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Jihadist radicalisation and other destabilising factors in the Sahel[1]

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Since the fall of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, and since the Tuareg revolution and subsequent coup in Mali in 2012, the Sahel has been plunged into a cycle of violence that continues to this day. Poverty and frustration, combined with organised crime, violent extremism and weak state institutions, are turning the region into an area of growing insecurity, instability and conflict.

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[1] This analysis is part of an ongoing line of research by the International Security Centre on the Sahel. Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum organised in March 2021, speakers belonging to the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum Expert Group have deepened the themes of their conferences, analysing the shared challenges, and the opportunities for cooperation on our common challenges. The political crises in Mali and Chad link the security crisis to governance challenges in these states, where the presence of self-defence militias and jihadist groups hinder economic and social development. In such a changing environment, with the Sahel being Europe's advanced frontier, it is now more important than ever to promote a space for dialogue in which both regions can share, cooperate and propose innovative solutions. This series of publications, as well as the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, have received a grant from the General Secretariat for Defence Policy of the Ministry of Defence.

Jihadist groups, armed groups, self-defence militias and criminal networks involved in arms and drug trafficking have taken control of areas where the authorities have little presence and where countries do not have sufficient control over their territories. This article will study, first, the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation in the Sahel, its evolution and causes and, second, the actions of other actors of violence such as self-defence militias and criminal networks. To define the geographical boundary of the analysis, the Sahel in this article refers mainly to the western part comprising Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso[2].

Evolution of the jihadist phenomenon in the Sahel

The first signs of jihadist activity in Mali date back to the early 2000s, with the first actions of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in the north of the country in 2003, which would later become Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)[3]. From 2007 until the Tuareg revolution of 2012, jihadist activity increased with several kidnappings of Westerners by the terrorist groups AQIM and MUJAO, the first group born in Mali from the Al Qaeda splinter group. The jihadist groups were able to consolidate their presence in the region by taking advantage of the limited control that the Malian government exercised in the regions bordering Algeria.

The Tuareg revolution began in January 2012 and lasted until 2015. At the same time, Iyad Ag Ghali, the Tuareg leader of the 1990s revolt, created Ansar Dine in 2012, a jihadist group linked to AQIM that took advantage of the chaos of the revolution to expand. Until 2015, jihadist groups were affiliated with AQIM in one way or another, but in 2015 a new jihadist group emerged in central Mali, Katiba Macina, an ethnic-communal group that recruited mainly Peul nomadic herders. With a similar radicalisation process, a jihadist group that maintains good relations with Katiba Macina, the Ansaroul Islam group, emerged in Burkina Faso in 2016.

Also in 2016, Al Saharoui, former leader of MUJAO, swore allegiance to Daesh, creating his own affiliate, the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara, and expanding mainly in the western region of Niger (Tahoua and Tillabéri). For their part, in 2017, the terrorist groups most closely linked to AQIM joined together in a network called JNIM, led by Ag Ghali, whose activity now predominates in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso. Since then, levels of jihadist violence have risen sharply in the area. Northern Burkina Faso, western Niger and central Mali is known as Liptako Gourma and is where most Sahelian jihadist activity is currently concentrated.

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[2] References will be made to the Lake Chad area (consisting mainly of Niger, Nigeria and Chad) and to West Africa, which encompasses more countries in the region.

[3] International Crisis Group. *Mali : Eviter l'escalade*. Rapport Afrique N°189 – 18 juillet 2012

This quantitative increase has also been accompanied by an unstoppable geographical expansion of these groups towards neighbouring countries, both to the south and to the west. First, in 2019, the EIGS began an expansion strategy from south-western Niger towards central Mali and Burkina Faso, attempting to operate in territories traditionally under the control of JNIM. This caused friction between the two groups, which until that time and exceptionally maintained a relationship of coexistence without violence. In fact, at the end of that year, clashes began between the two terrorist affiliates, which intensified during the first half of 2020. While EIGS initially enjoyed more victories, the year ended with its withdrawal to Niger and eastern Burkina Faso, perhaps also due to military pressure, especially from Operation Barkhane, which identified it as the main target during 2020.

The group is also active in territories near the Gulf of Guinea countries. In this southern zone, increasing attacks along Burkina Faso's border with Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin were recorded during 2019 and 2020. Cells of the Katiba Macina were reportedly installed both west and east of the Burkinabe border, while those of the EIGS were said to operate mainly in the east. The threat to these countries, of which various intelligence services had already warned, finally materialised in 2020, with two terrorist attacks in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire respectively.

