



Conflict among Terrorist Groups in Sahel Countries: Root Causes

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The years between 1991 and 2002 witnessed the proliferation of extremist movements in the Sahel countries, notably the Jihad Group that soon branched into other movements under different names according to their location or leadership. Those different names did not stem from a difference in ideology or goals, but from their different approaches and geopolitical environments, which resulted in conflicts among themselves, then developed into conflicts within the same movement.

Emergence in the Sahel Region

Sahel countries were the perfect choice to resettle and restructure fighters returning from conflict zones, particularly Afghanistan, who are well trained to fight States and armies, and strongly hold on to the enmity towards the West for the following reasons:

1. the weakness and fragility of Sahel countries regimes;
2. the politically unframed, traditional, religious environment;
3. racial and domestic conflicts in the region ;
4. the vast desert that goes beyond surveillance ;
5. tribal alliances which are easy to form at the availability of financial resources ;
6. easy recruitment of unemployed young people given the prevalence of unemployment;
7. widespread corruption adequate for information procurement and breaches of the regime's infrastructure.

In the early 2000s, the groups of West Africa's Sahel region suffered from a reduction due to the violent clashes in the 1990s. Chased leadership from everywhere desperately

tried to gather their forces in a global alliance, but local alliances inhibited any success in this regard.

The goals that prompted the emergence of terrorist organizations in Sahel countries varied from one country to another in terms of confrontation objectives and the civil conflicts in the region that stem from deep national and domestic foundations. In the early 2000s, sheltering the leaders of terrorist groups was vital for the internationalization of such conflicts and regeneration of their schemes.

Terrorist organizations took advantage of the chaos created by the conflict between insurgent groups and states, enticing those groups with support, training, and fighting experience in exchange for harboring them and allying with them. Extremist groups were at the center of national negotiations as a result of such infiltration, dictating their options as domestic necessities that could not be overlooked .

This is manifested in Ansar al-Dine's polarization of powerful domestic leaders and introducing them to extremist entities according to an agenda aiming at exploiting domestic conflicts and bringing new alliances under their umbrella.

Thus, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) shifted from a secular national movement with domestic demands into Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) under the command of Iyad Ag Ghali. The Macina Liberation Front, too, shifted into a field battalion affiliated with Ansar al-Islam under the command of Amadou Koufa.

Iyad Ag Ghali was keen on justifying this shift and branding himself as a jihadist. However, Amadou Koufa maintained the nationalism of the Macina Liberation Front. Despite the difference between the two approaches, the outcome is the same, which is the infiltration of extremist movements into insurgent groups, restructuring them to draw upon religious discourse as other terrorist movements do. Such a plan had the biggest impact on complicating the attempts at creating alliances and provoking further conflict among those groups.

Faction Struggle

Given the dire circumstances, citizens are compelled to accept a new discourse that promises to address their concerns and alleviate their pain, as well as to provide them with a fair share of freedom, stability, and justice. Thus, political movements originating

in exclusionary environments in Sahel countries and rebelling against regimes are becoming more prominent, particularly in Mali, Niger, and Chad.

Separatist movements continued to engage in cat-and-mouse battles with regimes, with no end goal in sight. While the State was often successful in relocating insurgent groups to remote outposts, it failed to crush them, and the issue remained unresolved until the arrival of al-Qaeda in the region .

Al-Murabitoun is the first armed group to publicly declare its support for al-Qaeda's ideology. It emerged in 2013 through the merge of two of the most active militant Islamic factions in northern Mali and the Sahara: Al-Mulathameen Brigade led by Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar Khalid Abu al-Abbas, known as The One-Eyed, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) led by Ahmed Ould Amer, known as Ahmed al-Tilemsi after Tilemsi commune in northern Mali, who was killed in a French raid by the end of 2014 and was followed by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi. Then soon after, Al-Murabitoun's branches proliferated in tributaries or in clusters stemming from liberation movements like the Macina Liberation Front did. Al-Murabitoun was the initial leading nucleus of al-Qaeda in northern Mali desert and Mauritania, from which ISIS stemmed.

Conflict between the two groups was inevitable as a result of the al-Qaeda defectors who joined ISIS and rapidly spread with an unusual pace, notably in the Sahel region, especially along the northern Algerian border with Mali .

Conflict Causes

Al-Qaeda, like ISIS, employs an anti-Western discourse that is also directed at Islamic countries that have allied with the West. As a result, the root causes of the conflict must be identified. There are several valid interpretations of the two organizations' escalating clashes, the most important of which are:

1) Leadership Ambitions

Former al-Qaeda leaders were aware of ISIS's power, but failed to achieve comparable results, which prompted some leaders to defect from al-Qaeda and pledge allegiance to ISIS, including Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, who joined the new organization and also polarized other al-Qaeda leaders to boost his influence. This led to a conflict of interest.

2) Different Agendas

After ISIS's resounding defeats in its early strongholds in Iraq and Syria, it decided to move to Africa, which it believed to be a perfect environment for the regeneration of its agenda due to the fragility of most African countries, particularly the Sahel Region. Thus, it decided to establish organizations that would serve under its command and create ties between the Sahel Region and West Africa, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria. This may be explained by the ongoing operations in the Lake Chad Basin, which serves as a networking hub for affiliated organizations in the region.

However, al-Qaeda, which entered the region first, believed that ISIS's endeavors to expand in the Sahel Region and polarize more al-Qaeda-affiliated members pose a threat to its existence, which paved the way for further conflict between the two parties.

3) Competing for Funds

Any organization requires financial resources to operate. However, in serious clashes with the authorities in the region, terrorist organizations' available resources are limited to ransom kidnapping, smuggling goods, and human trafficking to Europe. Due to the scarcity of funding and resources, rivalry arose, resulting in a fiery conflict .

4) Ethnic conflict

There are other motives fueling such a conflict, such as biases and ethnic intolerance. Communities of the Sahel Region comprise several ethnicities. Each is biased to its own citizens, like what happened with the Macina Liberation Front that comprises the Fulani ethnicity.

5) Government Incompetence

Most African Sahel countries suffer from poor education, a lack of basic services, and unemployment. Their governments are incapable of imposing their authority outside major cities, except for a few, thus opening the floodgates to human, drug, and arms trafficking. Militant organizations took advantage of such loopholes and formed alliances with domestic groups, specifically in northern Mali when conflict aggravated between al-Qaeda and ISIS to achieve more victories and gain as much support as possible.