

The Sahel: Africa's Perfect Stage for Terrorists?

The Sahel is defined as the large strip that runs from west to east across Africa, between the Sahara Desert and the tropical zone of Sub-Saharan Africa¹; in fact, Sahel derives from an Arabic word meaning 'shore', thus forming the southern shore of the great Sahara Desert. Although this area covers a dozen countries, due to the existence of a greater number of similarities between certain states in the area, reference is usually made to five specific countries when talking about the Sahel, specifically those that formed the G5 Sahel group between February 2014 and November 2023, with the aim of trying to find a joint and concerted solution to the instability in the area.

Indeed, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania share similarities given their historical and political past, to a greater extent than the rest of the Sahelian countries, and all of them are subject to strong instability. Within this general instability, it should be noted that in the case of the first three countries mentioned above, they share the so-called 'triple border', an area where 80% of the attacks recorded in the Sahel are concentrated².

The countries have the common legacy of the mostly French colonisation process, sometimes, and more in the framework of current narratives, it is held responsible for having generated great instability in their political institutions and in the economy of the states³. And, faced with the challenge of having to develop democratic and stable political regimes, the reality is that these have mostly failed, especially in the countries that make up this triple frontier, which have been subject to multiple coups between 2020 and 2023, generating a powerful feeling of instability, especially towards the most vulnerable population⁴ who always suffer the consequences of political and social instability.

In addition, they are very poor countries; in the Human Development Index these

¹ MONTER, Jara "El mapa político del Sahel", El Orden Mundial, 7 de febrero de 2025. <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/mapa-politico-sahel/>

² DEPARTAMENTO DE SEGURIDAD NACIONAL, "Terrorismo en el Sahel Occidental", 16 de julio de 2021. <https://www.dsn.gob.es/en/node/15446>

³ ALLIANCE SAHEL, "Décryptage des causes et déterminants de la crise au Sahel: quels enjeux pour les partenaires au développement", 12 de diciembre de 2023. <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/seminaire-decryptage-causes-determinants-crise-sahel/#:~:text=La%20région%20du%20Sahel%20fait,augmentent%20la%20vulnérabilité%20des%20populations>

⁴ FONDS MONÉTAIRE INTERNATIONAL, "La complexité des défis au Sahel", septiembre de 2024. <https://www.imf.org/fr/Publications/fandd/issues/2024/09/the-sahels-intertwined-challenges-yabi>

countries are among the 10 poorest of those evaluated worldwide⁵, and to which must be added the negative effects of climate change, which has a direct impact on food insecurity, health problems and the quality of life of civilians⁶, and have a life expectancy of around 53 and 65 years.⁷ As these are countries with limited security along with an overflowing population growth, with the population doubling every twenty years, since 65% are under 25 years old systems and bodies⁸ - since they are fed by the taxes collected - they are not very effective and security can only be provided in some parts of these countries, which leads to a growing feeling of distrust and frustration on the part of the population towards them and towards the government, so that the 'social contract', the obligation to respect the rules and laws of a state in exchange for receiving a series of services - the basic and primordial one being security - is not fulfilled in large parts of the Sahel.

Faced with this situation, jihadist groups sometimes present themselves as an alternative capable of offering certain services to cover these needs neglected by governments⁹. In such complex and hopeless conditions, where the feeling of abandonment and the instinct for survival grow, being part of a terrorist group - or an organised crime group - is often seen by many young people as almost the only work alternative, often the only viable choice.¹⁰ .. or emigration.

While the term 'jihad' generates debate and there is no clear consensus on its meaning and personal implication, in the literal sense it means "struggle" and for radicals it is used as 'holy war', which justifies terrorist attacks¹¹, largely obviating the meaning of 'inner

⁵ Datos de country economy (Human Development Index), 2024. <https://countryeconomy.com/hdi/niger>

⁶ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ Pedro, "Sahel: ¡tormenta perfecta de amplitud e intensidad creciente!!", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2021.

<https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2077188/Capítulo+8+Sahel+tormenta+perfecta+de+amplitud+e+intensidad+creciente.pdf/d4bc511b-75ef-6c12-aaeb-f9b51e72a765?t=1731579352666>

⁷ SOLER David, "La esperanza de vida en África", África Mundi, 26 de marzo de 2022.

