, which is under the authority of the Council and manages its decisions (its term of office is four years), the Security and Defense Committee comprising Chiefs of Staff and Delegated Representatives, and finally the National Committees for the Coordination of the Work of the Group of Five Sahel States in each member state, accountable to the Permanent Secretariat and under the authority of ministers responsible for development²⁹.

The force has already performed 17 successful joint operations, the first of which was Operation Hawbi, which was completed with the armies of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in November 2017³⁰. Furthermore, its most recent operation, Sama-3, was launched in March 2021 to reinforce and consolidate the results of Sama-2, which was conducted on 1 August 2020, in coordination with the French-led Operation Barkhane, with the goal of improving security and building trust between the joint force and the civilian population. This enables the gradual restoration of the national armed troops and local authorities, while also empowering civilian and military programmes and consolidating authority over the territory secured during the Sama-1 operation. Operation Sama-2 concluded on 31 January 2021, having contributed to

ongoing pressure on armed and terrorist groups as well as increased trust between the army and the civilian population³¹.

The approximate annual budget for the operations of the force amounts to €450–500 million and should cover the cost of establishing the force's command posts and operational costs for one year. Each of the five states pledged to contribute approximately €10 million³². Furthermore, the European Union, which is the largest supporter of this force, has pledged to increase its financial support from \$61 million to \$143 million and to invest some \$9.8 billion in development assistance in the African Sahel region within an estimated period of five years. This was in the framework of the conference held in Brussels, Belgium, in February 2018.

France is also supporting this army with equipment and military training worth €8 million, and has pledged to provide an estimated \$1.5 billion in development assistance over a five-year period. France and Germany have given around \$21.7 million and have launched several initiatives to raise the financial contributions needed to meet the needs of the force through bilateral contributions. These efforts have resulted in an increase in financial contributions from Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Japan, Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have pledged an estimated \$100 million and \$30 million respectively, and the US has pledged some \$60 million³³.

3. Accra counterterrorism initiative

The Accra Initiative, launched by Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo, is one of the multilateral regional frameworks for countering terrorism in the Sahel region. Furthermore, given their proximity to coastal states and their respective counter-terrorism expertise, Mali and Niger were admitted as observers in the same year in September 2017. This initiative is based on an organizational structure consisting of a permanent national security secretariat based in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, and focal points in each of the member states. Its primary goal is to prevent the spread of terrorism and to combat transnational organized crime and violent extremism in member countries' border areas³⁴.

This initiative is based on three basic pillars: information and intelligence exchange, training of security and intelligence personnel, as well as joint cross-border military operations. Meetings on the initiative are

held at two levels: The first is quarterly meetings at the level of heads of security and intelligence services, and the second is meetings at the level of government ministers responsible for security³⁵. This initiative carried out a cooperative security mission known as Operation Koundanglou I, which was completed in May 2018 by Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo, as well as Benin as an observer. In November of the same year, it also completed Koundanglou II, which included Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as Mali as an observer. Afterwards, Togo and Ghana completed Koundanglou III. The three operations resulted in the capture of a substantial number of terrorist organization members as well as the sources of their weapons³⁶.

This initiative has several strengths, including the fact that it does not rely on a large governance structure, but rather on a central coordination mechanism, represented by the permanent secretariat, and multiple sub-focal points; this reduces bureaucratic constraints and facilitates communication and cooperation. Periodic meetings of security and intelligence chiefs greatly contribute to confidence-building, as well as upholding the program as a truly African initiative to be funded by member states rather than relying on external funds, giving it the political autonomy required for success.

Assessment of Counterterrorism Efforts

As previously stated, cooperative regional efforts to combat transnational terrorism in the Sahel have been numerous and have had some relative success in terms of strengthening security in states where transnational terrorist groups or those affected by their activities and operations are based. This is accomplished by enhancing central governments' authority and control, as well as lowering the different risks posed by such groups. However, these efforts are very limited compared to international (non-African) efforts, which have been crystallized in a number of frameworks and initiatives launched by international forces – whether individually or multilaterally – in the Sahel region.

France, as the former colonial power of the five Sahelian states, is at the forefront of the international community's counterterrorism efforts in this region. France's role in this regard began to unfold in the early 2010s, as its national interests have been affected by the threats associated with the spread of cross-border terrorism in the region. France launched

Operation Serval in Mali in January 2013 following the continued internal conflict after the coup that overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012. This was followed by Operation Barkhane in August 2014, which is supposed to last until the first quarter of 2022³⁷, to be replaced by alternative arrangements including the Takuba Task Force (TTF), launched on 27 March 2020³⁸ and led by France, which consists of troops from eight European countries³⁹.

The limited effectiveness of joint regional counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel region can be explained by a set of key factors:

1. Deficit in financial allocations

There is a state of limited financial resources available to Sahel states, both individually and multilaterally through the African Union and regional economic groupings, to support regional counterterrorism efforts, thus driving reliance on external funding that is based on the self-interest of donors.

For example, the European Union is the largest supporter of the work of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram; it signed an agreement with the African Union Commission in August 2016 that runs until the end of December 2020.

The European Union Commission contributed €44.7 million through the African Peace Facility (APF) to improve effective regional coordination and command of military operations by providing assets for the force's operation, such as medical services, communications equipment, and others. This is one of the aspects of the European Union's expanded and integrated strategy to support the stabilization and economic recovery of the Lake Chad Basin Commission's countries, where more than 700 million euros have been allocated to the region, including humanitarian assistance, a risk trust fund, and stability financing⁴⁰.

Although the African Union received financial support from the European Union, it did not reach the Lake Chad Basin Commission until two years after the operation of the force in 2017, which disrupted its operation and made Nigeria bear the costs of operation in those two years⁴¹.

2. Operational and logistical difficulties

There is a shortage of suitable transportation as well as a scarcity of equipment and supplies to support military deployment on the ground, limiting their efficiency. Soldiers from the Chadian battalion serving

in the Five-Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5s), for example, are compelled to travel more than 200km by road from N'Guimi to Niamey, Niger. There are also inadequate medical capabilities, which represents a problem in all sectors, and the common force lacks the requisite air capacity to properly undertake counterterrorism measures. A more efficient intelligence system is also required⁴².

This type of constraint also hampers the effectiveness of the Accra Initiative to Counterterrorism in the Sahel Region of Africa, which is reflected in the limited temporal and spatial scope of military operations and the limited intelligence capabilities of member states. This leads to poor tracking and effective control of the movement of extremist groups across their borders, as well as obstacles in the diversity of languages used between states, such as English-speaking Ghana and their French-speaking counterparts, which have often impeded effective communication⁴³.

3. Weak military capabilities

The Sahel countries lack the military capabilities required to combat transnational terrorist threats. Furthermore, according to world rankings, they rank low in terms of the military strength of their national armies in 2021. For example, Burkina Faso and Mauritania are in the 129th and 126th positions, respectively, out of a total of 140 States⁴⁴. At the level of military spending, Mauritania and Mali are in the 133rd and 129th positions, respectively, at \$40 million and \$65 million⁴⁵.

The inadequate numerical strength of the military is one of the constraints on the five-Sahel Joint Force (FC5-G5s) estimated at some 5,000. The provinces of Mali, Gao, Kidal, Mopti and Timbuktu, require a total troop number of 90,000 to 112,000, which is three times the size of the Malian Army, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the French Operation Barkhane, which together stand at 33,000. This is explained by the limited number of military forces belonging to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, at a ratio of 20–25 soldiers per 1,000 people in the population⁴⁶.

Because of the aforementioned facts, these countries are forced to rely on foreign military assistance. For example, the European Union is providing missions in support of the defense and internal security of Sahel countries to strengthen the capacity of the central authority to counter terrorism, such as the European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM), which is composed of approximately 700 troops from

25 European States, 22 of which are members and three of which are non-members. Furthermore, it was launched on 20 February 2013 at the request of Mali's president on 24 December 2012, and its mandate was extended for four years beginning 18 May 2020⁴⁷. There is also the European Union Civil Crisis Management Mission in Mali and the European Union Civil Crisis Management Mission in Niger. The former was established on 15 January 2015, and its mandate runs until 31 January 2023⁴⁸. Moreover, the latter was launched in 2021, and its mandate runs until 30 September 2022⁴⁹.

4. Human Rights violations

Several cases of abuses and violations by forces during efforts to combat terrorism in the Sahel have been reported, which may result in the local population rejecting their role. For example, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUS-MA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported numerous security incidents in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger that were classified as human rights violations. Direct responsibility for a number of these incidents has been identified in the elements of the Five Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5s).

Soldiers from the eighth Chadian battalion of the joint force in Tera, Niger, were involved in sexual violence in the period between 15 and 27 March 2021. This resulted in the establishment of an internal investigation committee on 30 March 2021, the dispatching of a delegation led by the Commander of the Central Sector to give instructions to troops in the city of Tera and to meet with provincial and community leaders in an effort to reassure the local population. This took place on 31 March 2021⁵⁰.

5. Limited solidarity and regional integration

There is a current state of weakness in the Sahel states' common regulatory response to terrorist threats and dangers, where their collective interaction is dependent on the extent of the direct threat to their territory or regions, leading them to prefer individual or bilateral actions in the face of such threats. This is exacerbated by the fact that not all of the region's states are members of a single regional economic grouping, which enforces various sorts of inter-arrangements relating to terrorism. For example, the participating states, either under the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram (MNJTF) or the

Joint Force of the Five Sahel States (FC-G5s), do not belong to the same sub-regional groupings.

Furthermore, there are certain inconsistencies and contradictions in the military commitments by the region's states to the numerous regional counterterrorism operations. Chad and Niger participated in the Multinational Joint Task Force to Fight Boko Haram (MNJTF) with around 10,000 and 2,000 troops, respectively, and are also involved in the Joint Five-Coast Force (FCF-G5s) with approximately 600 and 1300 troops, respectively⁵¹; although Chad's participation has gone down to 1,200 troops. Its participation was reduced in late August 2021 due to concerns connected to the local necessity for these forces to maintain security in the transitional phase following the assassination of former President Idriss Déby in April of that year⁵². This is complicated further by both countries' participation in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, with 1,466 and 900 troops, respectively⁵³.

Conclusion

For any future vision aimed at strengthening counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, it is critical to focus on several key aspects, the most important of which is to shift away from the traditional approach based on military confrontation and toward a comprehensive approach based on the implementation of preventive measures that address the structural causes of extremism and terrorism. It is also necessary to reinforce the procedures for implementing the legal and institutional frameworks for preventing and countering terrorism in the Sahel, as well as to provide the required financial, technological, human, and information resources. This is necessary to prevent and combat transnational terrorism, by strengthening cooperation between the states of the region in order to diminish external dependence in this regard. Additionally, it is important to strengthen coordination and cooperation between African institutional frameworks (African Peace and Security Council), the sub-regional (Economic Community of West African States and the Lake Chad Basin Commission) and the international (UN Security Council), which are related to preventing and combating terrorism.

The Sahel countries could benefit from African support from outside the region, similar to what Egypt has provided for counterterrorism

operations in the Sahel, by hosting the headquarters of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States' Counterterrorism Center in mid-2018, as well as the joint military exercises that were held as part of the framework of The Sahel-Saharan Community, which were hosted by the Mohamed Naguib military base in 2018 and 2019⁵⁴. At the development level, Egypt has supported the peace-building system in post-conflict countries and signed an agreement with the African Union Commission to host the headquarters of the African Union Centre for Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development. This was on the sidelines of the first edition of the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development held in Aswan on 11 December 2019⁵⁵.

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A Review of the French Official Documents and Testimonies

8

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Introduction

France has historically played an instrumental role in shaping the political and security dynamics of the Sahel. As such, a deep understanding of France's positions on the Sahel becomes of supreme importance, particularly given that France is currently conducting an extensive review of its policies in the Sahel following 10 years of direct intervention. This analytical study builds primarily on reports from past decades from the French Senate and National Assembly, French press publications over the past year, academic papers, the memoirs by former presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, as well as a few books including Samuel Laurent's *Sahelistan* from 2013, which looks into the repercussions of the collapse Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya on the region.

