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**The Sahel after the Barkhane operation. Security situation and future prospects**

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*The Sahel after the Barkhane operation. Security situation and future prospects*

**Abstract:**

Nine years after the French intervention in Mali, violent extremism continues to spread in the Sahel, showing remarkable resilience despite efforts to prevent and combat radicalism by local governments and international actors. Jihadism, which seemed to be limited to northern Mali a few years ago, now extends to 75% of its territory, in addition to affecting Burkina Faso and Niger with an increase, in the Sahel as a whole, of 70% in the number of jihadist actions, and with Burkina Faso as the main focus.

The complicated situation in which the Sahel finds itself at a time when Operation Barkhane is called to come to an end in 2022 in favour of a new, more modest military deployment, makes us ask ourselves various questions about the future of security in the region, such as, What is the current situation of the jihadist groups operating in the Sahel? What will be the consequences of the of Operation Barkhane's withdrawal on regional security? To what extent regional governments and, more specifically the junta that governs Mali, is capable of responding to the numerous security challenges? What alternatives or possible solutions come up to the growing regional deterioration at a time when new external Actors, such as Russia, are appearing on the horizon?

**Keywords:**

*Sahel, Barkhane, jihadists, balance, perspectives.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## *El Sahel después de la operación Barkhane. Situación de seguridad y perspectivas de futuro*

### Resumen:

Nueve años después de la intervención francesa en Malí, el extremismo violento sigue propagándose en el Sahel, mostrando una notable resiliencia a pesar de los esfuerzos de prevención y lucha contra el radicalismo por parte de gobiernos locales y actores internacionales. El yihadismo, que parecía estar limitado al norte de Mali hace unos años, ahora se extiende al 75% de su territorio, además de afectar a Burkina Faso y Níger con un aumento, en el conjunto del Sahel, de un 70% en el número de acciones yihadistas.

Ahora bien, la complicada situación en la que se encuentra El Sahel en unos momentos en los que la Operación Barkhane está llamada a llegar a su fin en el año 2022 en favor de un nuevo despliegue militar más modesto, hace que nos planteemos diversos interrogantes sobre el futuro de la seguridad en la región, como pueden ser, ¿Cuál es la situación actual de los diversos grupos yihadistas que operan en el Sahel? ¿Cuáles son las consecuencias de la retirada de la Operación Barkhane en la seguridad regional? ¿Hasta qué punto los gobiernos regionales y, principalmente la junta que gobierna Mali, es capaz de responder a los numerosos desafíos de seguridad? ¿Qué alternativas o posibles soluciones se plantean al creciente deterioro que sufre la región en unos momentos en los que nuevos actores externos, como es el caso de Rusia están apareciendo en el horizonte?

### Palabras clave:

Sahel, Barkane, yihadistas, balance, perspectivas.

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## Taking stock of the situation of jihadist groups in the Sahel

Nine years after the French intervention in Mali, violent extremism continues to spread in the Sahel, showing remarkable resilience despite prevention and counter-radicalism efforts by local governments and international actors. The weakening of jihadist groups following the French intervention in January 2013 proved short-lived and the survivors of Operation Serval have shown a great ability to recover and adapt quickly to the changing security environment. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger alone, more than 6,200 victims<sup>1</sup> occurred between February 2021 and February 2022, making the Sahel the region where terrorist groups have grown the most, with the Islamic State replacing the Taliban as the world's deadliest group and Burkina Faso as the main focus.

During the early days of Operation Barkhane, which began in 2014, jihadist groups, mainly Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), managed to survive thanks to their "low profile" strategy and concealing themselves among the population, avoiding constituting operational structures ("katibas") that were too large and therefore easy to detect and destroy.

In this way, AQIM, supported by the Malian jihadists of Ansar Dine, gradually reorganised itself to operate throughout Mali, and even extended its actions to Burkina Faso and Niger. Thus, from 40 attacks recorded in 2014, Mali experienced 98 the following year and 157 in 2016,<sup>2</sup> becoming progressively more complex as armed groups began to operate south of Niger, as evidenced by the attacks on the Radisson hotel in Bamako (20 November 2015), Ouagadougou (15 January 2016) and Grand-Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire (13 March 2016).

