



THE SAHEL AND THE GUINEA GULF: A MACRO REGION STILL IN TROUBLE

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It is matter of fact that the macro region, which includes the Sahel and the Guinea Gulf, continues to be affected by the various fractural lines—from the lack of security, which remains the more visible one, to the weak economic and social development, to the radical Islamism and tribalism divide. However, security still remains one the most critical points. The Sahel region is one of the epicenters of jihadist terrorism worldwide, and in 2019 it was established as the area on the planet most affected by terrorism. Being close to the European borders and constituting a node of interconnection between all of West Africa, the possibility of jihadist terrorism expanding from the Sahel up to the Guinea Gulf and reaching the Maghreb and Mediterranean coasts, its stability is an issue that has always been worrisome. However, the evolution of strategic and institutional developments in the Sahel could mean that the concern for the security has led to monitoring, with increased attention the advance of jihadism towards the neighboring Gulf of Guinea as the first target.

The Gulf of Guinea is made up of seventeen coastline countries (and runs for 6,000 kilometers in total, ranging from Senegal to Angola). It is an interesting and strategic area in terms of hydrocarbon reserves, minerals (tin, cobalt and diamonds), agricultural and fishing resources. Furthermore, the Gulf of Guinea is important in maritime trade: around 25 percent of African maritime traffic passes through its waters and there are twenty commercial ports that supply both Africa and Europe with important raw materials. And then there is its importance in terms of demographics: it is one of the African subregions where the population is growing the most (the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is Nigeria, where the population is expected to double in 2050 to reach 800 million inhabitants).

Both Nigeria and Ghana are considered part of the six 'African lions' (the others are Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa) in terms of potential economic growth, despite important domestic problems. However, for some years now—especially since the AQIM attack in the Grand-Bassam tourist resort (which occurred in 2016 in Ivory Coast)—there are fears that the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, which in the north borders Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (which are now under illegal governments after coups) will swell the ranks of jihadist groups and this scourge will end up turning Guinea, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin into terrorist sanctuaries. While it is true that there were already affected Gulf countries (like Nigeria and Cameroon), the reality is that the subsidiaries of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State that operate in the region now have their sights set on the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, where the presence of jihadist fighters and attacks has been detected.

Meanwhile, France is still immersed in a long-term process of re-evaluating its "foundations of its diplomatic and military policy in the region" after the deterioration of relations with Mali, Burkina Faso

and now Niger. This situation is because of the coups d'état that occurred in these countries and the growing Russian influence in the Sahel through the Wagner mercenary group (now absorbed within the regular Russian armed forces).

In Niger, to help in the anti-terrorist fight after the end of the "Barkhane" operation, French troops had re-deployed some 1,500 soldiers from Mali. However, after the coup of 2023 and a bitter diplomatic tussle, Paris was obliged to withdraw its troops from the country, together with the German contingent. Consequently, the EU presence in the area has suffered a significant loss, which further pushed the Twenty-Seven to redefine the future of European operations and their nature, not only in the Sahel, the Guinea Gulf region and elsewhere (military, police, diplomatic, civilian, combat, mentoring/training, assistance).

For its part, the US has maintained a lower profile than France in reaction to the development of events in Niger and has retained its nearly 1,500 soldiers and armed drone patrols, deployed in two main compounds, tasked to the highly profiled hunt of terrorists and to identify illegal traffics and trade.

The presence of Western countries received another blow in mid-March when the junta in power in Niamey suspended "with immediate effect" all the agreements in defence and security with the US and, as a natural consequence, those forces should prepare their departure from the country (this new development, for now, seems to exclude the presence of the Italian troop contingent based in Niger).

The worsening of the security situation in the Sahel increases the dangers, given that in consideration of its geographical position, it plays the role of "sanctuary" of instability not only *vis-à-vis* the Guinea Gulf region, but also with the Mediterranean façade, and as mentioned also to the European continent.

It appears that in the Sahel, there are not only jihadist groups and their destabilizing threats, internal and external, but there is also the threat of the institutional changes *manu militari* (not only current, but also looming), together with new influences of new/old stakeholders (e.g., Russia, China, Turkey, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, India, Japan). The most visible is the dissolution of the regional architecture, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and G5S (Group of Five—Sahel).

The coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, the confused "transitions" in Chad, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau (and now Senegal) weakened the already weak institutions. In January the military juntas in West African nations of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger jointly announced their immediate withdrawal from ECOWAS. The juntas accused the regional economic bloc of imposing inhumane sanctions aimed at reversing

recent coups in their respective countries. After long and senseless tussles, ECOWAS de facto abandoned the idea of sanctions and punitive measures against the juntas. But already in the summer the three juntas decided to set up their own architecture, undermining further the solidity of the regional pacts and the plans to replace the current ones and prepare alternate architectures. ECOWAS, which recognizes only democratic governments, has faced previous challenges to its authority, with its regional court ruling last year that juntas lack the power to act on behalf of their nations in place of elected governments.

The move of the juntas followed a series of events that heightened political tensions in West Africa, including a coup in Niger last year. The three nations of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have recently formed an economic/monetary, security alliance, severed military ties with France and turned to Russia for support, and clearly look to expand their network. Moscow looking to expand its area of influence in Sahel, and based on old ties (such as, thousands of student grants issued for many years) is now looking at Chad.

In January, Russian President Vladimir Putin met Chadian incumbent leader Mahamat Idriss Deby, who is the son of the long-time General-President Idriss Deby, who fell in battle against Jihadists in 2021; Mahamat has been designated by the country military leadership as the "provisional" president). Thus, the Kremlin is courting a country that had previously maintained a pro-Western policy and had spurned Russia's outreach in Africa's Sahel region. Russia has been moving to edge out the influence of France, the former colonial power in West Africa and the Sahel, and build ties with countries that have been roiled by a wave of coups since 2020. The junta initially promised an 18-month transition to elections, but later delayed them until October this year, anticipating a massive wave of protests. Putin said that the two countries had "great opportunities to develop our bilateral ties," and that Moscow would double the quota for Chadian students studying at Russian universities. Deby's visit comes a week after the prime minister of Niger, also appointed by a junta, visited Moscow. Russia has courted Niger since a July 2023 coup ousted a pro-Western government there.

Chad, however, had been seen as an enduring keystone of French influence in Africa, with Moscow's clout there far more limited than in its neighbours. Russian influence in some countries, including in Mali and the Central African Republic, was initially spearheaded by Moscow's Wagner Group mercenary army, led by businessman and one-time Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin was killed in a plane crash last August, two months after he led Wagner in a failed mutiny aimed at ousting Russia's top military leadership, accused of bungling Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. Since Prigozhin's death, Moscow has moved to seize control of his network in Africa, incorporating Wagner's operations into its formal armed forces and security state led structures.

Mahamat Idriss Deby is running in the election scheduled for May 6th, with a second round on June 22nd; the Prime Minister, Succes Masra, is running against him. The electoral campaign is marked by violent and obscure facts (like the alleged revolt of a relative of Deby, who died after a clash with loyalist security forces).

A major issue for Chad is the presence of French troops in the country, the last outpost of Paris (France, after the independence of the country, carried out several military operations in order to keep her influence there, raising the confrontation with Libya in the 1980s close to open conflict). Earlier this month France's Special Envoy to Africa, Jean-Marie Bockel, met both candidates in the capital, Ndjamena, and said the roughly 1,000 troops stationed there would stay. "We need to stay and, of course, we will stay," he said.

There is strong concern in the small civil society of the country that France and other Western partners will not push for real change in political rule in case it jeopardizes their military presence in strategically-located Chad.

Finally, the problems of Chad are not only internal; in fact, the relations between Chad and Sudan have worsened since the conflict in Sudan occurred in April 2023, which appear without any solution. Sudanese officials and Sudanese armed forces claim that Chad is involved in the facilitating of arms to the RSF (the organized "*Janjaweed*" of the brutal civil war in Darfur) through their borders, leading to the recent diplomatic expulsion of diplomats in both countries. Additionally, the influx of refugees and reported war crimes on ethnic groups from Sudan by the RSF has led the situation to become uneasy between both countries as Chad and Sudan face worsening instability, even though the bilateral relations will likely decline. But an open conflict between the two is unlikely in the short term, as both nations focus on domestic issues. Chad will reinforce its refugee hosting capabilities with foreign partners as the conflict worsens in Sudan.

As mentioned above, the spread of terrorism to neighboring regions and especially to the Gulf of Guinea because of the porosity of the borders. This subregion also has its particular security problems coming from the sea: piracy, organized crime and illicit trafficking and illegal fishing. Some analysts observed that the terrorist groups have stated that they will not give up expanding their activities from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea (specifically, Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea and Togo).

This regional repositioning strategy responds to multiple objectives: a double political target, which confirms its call of protection for oppressed Muslims (the coast countries have large Christian

populations that could be targeted and pushed to exile/forced migration by focused violence campaign) and the establishment of a regional caliphate. As well, there is a strategic objective, which allows projecting a more dangerous image, and a tactical objective, which seeks control of borders marked by the presence of natural parks as a tool of refuge and a base of operations and internal communication routes.

