Growth of Jihadism in the Sahel | Iranzu Xiaochun

Este proyecto ha quedado en tercera posición en el «Concurso Defensa y Yo»?

¡Enhorabuena, Iranzu!

Overview

It is too comfortable for us to see things far away and believe that they will have no incidence in our daily lives. But it is precisely that characteristic non-imminence of Jihadi-Salafi threats that makes it increasingly dangerous. When we talk about Jihadi Salafism, we are referring to a wide
and complex net of terrorist actors which are operating in the Sahel region, causing much instability. Migration is one of the effects of instability, and that is why we need not look up to ourselves, but down to Africa (in geographical terms). We sometimes tend to live in globalization but somewhat forgetting we are being part of that process. Everything is connected: if there was instability in Africa, must we recognize, there are great chances of forced displacements of people, who would eventually arrive to our borders, and perhaps that, together with sporadic attacks could become burden enough for Westerners to react.

In this way, disentangling the entanglement seems a point of departure towards comprehending the puzzle. But, before, we must also understand how the puzzle was formed, that is, how these terrorist organizations came to be.

In the first place, the term “Salafi-Jihadism” is a movement that is formed by two terms, of which “Salafism” refers to the ideology and of which “Jihadism” refers to the use of violence to achieve political aims established by the ideology (even if original writings call for tolerance). It is, hence, a marginalised trend within Sunni Islam that marries the concept of “Salafism”, which returns to the practice of Islam in Mohammed times, removing modernization in how the religion is practiced. The key here is, that the idea that being Muslim and part of a Western society cannot be congruent, which leads to a fundamentalist view, and an extremist outcome.

Having failed in delivering the message within their own Muslim communities during the 80s and 90s, they turned to attack the western world, blamed for having supported the governments at that time (economically and militarily). The ideology is capable of keeping these groups united, establishing a strategic purpose. They recruit individuals to conduct Jihad in Western countries, which are out of their core of believers and also far from other communities sustained by these terrorist groups.

Following, we will analyse a wide picture, the historical background and actors in the region (both for terrorist networks and counter-terrorist or other approaches in the Sahel).

**Analysis**

The Jihadi-Salafi movement has, inside the Sahel, established a vanguard. They have arranged a core of believers while developing relationships with the population through other means (providing pragmatic benefits for the population: food, water, justice is a key, means of working). They have been able to do so through the preexisting familial and criminal networks in the Sahel.

Within the region, Al Qaeda has used local identity politics (an “us vs them” approach), which mainly strokes conflict against the targeted community, and later come to the defense on the part of the community they are trying to get in touch with. This tactic has been developed and
adapted through the years. An example of it is the way Al Qaeda strengthened itself when it attacked the Shia to have the Iraqi Shia attack the Iraqi Sunni, later coming to the defense of the Sunni. Their aim was to support the opposition to the Assad regime (which was predominantly Sunni), making themselves the “defenders of the Muslims”. Therefore, within the Sahel region, the Salafi-Jihadi movement is said to have been strengthened (not only Al Qaeda). On its part, the Islamic State (IS), has also exploited frictions to establish its own presence inside of the region.

Moreover, the area is very arid and hostile, it is basically desert. Smugglers have figured out how to move in there, and have created oases with supplies, moving them to next stations within a GPS system. Key hubs for smuggling and trafficking which serve to finance the groups are very difficult to close, even with aerial surveillance, drones, and other technical abilities, to get to and from the region is difficult. These hubs provide terrorist groups with resources, people, money, ways to make money and logistics to move their goods and people around.

And, besides this complexity, there difficulty of countering them lies in that they are very old networks, with very robust human trafficking, smuggling and trade systems. It has opened the door of access to Southern Europe and Eastern Africa, as well as to the Middle East. That is why Al Qaeda and IS are making an effort to have control over them: because both the licit and illicit economies are whole or partly sustained by these smuggling routes.

But complexity is not only specific to smuggling routes. Terrorist networks also are, since they have been merging and diverging along time and have managed to control their own territories. The current picture in the Sahel portrays three main groups: Al Qaeda or JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin), which is an umbrella group for other four organizations; the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which split from the JNIM in 2015 and Ansar Al Islam, which remains unaffiliated between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (but has IS leanings). It is a kind of harbinger in terms of what these groups can do in expanding the terrorism threat in the region.

