

# WHAT KIND OF TERRORISM IN SAHEL AFTER OPERATION SERVAL? | **NOMADIC JIHADISM AND REGIONAL EXPANSION**



The explosion of a car bomb on 28 September, in front of Malian military barracks in Timbuktu, served as a reminder that terrorism is still present in Mali. However, the new jihadist epicentre in the region moved to Libya, with direct repercussions on Niger and Chad. In this outlook, only a mobilisation of all players in the area as well as a regional and global approach from international community in long term will make it possible to face this challenge.

While the Sahelian jihadist groups were strongly destabilised by Operation Serval, the threat they represent is still alive. Mali is of course concerned by this persistent terrorism, combining with ideologists, active members and sympathisers having various motivations (1). But because of the success of the French military intervention, in an African Continent where number of fighters are nomads and with numerous grey areas, it had spread according to the principle of communicating vessels. Therefore, the fight against terrorism calls for action at the regional level against violent armed groups, in security but also in political and economic areas. In these instances, the window of opportunity opened by the French military intervention in Mali, to reduce the harmful potential of the jihadist groups and stem formation and recruitment dynamics, will only have been a missed opportunity.

**A persistent threat in Mali** | Operation Serval made it possible to dismantle the jihadist infrastructure in northern Mali. Logistic stores, caches of weapons, several training centres, a printing press and twenty workshops for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices were destroyed. In the Amettetaï valley alone, twenty tons of munitions were seized, to which were added several hundred weapons. From a human point of view, an important

number of fighters were killed or apprehended. The armed groups supposedly lost between 400 and 600 men of the 1600 estimated by French soldiers during the armed operations, including the Algerian Abou Zeid (2). In total, supposedly one third of the fighters were neutralised, one third have surrendered or switched sides, and one third have chosen to carry on fighting, starting with the men of the Mujao and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Aqmi), following their surviving leaders. In that respect in fact, the Mujao and Mokhtar Belmokhtar announced on 22 August this year, the fusion of their two movements and the birth of *Al Mourabitoune* (the Almoravids) in order to "*achieve the unity of Muslims from the Nile to the Atlantic*"; according to a statement released by the Mauritanian Agency ANI (3).

Although the intervention of France, Chad and African countries participating in the Misma made it possible to break the capacity of action of the jihadist armed groups in northern Mali, the military and police operations are not end. They are continuing, in order to destroy stocks of weapons and neutralise fighters refusing to surrender. However, contrary to actions carried out in January and February 2013, it is no longer a question of conquering an fiercely defended enemy stronghold and regaining territory, but instead of carrying out area control missions and anti-terrorist operations in conjunction with Minusma and Malian police forces, especially in the Gao region - where the Mujao has a strong territorial base - and the northern parts of the country. On 8 September, a vehicle full of explosives was thus discovered in a forest west of Anéfis, a village between Gao and Kidal, by French, Senegalese, Nigerian soldiers and Malian policemen. On 10 September a booby-trapped truck was also neutralised west of the town of Tabankrot, south of Gao, and four days later, legionnaires were challenged by four men south of Almoustarat, seizing after the confrontation a booby-trapped pick-up truck, weapons, several thousand ammunition rounds, communications and medical equipment.

The rescheduling of the withdrawal of French soldiers and the will to leave a permanent contingent of 1000 troops in Mali should prevent any reterritorialisation process by jihadist groups in the country. But the reduction of this unpredictable threat will take time and constitutes a real challenge for the Malian government, whose armed forces are being reconstructed, and an international community that is yet to arrive. As reminded by the United Nations special envoy in Mali on last 19 September, Bert Koenders, the Minusma does not have enough planes and helicopters and, from the 12,000 men initially envisaged, only 5,000 (from the Misma) were deployed (4).

**The emergence of a Libyan jihadist epicentre** | If jihadism still exists in Mali, it is not limited to this territory. By "*kicking the anthill*" (5), the French forces have fed the logic of dispersion. Many fighters fled from Mali to southern Libya where, under the Kadhafi regime, Tuareg people were in charge of security in some regions, especially on the border with Niger (6).

For several reasons, Libya constitutes an ideal sanctuary to rebuild the infrastructures undermined by the French intervention. On the one hand, it forms a crossroads between the Mediterranean and the Sahara, between the Maghreb and the Machrek, between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, between Egypt and Mali. On the other hand, whereas the European *EUBAM Libya* mission intended to assist the authorities to secure their borders was only officially launched on 22 May 2013, the political and security situation makes it a first class refuge. Weapons of any kind are readily available. The traffic goes through the peripheries of the country, taking advantage of the perturbation of the Malian route. Lastly and most importantly, the south and the east, important centres of jihadist recruitment for the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, are badly or even not controlled at all by a central government obliged to make do with 300 militia members, who are not all pledging their allegiance.

