

A New Hotbed for Extremism? Jihadism and Collective Insecurity in the Sahel

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Several jihadist groups sought a safe haven in the Sahel region following the defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq, making it a hotbed of terrorist activities. These groups have relied on crime, amongst other strategies, to survive and expand. Such strategies serve as the groups' lifeblood and help them forge alliances with local actors. The appeal of radical jihadist discourse capitalizes on human insecurities as manifested in political, environmental, and demographic challenges. This article considers not only the new threats to human security in the Sahel, but also the need for a multidimensional, inclusive, dialogue-based solution. Promoting development and social cohesion centered on human security could achieve better results in the region than resorting to external military intervention.

Keywords African Sahel, fighting terrorism, militarization, human security, Kalashnikov diplomacy

Introduction

The Sahel region poses a security dilemma that traditional security strategies and approaches have been unable to solve. Some scholars recognize the security of the region as being extremely complex, as it acts as an umbilical cord to the geopolitical space of the rest of the African continent.¹ As such, the manifestations of its security dilemma constitute a threat not only to Africa but also at a global level—especially to Europe (Ali 2018; Hassan 2019). Among the main drivers of this dilemma are unstable politics, terrorism, violent extremism, external debt, environmental degradation, civil wars, food insecurity, massive exoduses, fragile and porous political borders, illegal immigration, and drug trafficking (Middendorp and Bergema 2019).

According to the various indicators of violence in recent years, the region is likely to continue to suffer from terrorist attacks as jihadist groups target both security forces and civilians (Institute for Economics & Peace 2019). Since 2015,

activities by militant Islamist groups have increased more rapidly in the Sahel than in any other region of Africa. Indeed, over this period, the number of violent attacks by these extremist groups in the region has doubled. In 2019 alone, more than 700 violent incidents took place. Associated deaths increased from 225 to 2,000 during the same period (Comolli 2019). The wave of violence in 2019 displaced more than 900,000 people—nearly half a million in Burkina Faso alone (Le Roux 2019a). Three major terrorist groups, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the Ansar al-Islam group, are responsible for nearly two-thirds of the violent extremist incidents in the central African Sahel region, where they are concentrated in central Mali, the north and east of Burkina Faso, and western Niger. Security responses that include national, regional, and international parties are dedicated to addressing this crisis; however, the continued escalation of extremist violence underscores the exigences of reviewing the approaches and strategies put forward to combat terrorism in the region.

There are several major trends in the scholarship on terrorism in the Sahel region. Some studies have focused on the origins and development of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State (ISIS) and its affiliated groups in the Sahel region (Larémont 2011). Among the issues elucidated in the literature are strategic objectives, leadership style, tactical operations, and financing, as well as the effects of the Libyan civil war on the region. Another thread focuses on analyzing and studying various antiterrorist programs in Mali and other countries of the Sahel, which may provide a basis for implementing transnational counterterrorism approaches within the region. Some scholars have looked specifically at the French military presence in the region, as France is active militarily on the continent, with 4,500 soldiers deployed in Operation Barkhane (Griffin 2016). This operation is aimed primarily at containing the threat of terrorist groups in the Sahel.

Taking a different tack, some studies have offered a critical view of approaches to countering terrorism in the Sahel, especially by international actors (Cline 2007; Dowd and Raleigh 2013). These scholars have attributed the appeal of jihadi-criminal narratives in the Sahel to widespread human insecurity—not to the popularity of the ideology of radical Islam. They argue that the militarization of French and American antiterrorist and counterinsurgency policies is likely to further destabilize the region. These trends call for fresh consideration of the interventionist policy and a search for alternative approaches. Accordingly, this article argues that it is necessary to focus on local ecological and political contexts to gain a better understanding of the expansion of violent jihadism in this region. The mainstream literature largely neglects the local context, showing a preference for the influence of religious extremism narratives. Ideology is integral but not sufficient to the development of a violent jihadist rebellion (Ibrahim 2017, 5-13).

In the African Sahel, such movements are linked in their formative origins

to local social and political dynamics, and their rebellion is directed primarily at addressing local grievances rather than international Islamic issues. To fill the gap in the literature and further explore these local grievances, this article suggests shifting the focus from global dynamics to a study of the political ecology of land and natural resources governance (Ghanem-Yazbeck, Faleg, and Zoubir 2018, 102-6).

