

The “Islamic State” and the new dynamics of terrorism in the Sahel

Yoslán Silverio González

Ph.D. Student African Program at The College of Mexico

yosilglez@yahoo.es

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Abstract

The Sahel-Saharan region of West Africa has been affected by the expansion of terrorist activism. Since 2015, groups operating in the Sahel have continued their tendency toward fragmentation, driven at this stage by the emergence of the organization known as the Islamic State, whose official name is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The objective of this article is to characterize the behavior of terrorist organizations in the Sahel following the emergence of the Islamic State and how relations between previously existing groups in this area changed between 2015 and 2020. During this period, the behavior of terrorism in the vast Sahel-Saharan region has been characterized by an increase in the number of actors involved, the creation of new alliances, the fragmentation of other groups, and even the emergence of many others without a specific affiliation. Therefore, the dynamics are much more complex than those that can be determined solely by well-identified and structured groups. From this, it follows that the systems of loyalties and alliances established between them are confusing and malleable. That said, no generalizations about terrorism in the Sahel can be made, given that there is no single type of terrorism and the dynamics of each group may be different, although certain trends can be identified. The combination of all these factors made possible the occurrence of different coup d'états since 2020 in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, that lead to the progressive expulsion and withdrawal of French troops from those countries and also marked the collapse of Western antiterrorism program in the Sahel, reinforcing the growing influence of Russia and China in African's security issues.

Keywords: terrorism, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Sahel, Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (EIGS) and Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP)

Introduction

In June 2014, Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the "caliphate" from Mosul, signaling the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS):¹ a new transnational terrorist organization. Its areas of operations would extend across northwestern

¹ It is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or in English as 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Since September 2014, France has coined the Arabic term for Daesh: *Al -Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al- Sham -Daesh*, to avoid calling the organization a "state" let alone an "Islamic" one, and thus avoid associating Islam with the violent practices employed by its members. The Arabic name was also used by the Gulf countries and later by Western powers. However, they refuse to call themselves this way, because its sound in Arabic has a negative meaning: "the one who crushes something", "intolerant" or "the one who sows discord". It is a word prohibited by this type of "jihadists" and its use is punishable by torture (ABC, 2015, November 26). With this clarification, this article will use the Spanish name "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" and its acronym: ISIS, to refer to the main organization. Each ISIS-allied group has its own nomenclature.

Iraq and northeastern Syria. This would break the hegemony that al-Qaeda had enjoyed until then. In this way, new dynamics were introduced into international terrorism. By reviving the idea of the "caliphate," the "Islamist" doctrine promulgated by its members was reenergized. A new era of terrorism in the Middle East began, and recruitment networks would be reactivated, attracting new "Islamic fighters" from around the world to join their fight.

According to Iván Santo-Tomás López, from the Comillas Pontifical University (ICADE) in Madrid and a specialist in intelligence analysis for security: *"The emergence and initial expansion of Daesh in a large part of the territory of Syria and Iraq, modified the existing conception about the modus operandi and the aspirations of Islamist extremist groups due to their ability to present themselves as a proto-State, with its own territorial delimitation and its own administration."* (Santo-Tomás, 2020, p. 99). These elements could explain why the new ISIS proposal proved to be attractive.

As it began to gain notoriety and influence, immediately after its initial expansion and military "triumphs" on the ground, several groups emerged that paid homage to it, while others broke their ties with al-Qaeda. Most of them are based on the African continent, where ISIS has a total of nine groups and three major affiliates or provinces. Egypt's Sinai Province emerged in 2014 when the Ansar Bayt al- Maqdis group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. In 2019, the group carried out around 160 attacks, most of them targeting the Egyptian army and police. This would make it the second most active ISIS affiliate in Africa.

The Central Africa Province is made up of two factions, distant from each other, with no greater connection than the fact that they recognize themselves as part of ISIS. One faction is active in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the other in northern Mozambique. ISIS did not recognize them until 2019. However, beyond this general structure, there are other smaller groups active on the continent in countries such as Somalia, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia (Spanish, 2020). These groups include the Islamic State in Libya (ISL), the Islamic State in Tunisia, the Islamic State in Egypt, and the Islamic State in Algeria Province (ISAP). In the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) and the Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (ISSKTU) are active (Banunle, 2018, p. 109).

In this context, terrorist behavior in the western Sahel under the primary leadership of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) underwent significant changes. The emergence of new leaders and new spaces for dispute fostered fragmentation and, consequently, changes in terrorist activism in regions such as the western Sahel. Here, the third province of ISIS, West Africa, was organized, "integrated" by two groups: the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP).

