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THE TRANSMUTATION OF JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SAHEL AND THE REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Djallil Lounnas



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Djallil Lounnas¹

In March 2017, the four most powerful jihadi organizations in the Sahel, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din, Al-Mourabitoun and Katibat Macina – the latter three linked directly or indirectly to Al-Qaeda – announced their unification and the creation of the Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) also known as Group in Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali. This unification ended the factionalism that had long characterized jihadi organizations in the region and gave birth to what can be considered as one of the most powerful Al-Qaeda affiliates. The creation of the GSIM is especially dangerous in view of the fact that the Sahelian sub-regional system is composed of weak states unable to quell the jihadi threat and geographically linked to Libya, a collapsed state and considered a safe haven for jihadi organizations, in spite of the presence of the international community, especially the French military operation Barkhane. Even more dangerous is the presence of an affiliate of the Islamic State, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) led by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, an organization which, although on the surface appearing to be the main rival of the GSIM, has been following a strategy of rapprochement with Iyad Ag Ghali. France and its regional allies in the Sahel, namely Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, have responded to this mounting threat by creating the so-called G5 Sahel whose main purpose is to foster cooperation among its members in order to counter the rise of jihadi organizations. However, after one year of existence, G5 Sahel has proved largely ineffective, while at the same time the jihadi organizations have multiplied their attacks all over the region, thus strengthening their presence.

MAPPING THE JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SAHEL

The GSIM, the most powerful jihadi group in the Sahel today, was created in March 2017 and is the result of the merger of the Sahelian branch of AQIM led by its local leader, Yahya Abu al-Hammam; Ansar al-Din, a local Salafi jihadi organization led by Iyad Ag Ghali; Al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar; and Katibat Macina, led by Amadou Koufa. All these groups share a Salafi jihadi ideology, are affiliated directly to Al-Qaeda (AQIM and Mourabitoun) or recognize the moral authority of Al-Qaeda (Ansar al-Din and Katibat Macina) and all four leaders have known each other personally for a long time and have fought side by side in spite of their divisions.

Significantly, this merger occurred in the context of the redeployment of jihadi activities in the Sahel. Indeed, as a consequence of the French-led operations Serval and Barkhane, several hundreds of jihadists were killed or captured and their camps destroyed. However, as Serge Daniel notes, "the French operations did not solve the problems that created the 2012 crisis, they simply stopped the advance of the jihadists to the south, i.e. the January 2013 jihadi offensive on Bamako by AQIM and Ansar al-Din, which led the majority of them to withdraw to southern Libya".² And

¹ Djallil Lounnas is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco.

² Author's interview with Serge Daniel, journalist and specialist in jihadi organizations, Bamako, March 2017.

indeed, since 2013, new leaders have been appointed to replace those killed in 2013–14 during the Serval and Barkhane operations. Moreover, the jihadi organizations have received support from fellow jihadists from Libya, Tunisia and even Egypt, some of them specialized in explosives and rockets.³ As a result, following a brief period of decrease in jihadi activities in 2013 and early 2014, AQIM and Ansar al-Din resumed their attacks across the Sahel and further south (Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso). Speaking about Ansar al-Din in this context, Yahya Abu al-Hammam explained that “it’s a local Muslim organization which chose the path of the jihad in the name of God [...] in spite of some minor differences we converge on many issues [...] it is known that the Azawad people have suffered from injustice, oppression and marginalization”⁴ and so the implication is that it is expected that AQIM supports Ansar al-Din, a Tuareg jihadi organization.

Besides AQIM and Ansar al-Din, the third most powerful Salafi jihadi organization in the Sahel is Al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former key leader of AQIM who pledged his allegiance to Al-Qaeda since its creation in 2013. Since its inception Al-Mourabitoun has been responsible for numerous attacks in the Sahel and thus has been the target of many French and American operations, during which many of its leaders were killed.

Moreover, Al-Mourabitoun faced a major crisis thanks to the departure of Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the organization’s second in command, due to a major rift with Belmokhtar over the position to be adopted towards the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). After the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014 and the demand of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to all jihadi organizations around the world to pledge allegiance to him, Belmokhtar had decided to remain loyal to Al-Qaeda, whereas in May 2015 Sahrawi decided to split and pledge his allegiance to ISIS. He and his followers then created the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which was affiliated with ISIS. This was a major blow to Belmokhtar and Al-Mourabitoun was forced to start a process of rapprochement with its former mother organization, AQIM. According to Abu al-Hammam, and to a communiqué issued in November 2015, the attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako in November 2015 was carried out by jointly by AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun, following a decision to coordinate their operations. This was to become the first step towards the merger.