On a conceptual level, this study understands the term “jihadism” as the use of illegitimate violence to establish an “Islamic State”; however, jihadist groups differ in their specific aspirations, such as their agenda of actions or short-term goals. Conversely, Islamism is best understood as an ideology influenced by the Islamic religion. Indeed, Mozaffari (2007, 21) defines “Islamism” as “a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means.” Thus, Islamists are at pains to elucidate their politics by means of their Islamic heritage (Cook 2014). Some scholars, however, use the term jihadism very loosely and interchange it with related terms such as Islamism, violent extremism, and terrorist groups. A good majority of jihadist groups adhere to violent extremist narratives and look to establish the Islamic caliphate and Sharia law. For example, Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups believe in the globalization of a jihad that inspires the killing of non-Muslims in the name of God (Hassan 2016, 6-8). Other national jihadist groups place the goal of an Islamic caliphate in a secondary position to their other political and socioeconomic objectives.

This article first discusses the militarization of the Sahel by effective international and regional powers, and attempts to elucidate and analyze French and international operations from a comparative perspective based on the Afghan experience. Second, adopting an interpretative approach, the article provides a critical insight into the various responses to terrorism in the region. Since 2013, in the face of threats by terrorist groups, France has become the main protagonist in military operations—which include the provision of weapons to national forces—and these have negatively affected the security of local communities, as similar operations did in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This article begins with a critical review of the militarization approach to confronting terrorism in the Sahel and examines the possibility of benefiting from the lessons of Afghanistan. It then examines the expansion of terrorist groups across the Sahara Desert and their new strategies for survival. The discussion turns to the French deficit and to the possibility that American withdrawal might offer increasing opportunities for Russian intervention as a balanced alternative for dealing with the threats to human security in the region. Finally, the article suggests an alternative approach to combating terrorism in the Sahel by assessing existing approaches.

Militarization of the Sahel and the Afghan Lesson

It is obvious that militarized solutions have not fully succeeded in combating terrorism in the Sahel region of Africa. Policymakers and those studying global jihadism have articulated fears about reproducing the Afghan model on the African front. In the context of this debate, the approach of “Africanistan” (Michailof 2018) is sending a warning to Europe that the Sahel-Saharan region will turn into a ticking time bomb. The lessons of the American war in Afghanistan teach us that Kalashnikovs alone cannot defeat ideological rhetoric or solve the structural problems that fuel extremism. These lessons hold true for the youth who continue to join Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS in the Sahara Desert. In his study, Michailof focuses on the French-speaking Sahel and its four landlocked countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad, as well as the remote northern regions of Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon. As Michailof maintains,

While Mali and the Sahel may well have the potential to destabilize most of West Africa in about a decade, a misgoverned DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo] as big as Western Europe, with a population of about 80 million people and maybe 150 million in 20 years, can destabilize all central Africa. Unless a satisfactory political solution is soon negotiated, and a capable government team urgently put in place, a new tragedy is on its way in the heart of Africa, mostly due to appalling mis-governance. (Michailof 2018, 345-346)

The Sahel and Afghanistan are strikingly similar. Both regions have seen a similar demographic transition, stagnation in the agricultural sector, widespread unemployment, acute ethnic and religious tension, lack of law and order, regional instability, drug smuggling, and a spread of radical Islam (Alemu 2018). However, there are some important differences between the two cases that warrant reconsideration. First, the French military’s continuous involvement in the Sahel since the 19th century has given it a knowledge of the terrain, types of neighbors, and the nature of Islamic practices that the United States lacked in Afghanistan. Second, fortunately for the Sahel, it does not have a neighbor like Pakistan. Since the fall of Qaddafi in Libya (2011) and the resignation of Bouteflika in Algeria (2019), no regional power has had the ability to destabilize the Sahel.

Foreign military interventions led to the defeat of the forces of organized extremism that managed to gain power in both Afghanistan and Mali; however, neither country has been able to secure the sustained external support or security solutions needed for the protracted conflicts in these regions. Western military forces have already proven incapable of finally winning the battle in countries like Afghanistan and Mali. Indeed, Western forces have neither the legal mandate nor the qualifications to rebuild the countries in which they are intervening. As such, Western countries have three options: (a) maintaining covert forces to

prevent loss of life while providing support to local or regional forces carrying out combat missions—as in the case of the establishment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force; (b) launching raids to intimidate the enemy—as with the use of drones; or (c) winning “hearts and minds” by engaging in civil and military activities—as illustrated by the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), on which the United States spent about US\$300 million a year to little effect (Adebajo 2019). Conscious of this U.S. militarization strategy, the Barack Obama administration attempted to integrate development aid with its military goals in articulating a new defense and diplomacy (Keenan 2013; Campbell 2017).

