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Abstract

With the end of both Operation Barkhane and the reduction of the UN mission, MINUSMA, Northern Mali is at risk of yet another escalation of violence. As International troops draw back from the country, radical groups have started to fight each other. At the same time, the Malian government, now at its second overthrow in two years, can do very little except rally the Tuareg youths to take arms against these groups. In this complex and fluid situation, the radical groups that can be traced back to larger entities, such as IS and AQ, are not the only pivotal players in the region. There has been speculation that the Wagner Group is also present in Mali. The great interest that Western countries, France in the first place, showed, and now Russia shows is directly linked to the vast amount of natural resources that the Sahel country possesses.

A new trend is emerging, mainly as a result of the drawdown of western forces, that can deploy assets, equipment, and training far from those of the African countries like Mali and Niger; this trend, somehow already seen with the Tuareg appeal, is that of forming alliances between government entities and non-state actors, and even of starting talks with jihadists groups. This pivotal shift finds its main motives in diminishing attention to the Sahel region in light of the Ukrainian Invasion and the fact that African countries alone do not possess the capabilities required to quash insurgencies with groups like IS and AQ with their experience and current capabilities.

Keywords: Sahel, Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Africa

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Northern Mali continues to serve as a preferred arena for jihadists to fight for influence. Recently constant clashes have been going on between Iyad Ag Ghali's the Group for Support for Islam and Muslims (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate, and IS in the Sahel fighters in the Menaka region.

The clashes mostly take place in three settlements: Inchnane, Anderamboukane and Tamalate. Per reports, IS efforts are aided by foreign fighters. JNIM enjoys the support of local armed groups. Due to the fighting and the high level of violence the civilian population hastily fled to avoid being caught in the fire. The Menaka region is notorious for the number of weapons in it and everyone there has access to firearms.

Following the clashes and the advancement of IS and its supporters, Gen. al-Haj Ag

Gamou, a general in the Mali military and a prominent leader of the self defense group of the Imghmad tribe and his Gatia allies, called upon young Tuareg people in Mali and abroad to rush to the city of Gao to defend it from the IS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In a statement in Tamasheq (the Tuareg language) that has been disseminated on social media Gen. Gamou called the young men in his community residing in Mali and abroad who are weapons trained to rally and unite to defend their lands.

Similarly, Haj Moussa Achartoumane, the leader of Mouvement Pour la Salute de l'Azawad (MSA), a Gen. Gamou ally, called to unite in the face of the spreading IS threat – “there is a monster that was born and spreading in the area, and it will swallow everything if we don't stand united against it” he said.¹ Even non-Tuareg civilians joined the above call for unity.

It should be noted, not all of the Tuareg leadership are board with regards to the above call. Some think that the security situation in the region must be managed by the Mali military and not by armed tribal militias. It will be hard to convince young men to bear arms. An involvement of the Mali military may be more effective due to their equipment and the soldiers' training, both are better than what the militias would have. Further, one would assume that the Mali military that strives to regain control over the entire Mali territory will bring with it reconstruction programs for the war-stricken areas.

Each of the rival parties strives to control the Tallatet strategic region, which led MSA to take control over it and drive IS elements out of it by de facto supporting the residents and by providing them with food after they long suffered from famine under IS. In the recent fighting in Tallatet (also in the Menaka region), ISGS were defeated and withdrew to Tadjalalte and Anderamboukane close to the Niger border.

In a report published on October 27, 2022, Human Rights Watch organization (HRW) said that “leaders of communities in the Menaka region said that almost 1,000 civilians were killed during clashes among terrorist groups in the region since March this year ».²

The situation in the Sahel is alarming and looks as follows:

- 1.** ISGS is active in the border triangle of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as well as western Niger.
- 2.** JNIM, the formal al-Qaeda affiliate in Mali, is active in the central and northern part of the country and implemented an expansion strategy which is very visible in Burkina Faso.
- 3.** The Nigerian Boko Haram and its separatist group that is connected to IS in west Africa are active in the Lake Chad region.