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France in the Sahel: Threat, Opportunity, and Intervention

Since the turn of the millennium, France has been following with great concern the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel-Saharan region. These French concerns were expressed in the French White Paper on Defense and National Security of 2018 in its assessment of the security situation of the Sahel, from Mauritania to Somalia. According to the report, “the frequent shortcomings of state structures and the expansion of no-go zones, rent-based economies profiting a tiny minority, and the existence of criminal networks with substantial military means at their disposal, are all factors giving cause for concern.” The report touches on the threats to French interests in the Sahel: “Africa’s problems have a direct impact on our interests in the shape of illegal immigration, religious radicalization in Muslim areas, and the emergence of fundamentalist sects in Christian areas, terrorist groups claiming allegiance to Al-Qaeda putting down roots, the emergence of new drug routes, illegal arms trafficking, proliferation networks, money laundering, and health risks.”

However, France does not only view the Sahel as a source of threats, but a major opportunity that could be taken advantage of, as is embodied in the familiar mantra, “l’Afrique n’est pas seulement partie prenante de notre histoire, mais aussi un élément clé de notre avenir”¹ [Africa is not only part of our history, but also a key part of our future]. In effect, millions of French nationals are of African origin, and the number of French-speaking Africans allows French to remain a global language. Additionally, Africa is rich in resources and is a major market that continues to grow, which makes it a draw for major powers².

In 2013, France started its military intervention in Mali and since then the National Assembly and the Senate have issued several reports on the situation in Mali, its development and deterioration from different perspectives. These reports were prepared by prominent members including Gérard Larcher, president of the Senate, and former ministers, most notably Jean-Pierre Chevènement, former minister of defense, and Jean-Marie Bockel, former Under-Secretary of State for International Cooperation and Francophonie.

Similarly, the 2013 White Paper on Defense and National Security touched on the crisis in Mali, noting that it “illustrates the importance of the region and the seriousness, for Europe, of the threats emerging there. Internal tensions in the north of Mali and between the north and south of the country, combined with a weakening of Mali’s government, fostered the establishment of terrorist groups. After capitalizing on the trafficking endemic to this part of the Sahara, these groups were able to establish rear bases before then seeking to take control of the whole country, threatening to transform the whole of this sub-region into a hotbed of international terrorism.”³

The assessments of the 2017 Defense and National Security Strategic Review were no different, but the review touched on additional factors, including the impact of technology democratization on the capacity-development of jihadist groups⁴, the emergence of domestic incubators of terror⁵, the expansion of Al-Qaeda, the visibility of Daesh, and the resilience of Boko Haram. The review also tackled risks of the transfer of terrorism in the region, highlighting the interplay between the security situation in Libya and the Sahel⁶ and underlining France’s central goal of building up the military capabilities of African countries⁷.

Eventually, the Strategic Update of February 2021 pointed out that the terrorist threat is “advancing southwards to the point of threatening the stability of the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea.” However, the report said that “stabilization and development efforts in the Sahel are beginning to bear fruit”, attributing this success to the increased European and international involvement in Mali. On the opposite side, the review made it clear that the disintegration of Sahel states and the fragility of their institutions is nurturing the persistence of armed groups of all types, whether religious, ideological, or criminal. That said, the low ambition of the EU’s operational engagements in the Sahel was censured elsewhere in the report⁸.

Notably, the French official rhetoric seems to point the finger at the Malian government, even if parliamentary reports acknowledged the poor performance of the French development aid monitoring bodies⁹. Overall, the review focused mainly on the emerging confrontations between regional and major powers, but not without holding the Sahel states responsible for the current situation. Mention of the Sahel region was made in the context of discussing ways to intensify cooperation on a European scale¹⁰, where a section was dedicated to discussing France’s

approach to collaboration with the Sahel states' armies, starting from providing training to strengthening their military capabilities¹¹.

French Readings of the Sahel Crisis

Complementarily, a series of reports by the bicameral legislature of France, the press, and the academic community put forward multiple interpretations for the Sahel crisis. At large, there is unanimity among political actors, analysts and journalists putting responsibility for the Sahel's deteriorating situation on Sahel states, particularly Mali, albeit with differing views on the possibility of implementing reforms in the Sahel and reforming Sahel states' practices towards their populations. On the one hand, parliamentary reports see reform as achievable, in which military action is essential but not sufficient. Academia, on the other hand, see reform as generally impossible, or at least not feasible owing to the French military intervention that protects and strengthens the Sahelian state and instills a sense of security among officials, leaving them with no motivation for reform.

For its part, the French press focuses on blunders and abuses, including honest-mistake killing of civilians, compares France's goals against what has been achieved, and investigates how France's engagement in Libya makes inroads into its engagement in the Sahel. For example, in the book *Sahelistan*, the author explains how Mokhtar Belmokhtar's terrorist group was involved in cigarette smuggling, with an annual revenue of \$300 million. In southern Libya, Belmokhtar came to be known as Mr. Marlboro, with his group accumulating enormous wealth from cigarette smuggling, allowing them to pay multi-million-dollar bribes¹².

In his book *'Une guerre perdue, la France au Sahel' (A Lost War: France in the Sahel)*¹³, Marc-Antoine Pérouse points out that the French intervention was a losing bet, building on fatal mistakes in diagnosis and resulting in grave consequences, particularly after it evolved into a quasi-permanent intervention, having its scope broadened from repulsing an invasion to building states, developing their military capabilities, improving their performance and governance, and the continuation of military operations. According to Pérouse, the strategy that guided the transition from Operation Serval to Operation Barkhane was not deemed a success, given the considerable challenges, the conduct of local elites, and the geographical landscape of African countries. Fulfill-

ing the established goals of intervention came at a heavy price that was beyond the capacity of France and the EU.

The book put forward several lessons that proved to be true, most notably the hesitation to endorse local authorities' classification of certain groups as terrorist, and that jihadist groups are not like political parties and organizations that have strict hierarchies, and that they enjoy support from local populations who find them preferable to violations from the state, armed forces, police, and tax collectors. In many instances, the proliferation of terrorism in the Sahel has been accompanied by insurgencies. When it comes to Al-Qaeda and Daesh, the book reduces the relevance of local terrorist organizations' allegiances to Al-Qaeda and Daesh, and downplays the involvement of these organizations in terrorism and organized crime and their ties to terrorist groups in Libya.

Bicameral reports, on the other hand, addressed the roots of the Sahel crisis, concluding that there can be no security without development,¹⁴ nor development without security¹⁵. The history of French-Malian relations is – in part – a tale of development aid that failed to serve its purpose, pushing France towards a costly military intervention that resulted in a reduction in development aid.

The limited space here does not allow for a detailed analysis of the findings and recommendations put forward by the National Assembly and the Senate committees nor for a review of the evolution of perspectives of the legislature and the executive branch. However, the views expressed in these reports were largely consistent.

For instance, the bicameral reports make no mention of the failure of the French intervention in the Sahel and draw a distinction between the military and economic aspects. As far as the military dimension is concerned, they take the view that Operation Serval has been successful in halting the advance of armed groups towards Bamako, forcing them to push back and inflicting heavy losses on them, which resulted in the government's restoration of territories in northern Mali. Operation Barkhane, which was led in cooperation with the G5 Sahel states, succeeded in degrading the military capability of the jihadist groups, leaving them incapable of carrying out attacks similar to those that were about to bring the Malian regime down in 2012.

The Sahel's Tough Structural Challenges

A report issued by the Senate in June 2016¹⁶ tackled a number of structural challenges in the Sahel states. Below, we detail these challenges.

1. Overpopulation and Immigration

The report cites views of development experts who see the population growth rate as an impediment to development in the Sahel. Mali, for instance, has an annual population growth rate of over 3 percent, while this rate is approximately 4 percent in Niger. Nigerien women have the highest fertility rate in the world. This could be attributed to early marriage and lack of education. Culture also plays a part. In Chad, the rising fertility rate is recognized by the prevailing culture as being low. In Burkina Faso, half of women marry before 18. Contraceptives are lacking in most Sahel regions. Additionally, Sahel states' leaders generally refuse birth control policies as they see overpopulation as a guarantee for their countries to gain weight on the international arena.

Overpopulation has a bearing on immigration. In West Africa, there are 7.5 million migrants, most of whom have been internally-displaced. There has been forced displacement from regions like northern Mali and the shores of Lake Chad. The heavy presence of the displaced in many countries like the Ivory Coast and Libya gave rise to turmoil that forced them to return to their home countries. These high population rates entail heavy spending on education and health, and mean these countries have a low percentage of working-age people in their population.

2. Growth Bereft of Development

According to the report, economic growth rates in the Sahel are relatively high, amounting to over 5 percent, but overpopulation makes this economic growth less meaningful. However, the report describes the economic growth in the Sahel as "shallow", being restricted to specific sectors of the economy, the performance of which does not reflect on other sectors and only generates limited job opportunities. The majority of jobs in the agriculture sector are characterized by low productivity or are generated through the informal sector. While Sahel states are rich in natural resources, these resources are not adequately utilized as they are mainly concentrated in unsafe areas controlled by jihadists and criminals. There is also no certainty that the efficient exploitation of these

resources would be sufficient to bring these countries out of the poverty circle. Take Niger, for example. It is the third producer of uranium in the world, yet the lowest ranked on the Human Development Index.

In theory, the agriculture and livestock sector could be a strength for Sahelian economies, but it suffers serious disruptions. The majority of smallholders are women, as men migrate to cities for work. Furthermore, the agricultural sector has suffered years of drought, a state of insecurity, government corruption, and limited capabilities (e.g. slaughterhouses and cooling rooms). Perhaps this explains why the region continues to depend on imported food commodities and why millions of its population are still suffering extreme malnutrition.

The industry sector, on the other side, is slow-growing, contributing less than 10 percent to the GDP, which renders it ineffective in fixing the problem of unemployment. This poor performance could be ascribed to the hostile-business environment, conflicting legislation, instability, and corruption, in addition to the high-energy prices, vulnerable markets, and the poor road and transportation networks. Among all Sahel states, Mali's situation is the worst, given the tourism sector collapse, the absence of any progress on governance and anti-corruption measures, the inefficient tax system, and the lack of legislation reforms. Moreover, economic growth has not boosted the purchasing power of individuals.

3. Complex Conflicts

The Sahel-Sahara region is an arena of extremely complicated conflicts, where several factors overlap to create an intricate scene. On the one hand, the region is rife with ethnic conflicts, most notably the Tuareg rebellion. On the other hand, several Sahel states, including Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, have experienced recurrent military coups that adversely affected their stability, much less protest movements that call for increased transparency, greater justice, and more democracy. The wide development gap between the north and the south is a key driver of these protests. Additionally, the scarcity of resources gives rise to atrocious conflicts on arable lands. The majority of these conflicts take place between pastoralists and farmers. While such disputes have long existed, they are exacerbated due to overpopulation and climate changes that brought about contraction of the arable land required for sustainable economic activity. Left with few job opportunities and fed up with corruption and marginalization, youth have had a substantial role in these

conflicts since the independence of Sahel states. Given this situation, Sahel states are expected to witness a steady rise in violence.

4. Trafficking and Illicit Trade

In addition to the jihadist activity, trafficking networks were another direct reason for the collapse of the Malian state in 2012. These networks are long-standing and diverse, including the illegal trade in subsidized food commodities, fuel, and drugs. The collapse of the state in Libya added fuel to the flames, causing trafficking to go into orbit. These networks serve as the link between the north and the south countries of the Sahel, i.e. from the Gulf of Guinea to the Maghreb and vice versa.

The trade in small arms and light weapons is another flourishing activity in the region. The growing conflicts in the Sahel, Sahara, and neighboring countries increase the demand for light weapons. The supply is governed by the amounts of weapons seized in Libya and those stolen from the Sahel's regular armies. In the post-Gaddafi era, the arms trade has been widened to include heavy arms as well.

Notably, the illicit cigarette trade in the Sahel accounts for 10 percent of global cigarette production. Most of these cigarettes are smuggled to countries with protectionist policies, such as Algeria and Morocco, as well as European countries that impose taxes on cigarettes for health policy reasons.

5. Armed Organizations and Terrorist groups

The report underlined the difficulty of distinguishing between jihadist organizations and other armed groups, including those that signed the Algiers Peace Agreement with the Malian government. What is blurring the distinction between jihadist and armed group is the fact that they are all engaged in illicit activities. Additionally, some of these groups that were only involved in criminal activity or had political or economic demands were labelled "terrorist" or "jihadist". Furthermore, there are criminal groups that have carried out terrorist operations to attract the attention of pro-terrorist countries or some of their rival forces. What's more, it is common to have individuals from a jihadist organization in a criminal or political one, or vice versa.