While the United States tries to adopt new approaches to countering terrorism in both Afghanistan and Southeast Asia, the Taliban has always demonstrated its proficiency in using the presence of foreign forces as a tool to recruit and mobilize support among civilians. Likewise, President Emmanuel Macron of France has been endeavoring to change the rules of his country’s military presence in the Sahel, where it maintains about 4,500 soldiers. To this end, he is seeking more support from his partners in the European Union and his NATO allies, especially to finance the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Increasingly negative public opinion in Mali, Burkina Faso, and other countries in the region toward the French military presence is fostering the spread of extremist jihadist rhetoric which is often shrouded in nationalist slogans against foreign presence in general. While France’s Operation Serval succeeded in liberating the northern cities of Mali from the hands of extremist jihadists in 2013, Operation Barkhane, which began in 2014, has failed to expel the terrorists from either northern Mali or the outskirts of cities in Niger, where the aftermath of the Libyan crisis and instability in the Sahel region have taken a toll (Fort 2019). In fact, terrorist groups have expanded their influence in the Sahel, as evidenced by their ability to coordinate relatively large terrorist operations. At the same time, countless stakeholders and international actors—even within the European Union—are now seeking to play a major role in countering terrorism, adding a dimension of conflict between foreign agendas in the region (Diallo 2019).

Terrorist Expansion across the Sahara

Terrorist groups have managed to spread their tentacles in Mali across the arid regions of the Sahel, south of the desert, reaching neighboring countries that are not members of the G5, including Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Togo. Jihadist violence has destroyed fragile local economies and hindered humanitarian efforts in the area (Alfani et al. 2019). The Sahel region has two hotbeds of violent extremism and instability. The first includes Mali and its immediate neighbors, Burkina Faso and Niger, in the West Sahel, where several groups are linked to AQIM and some have pledged allegiance to ISIS in recent years. The

second is concentrated in the Lake Chad basin, including Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, an area which has been suffering from the terrorism of Boko Haram. Since 2016, a splinter group of Boko Haram has emerged, announcing its allegiance to ISIS. Despite claims by senior officials and some scholars of violent jihadism that Boko Haram has been defeated, reality has proven otherwise. As Hardy explains,

A close assessment of continued attacks in the Sahara-Sahel as well as a recognition of linkages between BH [Boko Haram] and other organizations in Africa show that violent extremism (especially in the Sahara-Sahel) is on the rise. The threat of jihadism on the African continent, therefore, has not been contained by any means. Rather, the technology, training, and access to capital and weaponry have both expanded and become more entangled. When one territory has been routed by counter-terrorism forces, surviving fighters have simply relocated to other geographies accompanied by key connections. In this way, BH—the fulcrum of violent Islam in the Lake Chad Basin—has become, over time, an international jihadist actor. (Hardy 2019, 258)

Western approaches to the jihadist situation in the Sahel—of which Mali has been viewed as the incubator and center—have met with dismal failure (see Table 1). The attacks that have taken place in Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire and in Ouagadougou, and in other West African cities since March 2016, were milestones in the study of jihadism in the Sahara region, where the process of predicting attacks has proven inept. Terrorist groups, militias, and armed gangs have proliferated in countries across the region, using special tactics such as brutal firearms attacks, roadside bombings, and hostage-taking, with the aim of weakening the rule of law and state authority and often fueling the fighting spirit between local tribes. Over time, terrorist groups have achieved high technical competence and they now use social media platforms to propagate extremist ideology. Notably, however, as the case of rising terrorism in Burkina Faso shows, there is some congruence in the means and tactics used by groups associated with Al-Qaeda and those linked to the “Islamic State.” These correspondences perhaps signal mutual support and coordination between the two groups; some fighters from Syria and Iraq relocated to the Sahel when their caliphate fell. In the light of this qualitative development in the tactics adopted by terrorist groups, military solutions by national and international forces became a necessary evil to stop the growing threats and to provide aid to countries under severe security pressure. However, past experience and the day-to-day reality in the border areas teach us that these proposed remedies are ultimately ineffective. Moreover, excessive use of force and the presence of foreign elements often inspire and fuel terrorist propaganda. Terrorist groups use religious symbols and narratives to broadcast their messages. Chaos and insecurity in local communities make the messages of extremism that spread hatred and propaganda among people—especially young

