ARMED VIOLENCE IN THE SAHARA

Are We Moving From Jihadism to Insurgency?

Mathieu PELLERIN

November 2019

POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

THINK • STIMULATE • BRIDGE

ifri

1979
2019

Sub-Saharan Africa Center

Ifri is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

Policy Center for the New South, formerly OCP Policy Center, is a Moroccan policy-oriented think tank based in Rabat, Morocco, striving to promote knowledge sharing and to contribute to an enriched reflection on key economic and international relations issues. By offering a southern perspective on major regional and global strategic challenges facing developing and emerging countries, the Policy Center for the New South aims to provide a meaningful policy-making contribution through its four research programs: Agriculture, Environment and Food Security, Economic and Social Development, Commodity Economics and Finance, Geopolitics and International Relations.

Author

Mathieu Pellerin is the Sahel analyst for the International Crisis Group. He has been an associate research fellow at Ifri's Sub-Saharan Africa Center since 2009. He specializes in political and security dynamics in the Sahel.

Abstract

While everyone is questioning the effectiveness of the anti-terrorist response in the Sahel, the first challenge is to ensure that the jihadist phenomenon in the Sahel is fully understood. Jihad in the Sahel is "glocal" and must be understood as the result of interactions between dynamics at the local level and on a more global scale. Far from representing a homogeneous movement of religious essence, Sahelian jihad results from the agglomeration of local sources of insurgency built on social, political or economic fractures - sometimes very old and which have crystalized. With the expansion of jihadist groups in the central and southern Sahel - far from their historical bases - this religious dimension is likely to be even less perceptible in the future. It will give way to hybrid forms of violence where self-defense, rebellion and jihadism feed off each other. However, the response provided by both States and their international partners seems to be out of step with this reality. They advocate a purely military response to a largely political phenomenon. In the absence of a political response, the insurgents are being pushed into a genuine radicalization.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Jihadism is undergoing changes that are taking place before our eyes. These changes require us to overcome an immediate view of events and to put ourselves at a reasonable distance from "jihadology". This has the main premise of interconnecting jihadist actors with each other beyond the regions and their specific characteristics, and not disconnecting these actors from the societies they operate in. Jihadism is first and foremost "glocal" and must understand the – naturally changing – interactions between the dynamics that take place at local level and on a more global scale. The development of the jihadist sphere tends to reduce this global dimension as a result of the continuous weakening of centralized jihadist structures.

In the Sahel, in particular, the global dimension is less and less dominant, as jihad is expanding into areas that are hardly connected to the original center, namely Algeria and northern Mali. The gradual descent of jihadist groups towards the southern Sahara *de facto* reduces the influence of these jihadist groups in new areas where they have few links. However, nowadays jihadist groups are most active in these new southern, and even sub-Saharan, territories, experiencing an exponential development in some regions in Burkina Faso where however, they only had a limited presence two years ago.

Finding an explanation for this paradox requires an understanding of Sahelian jihad as not primarily an essentially standard religious movement, but as the agglomeration of local insurgent centers built on social, political or economic divides – sometimes of very longstanding.

This paper proposes to analyze this trend. After presenting the principal developments by jihadist groups in the Sahel, we will analyze this "glocal" dimension of jihad in the Sahel, by emphasizing the importance of micro-local, societal realities in fueling jihadism that aims to be global. It will also need to analyze the ongoing tensions that exist between the local and global dimensions. Specific attention is paid to the Fulani community here, which is becoming increasingly wrongly associated with jihadism in the Sahel and even beyond. We will see that the idea of "Fulani jihad" does not correspond to reality, but is perhaps

tending to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, it will need to prospectively analyze where and how the Sahelo-Saharan jihad will continue to spread.[1]

The Fight Against Terrorism Reassessed

The ineffectiveness of the fight against terrorism in the Sahel is nowadays a legitimate question in terms of the general development of the security environment since 2013. The intensification of Operation Barkhane and the many successes it has had, coupled with the creation of the G5 Sahel and building the capacity of the Sahelian national armies, contrast with the general view of jihadism in the Sahel: attacks perpetrated by jihadist groups are increasing, their fatality is growing, and their area of influence is continually extending. One single piece of data sums up this situation: the first quarter of 2019 has been the deadliest in the Sahel since 2012.[2] Since July 2019, Burkina Faso and Mali have both experienced the deadliest attacks against their military bases. This data reflects a stalemate in the fight against terrorism. Unable to reduce the terrorist threat that was originally focused on northern Mali, the national and international armed forces are even impotently witnessing its exacerbation, and continuing geographical expansion. The fact that the G7 states, with France at the head, stated their desire to create a coalition against terrorism at the Biarritz Summit in August 2019, extending beyond the G5 Sahel, sounded both like an admission of this organization's obsolescence before it had even started its operations, and a recognition of the progression of the jihadist threat as far as the coastal countries of West Africa.

However, the Barkhane force has recorded its most significant successes in the last two years, with several, very lethal operations against the headquarters of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in Tinzaouaten in February 2018,[3] against the head of the Katiba (battalion), Al-Mansour Ag Alkassim in November 2018,[4] against Al Qaeda in the Maghreb's (AQIM) number two, Yahya Abu Hammam, in February 2019[5] and in October 2019, against JNIM's number two, Abu Abderrahmane Al-Maghribi. The French Minister of the Armed Forces' statement before the

2. Data provided by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

3. "Mali : un proche d'Iyad Ag Ghaly tué dans un raid de Barkhane à la frontière algérienne", *Jeune Afrique*, February 15, 2018, available at: www.jeuneafrique.com.

4. "Le chef de la faction Al-Mansour Ag Alkassim visé dans un raid de Barkhane", RFI, November 15, 2018, available at: www.rfi.fr.

5. P. Alonso and C. Macé, "Au Mali, l'armée française tue un 'historique' d'Al-Qaeda", *Libération*, February 22, 2019, available at: www.liberation.fr.

Senate in February 2019, summarized the results of the Barkhane and Saber forces: "In four years, we have incapacitated more than 600 terrorists [including] more than 200 fighters in 2018. […] Every quarter, we seize two tonnes of arms and ammunition".[6] However, these successes are insufficient in terms of the jihadist groups' capacity to conduct high intensity attacks against national and international armed forces, but also against civilians and armed fighters suspected of undermining their interests.

This capacity is obvious both within JNIM and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In the aftermath of the Tinzaouaten strike, during which several, high-ranking JNIM leaders were killed, the movement conducted three of its most serious (and complex) attacks since 2013: the first on March 2, 2018 in Ouagadougou against the French embassy and the general headquarters of the Burkinabe forces,[7] the second in April against the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) site in Timbuktu,[8] the third against the G5-Sahel HQ in Sévaré, forcing it to relocate (how difficult) to the one in Bamako.[9] In January 2019, JNIM claimed responsibility for the most serious attack since 2013 against MINUSMA in Aguelhok, killing 11 Chadian soldiers.[10]

ISGS has been presented for a long time, as having being driven out and profoundly disorganized by joint operations between Barkhane, the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA) and the Nigerien army from May 2017 to the end of 2018. However, despite the many operations carried out, the group's human resources and organizational capacities in the area concerned, namely the Menaka-Tillaberi border area is continuing to develop: the group is recruiting from new communities and developing new modes of action.[11] The group conducted its deadliest operations against the Nigerien Defense and Security Forces in the Tillaberi region in May and July 2019, respectively in Tongo and in In-Atès, causing at least

6. C. Fouquet, "Sahel : l'armée française a 'neutralisé' plus de 600 djihadistes depuis 2015", *Les Échos*, February 28, 2019, available at: www.lesechos.fr.
7. "Le déroulement de la double attaque de Ouagadougou se précise", RFI, March 5, 2018, available at: www.rfi.fr.
8. "Le camp de la Minusma à Tombouctou victime d'une 'importante attaque'", RFI, April 14, 2018, available at: www.rfi.fr.
9. "Mali : le QG de la force du G5-Sahel frappé par un attentat-suicide", RFI, June 29, 2018, available at: www.rfi.fr.
10. L. Lagneau, "Mali : dix Casques bleus tchadiens tués lors d'une attaque jihadiste à Aguelhok", Opex360, January 21, 2019, available at: www.opex360.com.
11. See on this subject, "Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDs in Western Niger", ACLED, June 19, 2019, available at: https://acleddata.com.