French Aid as a Tool to Address the Malian State Collapse

The crisis in Mali came to a head in 2012 and 2013, with the Malian state divided into the south, inhabited by multi-ethnic populations that make up 90 percent of the country's population, and the north, inhabited by Arabs and Tuareg. When the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was formed in 2011, it did not represent the entire population in the north, nor even all the Tuareg. This gave rise to the emergence of counter-militias, causing the conflict to take on an ethnic nature. The Libyan crisis aggravated the situation in the Sahel, where thousands of armed Chadians, Nigeriens, and Malians fled Libya. At this time, the Tuareg founded the MNLA and organized convoys that carries weapons from Libya to Mali. This environment enabled the MNLA to carry out an attack against government forces on 11 January 2012, in collaboration with Ansar al-Dine movement and other Salafi-jihadi groups. On 6 March 2012, the MNLA proclaimed northern Mali an independent state. However, a rift between the MNLA and the jihadist groups caused the latter to form an alliance to counter the MNLA. The alliance, which comprised numerous jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Dine, managed to rout the MNLA and recapture the northern cities. In January 2013, the jihadist groups advanced southward, which prompted the Malian president to seek assistance from France and the international community. Hence came the French military intervention that managed to curb the jihadist advance and retake the northern cities from the jihadists, causing them significant losses.

The report puts forward suggestions for addressing the crisis in Mali. Decentralization comes at the forefront of these suggestions, despite experts warning of its dangers. Most Malian politicians acknowledge its importance, as the first decentralization measures were introduced in the 1990s. Initially, two types of decentralization were proposed with regards to administrative division. The first envisioned each tribe, village, and faction as a local political entity, and the second involved geography, dividing the country into regions. The second perception prevailed and the country was administratively divided into geographical regions for which local authorities were established. Authority and responsibility

for providing services of education, health, and water management and irrigation were transferred to the local authorities. However, the decentralization was incomplete as the powers of the central government concerning guardianship and the autonomy of local governments were not clearly defined. Additionally, the transfer of authority was met with strong resistance from the central government, causing it to be delayed. What's more, powers pertaining to registration of landholdings –which is an extremely sensitive file that triggers conflicts and disputes– weren't transferred to local governments. Furthermore, the law did not give local authorities any role in development, democracy was lacking at the grass-root level, and decentralization was introduced before the 2015 Algiers Agreement, which required the resumption of decentralization while introducing some changes to what had been done. While the Algiers Agreement gained the approval of political actors and the Malian people in the beginning, it was later reconsidered, particularly after it was plagued with major difficulties, including corruption at the central and local levels.

Mali's heavy dependence on international aid and grants is an obvious manifestation of the crisis in the country. Shortcomings in the aid programs, particularly the French ones, is that they did not address overpopulation, develop the agricultural sector, or promote education. Also, the population of the south believes the north continues to stage rebellion despite receiving an unjustified share of aid, and asserts that the numbers show that the north is not Mali's poorest region.

In effect, French aid to the north fell following the state of insecurity that struck the region. With regard to international assistance to northern Mali, a distinction must be made between two periods, the first from 1992 to 2006 and the second from 2006 to 2012. Between 1992 and 2006, hundreds of projects were funded by numerous international actors, yet with a lack of coordination between them and without having a common underlying logic nor a unified direction. Turmoil has been a factor in the failure of these programs, particularly the road program, which got interrupted several times. Likewise, insecurity and the absence of inter-ethnic dialogue disrupted the development process. As for the second period that started in 2006, simultaneously with Mali's 10-year plan to develop the northern regions, the internationally funded projects dropped to 39 projects, down from 297. The cost of these programs was estimated at about €1 billion. Of all the projects,

four have been completed and 19 are still pending. In May 2013, following the French intervention, a donors' conference on Mali took place in Brussels in which donors announced financial commitments and pledges for a total of €300 billion, of which €280 million were from France. Actually, 95 percent of the amount was made available and 75 percent was disbursed. In October 2015, an international conference for the economic recovery and development of Mali was held in Paris, giving rise to pledges of €3 billion to be honored over three years, 20 percent of which were allocated to the development of northern Mali. In this conference, France promised to provide €360 million, of which 260 were new commitments. However, this aid remains insufficient as it does not address major issues like overpopulation and agriculture. Also, heavy spending – whether by the Malian state or from donors – in other areas like education did not bring the expected outcomes.

As such, international aid seems insufficient to help overcome the problems of the crisis in Mali, for lack of optimal use of it, as well as bureaucratic tangles. Moreover, the Sahara-Sahel region is not a priority in France's aid policy. For example, Mali ranks eighteenth on the list of priority countries in the French development policy. A close look at the situation in the Sahel and Sahara would reveal that the French model is no longer at the fore in the Sahel and it is being contested by other countries. The parliamentary report argues that while France's military intervention in Mali scaled up France's political capital initially, it soon backfired. With its military intervention, France took on a difficult mission while its competitors in the region enjoyed the fruits without bearing a military cost, which enabled them to allocate more funds for economic aid.

Operation Serval

In July 2013, the National Assembly issued a report on Operation Serval, which was launched the same year and marked the beginning of the French military intervention in Mali¹⁷. The report provided an assessment of the situation in the Sahel following Operation Serval. Before the French intervention, the report states, the Malian Armed Forces (MAF) suffered several weaknesses and internal divisions, which explains why the military cooperation arrangements hadn't had the expected effectiveness. In December 2012, the French forces in Senegal prepared a report in which they provided an assessment of the

MLF, stating that it is in need of comprehensive reform, including in its command structures: its forces were poorly trained, under-equipped and insufficiently supervised. Their equipment, coming from donations from different countries that have diverse military cultures, have mostly become obsolete.

As of 2013, the Malian land force had 7,000 soldiers and officers, 90 percent of whom were from the south, thus having limited ability to fight in the north. As for its gear, the land force had 35 amphibious armored scout cars, 18 wheeled armored personnel carriers, 14 T55 tanks (mostly unserviceable), 18 truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers, eight 122mm towed guns (unserviceable for lack of maintenance and towing vehicles), 60 23mm twin-tube submachine guns mounted on pickup trucks, 92 mortars, 192 pick-up trucks carrying 14.5 machine guns, and 140 personnel carriers. As far as the air force, it had a strength of 1,000 personnel and four MI24 attack helicopters, three MIG 21 fighter planes, two Marchetti FS 260 low-mounted cantilever wing monoplanes armed with 2×7.62mm machine guns, 11 TETRAS light-weight bomber aircraft, a Cessna 185 general aviation light aircraft, and a BT67 multipurpose transport aircraft (transport of troops, ammunition, and medical evacuation). As for the National Guard, it had a strength of 3,500 personnel, 2,000 of whom are from the south, and the rest, i.e. units serving in the north, are from the northern region as well as former Tuareg insurgents who were integrated into the National Guard.

The report states that the ethnic factor had an adverse impact on the effectiveness of the army, and that the scenario of a coup d'état always alarms the political power, causing it to devote little attention to defense issues. Moreover, the absence of the culture of planning and forward thinking means leaders are unlikely to contemplate policies of militarization.

However, the report acknowledges that the French military intervention in 2013 attests to the failure of the structural and operational military cooperation that the US and France had been engaged in with the Sahel-Saharan states. The report goes on to review the US initiatives in Mali following 11 September 2001, noting that the lack of Malian interest in capacity-building of the military was the reason why the US initiatives drew a blank. Maybe the leaders of these countries were fearing the military would seize power. This caused the US to turn to focusing on training the Tuareg, who are reputed to be seasoned in fighting in hazardous areas and mastering combat techniques. However, the Tuareg

deserted the US and joined the anti-state armed groups. For its part, France assisted in the military training of the MAF through two military academies: Ecole Militaire d'Administration (the Military Administration School, EMA) and the School of Peace Keeping Alioune Blondin Beye (EMPABB) in Bamako. Additionally, the European Union launched the EUTM Mali mission to assist the MAF in restoring their military capacity through the provision of advice, education, and training. France is the "lead nation" of the mission, coordinating and overseeing 550 soldiers representing 20 European countries, and training four Groupement Tactique Interarmes (GTIA), each comprising 550 personnel.

At the time of the direct military intervention in Mali, France had had 29 military missions in Africa, with forces concentrated in Senegal, Gabon and Djibouti. While the forces in Djibouti (1,900 personnel) and in Gabon (900 personnel) constitute forward operating bases, and the forces in Senegal (360 personnel) only serve as an operational cooperation hub, they proved useful during Operation Serval, particularly when it comes to logistical support. Alongside this presence, the French forces had previously engaged in several military operations in Chad, the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso. Perhaps this presence explains the extreme responsiveness of the French forces in the case of Mali. Indeed, the French forces that intervened in Mali to stop the jihadist advance were pre-positioned in Africa, mainly in Chad and the Ivory Coast.

The report touched on another organizational factor pertaining to French land forces. Since 2008, France has had a 5,500-soldier force kept on alert for six-month periods. This force can be mobilized and deployed within 12 hours. The forces that intervened early in Mali were already pre-positioned in Africa, yet this emergency force allowed for developing the intervention and supporting it with well-trained forces. The success of Operation Serval would not have been possible without the previous experience in overseas operations.

At some length, the report elaborated on the considerable challenges that disrupted the logistic support. Mali is a landlocked country, lacks sufficient airport capacity, and has a poor road network. Furthermore, the dispersal of the French units made the logistical support more difficult. The aircraft, ships, and trucks that transported supplies were not all French made. Due to supply difficulties, one military operation was postponed and another was cancelled.

The report also covers the media rhetoric of the French forces in Mali, its welcoming of journalists, and the success in achieving a reasonable degree of transparency without disclosing information that would benefit terrorists or endanger the security of operations. Strategists and military units were also praised for their success in managing a string of daring surprise attacks. The report also tackled the phases of Operation Serval. The first phase aimed at halting the southward advance of jihadists who were armed with heavy arms, coming from Libya and the Malian army. This phase witnessed the most complex air raid in the history of the French air force, which lasted for a duration of more than nine-and-a-half hours, over 4,000 kilometers, and required five instances of air-to-air refueling. The success of the first phase allowed for developing operations with the aim of taking over airports and cities seized by terrorists. This necessitated the extensive use of paratroopers. Later, Operation Serval focused on “expansion into the deep”, tracking down terrorists in their sanctuary in western Gao, and destroying their diverse armories, in conjunction with the Chadian armed forces. The tons of weapons and ammunition that were found revealed that the jihadists were preparing for terrorist operations beyond Mali, and maybe in France.

After the maneuvers carried out in April in central Mali, the jihadists opted for asymmetric tactics (mine laying, suicide attacks, and hit-and-run attacks). The outcome of the French maneuvers was very positive. Several dozen tons of weapons and ammunition were recovered. These seized weapons were either destroyed or given to Malian forces, and some were kept for analysis. In May 2013, Operation Serval entered a phase of handover to African or UN forces, while some French forces remained to put pressure on the terrorists.

The report then sheds light on the lessons from Operation Serval. These include the insufficient availability of critical equipment and the military capability shortfalls, and how these shortfalls hinder France’s ability to conduct interventions far from its bases, transfer its military equipment without foreign assistance, or monitor a vast theatre of operations or a fast-moving enemy with an unusual concentration of forces. This brings up real concerns over France’s ability to continue to fund prolonged foreign operations.

The report also detailed the cost of Operation Serval, which was higher than expected, prompting debate over how to cover its expenses without cutting the budgets for armament and training. Operation Serval, the report says, revealed the importance of the “on alert” force that can be deployed within a week to theatres of operations that are 3,000km away from France as well as the value of maintaining a French military presence in Africa. Having French bases in Africa means having a ready-to-intervene force that is familiar with the African theatre of operations. The operation also proved the ability of the French army to successfully carry out broad operations encompassing the full range of military activities, and highlighted the pivotal role of special forces, having managed to halt the jihadist advance southward and target terrorist leaders. In contrast, the report mentions some gaps in the French capability that Serval revealed, including the insufficiency of intelligence resources, strategic and tactical capacities, and methods of aerial refueling, all of which are gaps that the US and Britain filled.

