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COUNTERING GROWING TERRORIST THREATS IN THE THIRD WORLD – CASE OF WESTERN SAHEL IN NORTH AFRICA

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Exercise Solo Flight

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COUNTERING GROWING TERRORIST THREATS IN THE THIRD WORLD- CASE OF WESTERN SAHEL IN NORTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing threat of terrorist acts of a hybrid nature in the Western Sahel region of North Africa and if this is left to continue without containment would result in disastrous consequences to the peace and security of the United States, Europe and probably the entire African Continent. The Sahel is a region separating North and Sub-Saharan Africa that comprises five countries namely; Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, and Chad. The region has been transformed into a crisis hub due to its long characteristic nature of being a region prone to political violence, territorial or tribal disputes, and trafficking of all kinds due to long permeability borders and the resurgence of Islamic terrorist groups. The jihadist groups or armed movements that claim to fight in the name of Islam have become so sophisticated in their strategies since the ignition of the Malian crisis in 2012.¹

The jihadist convergence in the Sahel can be traced back to 1991-2002 at the time of the Algerian Civil War. After so many years of fighting between Algerian security forces and the Islamist Armed Groups (GIA), and the civil war claiming thousands of lives, authorities granted amnesty to the GIA members through what was called a Civil Concord referendum of 1999 and its most significant element of the agreement was the establishment of a process of clemency for Islamic fighters.² Despite the majority embracing the referendum, some of the militants were defiant and created the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) that continued fighting the regime. With such a development, the Algerian security forces reiterated and were not reluctant in their pursuit for peace and security within the country. When the GSPC realized that it was losing the fight and lacking support, it had no option but to resort to pledging allegiance to

¹ Olawale, Ismail and Alagaw Ababu kifle, "New Collective Security Arrangements in the Sahel: a comparative study of the MNJTF and G-5 Sahel", p 15.

² Hamza. Cherbib, "Jihadism in the Sahel: Exploiting Local Disorders," p 1.

the International jihadist organization Al Qaeda in 2006 and was rebranded by the year 2007 into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).³ This paper argues that the roots of the instability and militancy are grounded in the jihadist activities associated with factions originating from the Algerian civil war, the uprising in Libya and the war in Mali. The Western Sahel is a strategic security value that cannot be left open to terrorist influence. This paper recommends that the most appropriate way to deal with the threat is for the G5 Sahel initiative to incorporate Algeria in its security framework that will be based on local circumstances.

This essay will support this by exploring the dynamics of AQIM in the Sahel, uncovering its ideology, and develop approaches that are best suited to fight the threat. Algeria is considered a hegemony in the region and one that for over a decade fought jihadists within its territory. From 2014, the government of Algeria believed that extremists Islamist groups in the region could be marginalized by bringing the Maghrebi parties together to share tactics and promote dialogue despite it having had an isolation stance in the region due to conflicting positions on national security within the regime.⁴

DYNAMICS OF AQIM IN THE SAHEL

The Sahel region is a geo-strategic territory in North Africa which offers a gateway to Europe and the West through the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It is a region that is poor and with so many structural problems such as weak governance, corruption, crime, and violent extremism. Political weakness and violence in the region have become the main drivers of radical proselytizing and terrorist activities of hybrid nature of some Jihadist-Salafist organizations linked to Al Qaeda.⁵ The GIA, an Algerian militant armed group, came to limelight in the early 1990s and was aimed at overthrowing the government and establishing an

³ Laith Alkhouri, "Terrorism in North Africa: An Examination of the Threat," p 3.

⁴ IHS Markit, (Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst, 06 Nov-2014) "Militant Menace- Algeria responds to turbulence in the Sahel," p 1-2.

⁵ Anne, Wolf. *Commentary*, "The Journal of North African Studies", 21 (2), p 171-177, January 13, 2016.

Islamic state. With internal divisions amongst its members due partly to changes in its strategies, the armed group split and this saw the birth of GSPC which later became the main opposition to the government of Algeria. Due to its affiliation to Al Qaeda and in its pursuit of global jihad, the Algerian government with its Security forces launched a deliberate political and military campaign to crackdown the group. As a result of the anti-Islamist operations that were conducted between 2004 and 2006, part of the faction thinned out into some broad area of the Sahel between South Algeria and Northern Mali hence creating small pockets of banditry elements that later entrenched into local societies, illegal businesses, and supported their political causes.⁶ These interactions of factions led to AQIM becoming a regional franchise and a center of gravity that is able to carry out hybridized terror activities between the different jihadist groups.