Theoretical notes on terrorism

There is a vast literature called "Terrorism Studies" that has attempted to develop a theory of terrorism, reach a consensus on its definition, address its typology, its links to religion, delve into the causes behind this phenomenon, how to analyze statistical data, etc. The heterogeneity of the sources ranges from definitions provided by scholars on the subject

to official government documents. In the academic sphere, there is a group of experts from different disciplines – political science, law, history, and international relations.

These authors include: Alex P. Schmid, Ajai Sahni, Tore Bjorgo, Erica Chenoweth, Martha Crenshaw, Ekaterina Stepanova, Jeffry Simon, Harjit Sandhu, Lucien van Liere, David Rapoport, Jeffrey Kaplan, and Jean E. Rosenfeld. This selection of authors summarizes a portion of the scientific literature on terrorism. From Africa and the Middle East, scholars Kwesi Aning, Martin Ewin, Ludovic Kibora, Amadou Tidiane Cissé and Assaf Moghadam.

It is in this context that the complexity of establishing a single definition of terrorism arises, due to the lack of consensus within the international community and depending on the political stance and ideology of the person evaluating it. More than 250 definitions have been collected and identified, proposed from a wide variety of historical contexts (since the 19th century) and responding to a wide variety of political positions. Within the period of the "fourth wave" of terrorism, and particularly between 1999 and 2010, Joseph J. Easson and Alex P. Schmid compiled 84 definitions on the subject (Schmid, 2013, pp. 99-148), including those of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the United States Department of State, the EU, and various academics.

Within the multilateral framework, both the OAU (now the AU) and the OIC were among the first to define their stance on terrorism, beginning in 1999. At its 26th session, held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, from June 28 to July 1, 1999, the OIC adopted the Organization of the Islamic Conference Convention on Combating International Terrorism. Article 1 of the Convention defines terrorism as:

" Any act of violence or threat thereof, regardless of its motives or intentions, perpetrated in order to carry out an individual or collective criminal plan with the aim of terrorizing persons or threatening to harm them or endangering their life, honor, freedoms, security, rights or exposing the environment, occupying or seizing any public or private facility or property, or endangering a national resource, or international facilities, or threatening the stability, territorial integrity, political unity or sovereignty of independent States ." (Convention of the Organization of the Islamic Conference on Combating International Terrorism, 1999, p. 2).

Given the existence of different criteria regarding the definition of terrorism and the manipulation to which it is subjected, it is essential to adopt a criterion on how it will be understood in this work. For such purposes, it was decided to subscribe to the concept defended by the OAU/AU in the Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism of 1999. Here, **terrorism** was established: *" any act that (...) is likely to endanger the life or physical integrity and cause serious injury or death, of any person or group of persons. It is also defined as any act that may damage private or public property, natural resources, cultural heritage and that has the premeditated intention of intimidating, sowing fear, pressuring a government and affecting public services."* (OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating Terrorism, 1999, p. 3-4).

Reconfiguration of terrorist groups in the Sahel

Since 2007, the Sahel has attracted international attention due to the evolution of terrorist activism in the region. Virginia Comolli, a researcher on security and development

at the *International Institute for London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies* (IISS) argues that the Sahel region has two epicenters of instability. The first and most visible is around Mali and its immediate neighbors, Burkina Faso and Niger, in the western Sahel. Here, in addition to al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, ISIS-linked networks operate. The second core is in the Lake Chad Basin, which includes Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The most prominent group in this area is Boko Haram, which also suffered a schism at the hands of ISIS (Comolli, 2019).

Terrorism in the Sahel has gone through several stages. Despite the dismantling of their leadership as a result of the first two years of French military operations ², the groups maintained their operational capabilities and reconfigured. This trend marked a new period beginning in 2015, when new groups emerged in the context of the threat that the ISIS organization began to pose to AQIM's hegemony of terrorist activism. In Mali alone, AQIM had 200 fighters in the northern areas of the country, around Kidal and Timbuktu (Zerrouky & Guibert, 2016, January 12).

The first of the splits came from Adnan Abou Walid Al- Sahraoui, who had been one of the leaders of the Al- Mourabitoune group. On May 14, 2015, through a 35-second online recording published by the private Mauritanian news agency Al- Akhbar, through which they usually broadcast their statements, he paid homage to ISIS: the *bayat* or oath of allegiance to an emir. In this broadcast, he stated: *"We call on all jihadist groups to pay homage to the Caliph to unite the voices of Muslims and close ranks against the enemies of the religion (...). We also call on all Muslims to regroup around the Islamic State in defense of the Caliphate."* (Al Akhbar, 2015, May 13).