Next, the report addressed some of the profound problems the MAF suffered, including the estrangement between the political leadership and the army due to the political leadership’s permanent fear of a coup d’état, an omnipresence of the “culture of the immediate”. The result is a lack of equipment maintenance, an absence of planning and priorities, and poor-training management of forces. There is a dearth in officers and non-commissioned officers, no military-affiliated technical colleges, and sufficient supervision. The report also shed light on the ineffective command structures due to superimposition of the organizational structures in charge of operational preparedness and the operational structures in charge of territorial control, leading to permanent inefficiency, reinforced by a limited capacity of joint command centers.

The report also tackled the vulnerabilities of EU support. With the coordination difficulties between EU members, the EU force remains incapable of launching military operations without compromising rapid reaction and agility. In addition, European mid-flight refueling and surveillance (of vast theatres of operation and fast-moving enemies) capabilities have limits. French leaders told parliamentarians that the European support fell short of what was needed. While the French and Belgian contributions were valuable quantitatively and qualitatively, the German logistical support was slow. French military leaders felt that EU countries had suspicions about France’s intentions with its intervention in Mali.

The last section of the report dealt with exit scenarios for the Malian crisis. The report says that the French leadership hoped for rapid disengagement from Mali, but was aware that “if the war is won, peace doesn’t exist yet.” The report stated that France wanted a reduction of its troops in Mali to 1,000 troops at most by December 2013, hoping that another force would play the leading role with France providing assistance and information, and maybe help with Special Forces. However, a rapid disengagement of the French army was made impossible owing to the positions of countries neighboring Mali. For example, Algeria agreed to open up its airspace for the French forces, yet full security of Algeria–Mali borders remains elusive. The report also commended Burkina Faso for dealing seriously with the threat, which was a challenge for the Burkinabé government in view of its financial capacities. The Burkinabé government established the Anti-Terrorist Forces Group (GFAT), contributed to the success of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), and engaged in the political process in Mali, where discussions between the authorities in Bamako and representatives of the separatist or autonomist movements in northern Mali were held under the auspices of the Burkinabé president. As for Mauritania, while it did not take part in the AFISMA, it did, however, tighten its grip on the border with Mali and monitored the refugee camps. Niger was in a particularly difficult situation as it had to secure its vast borders with Libya, Mali, and Burkina Faso. It participated in AFISMA and in the international mobilization against the terrorist danger in northern Mali. The lack of strategic depth between Niger’s territory and jihadist forces prompted Niger to create a command that became responsible for securing the border with Mali. Despite substantial efforts, Niger’s situation remains critical due to significant shortcomings in its defense system. Finally, the report discussed the agreement signed by the Malian authorities with two Tuareg groups on 18 June 2013 following negotiations held under the auspices of the President of Burkina Faso. The agreement stipulated that the MAF shall undertake “gradual deployment” in Kidal and that the Tuareg rebel groups are to be “confined” (*cantonnées*), a term that is open to contradicting interpretations. The agreement also stipulated that MINUSMA would be deployed in Kidal to prevent any confrontation between the MAF and the Tuareg. The report mentioned that the Tuareg refused any disarmament initiatives unless a comprehensive agreement with the government was reached.

Operation Barkhane

In April 2021, the National Defense and Armed Forces Committee of the French National Assembly published a report on Operation Barkhane, two months ahead of President Macron's announcement of the end of the operation. At the outset, the report refers to the successful transformation of Barkhane into a European military force, underscoring that Germany and Spain's engagement in the Sahel is their largest foreign military engagement. The report points out that giving priority to counterterrorism action does not mean it is the be-all and end-all of the operation. While the military action is the *sine qua non* for achieving other goals, it is not the whole purpose. Focusing attention on achieving tactical successes is not sufficient to overcome the challenges pertaining to developing the capabilities of national Sahel armies. France's approach is aimed, after all, at consolidating Sahel states and their governance, enabling them to promote economic development in the service of social and human rights.

According to the report, the depth of the Sahel crisis means its resolution is not achievable in the short term, and will thus require long-term action. It adds that this must be well explained to European citizens to ensure Europe's continued commitment. The report echoed other reports in asserting that political solutions are the responsibility the Sahel states, stressing that France and Europe will support these solutions as long as the red lines are not crossed, notably non-negotiation with IS and Al-Qaeda leaders.

The report reviewed endeavors to develop Operation Barkhane to adapt to evolving threats, noting that, since its creation, its organizational structure, capacities, and force kept evolving, keeping pace with the strategic, operational and tactical changes. The report endorsed France's policy of "investing" in building up countries and securing regions where jihadists operate to enable a return of local governments and the restoration of public services, building bridges of trust between the state and local population in these areas and promoting economic development. This policy aims at destroying, or at least limiting, the effectiveness of terrorist groups, supporting national armies of the Sahel states, and streamlining and harmonizing military cooperation between them. Realizing that building up efficient national armies is a time-consuming process, France lobbied Western partners to engage in the political, military, and economic building of the Sahel states.

The thorough report dedicated a large section to elaborating on the main domestic actors, i.e. pro-Al-Qaeda and pro-IS jihadist groups, noting that these groups managed to overcome the Tuareg movements or keep them under their control with the ultimate aim of protecting and controlling convoy routes. The report pointed out the success of Al-Qaeda in finding “incubators” in local communities, unlike IS-affiliated groups that practice the most heinous forms of repression with no regard for local customs. Pro-Al-Qaeda organizations introduce themselves as “protectors of the population” from the brutality of national authorities. They never target humanitarian organizations. IS’ goal, however, is to eliminate everything it deems “un-Islamic”. These major differences do not suggest that Al-Qaeda does not practice the most ignoble forms of terrorism against its opponents, it is just more selective of its targets. Overall, both groups work to fuel ethnic and sectarian tensions between components of Malian society, and are heading down the same path in Niger and Burkina Faso.

Coming to the connection between terrorism and social context, the report indicates that the recruitment for terrorist organizations thrives on the breeding ground of extreme poverty. Overpopulation also means more of the populace moving into major cities, forcing governments to focus on developing the infrastructure in those cities, which in turn results in a reduction in budgetary allocations to rural and desert areas. Perhaps the absence of the state in these regions and governments’ concentrating their efforts in cities explains the terrorist expansion that never stops despite major blows against it.

The expansion of terrorism into the countries of the Gulf of Guinea was a phenomenon that President Macron used to justify changes to France’s counterterrorism strategy in Africa. The report states that this expansion does not suggest a failure of military campaigns, but rather an inability of Sahel states and Gulf of Guinea countries to achieve internal development and have a strong presence outside major cities. By contrast, terrorist organizations succeeded in disseminating their ideology across borders.

The terrorist violence provided a catalyst for all other forms of violence. For example, the rates theft, kidnapping of women, and conflicts over rangeland areas increased significantly. The report cited numerous experts who criticized the hasty and ill-conceived implementation of international recommendations pertaining to democratization, decen-

tralization, empowering women, enabling the poor, and giving preference to agricultural communities over pastoral ones. These recommendations, experts believe, have destabilized communities that had for ages been governed by hierarchy. All of these developments and rifts gave rise to the emergence of self-defense militias.

Aside from terrorism in the Sahel, the report analyzed and assessed France's military deployment, its modes of action, special forces missions, development of combat techniques, and the successful reliance on drones. Additionally, the report reviewed missions by the UN and EU and shed light on US and European military aid, highlighting the challenges arising from the limited number of forces and vastness of the area to be surveilled, as well as challenges to intelligence operations and how to overcome them, the impacts of climate impact on weaponry, and military coordination difficulties.

The report recognized that there is still a long way before counter-terrorism operations could be assigned to national Sahel armies. While the Chadian and Mauritanian armies are seasoned and robust, other Sahel armies, particularly the Malian army, suffer extreme vulnerabilities, including lack of efficient leadership, lack of mid-level executives (non-commissioned officers), a shortage of ammunition, and a weak infrastructure. Despite the significant improvement in the level and training of officers and soldiers, these armies are still lacking in the areas of planning and coordination. Furthermore, military leaders often pay no attention to basic human decencies, such as removing soldiers from their families for long periods, let alone the repercussions of a lack of equipment. The rehabilitation efforts of Sahel forces will not bear fruit before 10 years, when "trained" officers assume leadership positions.

While the report evaluated the outcomes of the French and Western military presence in the Sahel positively, it warned that the continued military presence may negatively impact the capabilities of the French army, which, while it has acquired certain skills in the process, it has become "deskilled" in others. Furthermore, the report highlighted the failure of France and Western countries when it comes to the media discourse and the formulation of the "war on terrorism" narrative. Russia and Turkey constantly question the intentions of Western countries and capitalize on any mistakes they commit. Furthermore, the two countries employ their tools to reinforce their presence in the region and have proven savvy in formulating two sub-narratives, one appealing to the

Sahel population and the other to the French population. As for the press, the report condemned the media's coverage of the military operations and its negative impact on the morale of officers and soldiers. While the French media provides extensive coverage of the rare cases of honest-mistake killing of civilians, it rarely talks about the losses suffered by French forces in their attempts to protect civilians.

The Press on French Counterterrorism in the Sahel

Besides the bicameral reports that explicated France's counterterrorism efforts, the French press has had its input on this interesting debate. In its 22 October 2021 issue, the French daily *Libération* published an article on the deteriorating relations between France and Mali. The article reviewed the visions of the Malian and French authorities and analyzed their divergent views. The significance of the article lies in the fact that it is balanced and non-aligned, albeit it expressly criticized France's "racial condescension" that angered the Malian army, and indicated that Paris disregarded the opinions of Bamako authorities on some important issues. Even President Macron was a subject of criticism. The article states that Macron's invitation to the G5 Sahel leaders to the Pau Summit seemed more of a "summoning". That said, the author voiced understanding of Macron's reasoning and motivations, having dealt positively with a heavy legacy and a war, as evidenced by his visit to Mali the week following his presidential inauguration, in which he affirmed France's support to the government and people of Mali. At the time, Macron called for "Africanizing" counterterrorism efforts and pushing international actors to increase or even double development aid and economic projects in Mali, in addition to holding several summits to this end. However, gradually his enthusiasm for this entangled file waned.

The article cites the opinions of French diplomats and experts who ascribe the strained relationship between Mali and France to the gap between France's desire for quick action from Mali and Mali's slow responsiveness, particularly when it comes to internal reforms, let alone the memories of colonialism that Paris jogged by playing the role of the Sahel's "policeman" and Macron's language in addressing the Sahel leaders.

The article indicates that three issues were at the center of the France-Mali rift. The first was the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement signed

between the Malian government and a few armed factions. Evidently, the Malian government had no desire to implement it, fearing it would provoke division, while Paris saw peace as possible only through this agreement. The second point is the restoration of state authority and services in northern Mali that would make for the departure of French forces without fearing a return of the jihadists. In this vein, Macron spoke of the need for Sahel countries to take the responsibility and fulfil their missions in restoring security and government services. Mali sees the point, but argues its inability to ensure security and safety. For the Malian state, jihadists have holed up but are lying in wait. The third file is negotiating with jihadists, which Paris sees as a “red line,” while the Malian authorities has been engaged in secret negotiations with jihadists that were publicized last February. On 19 October, Bamako announced plans to have a dialogue with Iyad Ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa.

The 13 August issue of *Le Point* published a series of articles on the Sahel, shedding light on the vulnerable security situation in the three-country point joining Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which has turned into a hub for terrorists and organized crime groups and one of the world’s main drug trafficking corridors. The region is home to Al-Qaeda and IS-affiliated organizations. Data indicates that since 2015 the number of terrorist attacks in the region has multiplied on a year-to-year basis, rising to 700 attacks in 2019, up from 225 in 2015, claiming the lives of more than 2,000 people and leaving 900,000 people homeless and displaced, 500,000 of whom are in Burkina Faso. These terrorist organizations primarily target military bases, government officials, and informants. They are adept at fueling tribal conflicts and playing on the dissatisfaction and anger of locals in poor areas. Year after year, terrorist groups expand their activities and geographical presence, giving rise to alarming signs of a jihadist axis extending from Chad to central Mali, given the ease of changing the jihadist affiliation by virtue of family and tribal ties.

