

The Sahel between the expansion of terrorist organizations and absence of a Holistic Strategy to defeat Extremism and Terrorism

(Revival of the third generation of Al-Qaeda in the Sahel ?)

By Brahim Laytouss



Introduction :

Security and stability are seriously declining in Africa, despite the passage of decade-long efforts - since the presence of French forces and their allies - securing law and order there. The purpose of this Paris-led effort was to confront and to fight against the Jihadi militant groups and threat posed to a number of African countries and specifically across the vast region between desert and savanna of five Sahel countries known as "G5" Sahel , Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.



Many organizations were established to tighten control and security over the various African regions, which include 54 countries in the whole continent, while the Islamic State is very active in more than 20 African countries already (CEP project Aug.2022) , East, West, Central, North and South. If we look to the international organisations working in Africa, such as UN peacekeepers (MINUSMA)¹, Economic Community of Central African States

¹ ACLED Regional Overview: Africa (2 - 8 July 2022) – ReliefWeb

(ECCAS), which includes the countries of Central Africa, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) organization, in East Africa - which is the weakest one due to the tensions between these countries- , as well as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) organization; which is one of the most powerful organizations in West Africa, even these ongoing coalition against terrorism , we note, however that there are still major security challenges for the wider region, even for the whole continent. However, the ease of cross border movement in these countries represents a major challenge for monitoring terrorist organizations and individuals due to these facilities and loopholes that are exploited by extremist groups. The reach of the record of 6,255 violent events linked to these groups in 2022 represents a 21-percent increase from the previous year.²

Impact of the French Withdrawal

Beside the G5 that is an institutional framework for coordinating regional cooperation in development policies and security affairs in West Africa. Formed on February 16, 2014 in Nouakchott, Mauritania, In 2014, France also launched Operation Barkhane to combat terrorism, first deploying 3000 soldiers in the member states of the Sahel group until the number reached more than 5000 soldiers, and carried out 128 combat operations in Mali in the context of countering terrorism, killing 55 French soldiers since the start of operations in 2014.

Last summer, French President Macron threatened to withdraw French soldiers from Mali, calling for European operations in the Sahel and for other countries to do their duty and responsibility, such as Germany and Italy, and the withdrawal process was already started on May 15, 2022.³ This will cause a real vacuum in the security landscape in the region ,despite criticisms on France's effectiveness.

What caused this dispute between Mali and France is the succession of military coups in the country in 2020 and 2021 and the entry of mercenaries from the Russian private security mercenaries called "Wagner group " in Mali with the support of the current ruling Malian authorities.⁴

² Sahel and Somalia drive rise in Africa's militant Islamist group violence, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Aug.9, 2022.

³ The New York Times, French Soldiers Quit Mali After 9 Years, Billions Spent and Many Lives Lost,by Elian Peltier and Ruth Maclean By Aug. 15, 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/world/africa/mali-france-military-operation.html>

⁴ Russian mercenaries linked to civilian massacres in Mali/ THE Guardian 4 May 2022.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/russian-mercenaries-wagner-group-linked-to-civilian-massacres-in-mali>



Photo : AFP

We notice an increase in the activity of jihadist organizations, starting with the attendance of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in the early nineties of the last century in Algeria. In the past months, African countries have been racing against time to hold several security conferences and seminars to contain the crisis of lawlessness, which is worsening day after day in the black continent.