This is where one of the most significant splits occurred in the group led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who had also had a complicated relationship with AQIM, from which he had separated and rejoined on several occasions. On this occasion, Belmokhtar did not ratify his affiliation with ISIS and instead reaffirmed his allegiance to Al-Qaeda, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri (France 24, May 15, 2015). On November 20, 2015, a terrorist attack took place against the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, killing 22 people. This attack was later claimed by Belmokhtar's group, just months after he had separated from Abou Walid Al- Sahraoui.

In 2015, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) also entered the regional scene, *active in central Mali*, in the majority Fulani territory. It is estimated that its initial members numbered around 150 and they began their operations around the city of Mopti. From its inception, it was affiliated with the AQIM emir, Yahya Abou Hamam, who, faced with the emergence of ISIS-associated networks, called on the rest of the *katibas*. active in Mali to regroup. At that time, despite having opposed an alignment with ISIS and calling his "caliphate" illegitimate, he declared that contacts with Abou Walid Al- Sahraoui had not been completely broken (Zerrouky & Guibert, 2016, January 12).

²The main component of France's fight against terrorism in the Sahel is called Operation Barkhane. It was established in 2014 and by 2015 had already carried out more than 150 counterterrorism operations.

This indicated a trend that would later manifest itself in the Sahel regarding relations between AQIM and ISIS affiliates, in which groups within the orbits of both organizations had avoided confrontation. This gave rise to what has been called "the Sahel exception." According to Cairo-based independent journalist Marc Español, this anomaly was made possible by the more conciliatory role of some AQIM leaders (Español, 2020, October 12). That situation would change by mid-2020.

Flore Berger, Sub-Saharan Africa Specialist at the *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (IISS) raises how the internal situation in Mali, resulting from what it calls "jihadist violence," has transformed into a multidimensional crisis with intertwined and overlapping conflicts, where terrorist groups are exploiting communal tensions and expanding throughout the Sahel (Berger, 2019, p. 1). For example, in the case of Mali, its population is divided into several ethnic groups: Bambara (35%), Fulani (15%), Dogon (9%), Tuareg, and other Arab minorities. The Bambara and Dogon are mostly sedentary farmers, while the Fulani are characterized as nomadic pastoralists. Traditionally, the Fulani have been marginalized communities by different governments whose policies have benefited farmers.

Aspects such as population growth, the spread of the desert, and agricultural expansion have made access to fertile land and drinking water a source of intercommunal disputes. These problems, coupled with terrorism, have given the contradictions between different communities a new dimension. For example, the Fulani ethnic group is often "accused" of being "allied" with terrorist groups³(Berger, 2019, p.1). Obviously, this approach is incorrect, in the sense that in the Sahel, there is no correspondence between terrorist groups and ethnic groups. Within the same group, there can be representatives of Tuareg communities, Arabs, and other ethnic groups.

Another Sahel country that began to experience a sustained increase in security problems was Burkina Faso, when a popular uprising overthrew the government of Blaise Compaoré in 2014, initiating a process of political instability, involving a de facto military-led junta, then a transitional government, an attempted coup d'état, the restoration of constitutional order, and presidential elections (Gonzalvo, 2019, pp. 105-106). This process was accompanied by the rise of terrorism in the country, which had not been affected by the crisis. Thus, Burkina Faso began to become another stage of terrorism in the Sahel and an example of how these groups had moved further south than their traditional areas of influence.

Attacks by groups affiliated with AQIM began in April 2015. According to Vicente Gonzalvo Navarro, a military officer and Doctor of Law from the Carlos III University of Madrid, the beginnings of this process in Burkina Faso were initiated by Souleymane Keita and Yacouba Touré, who had founded the *Ansar katiba. Dine Khalid Ibn al-Walid*, also known as *Ansar Dine Sud*. They based their bases of operations in the Sama forest in the Sikasso region, in southern Burkina Faso, near the border with Ivory Coast. Their activity was very

³ Incidents have been reported in the Mopti region of central Mali between Dogon self-defense militias - Dan Na Ambassagou - and the Fulanis of that area.

limited and they only carried out two attacks against Malian gendarmerie positions in mid-2015 (Gonzalvo, 2019, p. 127). The Khalid Ibn al-Walid brigade was dismantled by the Malian army and both Keita and Touré were arrested (Le Reporter, 2016, May 12).

