



THE CENTRAL SAHEL'S POWDER KEG: THE INEXORABLE ASCENDANCY OF JIHADIST GROUPS IN THE SHADOW OF A RENEWED INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

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It was on 13 January 2013, President Francois Hollande announced in a speech from the Elysée Palace the imminent deployment of French troops in Mali, inaugurating Operation Serval. The intervention came in response to a request from the Malian authorities to stem the advance of a heterogeneous coalition formed by independentist Tuareg groups and armed jihadist organizations. Besides fulfilling Bamako's demands, the paramount objective of Operation Serval was to thwart the creation of a safe haven for jihadist groups in northern Mali. However, the French counterterrorism operation ultimately failed to end the Salafi-jihadi insurgency. Ten years later, the war on terror in the central Sahel -



Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – has not yet reached a strategic breakthrough, as the relentless escalation of violence in the region since 2015 shows. From 2015 to mid-2019, the region also served as the odeon in which the so-called “Sahelian Exception” unfolded, namely the peculiar and peaceful coexistence between al-Qa’ida-affiliated groups and a proto-*wilayat* of the Islamic State. Since 2020, however, the scene is currently dominated by a fierce race between two major players vying for supremacy in the region. One front is spearheaded by Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslim (JNIM) – the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims – a coalition of organisations affiliated with al-Qa’ida. The opposite front is led by the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) a *wilayat* of the Islamic State. Against the backdrop of this conflict stands out a renewed international competition that sees Russia cunningly taking over the role of international interlocutor held by France. The French withdrawal from Mali has allowed Moscow to fill the power vacuum left by Paris mainly through the PMC Wagner Group, Kremlin’s *longa manus*. Moreover, the current waves of anti-French protests and Paris’s troops leaving the scene portend that the shadow of Russia looms over Burkina Faso.

In the last decade, the central Sahel has evolved into one of the most unstable regions of the African continent, assuming an unprecedented centrality in the Enlarged Mediterranean region due to the multiple and diverse transnational insecurity dynamics it experiences. Since 2020, a series of four coups d’état have taken place. Mali and Burkina Faso experienced two golpes at the hands of the army between August 2020 and May 2021 and between January and September 2022, respectively. The consequences of climate change, coupled with inefficient macroeconomic reforms, have progressively influenced regional migration patterns. The resulting fierce competition for the exploitation of natural resources has ineluctably paved the way for deep ethnic-social divisions, fomenting the spread of indiscriminate violence among farmers and herders. Weak and corrupt national institutions, unable to implement solid governance due to the absence of a



monopoly on the use of force, allowed the Salafi-jihadist groups to settle in the territory by capitalizing on sociopolitical and economic cleavages. Over almost two decades, the region has thus been the hatchery for several jihadist groups aligned with al-Qa'ida or the Islamic State.

The jihadist threat in the Sahel

During the last decade, although Africa was relatively a generator of jihadist violence at the dawn of the 21st century, it has recently become the global centre of jihad (Bacon, Warner, 2021). Over this arc of time, the Sahel has become one of the most vulnerable areas to the outbreak of jihadist organisations. As pointed out by the annual report (IEP, 2023) of the Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel recorded more casualties in 2022 than both South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa combined, accounting for 43% of victims globally and 60% in the African continent. The region has displayed an impressive surge in terrorism, rising by over 2000% in the last 15 years. In 2022, experts recorded 7,899 fatalities at the hands of militant Salafi-jihadist groups, an increase of 63% since 2021 (ACSS, 2023). After the crisis in Mali in 2012, the central Sahel has become the sub-region most affected by jihadism. In 2022, Burkina Faso and Mali accounted for 73% of terrorism deaths in the Sahel and 52% in sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2015, the Liptako-Gourma region - also known as the tri-border region - has become the epicentre of armed jihad in the African continent. The region, corresponding to a frontier territory where the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso converge, is a remote and underdeveloped area, which first turned into a safe haven and then into the main theatre of the confrontation between JNIM and ISSP.

Unlike how we usually envisage it in its purely global dimension, jihadism in the central Sahel has acquired the shape of a phenomenon described as "glocal" (Marret, 2008), in which local dynamics prevail over global ones. Jihadism originated from the agglomeration of local sources of insurgency grounded on



sociopolitical, ethnic, and economic rifts (Pellerin, 2019). For this reason, jihadist groups present themselves as an insurgent force, skilfully luring the loyalty, sympathy, or acquiescence of the local populations. Local people, especially communities marginalised or discriminated by the state have joined jihadist movements because they offer them the promise to imagine an alternative to the profoundly corrupt and unfair political and social system (Walter, 2017). Salafi-jihadist organizations demonstrated a genuine ability to comprehend and adapt to circumstances, more effectively than state elites and foreign military forces. Contrary to how we usually imagine them bound by a strict ideology, jihadists displayed very high degrees of fluidity in alliances and organisational structures (Raafat, 2021). Over time, this feature has favoured a series of mergers and splits between the multifarious Salafi-jihadist groups in the Sahara-Sahel region, allowing them to survive and evolve by perfectly adapting to the local context.