The newspaper touches on the knock-on effect of the French military strikes against IS in Mali, which caused the organization to move to Niger¹⁸. According to *Le Point*, the incapacity of the Chadian army to assume its security role further worsened the security situation in the Sahel. The Chadian army is busy countering the terrorist activity in Lake Chad and deterring insurgents in the Tibesti Plateau. As for the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising Nigeria, Niger,

Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, that was formed to fight Boko Haram in the vicinity of Lake Chad, it achieves only limited success due to lack of coordination, which precludes building on these successes towards a decisive victory, particularly with Boko Haram enjoying greater mobility across the border. Armies of the G5 Sahel states are still below par. Correspondingly, fast-moving terrorists are able to enter into temporary alliances that open up additional routes for them and provide them safe havens.

On 23 March 2021¹⁹, *Le Point* published an article on the situation in Niger, which has become a major theatre for terrorist operations. The magazine stated that between December 2020 and March 2021, i.e. the weeks preceding and following the election of Mohamed Bazoum as president of Niger, IS launched a string of attacks on villages and camps in western Mali. In their recruitment, terrorists exploit the long-standing conflicts between farmers and Bedouins over land ownership. The army, on the other hand, recruits members from all ethnicities and tribes, provided that they are familiar with the region's topography and local dynamics.

Conclusion

This review does not aim to capture all aspects of the crisis of the Sahel-Saharan countries and the surge of terrorist activity there, but is rather intended to provide a deeper understanding of the crisis by reviewing documents that spell out the positions of France, a country that played a pivotal role in responding to the crisis. The review draws on reports of defense and international cooperation committees of the Senate and National Assembly, books and academic journals, as well as articles by journalists who spoke with executive authorities in France and other countries.

Combined, these resources offer an integrated “narrative” of the Sahel, starting at the turn of the millennium, when the region comprised poor, multi-ethnic countries controlled by majorities inhabiting the south. These countries faced a myriad of challenges and have a long history of coups that have undermined trust between civilians and the military, and caused political administrations to have low interest in military development.

At large, elites and factions from the south marginalized the populations of the north, who represent a limited proportion of Mali's pop-

ulation and consist mainly of contending ethnicities and tribes on one level, and pastoralists and farmers fighting over land on another. Overpopulation and climate changes escalated disputes between pastoralists and farmers. The northern regions have witnessed sporadic insurgencies against the central government²⁰. Metropolitan authorities were good at playing on internal conflicts in the north to undermine all factions. However, the widening gap between the poor population in south and the desperately poor people of the north, as well as the rise of jihadists, have alarmed Paris, which began monitoring the situation, seeking to be of assistance. Yet Paris' involvement in toppling the Gaddafi regime was a big mistake, as it disrupted the balance of power in the Sahel and Sahara countries, causing insurgent movements to become much stronger than state militaries.

Events accelerated significantly in 2012. A Tuareg movement declared the independence of northern Mali and seized the main cities in the north, and a military coup overthrew the Malian authorities for failure to manage the crisis. By early 2013, the northern movements made a mistake by advancing towards Bamako. The Malian leadership asked France for help, and the latter intervened quickly and set matters right, halting the jihadist advance, taking over northern cities and inflicting losses on the jihadist movements. In addition, France initiated joint efforts with other actors to reach a political solution with non-jihadist rebels. These efforts gave rise to the 2015 Algiers Agreement. Since then, France has sought to give the process a fresh impetus by continuing and stepping up campaigns against terrorists and insurgents in the region, along with offering development aid. Paris' strategy was based on a two-fold military effort aimed at weakening the jihadists and reducing the threat on the one hand and reforming and strengthening local armies on the other. This military effort was a precursor to the gradual return of the Malian state in the north. On another front, having realized that the process would take considerable time, Paris worked on internationalization of military and development efforts so that Paris would not bear the burden alone.

Despite a range of tactical successes and the diminishing military capabilities of the jihadists, France's strategy in the Sahel has arguably failed. Terrorist organizations exploited their wide dispersal and managed to expand into central and southern Mali, the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region, some countries of the Gulf of Guinea, and

Lake Chad riparian countries, and furthermore and established alternative forms of local governance in rural areas, which appealed to the population.

There are several explanations for why France failed in the Sahel. Indeed, reports of the Senate and National Assembly avoided using the word “failure” and attribute France’s lack of a decisive victory to the difficult situation and non-action of the Sahel states, particularly Mali. However, these reports acknowledge the limited effectiveness of French aid, for reasons pertaining to the working mechanisms and bureaucracy. The military approach of France and the Sahel states has led to the uniting of rebel and jihadist forces and caused a number of tribal and ethnic combatants to join terrorist organizations, whether domestic or foreign²¹.

The new reality that has taken shape in the Sahel necessitates developing new approaches to counterterrorism, a direction that France announced after ending Operation Barkhane in June 2021. France’s new strategy is still nascent, but it will certainly take into account the new variable: the powerful on-the-ground presence of competing forces led by Russia.

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Anti-Terror Trends in Mali

9

DR. MADY IBRAHIM KANTE*

Introduction

Since its independence, Mali has faced great challenges in order to achieve security and stability. The country has suffered for decades as a result of rebel groups opposing the regime and terrorism that has grown since the early 2000s. The security challenges in Mali are not limited to internal crises. Neighboring countries in the African Sahel and West Africa are some of the sources of trouble for Mali.

Although all the Sahel states gained their independence since the 1960s, they failed to achieve a high degree of security because of the weakness and fragility of the ruling regimes or their failure to control their territories. That is in addition to the obstacles imposed by new threats, such as terrorism, that impeded development initiatives in the region, when countries reached a state of relative stability after the cessation of civil wars and military coups.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad) have witnessed the phenomenon of terrorism through the spread of terrorist organizations

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widely on a geographical scale in the region. In the early 2012, terrorist groups took control, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, West African Jihad and Unification Movement, and Ansar Dine over the entire north of Mali.

At that stage, terrorism dominated with its ideological and organizational link to terrorism in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, due to the mixing of terrorist elements during the era of “Jihad Afghan” against the Soviet Union. As for the current stage, terrorism in the Sahel region is no longer an imported phenomenon, but rather has become a local industry after the local population was integrated into terrorist groups, who undertook the formation and establishment of terrorist organizations by themselves. Therefore, the impact of terrorist acts in the region did not stop at threatening security and impeding development. Rather, their consequences were the main reason for the loss of innocent lives, destruction of property, spread of fear and intimidation, up to the intimidation of government agencies and private institutions in order to achieve political, ideological or social goals; either in a direct or indirect way.

The frequency of terrorist attacks in the African Sahel that is carried out by organizations linked to Al-Qaeda and its factions in the Sahel, in addition to the terrorist groups that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), has increased, which has turned the region into an arena for competition between Al-Qaeda and IS. Terrorist operations are intensively hitting Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger by groups: Nasret Ismal and Muslims, Katebt Al-Morabten, Jabhet Masina and Ansar Al-Sharea affiliated with Al-Qaeda, as well as the operations of IS that took place in the Great Desert under the leadership of Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi before he has been killed in a strike by the French forces, in addition to the operations of the Boko Haram organization, with its two factions, one is close to Al-Qaeda and the other is a pledge of allegiance to IS, which is active in Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. The expansion of terrorism was not limited to these countries only, but the terrorist organizations began to expand their operations in the southwest African region, which means that the alliance of these terrorist organizations led to the strengthening of terrorist attacks and the development in the organization of their attacks.

Earlier on, France took a position in the front row and declared war against terrorism in the Coast, which is justified by its entire subordi-

nation to French colonialism as well as France's vital interests in the region. France is showing a very great interest in the stability of the Sahel due to immigration and energy issues that cannot be neglected at all. France has intervened militarily in Mali since 2013 through the operations of Serval and Barkhane, but after eight years of war, terrorist organizations became stronger, as terrorism has spread from northern Mali to the rest of the country.

However, this French military operation in Mali raised doubts about Paris' interests in the Sahel region, which observers believe was the only reason for France's entry into the war, citing statements by President François Holland who confirmed, from the first days of military engagement in the Sahel that, "France has no interest in Mali, it does not defend any economic or political calculations."

However, in June 2021, French President Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane in Sahel without specifying a clear alternative for the future of anti-terror operations in the region. In light of the multiplicity of parties involved in counter-terrorism operations in Mali, it is possible to distinguish between three levels of these operations, as follows:

National efforts to combat terrorism in Mali

National efforts made by successive Malian governments have witnessed great development over a period of nearly a decade. The current moment is a delicate situation as Mali faces the challenges of terrorism and political transition both at the same time.

1. The evolution of the national response to the phenomenon of terrorism in Mali

With the threat of terrorism expanding from the northern outskirts of the country to the densely populated center, the Malian authorities launched an "integrated security plan" for the central regions in early 2018, which provided for the deployment of an additional 4,000 soldiers and the allocation of additional financial and logistical resources to the forces in the central regions. In fact, this integrated security plan did not rise to constitute a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism, even though its main objective was to combat terrorism effectively.

Many observers saw that the operations carried out by the Malian army were accompanied by many mistakes that contributed to raising the cost of terrorism on local communities, which constituted an obstacle to the state's restoration of control over multiple regions that are on their way to become the back bases of various destabilizing activities, which it has left large segments of the population adhering to the values of the nation state deeply frustrated. Although the military performance of the armed forces in Mali recorded some initial successes such as the capture of major cities and the protection of the central government in Bamako from a potential physical threat from terrorist groups, the prolonged phenomenon of terrorism and the inability of the national forces to resolve the battle led to the emergence of new conflicts, the most prominent of these is the ethnic conflict in the Mopti region in the center of the country between the Fulani and Dogon groups, in the Segou and Sikasso regions between the Bambara and the Fulani, in Timbuktu and Gao between the Tuareg and Arabs on one hand, and between the Tuareg and the Songi on the other hand.

2. The role of transitional authorities in the fight against terrorism in Mali

On June 5, 2020, the Malian capital, Bamako, witnessed a large protest to demand the departure of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. This popular demonstrations, which lasted for more than two months was served as an opportunity for a group of officers led by Asimi Guetta to overthrow the regime of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita on August 18, 2020.

The Malian people welcomed the coup for many reasons, the most important reason was the blockage of the political horizon at the time, and the response of the military establishment to many of the demands of the popular movement. The transitional committee was formed after consultations between the army "Comité national pour sauver le peuple" (CNSP), political forces and civil society; Retired Colonel Bah Ndao will be chosen as President of the Transitional Period, with the designation Colonel Asimi Gueta as a Vice President for the Transitional Period. However, internal divisions between the partners in governance have created a turbulent environment conducive to the spread of security instability in various regions of Mali. After the transitional President Bah Ndao decided to dissolve the government and asked Prime Minister Mukhtar Wan to form a new government, Vice President Asimi Gueta on

the evening of Monday, May 24, 2021 arrested the transitional president, prime minister and defense minister Major General Suleiman Doukuri to occupy Guetta as the transitional president, in light of an aggravating crisis that failed ECOWAS mediation in its containment.

After consultations with the political forces, Dr. Shugel Maiga was chosen as Prime Minister, and then the transitional government was formed which will organize the elections that are supposed to end with the handover of power. However, the Maiga government faced a major challenge represented in France's announcement to end the operation of Barkhane and reduce its level of deployment in Mali, which led the transitional government to rethink about building relations for cooperation with new allies in the security and military field, after Prime Minister Maiga stated that "France abandoned Mali halfway" during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly Summit on September 25, 2021.

Regional efforts to counter terrorism in Mali

The phenomenon of terrorism in the African Sahel revealed a great ability to cross international borders and move from one country to another. In front of this complex situation, it is no longer possible to limit counter-terrorism efforts in Mali to national efforts, especially with the multiplicity of Mali's regional movement circles by virtue of its location.

1. The role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the fight against terrorism in Mali

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) mobilizes the support of countries in the region for joint cooperation through multiple tools, including the formulation of a unified political position in support of the war on terrorism, and the launch of the Economic Community of West African states' strategy to combat terrorism, in addition to the many meetings held within the Economic Community of West African States to establish institutional mechanisms and executive arms to combat terrorism. But the main obstacle in activating the role of the Economic Community of West African States in Mali was the lack of funding, and the resulting logistical difficulties, so ECOWAS soldiers changed their helmets for UN helmets a few months later. The Economic Community of West African States also did not stop making changes to the strategy to combat terrorism, in every conference of the organization, which made it lose its stability and sustainability.