<https://www.africamundi.es/p/la-esperanza-de-vida-en-africa>

⁸ IFAD, "Afrontar los retos del desarrollo sostenible en el Sahel". <https://www.ifad.org/es/africa-occidental-y-central/sahel>

⁹ BALLESTEROS MARTÍN Miguel Ángel, "Análisis geopolítico del Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, octubre de 2015. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5270491>

¹⁰ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ Pedro, "El Sahel: ¿también epicentro de la reconfiguración global?", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 18 de marzo de 2025. https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/el_sahel_tambien_epicentro_de_la_reconfiguracion_global

¹¹ SANJUÁN MARTÍNEZ Casimiro, "El terrorismo yihadista. El yihadismo en el Sahel amenaza a Europa", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 5 de noviembre de 2020. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO140_2020CASSAN_yihadSahel.pdf

struggle' that any believer must sustain in the face of life's temptations in order to be a good believer. But, in the common wisdom, jihad comes to be understood as holy war. And with the intention of imposing a comprehensive vision of Islam, jihadists try to recruit and indoctrinate young Africans, offering them a sense of protection from other armed groups - in short, a sense of security - as well as a sense of identity and hope¹², filling the vacuum that would otherwise be filled by a developed nation-state.

Thus, jihadism is growing rampantly in the Sahel, where conditions are favourable for its development. Thus, in 2024, most of the global deaths related to terrorism occurred in the Sahel, an area where this figure has increased tenfold since 2015¹³.

Complexity of terrorist groups in the Sahel.

In this scenario, which is very favourable to the emergence and growth of terrorist groups, there are multiple groups that continue to multiply their attacks qualitatively and quantitatively throughout the region, although it is feasible to point to the existence of 'two large conglomerates of terrorist groups of jihadist aetiology'¹⁴.

The two groups that dominate the geopolitical landscape in the Sahel are, on the one hand, 'Jama'at Nusrat al islam wa ak Muslimeen' (JNIM), an Al Qaeda affiliate - the Arabic transliteration of its initials would correspond to 'Support Group for Islam and Muslims' - and, on the other hand, the 'Islamic State in the Greater Sahara' (EIGS or ISIS), which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS)¹⁵. To these two branches belong various groups such as Ansar Eddine, which acts under the umbrella of Al-Qaeda, as well as Macina or Al-Mourabitoun. In fact, JNIM is composed of an alliance between four terrorist groups that follow Al-Qaeda's line. Among them, three of those mentioned above are part

¹² DEPARTAMENTO DE SEGURIDAD NACIONAL, "El terrorismo en el Sahel", 12 de mayo de 2021. <https://www.dsn.gob.es/en/node/14943>

¹³ OBSERVATORIO INTERNACIONAL DE ESTUDIOS SOBRE TERRORISMO, "Anuario del terrorismo yihadista 2024". <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ES-ANUARIO-OIET-2024.pdf>

¹⁴ MARTÍN SERRANO Lucas, "Daesh vs Al Qaeda. La lucha por la supremacía a las puertas de Europa", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 11 de julio de 2016. D <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5998290>

¹⁵ FUENTE COBO Ignacio, "Radiografía de la amenaza yihadista en el Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 5 de marzo de 2025. https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/radiografia_de_la_amenaza_yihadista_en_el_sahel

of these Sahara Brigades that are grouped under the name of JNIM¹⁶, and represented by the slogan: 'One banner, one group, one emir', which makes clear the idea of unity among them. And under the aegis of ISIS or EIGS (Islamic State), the largest active terrorist group is Boko Haram, although other active groups, such as Junud al-Khilafa, also follow the same line.

What we understand by the oath of allegiance or loyalty comes from the practice of bay'ah and is one of the traditional procedures required to formalise terrorists' alliances with the respective organisations.¹⁷ This act of adherence to a group would be beneficial for both the one that lends allegiance and the one that receives it, being a way of projecting itself globally and going further in its expansion in the search for the constitution of a caliphate, while at the same time giving more power and a new status to the group that pledges allegiance. This procedure, which has been playing an increasingly significant role for the two Jihadist branches mentioned above, changed the terrorist landscape, given that until then they were only sympathetic to al-Qaeda, but several groups began to opt to join the Islamic State, a fact that reinforces the concept of the two dominant branches of global Jihadism.