From Algeria to Mali, the ascent of JNIM as the dominant actor of the central Sahel

The genesis of jihad in the central Sahel has roots outside the region. In the 1990s, the sociopolitical events in Algeria had a paramount role in the inception of Salafi-jihadist organizations. After the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan, many foreign fighters – the so-called “Afghan Arab” – who went to Afghanistan as volunteers to answer the call to armed jihad, returned to their homelands. In some of these states, these fighters united in small cells, converging around charismatic leaders who had fought in Afghanistan. In Algeria, in the early 1990s, a group of fighters evolved into an armed organization called Group Islamique Armé (GIA), led by Saïd Qari (Gray, Stockham, 2008), later emerging as one of the main Islamist armed factions taking part in the 1992 Algerian civil warⁱ. During the conflict, the GIA stained its hands with indiscriminate violence, particularly against civilians, and ended up losing the widespread consensus it initially enjoyed (Casola *et al*, 2021). These circumstances begot a mounting



discontent toward the group's leadership, triggering a profound endogenous division. In September 1998, many members of the group's command endorsed a new armed organization, the Group Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), headed by a former member of the GIA, Hassan Hattabⁱⁱ. In the meantime, the regime in Algiers resorted to a two-pronged strategy oscillating between offers of amnesty for jihadists or brutal and repressive military campaigns. Much of the GSPC leadership rejected this agreement. However, the group split up. A unit fled to the region of Kabylia (east of Algiers). The remaining combatants, under the mounting pressure of the Algerian army, were forced to cross the southern border and settle in the scarcely populated and ungoverned desert territories of northern Mali (Lounnas, 2013).

In 2004, Abdelmalek Droukdel took on the leadership of the GSPC, showing from the very first beginning steadfast support for al-Qa'ida. Between 2005 and 2006, after carrying out a series of attacks in Algeria and Mauritania, the GSPC caught the attention of Osama bin Laden who commended the impressive operations of the group. As a result, on 11 September 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the affiliation of the GSPC to al-Qa'ida (Guidère, 2006). In January 2007, the GSPC was officially integrated into al-Qa'ida, adopting the name al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Filiu, 2009).

Droukdel systematically replicated al-Qa'ida's organisational structure, as well as its operational methods, against the backdrop of similar ideological and doctrinal references (Filiu, 2010). Leaving aside the differences in name and rhetoric, the main change was the expansion of armed operations and smuggling activities in the Sahara-Sahel region. At this point in time, AQIM commenced what experts qualified as the "Sahelisation" process, namely the phase of expansion in the Sahel region. AQIM took root in the local society, economy, and trafficking networks, by cultivating relationships with communities, providing assistance, and recruiting members (ICS, 2012). This led Droukdel to secure relations with local traffickers



and to extend its activities into a strip of territory stretching from Mauritania to Chad (ICS, 2005). At that time, the *katiba* al-Mulathamum - “the masked ones” - emerged, assuming a prominent role and mainly operating in northwestern Mauritania and northern Mali. It was led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former member of GSPC and lieutenant of Droukdel.

Despite the successful expansion in the Sahara-Sahel region, AQIM focused the jihad on the Algerian territory. In October 2011, this posture provoked the first major splinter. A unit of the leadership, largely hailed from Mali and Mauritania, left the organisation and founded the Mouvement pour l’Unité du Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO) (Zimmerman, 2020). These combatants were critical of the Algerian-dominated AQIM leadership and they steered their activities toward the Sahel. Nonetheless, they were driven by an independence fervour than a secessionist one, hence continuing to follow the same Salafist ideology as al-Qa’ida but contextualising it to West Africa.

By the end of 2011, a new group was formed under the leadership of the Ifoghas Tuareg Iyad ag-Ghali, a powerful local powerbroker who had previously worked as a hostage negotiator for AQIM. In December 2011, he gave rise to the organization Ansar al-Din - “the guardians of the faith” (CISC, 2018). Ansar al-Din derived legitimacy by anchoring its strategy and action to the claims of the Malian Tuareg population. Ghali proficiently capitalized on the so-called “Tuareg question”, the independence struggle of the Tuareg populations in northern Mali. Although Droukdel never publicly stated it, Ansar al-Din was AQIM’s local affiliate (CISC, 2018). However, by common agreement with Droukdel, Ghali decided not to maintain the denomination “al-Qa’ida”, with the aim to conceal AQIM’s intent to expand into the Sahel (UNSC, 2013).