In the case of western Mali, the phenomenon is led by Katiba Macina, a member of the JNIM coalition, who is increasingly perpetrating attacks in the Malian region of Kayes, bordering Senegal and Mauritania. In fact, in February 2021, for the first time in three years, the Senegalese gendarmerie dismantled a cell of the group on Senegalese national territory.

In addition to the increased influence of the EIGS and military pressure in the TBA, which would generate a logical displacement of the groups towards less protected areas in which to rearm, other factors would favour the territorial expansion of terrorist groups. Firstly, these movements are possible thanks to the porosity of national borders and the lack of control by the authorities, a common phenomenon throughout the region, which allows militants to move easily between different countries, making it difficult to locate and prosecute them. On the other hand, the target territories offer the possibility of obtaining access to the Atlantic Ocean, where synergies could be established with other types of crime -especially in the Gulf of Guinea, the scene of important piracy or illicit trafficking networks-, making it easier to obtain financing and supplies. On the other hand, the natural wealth of these areas should also be taken into account, as they have a multitude of natural resources (gold deposits in particular) which, if exploited by terrorists, could provide another source of funding. All this, added to the structural weaknesses of the countries in the region-political instability, poor relations between governments and rural populations, lack of citizen loyalty and a feeling of abandonment,

among others-generates a very unfavourable context, in which the establishment and success of these terrorist cells is much more likely[4].

Finally, two other jihadist groups are active in south-eastern Niger, Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA), which was born out of a split from Boko Haram. The EIGS currently reports to the EIAO's parent, although it was formed earlier.

Factors of radicalisation in the Sahel

The Sahel conflict did not come out of nowhere; it was an accumulation of old frustrations, to which were added other phenomena that, with the various mutations and metamorphoses, the whole became a complex and highly dynamic multidimensional crisis. From colonisation to the emergence of terrorism, through the repression of some populations, droughts, drug trafficking and improvised peace agreements that were never respected. All these socio-economic, political and even cultural factors are mostly ignored in the various responses to the crisis, despite the fact that they are the root causes of this cycle of violence.

Socio-economic factors

Jihadist groups, community militias, non-terrorist armed groups, and criminal networks provide services and employment to local communities at risk and offer protection in some remote areas with little state presence. Inhabitants of these areas may see these groups as the best, if not the only, way to find employment and live in a secure environment.

Feelings of exclusion and marginalisation are widespread, especially among young people in disadvantaged localities and in environments where family structures are eroded. Behaviour is no longer governed by the social norms of yesteryear and young people do not know what to do with their time. These situations can lead to a sense of isolation. Violent extremist groups take advantage of this withdrawal by offering them an escape route, a sense of purpose and integration into a collective movement. This is how social networks become important vectors of radicalisation and recruitment.

Indeed, real or perceived discrimination against an individual, a community or both in general can foster violent extremism. When certain communities suffer socio-economic

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[4] Marta Summers Montero. *Enfrentamientos entre JNIM y EIGS.* Cambios en el equilibrio terrorista del Sahel. Documento de Opinión IEEE 98/2020

and political discrimination or lack of respect for their religion or culture, they are pushed towards radicalisation and even resort to violent extremism[5].

The frustration generated by the lack of opportunities and prospects among young people is a powerful driver of violent extremist activity. More educated young people often feel that they deserve a better life than what their society offers them. They struggle to access the jobs to which they feel entitled; they are aware of the nepotism that stands in their way. Young people do not always have the financial means to marry and generally have no voice in traditional societies[6].

Similarly, the lack of response to socio-economic needs, especially when accompanied by factors such as widespread corruption and lack of security and justice, can be exploited by violent extremist groups who sometimes offer remuneration or services to the population.

Political factors

Endemic corruption and elite impunity foster civic disinterest and political apathy, and sometimes feed a deep sense of moral indignation. The more corrupt the environment, the easier it is for violent extremist groups to present themselves as a virtuous alternative by denouncing the immorality of ruling elites. Cruel treatment and torture of suspected jihadists at the hands of defence and security forces can provoke a desire for revenge. Indeed, the more brutal and widespread the methods, the stronger the attraction to violent extremist activities and the greater the support of local communities for violent extremist groups. Support for violent extremist activities may be explained by the desire of some individuals to repair a dishonour to themselves or to the community.