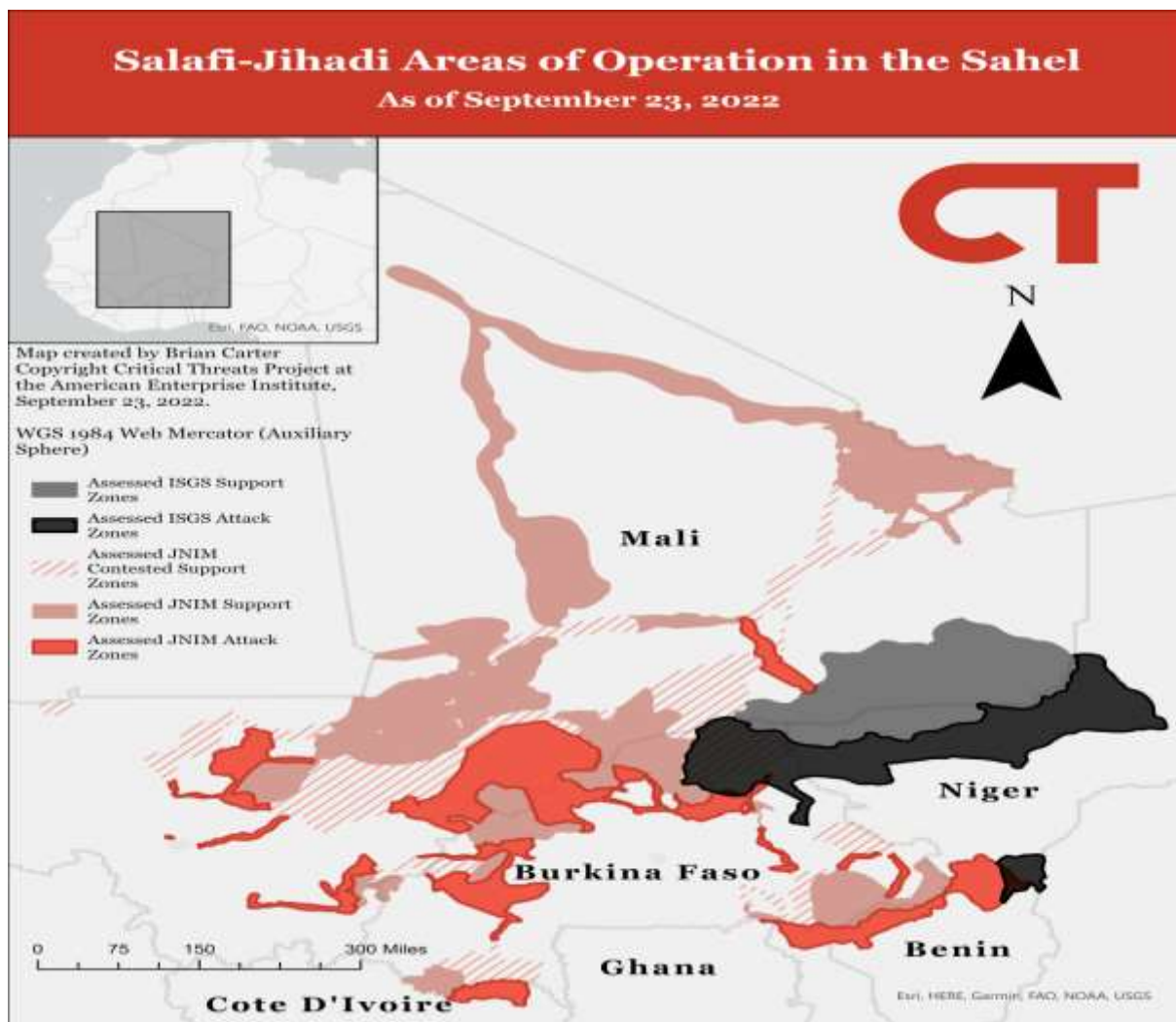
Mauritania established in its capital city, Nouakchott, on June 27 and 28 2022 a very important and significant international colloquium on the Sahel « Development, governance and Human Rights for the security of the population .

Mali held the first Forum of Muslim religious leaders for peace and stability in Bamako attended by 12 countries on September 21-22, 2022 .

And Senegal held at the - 24/25 October 2022, the African Security 8st Forum in Dakar under the title : “ Africa put to the test by exogenous shocks: challenges of stability and sovereignty.

Armed groups in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and Mozambique have shown the sharpest increases in violent activity in recent years. The death toll linked to Islamist militant groups has risen, reaching 14,635 last year - an increase of nearly 50 percent since 2019⁵.

⁵ Sahel and Somalia drive rise in Africa’s militant Islamist group violence, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Aug.9, 2022.



Source : Map Critical Threat Project , created by Brian Carter, Sept. 2022

Although we see, every day, increasing pressure on the strongholds of the extremist Sahel groups, especially in the triangle that includes Mali, Niger and Burkina⁶. From 2011 to 2020, the number of its terrorist operations amounted to 4,161, while its operations in 2011 did not exceed 693 operations.⁷As we know that African security is linked to European security⁸.

In order to have a global look at the expansion of armed groups in the Sahel, we make an inventory in the following table:

Figure groups in The Sahel⁹

⁶ Report, the New frontier for jihadist groups? North of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, Konrad Adenaur Stiftung , 2020. www.kas.de

⁷ www.africacenter.org

⁸ Clingendael Monitor 2016 | De EU als veiligheidsactor in Afrika.