The katibas that moved around AQIM were soon joined by Amadou Kouffa's jihadist group Macina Liberation Front (FLM), a group that abruptly emerged in January 2015<sup>3</sup> with the aim of expanding jihad to southern Mali and restoring the former empire of Macina. This group, which recruits among the Fulani populations of Mali, trapped between the Tuareg and Malian farmers in the south who reproach them for their pastoralist traditions,

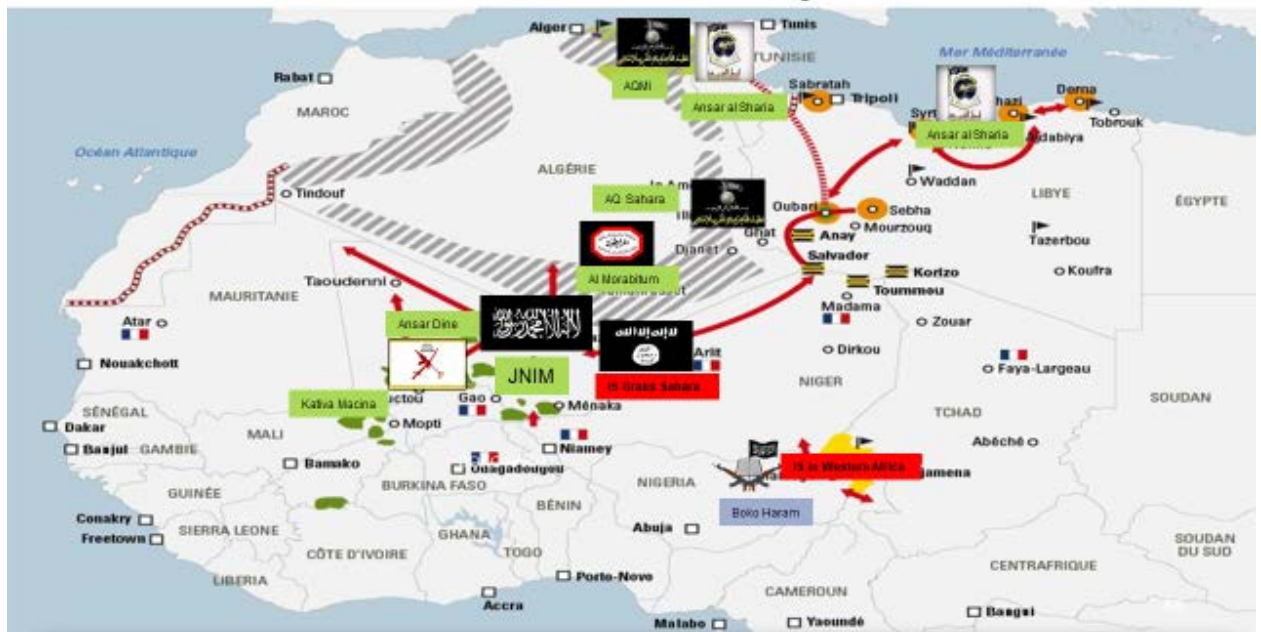
<sup>1</sup> "Global Terrorism Index". <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>

<sup>2</sup> Olivier HANNE, "Évolution du djihadisme et du terrorisme au Sahel depuis vingt ans – GeoStrategia", L'agenda stratégique 2.0, 25.12.2020, <https://www.geostrategia.fr/evolution-djihadisme-terrorisme-sahel/>

<sup>3</sup> Pauline LE RROUX, "Confronting Central Mali's Extremist Threat", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 22.02.2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/confronting-central-malis-extremist-threat/>

demonstrated its operational capacity by taking control, albeit temporarily, of the town of Fakola in the south-west of the country in June 2015.

## Situación actual de la amenaza yihadista



(Source: prepared internally)

In March 2017, all Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadist groups came together in an alliance of circumstance called the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM), the result of the artificial merger of Ansar Dine, AQIM, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) and Al-Mourabitoun, the latter a jihadist group created in August 2013 and whose leader, the Algerian Mojtar Belmojtar became notorious in January 2013 with his attack on the Tiguentourine gas facility in Algeria.<sup>4</sup> The new JNIM leader became Iyad ag-Ghali, the head of Ansar Dine,<sup>3</sup> who led the 1990 rebellion of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA) against the Malian government and is known in the West as an intermediary in the liberation of European citizens in the first decade of the century.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this merger was to increase the synergy of their actions by sharing networks, experiences and results but also, following al-Qaeda's strategy, to distance themselves from the other branch of international jihadism represented by the Islamic State (Daesh), which was then emerging strongly in the Sahel. JNIM used the strategy of presenting

<sup>4</sup> "Algeria hostage crisis: the full story of the kidnapping in the desert, Algerian hostage crisis", The Guardian, 27.01.2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/25/in-amenas-timeline-siege-algeria>.

<sup>5</sup> Ignacio CEMBRERO, "Un jefe tuareg de Malí negocia el rescate", EL PAÍS, 28.12.2009, [Un jefe tuareg de Malí negocia el rescate | España | EL PAÍS \(elpais.com\)](http://elpais.com).

itself as a reasonable actor, a promoter of Islamic governance and capable of issuing apologetic statements when civilians were killed, rather than the bloodthirsty terrorists that Daesh fighters were.