In addition, some low-density areas with poor or no governance provide a haven for extremist organisations that face few obstacles and even gain the support of the local population neglected by the governing authorities. All this creates the conditions for local conflicts of a certain magnitude that can lead to chaos, impede the functioning of state institutions and create a political vacuum that can be easily exploited by violent extremist organisations. Some governments have often supported militias and movements, only to lose control over them very quickly. In short, when a regime is

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[5] Violent reprisals by other communities and the state are provoking a widespread sense of frustration and injustice, mainly among Peul pastoralists in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Jihadist groups offer them an alternative to gain the protection and social recognition and prominence they feel they have lost. In eatriz de León Cobo; Patricia Rodríguez González. *La captación y radicalización de los peul por los grupos terroristas en el Sahel.* Documento de Opinión IEEE 125/2020.

[6] Augustin Loada y Peter Romaniuk, *Vers une résilience nationale dans un contexte d'insécurité régionale Prévention de l'extrémisme violent au Burkina Faso.* Juin 2014.

totally discredited and there is no viable opposition, those who oppose the government and want reform are pushed out of mainstream political channels and may turn to extremist groups.

Finally, if the state is no longer able to protect its population and provide security for its citizens, violent extremist groups use intimidation and coercion to force people to support them. Some populations may heed violent extremist propaganda claiming that the global political and economic system discriminates against the Muslim world, which is sometimes corroborated by individuals or collective feelings of discrimination.

Cultural factors

There is a strong correlation between the success of violent extremists and the perception that the West attacks Islam and Muslims. People who experience repression and humiliation on a daily basis are more sensitive to poignant and highly politicised images of Muslims suffering in other countries. This factor partly overlaps with and reinforces the political factor. People sometimes feel a more general threat to their culture, traditions, customs, values and sense of individual and collective honour and dignity.

Radicalisation among children

Having delved into the factors of radicalisation in the Western Sahel, it is essential to focus on the problem of radicalisation among children in this region.

Every day, thousands of children are separated from their families at a very young age to be exploited for labour or sexual exploitation, used in forced begging, victims of extreme cruelty by their families, abandoned, expelled from their homes, victims of internal and transnational trafficking, and thousands more forced to live on the streets of major cities for one or more of these reasons.

It is not possible to know exactly how many children are affected because, although the problems are visible, there are hardly any studies on the subject, reflecting the lack of interest in the issue. Some of the data we can offer are, for example, that a child can be bought for 30 euros in Benin. In Senegal, a study carried out in 2017 reports 150,000 children forced to beg for so-called Koranic teachers throughout the country. The Ivory Coast crisis has doubled the number of street children, the "microbe children", and the violent incidents provoked by them. In Freetown, there are more than 2,500 children living day and night on the streets, including some 800 children in prostitution[7]. These

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[7] For more information: Patricia Rodríguez González. *La trata de niñas con fines de explotación sexual en Sierra Leona.* Documento de Opinión IEEE 44/2020.

are some examples of systematic violations of the most basic children's rights, to which must be added the increasing vulgarisation of cheap drug use on the streets.

These children are being abandoned and sometimes even criminalised by society and the international community. The abandonment and mistreatment of a child at an early age has direct consequences on their development as adults: psychomotor retardation, emotional problems, physical health problems, etc. If they do not create trusting relationships at this age, they will grow up fearful of the world and the people around them. This situation of absolute lack of protection and vulnerability is exploited by jihadist groups that approach them with a proposal, a life project, identity and belonging, protection and money. In 2015, Boko Haram recruited young people in the north of Benin for 250 euros.

The child is not someone to be feared but someone who must unquestionably be protected, not out of fear but out of co-responsibility and humanity. Today, there is little or no investment by local governments in addressing these problems. Despite the fact that in most of these countries there is comprehensive legislation condemning these practices, it is systematically breached under the blind eye of the authorities and public officials who should be enforcing them.

Over the last 10 years, far from improving, the situation has deteriorated more and more under the passive gaze of those who are responsible for working to reverse this situation. It is not only necessary to invest funds but also to take care of the quality of interventions in the areas of mental health, family, the creation of shelters and reintegration programmes that provide real opportunities instead of perpetuating situations of poverty, if we really want to improve security and prevent extremism.