On the other hand, for any initiative to be successful, the financial tool is required. In this sense, the survival of these extremist groups depends on illegal activities, including arms and drug trafficking, livestock theft, gold extraction and poaching, activities that they can exploit more prolifically by gaining the control of territories in the Gulf of Guinea and setting up "no-go-areas" and/or "sanctuaries."

Furthermore, the plans of these terrorist groups include the creation of a great caliphate, which requires conquering territories. Added to this, is that the Gulf of Guinea is a strategic area of great interest for jihadists because it allows access to the sea, and from there the further expansion of their range of threat (e.g., how the Yemenite Houthi have affected the world trade market and global communication network).

In the hypothetical case that terrorist groups gain a foothold in this region, the benefits they would acquire would be multiple. Firstly, this would increase their logistics and movement capacity, especially on the northern border of the Gulf countries bordering Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where there are a large number of natural parks with impressive forests that could serve as refuge (like the Camoé National Park (Ivory Coast) and the W-Arly Pendjari which exceeds 32,000 square kilometers of protected areas. The last one is becoming an important corridor for jihadist movements due to the operational capabilities it allows. This park serves as a shelter and training site, while making aerial surveillance and obtaining supplies difficult. Furthermore, it makes it possible for terrorists to establish close contact with the populations, to whom they allow to continue their illicit activities—or even encourage them—and to whom they present themselves as an alternative government. For this reason, it is the area with the most jihadist attacks, as can be seen in the map below.

On the other hand, by controlling more territory, jihadist groups could expand their financing capacity, since this implies controlling more of the population and an increase in the number of people who must pay "zakat" (as one of the pillars of the faith, it requires all Muslims to donate a portion of their wealth to charity. Muslim believers must meet a certain threshold before they can qualify for "zakat." The amount is 2.5 percent or 1/40 of an individual's total savings and wealth. Of course, in a framework of terrorist

caliphate it is a criminal toll), thus increasing their coffers. This money is used to pay fighters, acquire weapons and other products, build mosques and madrassas and is also invested in the community to administer justice, make donations, etc., which, ultimately, favors the radicalization of the population. At the same time, territorial expansion allows jihadist groups to expand the places where they commit illicit activities, either through the illegal exploitation of resources or through participation in illicit trafficking businesses.

West Africa is a region with abundant raw materials that are welcomed in the international markets, given that they are in constant high demand, such as gold which brings high benefits. In this region, artisanal mining or unregulated extraction is increasingly widespread, and jihadists take advantage of this by charging taxes to miners or trading the extracted mineral. Again, the situation can contribute to the radicalization of the population or to its sympathization with the jihadist cause to the extent that the terrorists can offer it protection against the forces of the State that expels them from the mines or demands legal (taxes) or illegal (briberies) contributions to continue the exploitation.

However, organized crime and terrorism maintain different objectives and *modus operandi*. The first acts more discreetly so that their operations are successful, while the latter seeks publicity for their attacks to spread terror and to get popular support. Even so, both types of criminal organizations cooperate on numerous occasions, although these are usually short-term relationships of convenience. For example, one of the most profitable illicit businesses for organized crime is drug smuggling, for which African routes are increasingly important internationally. Tobacco, hashish, heroin, amphetamines and, above all, cocaine are trafficked through what is known as "Highway 10" (the name comes from the 10th parallel, which covers South American countries such as Colombia or Brazil, places of origin of cocaine, and the Gulf of Guinea, whose ports receive the drugs that are brought into Europe through the trans-Saharan routes via Morocco and Algeria to Spain, France and Italy). This promises to be more fruitful if the increase in demand for cocaine in Middle Eastern countries is consolidated.

The jihadists benefit from smuggling by providing security services and collecting tolls from traffickers in the large areas they control, ensuring the destination of their shipping. All of this contradicts the image of men of faith who follow the tenets of Islam that the jihadists want to project, and for this reason the links with illicit activities depend on the groups' need for money at all times. In fact, AQIM or Ansar el Dine issued fatwas condemning drug trafficking and confiscated and incinerated cigarettes and narcotics. However, for other groups like MUJAO smuggling is an advantage for the logistical and operational capacity of the jihadists groups since it allows them to acquire weapons, fertilizers (for

explosives and IEDs) vehicles and motorcycles that they use in their attacks. And sometimes smugglers occasionally swell the ranks of jihadists to commit attacks in exchange for money.