⁹ Caleb Weiss , AQIM's Imperial Playbook : Understanding al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's & expansion into West Africa , Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, United States Military Academy , USA, April 2022

Organization	Leader /Founder	Type of organization & year of active	Geographical spread	Strength & weakness index
Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Abdelmalek Droukdel (deceased), Abu Ubaidah Yusuf alAnnabi	Main organization of Jihadi Militants (AQIM) , since 2006 till present	Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, West Africa	Strong
Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)	Iyad Ag Ghaly	Sub-group of AQIM, 2017-present	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, Ivory Coast, West Africa	Strong
Ansar Dine	Iyad Ag Ghaly	Affiliate; later sub-group of JNIM Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), since 2011-2017	Mali, Algeria, Libya, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania	Strong
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO/ MUJWA)	Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou (fate unknown, likely deceased), Ahmed al-Tilemsi (deceased), Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui (deceased)	Affiliate; later sub-group of al-Murabitoon, 2011 – present	Algeria, Mali, Niger	Strong
Katibat Macina/Macina Liberation Front	Amadou Kouffa	Since 2015-present Sub-group of Ansar Dine; later subgroup of JNIM	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo, Ghana	Strong in Mali
Boko Haram	Abu Abdullah ibn Umar al-Barnawi, better known as Ba Idrisa In February of 2019, ISWAP	2002,, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), a splinter group of	Nigeria ,Niger, Chad and North-Cameroon	Strong

	<p>leader al-Barnawi was reportedly removed as the leader of the jihadist group</p> <p>Ba Idrisa was executed by ISWAP fighters on February 27, 2020</p>	Boko Haram.		
Al- Shabaab	Abu Ubaidah (Direye)	Sub-group of AQIM, 2006-present	Somalia	Strong
Al-Murabitoon	Abu Bakr alMasri (deceased), Ahmed al-Tilemsi (deceased), Mokhtar Belmokhtar (fate unknown, likely deceased), Himama Ould Lekhweir	Sub-group of AQIM, 2013/17 - present	Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast	Strong
ISIL	Abu Musab al-Barnawi (deceased, 2021)	Islamic State, Since 2015	West Africa , Sahel, Chad, Niger,Cameroon and Nigeria	Medium
Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine	Sedane Ag Hitta	Sub-group of AQIM, since 2012/2013-present Sub-group of AQIM; later Ansar Dine	Mali, Algeria	Weak
Katibat al Furqan	Djamel Okacha (deceased); Abdallah al-Shinqiti (deceased); Talha al-Libi	Sub-group of AQIM; later JNIM, 2009/2017-present	Mali, Niger, Mauritania	Medium
Katibat al Ansar	Hamada Ag Hama (deceased)	Sub-group of AQIM 2010/2013-present or actually Sub-group of AQIM; later Ansar Dine	Mali, Algeria	Medium

Katibat al Mulathameen/ Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade	Mokhtar Belmokhtar (fate unknown, likely deceased)	Affiliate; later subgroup of al Murabitoon; former subgroup of AQIM, 2012- 2013	Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya	Medium
Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru)	Abubakar Adam Kambar (deceased), Khalid al- Barnawi (detained)	Affiliate; possible sub- group of AQIM, since 2012- present	Nigeria, Libya, Mali	Strong

The main factors for increasing the expansion of terrorist groups and the spread of violence in the Sahel

Given the complexities of the phenomenon of terrorism and the absence of a comprehensive plan to combat violent extremism, we must first be aware of the economic, political and social factors, namely:

Fragility in governance, which results in rampant corruption in the army, to the extent that soldiers sell weapons to terrorists reinforcing the idea that what makes African countries strongly need a strong reform of its security forces and institutions.

Lack of law enforcement and democracy in Mali, there are only 599 judges, 326 lawyers and three courts for a population of 19.6 million people.¹⁰

Continuing to bring followers and recruitment through social media, Telegram and Roket Chat, as Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam doing it in the country of Sudan, and the launch of its media wing there with a new name: Al-Yaqout, as well as a new magazine called “ Voice of the Black Continent “.

The significant interrelationship and interdependence between crime and terrorism, especially on the border of Sahel countries and desert areas are threatening the stability of the region as a whole.

Creating conflict and alienation between the authorities and local communities, and limiting the purely security approach.

The absence of coordination and consensus on crucial issues, common goals and divisions within the African arena between neighbouring countries opened the door for extremist groups to cooperate among their branches, and even to form a jihadist alliance to fight the infidels and apostates as they promote in their media and propaganda campaigns. All of this obstructs the work with a comprehensive and complete approach.