In 2012, the outbreak of the Malian crisis marked a turning point in the history of jihad in the Sahel. On 17 January, the insurrection of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) - an



organisation with an ethnic Tuareg majority and an expression of the irredentism of the *Tamasheq*-speaking communities in northern Mali – provided AQIM and its affiliated groups (MUJAO and Ansar al-Din) a strategic opportunityⁱⁱⁱ to take root in the region. After conquering the central northern part of Mali, the conjunctural alliance between the MNLA and the jihadist groups was soon interrupted by the incompatibility of the two actors' objectives. The jihadists' desire to institute an Islamic state clashed with the "laicity" of the Tuareg communities.

On 11 January 2013, concerned by the abrupt advance of insurrectionist forces and the simultaneous golpe of the Malian army, French President F. Hollande announced the launch of Operation Serval, a military intervention boots on the ground. The French-Malian military offensive allowed the Bamako authorities to regain the Azawad territories^{iv}. Although the mujaheddin advance was halted, Operation Serval was not able to definitively eliminate the jihadist presence in Mali. The mujahideen took refuge on Mount Amettaï in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountain range (Kidal region – North-east Mali) where they started irregular and asymmetrical guerrilla warfare.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes of the Malian crisis, a new realignment between the jihadist actors developed. In December 2012, due to a series of disagreements^v with the top brass of AQIM, Belmokhtar decided to distance himself from Droukdel by renaming his group the *katiba* al-Muwaqi'un Bil Dima – "those who sign with blood". After the French intervention, Belmokhtar managed to preserve his power position, becoming the then-lead actor in the Sahara-Sahel region (C. Casola et al, 2021). Seeing their ranks swelled by former AQIM fighters, on January 2013, Belmokhtar consolidate his alliance with MUJAO – specifically, only the units headed by Abderrahane Ould al-Amar (Mémier, 2017)^{vi} – giving shape to a unique entity: al-Murabitun^{vii}.



Just over a year after Hollande's speech, Operation Serval – and Operation Épervier active in Chad since 1986 – was replaced by a new military campaign: Operation Barkhane. This new military set-up focused on increasing counterterrorism operations carried out with the support of the G5 Sahel countries^{viii}. This new military rearrangement indirectly contributed to an intense relocation process of the jihadist groups. The concentration of the Barkhane forces in the areas surrounding the southern borders of Algeria and Libya reduced the operational capabilities of the jihadist militias, prompting them to head southward to the central regions of Mali. In these areas, the mujaheddin leveraged political discrimination, the perception of marginalisation, and the socioeconomic exclusion of the local community – especially, the Fulani ethnic group – thus finding a solid social base. Operation Barkhane was therefore the fuse that triggered the spread of jihadists in the Liptako-Gourma region.

Jihadist groups thus began to concentrate on capitalizing on the so-called “Fulani question”. In a nutshell, the “Fulani question” refers to the extreme stigmatization of Fulani pastoral communities. They undergo indiscriminate violence by the state and the farmers, with whom they compete for land exploitation. It is exactly at this time that one of the chief actors of the Sahelian jihadist galaxy came into existence in central Mali. In 2015, the Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa – known under the battle name of Hassana Barry – constituted the Front de Libération du Macina (FLM), more commonly known as Katiba Macina (Le Roux, 2019)^{ix}. Since its origins, although it was not publicly declared, the FLM had deep ties with Ansar al-Din since Ghali was the mentor of Koufa (Le Roux, 2019)^x. Katiba Macina has stood out as the *de facto* dominant actor in the area that roughly corresponds to the inner Niger Delta and the Mopti region (Baldaro, Diall, 2020). Koufa incomparably manipulated the Fulani question, reaching a level of integration never seen before in Mali. In addition, following the re-installation of the state in central Mali in 2013, the clampdown on Fulani



pastoralist nomads sparked the radicalisation and mobilisation of this community towards Katiba Macina (Rupesinghe, Bøås, 2019).

In 2016, jihadism also reached Burkina Faso spreading in the northern part of the country. On 16 December, after the attack against burkinabé security forces in Nassoumbou (Ndiaga, 2017), Malam Ibrahim Dicko announced the foundation of Ansar al-Islam, the first-ever jihadist group in Burkina Faso (Le Cam, 2017). Koufa played a paramount role in the inception and diffusion of Ansar al-Islam, proving to be indispensable in the mobilization of Fulani communities. In May 2017, Ibrahim Dicko died of natural causes and was superseded by his brother, Jafar Dicko (Abba, 2017). Despite the increased brutality, the accession of Jafar has presumably been instrumental in sparking a degree of internal destabilisation and a decline in Ansar al-Islam's activities. Additionally, in 2019, experts emphasised that a number of militants may have split from Ansaroul Islam, joining FLM or ISGS following Ibrahim's death (Le Roux, 2019). Yet, the massive expansion of JNIM in Burkina Faso in recent years has revitalised Ansar al-Islam, due to the centrality of the country in Ghali's agenda.