The ISGS’ independency has not been formally recognized by Al Qaeda, and is considered by the ISIS part of the Islamic State in West Africa. Therefore, we can find two Islamic State groups in the Sahel, the ISGS and the eponymous ISWA (which covers Lake Chad, Nigeria, Niger and Chad).

Nowadays, the ISWS and the JNIM no longer cooperate, but have until spring of this year. JNIM still cooperates with Ansar Al Islam, and the latter with the IS. The Sahel has proved to be an ecosystem for these groups’ interactions, with growing and strengthening groups. The Sahel region started to be alive when in the early 80s – late 90s, Algerian networks established themselves there. The GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé) and IS groups splintered in Al Qaeda and the AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). In 1998, the GIA splintered and created the...
Salafist Group for Call and Combat, formally recognized as affiliate to AQIM in 2006 (Zimmerman, 2020).

AQIM emerged out of the Algerian civil war and aimed to conduct jihad to overthrow the Algerian state, and, because it was the premier AQ organization in North Africa, it drew recruits from that region, thus adding a non-Algerian component as well (these were people from Mauritania, Northern Mali, Lybia and Tunisia). But in the 2000s the situation degenerated, since the AQIM had a very strong focus on Algeria, and Algeria’s security was strong, so attacks were not successfully carried out if they even managed to. The risk the organization being shut down was so high, that AQIM attacks declined. Moreover, analysts observed that AQIM was being unpopular as an AQ organization. It was conducting kidnapping for ransom: European hostages, whose countries would negotiate for the return of their citizens (gaining a couple millions every time). In addition, AQIM was sitting on top of the smuggling network (pasta, cigarettes).

From terrorists’ perspective it kidnapped people for money, moved illicit goods along borders… but it really wasn’t seizing terrain, and wasn’t able to throw off any major terrorist attack. That is why people were dismissive of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb.

However, with the Arab Springs the scene changed once more. Lybia fell, Tunisia fell and Egypt went into a transition. The Lybian conflict is particularly relevant in this regard, since it held the Third Tuareg revolution, eclipsed by a major Islamic insurgency in 2012, which eventually spread to Bamako and ended up with French intervention. The strategy used here was the one mentioned before: the Tuaregs, an ethnic identity based in Northern Mali and the As Azawad region, with their homelands based in parts of Mali and stretching through parts of Niger and Lybia were used by the Gaddafi regime. After that, they had no money and returned to Mali, setting up the insurgency. The secular demands for visibility and better treatment soon turned into Islamic revindications: Iyad Ag Ghali (from the sub group within the Tuareg identity, key leader and smuggler, had lot of access to resources, and was also a Ghaddafi Jihadist), had made sure of it. An Ansar Al Din fighter, he made sure that it happened the same to the Assad Regime as had happened in the Syrian revolution before. He ensured revolution inside of Mali.

Another identifiable case is the one of the Fulani. This ethnicity has long been marginalized, same as the Tuaregs. However, despite their majority in some states, they have not been able to gain proper representation in the politics of their countries. Iyad Ag Ghali, together with Fulani Amadou Koufa, were able to rally the Fulani in central Mali by provoking attacks to Fulani communities and coming to their defense. Amadou Koufa stood up for the Macina Liberation Front in 2015, operating in central Mali and fought during 2012-2013 alongside Iyad Ag Ghali.

This shows how Al Qaeda has managed to manipulate discontent social groups into their political aims and jihad. These localized conflicts are a battlefield of opportunities for AQ and
associates to identify key leaders of new communities, using identities and choosing charismatic leaders to found new groups. An example of it is the creation of Ansar Al Islam (in Burkina Faso), by a Fulani called Malam Ibrahim Dicko, who fought in the Macina Liberation front in 2015.

Al Qaeda’s strategy is not to tie all these emerging groups. It is to tackle local leaders, found the groups and develop them to pose new threats. Some of these groups were very present in 2015 inside the Sahel. They were Ansar Al Din, AQIM fighters in the Sahara, the Macina Liberation Front and Al Murabitoun. This last one was upset with the Algerian focus of AQIM, and wanted to conduct Jihad, thus causing a separation from the AQIM. In 2017 all those four groups merged into JNIM, and still today the factions are very visible.

The second most important actor in the region, the IS, is a faction from AQIM. It separated in 2015 because its leader, Abu Walid Al-Sahraoui (long time AQIM member) had personal frictions inside the organization and wanted to conduct Jihad in a more radical way. He fought in 2012 in Timbuktu, Mali (while still under Al Qaeda control, he wanted to impose the Sharia law right there, especially corporal punishments). He managed to take loyal men with him and create the ISGS, threatening Niger.