Table 1. Regional Security Responses in the Sahel

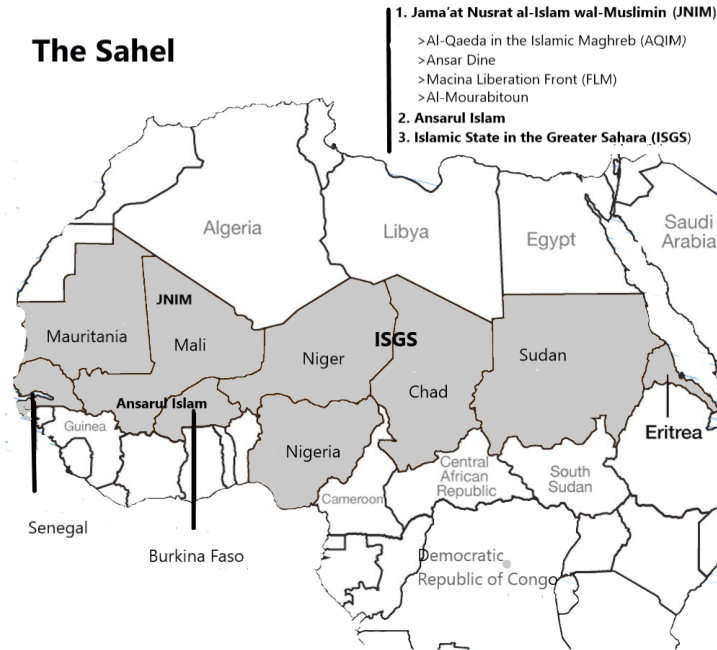
Mission	Mandate	Locations	Dates	Personnel Deployed	African Troops Deployed/ Trained	Annual Budget (US\$ mil)
United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)	UN Ch. VII Peace Operations	Mali	2013-- Present	15,900	8,250	1,070
G5 Sahel Joint Force	UN endorsed/ AU endorsed	G5 Sahel countries	2017- present	5,000	5,000	130
Operation Barkhane (France)	UN endorsed	Sahel	2014- present	4,500	n/a	797
EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM)	EU military training mission	Mali	2013- present	580	12,000	34
EU Capacity Building Mission in the Sahel (EUCAP Mali)	EU civilian capacity building mission	Mali	2015- present	140	6,000	38
EU Capacity Building Mission in the Sahel (EUCAP Niger)	EU civilian capacity building mission	Niger	2012- present	200	13,000	36

Source: The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "A Review of Major Regional Security Efforts in the Sahel" (2019). <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/review-regional-security-efforts-sahel/> (accessed January 3, 2020).

people—more effective in reaching their target audience. For example, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the mastermind of the Islamic State in the Sahara, has avoided using major strategies that require sophisticated organizational and logistical capabilities. Instead, he has increased the number of dependent cells in volatile areas and has benefited from ethnic and societal conflicts.

Though important, solid power approaches to counterterrorism are not effective. Indeed, national armies, especially in Burkina Faso, are underequipped and poorly trained, although governments already allocate up to 15 percent of their budgets to the security sector. Moreover, the alliance of the Sahelian group of five was unable to coordinate and control the border areas, where jihadist forces are particularly active. Armed groups usually use a hit-and-run method in areas in which they do not maintain a permanent presence, launching intermittent attacks as if they are operating these areas by remote control. As of 2020, the tentacles of terrorism extend from southwest Burkina Faso to Mali and western Niger.

Figure 1. Jihadist Groups in the Sahel



Source: Modified from Muhammad Suleiman, "Sahel Region, Africa." *The Conversation* (2017). <https://theconversation.com/sahel-region-africa-72569> (accessed June 3, 2020).

New Strategies of the Terrorist Groups

In May 2015, terrorist groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda in the Sahel witnessed heightened tension and division in their ranks when Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the second-in-command of Al-Murabitun, announced his pledge of allegiance to ISIS. However, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (and the Al-Murabitun leadership council) rejected this announcement, claiming that, because Abu Walid al-Sahrawi did not observe the Shura procedures, the statement did not represent the group, which, according to Belmokhtar, remained loyal to Al-Qaeda. However, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and his followers proceeded to establish the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, which ISIS recognized in October 2016. As a result of this division, a process of rapprochement began between various jihadist organizations linked to Al-Qaeda, including the carrying out of joint attacks. The process of integration and coordination reached its climax in March 2017, when AQIM, Ansar al-Din, FLM, and Al-Murabitun announced that they were united under the banner of one organization: Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly (see Figure 1). This merger ended the rivalry between the various Al-

Qaeda-affiliated groups in the region (Lounnas 2018). In addition to Islamic ideology, these organizations loyal to Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups—in a region that does not trust Western intentions—have publicly demonstrated that the essence of their mission is to fight the new colonial enemy that has been seeking to steal Africa’s wealth. Terrorist groups have evaluated these radical narratives and customized them to fit the local context, reflecting some of the interests of diverse ethnic groups such as the Tuareg, Arabs/Moors, Fulani, and Songhai (Africa Renewal 2016).