As for this group, it emerged as a Sahelian franchise of Daesh in the Middle East, adopting the name of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) and established itself in the Three Borders region, between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, in an area particularly neglected by the states.<sup>6</sup> Its history dates back to the oath of allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015 by the Sahrawi Adnan Abu Walid al-Saharawi, former spokesman of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and also former 'emir' of Al-Mourabitoun in Mali.<sup>7</sup> The IS-GS will become particularly prominent in sub-Saharan Africa and will be characterised as following the most intransigent and ultra-violent tenets of jihadism, becoming the preferred target of Western and Sahelian forces.

Its fighters were largely from the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), a group created in 2011 by Mauritanian Hamada Ould Kheira, who had left AQIM as a result of the group's internal ethnic-tribal antagonism under the control of Algerians such as Droukdel and Belmokhtar, while the fighters were mostly black Africans recruited from among the Fulani, Daoussahaks and Gao Moors.<sup>8</sup> From its stronghold of Ménaka, and strengthened by its local roots, egalitarian discourse and anti-Umoneg attitude, the MMUJWA would become known for its campaign of kidnappings and suicide bombings modelled on al-Qaeda.

Of particular interest is also the relationship between IS-GS and the other Islamic State (IS) franchise operating in the Lake Chad region under the name Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP). This group emerged in 2016 as a splinter group of Boko Haram, the most active and lethal group in West Africa, which, by 2019, had killed more than 35,000 people and displaced more than two million.<sup>9</sup>

Created in 2002 in the northern Nigerian state of Borno and led since 2009 by Abu Bakr Shekau,<sup>10</sup> after the death in police custody of founder Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram

<sup>6</sup> Jared THOMSON, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara", 22.07.2021, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-greater-sahara>

<sup>7</sup> Domenico CHIAPPE, "Abu Walid, el terrorista saharauí del ISIS que pudo ser español", HOY.es, 16.09.2021, <https://www.hoy.es/internacional/muere-terrorista-isis-20210916174309-ntrc.html>

<sup>8</sup> José NARANJO, "Al Qaeda se extiende en África occidental apoyada en el cantera subsahariana", EL PAIS, 16.04.2016, [https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/04/15/actualidad/1460728241\\_287676.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/04/15/actualidad/1460728241_287676.html).

<sup>9</sup> Kunle SANNI, "Nigeria: Boko Haram - 35,000 Killed So Far in Nigeria – UN", AllAfrica, 17.08.2019, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201908180028.html>

<sup>10</sup> Bloodthirsty jihadist leader who would die in June 2021.

was characterised by indiscriminate attacks on civilians and spread to neighbouring Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and the group changed its name to ISWAP, but due to his brutality, IS decided to remove him in 2016, appointing Al Barnawi, the founder's eldest son and until then the group's spokesman, as his successor, thus creating two factions: Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Both groups pursued the same goal of establishing a hardline Salafist-jihadist caliphate in the Shari'a-ruled Sahel, the main difference between the two being the ruthlessness of Boko Haram's actions, as opposed to ISWAP's greater concern for gaining the acceptance of the local population. Their phoenix-like operational trajectory tells a similar story for both, their greatest strength being their ability to use areas with little state presence to retreat and regroup, while using a variety of tactics to maintain the flow of resources that have made them deadly and resilient jihadist groups.

However, Shekau's death in June 2021, after the rival splinter group stormed his Sambisa Forest fiefdom, has weakened Boko Haram and facilitated the integration of many of its members into ISWAP.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of the relationship between ISWAP and IS-GS, the two jihadist groups are geographically independent, although IS-GS is technically considered a sub-group of ISWAP according to the Islamic State's bureaucratic structure. ISWAP is particularly active in the Lake Chad Basin region, where it has intensified attacks against security forces since mid-2018 mainly in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, while IS-GS is more confined to the Liptako Gourma region with operations in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M.R, "La última muerte de Abubakar Shekau, el sanguinario líder de Boko Haram", La Voz de Galicia, 12.06.2021, <https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/internacional/2021/06/11/ultima-muerte-abubakar-shekau-sanguinario-lider-boko-haram/00031623422695083181209.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Jared THOMSOM, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22.07.2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-greater-sahara>.



(Source: prepared internally)

Another differential aspect of Sahelian jihadism concerns the relationship between JNIM as an Al Qaeda affiliate and IS-GS as an Islamic State affiliate. For a number of years there existed, in contrast to affiliates in other regions of the world where they operate, a kind of tacit agreement of non-belligerence, and even cooperation between the two in joint raids against shared enemies; this is what came to be known as the "Sahelian anomaly".<sup>13</sup> This made it easier for jihadism to expand its range of action in other Sahelian and West African countries since 2017, taking advantage of porous borders where rural societies marginalised by the state lived.