Following these events, a new leader emerged in the region: Ibrahim Dicko, alias *Malam*, who moved freely between Mali and Burkina Faso. Malam Dicko had good relations with the radical imam Amadou Koufa, a member of the so-called Macina Liberation Front. However, contradictions with other forms of radical thought led him to found his own group: Ansaroul Islam. It quickly transformed from an Islamic proselytizing organization into a radical and violent one (Gonzalvo, 2019, p. 128). It had great influence over the local population in the interior of Burkina Faso and in Mali. Its main area of action was concentrated in the northern part of the country. The group was officially recognized in 2016 following its attack on a military base in Nassoumbou, carried out alongside the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

During 2017, terrorist groups in the region continued their process of fragmentation and/or mergers, in addition to greater geographic dispersion. On 17 In March 2017, the merger of several groups around AQIM into the coalition known as *Jama'at was confirmed. Nasr al- Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM): Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims. This group would include Ansar al-Dine, led by the historic Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Gali; the FLM katiba, Al Mourabitoun, and the Sahara *katibas* of AQMI. Among the leaders of the different groups that form part of the alliance were: Yahiya Abu Al Hammam ("Emir" of AQMI's Sahara Province), Abdelrrahman Al Sanhaji (the AQMI *qadi* "judge"), Mohammed Kufa (of the FLM), and Hassan Al-Ansari, second-in-command of Al Murabitoun, in the absence of the historic leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, whose whereabouts were uncertain at the time of the merger (Alamillos, 2017, March 3).

This coalition symbolically represented the quest for autonomy from regional terrorism, reaffirming its institutionalization and the leadership of all these local leaders, as well as the break with the Algerian Arab leadership and aiming to dispel divisions between ethnic groups and nationalities (Alvarado, 2019). The coalition transcended the local and national character, but reinforced its regional identity through the localization of its actions, aspirations, and objectives. For example, there is no generalized hatred towards the West, but rather against France in particular and indirectly, the United States, Germany, or the United Kingdom, as collaborators of Paris in its military operations in the Sahel (Alvarado, 2019).

Almost all of JNIM's attacks are focused on the triple border or what is known as the Liptko-Gurma Triangle, between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. This group was responsible for the March 2018 attack on the French embassy in Burkina Faso, which left 16 dead, eight of them military personnel (EFE, May 9, 2018). According to Wassim Nasr, a France 24 journalist and terrorism expert, the JNIM, in central Mali, has positioned itself as a "mediator" in inter-community conflicts, replacing the state and the police, while dispensing "justice." (Rodríguez, 2020, December 8). Perhaps these are some of the reasons why these terrorist groups enjoy significant social support. The JNIM remains the largest group in terms of number of fighters, operational level, and geographic reach.

According to Anastasia Voronkova, a researcher on security and development issues at the IISS in London, this alliance of groups under the aegis of al-Qaeda in the Sahel responds to pragmatic concerns and shared strategic interests, in contrast to the emergence of ISGS, which has attempted to reassert its presence and influence in the region. This alliance was not forged out of ideological ties but rather out of a need to minimize defections to ISIS, attract new recruits, and publicly project a united front. (Voronkova, 2017, May 2). She argues that these types of mergers or alliances do not last long because the groups retain distinct command and control structures. They also enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, which complicates coordination among them. The absence of individuals with authority and the trust of their members are other factors that undermine this type of intergroup alliance, in addition to the fact that these leaders do not abandon competition for power. The lack of strong ties between smaller groups and the central leadership suggests that such unity is seen only as a temporary vehicle (Voronkova, 2017, May 2).

The Ansaroul Islam group did not participate in the JNIM coalition. This suggested that Ansaroul Islam operated as a separate group. Its strategy was to try to dominate the populations of the most remote regions of northern Burkina Faso, particularly in Dicko's home province of Soum. Malam died in 2016 of natural causes, but his group continued to operate in the region, now under the leadership of his brother Jafar. From 2017 onwards, it began using improvised explosive devices and small arms in its attacks (Gonzalvo, 2019, p. 131). Ansaroul Islam also carried out continuous infiltrations into Malian soil in coordination with another katiba led by Amadou Kouffa, whose main areas are located in the Mopti region of Mali.

Terrorist violence in Burkina Faso is reported to continue to increase and the security situation to deteriorate. Since 2015, the northern and eastern parts of the country have been under siege by local terrorist groups such as Ansarul Islam, the Sahelian coalition JNIM, and ISGS. The situation for refugees and internally displaced persons has worsened since then, with the number of internally displaced persons increasing tenfold to one million (La Vanguardia, 2020, November 13). This country is an example of how local groups interact with those linked to AQIM and ISGS. These events indicate how violence in Burkina Faso has shifted from an internal conflict to a more regionalized one. For the first time since independence in 1960, the Burkinabe authorities have lost control over part of their territory (Berger, 2019, p. 1).

By March 2019, with the expulsion of the last ISIS fighters from the Baghouz region of Syria, the organization was declared "defeated," at least in that area. In October 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was physically eliminated in an attack by the illegal US occupation forces in Syria, in the Idlib region. The ISIS Shura Council appointed Iraqi Sheikh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al- Qurashi as his successor ⁴. However, its ramifications allowed its survival in other areas, such as the African continent and particularly the Sahel.