28 and 18 deaths in their ranks.[12] The group's influence is continuously extending in this area to the point that people have been forced to flee in recent months, particularly after the killing of several traditional leaders in the In-Atès area.[13]

12. "Niger : l'État islamique dans le grand Sahara revendique l'attaque ayant fait 18 morts", *Le Figaro*, July 3, 2019, available at: www.lefigaro.fr.
13. Interview with a leader of the Tillaberi faction, Niamey, July 2019.

Sahelian Jihad: A Common but Not United Front

Jihadist violence has undergone significant developments in recent years. The two main ones are the continuing rapprochement of jihadist groups and their gradual descent from the Sahara to the Sahel. The main factors that have led to these developments are largely because of the intensification in the fight against terrorism, both by the continued pressure exerted by Barkhane and through the foundation of the G5 Sahel. Although this organization is taking a long time to become operational, the announcement of its formation under European – and particularly French – leadership has led groups to adapt preventively.

So, the establishment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in February 2017[14] coincided with the formation of JNIM, an organization which brings together AQIM's, Ansar Dine's and Al Mourabitoun's Saharan katibas and Katiba Macina, with each one represented within the movement's shura (consultative council). The regrouping of Al Mourabitoun – formerly Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) – and of AQIM, formerly rivals, is the main change brought about by the formation of JNIM, even if this dynamic has been ongoing since December 2015 and the announcement by the emir of AQIM of the merger with Al Mourabitoun.[15] The groups under AQIM are therefore reunited within a single movement, while respecting the territorial balance which predominated among them before this date, with each group retaining a specific area of operations, even though Iyad Ag Ghaly has the power to co-ordinate all of these areas and achieve the movement's expansion into new territory.[16] The formation of JNIM was driven by the launch of the G5 Sahel, but especially by the development of the ISGS, founded on May 13, 2015, in a more global context when branches of Islamic State were developing in Libya, Egypt, Nigeria and even beyond. Islamic State's rivalry with Al-Qaeda was then at its peak and a requirement emerged for groups linked to Al-Qaeda to

14. During the second ordinary session of the G5 Sahel's Heads of States' Conference, which took place on February 6, 2017, the Heads of State announced the immediate establishment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, whose foundation was decided at a summit on November 20, 2015 at N'Djamena in Chad.
15. M. Mémier, "AQMI et al-Mourabitoun : le djihad sahélien réunifié ?", *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, January 2017, available at: www.ifri.org.
16. Interview with a specialist in Sahelian jihadist movements, Nouakchott, May 2019.

regroup. This requirement would even become essential after ISGS's initial actions at the end of 2016 and especially the acknowledgment of its Saharan branch's existence on October 30, 2016 by Islamic State's AMAQ agency. So, this acknowledgment raised concerns about material and human support from the Middle East and Libya, even though in fact communication between ISGS and Islamic State at central level seemed limited.

However, the foundation of JNIM never resulted in a risk of confrontation with ISGS. From January 2016, the emir of AQIM, Yahya Abu el-Hammam, told Al-Akhbar that contacts with ISGS were maintained.[17] Jihadist groups in the Sahel have always maintained relationships despite the rivalries they may maintain. These contacts were intensified throughout 2017 in order to form a common front against the G5 Sahel Joint Force that had been recently established on February 6, 2017. Several meetings were held during 2017 – often in the Menaka region – between the leaders of both organizations to determine the conditions of this common front that however does not indicate any merger.[18] The idea that leaders from the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) could have been involved in this rapprochement, as the UN Panel of Experts on Mali's report openly advocated in 2018, seems highly debatable. Nowadays, there is no doubt that both organizations are coordinating their operations, even providing mutual logistical support, particularly in terms of information or weapons. So, some operations conducted by ISGS in the Menaka region as far as the Tillaberi region in Niger would benefit from logistical support from JNIM.[19] One of the most convincing examples of this logistic cooperation occurred at the end of 2017, when an important JNIM leader, accused of spying, was arrested in the Menaka region by ISGS and handed over to JNIM.[20]

However, the two groups remain divided by very clear ideological differences and organizational rivalries. Targeting civilians and Christian communities has mainly been the subject of disagreements between the two groups that have been expressed publicly through press releases or sermons by the JNIM leaders. Since 2016, Amadou Kouffa has prohibited his men from targeting Christians after a Christian was shot by his movement near Douentza.[21] Even more than ideological differences, potential conflicts could arise over the division of territory between the

---

17. Interview with Yahya Abu El-Hammam, Al Akhbar, January 10, 2016.
18. Interview with an observer of jihadism in Mali, Bamako, November 2017.
19. Interview with a member of an armed group operating in Menaka, July 2019, in a Sahelian city.
20. Interview with a member of an armed group in Kidal, January 2018, in a Sahelian city.
21. Interview with a member of Mopti civil society, June 2019, telephone call.

two organizations. The agreement between the two movements is largely based on respect of their respective territories. The Menaka and Gourma Rharous regions in Mali, or the Sahel and eastern regions in Burkina Faso are the regions where the two groups coexist generally harmoniously despite frequent disputes. The attack on Koutougou (Burkina Faso) on August 19, 2019, claimed by ISGS, could be the first attack jointly conducted by both organizations, since the attack may have received support from the JNIM. However, respect of this territorial division could be challenged. Two groups claiming to be Islamic state have recently appeared in central Mali and in the far north of the Kidal region, along the Algerian border. These two areas are historical bastions of AQIM and JNIM and this territorial encroachment could be of a nature to seriously strain their relationships with ISGS. However, up to now the two groups have always managed to de-escalate the tensions between them.

The Continuing Expansion of the Jihadist Front

The second major development is the relocation of operations in the Sahelo-Saharan strip and to its southern part. The number of security incidents that occurred in 2018 and 2019 demonstrate this development, with a vast majority of the attacks occurring in central Mali (the Mopti and Segou regions), in the Burkinabe Sahel region (mainly in Soum province), but also in the eastern, Boucle du Mouhoun and northern Burkinabe regions. This spread of attacks towards the south stems from a strategy initiated since 2014 by Ansar Dine to reduce international pressure on the Kidal region, and which has been reflected by the opening up of the front in central Mali.[22] By continuing to further its influence in central Mali, Ansar Dine tried to extend the jihadist "front line" to southern Mali, particularly in the former kingdom of Kenedougou. In 2015 and 2016, the attacks that occurred in Samarogouan (Hauts-Bassins region) and in the Sikasso region stem from this strategy, but it was short-lived after the dismantling of Ansar Dine's Katiba Khalid Ben Walid.[23] Despite this dismantling, members and relatives of former leaders of this katiba continue to be active on both sides of the border. Since 2018, two cells linked to this katiba preparing attacks have been dismantled, one on the outskirts of Ouagadougou, the second in a village in Sikasso,[24] while two attacks targeting the defense and security forces were carried out in Sikasso in 2019, including a particularly ambitious one in the Yorosso department in May 2019.[25] On the Burkinabe side, attacks have also increased since August 2018, particularly in the south-western region.