Some jihadist groups, in contrast, aim to establish a broader regional presence, expanding their influence through landlocked countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, infiltrating Sahelian countries in an attempt to reach West African ports, and subsequently obtaining weapons and supplies and benefiting from profitable illegal trade. Security forces in Burkina Faso have admitted that they are ill-prepared to face threats that occur far from the country’s northern regions. Accordingly, Burkina Faso may become a staging ground for jihadists in the Sahel seeking to expand toward the west, particularly to Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana as well as Togo and Benin. These Sahelian states have limited experience of dealing with the threat of religious terrorism and will be easy targets. Moreover, Burkina Faso, like many countries of the Sahel and West Africa, faces broader security challenges that limit its ability to combat terrorism. For example, the Gulf of Guinea remains one of the most popular locations in the world for maritime piracy and is notorious for kidnapping and smuggling. These and other challenges limit the ability of local security forces to confront violent jihadism (Strategic Comments 2019).

Terrorist groups have tended to adopt new strategic options that enable them to hide behind local conflicts taking place in the Sahel region, especially between herders and sedentary farming communities. The fueling of conflicts between local communities likely benefits these groups by increasing the number of insecure areas in the region and eventually paving the way for foreign military intervention—a source of extremism and an important factor in promoting jihadist discourse and activity. In January 2016, Jamal Okasha, known as Yahya Abu Al-Hamam, “who became the second man in JNIM, the jihad group linked to al-Qaeda,” announced,

If France was partially successful by removing the Mujahideen from the cities and forcing them to retreat ... the results were different: The French intervention led directly to the spread of the Da’wa, and the number of Mujahideen, the people of religion and manhood multiplied from the Fulani, Tuareg, Arab, Bambara and Songhai tribes who came to support the Mujahideen and defend Their lands. (Okasha 2016)

To be sure, French military operations have somewhat weakened jihadist

groups and forced them out of urban areas; however, they also helped jihadists emerge as protectors of the Sahel residents in the face of a foreign military force supported by what these groups claim to be corrupt Sahelian governments. Jihadist groups also chose to live among the population of neglected rural areas, especially in central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger, where they exploited grievances and local unrest. For years, these regions have suffered from a lack of government authority as well as inadequate access to services and basic commodities (Jezequel and Foucher 2017).

Terrorist jihadist groups have been stirring up ethnic violence in central Mali and the Sahel region since 2013. Despite the importance of the Fulani component in the violent jihadist movement, the Fulani community itself is very diverse. As such, approaches to the question of a “Fulani jihad” should be measured, as the sedentary Fulani groups in urban areas did not follow the path of extremist jihadism but were themselves victims of its killings and looting. Indeed, jihadist recruitment operations relied mainly on nomadic pastoralists who resented the state and ruling elites. In 2012, jihadist rebellion began in Mali in the north by recruiting Fulani; soon, leaders of the insurgency expanded across ethnic lines, transcending its Arab and Tuareg base. Recruitment of Fulani in the center was clearly beneficial to jihadist groups in northern Mali. This strategy exacerbated problems faced by international forces as it became necessary to deploy over vast areas of the Sahara Desert. Violent jihadism found fertile ground for recruitment in neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso for similar reasons: a weak state and armed forces that are almost impotent and condemned for committing atrocities against civilians, as well as a proliferation of armed militias and organized crime gangs. In any case, the Fulani component of the radical movement is made up of individuals who sought to preserve a certain “Bedouin” way of life and felt that they had lost their identity in the postcolonial system of government. Therefore, participation in these movements is about more than religious ideology (Lebur 2019).

If most of the local conflicts in the Sahel are linked to competition over power or resources between different social or economic groups, then the preference of certain parties in these conflicts enables violent extremist groups to easily recruit and enhance their capabilities, thus compounding the conflict. Research conducted by the South African Institute of Security Studies (Assanvo et al. 2019) on the degree of linkage between violent extremism and local conflicts has shown contextual differences in how terrorist groups deal with local conflicts. Terrorist groups can participate directly in the fighting, play the role of mediator, or contribute to a temporary halt in the conflict. Extremist positions appear to be guided by several factors; among them are the level of penetration within local communities, the sociology of forming both terrorist groups and local communities, as well as the balance of power between conflicting groups and the goals or needs of violent extremist groups. However, the main drivers of violent

ethnic conflict are more complicated (Theroux-Benoni and Dakono 2019).

