



THE SAHEL BETWEEN ISIS AND AL-QAEDA DIVERGENCE OR DIVERSION?

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A glaringly heated development in the struggle between Al-Qaeda and ISIS thinkers is still persistent across the Sahel and Sahara region, aimed at wielding control over the region. The two parties are trying to assert self and control in the Sahel region. Taking advantage of the appropriate geographical location to carry out terrorist operations, as well as other factors, including: the expansion of the geographical area, the exacerbation of tribal affiliation, the conflict over non-renewable resources, and the drought of soil. The Sahel and Sahara region includes: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

Disagreement and Conflict

The diversity of terrorists of different orientations over the recent decades have obviously triggered many conflicts, and the terrorist movement in the Sahel since 2007 has paired up with those who are readily willing to adopt its orientations and help to further extend its influence and control in West Africa. In the wake of the military collapse of the Islamic State in the Middle East in 2017, the geopolitical map of the security threat in this region took a different form.

Practically, the main terrorist threat has snowballed into its new guise, manifested by the Sahel branch of Al-Qaeda, known as the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), and the ISIS branch in the Greater Sahara (EIGS). Since the beginning of 2020, violent battles have erupted between the two terrorist factions, which made up many discussions and analyses at the political and military level.

Changing the Strategic Approach

The crisis in the Sahel is increasingly growing more complicated by several factors, including the attempt to control natural resources, the myriad smuggling and trafficking hot points, and the struggle for liberation, triggering social and political chaos, which brought about the support of terrorist groups that impose their political

and military agenda represented in liberated lands as a basis for the expansion of terrorism that Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri posited in his book *Knights Under the Flag of the Messenger*. The association between the concept of territoriality and the modality of operation has become the basis for the survival of the various terrorist organizations, especially ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Both of the said organizations espouse overlapping goals, and are based on the claim of applying Allah's law on earth. ISIS was established by the Shura claim on a plot of land there, then it turned to geographical control over the entire region. Al-Qaeda was established there according to the claim of the concept of Islamic thought and identity, without interest in extending its geographic influence. However, the leaders of the organization in the Sahel adopted a different strategic military approach based on local conditions and realities, calling for a fateful jihad on historical and geographical foundations, invoking local heroic figures, which symbolize the offensive Fulani jihad in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represented by Suleiman Pal and Haj Omar bin Said Tal, nicknamed Hajj Omar al-Futi in the Sahel and Osman Dan Vodio, founder of Sokoto state, Nigeria, and the regional reference in West Africa.

Since strengthening international counterterrorism cooperation, terrorist organizations have adapted to the new international mode of action, applying the theory based on decentralization in terrorist action, that is, organizations abandoning regional hierarchy in favor of a new type of terrorism, based on networks that are almost without leadership, while easing the deadlock of combat doctrine lest it should impede the realization of the terrorist project. This includes the new mobile "autonomous" entities that operate relentlessly under the banner of ISIS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Utilitarianism and War Theories

The apparent expediency of some terrorist leaders in the Sahel has bought about the hybridization of the criminal act and the terrorist act. Smuggling or trafficking alongside other illegal activities have been used as methods of obfuscation and tricks to silently defend the draft invasion. The Emir of ISIS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) El-Habib Ould Abdi Ould Said Ould Bashir, nicknamed Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, has extremist ideologies and is convinced of the justice of religious conflict, combining utilitarianism with the claim of conservative Salafism. His main local strategy is based on holding onto the battle theory that Petraeus and Taber are famous for, which calls for tightening social contact with residents and mobilizing local figures who are able to secure financial and human resources, especially violence has ballooned into a heated stage given the lack

of initiatives from the side of the active states, due to the disagreement over approaches.

It is clear that the strength of ISIS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) lies in its ability to adapt major guerrilla theories (Maoist and Leninist) to its terrorist struggle. It decoyed and hypnotized the entire society, especially the youth, into violence, beginning with the destruction of the local governmental community structures that were the foundations of steadfastness, and then the direct attack on the defense and security forces (Inates Camp) in Niger, and (Indelimane Camp) in Mali. In 2019, terrorist groups increased their direct attacks on defense facilities (barracks, brigades, police stations, and observation points). This prompted the military institutions to adopt the approach of general violence or chaos, which terrorist strategies call for. These institutions have adopted the pure strategic vision of Bernard Brody, which calls in theory and in practice to act in complete isolation from morals, which led them to commit all kinds of atrocities (mass killing, kidnapping, and extrajudicial violations). This led to a loss of confidence between the defense and security forces and the population, and facilitated the recruitment and integration of terrorist groups into communities.

Likewise, the grassroots sense of insecurity (subjected to military and terrorist violations) has led to the establishment of self-defense groups. In these societies controlled by armed groups that suffer due to various conflicts, international terrorist organizations lay the foundations for their hegemonic project.

Camouflage War

The modern combat (terrorist organizations) embodied by Al-Qaeda came into existence in the aftermath of the Cold War, taking a position in the midst of the contradictions in the restructuring of national and international societies in the post-polar era, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the West to Africa through the Middle East, Al-Qaeda established itself as a geopolitical component that changed the traditional structure of political-diplomatic doctrines and in the traditional power relations. Under these circumstances, a superficial terrorist structure slipped into reality in 2006, nicknamed ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

The clashes between ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the early 2020s in the Sahel revealed, according to some analyses, communicable contagion. The forces of terrorist movements are likely to be exhausted as a whole. It is clear that such analyses provide a misunderstanding of the essence and purpose of terrorism, especially in the Sahel.

ISIS in the Sahara Desert (ISGS) is nothing but a passageway for Al-Qaeda, extending between these two entities bridges of solidarity that support the project of dependency. Terrorist violence contributes to the lure and legitimacy of the call and armed fighting. In the Sahel, it is not important to search for the lineage of terrorists in internal wars among brothers; rather, what is important is the supreme ideological vision of the new caliphate, whose features were hidden by a group of authoritarian sectarians in the 1990s. This breeding ground represents a reservoir for victims of terrorism. The survey that we conducted in the Sahel in 2019 reveal the superiority of ideology as the mental gateway for new terrorists.

Whether it is Al-Qaeda or ISIS (ISGS), the only fighting that interests them in the first place is that which leads to the emergence of a religious political system based on the lethality of the theoretical and ideological approach. Therefore, this battle represents a ploy to obscure the course of the terrorist project.

Based on our various surveys, we can say the ideological creed is a decisive factor in the structuring of terrorist groups and their activities. Most governments in the region avoid or ignore the fact that the current situation is the result of conviction and not the result of the criminal superiority embodied by illicit trafficking of all kinds. This is why the direct confrontation between ISIS (ISGS) and the Al-Qaeda affiliated branch (GSIM) appears to be a kind of camouflage.

In all the countries of the region, the threat is manifested in the shift from solidarity and tolerance to sectarian retreat and retrenchment, as the threat is imminent. Across several countries in the Sahel, a burning and driving desire is ubiquitously rife to replace the religious state with the German state under the concept of a single nation, according to which many citizens of the countries of the Atlantic coast (such as Senegal, Ghana, and Benin) join ISIS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Al-Qaeda branch (GSIM). Hence, local and international institutions must recognize that the terrorist threat is not a matter of groups or organizations. Rather, it is a matter of successive ideological cycles that adopt the project of global domination.