Then came the fall of Libya in 2011, and a number of armed groups emerged in the crisis that worsened the situation in the Sahel region. These new groups dispersed and proliferated into southern Algeria, northern Mali, south-western Niger, and eastern Mauritania and in recent years Burkina Faso and Chad, carrying along with them sophisticated arms and ammunition.⁷ These groups have increased the challenges of regional stability in that they have shown a gradual resurgence and further realignment of the jihadist armed groups that have continued to extend their operational range further south and across northwest African borders. There, they interfere in and interact in conflicts that already exist, and among a significant number of factions that are operating in this complex and fragmented region, the Jihadist-Salafist groups continue to remain

⁶ Ashour, Omar. "The Algerian Tragedy," Brookings Institutes, 25 January 2013.

⁷ Boeke, S. (2016, August 5). Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime? *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27(5), 914-936. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208280>

dominant and operating in most parts of southern Algeria, south-western Niger, and northern Mali.⁸

The situation was further compounded by the crisis in Mali in 2012 and the unforeseen alliances that AQIM created with the local warlords. Since 2013, an umbrella organization was created by AQIM in which it merged its satellite factions with other Jihadist- Salafist organizations active in the region such as al –Mourabitoun (the sentinels), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Macina Liberation Front (MLF).⁹ The founding of the Jamaat Nusrat-al-Islam wal-Muslim (JNIM) reflects AQIM's attempt to unite the Islamist front to implement the Sharia law in the region. JNIM has reemphasized its goal as to merge and reinforce the existing armed groups in the region in order to create a stronger organization that will be committed to developing a Jihadist – Salafist policy of “Sahelisation”¹⁰ If this goes on unchecked, it will be an undeniable fact that the presence of the jihadist groups in the region would pose a significant threat to the stability of West Africa or entirely Africa as a whole and could further again undermine the stability of the West.

These terrorist groups thrive and take advantage of existing conflicts between tribal or ethnic factions or states against non-state actors and engage in criminal activities. In 2003, a dangerous trend emerged in which GSPC/AQIM and its affiliates started engaging in the kidnappings of several foreign nationals despite their other involvements in dealings in arms and human trafficking, smuggling of cigarettes and narcotics as their source of income.¹¹ Between 2008 and 2009, the kidnapping business had increased its revenues to around 150% and it was

⁸ Raineri, L., & Strazzari, F. (2017, June). Jihadism in Mali and the Sahel: evolving dynamics and patterns. *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*. Brief Issue 21. Retrieved from <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/jihadism-mali-and-sahel-evolvingdynamics-and-patterns>

⁹ Chivvis, C. S. (2017, January 12). Mali’s persistent jihadist problem. *The Cipher Brief*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/africa/malis-persistent-jihadist-problem-2>

¹⁰ Ghanem Yazbeck, D. (2017a, January). Conditions in the Sahel benefit Al Qaeda. *The Cipher Brief*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/africa/conditions-in-thesahel-benefit-al-qaeda>

¹¹ Stanford University, Mapping militant organizations, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, 1 July 2016 <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/65> Accessed 18 April 2019.

believed that the group had over \$25 million from ransoms that were paid within the region and hence became the wealthiest affiliate that was able to support its operations.¹² This growing criminal industry and various dealings are increasing, and it is a means of sustainment for AQIM, and a means for recruiting more members, as well as procurement of weapons and various equipment for communications.

IDEOLOGY OF AQIM AND ITS TERRORIST ACTS

The predecessor organization to AQIM, the GSPC, after its separation from the then GIA sought to reshape the strategy from that of attacking the population to a new one of targeting military and security forces.¹³ With such a strategy, the organization fought for the establishment of Islamic Sharia governance and the targeting of Western nationals and interests in the region. The affiliation of the group to the core effectively placed it in the spotlight as a major player in the Jihadi efforts in North Africa and the Sahel region and therefore operates on the beliefs of rescuing countries in the region from the perceived tentacles of criminal regimes that betray their religion and their people, the “apostate enemies”.¹⁴ AQIM’s strategy blends well with local and global Jihadist – Salafist conviction that rejects influence by France and the West in the region. In its views, AQIM looks at the governments of the region as an extension of the Western powers and interests that are aimed at fighting and uprooting Islam, therefore accordingly the West must be confronted and if not directly, then only through its citizens and interests.

In the initial move of the group, by then GSPC into the region, it was motivated by survival and a desire to rebuild its structures and financial muscle. Then the “Sahalisation” of the

¹² Jean-Charles Brisard. “*Terrorism Financing in North Africa*,” <http://www.acdemocracy.org/terrorism-financing-in-north-africa/#sthash> Accessed 18 April 2019

¹³ Grobelaar, A., & Solomon, H. (2015, April 16). The origins, ideology, and development of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. *Africa Review*, 7(2), 149-161. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09744053.2015.1030870?journal>

¹⁴ Porter, G. D. AQIM’s objectives in North Africa, ‘*The Muslim Brotherhood’s role in the Egyptian revolution*,’ 5-8 February 2011.