1 See : <https://fr.yahoo.com/news/g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral-malien-gamou-appelle-jeunes-044031153.html> ; <https://www.dw.com/fr/au-mali-l-appel-aux-touaregs-de-battre-le-terrorisme-fait-reagir/a-63688011>

2 See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/27/mali-coordinated-massacres-islamist-armed-groups>

4. President Macron of France, formally announced on November 9, 2022, that Operation Barkhane has ended in Mali and the Sahel. 3 Some 3,000 troops will remain in Niger and assist with training and intelligence.
5. The British force exits Mali on the heels of the French and Swedish exit. British troops were stationed in Mali as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).4 The minister's representative for the armed forces, James Heappy, explained in the British parliament on November 14, 2022, that "two coups in three years in Bamako hurt the international efforts to achieve peace". Heappy also accused the Mali government of strong ties with the mercenary Wagner Group. Per him, "the British government cannot deploy its forces in a country whose government does not tend to act for stability and security".5
6. The British expeditionary force, on the ground since 2020, to exit Mali comprises of some 300 soldiers of which 16 females. It includes infantry fighters, explosives experts and medical stuff.
7. Around the Sahel the British force (attached to MINUSMA) could be identified through their vehicles, armed and equipped with advanced technologies. It operated in hard-to-reach areas such Gao and lately in the Trois Frontiers sector (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) where radical Islamic jihadists were established.
8. Even the Ivory Coast contingency returns to its neighboring home. 900 soldiers who will gradually leave by August 2023.6The likely reason is the significant deterioration of the diplomatic relations between the Ivory Coast and Mali on the heels of the July 10 arrest of 49 Ivory Coast soldiers, of which three have been released and the remainder are still under arrest in Mali.7 They have been indicted in Mali of "attempting to undermine state security" and per the Mali authorities they are mercenaries whose goal is to destabilize Mali. The above conflict is yet to be resolved.

3 See https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/11/09/fin-officielle-de-l-operation-militaire-barkhane-apres-presque-dix-ans-d-existence_6149123_3212.html

4 MINUSMA's mission in Mali – MINUSMA was formed by the UN Security Council's resolution 2100 (April 25th, 2013) to support political processes and assist with several internal security issues in the country. The members of MINUSMA have been tasked with supporting the transitional authorities in Mali to stabilize the country and implementing the transitional road map. On June 25th, 2014, the Security Council's resolution 2164 was unanimously adopted and provided that MINUSMA should also focus on guaranteeing security, stability and defending civilians; support national political dialogue and reconciliation; assist with restoring and building the state's authority; rebuilding of the security sector; and promoting the protection of human rights in Mali

5 See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-the-armed-forces-statement-on-the-un-peacekeeping-mission-in-mali>

6 See <https://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20221115-minusma-la-c%C3%B4te-d-ivoire-annonce-%C3%A0-son-tour-le-d%C3%A9part-de-ses-troupes-du-mali> ; <https://www.msn.com/fr-fr/actualite/monde/mali-49-soldats-ivoiriens-ar-r%C3%AAt%C3%A9s-%C3%A0-bamako/ar-AAZs34e>

7 See : <https://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20220903-lib%C3%A9ration-de-trois-soldats-parmi-les-49-militaires-ivoiriens-d%C3%A9tenu-au-mali>

The political and military reality point to the possibility that IS will fully control the Niger-Mali border region for the following reasons: (i) the withdrawal of the French forces (Barkhane, Takuba) and the reduction in MINUSMA; (ii) the deterioration of the security, social and political situation in Niger and Mali; (iii) low operational capability of Mali and Niger's militaries to eliminate IS that only gets stronger in the region and solidifies itself in this fragile region.

IS' growing strength in the Sahel and its success in the territories under its control are the result of several converging factors. The above may be classified into geopolitical or technical factors.