ECOWAS began the war on terrorism in West Africa with its intervention in Mali, but the group did not reach a tangible result as a result of its dependence on the interventions of external powers. It is noticeable that ECOWAS was unable to finance its intervention and its strategy to combat terrorism. ECOWAS has developed multiple initiatives and strategies to combat terrorism, but it was unable to fund them, it depends on foreign funding to implement these initiatives, and then the financiers stipulate conditions for its intervention, and in the end, the external power fights terrorism in the region. It can be said that the ECOWAS did not achieve tangible and effective results on the ground in its war on terrorism in West Africa, as it was only able to implement a small part of its strategy to combat terrorism in the region.

2. The role of the G5 Sahel forces in the fight against terrorism in Mali

The most prominent regional role at the field level is represented by the joint anti-terrorist force of the Group of Five Sahel countries known for its acronym G5 Coast, which was established and manages its activity with direct French support. In 2014, France replaced Operation Serval in the Sahel region, Operation Barkhane, which began on August 1, 2014 and consisted of 3,000 French permanent soldiers stationed in the Chadian capital (N'Djamena).

According to some Sahel security officials, the idea of creating a regional anti-terror grouping in the Sahel came from Paris. Despite the intensity of the deployed military forces, the result obtained from launching the work of the Five Sahel Group forces was not satisfactory at all. On the contrary, the formation of these forces followed in 2014, the expansion of terrorist activities day by day to other regions.

Since its establishment, the joint forces of the five Sahel countries have been working in close cooperation with the French Operation Barkhane forces, Operation Force on the Ground has been implemented in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, to support and assist the forces of the Sahel states in their fight against terrorist groups and transnational crimes, such as arms, drug trafficking, and human trafficking across the Sahel and Desert region.

However, many indicators appear to seriously doubt the effectiveness of the role of the joint force of the five Sahel countries. Terrorist groups move in the Sahel region as they wish and carry out terrorist operations

against the national forces and the Coast Groups, as the headquarters of the joint force of the G5 Sahel was completely destroyed at the end of June 2018. An armed attack led to the transfer of the military bases of the joint forces from northern and central Mali to the Malian capital Bamako on September 28, 2018.

However, the focus of regional efforts from the ECOWAS or the joint forces of the Sahel countries were limited to the security aspects, which hindered the achievement of these efforts tangible success. It is worth noting that one of the causes of the problem of terrorism in the Sahel is the spread of underdevelopment, poverty, social injustice, and others, which provided a golden opportunity for terrorist organizations to exploit these problems and recruit the local population. With this situation, regional development initiatives and projects were supposed to be the most important weapon to combat terrorism in the Sahel region, in order to close all doors to the spread of terrorism in the region.

International efforts to combat terrorism in Mali

Despite the numerous regional initiatives that have been adopted to combat terrorism in the Coast, they have not yielded any results in getting rid of terrorist movements and limiting the freedom of movement of terrorists within the region, on the contrary, the indicators of terrorism continued to rise, through the increase in the number and size of terrorist organizations, as well as their obtaining of funds through paying ransoms for the release of the kidnapped, in addition to the illegal trade in natural resources, which contributes to the development of these groups. This situation has imposed the necessity of using military capabilities for parties outside the African Sahel region. Both the French forces and the forces of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) have been fighting terrorism since 2013. Among the numerous international efforts to combat terrorism in the Coast, France has played the most prominent role in the past years, with the highest level of geographical spread and the largest size of the military presence. In Mali, the French forces play multiple military roles, extending from the capital, Bamako, in the far south, to the more turbulent Northern provinces.

1. French motives to be involved in the fight against terrorism in Mali

France has strengthened its military presence in the Sahel region with multiple tools, including direct and indirect presence, to be once again at the heart of the geostrategic Coast region, in order to monitor its interests in the region, which has the largest reserves of natural resources in the world, economic motives are also a major reason for French involvement in Mali. France is looking for ways to defend its interests against many countries such as China, Russia and others who are investing more and more to exploit the resources of the Coast, as well as signing defense agreements. For example, according to the director of the Nuclear Observatory, Stéphane Lohm, the French presence in Mali is explained by the desire to “secure the supply of French power stations with uranium: the latter is extracted in the mines of northern Niger”, a desert area separated from Mali only by a border line that is limited to geographical maps.

With the presence of its forces in the region, France also aims to protect the economic interests of the many French companies established in the Coast. For example, the roles of the Orano and Ariva groups, which have been in Niger for half a century to exploit the country's uranium and mining sites, and Orange, which operates in the field of telecommunications in all the French-speaking countries in the region. In a nutshell, France is pretending to withdraw militarily from Mali through a statement said by President Macron and then the French Minister of the Armed Forces has just issued another declaration in Mali, contradicting Macron's declaration saying that France will not leave Mali and will remain engaged in the fight against terrorism on its soil.

2. French military involvement in Mali

Since 2014, the Barkhane Operation Forces have been involved in combating all types of activity in its various manifestations, in cooperation with the Malian National Forces. The French forces in Mali faced many challenges, especially with regard to the protection of civilians, as the population of Mali accused the French forces several times of killing civilians during their operations against terrorism. This is in addition to the fluctuation in the level of effectiveness of French military operations in defeating terrorist organizations or even getting rid of them completely. The main shift related to the French military engagement in

Mali to combat terrorism was the announcement by French President Emmanuel Macron, on June 10, 2021, during a press conference that he would end the Barkhane military operation against terrorists in the Coast, according to terms and a timetable that would be determined in a few weeks. In fact, the issue of withdrawing French forces or reducing their number is not new. Macron had previously announced at one of the G5 Sahel summit, which was held in January 2021 in France “his country’s intention to take such a measure, but this was not implemented on the pretext that the withdrawal might destabilize the Coast”. As the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian previously stated, “It is clear that France does not intend to remain in the Sahel forever.”

3. Motives for the decline in French military involvement in Mali

Although the French withdrawal decision was promoted as a French protest against the internal political situation in Mali, this position reveals a great contradiction that the political circles in the Sahel countries are well aware of. When the military group ousted Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August of 2020, France was the first country to condemn this measure, but in April of the following year, France was the first supporter of the Chadian armed forces’ control of power following the killing of former President Idriss Deby Itno. Such contradictions contribute to weakening the level of trust between the governments of the Sahel and France. Despite being promoted by French diplomacy, the decision to withdraw from the Sahel and from Mali in particular comes as a result of a number of reasons, including:

- France’s insistence on the need for greater participation of European countries in supporting its military efforts in the Coast; it has previously expressed its frustration with the lack of commitment of most of these countries to fight extremist groups in the region.
- Avoid repeating the scenario of the Central African Republic in Mali, after the authorities in Bangui opened a wide scope for military cooperation with Russia at the expense of the existing cooperation with France, a trend that has been escalating since the new leaders came to power in Bamako. Discontent grows in Paris after eight years of military engagement during which terrorism has not been eradicated, while France has lost 53 soldiers since 2013, this trend is reinforced by the French forces achieving a reasonable number of goals represented in

preventing terrorist organizations from seizing the Malian capital Bamako and bringing down the state in Mali.

- What was revealed about the competition between France and the United States in Africa and the African Sahel in the post-Cold War era contributed to the weakening of the level of coordination and integration between the French Operation Barkhane and the forces of the American Military Command in Africa (AFRICOM), which did not help to effectively overcome the phenomenon of terrorism.

Conclusion

At present, the Malian state finds itself in a vacuum after the old allies had abandoned it. The Malian armed forces are currently operating on the ground without the French military drones support, and without any American logistical support. Based on this, three possible scenarios can be identified for the future of the fight against terrorism in Mali

■ First scenario: Searching for new international partners

Forging new cooperation with one of the world powers that have recently arrived in the African Sahel region, such as Russia, which seeks to use its strong relations with the transitional leadership in Mali. This was proved by the meetings held between Mali and Russia on the sidelines of the signing of military cooperation agreements in 2021. Russia can take advantage of the declining French position and the transitional political and security situation to strengthen its relationship with Bamako, in addition to the public opinion in Mali calls on the transitional authorities to strengthen military and security relations with Moscow. Russian support holds great importance in light of the escalation of the terrorist threat across the country from north to south and from east to west, in a close scene to the security chaos that struck the country in 2012.

■ Second Scenario: Reframing French military support

Following the French President's announcement of the end of Operation Barkhane, France suspended some of its joint military activities with the Malian armed forces, especially since the overthrow of transitional President Bah Ndao. But the French military presence in the Sahel could be recast in another way, where the French president declared that "Paris will continue to intervene, but in a new

framework to support the national local armed forces and in smaller numbers.” The Malian government can still request cooperation to obtain military support from France, allowing Paris to intervene to support the Malian armed forces, but in a new framework. Even if the future French support will be in smaller numbers of military elements, French support remains important in light of the need for the Malian army for more logistical support and military equipment. Where it remains important for the French forces – especially the air force – to continue to play a role in securing the coast, even though the numbers of ground forces have been reduced in order to limit their losses on the ground.

■ **Third scenario: Negotiating with terrorist organizations**

While negotiation and compromise are part of the natural compromises that contemporary wars end up with, this alternative is seen as quite exceptional in the context of the war on terror. With the inability of the Malian state to deal with Iyad Ag Ghali (leader of Nasrt Al-Islam and Muslims), Amadou Koufa (commander of the Macina Brigade) and IS in Mali by force, voices began to rise to demand a new framework to negotiate with them as Malian citizens, and to lead a joint battle against IS in Mali. The chances of this scenario are enhanced by the repetition of the precedents of negotiations between the two sides with the aim of achieving an exchange of hostages, as the previous transitional government of Mokhtar Wan did with Iyad Ag Ghali, to liberate more than 200 jihadists. This may pave the way for the adoption of Asimi Gueta and his Prime Minister Shugel Maiga a more advanced approach that may include negotiating in order to reach a peace agreement, with the organizations that dominate the financial component.

Overall, Mali is facing a critical and extremely difficult phase in its protracted war on terrorism, which imposes a set of high-cost and unrewarding alternatives. What makes the situation more complex is the faltering transitional phase, which began with the overthrow of former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August 2020, but it is not known exactly when and how it will end, and how the path of political transition will intersect with counter-terrorism operations.

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The Domestic Consequences of Terrorism in Niger

10

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Introduction

The complex reality of the phenomenon of terrorism in Niger dictates the need to present a comprehensive picture of the context surrounding the security crisis experienced by this country. While this context is highly variable and dynamic, this is for the purpose of evaluating the performance of governance and the rule of law, protection and stability therein, and presenting this picture makes it possible to evaluate the complementarities between the various stakeholders working in issues of peace, security and governance.

This study also seeks to monitor gaps and the legal vacuum at the level of legislation and implementation in order to better address deficiencies by making use of data collected in the field of different regions in Niger. Within the framework of the study dealing with the phenomenon of

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terrorism in Niger at the national level, it focuses on the regions of Diffa, Maradi, Tahoua and Tilberry, which has the priority because they are the most vulnerable and within each of them, the study will focus on some of the most important municipalities.

General Context of the phenomenon of terrorism in Niger

The phenomenon of terrorism in Niger can be understood without taking into account the general context in which it arose, which enabled it to escalate and become the most acute security threat to the country. This context includes various factors such as geographic location, economic conditions, and demographic reality, in addition to the basic features of the country's political practice.

1. Location

Niger is a semi-desert country, with its terrain characterized by low altitudes (200–500 m), except for very old mountain ranges in the northwest: the crystallized massif of the Aïre River, with its highest point (Mont Gripon) rising to more than 2,000 m, and the sandstone mass in the southwest known as Termit. The northern part of Niger is also characterized by the presence of large plateaus and vast sandy desert areas, such as Tenere and Taal. However, the southern part is characterized by the rotation of plains and plateaus, interspersed with rocks in the west, chalk hill chains in the center and east, and valleys and basins spread from west to east. Niger's climate is tropical semi-arid, characterized by a season; one is rainy and it runs from June to September, and the other is dry from October to May.

