

Jihadist threat: the Gulf of Guinea States up against the wall

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In recent years, jihadist groups have gradually shifted from northern Mali toward the centre of the country and then **Burkina Faso. An acceleration** occurred in 2018, with an increase in incidents in the south-west and flares of violence east of Burkina Faso, raising fears of spreading to Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. Contrary to the discourse on an external threat and the resilience of the brotherhoods, while dozens of nationals of the Gulf Guinea countries have joined jihadist groups in recent years, West Africa's coastal States have their backs against the wall in the attempt to develop and implement responses to stem the spread of jihadism, starting by learning from the experiences of their Sahelian neighbours.

On 8 November, the former Malian Touareg rebel leader lyad Ag Ghali, the Algerian Djamel Okacha and the radical preacher Fulani Amadou Kufa appeared in a video calling for a "continuing jihad". Unlike the previous videos in which the jihadist leaders are filmed, Amadou Koufa is in the centre and delivers the message. After accusing France of being at the origin of the violence in Macina, he addresses Muslims in Fulani to encourage them "to make jihad", starting with the members of his ethnic group. "My Fulani brothers, wherever you are, remember these words: come and support your religion, because Islam and Muslims are fought, devastated and burned." Several African countries are particularly mentioned: Senegal, Mali, Niger, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon.

By directly and explicitly addressing the Fulani, the leaders of Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) seek to reinforce the message that combines Fulani and terrorists in their image as defenders of this community in a context where Fulani fighters occupy a growing place in the jihadist groups. But, beyond the "spectre of a Fulani jihad" and its politicisation, the essentialisation of religion at the expense of local dynamics and the multiple motivations behind the rallying calls, or even the ethnic heterogeneity of the jihadist groups active in



Burkina Faso, this video echoes their extension to new spaces, the growing threat they pose to the countries of the Gulf of Guinea and the challenges this poses.



Figure 1. Gulf of Guinea

Burkina Faso in turmoil

Originally centred in northern Mali, the violence of the jihadist groups has gradually crept south, to the point that the centre of the country has become the main focus of the attacks. In 2017, the United Nations identified more than 1,000 incidents in the Mopti region alone, and during 2018, the region recorded the largest number of actions attributed to jihadist groups against armed forces, Malian Defence Forces, MINUSMA, signatory armed groups and Operation Barkhane (1).

⁽¹⁾ See reports to the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Mali, including those of 29 March, 6 June, and 25 September 2018.



Along with this expansion to central Mali, jihadist groups have settled in Burkina, to the extent that, on 1 January 2019, a state of emergency was declared in 14 border provinces of Mali and Niger. This expansion was prepared in the early 2010s (1), but the first attacks did not take place until 2015. On 25 October, a group of about 10 fighters led by Boubacar Sawadogo – linked to Ansar Eddine Sud – attacked Samoroguan gendarmerie, in the west of the country. But it is mainly the north that has been hit, with several attacks against state officials and members of civil society. In December 2016, Ansaroul Islam was created by Ibrahim Dicko. Made up mainly of Rimaïbés and Fulani, this organisation maintains links with other groups in Mali. In 2018, the attacks increased in the north without declining in the west, including actions against state officials in Galgouli (Poni province) and Batié (Noumbiel province) in August. Meanwhile, the security situation has deteriorated considerably in the east of the country with about fifteen attacks (explosive devices or skirmishes) between January and August. The likely perpetrators are elements of the Islamic State in the Great Sahara and Ansarul Islam, in alliances formed with influential members of the local communities who have studied the Koran in Mali (2).

Attacks in Burkina: a plot hatched by the old regime?

The attacks in Burkina are often presented as a consequence of Blaise Compaoré's policies and his forced exit from power. "If we are attacked today, it is because the truce, which was a form of collusion between Blaise Compaoré's regime and these movements, is over," declared President Roch Kaboré on 31 January 2016, in Ethiopia, on the side-lines of an African Union summit. This type of discourse stems from the involvement of the former regime in the release of hostages held by AQIM in northern Mali, the organisation of the 2012 peace negotiations in Ouagadougou between the rebels and the government, the freedom of movement granted to members of jihadist groups throughout Burkina Faso, as well as the 2015 coup attempt by soldiers of the Regiment of Presidential Security led by General Diendéré (3). According to this interpretation, the attacks are the fruit of a conspiracy in which armed jihadist groups and supporters of the former president remain in alliance against the new power. If the 2014 revolution generated a disruption of the security and intelligence services (4) while the Compaoré regime adopted ambiguous policies, simply stating that the attacks result from the new regime's courageous stance and manoeuvres by Compaoré's followers would be to overlook the expansionist ambitions of the armed jihadist groups in Burkina, the evolution of Burkinabe politics between 2012 and 2013 (5), the rigidity of the chain of command, and the multiple factors at the origin of the violence that feeds on local tensions and impacts the mobilisation of State agencies.