The question as to whether the transplant of AQMI in the south and east Libya was successful is still under debate. Some observers think that there might already be an advanced settlement (7). Others consider that the organisation might only be at the stage of logistic complications or temporary reception with other armed groups, and that any attempt

for a durable settlement will come up against the will of Libyan militias to keep their autonomy and their reluctance to give in to an organisation perceived as "Algerian" (8). Also, the existence of an ideological and organisational bridge between the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan, of a concerted action under the Al Qaeda flag, remains questionable.

Therefore, as reminded by the senators Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Gérard Larcher a few months ago, *"the question of the degree of settlement of Al Qaeda in Libya could well be, fundamentally, only a question of time"* (9). Whereas Aqmi was carrying out a strategy of insertion in northern Mali (10), the terrorist organisation was already present in Libya in 2012, with partisans *"active in the purchase of weapons, escorting drug convoys"* and the identification of areas for *"the possibility of a retreat to north Mali"* (11).

**Niger and Chad at the forefront** | For the Nigerian president, the presence of jihadist cells in southern Libya is particularly worrying. On 27 May this year, following attacks aimed at the Agadez barracks and a plant of the Areva group at Arlit, he declared that, *"for Niger in particular, the main threat moved from the Malian border towards the Libyan border. I confirm it, the enemy who attacked us in Agadez and Arlit comes from the south [Libya] [...]. The situation in Mali, which is only a consequence of the crisis in Libya, must not detract the international community from its duty to stabilise the situation in Libya"*. A few days later, this concern was reinforced by the escape of twenty-two prisoners held in the Niamey prison, including the Malian from Gao, Alassane Ould Mohamed, alias "Chébani" (12), and the attack against a police station in Niamey on 11 June.

The main worrying element for the Niger authorities resides in the presence in the country of nationals having fought with Aqmi and the Mujao, where they were taught the use of weapons. The Niger authorities' concern is particularly strong because the country is caught between: in the north, the Islamists present in southern Libya; in the west, the partisans of Aqmi and the Mujao still operational in Mali; and in the south, Boke Haram and his followers. Niger is however not the only one to worry about the violence in the sub-region. Chad, also, is particularly concerned by the presence of a security black hole in southern Libya. On the one hand, having sent 2,000 troops to Mali, the country is a target of first order. On the other hand, it must face the destabilisation risks on its eastern and southern borders, because of both the Darfour crisis and the strongly unstable situation in the Central African Republic, in spite of the presence of 1,300 Cameroonian, Congolese, Gabonese and Chadian soldiers from the international support mission to the RCA (Misca). Since the Séléka rebellion and the overthrow of President Bozizé, the country is under the control of gang leaders, the State does not collect any taxes, civil servants are not being paid, and 80% of the central African diamond trade is allegedly in the hands of local war lords (13).

The jihadist threat must not however be underestimated. Of course, Niger and Chad are - and will be - an action and even recruitment ground for armed groups or individuals laying claim to radical Islam. As reminded by the French researcher Emmanuel Grégoire, *"the constitution of Islamist cells in Niger is worrying: some Arab groups in the Tasara region have thus made economic and religious links (drug trafficking) with the Mujao"*. But *"the Islamist principles are not welcomed by the populations, whether they are from the north or the south of the country, and their influence remains at a minimum"* (14). On this point, we are far from a situation similar to that prevailing in Mali during months before the rising of a Tuareg revolt and the alliance between some of the rebels with the Aqmi jihadists. In fact, the main challenge of the Sahelian regimes resides in their capacity to prevent a political and social dispute liable to feed the jihadist rhetoric. In Niger, the internal tensions are strong, fuelled by hopes raised by the presidential program for development, the suspicion of the infiltration by political and security institutions by transnational criminal networks, the increasing feeling that the country is fighting a war for the West and the development of a civil Islamic society specifically critical, constituting both a radical force of contention, potentially violent, and a more pacific enterprise of "remoralisation" of public life (15).

**A window of opportunity to be seized** | The French military intervention in Mali opened a window of opportunity for the Sahel which remains to be seized. The threat represented by experienced armed jihadist groups, that have demonstrated their strong capacity for adaptation, will not disappear in the next few months, and it will affect the efforts as far as economic development is concerned, directly through a climate of insecurity, and indirectly by obliging local States to grant a substantial part of their resources to the military and police units. Whether we like it or not, the jihadists will still be making the news for a long time.