The year 2017 can be regarded as a milestone in the evolution of jihadist groups in the Sahara-Sahel region. On 2 March 2017, Ghali proclaimed in a video (Zelin, 2017)^{xi} the foundation of Jamat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslim (JNIM). JNIM is an umbrella organization composed of four independent al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups in the Sahara-Sahel region: Ansar al-Din, Al Murabitun, FLM, and AQIM in the Sahara. At the time of the foundation, the leadership consisted of the emirs of the four groups: Iyad ag-Ghali, Amadou Koufa, Hassan al-Ansari (al-Murabitun), and Yahya Abu Hammam (AQIM in the Sahara). Among them, Ghali was selected as the emir of JNIM. Yet, Koufa has always had a crucial role, especially after the death of al-Ansari^{xii} e Abu Hammam^{xiii}. JNIM was established with the purpose of unifying al-Qa'ida affiliates in the Sahel into a single group, however, leaving them free to



operate independently. Some experts have also pointed out that the external pressure of international military interventions and the establishment of ISGS may have prompted al-Qa'ida affiliates to unite under one brand. It may not be a coincidence that JNIM was instituted five months after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi publicly recognised ISGS in October 2016.

JNIM operates in an area that comprises the territories of Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Since its creation, JNIM became a leading player in the African jihadist galaxy. As of 2021, it is the main jihadist actor in the Sahel and the fastest-growing terrorist group globally (IEP, 2022). In 2022, JNIM was linked to roughly 77% of militant Islamist violence and 67% of related fatalities in the Sahel (ACSS, 2023). Moreover, JNIM carried out more than three times as many attacks as ISSP and nearly twice as many as the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA) (Nsaibia, 2023). JNIM is also the deadliest actor in the region and it kept expanding and progressively enclosing the capitals of Bamako and Ouagadougou. In 2021, the group's violence in the ex-Upper Volta increased by over 200% compared to 2020. Exploiting Burkina Faso's instability, JNIM deeply penetrated the country and was thus able to project its attacks toward the states in the Gulf of Guinea. Since the turn of 2019 and 2020, JNIM has incremented its activities in the territories of Benin and Togo bordering southern Mali and Burkina Faso. JNIM is also consolidating its political position in northern Mali. Between January and February 2023, Ghali tightened its relations with the northern Mali Tuareg armed groups to cope with the growing ISSP expansion. On 23 January 2023, several notables from the Daoussak community - belonging to the Daoussak faction (MSA-D) of Mouvement for the Salvation of the Azawad (MSA) - pledged their allegiance to Ghali (Baché, 2023). Once again, this illustrates how JNIM has become a reliable political actor capable of safeguarding the security and economic necessities of local communities.



The emergence of the fierce rival: the Islamic State Sahel Province

The presence of al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups does not exhaust the complexity of the network of Salafi-jihadist actors. The genesis of the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) can be traced back to the evolution of al-Qai'da-affiliated groups in Mali and, in particular, is closely linked to the figure of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi. Al-Sahrawi was involved in the formation of MUJAO, serving as the group's spokesperson. Afterwards, given his close relationship with Belmokhtar, he participated in the formation of al-Murabitun in January 2013. However, in December 2014, a dispute broke out within the leadership of al-Murabitun. On 14 May 2015, taking advantage of the havoc, al-Sahrawi proclaimed himself emir of the group and swore allegiance to the then-caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi^{xiv}.

Al-Sahrawi thus defected from al-Murabitun with a group of followers and unilaterally established the Islamic State in Mali (Warner, 2017). The group remained silent for a long period until the last quarter of 2016 when it carried out three notable attacks in the territories adjacent to the borders of Niger and Burkina Faso, grabbing the attention of the Islamic State's central command. Consequently, after ignoring him for two years, in 2017 the Islamic State acknowledged al-Sahrawi's oath of allegiance, posing the bases for the formation of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

In 2017, ISGS embarked on a remarkable operational evolution. The capacity of al-Sahrawi to mobilise new fighters increased exponentially due to its dexterity in exploiting the inter-ethnic dynamics of the Liptako-Gourma region. ISGS thus moved from small hit-and-run attacks to large-scale coordinated operations. The episode that best illustrates the military advancement of ISGS is the operation that was carried out on 4 October 2017, which also marked its ultimate ascendancy in the African jihadist landscape. In



the attack on the village of Tongo Tongo, al-Sahrawi men killed five Niger soldiers and as many as four US Green Berets (ICG, 2017). As a result, on 22 March 2019, the Islamic State published, in Al Naba's 175th newsletter (Zelin, 2019), a two-page report concerning the "Greater Sahara", officially upgrading ISGS to a regional subunit of the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP)^{xv}.