This expansion is unique in that it is not necessarily for the benefit of greater interconnection with other jihadist theaters of operation. This undoubtedly is due to the fact that in Libya, as much as in the Lake Chad region, jihadist groups, far from being engaged in a unification process similar to that observed in the Sahel, are undermined by divisions. The

---

22. Interview with a member of a Sahelian jihadist group, January 2018.
23. "Fin de cavale au Mali pour le djihadiste Souleymane Keïta", VOA Afrique, March 31, 2016, available at: www.voaafrique.com.
24. "Cellule terroriste démantelée au Mali : le profil des suspects", RFI, December 14, 2018, available at: www.rfi.fr.
25. "Mali : deux localités attaquées dans le sud-est du pays", RFI, May 20, 2019, available at: www.rfi.fr.

groups linked to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have grown weaker in Libya, because of their rivalries leading to deadly clashes in Derna, for example in 2015 and 2016, until the victory of the Derna Shura Council of the Mujahideen over Islamic State-affiliated brigades.[26] These divisions have significantly weakened the jihadists in Derna, which Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) took advantage of in order to retake Derna in June 2018.[27] Islamic State, as in Syria and Iraq, has failed in its attempt to establish a territorial base in Sirte, which generated strong resistance among the pre-existing armed forces in Libya, both linked to the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) and the competing forces of the National Libyan Army (LNA). The movement, which is now fought by both of these forces, is struggling to rebuild its resources in Libya. Despite sporadic attacks that reflect their residual presence, Islamic State's inability to exploit existing sociopolitical divisions in Libya restricts its ability to infiltrate and become established. Unlike what had been anticipated by many observers, the movement has not been able to exploit the current war between the GNA and the LNA, if only because both of these parties have also remained at war with Islamic State. Groups linked to Al-Qaeda would not have benefited greatly from this situation, one of the reasons could be that, anxious to benefit from international benevolence, they were careful to avoid excessive infiltration of their units by jihadists.[28] Despite everything, objective alliances would have been formed, the presence of many former members of jihadist Salafist militias in the east of the country – including the Benghazi Defense Brigade – were identified during the war against the LNA.[29] Furthermore, the LNA's "counter-terrorist" commitment, although it served as an alibi for politically-motivated operations, has also helped to weaken groups linked to Al-Qaeda. During the operations conducted in Benghazi and Derna, several Al-Qaeda leaders were killed or arrested, with the most important one probably being the leader of the Egyptian movement, Al Mourabitoun, Hisham el-Ashmawy, who was arrested in October 2018 and handed over to the Egyptian authorities.[30] Many Salafist militia leaders and former Ansar al-Sharia fighters were killed during fighting with the LNA, both in

26. K. Truitte, "The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council: A Revolutionary Islamist Coalition in Libya", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 5, October 2018, available at: www.universiteitleiden.nl.

27. "Libye : le maréchal Haftar annonce la 'libération de Derna'", RFI, June 29, 2018, available at: www.rfi.fr.

28. W. Lacher, "Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 Civil War is Transforming Libya's Military Landscape", Small Arms Survey, August 2019, available at: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

29. Interview with an observer of armed violence in Libya, August 2019, telephone conversation.

30. M. Daou, "Qui est le jihadiste le plus recherché d'Égypte, livré au Caire par le maréchal Haftar ?", France 24, May 29, 2019, available at: www.france24.com.

the east and west of the country.[31] It remains to be seen whether the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the LNA does not benefit the recruitment of new jihadists in the medium term. The complexity of the Libyan context marked by the presence of heavily-armed groups with volatile alliances, some of which are seeking favors with the international community, is not necessarily favorable as a safe haven for jihadist groups. Therefore, the outflows of fighters seen in recent years in the Sahel are mostly directed from Libya to Mali. Since 2018, several outflows of Maghreb fighters from Libya have been reported in the far north of the Kidal region. However, these flows also operate in the other direction and many Sahelian jihadist leaders are often located in the south-west of the Libyan Fezzan, further giving rise to some strikes by the coalition against terrorism, starting with the one that killed Mokhtar Belmokhtar.[32] The departure of Barkhane from the Madama base would have made traffic along the Mali-Libya axis considerably easier to the benefit of both jihadists and traffickers.

The internal divisions that the obscure Boko Haram[33] has experienced and continues to experience, have not been favorable to expanding its sphere of influence beyond north-eastern Nigeria and Lake Chad. The first division, which has its roots in the historical ideological differences between the two wings of Boko Haram, embodied by Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau, occurred in February 2015 with the alignment of Boko Haram's dissident wing with Islamic State. Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) then relocated to the Lake Chad area, that until then had only been used for logistical purposes, while Shekau's group concentrated its forces in the Sambisa forest. Although, ISWAP had to fight Shekau's units in Lake Chad in 2016, in order to take refuge there, both groups subsequently avoided each other despite the occasional episodes of tensions, as in mid-2018.[34] The groups' respective leaderships may have carefully prevented the few clashes from escalating, according to some sources, at Islamic State's request.[35] Nowadays, their coexistence is generally peaceful and Islamic State may have encouraged ISWAP to get along with, or even collaborate with Shekau's wing[36] if necessary.

---

31. *Ibid.*

32. L. Lagneau, "Le chef jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar visé par une frappe française en Libye ?", Opex360, November 28, 2016, available at: www.opex360.com.

33. The group's exact name is Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna li-Dawa wal-Jihad, or the Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad.

34. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province", Rapport Afrique No. 273, International Crisis Group, May 16, 2019, available at: www.crisisgroup.org.

35. "Survival and Expansion: The Islamic State's West African Province", Global Initiative for Civil Stabilization Report, April 23, 2019, available at: https://divergentoptions.org.

36. *Ibid.*

ISWAP has won this leadership war. In 2016 and 2017, the organization may have benefited from significant financial and human support provided by Islamic State, particularly from Libya, even though the extent of this support is subject to varying assessments.[37] In addition to this support, the development of new financing methods allowing it to be completely independent and defections of elements from Shekau have enabled ISWAP to start a succession of operations against Nigerian army from July 2018. This increase in power was accompanied by a substantial internal reshuffle that resulted in the execution of Mamman Nur, accused of spying for the Nigerian government, because he negotiated the release of hostages at Daptchi, and the sidelining of Abu Musab al-Barnawi. His replacement in March 2019 by Ba Idrissa, appointed by ISWAP's Shura, could promote a rapprochement with Shekau's wing and some fear that this could be reflected by a takeover of the organization by Islamic State's central office. According to some sources, the movement's new leaders may have been trained for a while in Libya.[38] These divisions and changes at the head of the movement have hardly affected ISWAP's fighting strength, no more than the intensification in operations conducted by the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) contributed to it. Although, the Nigerian authorities regularly announce "the end of Boko Haram", the Shekau wing remains particularly resilient, while ISWAP is continuing to mount very intense attacks against the Nigerian army. Since the summer of 2018, ISWAP has been able to take control of several Nigerian military bases. The success of the two branches of Islamic State in West Africa make the Sahel a new priority territory for the movement. In April 2019, in his first video published since 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi specifically mentioned Abu Walid al-Sahrawi to ask him to spread jihad in the Sahel and West Africa.

---

37. According to a GICS report, human support provided by Islamic State may have been constant and widespread, while other reports, like that cited by ICG, are more cautious on this subject.
38. "Survival and Expansion: The Islamic State's West African Province", *op. cit.*

"Glocal" Jihad in the Sahara

The adjective "glocal" is often used to characterize the identity of jihadist groups worldwide. It has been applied to many jihadist groups since Jean-Luc Marret popularized it in an article in 2008 about AQIM.[39] This glocal agenda was then presented by a recognized specialist of jihadist movements, as a thought-out strategy Al-Qaeda-wide, to adapt to the pressure exerted by the international coalition against this organization in the Afghan-Pakistani area.[40] This prism of interpretation has become assimilated, to the point that is inconceivable nowadays to consider jihadist groups independently of the social, political and community context in which they evolve, whether in Syria, Iraq, the Philippines, Yemen or in all the Maghreb countries. These groups adapt or change as a result of local, national and international events that may, for example, lead these groups to redefine their agenda; as was the case for jihadists in Algeria, some of whom chose to focus on a national agenda.[41] The case of the Egyptian Sinai is also indicative of this change: originally, a manifestation of jihad mainly conducted by the Bedouin tribes against the Egyptian state, it has become the theater of globalized jihad as a result of Ansar Beit al-Maqtis' allegiance to Islamic State and the return of Islamic State fighters from Iraq and Syria after the fall of the Caliphate. These groups can also feed off of national crises, like the Arab Spring, that started independently of any influence from the jihadist groups, but which they have *ultimately* benefited from greatly. Finally, they can exploit micro-local contexts marked by social divisions (often community, but also legal)[42] and multi-faceted grievances. This latter pattern is the most widespread in the Sahel. Existing literature on the subject for the Sahel is unanimous in maintaining that individuals' engagement in jihadism is less due to religious issues than to sociopolitical or economic situations.[43] Three main patterns now dominate in the Sahel.