Therefore, the strategic objective of conquering territories allows jihadists to increase their recruitment niche and sympathizers among the population, which favors their intelligence work. Thus, through the Koranic schools they replace the state in the provision of basic services, allowing the population to continue with their illicit economic activities or supporting the cause of the Fulani or Peul tribe herdsman.

When analyzing the aspects that may favor the ability of jihadists to move to the Gulf of Guinea, the first thing to take into account is the idiosyncrasy of these countries: porous borders; exponential population growth; structural weaknesses at the political, economic and social levels; and where ethnic, religious and shepherd-farmer conflicts are common. The population is numerous, very young, but has few economic and educational opportunities; there are striking differences in standard of living between those who live in the coast and inner areas.

The aforementioned challenges cause terrorism to proliferate, expand and exploit. On the northern borders of these countries with the Sahel, specifically with Burkina Faso, there were recorded more than 189 unofficial access points, which facilitate the entry and exit of jihadists and take advantage of the lush forests of the national parks. to make quick raids and avoid security forces.

As mentioned, the demographic trends indicate exponential population growth: by 2050, Africa is expected to be populated by 2.4 billion people and Nigeria is expected to become the third most populous country in the world. Although this phenomenon represents an opportunity, it also represents an enormous challenge to the extent that it exacerbates social problems and the feeling of marginalization among part of the population, especially among young people, and shows in full the poor governance of the state authorities.

At the same time, in the inner side of the Gulf of Guinea, and bordering the Sahel, there is significant disaffection towards the State, due to its unequal access to basic resources such as drinking water or electricity. These communities are persecuted for their economic activities, while half of their inhabitants live in extreme poverty. Added to this is that the majority of people who live in these areas are Muslims and tend to be discriminated against by the often Christian dominated leaderships, like in Ivory Coast, with a strong Christian identity in the south, where the administrative, political and

economic power is located and the question of *ivoirité* is decided. In this way, the religious component plays a fundamental role. In the examples of Togo and Benin, the Muslim population represents less than 20 percent of the total and is mainly found in the north, where they often lack access to basic resources. This situation is a great window of opportunity for the jihadists to exploit the situation to their advantage, attracting to Salafism young Muslims who feel betrayed by the elites of their religion, with a Sufi majority, relatively close to a Christian government that does not satisfy basic needs.

In Ghana, where in principle the religious component does not generate so many differences between its inhabitants—the different confessions coexist peacefully and interreligious marriages occur and there are good relations between leaders—the jihadists find another way to exploit friction, as the Katiba Macina does. Also known as the Macina Liberation Front, this jihadist group is made up of a majority of former MUJAO combatants from the Peul community. Their recruitment method is based on exploiting the inter- and intra-community tensions of the Peul. Furthermore, they consider that the upper castes "act in complicity with the administrative, judicial and military authorities, which prevents Peul herders from turning to the state to assert their rights, leaving them with no other alternative than to turn to terrorist groups." The conflict is exacerbated by the progressive degradation of land caused by climate change, which makes this disputed resource increasingly scarce.

This same intercommunity violence occurs in other Gulf countries. In Ivory Coast, the Lobi and Koulango ethnic groups, farmers and landowners, confront the Peul, nomadic shepherds. In Benin, it is the Bariba and the Dendi who confront them. The problem is that because of the difficult living conditions in the south of the Sahel countries, the Peul are moving to the north of the Gulf of Guinea territories, which generates tension among the local populations, already in difficult situations.

While it is true that the current economic and social situation of the Gulf nations is not as bad as that of the Western Sahel countries when they began to feel the jihadist threat, both subregions have many weaknesses in common. Jihadists are aware of this and, for this reason, they replicate the models that have proven successful over the last decade.

The jihadists begin by progressively integrating into the political, economic and social structures of the localities that interest them—specifically, in the areas belonging to natural parks—creating clientelist networks and taking control of trade routes, given the importance of the organized crime in the region. After this, they attack infrastructure and posts linked to the state, such as schools, municipalities, police stations, customs, etc. In this way, they manage to delegitimize the state—which already has a bad

reputation—while instrumentalizing the unrest in these societies, injecting weapons that aggravate conflicts and later presenting themselves as peacemakers. Ultimately, they settle in communities, consolidate themselves in a certain area and end up supplanting the state.