⁴Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al- Qurashi blew himself up with an explosive belt during an operation by the United States occupation forces in Syria, in the Idlib region, on February 3, 2022. After his death, Abu al-Hasan al- Qurashi was elected as the leader of the Islamic State (Deutsche Welle, 2022), who was also eliminated in October in the Syrian province of Daraa. This was the second death of an ISIS

Multiple socioeconomic, political, and geographic factors have fostered the development of terrorism in the region. However, other factors can be mentioned that contributed to the emergence of ISIS cells in the Sahel, their subsequent development, and their survival, when by 2019, the areas under ISIS control in the Middle East had been virtually eliminated. In the Sahel region, in addition to the characteristics of the states—defined as weak—identity conflicts are compounded through armed groups and militias of diverse nature: nationalist, religious, and terrorist-based.

Through these armed groups, the discontent and divisions that exist between historically marginalized ethnic communities are usually channeled, which also allows these terrorist groups to legitimize their discourse (Santo-Tomás, 2020, p. 99 and 104). For his part, researcher Jacob Zenn, a Boko Haram specialist at the Jamestown Foundation, also states that ISIS-linked groups in West and Central Africa emerged from ethnolinguistic minority communities that tend to be far from their respective countries' capitals and are politically, economically, and culturally marginalized. Zenn points out that these groups have supporters beyond national borders with whom they can identify (Spanish, 2020, October 12).

However, Iván Santo-Tomás López argues that the presence of several satellite armed groups of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Sahel, along with their varying degrees of legitimacy among different ethnic communities, has hampered the territorial expansion of either group, as there is no prevailing model between the two groups. (Santo-Tomás, 2020, p. 115-116). Perhaps this explains why, during several years in the period analyzed here, there were almost no direct clashes between these groups, and why they coexisted in their respective zones of influence.

In 2017, Spanish professor Luis de la Corte Ibáñez (Autonomous University of Madrid and Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies) proposed several scenarios arising from the loss of territorial control of ISIS's "parent structure." This projection does not include the rest of the groups that fly the black flag of ISIS. De la Corte Ibáñez argued that ISIS would progressively degrade and lose its operational capacity, or, on the contrary, would strategically re-adapt to be able to continue operating in various conflict scenarios. (De la Corte, 2017, p. 4, 5) He also stated that the lack of geographic continuity between its region of origin in the Middle East and the areas where its "external provinces" operate made it impossible to transfer recruits, resources, and assets. However, these affiliated groups would evolve depending on their own capabilities and resources, as well as the context of the countries in which they operate (De la Corte, 2017, p. 8, 14).

While the emergence of ISIS has changed the dynamics of terrorism in the Sahel, it is argued that these groups have gained greater autonomy from the two main exponents of terrorism: al-Qaeda and ISIS. At the same time, they are no longer considered a "franchise" of these organizations; they have consolidated their geographic footprint without global

leader in the same year. Since the death of Al- Baghdadi, the leaders of the Islamic State have been nicknamed Al- Qurashi, in reference to the Quraish tribe to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged (RTVE, 2022, November 30).

aspirations, while many other small, unrelated groups have emerged (Alvarado, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to delve deeper into the internal characteristics of the two groups linked to ISIS in this subregion.

Sahel: Groups linked to the terrorist organization "Islamic State"

The creation of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) group in May 2015 by Adnane Abou Walid Al- Saharawi and a handful of men who remained under his command, coincided with the rise of ISIS. The new Sahelian franchise would begin to legitimize its presence through a series of terrorist actions to capture the attention of the international community and reassert itself in the area. Its main areas of operations are located in the "triple" border region or Liptako-Gourma, where Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger converge, from where they have attempted to increase their zones of influence and expand, from the Nigerien region of Tillabéri, eastwards, approaching the border with Nigeria.

It wasn't until October 2016 that ISIS officially recorded Walid Al- Saharawi 's declaration of allegiance to the organization through its news agency, Amaq. However, ISIS leaders appear to have paid little attention to the group until years later. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project researcher Héní Nsaibia , indicated that there was indeed no major link between ISIS and ISGS until 2019. In March of that year, ISIS's "official" media outlet, Al -Naba, in its 175th issue, dedicated two pages to referring to the group's terrorist actions in the Sahel. Here, it acknowledged the authorship of several ISGS attacks, such as those in Tonga Tonga, Niger, in October 2017 and the one carried out against French forces in Mali in March 2019 (Postings, 2019, May 30). This type of publicity by ISIS indicated not only a reconnection with the group in the Sahel but also a recognition of Abou Walid Al- Sahraoui as a trusted leader.