⁽¹⁾ Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso", CTC Sentinel, vol. 11, no. 3, March 2018, https://ctc.usma.edu/ansaroul-islam-growing-terrorist-insurgency-burkina-faso/ (accessed on 25 January 2019).
(2) Mahamadou Savadogo (interview with Sophie Douce), "Nous assistons à la naissance d'une nouvelle cellule terroriste au Burkina Faso", Le Monde, 5 September 2018.

⁽³⁾ Joe Penney, "Blowback in Africa. How America's Counterterror Strategy Helped Destabilize Burkina Faso", *The Intercept*, 22 November 2018, https://theintercept.com/2018/11/22/burkina-faso-us-relations/ (accessed on 18 January 2019). This viewpoint is reinforced by the absence of claims for the attacks, attributed according to Héni Nsaibi to two factors: neither Ansaroul Islam nor the EIGS have a media branch; claims attract attention and trigger military and intelligence operations which would affect the militants' ability to act (cited by Joe Penney, *art cit.*).

(4) Ibid.

⁽⁵⁾ Rinaldo Depagne, «Inquiétante escalade de la violence jihadiste au Burklina Faso », International Crisis Group, commentary, March 5 2018. Between 2012 and 2013, Compaoré "revised its strategy, gradually moving away from the arrangements with the armed groups in favor of a more direct military intervention". To the point of seeing Ouagadougou threatened, in February 2013, by a MUJAO spokesperson.



Several reasons can be put forward to explain this spread to Burkina Faso. First, as stated by lyad Ag Ghali, in an interview dated 2017, the fight must be expanded to new theatres (1). While this approach responds to the military pressure on jihadist groups in northern Mali, where the French have achieved several tactical successes in 2018 and where the Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC - *Mécanisme opérationnel de coordination*) is progressing (2), it also echoes the transnational character of jihadist ideology and the circulation of ideas and people. Next, the jihadist groups were able to find refuge among the local population to set up operations and carry out their attacks. Finally, they benefited from the disruption of the security apparatus and intelligence services in the aftermath of the 2014 revolution.

Growing pressure on coastal countries

Recent attacks in Burkina just near the borders of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin, as well as the arrest in December 2018 of people preparing operations in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Abidjan during the New Year (3), put under pressure Gulf of Guinea countries. However, the first signs of action by jihadist groups in these countries date back to the mid-2010s. In the W Regional Park, fighters from Mali reportedly conducted a reconnaissance operation in 2014-2015 reaching as far as Benin (4). Similarly, in 2015, several members of an active JNIM cell in the Sama forest, on the border between Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, were detained (5), while the remaining combatants continue their activities. In fact, members of this unit allegedly kidnapped a Colombian nun in the Sikasso region in February 2017 before being arrested near Koutiala on 6 December 2018 (6).

Jihadist armed groups have also recruited members in coastal countries. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) featured members from several countries including Guineans, Ghanaians and Beninese. After the departure of the Nigerian Bilal Hicham from the Ousmane Dan Fodio combat unit, it was even a native of Benin from the south of the country and a Yoruba, alias Abdullah, who became head of the unit (7). And the MUJAO is not isolated: according to Libyan authorities, dozens of nationals from Ghana, Senegal and Gambia have joined the Islamic State organisation in Libya (8).

⁽¹⁾ Taken from Alex Thurston (translated from Arabic by the author), "Iyad Ag Ghali's Military Strategy in Mali", Sahel blog, 12 June 2017, https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2017/06/12/iyad-ag-ghalis-military-strategy-in-mali/ (accessed on 9 January 2019).

⁽²⁾ Following the killing of an MOC officer from Timbuktu on 18 November 2018, claimed in a statement dated 28 December, the JNIM broadcast a message on 3 January 2019 as a rallying call addressed to the combatants willing participate in the campaign.

⁽³⁾ The headquarters of the Ivorian army (Abidjan) and a hotel were subject to recognisance by a Burkinabe resident in Abidjan, the brother of one of those arrested (RFI, "Cellule terroriste démantelée au Mali: le profil des suspects" 14 December 2018).

⁽⁴⁾ Interview, Dakar, January 2019.

⁽⁵⁾ Baba Ahmed, "Mali: comment la DGSE a arrêté Souleymane Keïta, l'émir d'Ansar Eddine du Sud", Jeune Afrique, 4 April 2016.