Al Qaeda was the first reference group to establish the Islamist terrorist phenomenon in the Sahel. In 2007, the first terrorist organisation in the geographical area of the Sahel was renamed Al Qaeda because of the power that this global denomination reflected¹⁸. Later, the Islamic State created the 'Agency of Distinct Provinces' in 2014, which allowed the group to plan an African strategy¹⁹. And this shift towards the Sahel coincides with the year of the fall of Mosul in Iraq, a city in which the Islamic State had proclaimed its caliphate three years earlier and which in 2014 had been liberated by an international coalition from Jihadist hegemony, drastically reducing the presence of members of the terrorist group.

¹⁶ ECSAHARAU, "Estos son los grupos terroristas que operan en el Sahel", 22 de septiembre de 2024. <https://ecsaharai.com/09/2024/estos-son-los-grupos-terroristas-que-operan-en-el-sahel/>

¹⁷ IGUALADA Carlos y YAGÚE Javier, "El uso de la bay'ah por los principales grupos salafi-yihadistas", OIET, 13 de octubre de 2021. <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/actividades/el-uso-de-la-bayah-por-los-principales-grupos-salafi-yihadistas/>

¹⁸ HERRERO Rubén y MACHÍN Nieva, "El eje Magreb-Sahel: La amenaza del terrorismo", Revista UNISCI, octubre de 2015. <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-74789/UNISCIDP39-8RUBEN-NIEVA.pdf>

¹⁹ ORIENTXXI, "Estado Islámico, diez años de expansión en el continente africano", 24 de marzo de 2023. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/estado-islamico-diez-anos-de-expansion-en-el-continente-africano.6325>

And the growth of these groups in this strip of Africa, in the Sahel, highlights both the vulnerabilities that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are trying to exploit to achieve their objectives and the fact that the loss of control of a territory does not mean the end of the Jihadist struggle.²⁰, in search of alternative spaces.

Coexistence of Terrorist Groups in the Sahel: Allies for a Common Cause?

Thus, several terrorist groups coexist in the Sahel, all sharing the same Salafist ideology and the common goal of returning to the original Islamic community by establishing a caliphate²¹. One example is the 2018 campaign to isolate Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, which was coordinated by both major groups to gain control of that territory—demonstrating that, under certain circumstances, the two major groups can cooperate to achieve jihadist objectives²².

Analyzing the actions and attacks carried out by each group shows that each faction has more or less presence in specific areas, and in several of them, different Salafi groups coexist. In fact, in the so-called “tri-border area”—the region most affected by these attacks—the two main jihadist branches operate side by side²³. However, according to findings by the International Observatory for the Study of Terrorism in February 2025, JNIM (an Al-Qaeda affiliate) was the sole perpetrator of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso and the main actor behind those in Mali. In contrast, in Niger, it is the Islamic State that has caused the highest number of casualties²⁴. And although JNIM has been active in the Sahel longer than ISGS, which is reflected in the wide area they operate in, ISGS is responsible for more victims due to the intensity of its attacks.

²⁰ BBC NEWS MUNDO, “Caída de Mosul: cómo Estado Islámico se está transformando ante la pérdida de su territorio”, 10 de julio de 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-40407044>

²¹ THOMAS Dominique, “État islamique vs Al-Qaïda: autopsie d’une lutte fratricide”, Politique Étrangère, 2016. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2016-1?lang=fr&tab=sommaire>

²² PÉREZ Carlota, “Al Qaeda y Daesh: rivales en Oriente Medio y aliados en el Sahel”, ATALAYAR, 29 de junio de 2018. <https://www.atalayar.com/articulo/politica/al-qaeda-y-daesh-rivales-en-oriente-medio-y-aliados-en-el-sahel/20200224202755144652.html>

²³ BEAUDOUX Clara, “Qui sont les groupes islamistes qui opèrent en Afrique de l’Ouest?”, Fance Info, 20 de febrero de 2013. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/qui-sont-les-groupes-islamistes-qui-operent-en-afrique-de-l-ouest_1645959.html

²⁴ AGUILERA Ana, “Actividad yihadista en el norte de África y el Sahel”, OIET, 26 de marzo de 2025. <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/yihadismo-en-el-magreb-y-el-sahel-2025/actividad-yihadista-en-el-norte-de-africa-y-el-sahel-febrero-2025/>

Because these groups often overlap in the same localities and carry out separate and uncoordinated operations, it is clear that they mostly act independently, leaving behind evidence of distinct attacks. Even though it may seem logical to assume they would act jointly toward their shared goal, this is not usually the case.