However, in 2019, this pact was broken and tensions between JNIM and IS-GS became violent in the Three Borders area of the Liptako region. The causes of this rupture must be attributed to a number of factors, the main one being the ideological hardening of the IS-GS, resulting in its integration into the more radical ISWAP and the consequent pressure to confront JNIM. To this should be added the tensions that have arisen between the two groups, driven by the growing operational ambitions of the IS-GS, which competes for fighters and resources in the Sahel.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The jihadist risk now extends to Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Senegal, and although the ISIS has been weakened in Mali through military action by France and its partners and lost its leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in September 2021, it continues to seek a foothold in western Niger and Burkina Faso, even if that means linking up with Boko Haram in Nigeria. The JNIM, whose emir Droukdel was also killed in June 2020 in southern Algeria, is reportedly trying to strengthen itself in the Azawad by taking advantage of the lack of reaction from Algeria and in central Mali, where it is forced to coexist with nationalist groups in the Azawad.

To complete the picture of armed threats in the Sahel, we should finally add the separatist groups in northern Mali, signatories to the 2015 Algiers agreements that were supposed to guarantee peace and reconciliation. These armed groups have formed a kind of parallel army in the Kidal region, dominated by the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), which is an alliance of rebel groups created in Mali in October 2014. These groups came together in September 2021 to form the "Permanent Strategic Framework" (CSP),<sup>15</sup> which is dominated by Tuareg and Arab nomads and where Mali's majority communities (Songhaïs, Peuls, Bellahs) are poorly represented.

### **Taking stock of the military forces' performance**

As far as Western and Sahelian government military forces are concerned, it is undeniable to admit that, from a tactical point of view, important successes have been achieved in recent years. Operations against armed terrorist groups during 2020 and 2021 have resulted in the targeted elimination of some of the most important jihadist leaders, including Abdelmalek Droukdel (head of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM),<sup>16</sup> Bah Ag Moussa (one of the leaders of the Support Group for Islam and Muslims, JNIM), Abu Walid al-Saharoui (head of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, IS-GS), or Abu al-Maghrebi (religious leader of JNIM).

These favourable results on the ground have not, however, prevented the spread of jihadist violence to southern Mali and Burkina Faso and also to western Niger, and even

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<sup>15</sup> The CSP is composed of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), all signatories to the Algiers Process Peace and Reconciliation Agreement.

<sup>16</sup> Oren CHAUVEL. "Elimination de Droukdel par la France: crise pour AQMI et tournant dans la lutte contre les GAT?", IEC-IES, 07.07.2020. <https://urlz.fr/gH1j>



attacks in Burkina Faso's border areas with countries in the Gulf of Guinea. This was the main reason for the double military coup in Mali in August 2020 and May 2021 and the coup d'état in Burkina Faso in January 2022.<sup>17</sup>

The deterioration of the situation led French President Emmanuel Macron to decide in early June 2021 to suspend joint operations between French and Malian soldiers, while assuring that France would remain militarily engaged in the Sahel, but within the framework of an "international alliance associating the states of the region",<sup>2</sup> a new mission whose precise outline has yet to be defined.

In fact, this is not a new decision; at the Pau Summit in January 2020, which brought together the G5 Sahel countries<sup>18</sup> and France, the French government had already expressed its desire to reduce its presence in the Sahel and reiterated the need for African countries to take responsibility for the security of their citizens. However, it was the second coup d'état on 26 May 2021 that ousted interim president Bah Ndaw and made Mali's hitherto vice-president Assimi Goita the transitional president, which precipitated the decision to withdraw from Mali.

The new Malian junta, in a context of growing hostility towards the French presence in Mali – the greatest expression of which was the expulsion of the French ambassador in January 2022<sup>19</sup> – demanded the departure of all French and European forces and the handover of the Barkhane bases to the soldiers of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Malian army, but also to the Russian mercenaries of the Wagner group who, in early January 2022, settled at the military base in Timbuktu.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, the new French design to "reposition" its forces was an implicit recognition that its counterinsurgency strategy was not working and that the natural consequence was to reduce the number of troops in the Barkhane force by half, in a process that was to be completed by the middle of 2023. The military force would thus be reduced from 5,100 to 2,500 French soldiers redeployed outside Mali, mainly in the "three borders" area

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<sup>17</sup> "Las acciones yihadistas en el Sahel aumentaron un 70% en 2021, con Burkina Faso como principal foco", Europa Press, 01.02.2022. <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-acciones-yihadistas-sahel-aumentaron-70-2021-burkina-faso-principal-foco-20220201115352.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania and Chad.