---

39. J.-L. Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 6, 2008, p. 541-552, available at: www.researchgate.net.

40. A. Djaffar, "New Model Jihad", *Le Monde*, February 1, 2010, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

41. I. Werenfels, "Going 'Glocal': Jihadism in Algeria and Tunisia", *in* G. Steinberg and A. Weber (ed.), *Jihadism in Africa: Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliance*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2015, available at: www.swp-berlin.org.

42. Mainly, segments of formerly servile people who challenge their marginality in their communities.

43. L.-A. Théroux-Bénoni, W. Assanvo, I. Maïga, *et al.*, "Jeunes 'djihadistes' au Mali. Guidés par la foi ou par les circonstances ?", Institute of Security Studies, August 2016, available at: www.g5sahel.org; M. Pellerin, "Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel", *Notes de*

Individuals' engagement in jihadism is often the result of real or perceived injustice. This has enabled jihadist groups to extend their influence in these areas hardly affected or unaffected by jihadism until now, but where many local grievances exist, like in central Mali, Soum or even eastern Burkina Faso. These contexts harbor a certain number of already documented similarities that show a crisis in the governance of rural areas. This crisis is marked by many conflicts over land, often between communities of pastoralists and farmers, and also sometimes between farmers or pastoralists themselves. The crisis in central Mali is partly explained by these conflicts, between historically complementary communities, but which have become rivals due to increasing land pressure.[44] It simultaneously results from the impacts of greater climatic shocks in the Sahel than elsewhere, a particularly high population growth and public policies that neglect pastoralists (particularly those practicing transhumant pastoralism), or that promote land grabbing by the elites. Fewer and poorer lands to be shared between still more people are the parts of an explosive equation that drives each rival community to resort to arms.

This rural crisis is often accompanied by injustices affecting the most vulnerable people, namely those that have little access to state institutions and therefore, little connections enabling them to win their case. Pastoral communities, particularly the Fulani, are often victims of these injustices here. This situation is not fundamentally new, but it has taken hold over the years, until nowadays becoming specifically suitable to be reclaimed by newly present armed groups that provide rebellious people with the opportunity to rise up, with weapons and a meaningful ideology for many of them. It is striking to note in all of the areas exposed to jihadist influence that the sermons of these groups alternate between religion, fighting against injustice for the benefit of a more equal society, and liberation of the lands for the benefit of those who say they were stolen from.[45] ISWAP's capacity in Lake Chad or that of Katiba Macina in central Mali to ensure an equal social order, where theft is prohibited regardless of community membership or the social

l'Ifri, Ifri, February 2017, available at: www.ifri.org; "Radicalisation, violence et (in)sécurité. Ce que disent 800 sahéliens", Center for Humanitarian Dialogue-United Nations' Development Programme, 2016, available at: https://radical.hypotheses.org; L. Raineri, "Si les victimes deviennent bourreaux. Facteurs contribuant à la vulnérabilité et à la résilience à l'extrémisme violent au Sahel central", International Alert, June 2018, available at: www.international-alert.org; M. de Bruijn (ed.), *Biographies de la radicalisation. Des messages cachés du changement social*, Bamenda, Langaa RPCIG, 2018.

44. N. Bagayoko, B. Ba, B. Sangaré, *et al.*, "Gestion des ressources et configuration des relations de pouvoir dans le centre du Mali : entre ruptures et continuité", African Security Sector Network, 2017, available at: http://africansecuritynetwork.org.

45. Author's observation after fieldwork conducted in all of the Sahel countries since 2012.

status of the person who committed it, where all forms of corruption are condemned by justice intending to be fair, are the driving forces behind the entrenchment of these groups.[46]

Individual or community engagement in jihadism also results from a perceived need for security. Indeed, the jihadist groups often take advantage of unbalanced community relations, where some actors are looking for a security umbrella to deal with armed men, whether they be self-defense groups, armed rebel groups or communities armed by the states. One of the most common patterns in the Sahel[47] is joining jihadist groups for the sake of protection. It is clearly essential to understand the Fulani of Gourma's, and especially of Tillaberi's, reasons for joining the jihadist groups developing in this area since 2012: MUJAO, Al Mourabitoun and now Islamic State. It is a question for them of protecting themselves against the Imghad and Daoussahak Tuaregs, that have trained or joined armed groups, namely GATIA, and the MNLA respectively and then the MSA.[48] Consequently, one of the main dynamics for joining for protection is the engagement of self-defense groups, more or less supported by the Sahelian national authorities in the fight against terrorism. In the name of this, entire communities are targeted due to stigmatization, starting with the Fulani community. In Burkina-Faso, faced with the development of the Koglweogo, that are mainly Mossis, the Fulani communities also sought to arm themselves, initially by joining the Koglweogo in their turn, before organizing around the Rouggas.[49] But, since the start of 2019 and the increase in operations by the Koglweogo targeting the Fulani community, these groups have not been enough and joining jihadist groups has been necessary as a last resort solution. This alignment is often limited to passive complicity or to circumstantial alliances. When it is not protection, many turn to these groups for the sake of revenge: revenge against these self-defense groups or against the states after their defense and security forces have used disproportionate violence. The increase in accusations of arbitrary arrests and of summary, including sometimes mass, executions, brought against the Malian and Burkinabe forces since the beginning of the year by Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Amnesty International, but also by local organizations such as Kisal, the Collective Against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities (CISC) or the

---

46. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province", *op. cit.*; A. Thiam, "Centre du Mali : enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée", Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2017, available at: www.hdcentre.org.
47. M. Pellerin, "Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel", *op. cit.*
48. Respectively, the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad.
49. The Rouggas are people chosen by the pastoralists to manage the safety of herds.

Burkinabe Movement of Human and People's Rights (MBDHP), reflects the new significance of this violence committed against civilians. These abuses are currently the main driver of radicalization or alignment with jihadist groups for the sake of protection in central Mali or the Burkinabe Sahel.[50] In Soum in particular, many jihadist fighters became so, after their village was attacked or close relatives were executed.[51] Far from being a solution, the abuses worsen the problem of terrorism by fueling properly local logics of insurgency, where the religious dimension of jihadist engagement is scarcely present or not at all.

A third dynamic of engagement in jihadist groups is that of actors acting as mercenaries for the benefit of jihadist groups. They may be bandits, traffickers, poachers, or private individuals seeking gainful employment. Depending on the context, these actors, whose material interests would have been undermined by the authorities, share an opposition to them with the jihadist groups. As a result of the support they enjoy with these groups, they then seek to recover their thwarted interests. In eastern Burkina Faso, some poachers have taken advantage of the development of jihadist groups to increase their attacks against rangers and their facilities in some protected areas.[52] Some people even assert that the poachers may have joined the jihadist groups. Their mobilization should not be read as simply guided by economic opportunism. It has a social dimension. These poachers were previously hunters, who switched to illegal hunting, because of the granting of hunting reserves for the benefit of a tourist industry, which has scarcely benefited the local communities.[53] The most common trajectory throughout the Sahel is that of armed bandits who ally with or join jihadist groups. Given that the presence of more or less organized road-jackers is becoming widespread throughout the Sahel, these bandits are a large pool for recruitment. The latter are recruits of choice for the jihadist groups: already trained in handling weapons, feared locally and generally perfectly familiar with the geography of their territory, they are quickly mobilizable actors in armed operations. An observation of the organization chart of jihadist groups in the Sahel quickly shows that many leaders have had a background in banditry. One of the best known currently in the Soum area is Oumarou Boly, known as Oumy, a military leader of Ansarul Islam who, up to 2015, had the reputation of being a bandit involved in road-jacks and particularly in vehicle thefts

---

50. This observation by the author is broadly corroborated by the Human Rights Watch reports. Human Rights Watch, "Burkina Faso : meurtres et abus commis dans le conflit du Sahel", May 2018, available at: www.hrw.org, and Human Rights Watch, "Avant nous étions frères", December 2018, available at: www.hrw.org.
51. Observations made by the author in different regions in Burkina Faso.
52. Interviews conducted with several figures established in the east, Ouagadougou, July 2019.
53. *Ibid*.

between Mali and Burkina Faso. In eastern Burkina, many former bandits – probably more than before – have joined the jihadist groups.[54] This specific feature is due to the fact that the eastern region has for a long time been the main center of banditry in the country, until the Koglweogo largely stopped their criminal activities in 2015 and 2016. So, made unemployed, many of them sought the support of jihadist groups to wreak revenge on their former persecutors.