¹⁰ Mali Country Report 2022, Bertelsmannstiftung Transformation Index (BTI).

New realities in Africa needs a new Strategy

Given the complexities of the phenomenon of terrorism and the difficulties of a comprehensive plan to oppose violent extremism, a comprehensive approach must be taken, as the European Union has intended, which in my view can be summarized in two words: more engagement and a better coordination.

The directive note for EU member states 2017/54110¹¹ on ‘Defining and combating terrorism’, in which all EU member states were required to move to defining their national legislation by 8 September 2018, what are terrorist crimes that are deliberately committed, given their nature or context, they are committing actions that may cause damage.

Seriously to the first country of an international organization and when it aims to: severely intimidating the population; forcing a government or international organization to perform or to refrain from doing any act; seriously destabilizing or destroying the political or constitutional infrastructure, or the economic or social structures of a country or an international organization¹².

This is exactly what is happening for the Sahel countries, especially since they are considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world.¹³ That is why the United Nations has launched some strategic plans since 2013 and the European Union has launched several initiatives to reach the following three goals: firstly making governance inclusive and more effective, secondly building capacities to confront transcontinental threats, and thirdly enhancing resilience when the coastal people, and allocated European development support, amounting 22 billion euros to implement 913 projects in order to achieve these important goals.¹⁴

The European Union’s strategy in opposing extremism and terrorism is based on four rules: prevention, protection, prosecution and response. These mechanisms are carried out in a kind of balance to achieve inclusiveness in the proposal and plan, and this is what is currently missing in the approach applied in the Sahel countries, where many countries (Somalia, Mali and Niger) complaining from the issue of an excessive use of security and punitive means and the absence of prevention and field treatment.

It came in the European guide putting the phenomenon of extremism and radicalism in its proper context that every fieldworker of combat, must accompany him during his work, the factors pushing to extremism in addition to that, the pull factors (the emotional nature of religion and the ideologization of religious discourse and how to interpret its religious texts and their use for partisan and sectarian agendas) to succeed in properly addressing this phenomenon.

The European index puts four classifications of the main drivers of the phenomenon of extremism and radicalization: firstly structural drivers (corruption, injustice and racial

¹¹ Directive (EU) 2017/541 on combatting terrorism, Luxembourg, Office of the European Union, 2021

¹² European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2021. www.europol.europa.eu

¹³ Sahel Programme, Progress Report 2017, United Nations office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

¹⁴ Ibid.

discrimination), secondly individual motivations (desire to belong, love of adventure and influenced by ideology), thirdly group dynamics (encouragement and group pressure) and fourthly last but not least facilitating factors (religious leaders and their discourses).¹⁵

Emphasis was placed on the participatory approach and the cooperation of all parties and components of society in accordance with a tight working plan and a focus on proactive and preventive work and contesting and denouncing content on sites, as European laws require all major companies to remove violent and hateful content after an hour of maximum publication and appearance on social networks.

It should also be noticed, with regarding to cyber security, that 60 percent of piracy and digital threats originate mainly from 11 African countries, where the absence of law enforcement and thus terrorist groups escape from abiding by laws and regulations, which constitutes a real threat in the future to confronting and addressing them.

Conclusion :

In line with above developments BIC advocates following action points and policy considerations.

Islamist group violence in Africa has risen unrelentingly over the past years and need an urgent holistic AND comprehensive EU and international approach and cooperation.

The politics of repression, however, are simultaneously effective and counterproductive if not combined with prevention and training programs.

The security in the Sub-Saharan & Sahel region became a real danger and being kidnapped from a hotel is normalized and very realistic due to the record 6,255 violent events linked to these groups in 2022 that is representing a 20-percent increase from the previous year.

Currently, there is a high state fragility, influencing on the local communities and pressuring on the border security, especially the 15 countries, all members of ECCAS and other Mediterranean borders with the EU. The violence in the Sahel had internally displaced at least two million people AND the ongoing conflicts encouraging illegal migration waves.

The fight against militant Islamist groups in Africa, can only be successful by combining prevention with adapted CVE- programs and training of religious leaders and security services.

The EU's rhetoric of a 'partnership of equals' has to be changed to a concrete action plan and exchange programmes and to cooperate with different African countries at all levels.

¹⁵ EU-CT- CVE , Operational Guidelines on the preparation and implementation of EU financed actions specific to countering terrorism and violent extremism in third countries, European commission,2018.

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