<sup>19</sup> "Le Mali annonce l'expulsion de l'ambassadeur de France sous soixante-douze heures", Le Monde, 31.01.2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/01/31/le-mali-decide-d-expulser-l-ambassadeur-de-france\\_6111729\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/01/31/le-mali-decide-d-expulser-l-ambassadeur-de-france_6111729_3212.html).

in Niger's territory,<sup>20</sup> and its mission would be exclusively anti-terrorist, aimed at curbing the expansion of jihadist groups towards the south, a trend that has been increasing in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

This operational redefinition of the framework for French military action implied – along with a commitment to continue fighting terrorism – a significant reduction of its conventional forces in favour of a greater increase in special forces, as well as a greater reliance on air assets to the detriment of ground capabilities.

The increased use of drones from late 2019, combined with special forces, would support this troop reduction strategy, as they are more effective at eliminating adversaries than ground forces. As a result, drones now account for 40% of air strikes, with the result of operations in the area multiplying.<sup>22</sup>

The reduction of French troops in the Sahel will necessarily affect the other French operation in the region, Operation Sabre, which has been active since 2009. With its operational base in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, Task Force (TF) Sabre is composed of 400 French special forces troops and has been primarily responsible for the elimination of most high-value targets (HVTs) such as jihadist leaders.

In the new context of French redeployment, its organisational and operational autonomy vis-à-vis Barkhane risks being affected by the end of this operation. In fact, TF Sabre could lose some of its human and material resources if Barkhane disappears, to the benefit of the increased power of the new Takuba force that, although European, bases its structure to a large extent on the French special forces that have defined the rules of engagement and operational procedures.<sup>23</sup>

Created in July 2020 to make up for the shortcomings of the European Union's training mission in Mali (EUTM) – given the impossibility for the European trainers of the EUTM to accompany Malian soldiers during their operations – the Takuba force was to reach 2,000 combatants from several European countries and take part in counter-insurgency actions, replacing Operation Barkhane.

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<sup>20</sup> Liptako region located on the border between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.

<sup>21</sup> Michel GOYA, "France In The Sahel Is A Policeman Trying To Escape From Prison", Hoover Institution, 21.09.2021, <https://www.hoover.org/research/france-sahel-policeman-trying-escape-prison>.

<sup>22</sup> France has six armed drones and seven fighter jets in the Sahel.

<sup>23</sup> ALONSO, Pierre. "L'opération Takuba, successeuse de Barkhane? L'union fait la task force", Libération, 21 October 2021. Available at: <https://urlz.fr/gHby>

Their deployment is an implicit recognition of the inability of French forces to control the vast territory of the Sahel, except temporarily and in specific areas, and of the weakness of local armed forces, especially in Mali, to do so. Thus, the constituent purpose of Task Force Takuba would be to integrate local forces with European special forces teams, thereby creating a critical mass of forces capable of defeating any opposing group and better protecting the population. This would obviously not solve the structural problems of local armies, but it would allow them to be much more effective on the ground and to do so more quickly.

And in counter-insurgency warfare, the principle is that hitting the enemy is good, but controlling the terrain is better, with the combination of the two effects producing the best results. This principle works well in theory, but it remains to be seen whether it could yield strategic results in the Sahel scenario.

Moreover, TF Takuba is suffering from serious structural problems stemming from its slow deployment, the reluctance of some states to participate in it, the traumatic expulsion of the Danish component from Mali when it arrived on the grounds of bureaucratic shortcomings, the small number of its components, which do not exceed 800 troops, half of them French, and the fact that they cannot operate in Mali, where the centre the insurgency is located.

As far as training missions are concerned, they remain today the EU's main and most substantial contribution to security in the Sahel. Although the will of Europe is to strengthen its means and capabilities to support the security forces of the countries in the region, an objective it considers crucial to increase the protection of local populations and the stability of the region, its survival will depend, in any case, on whether the necessary conditions are met, as recognised in the EU-AU joint declaration of 17 February 2022.<sup>24</sup>

These conditions include a strict separation between its activities and those of the Russian paramilitary group Wagner, which is increasingly active in the Sahel, and a guarantee that EU-trained Malian soldiers would not subsequently join units operating under Wagner's orders.<sup>25</sup> At this time, there is no consensus on the future of EU

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<sup>24</sup> "Déclaration conjointe sur la lutte contre la menace terroriste et le soutien à la paix et à la sécurité au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest", Élysée, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/02/17/declaration-conjointe-sur-la-lutte-contre-la-menace-terroriste>.

<sup>25</sup> "Crucial European Union foreign ministers' meeting on EU presence in Mali", Africa Intelligence, 18.03.2022, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_diplomacy/2022/03/18/crucial-european-union-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-eu-presence-in-mali.109761562-art](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_diplomacy/2022/03/18/crucial-european-union-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-eu-presence-in-mali.109761562-art).

operations in Mali, with several member states in favour of suspending the mission, while others are reluctant to do so.