The motivation for terrorist groups to form alliances can depend on international political-military pressure and the policies of local regimes.²⁵ Additionally, personal relationships between leaders and members of these terrorist groups can significantly influence the connections between factions. These relationships, often complex, can be explained by the fact that many of the terrorist groups currently active in the Sahel were born out of internal tensions within larger factions, including differing views on how jihad should be carried out.²⁶ Such tensions sometimes result in splinter groups—some maintaining ties, while others become rivals. One example is the close relationship between Amadou Koufa, founder of Macina (now part of JNIM), and Iyad ag Ghali, leader of Ansar Dine and head of JNIM. Similarly, in August 2018, the UN Group of Experts identified Abdallah Ag Albakaye, a Tuareg emir of JNIM, as coordinating actions between JNIM and ISGS in the Gao region of Mali.²⁷

These coordinated actions were possible for a time when both Salafi groups carried out attacks together without competing or issuing dual claims of responsibility. These attacks were officially announced by only one of the groups, although later reports revealed that fighters from both branches were involved—for instance, the May 2019 ambush in Niger in which around 30 Nigerien soldiers were killed. Regarding this attack, a JNIM commander confirmed that the fighters were split between the two groups²⁸.

Such fluid personal relationships gave rise to the so-called “Sahelian exception,” which referred to the unusually cordial relations between rival leaders and the absence of

²⁵ FUMAGALLI Giuseppe, “Terrorismo in Africa; le complicità dei regimi autoritari”, Instituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, 5 de abril de 2016. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/terrorismo-africa-le-complicita-dei-regimi-autoritari-14927>

²⁶ DE LEÓN COBO Beatriz, “La estrategia global de los grupos yihadistas del Sahel”, OIET, 15 de enero de 2021. https://observatorioterrorismo.com/actividades/la-estrategia-global-de-los-grupos-yihadistas-del-sahel/#_ftn5

²⁷ UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, “Letter dated 8 august from the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali addressed to the President of the Security Council”, 8 de agosto de 2018, p.20. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2018_581.pdf

²⁸ ALJAZEERA, “ISIL claims attack on Niger soldiers as death toll rises to 28”, 16 de mayo de 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/16/isil-claims-attack-on-niger-soldiers-as-death-toll-rises-to-28>

conflict between the two factions. But this is not always the case.

Competition for jihadist dominance in the Sahel?

While Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have come to show connections in certain attacks, the style and tone of each group differs. The controversies and disputes that can be observed between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are essentially two-fold: religious and political.

A phenomenon that was already occurring in previous years in parts of the Middle East, but is becoming increasingly common in the Sahel, is precisely this fragmentation and splintering of terrorist groups, which leads to clashes and disputes. In February 2018, JNIM claimed responsibility for an explosive attack in Mali, which EIGS claimed a year later; identical claims of attacks in the same territories are coming to light between 2019 and 2020²⁹. But what is significant is what happened in Mali in 2020, when a clash between terrorist groups took place due to the crossing of Al Qaeda-dominated territory by terrorists under the aegis of the Islamic State, a clash that was made official in a letter from the 'number two' of the EIGS affiliate to the JNIM³⁰.

Despite this, and despite this and other clashes, it was not until May 2020 that both JNIM and EIGS openly acknowledged the armed disputes between them, and did so in an 'official' manner, in the weekly Al Naba newsletter³¹, a publication of the ISIS jihadist gang, which specifically mentions clashes in the area of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali known as the triple frontier.

Later in 2022, the EIGS celebrated the addition of 11 new Al Qaeda members, news announced by the EIGS in a tone of supremacy and describing Al Qaeda fighters as sinners and infidels to God.³² And, on the part of the other groups, similar patterns are

²⁹ POST X, Menastream, “#Burkina faso: #JNIM claimed Thursday’s attack against the police station in Manila...”, 27 de enero de 2019. <https://x.com/MENASTREAM/status/1089648251291254784>

³⁰ EL IMPARCIAL, “Al Qaeda y Daesh se enfrenan en un conflicto armado inédito en el Sahel”, miércoles 9 de abril de 2025. <https://www.elimparcial.es/noticia/212597/mundo/al-qaeda-y-daesh-se-enfrenan-en-un-conflicto-armado-indito-en-el-sahel.html>

³¹ NSAIVIA Héni y WEISS Caleb, “The end of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qaïda finally came to West Africa”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Julio de 2020. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>

³² OBSERVATORIO DE AL AZHAR, “Daesh celebra la incorporación de 11 miembros de Al Qaeda... una muestra más

followed.