On 17 August 2021, pressure from international anti-terrorist forces brought about the killing of al-Sahrawi^{xvi}. After the death of its founder and leader, ISGS suffered a temporary setback, characterised by a lack of cohesion among its subunits. Nevertheless, the group immediately renewed its campaign of violence by placing younger and more violent commanders in charge. In October 2021, Abdul Bara al-Sahrawi, an experienced logistician who had previously operated in Libya, became the emir of ISGS (UN, 2022; Chesnutt, Zimmerman, 2022). Bara al-Sahrawi immediately undertook an intense military offensive, reaching a significant turning point. On 21 March 2022, the Malian army was attacked in the commune of Tessit in the Gao region (ICG, 2022). The assault was claimed twenty-four hours later by the Islamic State, however, in the name of the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), raising ISGS into the Islamic State's seventh *wilayat* on the African continent.

ISSP is the second most active Salafi-jihadist actor in the Sahel and it primarily operates in the Liptako-Gourma region. In 2021, it represented the most significant threat in Niger, accounting for nearly 80% of all civilian fatalities in the country (Nsaibia, 2022). Broadening the analysis to the central Sahel, according to ACLED, ISSP conducted approximately 87 attacks causing roughly 667 fatalities. Throughout 2022, the structural reorganisation and intensive offensive strategy implemented by Bara al-Sahrawi led to a significant increase in ISSP's average operations and fatalities (Nsaibia, 2023). ISSP showed to be able to expand its operation in neighbouring Benin thanks to the instability gripping Burkina Faso.



Between March and April 2022, ISSP launched an intensive offensive on the Mali-Niger border, escalating clashes with the Cadre Stratégique Permanent (CSP)^{xvii} militias. Within a month, they murdered roughly 400 civilians in retaliation for the CSP attacks. In the overall offensive from March to August 2022, the group allegedly killed more than 1,000 individuals, including civilians, armed non-state actors, and members of rival jihadist groups. At present, ISSP is seeking to institute a pseudo-state in the northern areas of the Liptako-Gourma region (Nsaibia, 2023), fulfilling the desire to build a safe haven for its organization.

The jihadist schism in the central Sahel

History has often proven how, in a civil war, insurgent groups of different factions tend to confront each other, instead of joining forces and fighting the common enemy. This tendency can also be observed in conflicts in which al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State operate. The central Sahel, though, for almost five years has been unaffected by this dynamic. From 2015 to mid-2019, al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups coexisted with ISGS within the territories of the central Sahel. This peculiar coexistence, which developed in the Liptako-Gourma region, shaped what experts defined as the "Sahelian Exception". Yet, JNIM and ISGS never entered into a fully-fledged alliance. They cohabited peacefully and implemented *ad hoc* collaborations to organise attacks against local pro-government militias, state security and defence forces, and international counter-terrorism dispositions. However, relations between the two jihadist groups frayed due to ideological reasons, ambitions, and mutual threats perception. Disagreements and rivalries gradually polarised the positions of JNIM and ISGS, driving them to the ineluctable open clash.

Several elements forged the so-called Sahelian Exception. The common background of JNIM and ISGS and the personal relationship between Ghali and al-Sahrawi played a paramount role in facilitating the development of cooperation^{xviii}. In early



December 2017, in fact, Ghali and al-Sahrawi allegedly met in the Kidal region to discuss the stipulation of an agreement to establish a territorial demarcation (Jeune Afrique, 2018), a kind of non-aggression pact. Collaboration between JNIM and ISGS also developed at the lower levels of the hierarchical scale. In 2018, a UN panel of terrorism experts identified three fighters from the ranks of al-Qa'ida serving as mediators or intermediary subjects with ISGS (UNSC, 2018). Moreover, the attested relations between JNIM and ISGS were fostered by a substantial "exchange of personnel". There was evidence that individuals with no specific allegiance to al-Qa'ida or the Islamic State, who were referred to as "nomadic armed groups" (Nsaibia, 2020), often moved from one organisation to the other, according to their objectives or the geographic area in which they resided.

On a more practical level, JNIM and ISGS unfolded coordinated actions and joint attacks, by providing mutual logistical support in terms of weapons procurement, fighters, and information sharing. One of the first coordinated operations occurred in November 2017. Ghali and al-Sahrawi launched a coordinated assault on a joint military grouping of MINUSMA and the Malian army in the I-n-Delimane area, in north-eastern Mali (Menastream, 2017). The cooperation between JNIM and ISGS was also well documented through episodes in which the former allowed the latter to operate in its territories or to cross them to carry out attacks (Joscelyn, 2019). Besides the military dimension, the collaboration was also documented in a kidnapping operation. On 1 May 2019, four tourists were kidnapped in northern Benin and then transported to Burkina Faso. According to a Burkinabé security source, Katiba Macina ordered the kidnapping and took the hostages into custody, while the kidnapping was carried out by individuals close to the ISGS (Douce *et al*, 2019).