The other two forces on the ground are also failing to produce tangible results in improving the stability situation, due to a lack of equipment, financial means and transnational coordination. The G5 Sahel Joint Force – created in 2017 and officially composed of 5,000 men from Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad – is conditioned by the need for greater regional cooperation to prevent each of them pursuing their national interests above all else.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, reliance on the support of other military structures such as the Barkhane force for training and MINUSMA for operational support does not facilitate operational performance either.

In the case of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) in Mali – present in Mali since 2013 – its work is hampered by the fact that its mandate is limited to the territory of Mali.<sup>27</sup> With France's withdrawal, the UN has announced an increase in personnel from 13,000 troops and 1,700 police officers to 17,300<sup>28</sup> in order to fill the territorial gaps created by the French withdrawal and prevent security vacuums. However, as with the G5 Sahel joint force, the lack of material, financial and intelligence capabilities, and the fact that its mission is exclusively to support the authorities and not counterinsurgency, make it difficult for it to replace the French in its role.

On the other hand, there are regional armies and self-defence forces that have spontaneously emerged from within the civilian population as a result of the security situation deteriorating. Their performance falls far short of internationally accepted standards and the Malian army's overreaction against Fulani civilians accused of harbouring both JNIM and IS-GS militants is having the opposite effect of increasing local recruitment and driving many populations to seek protection from the jihadists.<sup>29</sup> Indiscriminate attacks against the local population by government-affiliated forces would,

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<sup>26</sup> "Après trois ans d'existence, la force Sahel peine à convaincre", VOA, 21 December 2020. Available at: <https://urlz.fr/gHaL>

<sup>27</sup> Bertrand Ollivier, "Les implications de la mise en place de la Force-Conjointe du G5 Sahel sur la MINUSMA et les contributeurs Régionaux", GRIP, 04.2021, [https://www.observatoire-boutros-ghali.org/sites/default/files/Note%20OBG%20MINUSMA-FC\\_Bertrand.Ollivier.pdf](https://www.observatoire-boutros-ghali.org/sites/default/files/Note%20OBG%20MINUSMA-FC_Bertrand.Ollivier.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> "Adaptation et effectif autorisé de la Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali", Rapport du Secrétaire général (S/2021/657), 16.07.2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/adaptation-et-effectif-autoris-de-la-mission-multidimensionnelle-int-gr-e-des-nations>.

<sup>29</sup> UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment", 2017 (<http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>).

according to MINUSMA, have resulted in more civilian casualties than actual jihadist casualties by 2020.<sup>6</sup>

In other cases, it is local communities that have set up rural self-defence militias, with the consent of the state, violently imposing their own law.<sup>30</sup> This situation has also spread to Niger, a large and poor country currently threatened on five of its seven borders by major jihadist groups, which is considered the best French alternative to deploy after the expulsion of its forces from Mali.

One final actor that has emerged strongly in the security arena in recent years is Russia. Since hosting the first Russia-Africa summit in October 2019 in Sochi, President Vladimir Putin has been striving to make his country play a leading role in Africa, extending geopolitical competition as in the Cold War era.

In the Sahel, as before in Syria, Central African Republic and Libya, Russia has taken advantage of the insecurity and the vacuum created by the announcement of the departure of French forces from Mali, seeking to replace the traditional French partnership and extend its influence in the region through irregular means. To this end, its strategy, which began in December 2021, has relied on disinformation by facilitating the activities of the private military company (PMC) Wagner – linked to the Kremlin through the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Security Service (FSB) – and capitalising on anti-French sentiment at a time when it has spread across the region.<sup>31</sup>

As in the Central African Republic and Mozambique, Wagner has taken advantage of the Malian junta's turn towards Russia to secure regime protection services and security for senior Malian officials against any coup attempt, while securing significant financial benefits through financial and mineral concessions.

However, it cannot be assumed that the use of mercenaries by the Russian Company, Wagner, guarantees success in light of what happened in Libya, where 1,200 Russian mercenaries failed to deliver victory to Marshal Haftar in his offensive against Tripoli in the spring of 2020. Moreover, if we take into account their poor operational results in carrying out similar missions – for example, in 2019 against the Islamist insurgency in

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<sup>30</sup> Nsaibia, H., "State atrocities in the Sahel: the impetus for counterinsurgency results in fueling government attacks on civilians", Analysis, Armed Conflict Location and Data Project (ACLED), 20 May 2020 (<https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>);

<sup>31</sup> Jared THOMPSON, Catrina DOXSEE, Joseph S. BERMUDEZ Jr, "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali", CSIS, 02.02.2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>.