Radicalisation of jihadist leaders

This section will study the biographies of the leaders of two jihadist groups operating in the Sahel: Iyad Ag Ghali (Ansar Dine and JNIM) and Amadou Koufa (Katiba Macina). Understanding their radicalisation process is essential to understand how a phenomenon that was so alien to the region 15 years ago has been able to expand so rapidly. If the sudden and rapid expansion of jihadism in the Sahel has aroused interest among experts, it is because the Sahel's heterogeneous population is traditionally Sufi and has coexisted with and even taken on some practices of traditional African religions. The radicalisation of Sufi community leaders to Salafism has pushed several communities to follow this more conservative branch of Islam that focuses on restoring the vision of Islam practised by early Muslims. Many of the leaders have belonged to the peaceful religious movement known as Dawa Tabligh, a missionary group founded in 1927 with the aim of re-Islamising Indian Muslims. This religious community has spread

across Pakistan and later the world, from Paris to the Sahel. Although no direct link between Al Qaeda and the Dawa Tabligh has been proven, jihadist groups recruit their members because of the similarity in the group's discourse and conservative teachings.[8]

Starting with the head of JNIM, Iyad Ag Ghali is a Malian Tuareg from the Ifoghas tribe who led the Tuareg revolution in the 1990s. In the early 2000s he joined the Dawa Tabligh movement, and from then until 2011, he was radicalised and had his first contacts with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. He was sent as a consular advisor to Saudi Arabia, from where he was expelled because of his alleged contacts with Al Qaeda. After the fall of Gaddafi in Libya, while numerous Tuareg leaders gathered in Zakak in northern Mali before the start of the revolution in late 2011, Ag Ghali returned to Mali with the intention of leading the revolution and creating an Islamic republic in which Sharia would be established. The Tuareg leadership considered him too radicalised to lead the revolution. It was then that Ag Ghali, taking advantage of his contacts with AQIM, decided to form his own jihadist group, Ansar Dine. Ansar Dine opposes the independence of Azawad for which Ag Ghali had fought so hard in the past, and instead advocates the application of Shari'a in its most extreme form promoted by AQIM and other jihadist groups. [9]

The second biography to be studied is that of Amadou Koufa, a Peul poet and religious leader from central Mali who will be radicalised and become the founder of the jihadist group Katiba Macina. Koufa had an excellent traditional Koranic education, training with famous Malian preachers. In his speeches, he promoted traditional Islam and criticised the injustice of the caste system within the Peul community. Until his radicalisation, he was considered an authority figure in the religious sphere. In 2009, while the Malian government was carrying out some social reforms such as the reform of the family code, Koufa joined the Dawa Tabligh, where he felt that his conservative views and speeches were heard and supported[10]. In the Dawa, Koufa established a better relationship with Ag Ghali and later joined Ansar Dine after its formation. He was initially the emissary of this group in the central region of Mali, where he was originally from, but later decided to form the Katiba Macina group. Koufa and Ag Ghali, along with the leader of AQIM-

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[8] Mathieu Pellerin, *Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel*, Notes de l'Ifri, Ifri, février 2017.

[9] Adib Bencherif. *De la « question touarègue » aux mémoires du conflit : pour une réconciliation malienne. Centre FracoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix. UQAM.* 2018. P.10

[10] Modibo Ghaly Cissé. H. *Koufa, fer de lance du radicalisme dans le Mali central.* En *Prédation et violence au Mali: élites statutaires peules et logiques de domination dans la région de Mopti*, Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines. 2019.

Mali and the leader of Al-Mourabitoun, formed the Jamaat Al-Nusra Al-Islam Wal Muslimin (JNIM) terrorist network in 2017[11].

Self-defence militias as actors of violence in the Sahel

Self-defence militias have existed for decades in the context of security crises in the Sahel. In Mali, following the revolutions of 1990, 2006 and 2012, various militias such as Ganda Koy and Ganda Izo emerged in the territories adjacent to the north of the country to defend themselves against the crime and insecurity caused by the uprisings. These militias were even signatories to the peace agreements that followed the revolutions. As the state is unable to provide security for its citizens, some young people create these armed groups on an ad hoc basis, with the aim of protecting their livestock and villages for short periods of time.

Thus, although the phenomenon is not unknown, the irruption of jihadism in the Sahel has led to the creation of self-defence militias that have been consolidated over time and have become another actor in the violence against the civilian population. The Liptako Gourma region (border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) is one of the most ethnically heterogeneous (Fulani, Tamasheq, Bambara, Songhai, Dogon, Arabs, etc.).