Geopolitical Factors

- 1.** Control over natural resources – all the organizations and gangs in the region are vying and fighting for control over natural resources which support funding their operations. Radical Islamic groups managed to control large part of this wealth and it funds their operational and social programs.
- 2.** Lack of vacuum – every void gets filled quickly. The French withdrawal from Mali contributed to an increased IS activity. Russia leveraged this to arrive at an agreement with the Mali government to deploy 1,000 Wagner Group mercenaries under the cover of providing protection to geologists exploring Mali's mineral resources.⁸
- 3.** Building frontline observation posts – IS took over the border regions, assisted with mineral smuggling and clashed with Wagner Force patrols over said minerals which required the former to build the above posts.
- 4.** Capitalizing on the targets' weak capabilities – IS capitalized on the fact that the world's public opinion was focused on the Russia-Ukraine war and doubled the murders, uprooting civilians from their homes while exploiting the Mali military's weaknesses (lack of location and triangulation equipment, visual intelligence, and air capabilities that were all handled by the French military).
- 5.** Getting close to several tribes in the region due to commerce – economic tribal interests in the border region provide a bedrock for cooperation with IS that enjoys economic wealth due to their cattle and sheep trade in the region with multiple tribes. Such cooperation is essential to the tribes in question's survival even at the expense of those who oppose IS.
- 6.** Miscalculation and the issue of the dialogue with the radical groups – the concerns of the Nigerian president, Muhammad Bazoum, regarding the French troops' withdrawal from Niger, like what had happened in Mali, drove him to negotiate with armed factions to form a joint border protection task force, that, in addition to Niger's statement that

⁸ See <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210914-mali-le-groupe-wagner-bient%C3%B4t-au-mali>

it would be agreeable to conduct a dialogue with radical Islamic groups. These groups have tremendous confidence in their ability to control the border and its crossings.⁹

Technical Factors

IS excelled in terms of recruitment, training, monitoring and focus and used the newest available western technologies to maximize its capabilities. The same happened in the Sahel.

1. Use of technology – IS uses the best technologies to promote its goals and ideology through the internet and social media. It has an expensive activity in this field which by its nature is difficult to monitor which has brought up the number of those who join its ranks and compensate it for the losses it suffered on this front when it was defeated in Iraq and Syria.
2. Significant investment to promote its ideology – IS allocates significant amounts to its channels and its web-based stations and it increased its digital footprint since the launch of its Dabiq magazine.¹⁰ IS channels and studios were always equipped with the best equipment and operated by the best people trained in the west it could find and who follow its ideology. It also publishes periodicals to promote the services it provides the local populations in the territories under its control.¹¹
3. Information security – IS has high technological capabilities to safeguard its media communications¹², which makes it difficult for western governments to monitor its activities and take steps to impede its plans and activities. The above is exacerbated due to the poor capabilities the Sahel states gave in the field.¹³
4. Focus and clarity in defining targets – IS managed to possess modern tracking and monitoring capabilities which also enable it to identify and select targets (individuals or sites) and maintain confidentiality which assisted it in successfully achieving its goals in its African theaters.

9 See <https://www.lavoixdunord.fr/1154311/article/2022-03-18/niger-pour-retrouver-la-paix-le-president-veut-dialoguer-avec-les-jihadistes>

10 Antonia Ward, "ISIS's Use of social media Still Poses a Threat to Stability in the Middle East and Africa," RAND (11.12.2018). <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/12/isiss-use-of-social-media-still-poses-a-threat-to-stability.html>

11 For expansion see Clara Pellerin, "Communicating Terror: An Analysis of ISIS Communication Strategy," Science Po, Kuwait Program (2016). https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/KSP_Paper_Award_Spring_2016_PELLERIN_Clara.pdf

12 For ISIS cyber capabilities see Cambridge Centre for Risk Studies, 2017, P. 23-26 <https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/pool-re-cyber-terrorism.pdf>

13 For expansion in French see Christophe Châtelot, "Contre-terrorisme: les limites du G5 Sahel," Le Monde (29.9.2019). https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/09/02/contre-terrorisme-les-limites-du-g5-sahel_5505309_3210.html

Conclusion

In conclusion, the radical elements establishment in the Sahel and western Africa is continuous. The termination of Barkhane Force's activity in Mali, the reduction of the scope of its mission and goals and the pulling of troops from Sweden¹⁵, UK and Ivory Coast from MINUSMA weakens the western contingency that remained in the Sahel and Niger to effectively act against the radical Islamists centers.

The heads of Niger and Mali, having seen the weakness of their militaries and their inability to govern their distant peripheries tend to develop a dialogue with the jihadists, hoping to lower the flames and bring about national stability, which in the writer's opinion is destined to fail over the course of time because IS elements only look to expand their control and add territories to finally form the caliphate.

The global focus was shifted in 2022 towards the Russia-Ukraine war. The state of affairs in Africa with regard to the expansion of radical Islam is valid, alarming and the focus on the Ukraine due to the concerns regarding the use of "dirty" bombs or the eruption of a third world war only amplifies the risk it carries.