In terms of water resources, Niger has abundant hollow and surface resources on which agricultural and pastoral activity in the country depends. However, accessing water is a problem for a huge number of the population due to often difficult operating conditions. In recent decades, the desert is expanding by 100,000 hectares each year, and internationally supported government reforestation programs face significant obstacles due to severe droughts, the growing demand for timber and agricultural land; since 1990, the forest has lost one third of its surface area, covering only one percent of the country's area. The area of land covered by forests is estimated at only 14 million hectares.

At the pediological level (soil study science), the soil of agricultural land in Niger is affected by the continuous decline in fertility, low water retention capacity and the phenomenon of high alkalinity and Mel. However, thanks to the natural renewal managed by farmers collectively, land degradation has decreased significantly, erosion has decreased and the repercussions of land degradation have been contained to an acceptable degree. In terms of vegetation cover, Niger is home to multiple plant species and formations with about 1,600 plant species.

2. Economic Conditions

In 1999, economic growth in Niger reached 5.86 percent, a significant decrease from 2018, when the country achieved an estimated growth rate of about 7 percent, but Niger's economy growth rate remains above the average rate of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) of 3.8 percent. However, it is below the average growth rate of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) of 6.4 percent. Niger's economy has achieved these rates, supported by the progress of the construction, services and agricultural production sectors, but of course the country's economy has been severely affected by the repercussions of the spread of the coronavirus.

In the same year, inflation in the country fell by 2.5 percent according to the National Institute of Statistics (INS). However, with the multiple effects of supply and demand shocks related to the spread of the coronavirus, inflation exceeded 4 percent the following year.

The Niger economy remains undiversified and is still in its early stages. In fact, agricultural and pastoral activities and hunting are sources of income for the vast majority of the population. The government would accelerate the implementation of the development policy for manufacturing and agro-industries through the application of the advantages provided by the new investment law; revitalize these sectors and create decent jobs for a large number of people, which will contribute strongly to poverty reduction. Service activities, including trade, transport, information and communications technology (ICT) and administrative activities, are second in the ranking of income sources.

Regarding foreign trade, performance improved in 2019 with an overall surplus of 377.7 billion CFA francs, compared to a deficit of 114 billion CFA francs in 2018. This improvement in the overall balance of

payments surplus can be explained by the good management of financial returns resulting from increased foreign direct investment.

3. Social Structure

Niger achieves one of the highest population growth rates in the world. Niger's population grows by about 3.7 percent annually. In 2012, Niger's population was estimated at 17 million and 138,000 people, but in 2019 this number increased to about 22 million. The average population density is 13.5 people per square kilometers. Most of the country's population lives in the southern strip because of its suitability for agricultural and pastoral activities, and the population component in Niger is predominantly youth, in addition to the concentration of the majority in rural rather than urban areas.

Despite demographic weight and weak economy, efforts in the social field have made it possible to record significant progress, especially in the context of improving the access of basic social services to the population. However, strong demographic growth -- with regard to human development -- along with restrictive climatic conditions such as repeated droughts and inadequate and inefficient natural resource exploitation systems have exacerbated the fragility of livelihoods. According to studies conducted at the national level by the National Institute of Statistics, about 40 percent of the Nigerians are poor, and nine out of ten poor Nigerians live in rural areas. As a result, Niger's human development index reached 30,354 in 2017 and 30,30 in 2018, which is one of the lowest in the world.

4. The Political System

The Democratic Republic of Niger adopts a semi-presidential system. The President of the Republic is the head of state. The Prime Minister is the head of government. The political system is based on multi-party. The National Assembly is the Parliament of Niger and consists of one chamber with 171 seats, and its deputies are elected for a term of five years. The country is divided into eight constituencies, several deputies are elected on the basis of proportional representation, with a total of 158 deputies, and eight special constituencies have been approved to represent national minorities, and five constituencies for Nejrri living abroad. The Niger judiciary is built to build a hierarchy top of the Constitutional Court, followed by the Court of Cassation, along

with private judicial bodies, such as the Council of State, the Accounting Council, and the Court of Justice.

The elections are managed and organized by the Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI), which in 2019 developed a biometric electoral register to organize the general elections in a free, credible and transparent manner. To accelerate the course of political reform, the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) held sessions on conflict prevention and management in a consensual manner on issues of national concern, and called for dialogue to parties that are not signatories to the Charter of Political Parties.

Following independence, the support of the former colonizer of the Progressive Party of Niger (PPN/RDA) forced the Niger opposition -- embodied in the Democratic Union of Niger (UDN SAWABA) -- to resort to armed struggle. This helped to transform the First Republic into a one-party system realistically, although the constitution retained its recognition of the multi-party system, which ended with the adoption by the Second Republic in 1974 of the principles of social democracy, so that the National Movement for the Development Society is recognized as a single party entitled to practice political activity in the country.

After an exceptional period of 17 years, the holding of the National Sovereign Conference in 1991 was the starting point for Nigerian democracy, which resulted in the adoption of a new constitution of great symbolic importance, given its promotion of political rights and freedoms, which formed a firm reference for both the third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh republics at least at the level of the declared slogans; each of them presented itself as a democratic, social and non-sectarian republic that guarantees religious freedoms, is based on the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers, and ensures the preservation of multi-party, political and trade union freedom and freedom of association.

But the process of building democracy in Niger certainly suffered from the repercussions of coups and successive transitional periods, but these events did not fundamentally threaten the choice of the Republican democratic system. In general, the rule of law remains a major challenge in Niger as the authorities fail to meet the public demands and basic needs of society, which is a negative factor, especially with the expansion of the activity of terrorist organizations that threaten the security and stability of Niger.

Regional emergence of terrorism and its expansion towards Niger

Niger is the meeting point of the two main terrorist circles in the African coast: the circle that started from northern Mali and extended south to be concentrated at the meeting point of the border between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The other circle that appeared on the southwestern shore of Lake Chad in the states of northeastern Nigeria, from which it extended to all lake basin countries: Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

1. The roots of terrorism in the African coast

In the early 1990s, Niger's regional environment witnessed a very dangerous phenomenon, which began in Algeria with the return of many Arab "Afghans". With this flammable environment available, the crisis of the Algerian elections in 1992 led to the country to enter a civil war led by elements of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Through its military wing, which was initially formed of several hundred fighters, along with elements of the "Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat" (GSPC) and other similar organizations that entered into violent confrontations against the Algerian army. In the early 2000s, elements of the (GSPC) settled in northern Mali and joined Al-Qaeda, resulting in the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI).

In this remote area of Mali, the 50-year conflict between the population of the north (mostly Tuareg and Arabs) and the central state weakened the control of the state, creating an appropriate vacuum for the occupied by terrorist organizations; Al-Qaeda elements in the Islamic Maghreb proved able to use these conflicts brilliantly to expand in all provinces north of the Niger River through a strong military structure. One by one, terrorism imported from abroad has been able to recruit former rebels to form indigenous movements within the framework of multiple organizations such as Ansar Dine, movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, the Massena Liberation Front, Jama'at Nasr Al-Islam wal Muslimin and others.

Manifestations of terrorism imported from the Middle East quickly intersected with the locally rooted insurgency in northern Mali, by expanding the recruitment of community members, adopting mixed

demands that combine political and ideological demands, or advocating communities that faces some problems with the state.

Besides the spread of terrorism from Mali to Niger and Burkina Faso, Boko Haram expanded in the Lake Chad basin, a movement born in Borno State, Nigeria, and reached eastern Niger, southern Chad and far north of Cameroon. In this situation, terrorism has become the main challenge of Niger and a source of geopolitical concern for the great Western powers and the entire international community. Terrorism is putting pressure on Niger to the west in terms of its border with Mali, and to the densely populated southeast, through the expansion of Boko Haram through Lake Chad.

2. Terrorism benefits from regional conflict

There are two dimensions to the terrorism rampant in the Sahel; one is international of Middle Eastern origin, fueled by anti-Western and anti-Zionist rhetoric, and a discourse of confrontation between Islam and the Christian West. The other dimension of terrorism in the Sahel is a local dimension that finds fertile ground among the nomadic population and tends to become a unifying factor for traditional forms of insurgency and opposition in the Sahel.

It is worth mentioning that armed conflicts in the Sahel region preceded the effects of emerging terrorist organizations in the Middle East. The origin of armed conflicts in the Sahel region date back to the rebellion of the Revolutionary front in Chad at the end of the 1970s, when this revolution ended with the seizure of power by the northerners in Chad.

In the 1980s, following the war between Chad and Libya to control the Ozo sector, Gaddafi's defeated forces in Wadi Doum abandoned a large arsenal before withdrawing north, and the military defeat led Libyan forces to decide to demobilize fighters of the Allied Islamic Corps, which included groups of Tuareg and Tabu. Demobilized fighters quickly took control of the arms arsenal in Wadi Doum, launching a series of armed rebellions in northern Niger and Mali in the 1990s. This arsenal would also have fueled the emerging conflict in Darfur in preparation for its peak after nearly a decade.

All these conflicts have led to the widespread proliferation of light and heavy weapons and have contributed to the creation of large segments of armed men who engage in violence in the Sahel region.

Insecurity has increased over time in order to exploit the ease of penetration of the borders separating the countries of the region, which has led to the development of organized crime, trafficking and smuggling of all kinds, and the transformation of some of the usual conflicts between farmers and pastoralists into identity and community conflicts, which are now exploited by extremist and terrorist groups that challenge the Niger state by giving it an ideological character.

In light of the many rebellions in the Sahel region on the basis of identity, the governments of the country's region have lost control over the vast desert areas, especially on the economic side; this provided an opportunity for the development of organized crime associated with smuggling activities and trafficking in arms, drugs and migrants. The Sahel region is characterized by large areas that are difficult to cover, and nomadic people that makes it difficult for the governments of the countries of the region to control their activity and movement through the desert. These areas have witnessed the development of many forms of trafficking and smuggling of goods supported by Algeria and Libya, who's smuggling to the poorest Sahel countries has become a profitable activity.

Smuggling has created important links between both sides of the desert, linking smugglers to the mafia of political circles. The phenomenon of smuggling has gradually expanded from smuggling basic products to cigarette smuggling, and has created a market imbalance in North African countries, before the same smuggling circles realized the drugs coming from Latin America that move to Europe, and later, human smuggling entered on the same lines of smuggling, as did the civil war in Algeria, as well as the ongoing conflicts in Libya and the opening of the arsenals of its military institution; to increase and enrich smuggling movement through the desert by bringing stolen arms and vehicle flows from north to south, and smuggling of humans and drugs from the south to the north.

The mixture of illicit smuggling activities has turned the region into a turbulent arena favorable for all outlaws; in which militants involved in terrorist activities coexist with smugglers and dangerous elements of organized crime.

The proliferation of terrorism in Niger

Rising terrorism poses a strategic challenge to the armies of the Sahel region; it is never easy to wage war in populated areas, especially in local regions, some of whose youth have joined the other organizations. Technically, the coast and desert region has rugged terrain areas that severely hinder military equipment, and the region enjoys a hot and dry climate, and is inhabited by nomadic groups who have had crisis relations with the state for decades.

To keep pace with all these challenges, the affected countries joined forces, with the support of the international community, to establish the group of five Sahel states, which includes Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), which with the support of the African Union, deployed the Multinational Joint Force (FMM), composed of troops from Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Benin to support regional stability. Besides the rugged terrain, the complex social context is a major obstacle to counter-terrorism operations, with its well-established tribal alliances and inherited hostilities that are difficult to separate without comprehensive knowledge of the society and its constituent groups.

Unfortunately, Sahel armies lack the social knowledge of this reality to a large extent, which has already posed a great challenge to the operations of the colonial army during its attempts to liquidate the recent enclaves of the anti-occupation resistance. Today, the social context of the Sahel countries creates a meeting point for many terrorists and smugglers on the bases of interest and tribality.

Despite the intensive international counter-terrorism presence in the Sahel through the French operations Serval and Barkhan and the forces of the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), terrorist groups continue to operate in the region, supported by the turmoil provided by the presence of armed separatist-oriented movements. The experience of the Algiers Peace Agreement between the Government of Mali and the emergency organizations in the north of the country indicates the difficulty of returning state authority to these troubled areas. The armed rebellion in the northern Saharan regions of the Sahel countries contributes to creating an environment conducive to the continuation of the terrorist phenomenon.