The communities, with different economic and social models, live in a limited territory. Previously, disputes over land, water, water use or transhumance routes, especially between agricultural communities such as the Dogon in Mali or the Mossi in Burkina Faso and nomadic pastoralist communities such as the Fulani, were resolved peacefully through the mediation of the chiefs of traditional structures. After the 2012 revolution and the spread of jihadism in central Mali, the climate of insecurity and reliance on these armed groups and weapons to resolve conflicts was already in place[12].

Just as jihadist groups took advantage of inter-community tensions to recruit the most marginalised castes of the Fulani community, Dogon self-defence groups and Dozo hunters used their communities' fear of radicalisation of some Fulani to mobilise young people. In late 2016, the self-defence militia Dan Na Ambassagou (Hunters who trust in God) was born. In their narrative, they accuse the Fulani of being jihadists or jihadist sympathisers, including the Katiba Macina group. Although they were initially supported or at least tolerated by state authorities, this has changed due to Dan Na Ambassagou's

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[11] Beatriz de León Cobo. *De líderes comunitarios a jefes terroristas, ¿cómo una secta indo-paquistaní radicalizó a los líderes del terrorismo en el Sahel?* Atalayar. Septiembre 2020.

[12] Olivier and Catherine Barrière, *Un droit à inventer. Foncier et environnement dans le delta intérieur du Niger.* IRD Éditions, Paris, 2002.

attacks on unarmed civilians, women and children, wiping out entire Fulani villages, such as the massacre in Ogossagou (Mali) in March 2019[13].

Conclusion and some recommendations

All of the above factors and their consequences demonstrate the limitations of the responses already advocated by our states to the complex crisis in the Sahel. Our observation, research and interviews on the ground have led to a number of recommendations.

Protection of civilians at the centre of counter-terrorism operations

Sahel countries and their partners should review their approaches by advocating dialogue with all actors and placing the protection of civilians at the centre of the mandates of the various military interventions in response to the crisis. According to the April 2021 report of the Citizens' Coalition for the Sahel, "in 2020 in Mali, more civilians were killed in attacks by military operations (35%) than in attacks by jihadist groups (24%)"[14]. Socio-economic development, governance reforms, humanitarian emergencies and the fight against impunity must be among the priorities of the new approach.

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[13] Beatriz de León Cobo y Patricia Rodríguez González. *La captación y radicalización de los peul por parte de grupos terroristas del Sahel.* Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE). Octubre 2020.

[14] Coalition citoyenne pour le Sahel. *Sahel: Ce qui doit changer. Pour une nouvelle approche centrée sur les besoins des populations*. Recommandations de la Coalition citoyenne pour le Sahel, Avril 2021.

Transition in Mali as an opportunity to manage the socio-political crisis that led to the coup d'état

Today, the future of the Sahel is intimately linked to the success of the two transitions in Mali and Chad. The effectiveness of the G5 Sahel on the ground will depend on the stability of Chad and the peace process in Mali. The international community must support the efforts of the transitional authorities by advocating the restoration of constitutional and democratic order. Prior to the coup in Mali, the deep crisis of confidence between the government and the movements that signed the 2015 peace and reconciliation agreement prevented the proper implementation of the agreements. This transitional government has the opportunity to help re-establish trust with the population of northern Mali by supporting the development of the regions and facilitating the integration of former members of armed groups into society[15]. While some politicians argue that a modification of the agreement is necessary, as it is a "germ of partition of the country", the national authorities and the international community should focus on fostering inclusive dialogues that do not paralyse the implementation of the agreement's urgent measures and that allow for effective and sustainable compromises to be found[16].

In addition to the Tuareg issue, violent tensions between communities and the lack of trust between communities and the state itself indicate the urgent need to rethink Mali's social cohesion strategy.

Development and dialogue with different local actors

The governments of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, with European support, should, in addition to the military option, prioritise dialogue with the opposition, civil society, armed groups and some local jihadists with political objectives[17], while providing adequate responses to the socio-economic, political and cultural factors that are at the root of the radicalisation of communities, with a special emphasis on child protection. This approach will restore confidence and security, initiate the return of refugees and IDPs, rehabilitate basic social services, de-radicalise local communities and isolate violent extremism.

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[15] Mamadou Bodian, Aurélien Tobie, Myriam Marending. *The Challenges of Gouvernance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali.* SIPRI. 2019.

[16] Carter Center. Report of the Independent Observer. *On the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Emanating from the Algiers Process*. Diciembre 2020.

[17] International Crisis Group. *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*. Africa Report N°276. 28 May 2019.

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