The reasons for engagement in jihadist groups therefore initially broadly appear to be far removed from the religious dimension. This does not mean that is does not count. Firstly, the primary actors in a jihadist cell who enter into a new area are often ideologues, who start by preaching discreetly in the targeted area, where they hail from. The way that Ansarul was founded in the Soum region falls under this strategy. It is the same in eastern Burkina Faso, where the first identified jihadists were genuine jihadists who had fought in Mali in the ranks of Ansar Dine or AQIM, particularly in katiba Macina, and who had been sent east to export the movement.[55] It is the same, as we will see, in the Niger-Nigeria border area between Konni and Sokoto. What could be described as the "hard core" of the jihadist movements, therefore provides this work of gradual establishment of the first cells, before these are later responsible for recruiting locally by exploiting the above-mentioned sociopolitical or economic contexts. However, it would be rash to assume that these actors are always driven by non-religious motivations. The radicalization process occurs subsequently, once the individual is committed to a path, which is difficult to extricate themselves from other than by arrest or execution, or because they have become convinced and the jihadist ideology appears to them as the best response to the situation that resulted in them taking up arms. From this point of view, one of the most common radicalization trajectories is that of bandits, who find a way of redemption and moral salvation in religion. Although they continue to be described as "bandits", because they were known as such for a long time, they have operated on a real radicalization trajectory and have left their criminal past behind for that of combat that they consider to be meaningful. In fact, for the jihadist groups, the redemption of these "bandits" is sometimes a condition of their integration. It is not unusual for jihadist groups, in some areas where they have become established, to constrain local bandits by pledging war if they did not repent and join them. The "jihadization" of banditry is the most worrying dynamic for the Sahel as there is a large recruitment pool.

---

54. Interviews conducted with several figures established in the east, Ouagadougou, July 2019.
55. *Ibid*.

Confrontations Between the Local and the Global

The jihadist groups are therefore far from being homogeneous in their make-up. Jihadists, insurgents, or plain mercenaries (bandits, traffickers, poachers, etc.) coexist and "fight" there at the same time. The resulting hybrid violence gives rise to configurations that are particularly complex to understand, where the nature of the relationships that bring these actors together have many gray areas. It is particularly difficult to know the autonomy of action enjoyed by local actors with regard to the groups they are linked to. It is generally agreed that local units enjoy great autonomy. Several individual trajectories even suggest that some of them act relatively independently of any directive from the groups they are linked to.

"Glocal" agendas are the source of strife that occurs regularly. One of the main sticking points is due to the coexistence between defense of a community identity and jihadism; two concepts that are difficult to reconcile. The promotion of specific community interests is against the unity of Muslims (*Ummah*), which is why some jihadist groups are very reluctant to claim a community agenda. This specific point is the source of regular tension between members of JNIM and ISGS. Unlike JNIM, ISGS seems to have sought to exploit pre-existing tensions to recruit specifically within certain communities. Whether in Menaka or in north-central Burkina Faso, ISGS leaves its fighters belonging to targeted communities, particularly the Fulani, free to carry out reprisals against civilians. This may also explain the success of ISGS in these areas, and particularly the influx of some JNIM members. This happened for the first time in the summer of 2017, when the Tolebe Fulani from the north Tillaberi region were targeted by MSA and GATIA. Some of Amadou Kouffa's Fulani fighters left central Mali with their weapons to support their relations in Menaka.[56] More recently, a group of Ansarul Islam fighters joined ISGS. Among the reasons that may have led to this, there is the possibility within ISGS of carrying out intercommunity reprisals.[57] Similarly, the kidnapping by Katiba Macina (JNIM) of the Fulani village chief of Boulikessi, Amirou Boulikessi,

---

56. Interview with a former militiaman in northern Tillaberi, Niamey, September 2017.
57. Interview with a civil society actor from Soum, Ouagadougou, July 2019.

triggered significant reprisals among the Fulani fighters. Some of his direct relatives, who were fighting in Ansarul Islam, left the group in response and joined ISGS.[58]

JNIM is readily cautious about using community identities. However, the organization cannot ignore the functioning of Malian society, whose northern part is governed by tribal relations. From the beginning of the 2000s, increased marriages among the different tribes were intended precisely to win the favor of their dignitaries. Some tribes, like the Wasra in Timbuktu, were largely infiltrated in this way.[59] In 2015, in a highly publicized video, Abu Talha al-Libi openly addressed members of the Awlad Ich tribe asking them to join the group. JNIM regularly refers to tribes, when the latter are accused of joining the "crusaders", particularly by integrating in the Operational Coordination Mechanism (OCM).[60] A message from Yahya Abu Hammam in October 2018 threatened tribes that joined the OMC with reprisals, referring to the attack against the OCM in Gao in January 2017, and a month after the assassination of the head of the OMC in Timbuktu, an Arab from the Berabiche tribe, a tribe that was historically among the first to approach AQIM. The Berabiche Arabs were explicitly threatened by the leader of JNIM who was recently killed. More specifically, this assassination had an impact on relations between Katiba Al-Furqan, that operates in this area, and Salim Begui's faction, the Awlad driss, who historically have been infiltrated the most by AQIM. In Janury 2019, JNIM's spokesman, Abu Duhana al-Qasimi, openly warned about the danger of tribalism, which he accuses the "crusaders" of being behind. A tribalism that would threaten to plunge society into wars between Arab tribes that characterized the pre-Islamic era of *jahiliya* (ignorance).[61] We will see in the following section, that Katiba Macina, reluctant to play on the Fulani identity, finally decided to do this at the end of 2018.

---

58. *Ibid.*
59. M. Pellerin, "Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel", *op. cit.*
60. Arrangement provided for in the Algier Agreement, "The OCM is leading the gradual redeployment of the Malian Defense and Security Forces (MDSF) throughout the northern regions. These redeployed forces must include a significant number of people from the northern regions, including in positions of command, so as to consolidate the return of trust and facilitate the gradual securing of these regions. The OCM is responsible for planning and conducting joint patrols, including proportionately units of the MDSF, the CMA and the Platform". MINUSMA website, accessed in November 2019.
61. T. Joscelyn and C. Weiss, "JNIM Spokesman Warns Tribes in Mali", *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 3, 2019, available at: www.longwarjournal.org.

Relations between foreigners and Ansar (locals) are regularly marked by rivalry and sometimes tinged with mistrust. The Sahelian theater is considered by AQIM as a new theater and still poorly prepared for the full implementation of sharia law, as, Droukdel's letter, found in Timbuktu in 2013 suggested, the temptation is great for AQIM to want to place foreigners at the head of the organization's Katibas. Historically, one of the reasons that led to the foundation of MUJAO was the desire of non-Algerians to become autonomous from AQIM, while it was mainly under the influence of Algerian leaders. Since then, this rivalry between the Ansars and Maghreb jihadists is ongoing and may even lead to internal divisions within katibas. Since the death of the leader, Yahya Abu Hammam, Katiba Al-Furqan has been stricken by a division between two successors, one Algerian, Abu Usama Al-Jazairi, the other Mauritanian, Abu Talha Ould El Hassin El Barbouchi (better known under the name of Talha al Azawadi). Although, AQIM's shura seems to have chosen Al-Jazairi, the Ansar in the katiba would be opposed to it.