GSPC/AQIM made the group focus on crime in the region, including kidnapping and drug smuggling to keep up with its operations. Organizationally, the group is more decentralized in its approach and sees the Sahel region as the primary geographic location for its operations. The leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al- Zawahiri sees the region in general as a new front to weaken the United States, and not really as a launching pad for operations in the West as yet due to its operational reach. He did though underscore his focus in his 2010 manifesto and guidelines towards his Jihad work stating that:

In Algeria, where the American presence is small and unnoticeable, the struggle against the regime is for the sake of weakening it and to spread the jihadi influence across the Islamic Maghreb, the West African Sahel and South Saharan countries, and in these regions the signs of [mujahideen] confrontation with the Americans and their allies have started....[sic] All the mujahideen brothers should consider targeting the Western Crusader-Zionist coalition's interests in any location in the world the most important of their duties, and to seek it to the best of their ability.¹⁵

Not yet has AQIM claimed responsibility on Western soil for terrorist attacks or operations but it continues to underscore that one out of the many goals is to target Western citizens and interests. AQIM seems to be confrontational towards the West at large, as it views Western and "Zionist" influence as harming Muslims in regards to threats, persecution, and targeting. Of much interest is AQIM's grievance towards France just from its inception due to the role that country played in Mali and further to note is that its targeting is not based on nationalists' borders only neither is it limited to French citizens and interest. The fight against the West could be seen as part of a large battle that the group is strategically and systematically pursuing for a greater cause and only time will tell.

¹⁵ Laith Alkhouri, "Terrorism in North Africa: An Examination of the Threat," p 9.

Though in 2007, with its focus on the promised strategy it carried out simultaneous and deadly bomb attacks on the regions United Nations (UN) headquarters and a Constitutional Court of Algeria on April 11th, 2007. In this well-timed and notable attack, approximately 33 individuals lost their lives, and this marked the start of a new period in the fight against terror in the Maghreb as it became evident that AQIM would not easily disappear.¹⁶ AQIM continues to be dangerous as is evident when it killed U.S. peacekeepers in Timbuktu, Mali in 2015, held 100 people hostage and killed 19 in Bamako in the same year. The following year, they laid siege to a hotel and some restaurant in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso killing 28 people and holding 126 hostages. Early in 2018, they took over a Malian military camp killing 14 soldiers, going away with military hostages, weapons and vehicles.¹⁷ These acts show how adaptable and cunning AQIM has become in the region that it can operate and carry out such attacks with such ease and without early detection.

APPROACHES TO COMBATTING TERROR ACTS IN THE SAHEL

AQIM has its core footholds in the southern parts of Algeria and northern Mali, and in recent past has gained heavy influence in Mauritania, Niger and other neighboring countries. Its growing revenue corrections and connections with the local faction networks allow it to move and grow in almost any direction that is making it so hard to combat. The security situation of late seems quite challenging to define and at the same time difficult to solve due to the complexity of relationships. The ability of these factions to change loyalties, thin out in the desert or local populations, taking advantage of instability in the surrounding areas and share resources means that trying to combat them or getting to the root problem can be like asking one

¹⁶ Laub Zachary and Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 March 2015.

¹⁷ New York Times, "Ambush on Mali Army Camp" <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/world/africa/mali-army-camp-islamic-attack.html> ACCESSED 19 April 2019.

to hold onto the Saharan sand itself. However, the question that comes to mind is, "how did Algeria manage to contain such threats in its territory."

During its fight against terrorism in the 1990s, Algeria used strategies that embraced the dedication and patience of both the government and security forces. Algerian security forces had undergone a tremendous transformation in the past and also of recent in 2013 when its special forces devoted to anti-terrorists operations became an independent entity of its own.¹⁸ Algiers believes in the containment of terrorists from its doors, and that is keeping them out of the boundaries of the country. This approach called for bold decisions by government officials which saw a number of measures undertaken such as the closure of borders on any sign of trouble which is a huge undertaking(e.g., a 1500 Km border with Morocco since 1994 though on political reasons and 1400km with Mali since 2013). Algeria also declared all borders as restricted military zones, which is only so possible with a professional, well-motivated and equipped security force. For instance, the 1000 km border with Tunisia has an estimated 8,000 troops stationed along it.¹⁹

The Algerian armed forces are postured and trained to fight and to fight terrorism so well. It is one of the strongest on the African continent, with force levels of over 130,000 troops, experienced in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations and for past a decade plus has been fighting low-intensity conflicts against jihadist networks.²⁰ Since the fall of Libya, the Algerian military has stepped up efforts to combat the threat and maintained its military budget of about \$10 billion per year which is the highest in Africa despite fluctuations in its economy.