In the shadow of these dynamics, however, an intense struggle for supremacy of the local populations was brewing. The onset of the intra-jihadist conflict was triggered by several factors. In mid-2019,



the huge pressure exerted by the Islamic State central command on ISGS boosted the conflict escalation, inciting al-Sahrawi to take on a more aggressive military strategy. In early 2020, the deep-seated ideological differentiation emerged abruptly giving rise to a no-holds-barred media clash, along the same line as the global rivalry between al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State. The different forms of governance, particularly the enforcement of *shari'a*, implemented by the two groups became the main instrument of delegitimization in the intra-jihadist confrontation (Raafat, 2021). According to experts, JNIM enacted a more flexible approach in contrast with ISGS's draconian *modus operandi* (Callimachi, 2013). The two groups also enacted different methods to land governance and the repartition of the spoils of war. JNIM actualized a centralized top-down mechanism of redistribution versus ISGS's more horizontal redistribution system. The revolutionary system deployed by al-Sahrawi, aimed at eroding the power of the Fulani ruling classes - the *Djowros* - and favour the lower social classes - the *Peuls rouges* - triggered the defection of many fighters from JNIM, thus exacerbating the tension between the two groups. However, if the prevailing trend between 2017 and 2019 was that JNIM fighters defected to ISGS, it reversed in favour of JNIM with the outbreak of conflict between the two groups (Nsaibia, 2022).

The conflict between JNIM and ISGS commenced in July 2019 when they clashed in the village of Ariel in northern Burkina Faso (NSJ, 2019)^{xix}. The armed confrontations steadily ramped up in the following months, mainly in central Mali. In the second half of 2020, after the advance of al-Sahrawi units, JNIM succeeded in ousting ISGS from the area of the Inner Niger Delta, thus shifting the epicentre of the conflict to the heart of the tri-border region. JNIM's counter-offensive was also favoured by the new French-led counter-terrorism strategy that, after the Pau Summit in January 2020, targeted ISGS as "enemy number one" (Figaro, AFP, 2020). Throughout 2020, the conflict between JNIM and ISGS showed a progressive decrease (Nsaibia, 2021), although the two groups



clashed at least 125 times, resulting in an estimated 731 fighters killed on both sides. Since mid-2020, analysts commenced speaking about a process of gradual de-escalation mainly due to the fact that it was extremely costly for both groups to carry on a war on two fronts. In 2021, according to ACLED and the Crisis Watch of the International Crisis Group databases, the intra-jihadist war continued to follow this downward trend, resulting approximately in 44 clashes and 217 reportedly fatalities. The decreasing trajectory persisted in the first half of 2022, with approximately 15 clashes and 36 fatalities recorded. As a result, data collected in 2021 and 2022 show that the frontline has stabilised in the core of the tri-border region and in northeastern Mali. Additionally, JNIM's superiority in manpower, its deeper socio-political ties, larger and more complex alliances, and geographic reach outmatched the smaller ISGS, whose profile resembles a sophisticated variant of roving bandits (Nsaibia, 2022).

Paris leaves the scene and Moscow does not miss the chance

If dates are a lens through which historical events are construed, 15 August 2022 represents a milestone in the international competition over the influence of the central Sahel. On that day, the last units of the French troops departed Mali for redeployment in neighbouring Niger (King, 2023), henceforth the new Western-led counter-terrorist stronghold. After the coup in May 2021, in a scenario of worsening insecurity due to escalating jihadist violence, relations between Paris and Bamako began to decline. The decision of Assimi Goïta - the President of the Malian military junta since May 2021 - to scupper the January 2022 democratic elections and the statements of the then-French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian - who defined the Malian military junta as "illegitimate" and "out of control" (BBC, 2022) - spawned an irreconcilable diplomatic incident. The subsequent expulsion of the French ambassador from Mali only heralded President Macron's announcement of the withdrawal of the military dispositif on 17 February 2022.



The central Sahel has been hit by a severe wave of “anti-democratic epidemic”. Between August 2020 and September 2022, Mali and Burkina Faso fell twice into the hands of their respective armies. This authoritarian backslide whetted Moscow’s appetites. The lack of Western support for the Malian government prompted Goïta to look for a new international partner. After a series of meetings between September and December 2021, Bamako concluded an agreement with Moscow for the supply of armaments and the deployment of the PMC Wagner Group. Along the lines of its engagement in the Central African Republic, the Wagner Group operates in parallel with the Kremlin to support the Malian regime in exchange for financial and mining concessions (Thompson *et al*, 2022).