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province – and add to this the high legal and humanitarian costs they impose, including serious human rights violations, we can conclude that Wagner is more of a tool to increase Russian influence on the continent than an element to increase security and regional stabilisation. In any case, its influence on the region's political future will depend greatly on the outcome of the war in Ukraine where Russia's attention is currently focused.

### **Is it possible to reach an end to hostilities with jihadists in the Sahel?**

The major transformations in the security situation in the Sahel in recent times with the announcement of the "end of Barkhane", the emergence of a feeling of hostility towards French policy and the multiplication of ad hoc agreements with JNIM-affiliated jihadist groups in both Mali and Burkina Faso, seem to pave the way for the relaunching of a possible negotiation at a national level, initially in Mali but which could be extended to other countries. This would follow the precedent set in Doha by the agreement between the Taliban and the US in February 2020 to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup>

Eventual negotiations would be favoured by a regional context in which jihadist groups would have been able to exploit local grievances and bad governance – using rhetoric based on anti-colonialism – to stir up local sentiments, presenting themselves as indispensable actors to expel foreign forces.

In this direction, JNIM's recent willingness to enter into negotiations with the Malian state authorities seems to indicate a certain strategic flexibility, albeit based on a non-negotiable extremist ideological position on jihad, whether global or local. No matter how many setbacks and delays they suffer and no matter which regime they face, their mission to turn the Sahel into an Islamic emirate remains a priority.

This negotiating position, whose interlocutor would be the terrorist leader Iyad Ag Ghali, would be supported by Algeria, which is concerned about the evolution of the political and security situation in its southern neighbours, especially in Mali, and which has always been wary of the Barkhane operation, an anti-terrorist action led by the former colonial power. Moreover, the G5 Sahel initiative, supported by France, is also viewed with some caution by Algiers, which would have preferred the management of the continent's

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<sup>32</sup> Mujib MASHAL, "Taliban and U.S. Strike Deal to Withdraw American Troops from Afghanistan", The New York Times, 29.02.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/asia/us-taliban-deal.html>.

security issues through the African Union and regional and bilateral collaboration between states, such as the Joint Operational Military Staff Committee (CEMOC) launched in 2010 and based in Tamanrasset.

Algeria, whose counter-terrorism policy has traditionally oscillated between the carrot and the stick – a counter-terrorism policy based on conventional operations, but leaving open the possibility of jihadists surrendering in exchange for some form of amnesty<sup>33</sup> – would now favour strengthening the JNIM vis-à-vis the CMA, albeit conditional on any agreement having the approval of the Algerian intelligence services and the Algerian government.<sup>34</sup>

It is therefore worth asking whether – and to what extent – the Islamic emirate claimed by the jihadists can become a credible alternative to a model of state that is considered dysfunctional and imposed by large sectors of the local population, where imported formal legality is also less effective and justice usually translates into impunity. If this alternative is confirmed, it would mark the end of a historical cycle of European interventions, with the occupation of the Sahelian space by indigenous jihadist organisations, even if this was not achieved in a violent and coercive manner.

However, reaching a possible agreement does not seem to be an easy task. If the JNIM jihadists – mostly Sahelian and more inclined to negotiate – were to accept this, they would be forced to break with their Algerian jihadist-dominated AQIM matrix, which they would have to get rid of. AQIM would only accept a compromise contrary to its *raison d'être* if it were a capitulation by the Bamako government. In any case, a real compromise would only be possible if the local jihad broke with Al-Qaeda's global jihad and the local authorities accepted – at least formally – that Shari'a would apply to the whole of Mali.

It would also require the current JNIM fighters to lay down their arms, something that would only happen if they were offered significant rewards through an ambitious disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process funded by the international community. In this scenario, it is quite possible that the IS-GS – a group that categorically

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<sup>33</sup> Jihad GUILLON, "Sahel: Négociateur avec Iyad Ag Ghaly est un point de désaccord majeur entre Paris et Alger", *Jeune Afrique*, 02.06.2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1180965/politique/sahel-negociateur-avec-iyad-ag-ghali-est-un-point-de-desaccord-majeur-entre-paris-et-alger/>.

<sup>34</sup> Adam EUGENE, "Un gradé des services de renseignement algériens à Tinzawaten pour semer le trouble au Mali", *Agence Afrique*, 04.11.2021, <https://www.agenceafrique.com/30992-un-grade-des-services-de-renseignement-algeriens-a-tinzawaten-pour-semer-le-trouble-au-mali.html>.

rejects any dialogue – would attract all those disgruntled people who, for ideological or material reasons, would not accept a negotiation process with the government.

It is precisely this lack of guarantee of success that makes the Bamako government view the possibility of dialogue with JNIM with great hesitation.