However, the Gulf of Guinea does not yet suffer from established terrorism as the Sahel does, which requires the establishment of a strategy to confront the jihadist threat as soon as possible. There are many dimensions that must be taken into account for the fight against jihadist terrorism to be effective and to contain its advance in the Gulf of Guinea. Unlike the Sahelian countries, those in the Gulf of Guinea are stronger economically and politically (both relatively), although they must face similar challenges. In this sense, not repeating the mistakes that have led Mali or Burkina Faso to become the focus of jihadist terrorism worldwide becomes imperative for the Gulf of Guinea. Therefore, the approach of these countries must be comprehensive. That is, the solution lies through the indissoluble link between security, good government and development; however, there is still a long way to go to contain the threat.

The most urgent measure—because it is the most short-term—is to secure the borders by promoting security. This requires increasing the preparation of the armed forces and police—including respect for human rights—and improving their equipment and training. As of now, Benin and Togo are at the lowest level and the most threatened and weak, to the point that they are not even among the 140 best military forces in the world. Benin has already increased defence spending and requested aid from Rwanda; Togo has also increased defence spending, declared a state of emergency in the north and launched a development program for the “Savanes” (in French) region, the northernmost, poorest and most threatened by jihadists groups filtering in from Burkina Faso.

Promoting development is essential to stop the jihadist advance, although its results will only be seen in the longer term. It is necessary to invest in public infrastructure—especially in communication networks—education, health and employment. However, traditionally these types of measures have lacked effectiveness because the financing—national and international—ends up not being directed to the projects, since the corruption within state structures has hindered previous attempts.

For the above reasons, establishing good governance in these countries is key for future stability. The situation not only requires fighting corruption, measures must also be put in place to promote social cohesion and ensure peaceful coexistence, so that citizens, when threatened by terrorists, do not choose to turn their backs on the state, but that they take advantage of its protection.

The countries of the Gulf of Guinea are increasingly aware of the threat posed by the transfer of jihadist activities from the Sahel region to their northern borders and are taking measures to combat them. However, these have not yet had any effect and it is necessary to give them greater impetus, especially with regard to development.

Again, there are several points that must be taken into account: first, the religious issue must be addressed, cooperating with religious and ethnic leaders to prevent radicalization and promulgating a moderate and peaceful Islam, but avoiding the external hand of countries that use this tool to try to expand their area of influence like Morocco (which use religious diplomacy as one of its multifaced external action, focused to contrast the one of Algeria). Second, grazing and agriculture must be regulated with projects that establish conciliation in land use. Third, the sources of financing for terrorists must be cut off through the fight against organized crime, the regulation of small-scale mining and the implementation of blockchain technology to control the origin of gold and other traded materials. Likewise, the efforts made by these countries must be accompanied by international cooperation, especially in terms of financing and capacity support. For example, the "Accra Initiative" has to be strengthened to avoid the disastrous results of the G5-Sahel. Therefore, the involvement of Europe and specifically France is essential, which must rethink cooperation relations and approach—especially in terms of security—with its former colonies, since the current situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger risks to make things replicated also in the Guinea Gulf region. A greater role for the local security forces, with training help from the West, would boost cooperation in intelligence and prevent the warlike scenario that is taking place in the Sahel.

All these measures and initiatives should be periodically monitored to control their evolution and effectiveness, which would also allow for the establishment of an early warning system that helps anticipate threats. At a European level, a careful monitoring of situation and trends must be promoted, given the high interests in terms of energy, raw materials (minerals, fishing) and immigration. Although only 10 percent of migrations in Africa are destined for Europe, in the face of a demographic boom as high as the one expected, the number of people who want to reach European soil could become unaffordable.

Today the outlook is not very promising, taking into account the deterioration of security that is being experienced in the neighborhood of these countries, especially after the recent coups d'état in Niger and Gabon (the dubious situation in Senegal is reason of concern, as well the situation in Cameroon and Central African Republic). Europe must pay attention to the role that Russia plays—for now, through

Wagner—in the region, given that Moscow has presented itself as a partner for security cooperation in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger or Chad: Sergei Lavrov made reference in statements to Guinea and the rest of the countries bordering the Gulf.

Further, the appeal of Russia as anticolonial and antagonist of Western economic and security architectures has found a large and positive feedback in the local populations. The Gulf of Guinea is, therefore, at a crossroads. Behind it, there is the multifaced pro-Western system (EU, NATO, G7, OECD, IMF/WB) which is veering away from the evolution of the microregion (and the two subregions). Rather, it depends on the capacity of the Guinea Gulf states, singularly taken and/or organized in the residual regional architectures, to face this challenge whether this ends up becoming a replica of Sahel, or whether it ends the jihadist threat and is more resilient in the fight against other security problems it suffers from, such as organized crime and piracy.

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