⁽⁶⁾ Two Burkinabe, one Malian and one Ivorian citizen.

⁽⁷⁾ AFP, "Un Béninois remplace un Nigérien à la tête d'une katiba islamiste au Mali", 28 December 2012.

⁽⁸⁾ Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Others. Foreign Fighters in Libya", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Note, no. 45, 2018.



The first major shock was the Grand-Bassam attack, backed by the Arab Ould Nouini and perpetrated by a suicide commando in March 2016. According to the authors of an internal report by the Secretariat of Ghana's National Security Council, "After the attacks in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo are the next targets" (1). Two months later, a memo addressed to the Beninese armed forces was made public, in which units were asked to "boost security in the various areas threatened with terrorist attacks" and to be "more vigilant during border searches" (2).

With the increase in attacks east of Burkina Faso, 2018 was marked by several measures to strengthen border security. In particular, Togo and Benin deployed additional units in the north of their territories to boost the coverage of their networks. In parallel, joint operations were organised. In May 2018, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo deployed nearly 2,000 members of the defence and security forces as part of Operation Koudalgou, resulting in 200 arrests, including two people suspected of links with jihadist groups (3). On 25 October, the Chiefs of Staff of the armed forces of Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger and Togo met in Cotonou to ratify strategies and actions to pool efforts and effectively combat extremist violence and terrorism. A few weeks later, a cross-border security exercise was held between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Although this mobilisation shows certain awareness and the willingness to publicise it, it is not without raising several questions. First, cooperation remains difficult between the different players in the sub-region (4). Admittedly, the operation against a cell in Ouagadougou, in May 2018, is the result of the collaboration between Burkinabe and Malian armed forces with French technical support. In the judicial field, the WACAP initiative (5) – supported by the UNODC – has allowed exchanges between judges in the subregion to be strengthened. However, cooperation remains hampered by a culture of mistrust between States, between the government agencies of the same state, and within those agencies themselves. Secondly, the control of flows on the northern borders is limited by old practices of bypassing checkpoints, the corruption of State agents, or civil status constraints. This surveillance is all the more difficult given that the jihadist groups rely on the local know-how of smugglers and traffickers. Several of these individuals have even joined the jihadists, such as Ahmed Al Tilemsi in Mali, a senior figure of Al Mourabitoune killed in 2015, or Bana Fanaye in the Lake Chad region, at the head of the N'Djamena terrorist cell responsible for the attacks in the Chadian capital the same year.

⁽¹⁾ Edmond D'Almeida, "Le Ghana et le Togo dans le viseur des terroristes, selon un rapport des renseignements ghanéens", Jeune Afrique, 18 April 2016. Following the Grand Bassam attack, a hotel attack simulation drill was held Togo.

⁽²⁾ Vincent Duhem, "Le Bénin doit-il craindre la menace terroriste? », Jeune Afrique, 16 June 2016.

⁽³⁾ AFP, "200 arrestations dans une opération conjointe Burkina-Ghana-Togo-Bénin", 19 May 2018.

⁽⁴⁾ Various interviews, West Africa, 2017 and 2018.

⁽⁵⁾ The Network of West African Central Authorities and Prosecutors (WACAP) brings together the 15 ECOWAS countries and Mauritania. It aimed at streamlining exchanges between members of the Ministries of Justice.



Last but not least, a strategy cannot just be based on drafting a new penal code, creating specialised courts (1), carrying out joint operations, deploying agents or ensuring unrestrained information collection. A diplomatic cable from the American Embassy in Ouagadougou, written in 2009, illustrates this challenge. The Burkinabe regime is conducting intelligence actions in the north of the country. Potentially dangerous individuals have been identified. However, transforming intelligence information into strategy and action is difficult. As summarised by the author, "the GOBF [Government of Burkina Faso] has their names, they know who they are, but don't know how to move forward and properly exploit that information" (2).

Multiple

internal vulnerabilities

The intensity of the exchanges between the coastal States and the Sahel hinterland, the dispersion of communities, the numerous mobility opportunities – whether to settle durably in another country or following more temporary circulation criteria –, the trade flows (3), or the use of communication tools are all factors that can encourage regional and international "plugs" around religious and political rationales, but also social interchange as a gateway to voluntary or involuntary commitments or giving rise to recruitment opportunities. Thus, Saleck Ould Cheikh, after his escape from Nouakchott prison in December 2015, travelled to Guinea-Bissau and Guinea. Suleymane Keita, following the arrest of seven of his fighters in September 2015, fled to Guinea – where his family is from – before moving to other countries and the announcement by Malian authorities of his arrest (4).