Both organizations have been developing and gaining in strength, this being allowed by the physical space. Both were able to recruit people from the two sides of the population, and up until spring this year, there were not conflicts between both. But now, there are: in Nigerian and Malian borders there has been a quite intense fighting going on.

And while we let the groups fight among themselves, the international community is making efforts to counter this terrorist cells. Countries who have specific interests in the Sahel, such as France (mainly economic), have entered into the region. In 2013, at the request of the Malian government, France launched operation Serval, the first counter terrorist operation against Ansar Al Din and AQ inside Mali (specially the north, where Ansar Al Din had established an emirate based in Timbuktu). The French have also led “Operation Barkhane”, which consisted on counter terrorism support for local African partners. But the French alone wouldn’t cope with the whole task, and looked to the EU to bring a greater effort in the region. This has been reflected in the French led EU Takuba Task force, which worked close to the G5 Sahel forces and Mali. It has mainly sent a couple hundred advisers to serve for the African forces, but have also brought capabilities, aerial surveillance and some air support to the table.
The UN has also aimed to stabilize the region, sending a special mission to Mali called MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali). It is based on Chad forces and other contingents from other countries. It pushed for the Algiers accord, signed under international pressure between the Malian government, the Tuaregs and the CMA in 2015.

Another international effort, this case willing to coordinate is the G5 Accord of 2016-2017. The problem in the Sahel is that there are non-securitized regions, specially those in the periphery of the countries, where terrorist actors tend to act. These regions are characteristic for their aridness and deserts, which makes them very difficult to be protected; added to a centered-focus security and the transnational issue that may arise, a big challenge is to be faced. Coordination (sharing of intelligence and trying to deal with weak borders) is required in this regard, because militants based in Niger are crossing over into Mali, and the Malian Army is not being able to pursue them or vice-versa. To the South, the Multinational Joint Task force is focused on Boko Haram and the Lake Chad region. That established coordination between Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

On US’s behalf there is AFRICOM, which provides training and equipment to Niger. It also supports French missions through strategic airlift (moving French troops into Africa). They have also contributed to intelligence sharing and aerial surveillance with drones.

As we can see, there are many efforts, but these are not well coordinated, and the efforts to do so are not very fruitful. Local armies are fighting groups inside their borders, while trying to coordinate with inputs from France and the US. Requirements to begin well-coordinating in order to counter all terrorism factions are huge. Another problem regarding efforts is burden share, because it might seem a good idea: however, if no nation has full command of what is happening, it is only responsible for what is happening inside its area. And, as lecturer K. Zimmerman said “when you are only responsible for parts of the problem, no one would be solving the entire problem”.

Conclusions
The Sahel region is a very poor security region: it has weak borders and the proper physical environment for terrorist groups to proliferate. Governments are not able or are unwilling to provide for victim protection, which is in turn done by terrorist groups themselves. These strategy of creating links and aiding ethnic minorities is gaining them strength. This is the case specially in Mali, where after a bloody civil war, the policy responses are still not up to the problem and where the political elite it to be blamed. Burkina Faso and Niger undergo much more pressure than Mali does, therefore its leaders have tried with few results to meet their citizen’s security demands.

The Malian government is a key actor: it doesn’t have the political will to get to the roots of the conflict, thus limiting international actor. In this way, the 25,000 personnel committed to the region by the MINUSMA, the EUTM in Mali (EU Training Mission), the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) in Mali, the G-5 Sahel Joint Force and the French operation Barkhane will be of restricted aid. Still, it remains to the international community to learn from Somalia, where a shared approach advanced the political transition. Because, it is in fact, the Sahel Alliance the one under fire for being too ambitious and tackling complex problems with exclusive military solutions.

It is thus, important to protect the population through cutting finance networks, as well as making sure that coordination mechanisms really work. Setting up multilateral missions would also permit to avoid ambiguities and of course, pursuing and imposing sanctions for individuals who try to disturb the peace needs to be reconsidered (Lebovich, 2020).

However once more, none of these actions will be really effective until the region’s politics are effective and the elites engaged. Mali needs to disrupt its war economy and their leaders need to look for their population’s needs, otherwise, they will be “setting up the stage for further extremist gains” (Devermont, 2020).

Unas palabras de la ganadora:

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Bibliography


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