

**Addressing the threat of
terrorism of the ISGS in the
Sahel region**



AU-PSC

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Forum: African Union Peace and Security Council

Issue: Addressing the threat of terrorism of the ISGS in the Sahel region

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Introduction

The Liptako-Gourma area of the Sahel, which covers parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, is home to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), an operationally autonomous subgroup of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). It has heightened tensions within the community and engaged in deadly competition with other jihadist organizations in the region in an attempt to build a Salafi-jihadist caliphate. ISGS is notorious for its use of violence against people and has assaulted foreign and local security forces on several occasions. As counterterrorism measures alienate people and fail to reverse ISGS's territorial advances, the organization will probably continue to be a danger to the Sahelian nations and local populations (Thompson).

Many of ISGS's militants are native to the regions in which it operates, particularly Dawsahak warriors from Ménaka and the Malian city of Gao, as well as Nigerien Peul fighters. These claims are supported by interviews with local observers as well as regional and international sources. The ISGS fighters were behind numerous attacks against Burkinabe, Malian, and Nigerien troops, as well as militias such as the Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad (MSA) and Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA). Among these attacks was the fatal one that claimed the lives of four American soldiers and five Nigerien soldiers at Tongo Tongo in the province of Tillabéry (ECFR).

Consistent with the overarching philosophy of the Islamic State, ISGS aims to build a strict Salafi-jihadist caliphate in the Sahel, overseen by a strict application of sharia law. Local commanders strictly regulate the celebration of special occasions like weddings, but they outlaw music and partying in areas under ISGS authority. In a Tin-Hama, Mali market in May 2021, accused robbers had their right hands and left foot amputated in public by suspected ISGS members. In some cases, where the state has failed to provide governance services, ISGS has also stepped in to handle the situation. For example, it has handled land tenancy disputes and guarded cattle in Niger's Tillabery region from being stolen by marauders (Thompson).

Definition of Key Terms

Jihad

A holy war fought by Muslims to defend Islam (OED Online).

Salafism

Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam whose modern-day adherents claim to emulate “the pious predecessors” as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible (OED Online).

Jihadi Salafism

Whose followers seek to overthrow supposedly apostate regimes in the Muslim world through violent jihad (OED Online).

Sahel Region

The Sahel is a semiarid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal eastward to Sudan. It forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south (Britannica).

General Overview

History of the ISGS

The founding of ISGS dates back to May 2015, when Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi swore allegiance to the Islamic State. Al-Sahrawi was a seasoned fighter in the Salafi-jihadist battle in the Sahel at the time of this oath. Al-Sahrawi became a top commander in al-Mourabitoun, an al-Qaeda offshoot that is presently a component of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims—JNIM) after joining the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in 2012. Mokthar Belmokthar, the head of al-Mourabitoun, renounced al-Sahrawi's promise to the Islamic State and then reaffirmed al-Mourabitoun's allegiance to al-Qaeda. Al-Sahrawi's formal departure from al-Mourabitoun was marked by this rupture in allegiance, which also marked the beginning of ISGS as a stand-alone Salafi-jihadist group (Thompson).

After Jamaa Nusra al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), the rival organization of al-Qaeda in the Sahel, ISGS is the second most active armed actor in the region's conflict. ISGS operates mostly in the

Liptako-Gourma area, but it also has a strategic base in the border area between Mali and Niger, where villages like In-Araban, Akabar, and Infoukaretane are vital locations (see map below). In several of the territories that make up this area, such as the Gao and Menaka regions in Mali, the Oudalan and Seno provinces in Burkina Faso, the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions in Niger, and the places that border the aforementioned countries, the group has emerged as the dominating actor (ACLED).

The Islamic State's central leadership did not instantly acknowledge Al-Sahrawi's loyalty, creating some public confusion about the group's standing inside the organization. The first armed attack by ISGS was reported in September 2016 at a border checkpoint close to Markoye, Burkina Faso. That October, ISGS fighters launched a raid on a Koutoukalé, Nigerien prison complex, ostensibly to release militants belonging to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram who were detained. On October 30, 2016, the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency acknowledged the ISGS's loyalty promise in response to this display of the group's capabilities, establishing a formal, if figurative, relationship between the two organizations. However, the recognition of the Islamic State did not confer official wilayah (province) status upon ISGS. In April 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made an appearance in a video endorsing al-Sahrawi and urging ISGS followers to intensify their operations against French and local security personnel. This marked the official acceptance of the ISGS vow. Since then, ISGS has increased the area it covers for activities, forming an arc that encompasses the areas of Mali's Mopti, Gao, and Ménaka, Burkina Faso's Sahel and Est, and Niger's Tillabéri and Tahoua (Thompson).

Activities of the ISGS

As previously indicated, ISGS's connections to IS Central were, at most, shaky for most of its existence and the years between 2015 and 2019, when it was known as the ISGS. Notwithstanding the seeming disconnection between the group and the public, as seen by the ISGS's nonattendance from IS media activities, the group's acts of violence and cruelty showed its unwavering allegiance to the parent organization. When the group was fully incorporated into the IS organizational framework as the distinct Greater Sahara faction of ISWAP in March 2019, this shaky connection was broken. The group's and JNIM's militant expansion throughout the Sahel occurred in tandem with the group's incorporation as an independent arm of ISWAP. Following the ISWAP integration, IS Sahel's capabilities underwent a significant shift when, over the course of a year between May 2019 and May 2020, the group attacked and overran multiple military positions in the Liptako-Gourma area, allegedly killing over 400 soldiers from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (ACLED).