On the other hand, the inability of Sahel countries to provide justice and security in a satisfactory and impartial manner to the entire population has led to the proliferation of self-defence militias in the centre of the country, whose activity has not been limited to protecting their communities from the dangers of terrorism, but it has engaged in a series of violent operations in the context of the struggle for access to natural resources.

This phenomenon spread from Mali to its neighbourhood countries in a remarkable speed. On the border between Niger and Mali, and in an area between the towns of Ansonjo and Minaka in Mali, and Ayora and Abala in Niger, the traditional conflict between farmers and pastoralists worsened after some actors joined the Islamic State in Sahara, away from their violent activity in support of their political cause. Fighters of this terrorist faction began to engage in another type of violence motivated by the defence of their communities from attacks by neighbouring groups, a trend that intensified their reprisals against the security forces in Niger, on the pretext of their failure to protect their communities.

Thus, an ordinary rural conflict has become a violent phenomenon closely related to international terrorism; since 2018, violence has spread on the right bank of the Niger River, in the areas adjacent to the border between Niger and Burkina Faso, affecting the provinces of Torodi, Sai and Gotai. Where terrorism's violence takes root in the Sahel-Saharan region, it feeds on pre-existing conflicts that States have not been able to prevent or resolve for decades. The other cycle of violence affecting Niger is in the Lake Chad basin, in which Boko Haram, with its multiple dissident factions, plays the most prominent role that contributed to the disruption of security conditions in the Diffa region in particular.

Boko Haram was created in 2002 in the Maiduguri region, in the far north-eastern Nigeria, and its activity has spread across Lake Chad to the borders of Niger, Chad and northern Cameroon. Under pressure from the anti-terrorist coalition of the Multinational Combined Force of the Lake Chad Basin, the group was divided into several small groups without weakening its destructive activity. In early 2015, Boko Haram attacked Niger while a major faction, including the Islamic State, was pledged. In the Diffa region, Boko Haram attacks disrupted the regional economy, caused a humanitarian catastrophe

with internal population displacement, and a large influx of refugees from Nigeria.

The repercussions of terrorism in Niger

The local level of government is of great importance in Niger, because of the vast area of the country, and because of the diversity of its population components, each of which has a coherent traditional power structure. On this basis, a distinction can be made between three institutions strongly present at the local level in Niger, including:

- Subsidiary institutions emanating from the central government, which are composed -- at the regional and provincial levels -- of designated authorities, governors and directorates, and are surrounded by decentralized circles representing ministries.
- Decentralized institutions consisting of regional councils and municipal councils elected by the population.
- Traditional and customary authorities composed of sultans, heads of groups and provinces and heads of villages and tribes, who play an essential role in supervising the population because they enjoy the factors of kinship and established standing.
- Technical service institutions representing ministerial departments, located throughout the country and assisting decentralized authorities in their tasks related to economic, social and cultural development.
- Communities face multiple challenges, including instability and regional insecurity, climate change, commodity price volatility, and population growth that has a direct impact on education, health and the economic integration of young people into the labor market, factors that are directly related to the reality of the phenomenon of terrorism at the local level. The following is a presentation of the interactions of terrorism with local environments in four of the administrative regions into which Niger is divided.

1. Maradi

Despite the remarkable relative calm enjoyed by the region in the second quarter of 2011, it is highly vulnerable to insecurity along its border with Nigeria, especially in the municipalities of Gedan Rumji and Madarunva, and in isolated villages and border camps of the municipalities of Gabi, Savo, Tiberi, Jidan Surei and Dan Issa. During the second

quarter of 2021, the region recorded 32 attacks compared to 50 attacks in the first quarter. The municipality of Madarunva remains the most affected of all municipalities.

2. Tahua

Unlike Maradi, the Tahua region has been exposed to increasing waves of terrorism since the first quarter of 2011, concentrated in the provinces of Telia and Tasara adjacent to Mali. Despite the state of emergency imposed in the region since March 2017, the security situation in Tahua deteriorated due to the heavy proliferation of weapons, whether at the level of terrorist organizations, organized crime groups or even self-defence groups.

Although acts of violence committed by self-defence groups decreased by about one third from the previous quarter, these incidents continue to occur at a frequent rate, especially in the municipalities of Telia and Tasara. The activities of transnational organized crime groups are also concentrated in the municipalities of Bangui and Kuni adjacent to the states of Zamvara and Sokoto in Nigeria; in addition to the escalation of human rights violations in the northwestern localities of the region, including incidents of theft and looting of property, attacks on physical integrity and continuous violations of the right of citizens to move freely.

3. Tilberry

The Tilberry region is the most violent and conflict-prone region in Niger, despite the declaration of a state of emergency, its continued extension, and the strengthening of the security apparatus by the government. The security situation along the border strip with Mali and Burkina Faso continued to deteriorate during the second quarter of 2021.

The municipalities of the north and northeast of the region have experienced the worst level of security deterioration concentrated in the municipalities of Macalundi, Inatés, Tundikiwende, Banbango, Abala and Anzuro. Security deterioration along the sub-road network linking the municipalities of the region has also worsened. The population in Tilberry suffers from serious human rights violations, such as targeted assassinations, physical attacks, extortion of funds, cattle theft, burning of food stocks, and attacks on schools and health centers. This situation floods the population in an unprecedented situation of vulnerability and fragility, and undermines the population's

freedom of movement and access to basic social services, including basic needs. The borders of the Tilberry region with Mali and Burkina Faso have contributed to providing space for the activity of various terrorist organizations; the region is the link between all forms of violence and instability that affect the most vulnerable sections, including Abala, Euro and Terra. However, this is also the case in Banibango and Awalam provinces, where many young people joined the Islamic State in Sahara under the leadership of Abi Al-Waleed Sahrawi. Lately, military operations by the Niger army and police forces, with the support of the French and international forces, contributed to restoring relative calm, especially after the control of the entire border strip with Mali and Burkina Faso following the deployment of Burundian forces. However, border penetration remains a catalyst for the spread of terrorism, especially in the border area with Mali, between the municipalities of Tuntikyondi and Inás. During the second quarter of 2021, 126 security incidents were reported in the provinces of Abala, Ayurou, Banbango, Alam and Terra, an increase of more than 3 percent compared to the corresponding period of 2021.

4. Diffa

Despite being the region of Niger most affected by Boko Haram terrorism by virtue of its view of Lake Chad. In the second quarter of 2021, the Diffa region witnessed a positive variable represented by the voluntary return of displaced people to the world, in response to the call launched by regional and national authorities on June 20. The currents of return are expected to extend to 300 villages that will receive 104,000 returnees. Displaced people from the villages of Parwa, Jam Jam and Kindangi were the first to start the return process; the returnees reached about 9,000 people.

The return to the municipality of Parwa also included 1,187 families of 5,933 people, and the door was opened for the return of refugees from neighbouring countries who settled in the villages of the Diffa region by virtue of the tripartite agreement signed between Niger, Nigeria and Chad, this was actually implemented with the return of 127 Chadian families, comprising 657 people who fled the clashes between the army and the rebels, which took place in Chad in April.

Proposed measures to bolster the fight against terrorism in Niger

Niger's counter-terrorism policies are based on a wide range of documents revealing the political will of Niger to deal with the issue of terrorism from its multiple angles, including the National Economic and Social Development Plan in 2017–2021, the national reports for 2018 and 2020 submitted by the government on their achievement in achieving the sustainable development goals in Niger, reports and strategies of specialized institutions such as the High Authority for the Promotion of Peace (HACP) and the National Centre for Strategic and Security Studies (CNESS), as well as official documents issued by the Ministries of Justice and Interior.

In this regard, the research focuses on the actions implemented under the fourth axis of the national economic and social development plan and the sixteenth international goal of the sustainable development goals. These documents are supported by a solid legislative structure that includes the Constitution of November 25, 2010, the Penal Code and its amendments, the Code of Criminal Procedure and its amendments, and the Law on Combating Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism.

The Law on the Formation and Determination of Powers, the Rules of Functioning of the National Security Council, the Law on Military Justice, and the Law on Determining the Powers, Organization and Functioning of the “centre national d'études stratégiques et de sécurité” (CNESS). Since President Mohamed Buzum came to power, Niger has embarked on the reform of the national counter-terrorism policy, as well as smuggling and organized crime.

In light of the availability of the political will of the ruling regime, and its firm commitment to combating terrorism; Niger still needs a more comprehensive approach to combating terrorism that includes healing some of the wounds of society on one hand, and strengthening the links between the authority and citizens on the other hand, thus opening a new area of trust between the defence and security forces and the population.

In this regard, Niger seems to need a series of actions to ensure enhanced confidence of the population in the security forces and the republican judicial system, highlighting the state's efforts in combating terrorism and strengthening the rule of law. This is in addition to strengthening and supporting traditional leaders in their efforts to counter violent extremism, as well as supporting and reintegrating youth, and

making significant efforts to stabilize communities through building and implementing basic social services, ensuring peace and social cohesion.

To achieve these goals, Niger can use its long experience in combating terrorism to accelerate the comprehensive fight against this serious challenge through a series of actions, including at the institutional level the development of the National Security Council and its branches, establishing and strengthening specialized structures and units, especially specialized judicial centers.

On the security level, it is useful to develop a comprehensive national policy for border management, as well as national plans for an effective response, in addition to dividing the internal security forces in different regions into a larger number of sub-units, expanding the establishment of specialized training centers for members of the security sector concerned with direct confrontation of terrorism, and strengthening the internal cohesion of the army and police forces, ensuring that the various groups and regions are adequately represented within them.

At the societal level, it would be useful for the government of Niger to support peace building and management initiatives for community security, the establishment of the Permanent Rural Law Secretariat and the Land Commission, strengthening the participation of the traditional authority in the fight against terrorism, and granting social entities more formal recognition through political and symbolic initiatives, such as the institutionalization of the National Kinship Week, as well as the establishment of local peace committees jointly supervised by the administrative and traditional authorities to promote peace at the local level.

These proposals are aimed at strengthening Niger's capabilities to embody the political commitment clearly expressed by the government in the form of concrete measures that contribute to an effective response to terrorism and reducing harm, especially at the level of the most vulnerable communities.

References

1. Les localités prioritaires sont de localités se trouvant dans les zones comme Banibangou, Abala, Ayorou, Bosso, Geuskerou
2. Les localités à risque sont des localités qui peuvent basculer à tout moment au rouge comme Kolo, Goudoumaria, Dan Issa, Madarounfa
3. Les localités de monitoring sont celles qui sont susceptibles d'être exposées à l'insécurité comme Kao, Takanamat, Konni, Madaoua
4. Rapport National volontaire sur les ODD 2020
5. Stabiliser Les Zones De Conflit Capitalisation de l'Expérience de la Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP) (1994-2020)
6. Stabiliser Les Zones De Conflit Capitalisation de l'Expérience de la Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP) (1994-2020)
7. OCHA Analyse situationnelle trimestrielle au 30 juin 2021
8. AXE 4 Amélioration de la Gouvernance, Paix et sécurité
9. ODD16 : La gouvernance s'est améliorée, fruit des différentes réformes mises en place par le Gouvernement.
10. Brochure de sécurité intérieure de 2017

In March 2012, Ansar Al-Din group, led by Iyad Ag Ghali, managed to establish control over several cities in northern Mali, opening the door for a long-drawn-out wave of growing terrorist activities that is ushering in its second decade and stretching to include Sahel states and neighbouring regions.

Terrorism in the Sahel isn't only characterized by proliferation and sustainability, but has developed roots in communities by weaving a tangled web of relations with different actors, including local communities, tribal and ethnic leaders, and organized crime groups, in addition to state entities where corruption laid the groundwork for proliferation.

The spillover of terrorism in the Sahel over the past decade doesn't suggest inaction or absence of anti-terrorism efforts. The reality on the ground indicates that this period saw the largest national, regional, and international military mobilization in the history of Sahel states since their independence, where national armies became involved in confrontations with terrorist organizations, some of which were of a purely national character while others came under different forms of multilateral regional arrangements, backed by UN peace-keeping forces as well as other forces of multiple international powers that were involved directly in protracted military confrontations.

While these efforts achieved some modest successes, most notably inhibiting terrorist organizations from taking over vast territories of the Sahel region, they failed to entirely eliminate this dire threat, particularly after terrorist organizations managed to take shelter behind local communities where conducting robust security operations becomes challenging due to difficulties having to do with distinguishing between terrorists and locals.