The Kidal region is particularly marked by these community influences, positive as well as negative for jihadist dynamics. The unity that prevails within Ifogha society, the traditional driving force behind the strength of this numerically small tribe, has been an advantage for AQIM's infiltration in the region, although the organization has relied on an endogenous component, namely Ansar Dine. The Ifogha membership and Iyad Ag Ghaly's leadership play an essential role in the movement's unity. One of the hypotheses raised here and which would merit further study is that fighters' commitment within Ansar Dine, and nowadays JNIM, represents for many Ifoghas, who have followed Iyad Ag Ghaly since the 1990s, a continuity in insurgent engagement, without always being accompanied by objective religious radicalization. However, this tribal unity is undermined by the confrontation between a local, and therefore largely insurgent and tribal, agenda and the reality of jihad that follows global rules. Many arrests and executions perpetrated against alleged informers of the Malian, French or Algerian authorities have always been a source of tension locally. In the aftermath of Barkhane's operation in Tinzaouaten in February 2018, JNIM carried out a witch hunt against possible spies that resulted in many arrests, including some innocent people, like the head of the faction, Taghat Malet, in September 2018. Relations between the CMA and JNIM have deteriorated significantly and have caused many actors in Kidal to fear that it may pave the way for confrontations. Others maintain that Iyag Ag Ghaly is a bastion against these tensions and that his possible disappearance would pave the way for a tribal settling of

scores, particularly targeting non-Ifogha communities represented in JNIM, who are suspected of using jihadism to marginalize the Ifoghas. One of the main JNIM leaders, Kel Adagh, which has been responsible for many of the executions in recent years, embodies these tensions and suspicions. These tensions also hide the complicated relations between Ansar Dine and AQIM, with the former refusing to leave jihad to the North Africans in their area.

The fight against terrorism, as national governments and their international partners think of it nowadays, seems largely unsuited to this "glocal" threat. The prevalence of some outbreaks of insurgency requires less a purely military response than political solutions that are woefully lacking nowadays. Not only does the diagnosis, which is generally made of the Sahelian situation, relegate this political dimension to the background, but the states do not seem equipped to provide a response of this nature, with the exception of perhaps Niger with the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP). Given the ineffectiveness of the fight against terrorism conducted by their respective armies – with the exception of Mauritania – the Sahelian states and France have striven to use sub-contractors to carry out this operation. Yet, these new responses have seriously played a part in highlighting the social – often community – divisions that however form the basis of some actors' engagement in jihadist violence. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, this has exacerbated radicalization factors and undeniably fueled recruitment for jihadist groups.

In fact, non-statal, armed groups, that some Sahelians appeal to, are far from being neutral at community level. In central Mali, the Dogon Dozos – [62] but also to a lesser extent the Bambara and Bozo – seem to have *at least* benefited from the Malian government's support in what they considered as a mission to secure their lands. Since the death of the Dozo leader, Théodore Somboro, in October 2016, the Dogon Dozos have engaged in a war against the jihadists, with the latter being confused with the Fulani community which feels de facto stigmatized. In an audio recording on the evening before his death, Somboro himself called for the Fulani community to be targeted.[63] In such a context, soliciting the assistance of the Dozos for anti-terrorist purposes, naturally runs the risk that they will indulge in an

---

62. The Dozos are hunters, traditionally responsible for protecting and caring for the people in their villages. They are mainly present in southern and central Mali, in western Burkina Faso, northern Côte d'Ivoire or in Guinea.
63. Audio file accessed by the author in April 2017.

intercommunity settling of scores, and hence encourage the Fulani to seek protection from those who have the capacity, namely the jihadist groups.

The same set-up appeared from spring 2017 in the Menaka (Mali) and Tillaberi (Niger) regions, when the Nigerien government, Barkhane and the so-called legal armed groups, namely MSA and GATIA, agreed to make the Menaka region secure. Initially, led by the governor of Menaka, who wanted to involve the Malian armed forces (FAMAs) and the Co-ordination of the Movements for Azawad (CMA) inclusively, alongside these two groups to secure the city of Menaka, this security mission was reclaimed – and diverted from its initial purpose – by Barkhane. It was turned into an operation to fight ISGS by also extending it into Nigerien territory with support from the Nigerien government. Not only have the operations carried out by the MSA and the GATIA not produced the desired effects in the counter-terrorist plan, but they have significantly damaged the social fabric in the region, particularly between the Daoussahaks and Imghad Tuaregs on the one hand and the Fulani on the other. They have given rise to numerous settling of scores between these communities. The Fulani community in Niger organized itself and conducted a public campaign to expose the alleged assassinations of more than 100 Fulani civilians during these counter-terrorist operations in 2017 and 2018.[64]

What France describes as "ad hoc co-ordination"[65] to minimize its engagement alongside these armed groups may have stopped since early 2019; a decision which may not be unconnected with the effects of these operations on social cohesion in the area and the possibility, from the French point of view, that its legal responsibility may be incurred. In Burkina Faso, the collaboration that was gradually established between the Koglweogo and the Burkinabe authorities since 2015, has also been at the expense of social cohesion, with the Fulani population suspected of supporting terrorism, becoming the primary target of the Koglweogo. This continuing deterioration in relations between them led to the intercommunity massacres that occurred in Yirgou and Arbinda in January and March 2019. It has heavily fueled recruitment for jihadist groups in the Centre-Nord and Soum regions more than elsewhere in the Sahel.

---

64. R. Carayol, "À la frontière entre le Niger et le Mali, l'alliance coupable de l'armée française", *Médiapart*, November 29, 2018, available at: www.mediapart.fr.
65. *Ibid*.

The Mirage of Fulani Jihad and the Risk of a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Amadou Kouffa's engagement in Ansar Dine's Katiba Macina from 2015 has had the effect of focusing the authorities' and observers' attention on the Fulani community, as being the spearhead of jihadism in the Sahel. Well before the spotlight was on Amadou Kouffa, individuals from the Tolebe Fulani communities in the Tillaberi region and the Djelgobe Fulani communities in the Gourma region had joined MUJAO for protection purposes in 2012, as we already mentioned. In the wake of Amadou Kouffa, his student Ibrahim Malam Dicko founded Ansarul Islam in 2016, while ISGS draws on a large pool of fighters from the Fulani community both at the Tillaberi-Menaka border and in the Burkinabe Sahel region.

The involvement of the Fulani community in jihad may certainly have an identity-related dimension. It is part of an ancient history – often considered as the community's golden age – which was that of jihad led by the Toucouleur and Fulani leaders, the most illustrious being Sekou Amadou in Macina and Usman dan Fodio in Sokoto. The press release that gave rise to MUJAO was also not mistaken in mentioning the legacy left by Usman dan Fodio, which was reflected in a desire in 2011 to subscribe to jihadism in the Sahel, and particularly within the Fulani community. Others maintain that references to dan Fodio are flourishing within Fulani communities, which however have not been proven. However, out of the 19th-century jihadist leaders, dan Fodio is the one who left the greatest number of written works, which those who miss this golden age can draw inspiration from today. Support for this ancient history however, scarcely proceeds from religious conversion, even though the education of generations of young Fulani talibe (students), (like those from other communities) by jihadist groups since 2012, should produce a wave of individuals committed in the name of the faith. It is true that in many areas, the Fulani are nowadays highly represented within jihadist groups.

