

# **JIHADIST ACTIVITY VS. MILITARIZED HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS: THE CENTRAL SAHEL CASE STUDY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

With the withdrawn of French troops from Mali, a militarized decade-long intervention, and the jihadist expansion moving south from Burkina Faso and Mali, the present research aims to understand what this means to the status of the humanitarian activity in the region and which lessons can be derived from the nexus between humanitarian intervention and jihadist intervention in the Central Sahel.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) will be the intervention in focus to be analyzed in this research, based on the Chapter 8<sup>th</sup> of the UN Charter. These interventions, along with the case study of the Central Sahel will serve as the starting point to answer the following research questions: (i) Is there a correlation between the presence of militarized humanitarian intervention and the proliferation of jihadist militant NSAG in Central Sahel region (Burkina

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Faso, Mali and Niger) over the past decade; and (ii) What is the impact of jihadist activity in militarized humanitarian intervention and what is the impact of militarized humanitarian intervention on the jihadist activity in the Central Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) over the past decade.

In addition, it is necessary to state from the beginning of this research that when referring to humanitarian activity, this study comprises not only the impact that the jihadist activity has to the militarized humanitarian actors and interventions in the regions, but also, in general, humanitarian organizations; since, one of the main roles of the militarized interventions with humanitarian purposes is to protect humanitarian convoys and the security of humanitarian actors. More about the role of the militarized services to securing humanitarian access and security for the humanitarian workers will be discussed in connection to the section on security incidents.

The jihadist militant groups will be often referred to in this research as non-state armed groups (NSAG) as well as only armed groups, considering the theoretical lens of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which does not distinguish between NSAG in terms of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency classifications. Other common terms to define these actors are ANSA (armed non-state actors), AGDA (armed groups and de facto authorities), parastatal and paramilitary groups.

As for the military state components officially recognized by the government of a nation, the terms used will be armed forces, intervening military forces, interveners. Despite of the fact that jihadist militant groups can be involved in activities related to private military companies' services (private military companies, PMCs, or mercenaries), as well as activities characterized by criminal organizations behavior, these specific features will not be utilized to deconstruct NSAG's definition as it is characterized by IHL.

With the aim of analyzing the relationship between two reality indicators, the proliferation and fragmentation of NSAG in the Central Sahel with the presence of international militarized interveners, the definition of militarized intervention in this case study will consider a series of military and security initiatives including the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Operation Barkhane, the Takuba Task Force, the Sahel Coalition, the Sahel Alliance, the Security and Stability Partnership in the Sahel, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

## **1 JIHADIST ACTIVITY OVERVIEW: CENTRAL SAHEL CASE STUDY**

When analyzing the reasons for the proliferation of jihadist groups, the referred process can also be broken down into a collection of drivers, including dynamics of interaction like support, merging, fragmentation, alliance, cooperation (Nusrat Al-Islam in Burkina Faso cooperating with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)), affiliation (Mali-based Nusrat Al-Islam as an AlQaeda affiliate), coalition (Mali-based Nusrat Al-Islam – AlQaeda “affiliate” but also a coalition of several other jihadist NSAGs), as well as regarding the influence of motives, reasons objectives, purposes and goals, as these factors also play a role on the organizational structure these NSAG will carry out (Gaggioli; Kilibarda, 2021, p. 224-225).

The Institute for Economics and Peace states that two types of NSAGs have historically operated in the region, having the first one Ethnic-nationalist-religious-based NSAGs (I) as Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun and the Katiba Macina) being replaced by the second type transnational jihadist NSAGs (II), which has developed in the past decade a modus operandi more focused on sustained, low-intensity conflict (IEP, 2023a, p. 62).

For the purposes here established, it is necessary to analyze deeper the characteristics of the Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in relation to their interference into civil humanitarian activity and militarized humanitarian activity, as well as investigate their expansion deeper into Burkina Faso and Niger around the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area, considered the epicenter of jihadist activity in the Sahel. When analyzing specifically Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen’s narrative, it includes the fight against the presence and influence of international militarized interveners in the region, like the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Operation Barkhane (Australian National Security Website, 2023).