Therefore, it is feasible to point out that, on the one hand, tensions are generated due to clashes in the same territory and the desire to dominate it, and that despite having the same objective of imposing the caliphate, the motivation to control each region by a particular group is important, so much so as to fight against 'apparent partners', which reflects a clash over territorial ambitions.

On the other hand, there is also a certain religious and ideological fragmentation, a certain vision of Islam, which is what each group tries to impose, and this is of utmost importance, given that all this is framed in a 'holy war', so that the religious approach is a very important dimension in explaining these clashes. Both jihadist branches are based on the theory of takfirism, a doctrine that the Islamic State accuses al-Qaeda of not applying properly and vice versa³³. As a result, both terrorist groups have blamed each other for deviating from the path of jihad; indeed, earlier this year the ISIS released a propaganda video mentioning JNIM as 'impure' for not applying Shariah³⁴.

For this reason, and despite this common goal of creating an Islamic caliphate, since 2020 attacks between the two groups have not ceased and they have actively worked to increase the degree of territorial control exercised by each group, as a way of gaining supremacy in the region. Thus, in April 2020, JNIM had to withdraw from part of northern Burkina Faso due to pressure from the EIGS³⁵, which is also gradually, and to a greater extent, taking root in the southern part of Niger, forcing JNIM to leave the area³⁶.

Since then, there has been constant fighting between the groups in several regions of the Sahel, with the aim of consolidating and imposing themselves as the dominant reference

de las diferencias entre ambas organizaciones terroristas", miércoles 3 de agosto de 2022.
<https://www.azhar.eg/observer-es/details/ArtMID/1201/ArticleID/63847/Daesh-celebra-la-incorporaci243n-de-11-miembros-de-Al-Qaeda...-una-muestra-m225s-de-las-diferencias-entre-ambas-organizaciones-terroristas>

³³ THOMAS Dominique, "État islamique vs Al-Qaïda: autopsie d'une lutte fratricide", Politique Étrangère, 2016.
<https://shs.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2016-1-page-95?lang=fr>

³⁴ AGUILERA Ana, "Actividad yihadista en el norte de África y el Sahel, febrero 2025", OIET, 26 de marzo de 2025.
<https://observatorioterrorismo.com/yihadismo-en-el-magreb-y-el-sahel-2025/actividad-yihadista-en-el-norte-de-africa-y-el-sahel-febrero-2025/>

³⁵ SUMMERS Marta, "Enfrentamientos entre JNIM y EIGS. Cambios en el equilibrio terrorista del Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 6 de julio de 2020.
https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE098_2020MARSUM_Sahel.pdf

³⁶ MARSTON Barry, "Analysis: High jihadist activity in Africa's Sahel continues", BBC, 9 de noviembre de 2023.
<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204qwhm>

point for jihad³⁷... and those who suffer the results of this fighting end up being the civilians in these areas where government action is almost non-existent.

Conclusion

The Sahel has become the epicentre of Islamic terrorism in which multiple terrorist groups from the two main branches coexist, as both JNIM and EIGS have been able to see the potential that this vast geographical area offers them due to the weakness of the region's states, especially in terms of security, to oppose these terrorist groups. And it is this vacuum that terrorist groups - and also organised crime groups - are trying to fill, presenting themselves as almost the only alternative life - apart from emigration - for many young people, which is why these groups are growing in power and degree of territorial control. While the common goal of all jihadist groups is to establish a caliphate, and despite the existence of a period of peaceful coexistence between the two main branches of jihadist terrorism, differences over both religious issues and simple power struggles are yet another source of conflict in this tortured part of Africa and the world. And, in addition to the chaos and suffering generated in the region, being the epicentre of global jihadism in a global world does not only have a regional impact. It has, and increasingly so, a global impact.

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³⁷ FUENTE COBO Ignacio, "Radiografía de la amenaza yihadista en el Sahel", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 5 de marzo de 2025. https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/radiografia_de_la_amenaza_yihadista_en_el_sahel