Like the rest of the terrorist groups active in the Sahel, they oppose the foreign military presence in the Sahel, against which part of their attacks have been focused. The group accuses the Tuareg communities of Imghad and Daoussahak are accused of being "complicit" with France, as well as the Nigerien government. Taking advantage of these ethnic dynamics in the region, their main source of recruits apparently comes from the Fulani community. They also focus their attacks on the Tuareg leaders: Moussa Ag Acharatoumane and El Hadj Ag Gamou. They respectively lead the armed groups *Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad* (MSA) and *Groupe Tuareg Imghad et Alliés Self-Defense Force* (GATIA), which signed the 2015 Peace Agreement with the Malian government, mediated by Algeria.

Since their inception, they have demonstrated great military activism and have claimed responsibility for several attacks through statements by their leaders. Among the most significant have been the following: in September 2016, they carried out an attack against a Burkinabe gendarmerie outpost on the border between Burkina Faso and Mali. In October of the same year, they carried out another action against a military outpost in Intangom (Mali). One of their attacks with the greatest international impact was the one carried out on October 4, 2017, in the town of Tonga Tonga in the Nigerien region of Tillabéri against a unit of the United States special forces. (New York Times, 2018). Four of the 12 soldiers belonging to the

United States Special Forces who were patrolling the border area with Mali and Burkina Faso, and five soldiers from the Nigerian army, lost their lives in this ambush (Gonzalvo, 2019, p. 109).

In January 2018, the group claimed responsibility for a series of suicide attacks against Operation Barkhane forces in Mali, detonating a truck loaded with explosives against a French convoy between the Menaka and Indelimane regions. In May of that same year, the group kidnapped and executed Hamada Ag Mohamed, a local leader in the Malian town of Tin. Habou. (Security Council, 2020, February 23). All these facts indicate the way in which they have transnationalized their terrorist actions, following the trend of most other groups active in the Sahel. Although their largest attacks have been carried out against military personnel in the area, they have not ceased to have an impact on civilian populations. According to Hénri Nsaibia, ISGS carried out several of the deadliest attacks against state forces ever recorded in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger during the second half of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, as well as numerous mass atrocities against civilians (Rodríguez, 2020, December 8).

One of the elements that has characterized most of this period has been the lack of direct confrontation between ISGS and groups belonging to the JNIM coalition. This peaceful coexistence between the groups has been referred to as the "anomaly" or "exception" of the Sahel, which lasted for a period of five years, from 2015 to 2019. This period was characterized by cohabitation and understanding, though never full cooperation, as noted by the media, numerous experts, the US Department of Defense, and agencies, including the UN (La Voz de Galicia, 2020, May 3).

In those years, it has been suggested that on several occasions meetings took place between the leaders Abou Walid al- Saharawi and Iyad Ag Ghaly, such as the one that occurred at the end of 2017 in the Kidal region (Mali). Around the same time, other exchanges were recorded between Walid al- Saharawi and other leaders under the command of Iyad Ag Ghaly in Ménaka. (Gonzalvo, 2019, p. 129). These exchanges were possible because both groups had a common past in AQMI, there were strong interpersonal and even kinship relationships, either through belonging to the same ethnic group or through family ties, and their leaders had known each other for many years.

The exchanges had not only occurred between the leaders of the respective groups but also between their members, some of whom even served as liaisons between the groups. They even coordinated kidnappings and attacks; for example, if an attack was planned, the other group would not prevent it, or if a barracks was attacked, men from both sides participated because they could benefit from the military equipment they obtained (Rodríguez, 2020, December 8). They offered logistical support and intelligence information. These relationships between the groups have also occurred to gain influence and agree on which areas each would control, although many of their areas of operation overlapped. For example, JNIM operates mainly in northern and central Mali, while ISGS operates in the south, on the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border. This type of collaboration between ISIS affiliates and al-Qaeda has been a particular feature in the Sahel.

However, pressure against this existing harmony in the Sahel came from ISIS, when in its weekly newsletter, *Al Naba*, it described JNIM members as apostate militias, Algerian watchdogs, and other derogatory terms (Rodríguez, 2020, December 8). Following these statements, contradictions between ISIS and JNIM increased. By April 2019, the first clashes between the two groups were recorded in Mali, in the Dialloubé area, and in northern Burkina Faso. These clashes occurred between the JNIM's Macina Liberation Front and ISIS.