For example, the deteriorating security situation on the border between Mali and Niger illustrates how terrorist groups use local conflicts to recruit members. In the early 1970s, when a severe drought hit the Sahel, tensions erupted, particularly between the Fulani in Niger and the Tuareg in Mali (Benjaminson and Ba 2019). The conflict was primarily about scarce natural resources and accusations of cattle raiding. In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the armed rebellion, violence in this area—especially by the Tuareg on both sides of the border—turned professional in nature, which led to bloody confrontations and the formation in March 1997 of Fulani militias to secure their areas. There is no doubt that the failure of the border guards to protect the residents of the border region deepened the Fulani's conflict with the Tuareg. Meanwhile, the official Bedouin brigades have ignored the criminal activities of the region, including theft of livestock, or have colluded with the aggressors. Over the years, jihadist movements in the region have inherited and appropriated the Tuareg-Fulani conflict in the border areas (Theroux-Benoni and Dakono 2019).

Climate change compounds the local conflicts mentioned above. Jihadist groups in the Sahel region have exploited the grievances of some of the communities most affected by climate change. As Walch (2017) explains, marginalized communities have been left to manage the devastating impacts of climate change on their traditional livelihoods on their own and the jihadists are filling the gap left by the state. Although climate change has not created jihadists in the Sahel, its effect on already struggling local communities produces a fertile environment for recruitment.

The Arrival of the Russians and Kalashnikov Diplomacy

Once it became obvious that the French and the other Western powers were unable to contain hotbeds of extremism and terrorism in the Sahel and West Africa, attention turned to the Russian alternative, especially in view of the prominent role played by Moscow in the Syrian crisis. Civil society organizations began to call for Russian intervention to combat terrorists in the Sahel. On April 18, 2019, the Russian ambassador to Mali, Alexey Dolyan, attended a meeting in Bamako with the Malian Patriots Group, an openly pro-Russian political party. Bamako was also seeing popular demonstrations and campaigns for people to sign petitions demanding Russian intervention. When Bamako signed a military cooperation agreement with Moscow in June 2019, the move toward Russia seems to have attracted governments elsewhere in the Sahel. In return, Russia is striving to provide a balanced alternative to French domination in the francophone sphere of influence by highlighting its ability to fight terrorism. In one example, Moscow has since 2015 succeeded in establishing an “African axis of influence,” linking the

coasts of the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea through the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.

In any case, the multifaceted crisis in the Sahel region will persist, as an increase in terrorist hotbeds has pushed the Sahelian countries to seek Moscow's security services. In Africa, the Russian approach to managing hybrid war threats—referred to as “Kalashnikov diplomacy”—has manifested in sales of military equipment, sending in security advisers, and recruiting personnel from private “mercenary” security companies. This strategy has proven effective in the Central African Republic. According to statements made by President Vladimir Putin during the 2019 Russia-African Summit in Sochi, Africa needs support from Russia in various fields, and Russia is ready to provide the Sahelian countries with assistance in combating terrorism.

According to SIPRI, countries undergoing insurgent terrorist attacks, including from jihadists, have purchased large quantities of arms from the usual sources—namely, China, France, Israel, Russia, and the United States. SIPRI explains that “Russia accounted for 28 percent of arms exports to sub-Saharan Africa in 2014-2018, China for 24 percent, Ukraine for 8.3 percent, the U.S. for 7.1 percent and France for 6.1 percent” (SIPRI 2019, 8). Thus, Africa is playing an important strategic role in Russia's foreign policy in at least two key ways: for the economic benefits of its mineral wealth and as a market for Russian arms exports and military aid—two factors that are often combined in a weapons-to-resource approach. The Kremlin's new policy in Africa after 2014 can be explained partly by Russia's confrontation with the West over its annexation of Crimea and its intervention in Syria (Kalika 2019, 6-9).

This summary raises the question: will the Sahel come to present a global security dilemma? On a strategic level, the celebratory summit marking the 70th anniversary of the establishment of NATO pointed to the challenge of the rise of China and to the threat posed by Russian hostilities. NATO's neglect of the Sahel region will open the door to growing Russian influence in the region, which could drive the NATO countries into a frightening strategic trap. The Russians will try—as we have discussed—to establish a presence in the Sahel until they reach the coast of West Africa. With the United States planning to reduce its military presence in Africa by 10 percent and France possibly reassessing its military presence in the Sahel, a power vacuum may open up, giving other, emerging powers an opportunity to intervene. It has been predicted that Western efforts in the Sahel—such as the United Nations Mission in Mali—are unlikely to cease any time soon, but they will probably not expand in the face of escalating violent militancy, which may give Russia an opportunity to grow its presence there (Stratfor 2018). Indeed, Russia is involved in security cooperation with nineteen countries in Africa, including the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Niger, Rwanda, Gambia, Ghana, and Ethiopia. Certainly, Moscow's move into Africa is partly motivated by Putin's desire to revive his country's position as

a superpower. It appears that a new confrontation is taking shape on the highly complex and intertwined African Sahel front. As Matushevich asserts,