More favourable are the chances of success offered by the agreements reached with the CSP in February 2022 in Rome, where the northern Malian armed groups represented there signed a peace agreement with the Malian Minister of National Reconciliation, Ismaël Wagué.

Dubbed the "Rome Agreement in Principle", and under the patronage of an Italy that pursues its own agenda, this agreement aims to ensure a definitive cessation of hostilities between Azawad and Bamako and represents the culmination of diplomatic efforts initiated by Algeria in 2015, but also a snub to Paris, which considers that the rebel movement should be "disarmed, not armed".<sup>35</sup>

If this agreement lasts, it would be excellent news for the pacification of a key country in the Sahel and good proof that, ultimately, the Malian government is capable of guaranteeing its territorial integrity through diplomacy rather than arms, and without the need for French intervention and even under conditions of ECOWAS sanctions. Ultimately, however, everything will depend on the ability to integrate the other variable in the security equation – the jihadist groups – into these arrangements, and this remains to be seen.

### **Future outlooks for security in the Sahel**

The outlook for security in the Sahel remains bleak in the short to medium term. Jihadist groups have been demonstrating great resilience in adapting quickly to the dynamics of operations on the ground, even when faced with tactical defeats. Every time an African government has declared that a group is "defeated", the facts have been disproved shortly afterwards. Military efforts to defeat them on the battlefield, the preferred option for restoring security, have been disappointing.

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<sup>35</sup> "Con el Acuerdo de Roma, ¿Malí recuperará su integridad territorial?" El Journal de l'Afrique, 4.02.202, <https://lejournaldefrafrique.com/es/con-el-acuerdo-de-roma-mali-recuperar%C3%A1-su-integridad-territorial/>.



The military efforts of French and local forces, despite having taken out many of the jihadist leaders, as well as regional initiatives such as the G5 Sahel joint force, or military training provided by the European Union (EUTM) have not yielded the expected results and, surprisingly, have failed to overcome local jihadist groups as reliable providers of security and services.

In this regard, experience over the years indicates that military strikes against jihadist organisations tend to displace them by forcing them to seek refuge, rather than eradicate them, so that once military pressure diminishes, they return stronger and expand further, unless the capabilities of the state in which they have been operating have substantially improved.

On the other hand, and regardless of the difference in approach or ideology, the new security reality in the Sahel is defined by intense competition between regional Islamic State and al-Qaeda franchises, exacerbated by pre-existing structural vulnerabilities, which has resulted in increased violence and conflict.

However, competition between the two branches of jihadism in the Sahel may be a favourable factor in the new context of French withdrawal and contribute to the weakening of these groups and the depletion of their resources, effectively diluting the threat they pose.<sup>36</sup>

But the opposite can also happen: direct competition for new recruits and the support of locals can lead to a "bidding up" process using increasing levels of violence to demonstrate their commitment and relative power vis-à-vis the competing organisation.<sup>37</sup>

Such competition between jihadist groups can aggravate the insecurity situation by encouraging operational innovation, increasing recruitment and pushing civilians to choose sides, contributing to the prolongation of the conflict, as well as to the resilience and adaptability of competing groups.<sup>38</sup> If this were to happen, it would further complicate the security landscape in an already fragile region.

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<sup>36</sup> Jacob Zenn Clarke Colin P., "Al Qaeda and ISIS Had a Truce in Africa—Until They Didn't" *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed 3 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/26/al-qaeda-isis-west-africa-sahel-st...>

<sup>37</sup> Mia M. Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding", *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20202305>.

<sup>38</sup> Brian J Phillips, "Enemies with Benefits? Violent Rivalry and Terrorist Group Longevity", *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 52, Issue 1, January 2015, accessed 22 August 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022343314550538>.

Moreover, the change in the mechanism of Operation Barkhane to delegate responsibility for counter-insurgency to local armies and the European partners of the Takuba force comes too late, and does so at a time when local populations' protest and the French authorities' inability to communicate strategically are showing the limits of external military action.

It seems fundamental, therefore, in order to have a minimum guarantee of success, to achieve a greater "hybridisation" between international forces and local armies that avoids possible rejection, so that the former appear as a support element and not as those responsible for counter-insurgency action.

In conclusion, the local and international response to the jihadist threat has been enriched over the years and it is now accepted that a multidimensional and inclusive solution, beyond the purely military, is needed that addresses the economic, social and governance dysfunctions that are at the root of local insurgencies and jihadism, reinforces the sovereign functions of Sahelian states, starting with the security forces, but also local public services. This response must, however, maintain a military and police dimension that is absolutely essential in ensuring a minimum of law and order in weak, incapable and dysfunctional Sahelian states. Ultimately, success will depend on translating this awareness into action in a physical space, the Sahel, which today remains largely uncontrolled.

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