In Burkina Faso, members of the EIGS, led by the Nigerien Moussa Moumouni clashed with Ansarul Islam, an ally of Al-Qaeda. It is suggested that other causes of these antagonisms were the management of the area's natural resources or the fact that the then Malian president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, had announced his willingness to negotiate with both Iyad Ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa (FLM), both of Malian nationality (La Voz de Galicia, 2020, May 3.). The confrontation was publicly acknowledged in the aforementioned ISIS bulletin for May 2020. For researcher Héní Nsaibia as for the journalist Wassim Nasr, the confrontation between both groups was evident and without a point of return (Rodríguez, December 8, 2020).

The second focus of terrorist activism in the Sahel, as Virginia already pointed out Comolli, was located around Lake Chad. The main group operating in this area since 2009 has been Boko Haram, whose terrorist actions had been characterized by their cruelty towards civilians through attacks on villages, the mass abduction of women⁵, targeted killings, attacks on churches and public markets. This group had also suffered an internal process of decomposition of its leadership, due to contradictions between Abubakar Shekau and Habib Yusuf, known as Abu Mosab al- Barnaoui and son of the group's founder, Mohammed Yusuf. However, the most significant split was in favor of ISIS.

In March 2015, Boko Haram issued a statement pledging allegiance to ISIS. This signified the real possibility of the "caliphate" expanding into western sub-Saharan Africa. Jacob Zenn, a researcher at the *Jamestown Foundation* think tank and an expert on Boko Haram, would indicate that this alliance between ISIS and Boko Haram would make sense for both groups and, above all, because Boko Haram would gain greater legitimacy (Alkhshali & Almasry, 2015, March 12). However, by late 2016, ISIS did not recognize Shekau 's leadership, as he had been leading BH since 2009.

The group was thus divided in two, with one faction remaining loyal to Shekau 's leadership and the other identifying with the ISIS-influenced faction. Thus emerged the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The main leader of this ISIS affiliate in the Sahel was Abu Abdullah ibn Umar al-Barnawi (Abu Musab al- Barnawi), who was appointed as the new "governor" of the West African *province*. (Postings, 2019, May 30). Al Barnawi led the group from the summer of 2016 until March 2019, when he was replaced by Abou Abdallah. Idrisa or Abou Abdullah Ibn Umar Al- Barnaoui.

⁵In 2014, 276 girls were kidnapped in the town of Chibook. Of these, 120 were exchanged for Boko Haram prisoners and money, several dozen were killed in fighting, and around 25 were married to Boko Haram militants. In December 2020, 333 students were kidnapped from a secondary school in the town of Kankara, Katsina State.

Most of ISWAP's attacks have been concentrated primarily in the area around Lake Chad in eastern Niger, western Chad, northern Cameroon, and northeastern Nigeria. However, the vast majority of its terrorist actions have been in Nigeria. ISWAP has managed to intensify its operations and, above all, continue to advance northward, into Niger, and westward, influencing the Nigerian states of Kaduna, Zamfara, and Sokoto.

Robert Postings, researcher on the Islamic State and columnist for the specialized American newspaper *The Defense Post*, refers to how ISIS, in a context of restructuring of its "provinces" incorporated EIGS into the *wilayah* of West Africa, understood as ISWAP. At the same time, ISIS propaganda attributed ISGS attacks to this "province," even though the two groups operated in different parts of the Sahel and had their own internal dynamics. However, Postings points out several ideas in this regard, such as the fact that this statement did not mean that there was a definitive link between the two groups, much less that ISGS was subordinate to ISWAP, which is why they continued to operate independently. In short, it was merely a propaganda strategy. (Postings, 2019, May 30).

Similarly, Jacob Zenn, assistant professor of Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics at Georgetown University, considered that this merger was not real, but that, although they remained separate, there were potential connections between the two groups (Postings, 2019, May 30). Nsaibia, as well as Jason Warner, assistant professor of social sciences at West Point, argued that there has indeed been at least some interaction, albeit minimal, between ISIS and ISWAP (Postings, 2019, May 30). These elements allowed for the identification of a set of possible scenarios in which the two groups could have united and thus consolidated ISIS networks throughout the subregion, or even in which ISIS could have handed ISIS control of its own province. Ultimately, neither of these scenarios materialized during the period studied.

Conclusions

In making a general assessment of terrorism in the Sahel, it should be noted at the outset that the Sahel-Saharan region possesses particular geographic attributes, such as its vast desert and semi-desert zones, its low population density as far as the Sahara is concerned, its significant cultural and linguistic diversity, expressed in the diversity of its ethnic groups, and its severely deteriorated socioeconomic situation. All these factors have made the area a stronghold for the emergence and expansion of armed groups of various stripes, including terrorists.