The collaboration initialled with Russia resulted in a temporary *montée en puissance* of the FAMA in February 2022, albeit limited to the territories of central-southern Mali (Mali-online, 2022). Nevertheless, it was just smoke and mirrors, since FLM launched 9 attacks within 150 km of Bamako between May and August 2022 (ACSS, 2022). Far from any doubt, the presence of the Wagner Group, as observed in the CAR, has escalated violence against civilians. The massacre that occurred in the central Malian town of Moura in late March 2022 thoroughly portrayed this trend. According to experts, the FAMA alongside the Wagner Group allegedly summarily executed an estimated 300 civilian men (HRW, 2022). Prigožin, in fact, did not deploy capable, disciplined, and well-equipped troops to deal with Bamako’s security concerns and its brutal and indiscriminate counterinsurgency efforts are serving as a recruiting tool for jihadist groups (Nasr, 2022).

Experts are also warning the Kremlin’s *longa manus* looms over Burkina Faso. During 2022, popular anti-France protests and demands for Russian intervention increased, primarily concentrated in Ouagadougou. On 18 January 2023, the internal pressure, combined with the external influence exerted by Mali,



persuaded the military junta – headed by Captain Ibrahim Traoré – to demand that Paris withdraw its troops from the country within a month, stoking fears that another African country is set to hire the Wagner Group to help contain worsening jihadi insurgency (Nsaibia, Weiss, 2023). However, despite not being publicly confirmed by the military junta, rumours are suggesting “a dozen members of the Wagner group arrived in Ouagadougou on 24 December [2022]” (Informateur.Ci, 2023). Burkina Faso’s flip-flop also came in the weak of a rapprochement between Traoré and Goïta after a meeting in November 2022 (Fatchina, 2022). This eventuality gains even more plausibility given the words of Prime Minister A. J. Kyélem de Tambèla after talks with the Russian ambassador in January 2023, asserting the intention to strengthen the partnership with the Kremlin.

New men at the helm: are we moving towards a new phase of security instability?

The withdrawal of France and the arrival of Russia in Mali have heavily influenced the balance of power in the central Sahel. With the Kremlin’s wholehearted support, the military junta in Bamako has alienated its regional and international partners. Apart from severing ties with France, Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel in May 2022, weakening the regional counter-terrorism dispositif. Goïta also pursued a heavy-handed strategy that has exacerbated the militant Islamist violence, thereby accelerating the security crisis (ACSS, 2023). In Mali, the authoritarian drift and the deployment of the Wagner Group’s forces thus proved to be the perfect recipe for the expansion of the jihadist organisations, which have never reached such operational levels.

After the coups d’état in 2022, Burkina Faso seems to take a leaf out of Mali’s book. In light of Wagner’s ineffectual counterterrorism capabilities and coarse tactics, analysts are all likely concerned that the deployment of the Russian PMC to Burkina Faso would further fan the flames of the jihadi fire. Both of these factors also have the



potential to facilitate spillovers of violence in the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo. By dint of the porous border, Burkina Faso has turned into a platform from which project operations in West African coastal countries, a mouth-watering morsel for jihadist groups. The marginalisation of Muslims and the competition between farmers and herders for the exploitation of resources are all social cleavages which jihadist groups can manipulate without a hitch (Guiffard, 2023). In addition, the geographic conformation, which favours the disconnection of the coastal capitals from northern areas, makes the frontier territories easy to be sneaked into.

The current security crisis in the central Sahel still poses a highly complex scenario. Despite the outbreak of the intra-jihadist war, the solid territorial presence and the operational capabilities of JNIM and ISSP have not been compromised. The foreign powers' interventions and the local governments' actions persist in concentrating exclusively on the physical removal of the jihadist presence, deemed the panacea to the multilayer crisis plaguing the region. Actually, it is pivotal that counter-terrorism operations get to the roots of the problem through a strategy that addresses the socio-political and economic dimensions, thereby disrupting the chief factors of mobilisation and isolating jihadist groups from the local communities. Applying the notion that war is nothing but the continuation of politics by other means, the absence of a clear political purpose will render any future military intervention gradually ineffective, causing more collateral damage than achievable results.

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ⁱ The Algerian civil war – also known as the “Black Decade” or “*La sale Guerre*” (the dirty war) – broke out in 1992, during the army-led coup d'état and ended in 1999, the year of the election of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The conflict pitted the security forces against jihadist guerrillas who, in the most acute phase of the war (1994-1995), numbered 50,000.

ⁱⁱ Hassan Hattab is the founder and first emir of GSPC. He left the Algerian army in 1989 to join the GIA. In 1996, he withdrew from the GIA due to conflict with the leadership that wanted to adopt an overly violent strategy towards civilians.