At this stage, the Fulani's engagement in jihadism is based on common and cross-border social realities. These realities are firstly that of the transhumant, pastoral communities who are illiterate because they have little or no education, often deprived of access to basic social services,

generally poorly connected to the political and administrative elites and hence they have very little links within the local or national administrations. This social marginalization exposes them to all forms of injustices and without exception in all the pastoral areas from Mopti up to Lake Chad (*at least*). The most common are related to their livelihood, herding. One of the main driving forces of this injustice is the racketeering perpetrated against them by the Defense and Security Forces, on the grounds that they do not have identity papers or they cut branches. Just as routinely, pastoral communities suffer from a state of land tension that is increasingly recurring among them, but particularly with farmers. The authorities are often unconcerned about the need to not heighten tensions through ill-conceived public policies or development projects, often help to aggravate tense situations. Due to the low political and administrative support that the pastoralists have, the disputes that occur rarely have a legal outcome in their favor. This feeds a deep resentment that has continued to take hold over the years. As one researcher summed it up, the Fulani are initially supporting a "cattle jihad".[66]

This "cattle jihad" has gradually given way to a second wave of alignment mainly based on a feeling of revenge against harassment, arrests and targeted assassinations perpetrated against members of the Fulani community, particularly in Mali and especially in Burkina Faso. These abuses are perpetrated by both the Defense and Security Forces and the self-defense groups which they often rely on. They can stem from difficulty in identifying who is actually involved in jihadist groups, from the stress of military units sometimes deployed for over a year in terrain that they do not know, or from the result of false accusations that are considered as objective information. They can finally be borne as physical and targeted assassinations of individuals suspected of being jihadists. Regardless of the reasons for committing the abuses, they are only exacerbating the problem and convincing the Fulani people to fall in with the jihadists out of revenge or fear of being executed.

It is not unusual to record the feeling of Fulani individuals, in Mali as in Burkina Faso, who say they are more afraid of the Defense and Security Forces than the jihadists. One of them expresses this feeling in these terms: "The jihadists warn you once before coming back to assassinate you if haven't listened to them, the FDS don't give you a chance."[67]

---

66. G. Zanoletti, "Mali : le 'jihad de la vache'", *Libération*, June 12, 2019, available at: www.liberation.fr.
67. Statement by a refugee from the Centre-Nord region taken in Ouagadougou in May 2019.

This pervasive mistrust of the Fulani, which is reflected in these increasingly widespread and massive abuses, is however anything but justified. It forgets several essential truths. The first is that the Fulani are the initial victims of violence committed by jihadist groups in areas where this community is in the majority. Far from carrying out any tribal insurgency, these groups are firstly fighting the traditional elites, starting with those that are Fulani; they are the traditional authorities, imams, or local politicians, accused of corruption or maintaining an unequal system. This discourse is traditionally driven by reformist Muslim movements, and in particular has been at the center of Amadou Kouffa's sermons since the start of the 2000s,[68] as well as those of his student, Ibrahim Malam Dicko. These two preachers have respectively suffered from a social status that did not allow them to access the religious roles they hoped for because of blocking by the traditional religious authorities, both in Mopti and in the Soum region. This has gradually fueled their speeches calling for this system to be challenged. Therefore, the principal officials of the Fulani community are primarily targeted by the jihadist groups, including their Fulani leaders. Subsequently, the jihadist groups extended their fight against all those suspected of not supporting them, particularly those suspected of informing the government or international forces. In mainly Fulani territories, Fulani citizens are those who have suffered the most heavily from this state of affairs.

As the situation has developed unfavorably in central Mali, in the Tillaberi region, in the Sahel or eastern Burkina Faso, communities have given up the risk of collaborating with the government or its defense and security forces, as they are *ultimately* unable to protect their informants. The executions have continued to increase since 2013, forcing the majority of communities, and increasingly local politicians, to play the neutrality game. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, communities living under occupation by the jihadist groups invariably use the same expression to complain about their situation: they say they are "between the devil and the deep blue sea."[69] Adopting a position of neutrality is difficult for them, pressed on both sides to collaborate, and consequently, suspected by both sides of collaborating. This neutrality can only be relative, and each community adapts to the reality that prevails locally. This is the basis of some governments' conviction – particularly in Burkina Faso – that entire communities are won over by the jihadists. This makes it legitimate, in their eyes, to stop them, or even fight them even when they are disarmed.

---

68. A. Thiam, "Centre du Mali : enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée", *op. cit.*
69. Interviews with representatives from different regions, Ouagadougou, Bamako, Niamey, Tillaberi, 2016-2019.

The risk (which is also already largely realized) of such a policy is to help to legitimize the jihadist cause and to participate in building jihad centered around a dominant community, the Fulani. The prophecy, initially illusory, becomes reality. Since 2018, in central Mali and since early 2019 in different regions of northern Burkino Faso (Nord, Centre-Nord and Sahel in particular), the fight against terrorism has taken on the appearance of a settling of scores between communities to the point that actors from each party are no longer able to distinguish the meaning of their engagement. From the jihadist point of view, JNIM's deep reluctance to support community discourse has given way to reality. Amadou Kouffa, in an audio recording dating back to September 2018, for the first time calls for the Fulani in several West African countries to join the jihad to resist the opposition they are victims of, according to him. Previously, in an audio recording dated from 2017, he authorized the Fulani to defend their community, but without ever leaving the pathway of jihad. Nowadays, many are involved in Katiba Macina for the sole purpose of defending the community.

The situation is even more worrying in the Burkinabe Centre-Nord region, racked by local, community-based violence since early 2019, between the Fulani on the one hand and the Mossis and Foulsés on the other. This region, hardly affected by jihadism until now, has fallen under the influence of these groups as a result of the recruitment of many Fulani, motivated by a desire for family or community revenge, or by the need to protect themselves from other communities, after several large-scale massacres perpetrated against the Fulani, particularly at Yirgou in January 2019 and Arbinda in March in the same year. Most of them have joined ISGS, which gives its fighters more latitude to carry out community reprisals against civilians. Most of the attacks perpetrated against Mossi and Foulsé civilians have occurred in ISGS territory. This risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy is summed up by the words of the Malian Fulani leader, Ali Nouhoum Diallo, who has however clashed head-on with Amadou Kouffa: "If I was 16- or 17-years old today, I would take up arms".[70] However, as significant as the proportion of Fulanis within the jihadist groups is, the Fulani community is far from forming a uniform whole, and jihadist fighters represent no more or less than a tiny minority of a community of nearly 6 million inhabitants in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

This "communitized" jihad also has nothing natural about it. By definition, recruiting within a specific community in order to enable it to attack others, is counter-productive for the jihadist groups because it is

---

70. Interview with Ali Nouhoum Diallo, *Journal du Mali*, May 31, 2018.

helping to divide the *Ummah* and, as we have already stated, threatens to drag society back to the time of the *jahiliya*. Therefore, it is likely that what is currently community-based will become religious tomorrow. In other words, social and community-based radicalization, that is reflected by a desire for insurgency against a societal order unfavorable to a specific community, threatens to mutate into religious radicalization, based on the objective conviction that jihad is an insurmountable horizon for this community to take justice into its own hands. The implication of such a development for the Sahel states is significant. While the movement remains insurgent and there are socio-political grievances, there is an area of negotiation for states managing to divert individuals away from violence. As soon as the radicalization is based on religious ideology, the margin for negotiation alternatively proves to be narrower and less easy for the Sahel states to undertake. To avoid this shift, the affected Sahel states must show that the Fulani are full citizens and that their over-exposure to the jihadist threat however does not make them possible suspects. Niger has shown the way in the Tillaberi region, by promoting the recruitment of young Fulani in the army, by increasing forums for dialog between the Defense and Security Forces and local communities, or by conducting public hearings to grant identity papers to pastoral populations that often do not have them. These signs of trust naturally help to keep the Fulani away from any jihadist recovery, perhaps more than the military operations that are now being conducted in Burkina Faso, as in Mali, with the assumption that certain communities are more suspect than others.

While the emphasis is placed on the Fulani community, the jihadist groups are recruiting elsewhere, infiltrating all communities without exception. Katiba Khalid Ben Walid, and what remains of it today, historically recruits more from the Malinké and Mossi community. Ansarul Islam also has Mossi and Fulsé fighters within its ranks. In central Mali, an apparently increasing number of Dogons and Bambara are being recruited for Katiba Macina. Finally, along the Mali-Niger border, the existence of Daoussahak Tuareg or Djerma ISGS cadres is no secret to anyone. To focus on the Fulani community, is to see it as a community or religious predisposition, whereas the problem is found elsewhere.