As Russia's rivalry with the West heated up and the rumblings of a "new Cold War" made some contemporary observers nervous, the continent of Africa has reemerged as a stage for and participant in rivalries between the major global powers, particularly the United States, China, and Russia. In this new contest, Russia, despite being circumscribed by its own economic deficiencies and limited ability to project power globally, possesses some important advantages. (Matushevich 2019, 39)

The Russians are clearly seeking to gain economic and political benefits from the continent in exchange for helping the Africans with security and armaments, efforts that will lead to further militarization in Africa. However, the Russian presence is still limited compared to that of the United States or France. But Russia has far-reaching plans in Africa, even taking into account the activities of other great and medium-sized powers (Besenyő 2019; Matushevich 2019).

In 2013, China decided to participate in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which marked a sea change in Chinese strategic thinking. After establishing an economic footprint in Africa, China has asserted its military presence in active conflict zones on the continent with the aim of showing Africans that it has become a responsible world power and that its motives in Africa are broader than a desire to access natural resources. To this end, China established a military base in Djibouti in 2017 to protect its assets and its citizens in Africa (Monyae 2018). Beyond these moves in Mali and Djibouti, China has financially supported the post-2017 G5 Sahel Joint Force initiative to counter terrorism and promote regional stability. However, despite these Chinese efforts to expand into the Sahel and the results they have achieved, China's gains there cannot be compared to those in other regions of the African continent—perhaps due to intense competition with traditional superpowers such as France and the United States.

Obviously, the scale of Russian involvement in Africa cannot be compared with that of China. As we have seen, China has expanded its economic clout to interfere in settling African local conflicts and maintaining regional stability. The Russians, long absent from the continent, are trying to take advantage of the Soviet legacy and exploit any available opportunity to provide security and military services to regions where Western powers and China are not providing enough support.

Toward a New Approach

We urgently need to adopt a new approach to understanding and analyzing the terrorist phenomenon in the Sahel. In discussing the situation in the Sahel, Western

analysts and policymakers in general remain trapped in the jihadist paradigm. When security threats become hybridized with the escalation of local-level inter-community conflicts, it is not surprising to find their language peppered with terms such as “Islamic groups,” “jihadist cells,” and “Islamic radicalism” (Sambe 2019). Prevailing terrorist narratives in the region indicate that religious discourse is increasingly disappearing as societal tensions worsen. In the meantime, the jihadist movement seems to be reemerging based on a new ideologized religious discourse. Some scholars have gone so far as to describe this development as a new post-jihadist era (Ashour 2011).

The rise of Burkina Faso’s first homegrown militant Islamist group, Ansarul Islam, in 2016 is considered to be the result of local sociopolitical and cultural conditions, and the emergence of jihadist organizations in the Sahel such as the Macina brigade in central Mali may be attributed to interconnected contexts of social marginalization and the predicament of religious identity in these Sahelian states. It has become apparent that post-jihadism in the Sahel reflects the importance of tribal factors to our understanding of the new dynamics of extremism in the region. At least the jihadist groups, which effectively served as radical social movements that promoted local agendas, used preaching and social services to achieve their goals (Le Roux 2019b).

The African experience has shown that terrorist groups cannot be defeated only with guns and bombs. A long-term strategy must be devised to foster durable African-led solutions to collective insecurity in the Sahel (Downie 2015). Nevertheless, an understanding of the nature of the global jihadist movement and the key role that regional and international ties play is useful in guiding counterterrorism strategies and identifying and halting the continuous flow of funds and ideas that contribute to building the capacities of African jihadist organizations. This article calls for an inclusive approach to countering violent terrorism—one that takes into account the societal and cultural context of the Sahel region and posits the importance of a multifaceted methodology. This approach includes embracing popular participation as a fundamental issue in combating terrorism while implementing structural reform of security sectors. The suggested approach should focus on human security and include the economy, education, employment, the environment, and good governance as factors crucial to human well-being. At the same time, work should be done to revive the self-immunity of African societies by addressing the root causes of extremism and making room for political solutions, including dialogue with the jihadists (Mahdi 2020). However, the growing role of China and Russia in the Sahel region could complicate and fuel the militarized approach to peace and security. Both countries have recently crept into the African security arena. In 2019, China hosted the first China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in Beijing, attended by representatives from fifty African countries. For its part, Russia looks to Africa to increase its arms sales and beef up its military influence. Strategically,

Russia's new involvement in the Sahel could lead to a new stage of cooperation with China in Africa.