Finally, it should be noted that, with regard to Amadou Koufa and his Macina brigade, Koufa and Iyad Ag Ghali had enjoyed good personal relations. Moreover, Koufa was one of the major leaders of Ansar al-Din between 2011 and 2013, before he decided to create the Macina Liberation Front, a mostly Fulani jihadi organization. A member of a non-governmental organization (NGO) working in the Mopti region observed that “when one hears him preaching, Koufa appears to be a leader who knows how to convince and attract people, he makes them adhere to his ideas, especially the Fulani populations, some of whom claim to be respected now that he exists. In this very religious area he condemns marginalization, poverty, insecurity. These are major factors that make people support him.”⁵ Close to Ag Ghali, supported by the local population, a Salafi jihadist in ideological orientation – nothing separated Koufa from Ag Ghali, Abu al-Hammam and Belmokhtar and

3 See Serge Daniel, *Les mafias du Mali. Trafics et terrorisme au Sahel*, Paris, Éditions Descartes, 2014.

4 Interview with Yahya Abu al-Hammam, AQMI leader, conducted by the Mauritanian news agency Al-Akhbar (in Arabic), 10 January 2016, <http://arc.alakhbar.info/index.php/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html>.

5 Author’s interview with an NGO member working in the region of Mopti, Bamako, March 2017.

therefore, he (Koufa) could only welcome a merger with the other jihadi organizations.

It was against this background that the four organizations announced their merger and the creation of the GSIM under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali. In their official declaration, Ag Ghali confirmed their allegiance to Abdelmalek Droudkal, supreme emir of AQIM, and to Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus reaffirming the direct link with Al-Qaeda. More surprisingly, the GSIM pledged its allegiance to Hibatullah Akhundzada, leader of the Afghan Taliban and self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin (commander of the faithful) and recognized as such by Al-Qaeda. This was a direct message to ISIS in the sense that it confirmed that the GSIM rejected the Caliphate of Al-Baghdadi. Finally, and most significantly, the GSIM was an answer to the creation of the G5 Sahel under French leadership whose kick-off meeting was announced for later that month in Bamako. Indeed, in an interview for *Al-Massar*, the Al-Qaeda in Yemen's weekly, Iyad Ag Ghali explained that the enemies of his organization were the enemies of Islam who included, for him, France and the G5 Sahel states.⁶ A western observer considered that "in any case there was no competition among these groups in the sense that their ideological convergence was obvious. Their quasi-union already existed implicitly. The real issue was who was to be their supreme leader. The choice of Iyad Ag Ghali was the most appropriate one, he is a major local figure." The same observer added: "we may say in a way that Ag Ghali translated the fight of Al-Qaeda into Tamashek in the sense that Al-Qaeda struggle become a local one, not just a sort of international crusade without any link to the local realities of the populations".⁷ Since then, the GSIM has stepped up its attacks across the whole of Sahel.

Concentrated in eastern Mali towards Niger and in the south-east towards Burkina Faso, the ISGS has been involved a very few attacks, the most important one being the Tongo-Tongo ambush in Niger during which four American soldiers were killed. It should be noted that, while the creation of the ISGS was announced in May 2015, it took over a year and half (to October 2016) for ISIS to recognize this allegiance. Thus the ISGS was claiming to act under the banner of ISIS without the formal endorsement of this organization.⁸

Many reasons can be adduced to explain this. The first is that ISGS is itself a very weak organization, fighters numbering dozens not hundreds. However, it is nothing if compared to the Al-Qaeda affiliate, the GSIM. Furthermore, its popular support is extremely limited compared with that of the GSIM, and ISIS already had a powerful branch in Africa in the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), commonly known as Boko Haram, under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. In these respects the ISGS was of little importance for ISIS, which was looking rather at Boko Haram and Daesh in Libya as major affiliates in Africa.

6 Cited in Malek Bachir, "France Is Our First Enemy, Says 'Emir' of New Al-Qaeda Affiliate", in *Middle East Eye*, 7 April 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/node/62309>.

7 Author's interview with a western observer, Bamako, March 2017.

8 See Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State Recognizes Oath of Allegiance from Jihadists in Mali", in *The Long War Journal*, 31 October 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/islamic-state-recognizes-oath-of-allegiance-from-jihadists-in-west-africa.php>.

This notwithstanding, and while the relations between ISGS and the Al-Qaeda affiliated groups were difficult and marked by competition, they never reached the level of violence and fighting that took place in Syria between Al-Nusra and ISIS. Indeed, only one violent clash was reported, in June 2015, between AQIM and the ISGS. This took place in the region of Gao during which Sahrawi was severely injured and several of his men killed.⁹ However, apart from this confrontation, it seems that the Al-Qaeda affiliates and ISGS have constantly avoided confronting each other, thus making future reconciliation possible.