The gradual expansion of the jihadist groups' area of influence is raising questions about these groups' ability to continue their conquest of new territories. Reliable numbers are already raising concern about a spread in areas scarcely or unaffected so far. The downward trend of JNIM in the southern part of the Sahel is a major concern for the West African states who only understood the terrorist threat from the point of view of attacks in the capitals originating from cells based in the Sahara. Now, the

spread is such that these states fear the permanent establishment of cells with the risk of destabilizing some of their regions. From this point of view, northern Côte d'Ivoire has been the subject of particular concern, since 2015, when Katiba Khalid Ben Walid briefly established training camps along the border with Burkina Faso. Nowadays, Katiba Macina may be behind attempts to establish itself in the northern part of Côte d'Ivoire. Some fear that possible political tensions caused by the next Ivorian presidential election in 2020 may be a breeding ground for their development. Simultaneously, the country's border area, shared between the Sikasso region in Mali, the Cascades region and south-western Burkina Faso continues to be subject to jihadist attacks, admittedly still sporadic, but which reflect a progressive surge of these groups southwards.

The situation is particularly worrying in the cross-border area which abuts the eastern region of Burkina Faso. The far north of Benin is already affected by the infiltration of jihadist groups – some ISGS leaders are even frequently located there – who find in this area both a withdrawal area in the face of pressure exerted by the Burkinabe military forces, a transit zone to Nigeria and Niger, and a full-blown development area. The worry is just as palpable in northern Ghana, considered since 2018 as a logistics supply and withdrawal zone for jihadist groups operating in eastern and eastern central Burkina Faso. The first attacks that occurred in central-southern Burkina Faso since June 2019, also raise concerns about a risk of spread on Ghana's western border. In northern Togo, the same concerns exist, especially as one of the few jihadist cadres arrested in eastern Burkina Faso, had been arrested by the Togolese authorities at the beginning of the year.

These three countries bordering eastern Burkina Faso, share some sociological realities, starting with the coexistence between sedentary farmers and, mainly Fulani, pastoral populations, who experience significant difficulties integrating. The injustices they are victims of, are a breeding ground which we have seen the impact of in other Sahelian areas. The stigmatization, that the Fulani community is currently experiencing generally, may expand to these areas according to some Fulani pastoralists interviewed, and may not be unconnected to the waves of recent arrests that the Fulani community has had to deal with in recent months in these territories. The situation is therefore favorable for these actors to be recruited by jihadist groups, that see a strategic depth in these new territories, primarily intended to further complicate the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. Therefore, there is concern that these territories may experience the development of operational cells in the medium term.

One of the major concerns of observers of the Sahelian jihadist scene is the possibility of a link-up between the two branches of Islamic State. From an organizational point of view, the two branches come from the same geographical province of the Islamic State, the province of West Africa, but are different entities, one having the same name – Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) – and the second one being called Islamic State in Great Sahara. The nature of their relationship is the subject of much speculation in terms of co-ordination and mutual support which it is difficult to decide on with certainty. Nevertheless, it is obvious that each of these branches is seeking to extend its influence, in order to be less trapped in a territory and so less vulnerable to counter-terrorist operations. From ISWAP's point of view, there are some indications that the group is seeking to expand northwards: for the first time, the organization conducted an attack in Nguigmi, at the far north of Lake Chad, while the group chose to highlight a Manga native in its video renewing its allegiance to Islamic State. The issue of ISWAP expanding westwards into Kaduna, Zamfara and Sokoto states is also on everyone's minds. ISWAP may still have some sleeper cells in these countries, particularly in Kano, where different hostage release negotiations have taken place in recent years. Others maintain that the connections – *at a minimum* logistical – with armed groups in Zamfara are already effective. However, from ISGS's point of view, the temptation to extend eastwards from the Tillaberi region is more obvious. Since late 2018, ISGS members based in north Tillaberi have been traveling to the border area between Niger and Nigeria to try to establish cells there.[71] They succeeded in the Konni and Doutchi areas, recruiting local Nigerien and Nigerian leaders, benefiting here from the family relationships of the Tolebe Fulani, who are established in north Tillaberi, and are originally from Sokoto in Nigeria. They have also recruited among local road-jackers and returned stolen cattle to some owners affected by the same road-jackers. They carried out an attack on gendarmerie officers in early 2019, although some sources question the responsibility of jihadist groups. However, there is little doubt about this. Their entrenchment at this stage remains limited, but is gradually continuing.

This border area is a gateway to the area from Maradi to Zamfara, which appears to be key in the event of a rapprochement between the two branches of Islamic State. This area, which extends into Kaduna and Sokoto states, has been plagued for some years by banditry, which has experienced a particularly significant increase in intensity since 2018. The

---

71. "Insécurité : découverte d'une cellule djihadiste près de Konni, à la frontière avec le Nigéria", ActuNiger, December 10, 2018, available at: www.actuniger.com.

states, particularly Zamfara and Kaduna, are dealing with heavily armed groups of bandits, sometimes equipped with rocket launchers, who are responsible for daily attacks. Their involvement in armed banditry has always been motivated by the need to protect their own livestock against potential thieves and out of the economic interest that they get from racketeering and kidnapping. It is feared that the driving force for their commitment is becoming increasingly socio-political, with regard to armed opposition, which they have to face from the self-defense groups supported by the federated states and which carry out many abuses.

The risk is that these armed groups will be recruited by or allied with jihadist groups, an even greater risk if we consider the demographics of these areas, and the tens of thousands of armed actors engaged in these activities. And, all the more so when these clashes between armed bandits and self-defense groups go hand in hand with historical community rivalries between Fulani and Hausas. The risk of intercommunity excesses is exacerbated by the unprecedented development of hate speech against the Fulani across the country. For the time being, and despite many unsubstantiated rumors, these groups of so-called Zamfara bandits seem to be attached to no group. Currently, in Sokoto state, cells linked to ISGS have entered into a deadly confrontation with the Zamfara bandits, which partly explains their difficulty in infiltrating this area. But, faced with the "jihadization of banditry" which is spreading throughout the Sahel, it is feared that these actors, who share common objectives, will end up coming closer together, until they create an effective bridge between ISWAP and ISGS.

Conclusion

The development of new jihadist centers far from the historical bases of the original groups that were the GSPC and then AQIM, leads to very hybrid forms of violence where self-defense, insurgency and jihadism interact, confront, and fuel each other. This gives rise to the formation of insurgency dynamics where the religious dimension – in any event initially – is quite minor. The jihadist groups are just igniting the sparks that are the result of situations of injustice, marginalization and localized violence, that have taken hold to create conditions for the establishment of centers of insurgency, which take on the trappings of religion without its substance.

There is a danger for the states involved, which often do not understand either the speed with which this violence is becoming widespread, or the scale with which it breaks out. The reason for this misunderstanding is precisely that they hide their societal and insurgent dimension, to see only the manifestation of "armed bandits", of "traffickers" or just onlookers attracted by the money offered by the jihadist groups. These cases obviously exist, but they form only the visible and mainly reassuring side that the authorities wish to retain.

However, hiding this insurgent dimension leads the authorities, as well as their international partners to develop responses that are scarcely or not adapted to the reality that they must fight, or may even be counterproductive. Focusing attention on a development need, presented as the key to satisfying communities' interests, amounts to ignoring that no development project is capable of correcting social injustices, if it is not preceded by reforms in governance to ensure that these projects target the most vulnerable communities, or even do not contribute to emphasizing existing inequalities between different population groups. Similarly, no development project is likely to fight against errors in governance that has the effect of fueling communities' resentment.

This approach, that was too focused on a poorly controlled military response, has had the effect of increasing the Fulani community's stigmatization, which molds the minds of a large part of the Sahelian leaders and some of their international partners. This form of culturalism is particularly harmful when it is unconsciously or consciously imposed as a way of thinking. This necessarily has a very negative impact on the relationship that the authorities, as well as the population, have with the

Fulani community. The greatest impact is the increase in abuses that exacerbate the problem that the authorities intend to deal with, fueling strictly local insurgency logics and helping to legitimize jihad for individuals who until now would never have thought of participating in it. Everyone who works in the Sahel knows individuals directly or indirectly – particularly Fulani – who fit this pattern.