Internal tensions in the Gulf of Guinea States are another source of vulnerability: political tensions, social tensions, economic tensions, religious tensions... The authors of a 2014 report published by the Clingendael Institute identified several factors that could foster the growth of violent extremism in Benin and Ghana (5): the frustration of youth with older generations who monopolise political and economic power; disparities between urban and rural areas; illiteracy rates; the birth of new religious ideologies such as evangelical Christianity and Sunni revivalism. In northern Benin, for example, many mosques have been built, accompanied by the introduction of veils worn by girls and women, especially in the city of Djougou (6). Similarly, the Ghanaian National Peace Council has had to step in several times in response to radical preaching and anti-Muslim sermons.

⁽¹⁾ The Beninese Court for the Repression of Economic and Terrorism Crimes (CRIET) has the particularity of being the first and last instance court, without the possibility of lodging appeals on the merits of the case.

⁽²⁾ United States diplomatic telegram, "MOD Discusses wide range of regional security issues with CDA" Embassy of the United States in Ouagadougou, 8 December 2009 https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09OUAGADOUGOU1136_a.html (accessed on 21 January 2019).

⁽³⁾ The circulation of weapons and improvised explosive device components is one of the aspects of these exchanges.

⁽⁴⁾ Interviews, Dakar, April 2016 and January 2019.

⁽⁵⁾ Peter Knoope and Grégory Chauzal, Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin. The Potential for Radicalization and Political Violence in West Africa, Clingendael Report, January 2016.

⁽⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 22. The same phenomenon was observed in Senegal and Burkina Faso in 2015-2016 (interview, Dakar, February 2016, interview, Ouagadougou, March 2016).



The reasons for joining armed jihadist groups cannot be reduced to the growth of religious currents imported from the Arab-Persian Gulf. Several studies have shown the major role played by feelings of injustice, local conflicts, and the behaviour of defence and security forces in the shift towards violence and its continued presence (1). Similarly, taking up arms in god's name against the powers that be predates the arrival of Wahhabism and, in the wake of the terrorist attack in Grand Bassam in March 2016, the main Salafist associations of Côte d'Ivoire denounced this terrorism and the erroneous confusion between of Salafism and violence (2). The rise of a stricter Islam advocating for a moral and spiritual renewal on the African continent nonetheless represents, for the players advocating violence in the name of religion, extra leverage to gain an audience, a complacent ear, support, funding and even for recruiting fighters by relying on the anti-Western sentiment and anger present in part of the population. The author of a study on the perception of terrorist groups in Ghana, following interviews with people living in the Madina district of Accra, was concerned about the penetration of ideas legitimising the jihadist movements' activities among youth and their potential impact on recruitment (3).

Sunni revivalism is also a source of conflictual competition. In Guinea, for example, tensions between Wahhabi youths and traditional Sufi scholars led to the destruction, in 2014, of the so-called "Tata 1" Wahhabi mosque in the Donghol neighbourhood. Funded by an association from the Arab-Persian Gulf, via a Guinean association, the mosque was taken over by Diallo Al-Hamdou, a self-proclaimed Wahhabi imam (4). The path of several Senegalese citizens, sentenced in July 2018 for criminal conspiracy in connection with a terrorist undertaking, illustrates how these tensions can trigger the decision to take up arms and turn towards global terrorist movements. In fact, following the attack by Mouride talibés on the home and mosque of imam Abdou Karim Ndiour in Diourbel, one of the accused, Matar Diokhané, "had overseen the creation of the Martial Arts Sports Association (ASPAM) for the purpose of initiating Sunnites in martial arts" before – the ASPAM did not provide access to weapons nor give satisfactory military training – participating in two meetings "with the agenda of determining which entity to support between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State" (5).

These religious tensions are all the more dangerous because they occur in countries shaken by conflicts over land, livestock, mining resources and their exploitation, with challenges to social hierarchies by young people and "social cadets", and where the political stage is unsettled: in Côte d'Ivoire, power is focused on the 2020 election, disappointments are great with respect to the Ouattara's mandate, and the integration of his fighters have left their mark on the security apparatus; in Togo, since 2017 the opposition has rallied against the regime and constitutional reforms (6); in

⁽¹⁾ See for example: PNUD, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, New York, 2017; Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni *et al.*, "Jeunes "djihadistes" au Mali. Guidés par la foi ou par les circonstances?", analysis Note 89, ISS Dakar, August 2016; Mathieu Pellerin, *Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel*, IFRI et OCP, February 2017.