The success of the fight against jihadist groups in the region thus imposes an international action in the long term in Mali, but also in Libya and other sub-regional partners. This is a two-fold challenge: preventing any reterritorialisation process and eradicating the recruitment dynamics. In this second perspective, a balance still remains to be found between the reinforcement of security forces, the involvement of the foreign soldiers, the answer to expectations of societies in political or economic spheres, and the speeches which do not stigmatise a population and a religion.

The main question concerning jihadism in the Sahel after Serval is therefore the capacity of action and the anchoring of the jihadist groups into local societies and, in parallel, the efficiency of local regimes to provide to their populations basic services, to protect them and to ensure the freedom of elementary rights. To say it differently, by focusing too much on a real but limited jihadist threat, Europe and United States are taking the risk of reinforcing this threat by giving it the echo it needs to feed its rhetoric and exist and, by doing, to weak their local partners.

## | Notes

- (1) Terrorists, traffickers and rebels with political motivations can agree from time to time but they have their own objectives and dynamics.
- (2) Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali. Les nouvelles menaces contre la France*, Paris, Fayard, 2013, p. 59. The difference between the number of jihadists and estimates before the French military intervention, much higher, is linked to the fact that many Ansar Dine fighters left the movement after the beginning of Operation Serval.
- (3) By the end of September, no leader was officially named for the new organisation, as well no attack was - yet - claimed. This declaration of the fusion by the *Signatories in blood* of the Mujao can be analysed as a direct consequence of Operation Serval on the jihadist groups and the reduction of their fighting potential: in order to keep a critical mass and carry on putting pressure on the events, they have to join their strengths.
- (4) Christophe Boisbouvier, « Bert Koenders : "il reste un risque jihadiste au nord du Mali" », *RFI*, September 19th 2013.
- (5) Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Gérard Larcher (rapporteurs), *Mali : comment gagner la paix ?*, Rapport d'information n°513, Commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées (Sénat), 16 April 2013, p. 104.
- (6) Patrick Haimzadeh, *Au cœur de la Libye de Kadhafi*, Paris, JC Lattès, 2011, p. 161.
- (7) See for example Samuel Laurent, *Sahelistan*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.
- (8) Jean-Pierre Chevènement et Gérard Larcher (rapporteurs), *Sahel : pour une approche globale*, Rapport d'information n°720, Commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées (Sénat), 3 July 2013, p. 93.
- (9) *Ibidem*.
- (10) The French soldiers from Operation Serval found a report dated 20 July 2013 in Timbuktu, written for « discussions collégiales » within Aqmi and called *Orientation du jihad dans l'Azawad*. Organised in six chapters with the sub-title « Vision globale du projet jihadiste dans l'Azawad et politique d'Al-Qaida et à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de l'Azawad », Droukdel exposes his objectives for the Azawad and the legacy of the movement. In fact, the control of this territory only constitutes a starting point. On the one hand, it is a laboratory within the organisation of an

emirate. On the other hand, the « *international jihad* » carries on outside the Azawad « *independently from Ansar Dine* ». In any way, with the offensive towards the south - very probably not welcomed by Aqmi -, this project became invalid, the organisation having to find another space for "its" emirate.

(11) Jean-Louis Carrère (senator), quoted by Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Gérard Larcher (rapporteurs), *op. cit.*, p. 105. Also refer to *Al Qaeda in Libya: a profile*, Library of Congress, August 2012 (<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/aq-libya-loc.pdf>).

(12) Alassane Ould Mohamed was convicted for the assassination in December 2000 of the American defense attaché in Niger, as well as the murder in 2009 of four Saudi tourists in western Niger, near the Malian border. He was presumably also suspected of having been implicated in the kidnapping, in December 2009 near Niamey, of the special UN delegate to Niger Robert Fowler and his assistant.

(13) Nathalie Guibert, « Centrafrique: les scénarios du soutien militaire français pour dégager les routes et sécuriser les villes », *Le Monde*, 24 September 2013.

(14) Emmanuel Grégoire, « Islamistes et rebelles touaregs maliens: alliances, rivalités et ruptures », *EchoGéo*, Sur le Vif, 2013 (<http://echogeo.revues.org/13466>).

(15) International Crisis Group, *Niger. Un autre maillon faible dans le Sahel ?*, Rapport Afrique n°208, 19 September 2013 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-de-louest/niger/208-niger-another-weak-link-in-the-sahel.aspx>).



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