One of the most promising variables to analyze is the fragile community dynamics involving semi-nomadic herders and sedentary farmers, as well as the ethnic tensions between Tuareg, Dogon, Bambara, and Fulani populations, which also integrate ethnic non-state armed groups that differ and are not necessarily connected to the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State’s affiliations rivalry in the region, representing another layer of complexity. When it comes to drivers of violence and conflict within the communities, it is possible to observe herder-farmer conflicts in the region.

Considering the dynamics of interaction between these two layers, commonly the Fulani ethnicity is accused of endorsing Salafi-jihadist armed groups being victims of attacks from the other ethnicities, while the Dogon and Bambara populations receive indiscriminate attacks by jihadist NSAG (Casola, 2019). Another important factor that should be considered is the aggravation of the climate crisis and the ecological degradation, affecting directly the already

difficult relationship between farmers and herders that compete for “new grazing routes, arable land and water facilities” (IEP, 2023a, p. 62).

In Burkina Faso, as described by the International Crisis Group report 287, the failure of the state to deal with the root causes of the internal disturbances, particularly intra-community conflict, in conjugation with intervener’s violent counter-insurgency measures that have mainly affected the local communities supports the recruitment and the allegiance to jihadist NSAG. “Jihadists exploit injustices frequently linked to land disputes and coupled with political and community-based issues. (...) Militants are a motley crowd of insurgents motivated by local concerns around a small core of ideologues. They include farmers and herders who are victims of land-related injustices or racketeering, (...) and stigmatized populations. Militants extend their reach notably by exploiting local conflicts that are linked to the multifaceted rural crisis and often involve self-defense groups”. (International Crisis Group, 2020). The hostilities between NSAG in the region and foreign security interventions are also known to be one of the causes of internal displacement in the region.

## **2 APPLYING DATA ANALYSIS TO THE JIHADIST EXPANSION**

This paper parts from the premise that the Central-Sahel region (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) have experienced an expansion in militant Islamist violence in the past decade (2013-2023) (Shurkin, 2022). Integrating the data processed by the African Center for Strategic Studies and collected by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Daniel Byman, HumAngle, Thomas Joscelyn, SITE Intelligence Group, The Soufan Group, Stratfor, Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC), and Aaron Y. Zelin, in the next paragraphs, this research will present how the variables to be analyzed were initially chosen. It is essential to clarify though that the incidents accounted for do not include criminal networks and illicit trafficking.

One variable analyzed could be how to measure the violence involving African militant Islamist groups through the number of incidents and the number of fatalities in the Central Sahel, currently the most affected region in terms of total numbers of violent events (2,912), particularly concentrated in Burkina Faso (50%) and fatalities (9,818) particularly concentrated in Burkina Faso and Mali (87%) (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). Niger accounts for 8% of the number of events and has its borders recently been affected by the withdrawals of the Barkhane and MINUSMA forces in Mali (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).

In terms of collecting these incidents features and analyze them, it is possible to consider armed clashes, threats, physical aggression, targeted kidnappings, assassinations, number of fatalities (dead and wounded), the extent of damage to essential infrastructure, armed attacks on the security forces, number of persons involved in the clashes, weapons (Kienou, 2022).

The same source (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023) indicates that battles represent 60% percent of all fatalities in the region, being most of the battle escalation linked to the Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), as well as, with the withdrawn of Barkhane and MINUSMA forces in Mali, it is also possible to identify in Mopti a 37% increase in fatalities and in Gao a 40% increase. Battles are one possibility of analysis related to the number of fatalities in the region, along with remote violence and violence against civilians.