⁽²⁾ Frédérick Madore, "Le nouveau dynamisme du salafisme en Côte d'Ivoire: vers une radicalisation de l'islam ivoirien ?", Tenth International Congress of the Association of Mandé Studies, August 2017, Grand-Bassam, p. 8, https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01691275/document (accessed 15 January 2019).

⁽³⁾ Ruby Yayra Dei-Fitih, The Ghanaian Perceptions about Transnational Terrorism and Islam and their Implications for Christian-Muslim Community Coexistence. The Case of the Madina Community, Norwegian School of Theology, master's thesis supported in Spring 2018, p. 72-73.

⁽⁴⁾ Christophe Châtelot, "En Guinée, la poussée wahhabite bouleverse les équilibres religieux", Le Monde, 22 September 2017.

⁽⁵⁾ Indictment of the representative of the Public Prosecutor's Office, public hearing of the Special Criminal Court of 19 July 2018, Dakar First Instance Regional Court.

⁽⁶⁾ Laurent Larcher, "Au Togo, dans le fief de l'opposition", *La Croix*, 3 January 2018. In October 2017, two imams were arrested. In response, a crowd attacked police stations, looting and burning gendarmerie barracks.



Guinea, Alpha Condé faces social discontent and active opposition... With three risks: the political manipulation of the terrorist threat, disarray in the security apparatus, and a focus by the authorities on domestic politics issues at the expense of mitigating conflicts and decreasing internal vulnerabilities to violent extremism.

Not repeating the same mistakes

Faced with the threat of attacks, recruitment drives and the presence of terror cells, the Gulf of Guinea States have their backs against the wall. Not that this threat is new. But it has increased considerably as a result of southward progression of the jihadist armed groups active in northern Mali. In this context, both the establishment of jihadism in the Sahel and the Boko Haram's shift towards violence are harsh lessons. It must be remembered that the repression and the extrajudicial execution of Mohamed Yusuf, in a police station in Maiduguri, was responsible for converting Boko Haram into a group of insurgents who pursued weapons, money, and combat training. In Burkina Faso too, the violence of the defence and security forces has contributed to driving members of local communities into the arms of the jihadist groups (1).

Mali and Burkina Faso also provide us with three further lessons. The first lesson concerns the consequences of a "laissez-faire" attitude, or poor interpretation of the threat, by presenting it as coming from outside and failing to find resonances domestically, or a secondary issue. In northern Mali, the authorities regarded the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) as an Algerian problem. The main threat was the emergence of a new Tuareg uprising (2). As for Burkina, jihadist attacks tend to be reduced to manoeuvres by supporters of Blaise Compaoré to destabilise the post-revolution government. The second lesson is related to the repercussions of the militarisation of national security, to the detriment of the rule of law and the capacity of public authority representatives to appease local conflicts likely to kindle revolts. The third lesson is the imperative need for an effective coordination and cooperation among States against a transnational threat that disregards borders.

These lessons point to two main pitfalls. The first is failing to take into account (1) whether through a "laissez-faire" approach supported by the discourse on the external nature of the threat or the supposed bastion of authority exercised by traditional brotherhoods or social groups, (2) through a strictly security-based response with no actual strategy to coordinate the different state services to reduce the ability of preachers or members of armed groups to gain support based on feelings of injustice and anger, (3) or through a lack of cooperation within and between States. The second pitfall concerns the political manipulation of the fight against terrorism to remove opponents, legitimise power and attract external funding. That terrorism is used as a resource is in the rules of

⁽¹⁾ Morgane Le Cam, "Confessions d'un djihadiste du Burkina: 'Vu ce que font les forces de sécurité à nos parents, je ne regretterai jamais leur mort' ", Le Monde, 10 December 2017. On the 2018 abuses in Burkina Faso and their exploitation, see: Morgane Le Cam, "Au nord du Burkina Faso, les exactions de l'armée contrarient la lutte antiterroriste", Le Monde, 12 May 2018.

⁽²⁾ Yvan Guichaoua and Mathieu Pellerin, Faire la paix et construire l'État. Les relations entre pouvoir central et périphéries sahéliennes au Mali et au Niger, Études no. 51, IRSEM, July 2017, p. 49.



the game, but on the condition that the approach is focused on the rule of law and not only the security forces or combatting internal opposition, that an inventory is carried out in parallel on the structural shortfalls and challenges, and that an integrated strategy to strengthen the resilience of society is implemented at the highest level of the state.

In view of the structural challenges facing West Africa and the developments in recent decades, the question today is less a matter of knowing how to defend against terrorism, but rather, how the responses devices will be able to limit the impact and stem the spread of terrorism.

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