The campaign of violence seems to be motivated by the increasing rivalry between IS Sahel and JNIM, with the former attempting to subvert the authority of its al-Qaeda counterpart. France launched massive military operations to address the growing threat posed by IS Sahel due to the group's increasing lethality and the seeming incapacity of government forces to oppose it. The group was targeted by a military campaign that took place between early 2020 and mid-2021, during which IS Sahel experienced severe attrition and lost much of its historical core leadership in the Western Sahara. The founder of IS Sahel, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, perished during this fight as well. On August 17, 2021, a French military bombing in the Dangarous woodland claimed his life (ACLED).

Targets, Tactics, and Organizational Structure of the ISGS

ISGS fighters frequently attack community-based armed groups in addition to international and Sahelian security forces. For instance, ISGS took credit for an ambush that occurred in October 2017 close to Tongo Tongo, Niger, which resulted in the deaths of several American and Nigerian forces. At least 71 soldiers were killed in an attack on a Nigerien military facility in Inates in December 2019, which ISGS claimed was its own. The attackers also purportedly took control of the base and held it for several hours (Thompson).

Significant violence against civilians is also committed by ISGS. According to one research, each attack by the organization results in 3.5 civilian deaths. When civilians are perceived as standing in for state or religious institutions that ISGS is fighting, they are frequently singled out by ISGS. For instance, in April 2018, ISGS asserted that it was behind the abduction of a Burkinabé educator who was suspected of utilizing French in the classroom and the murder of Koutougou, Burkina Faso's mayor, due to his purported involvement with the Burkinabé military. Five Christian citizens were allegedly abducted by ISGS in June 2021 from a roadblock separating Gao, Mali, and Niamey, Niger, and then executed (Thompson).

Al-Sahrawi and a few pro-Islamic State fighters from al-Mourabitoun, who left the group when al-Sahrawi swore allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015, became the core of ISGS. By recruiting and enlisting locals and gaining control of already-existing Salafi-jihadist cells in the Sahel, ISGS has expanded over time. ISGS has developed contact with Ansaroul Islam, a group located in Burkina Faso, working with and including militants who have sympathy with the Islamic State. In addition, several waves of JNIM fighter defections in regions such as central Mali and northern Burkina Faso have contributed to the growth of ISGS. Because different ISGS cells exhibit different degrees of

autonomy from the ISGS leadership, the ISGS organization in some regions—like Burkina Faso—is comparatively more decentralized than in other regions (Thompson).

Recent Activities of ISGS

The ISGS reported an attack in February of this year that claimed the lives of seventy soldiers in Burkina Faso's Oudalan Province. The incident shows that the "dual war" in Burkina Faso is still going on, despite media sources indicating that the death toll may have been closer to 50 soldiers. While ISGS and the Burkinabe army are engaged in combat, there is also an ongoing intra-jihadist civil war going on between ISGS and the JNIM that is attacking both soldiers and civilians throughout the region. Just a week before the ISGS attack, Burkina Faso said that France had finished removing its military personnel from the nation. This was in response to demands made by the Burkinabe junta, which was established in a coup last year. The latest ISGS attack and other struggles to contain the growing strength of jihadist groups, however, along with the ongoing lack of progress in restoring democracy, suggest that the junta's anti-French rhetoric is meant to help it maintain enough public support to stay in power (Mohamed).

The fight against militants has not stopped the development of insurgency throughout the Sahel, despite greater international involvement. Because of this setback and France's increasing unpopularity and tensions with its former colonies, French President Emmanuel Macron declared on July 13, 2021, that Operation Barkhane would conclude in the first quarter of 2022. The ensuing security void was taken advantage of by violent extremists, who increased their attacks throughout the Sahel. MINUSMA, known as the most dangerous peacekeeping mission of the United Nations, has been the subject of numerous attacks. The Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary outfit operating in other fragile contexts like the Central African Republic, Libya, Mozambique, Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine, was contacted by the Malian military junta to provide security aid instead of French help. The Wagner Group has sent 1,000 mercenaries to Mali since its founding in December 2021. These mercenaries are kept at fifteen outposts, including former French bases (CFR).

Diminishing land and water resources has led to increasingly frequent clashes between herding, farming, and fishing communities. Violent extremist organizations have not only helped worsen humanitarian conditions, including by targeting humanitarian workers but have also exploited insecure conditions to recruit and control populations in the Sahel. In addition, the weakened economies and proliferating violent extremists have increased illicit activity and criminal organizations in the region, further contributing to instability (CFR).

Major Parties Involved

USA

In accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, the **U.S.** Department of State designated ISGS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on May 23, 2018. Previously, in accordance with Executive Order 13224, as modified, the Department of State designated ISIS-GS as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist on May 16, 2018. Consequently, all of ISGS's assets and property interests that are under U.S. jurisdiction have been banned, and Americans are normally not allowed to do business with ISGS. It is illegal to intentionally give material assistance or resources to ISGS, as well as to try or conspire to do so ("Isis in the").

ISGS

Naturally, ISGS itself is also very involved in the issue, being at the epicenter of all problems caused.

France

France is actively involved in counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel region through Operation Barkhane. This operation aims to combat jihadist groups and stabilize the region. French forces additionally provide military support to countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania. The UK, Germany and Canada also provide military assistance.

African nations (examples are Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso)

African nations are severely influenced by this issue, suffering from terrorist attacks on their people and resources.

Possible Solutions

To solve this complicated problem, there are many possible solutions. It is important to start with enhanced security; this can be established with aid from international organizations. This security, however, is only a temporary solution. It is necessary to look at the root causes where terrorism stems from, in order to prevent the further expansion of it.

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