Still about the indicators that can explain the security situation related to African Militant Islamist groups in Central Sahel, the Global Terrorism Index 2023 portrays Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> positions, respectively, in the overall ranking which includes collected data from 163 countries. Interesting observe the expressive climbing on the ranking for these three countries from 2011 until 2023, that for Burkina Faso accounts 111 positions, for Mali 37 positions and for Niger 39 positions, as IEP clearly states about the deterioration of the situation: “The Sahel has become increasingly more violent over the past 16 years, with terrorism deaths rising by over 2,000 per cent between 2007 and 2022. This increase in violence shows no sign of abating” (IEP, 2023a, p. 5).

Mali ranks in the position 153 in the 2023 Global Peace Index, displaying a profound deterioration led by the increased jihadist activity and attacks against the Malian state and UN peacekeeping troops, the lack of governability and state territorial control, increased ethnic-based militias violence and political terror (IEP, 2023b).

A comprehensive list of variables would include: (i) increased political instability; (ii) amplified geopolitical tensions and the presence of external actors; (iii) use of hard counterterrorism measures; (iv) inability of governments to provide effective security; (v) exploitation of socio-economic, political vacuums as well as grievances; (vi) climate change; (vii) ethnic polarisation and pastoral conflict generating intercommunal violence – like in the Mopti and Ségou regions between Dogon and Fulani –; (viii) abuse by state security; (ix) the growth of transnational Salafi-Islam ideology; and (x) conflict over natural resource extraction.

All of which “are likely to continue to undermine the conditions necessary for Positive Peace, trapping the Sahel in a cycle of violence and vulnerability” (IEP, 2023a, p. 60) as assessed by Global Terrorism Index 2023, which also indicates that the Sahel currently (data from 2022) produces 43% of terrorism related fatalities globally, particularly connected to

NSAG as IS and JNIM. This same data about the rising of fatalities when compared to 2007, shows an exponential grow of more than 2000% over the past 16 years (IEP, 2023a, p. 61).

### **3 THE NEXUS BETWEEN MILITARIZED HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AND JIHADIST ACTIVITY**

This section focuses primarily in addressing the prioritized considered points of nexus between humanitarian activity in and around jihadist-controlled areas, indicating the main components of interaction. The first component to be discussed is territory control, including not only the control over the referred piece of land, but also the influence over the population through the provision of services, the application of parallel legal and social norms imposed by the NSAG, the use of informal courts, the regulation of aid, the chain of command, the fragmentation and governance structures (Bahiss, I. & all, 2022) – all of which concerning humanitarian access.

It is equally important to highlight the state-alike activities performed by NSAG as the provision of food, protection, and healthcare, which connect them directly to considered humanitarian activities. “Population control, rather than territorial control, has become a key practice of West African jihadists”, alongside with punishment for transgressions of jihadist norms (Bahiss, I. & all, 2022). This modality of population control does not necessarily equal territory control, on the opposite, it works more like a political influence present in the minds of the population.

The militarized intervention response to jihadist activity – unable to effectively protect civilians in and from the conflict – along with the restricted public orders decreed by central Sahelian governments to support in the contention of jihadist expansion affect directly the already vulnerable local communities. One important variable to play a role in this scenario is also the trust on peacekeepers/interveners by the local population and the local government and the local perception of the mission.

Regarding humanitarian access restrictions, once again the humanitarian negotiations and the humanitarian diplomacy play a central role: particularly concerning CIMIC (civil military cooperation) mechanisms between humanitarian organizations and national and foreign military interveners. An interesting definition of CIMIC objectives can be found in the NATO’s CIMIC Handbook: “The aim of CIMIC is to support the mission objectives by establishing and maintaining cooperation with non-military actors within the area of operations. Ideally, all actors will work to a common goal. Where this is not possible, interaction will ensure

that activities are harmonized as far as possible to avoid negative impacts on own operations as well as on non-military operations and the civil environment. This will minimize interference or unintended conflict between different actors” (CCOE, 2020).