The aspect of thinking that one would combat terrorism through military means alone is a far-fetched course of action to pursue, and Algiers is so much aware of that, and hence believes

¹⁸ Florence, GAUB. Algeria's army: on Jihadist alert p2.

¹⁹ Florence, GAUB. Algeria's army: on Jihadist alert p 2.

²⁰ *Ibid* p3.

in cooperation, Amnesty and reconciliation of factions involved as it experienced during the 1990s conflict. Due to the Charter on peace and national reconciliation that was signed in 2005, though with criticism, an estimated quarter of Algeria's 27,000 fighters defected from Islamist networks countrywide including high ranking individuals.

Algeria now seems to be facing a most acute security challenge since the end of its dark decade in 2000. This threat is the fallout from the Arab spring and the implosion from Libya that is combining with threats from the Sahel. Amidst these frustrating and deteriorating conditions, Algiers stands apart as an active state that possesses a strong military, a police apparatus along with expansive and proficient intelligence networks. This threat would only be conquered with the aspects mentioned above, and the need for further cooperation between states involved such as Mali, Niger, and Mauritania.

Several security arrangements over the past decades have been initiated in the Sahel at national, regional, continental and international level but these have proved to be a challenge in resolving these dynamic and ever-changing threats. For this paper, the focus will be on the G5 Sahel security initiative which was established in 2014, though what remains to be figured out is the capacity to respond and the ability to adapt by states. The G5 Sahel members, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, saw the need to respond to a challenging regional security threat by launching a joint security force in 2017. Although these forces are spread over the region in three sectors: Western (Mali and Mauritania), Central (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), and Eastern (Chad and Niger), the 5,000 troops are not adequate to contain the threat.²¹

As much as the initiative is focused on countering the threat in the region, probably more thought and evaluation should have been raised at regional level to include Algeria in the

²¹ Giuseppe, Dentice. "Terrorism in the Sahel Region": An evolving threat on Europe's doorstep. No.80,(19 February 2018), p 7.

initiative despite regional politics at play. Of late, Algeria has been making adjustments with regards to its doctrine in line with the constitutional principle of non-intervention abroad and has been handling security threats based a case to case basis. It would be wise to incorporate Algeria in the fight as it is one of the hegemony in the region. The G5 Sahel member states have thin troops on the ground to counter such a threat due to some overlaps such as troop contributions in various security bodies in the region and a lack of funds to sustain the operations. The alternative to such is as mentioned, and the best approach would be as outlined in the following paragraph.

The mapped geographical areas that these jihadi groups operate on are the southern parts of Algeria (without security force presence) between the borders of northern Mali, northern Niger, part of Chad and Libya.²² The longest among these borders is the one with Mali, which is 1,359 Km. Niger is 951 Km, and the one between Libya and Algeria is 989 Km. With such experience in border control that Algerian security forces have, evidently with the way that the borders between Morocco and Tunisia have gionbeen contained over the years such an endeavor would not be far-fetched. With forces on ground well-coordinated and pushing in from all approaches, reducing the space of operations, curtailing the ability of groups to recruit within these areas with significant economic/ developmental initiatives and enhancement of surveillance of security forces over religious preaching that spreads radical ideologies, in no time the threat would be contained. To achieve this, member states have to commit to the cause and remove all barriers of differences be it political, economic, religious, tribal or ethnic.

CONCLUSION

The operational geography in which the regional security architecture, the G5 Sahel is expected to operate on in order to neutralize AQIM is vast and complex. Priorities among the

²² African Center for Strategic Studies, "The G5 Sahel Joint Force Gains Traction," 9 February 2018. Accessed 20 April 2019.

nations involved will have to be coordinated at length with precise mapping and vigorous continuous tracking of extremist groups operating in the area in order to follow their evolution and changes if they occur. Through local ownership as earlier said, Algeria as a powerhouse in the region will have to be involved in the fight. With its economic and military clout, the dynamics of countering this threat will be elevated to a level that would bring hope to the region that has for decades been experiencing conflicts of a different nature.

Algeria's contribution to the cause, with the existing members' readjustments of their troop contributions towards other security arrangements that are ongoing and refocusing on containment of AQIM, would see drastic changes to the security environment in the Western Sahel. With such numbers of security forces brought together that are interoperable, would see specific criteria such as; having humanitarian safe zones that would accommodate the needy without further interference from extremists established, easy identification of supply lines for terrorist groups cut off and mechanisms developed that would provide alternative livelihood options because security would have been guaranteed.

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