Between 2015 and 2020, the behavior of terrorism in the vast Sahel-Saharan region has been characterized by an increase in the number of actors involved, the creation of new alliances, the fragmentation of other groups, and even the emergence of many others without a specific affiliation. Therefore, the dynamics are much more complex than those that can be determined solely by well-identified and structured groups. From this, it follows that the systems of loyalties and alliances established between them are confusing and malleable. That said, no generalizations about terrorism in the Sahel can be made, given that there is no single

type of terrorism and the dynamics of each group may be different, although certain trends can be identified.

The development in the Sahel of "alternative" terrorist groups to al-Qaeda and its affiliate, JNIM, as well as ISIS satellite affiliates in the region: ISWAP/ISGS, complicated the security landscape and introduced new dynamics in relations between the groups. In this regard, high levels of "coordination" between them were evident, as they respected each other's generally distinct areas of influence. This means that the dispute between al-Qaeda and ISIS was very subtle in the Sahel and had no implications beyond the fact that the groups were fragmenting.

Although such levels of synergy between groups belonging to al-Qaeda or ISIS had not previously occurred in other regions such as the Middle East, they persisted here during the first years after 2015. As their spheres of influence expanded, this balance was disrupted, and competition for regional control increased by 2019, for example, between the JINM and ISIL. Despite this, the levels of cooperation and collaboration between other local groups have continued. There is a dynamic of interrelationships and interdependence between all the groups that is difficult to ignore, even more so when these same groups are linked to other organized crime networks, from which they derive part of their funding. Each of them also uses terrorist methods adapted to the specificities of the Sahel and enjoys strong social support.

The defeat of ISIS, or by default, its complete weakening in the Middle East, did not mean the disappearance of its affiliates in the Sahel. Both ISGS and ISWAP maintained and increased their terrorist activism. However, during the period analyzed, the predicted scenario regarding a possible merger between ISGS and ISWAP did not occur. Therefore, both groups have maintained their operational independence and separate leaderships. One element to consider is that both organizations have been unable to overcome AQIM and its affiliated groups, so it can be stated that by 2020, the Sahel remained controlled by al-Qaeda, and the expansion of both ISIS-linked groups has been halted.

Regarding policies to combat terrorism in the Sahel, it should be noted that these yielded only partial and very lukewarm results in the 2013-2014 period, when France's Operation Serval in Mali managed to dismantle, only temporarily, groups linked to AQIM. With the emergence of ISIS in 2014, groups in the Sahel reorganized in favor of Abou Baqr al-Baghdadi, as did groups surrounding al-Qaeda. From 2015 to 2020, the diversity of terrorist actors, their geographical dispersion, or, by default, their concentration in certain areas within a single country, has meant that the counterterrorism agendas implemented by a host of state, regional, and international actors have yielded no objective results during this period. The existence of multiple strategies to confront a diffuse and evolving network of terrorist groups has hampered the coherence of these counterterrorism programs.

The political changes that have taken place in the Sahel over the past five years have been a result of the sustained context of insecurity experienced in the region and also an expression of a transformation in the dynamics of the international geopolitical arena. The weakening of the Euro-US model of security cooperation and its failure to contain terrorism

provoked a wave of coups against the French military presence in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Since 2020, the "coup" governments adopted an anti-French narrative that has had repercussions in former Western allied countries, such as Senegal, Chad, and the Ivory Coast, which have also requested the withdrawal of French troops.

The political crisis affected the structure of ECOWAS when the Sahel countries decided to withdraw from it and create the Alliance of Sahel States. In this region of the Global South, the traditional Franco-US hegemony has eroded. On the other hand, these changes have allowed, first, the consolidation of China's position, not only in the Sahel, but throughout the entire sub-Saharan region. China has managed to completely displace traditional players—such as France, United States, and the European Union (EU)—from economic control, in terms of trade volume and foreign direct investment, and has consolidated its position as Africa's main strategic partner and is advancing its own security agenda. Second, these political changes have allowed a greater Russian involvement in security issues to combat terrorism. Russia has increased its international role not only through its actions in Syria and Ukraine, but also in the Sahel, an area where traditional Euro-American influence is declining. The medium-term scenario presents a strengthening of the Sino-Russian axis in detriment of the France-US "bloc" in sub-Saharan Africa.

About the Author

Yoslan graduated with a degree in History from the University of Havana (UH) in 2009. He was at the Center for African and Middle Eastern Studies (CEAMO) between 2009 and 2010. Since September 2010, he has worked at the Research Center on International Politics (CIPI). He earned a Master's degree in Contemporary History with a Specialization in Africa and Asia from the UH in 2014. Between January 2016 and August 2021, he served as Head of the Africa and Middle East Group at CIPI. He obtained a Master's degree in African Studies from the Colegio de México (Colmex) in 2023 and is currently a student in the Ph.D. Program in African Studies at Colmex.

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