The region continues to suffer from a preponderance of security perspectives in dealing with the problem of violent terrorism, which has fostered a multiplicity of actors and stakeholders on the ground. This plethora of international partners, each with its own priorities, has produced a clash of interests and agendas. For example, the increased focus on counterterrorism, as emphasized in international efforts, has led to neglect of political solutions to the conflict. Likewise, foreign support and resources have been directed at addressing security challenges such as terrorism and human trafficking, and there has been a failure to tackle issues of reform and governance at the national level. Dealing with security challenges without providing workable alternatives for managing the grievances of the local population is likely to foster resentment of foreign presences. Ismail and Skons (2014) rightly assert that external actors increasingly emphasize the importance of local ownership and devise policies to support African countries to help themselves. However, they often come with predefined programs and they tend to interfere when things do not develop as they would like. There is a need for true partnerships.

Political lessons can be drawn from recent events in the Sahel. Despite some shortcomings, analysts and practitioners increasingly view regional groupings devoted to countering terrorism—such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force or the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin—to be an effective form of multilateral response. The troops working in these operations are native to the region and understand the cultural and political landscape better than UN peacekeepers whose behavior on the ground has come under scrutiny in recent years. Close cooperation in West Africa, which reflects African initiatives and includes Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and possibly other countries, may hinder the spread of jihadists, especially when combined with Western financial and capacity-building support. Despite enhanced security measures, the movement of armed groups across borders will remain difficult to detect. Perhaps this reality evinces the importance of the comprehensive approach advocated in this article. Such an approach would address domestic grievances stemming from political marginalization, social exclusion, and the absence of economic opportunities. In turn, this work would reduce the attractiveness of factors that fuel and mobilize criminal groups. This would be the case, in particular, if the countries of the Sahel and West Africa were to use the resources and capabilities earmarked for combatting terrorism in political recruitment processes; trying to crush national political opposition forces will only lead to more discontent and fuel armed resistance.

Active community participation in counterterrorism and development initiatives is crucial. Successful and sustainable local participation requires input from citizens themselves, including members of the private sector and civil

society, and cannot rely solely on government initiatives at the national level. Violent extremism cannot be defeated overnight, but local management (Okasha 2016) and participation in initiatives such as dialogue with the jihadists can help build a more peaceful and stable future across the region (Sand 2019). The security dilemma in the Sahel requires a paradigm shift away from the military approach of France and other Western partners. It is time to take national and regional responses seriously. However, dialogue and political solutions should not be seen as an admission of defeat or as a strategic choice that suits all concerned countries in the region. Instead, the dialogue should be regarded as an integral part of a comprehensive strategy that includes all the components of smart power capable of dealing with the globalization of the terrorist phenomenon in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The Sahel is facing multiple crises, ranging from food insecurity and tribal conflicts to violent extremism. Fragile and unable to control and protect their national borders, the local governments cannot address these problems themselves and therefore seek foreign aid. This study suggests that to understand the phenomenon of violent extremism in the Sahel region, one must consider the geographical features of the region and their impact on the Sahelian countries. The Sahel region has been in the global spotlight due to religious terrorism, regional instability, and bad governance. In addition, internal factors such as climate change and rapidly changing demographics have contributed to local and transnational conflicts. Finally, the proliferation of security elements in the Sahel raises questions about a military approach and its importance within the framework of a comprehensive strategy of engagement.

Nevertheless, much remains to be done to counter extremist and terrorist groups in the Sahel. Given the multifaceted strategies these groups adopt, it has become imperative to develop a variety of responses, perhaps the most prominent of which is to maintain a security presence in marginalized areas and to make a greater effort to integrate community leaders and their representatives into security planning. The jihadists' great advantage comes from their invisible armies. Terrorists usually withdraw into the civilian community and then carry out intermittent attacks. In addition, foreign armies face an intelligence problem. Locals today tend to provide information to armed groups rather than cooperate with national armies. And, finally, as this article shows, the jihadists are exploiting ethnic tensions to their advantage, complicating an already volatile situation and generating further hostility toward national armies.

Notes

1. The Sahel is a strip of semi-arid territory stretching from Senegal on the Atlantic coast, through parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan to Eritrea on the coast of the Red Sea. The region suffers from structural problems related to extreme poverty, climate change, and lack of government capacity. In recent years, many parts of the Sahel have been in the international spotlight due to famines, religious terrorism, anti-state rebellions, as well as arms, drugs, and human trafficking.

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