It remains also useful to analyze the situation where intervening military forces conduct activities considered of humanitarian nature, like the examples of the ones conducted by Operation Barkhane related to infrastructure of schools and health centers and by MINUSMA related to the provision of health services, access to water and livelihoods. These activities are connected to a CIMIC area called Resilience through Civil Preparedness (RtCP) (CCOE, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

In this scenario, after the identification of some of the main variables related to the diagnostic of the existence or the inexistence of an interconnection between the presence of military humanitarian intervention and the proliferation and fragmentation of jihadist militant NSAG, it is clearly possible to observe that the high number of drivers require further analysis.

A possibility in this case, which also can be interpreted as a recommendation for future research that analyze this same correlation, is to utilize the following thinking tools/steps for foresight: (i) cluster brainstorming; (ii) identification of key drivers; (iii) multiple scenarios generation; (iv) indicators generation, validation, and evaluation. All these techniques can be found in the framework of the Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis, also including the Handbook of Analytic Tools & Techniques, from Professor Rudolph H. Pherson.

After the brainstorming and categorization of clusters of drivers, it is necessary to identify the key-drivers that will be used in the next steps of the process. In this case, the drivers chosen were the ones that mostly indicated the diagnostic of the situation in hand, in order to answer the main questions posed for this analysis: (i) Is there a correlation between the presence of militarized humanitarian intervention and the proliferation of jihadist militant NSAG in Central Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) over the past decade; and (ii) What is the impact of jihadist activity in militarized humanitarian intervention and what is the impact of militarized humanitarian intervention on the jihadist activity in the Central Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) over the past decade.

The key drivers chosen were Presence of Militarized Humanitarian Interveners (high/low) and Jihadist Activity (high/low). With these two key-drivers, 4 combinations (scenarios) can be generated: High-High, High-Low, Low-High and Low-Low, as the following scenarios show: (a) High Level of Presence of Militarized Humanitarian Interveners, High

Level of Jihadist Activity, (b) High Level of Presence of Militarized Humanitarian Interveners and Low Level of Jihadist Activity, (c) Low Level of Presence of Militarized Humanitarian Interveners and High Level of Jihadist Activity, and (d) Low Level of Presence of Militarized Humanitarian Interveners and Low Level of Jihadist Activity.

The four scenarios generated will be then classified between Best Scenario, Worst Scenario, Wild Card and Non-selected. The indicators chosen for this case are the measurements of fragile state (utilizing the Fragile States Index), societal resilience (utilizing the Global Peace Index 2023 and the Positive Peace Report 2022) and terrorism (utilizing the Global Terrorism Index) because. In this phase, the indicators are tested if they are observable and collectible, legal and not high-cost, valid, reliable, stable, and unique (CCOE, 2023b). The last phase consists in crossing the indicators with the scenarios they were created for, to evaluate if they finally useful to indicate that the current situation is heading in one of the scenarios' direction.

In addition, to evaluate if your assumption (thesis) is reliable and your research is not assumption-driven, it can be useful to utilize the following criteria based on the Key-Assumptions Technique: “Why do I think that assumption is correct? Under what circumstances might this assumption be untrue? Could the assumption have been true in the past but not today? How sure am I that the assumption is true? Basically solid (2) Assumption correct with some caveats (1) Unsupported or questionable assumption (0)” (CCOE, 2023b, p. 112).

In this initial stage, thinking tools like the Argument Map – which contains Hypothesis, Justification, Evidence, Rebuttal and Counterevidence –, the Issue Redefinition and the Analytical Spectrum – which contains descriptive analysis, explanatory analysis, evaluative analysis, and estimative analysis –, can be highly valuable (CCOE, 2023b).

It is possible to identify the nexus between the features of a fragile state, lack of societal resilience and the characteristics and consequences of terrorism in a protracted crisis in the Central Sahel, affecting particularly Burkina Faso and Mali. The presence of international militarized interveners in the region only adds complexity to the crisis and it is unlikely that the maintenance of the UN peacekeeping and French troops would have broken the vicious cycle of a complex emergency that nourishes itself.

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