ⁱⁱⁱ The importance of this opportunity for the AQIM leadership can be observed in the documents that the jihadists left behind in Timbuktu during their escape (after the French intervention in January 2013), later named “The al Qa'ida Manual in Mali”. The documents were found by Associated Press journalist Rukmini Callimachi in Timbuktu, in a building that had been occupied for a year by al-Qa'ida affiliates.

^{iv} The recapture of the northern territories happened with the exception of the Kidal region. This was because, after the rupture of the alliance with the jihadist forces, the MNLA, co-opted by France as an ally, obtained the opportunity to participate in defining the political balance and managing the control of the territories.

^v Relations between Belmokhtar and Droukdel have always been tense and culminated in a dispute over the domination of Malian territories. Droukdel, frightened by Belmokhtar's unstoppable rise, tried to harness him by elevating other fighters in rank. Belmokhtar harboured deep disagreements with Abu Zeid, especially dissenting with the strategy with which the latter managed kidnapping operations. Emblematic was the kidnapping of Canadian diplomat R. Fowler (UN special envoy to Niger)



on 3 November 2012, for which Belmokhtar received a stern warning from al-Qa'ida's central command.

^{vi} The communiqué was signed by Ahmed al-Tilemsi and not by Mohamed Kheirou, at the time the emir of the MUJAO. The party headed by the latter continues to exist independently of Al-Murabitun. One reason for this division is said to be tribal: Tilemsi belongs to the Arab Lamhar tribe while Kheirou belongs to the Berber Tagounanet tribe.

^{vii} Al-Murabitun, Arabic for “the sentinels”, refers to the Berber Almoravid dynasty that ruled between the 11th and 12th centuries (1040-1147) an empire stretching from the Maghreb and Western Sahara to the Arabian Peninsula. This reference is the result of Belmokhtar's project to unify the Muslims of the Maghreb and the Sahel.

^{viii} The Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) was founded in 2014 as a regional, intergovernmental organization. It provides an institutional framework to promote development and security within its five member countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

^{ix} The FLM was intended to reinstall “the Islamic Republic of Macina” in central Mali. The organisation's name is a direct reference to the Macina Empire that, from 1818 to 1863, ruled the territories of the current regions of Ségou, Mopti, and Timbuktu. The FLM adopted the narrative of this empire to gain popular support, especially among the Fulani (the dominant ethnic group in the Macina Empire), intending to conquer the territories of central Mali and replace the government authorities.

^x The relationship between Ghali and Koufa arose when the latter, returning from a trip to the Middle East and Afghanistan, settled in northern Mali and joined Ansar al-Din between 2008 and 2009.

^{xi} It is interesting to underline that the name of the media centre which published the video is Al-Zallaqa. The term is a reference to Spain. The term refers to how slippery the ground was from the blood spilt when the Almoravid troops of Ibn Tashufin defeated the Christian army of Alfonso VI at the Battle of Sagradas (in the province of Badajoz, Spain) in 1086.

^{xii} Hassan al-Ansari was the co-founder of Al Murabitun. He became the emir of Al Murabitun in 2016 after Belmokhtar's death. He was killed in March 2018 during a French raid in Tinzaouatene, Algeria. Since his death, the new emir of Al Murabitun is unknown.

^{xiii} Yahya Abu Hammam, born as Djamel Okacha, was the emir of AQIM in the Sahara, based in Timbuktu. The French army announced his death in



February 2019 but there is no clear evidence of this and JNIM has made no statement on the matter.

^{xiv} More precisely, the first seeds of what would become the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara were taken during the holy month of Ramadan in the summer of 2014, when Hamada Ould al-Khairy - a senior Mauritanian MUJAO commander - wrote a letter in support of the then proclaimed Islamic State.

^{xv} The Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) is a jihadist terrorist group that operates in the Lake Chad Basin, among Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Even if its formation dates back just to 2015, its roots are more profound. Indeed, ISWAP belongs to the Salafi-jihadist environment that gained momentum consistently during the nineties in north-eastern Nigeria. Specifically, its direct predecessor was the religious sect, and successive terrorist group, *Jama'at Ahl as-Sunna li-da'wa wa l'Jihad*, better known as Boko Haram (BH).

^{xvi} The killing of al-Sahrawi was publicly announced by President Macron about a month later, on 16 September 2021.

^{xvii} The Cadre Stratégique Permanent (CSP) is an institutional structure composed of the Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and the groups of the so-called *Plateforme* (a pro-government coalition established in 2014 on the eve of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreements).

^{xviii} Although it was never publicly stated by the two emirs, in 2016, Abu Hammam highlighted that in an interview with al-Akhbar: "It is still a normal relationship and we have a connection with them". On the other hand, in 2018, an ISGS spokesperson, in an interview with Agence France Presse, asserted "Our brothers Iyad Ag Ghali and the other mujaheddin defend Islam like us".

^{xix} According to some experts, the clash in Ariel can be considered the first conflict between JNIM (Katiba Macina) and ISGS.