THE G5 SAHEL AS THE ANSWER?

The G5 Sahel is the latest initiative taken by France to help foster cooperation to combat terrorism in the Sahel. Created initially in December 2014, this organization embraces Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger and is heavily supported by France. A G5 official explained that “the countries of the G5 are similar from all points of view and are all confronted to a very grave security threat whether criminal (drug trafficking, weapons, illegal immigration) or coming from jihadi organizations”.¹⁰ According to him, this initiative aims at reinforcing those five countries in their military and infrastructure capabilities. He further explained that the road map of this new organization is based on negotiations between European Union states, particularly France, with the members of the G5 and focuses on fighting terrorism and illegal immigration. However, according to several observers the organization suffers from numerous problems including the fact it is tactically linked to the French military operation Barkhane in addition to the problem of financing. Indeed, the financial needs of the G5 Sahel are challenging, especially given the poverty and weakness of the G5 states. Indeed, as one observer explained, the international community is tired of financing an additional initiative after years of presence in the Sahel, especially as this initiative is one of the latest international actions that has been launched in the region and so far with few results and yet at a high cost. Another problem is the refusal of the major regional powers, especially Algeria, to join the organization or to intervene militarily in the region. Indeed, Algiers believes that this initiative will not solve the problems and has instead called for an inclusive dialogue with non-jihadi organizations of the region, to satisfy what Algiers considers legitimate demands from the local populations as well as the strengthening of state capacities (control of the borders, security services, economic development etc.) in the region.¹¹ In regard to any possible military intervention in the Sahel, Algiers has repeatedly made it very clear that, due to constitutional, historical and doctrinal reasons, the Algerian army will not conduct any operation outside of its borders. This notwithstanding, Algerian officials confirmed that Algeria is ready to collaborate within its capabilities to stabilize the region.

CONCLUSION

Since the end of 2017–early 2018, the defeat of ISIS in the Middle East has led to a redistribution of the cards in the Sahel. Indeed, many point out the risk of the return of the North African fighters

9 “Mali: L’émir d’al-Mourabitoune gravement blessé dans des affrontements”, in *El Watan*, 17 June 2015.

10 Author’s interview with an official from the G5 Sahel, Bamako, March 2017.

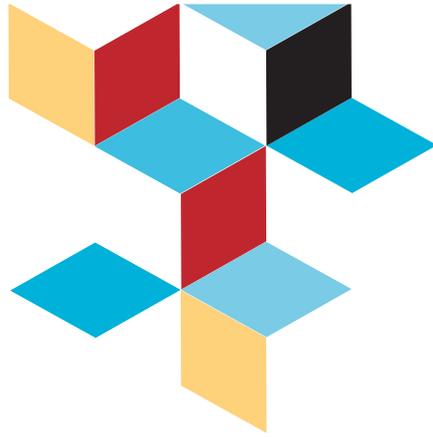
11 Author’s interview with Algerian former diplomats, Algiers, January 2018.

who went to the Middle East and see them joining either the GSIM or ISGS, by going to Libya, a persistent collapsed state. One western observer has already stated that, since late 2017, several operations conducted by Sahelian jihadi organizations were similar to those observed in the Middle East. The same observer excludes what he called “a massive migration to Libya from the North African fighters coming back from the Middle East, and then to Sahel, most of them are likely to go to their countries and surrender to their authorities or stay in Syria/Iraq to fight, however a small number may try to join Libya and train the jihadi organizations there”.¹² Indeed, there have been strong rumours since early 2018 of a rapprochement between the GSIM and the ISGS. As a proof of this rapprochement, a certain Amar, the ISGS spokesman, gave an interview to the Agence France-Presse in January 2018 in which he explained that “we will do everything we can to prevent the G5 Sahel from deploying itself in the Sahel. [...] Our brother lyad Ag Ghali and the other mujahideens defend like us Islam. [...] To defend Islam we give help to each other and will continue to do so”.¹³ Other rumours indicate that a meeting has already taken place between Sahrawi and lyad Ag Ghali.¹⁴ While the merger of the two organizations seems unlikely, due to their ideological divergences, at least in theory, a possible collaboration between the two remains very possible. Despite the efforts of the G5 to strengthen its hand, the results on the ground remain extremely poor and the states of the region are still unable to counter the jihadi threat.

12 Author’s interview with a western observer specialist of those questions, November 2017.

13 AFP, “Union des jihadistes contre la force du G5 Sahel, selon un groupe se réclamant de l’EI”, in *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 13 January 2018, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1094189>.

14 “Sahel: lyad Ag Ghali tente-t-il un rapprochement avec Abou Walid al-Sahraoui?”, in *Jeune Afrique*, 15 February 2018, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/529517>.



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