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Jihad in West African Sahel: Rise of a New Caliphate?

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

As the self-styled Islamic State loses ground in Iraq, Syria and Libya, Al Qaeda looks to unify its forces in Western Sahel. The AQ network aims to strengthen its foothold in this poor and unstable region of northern Africa, but the scope and impact of such an action should not be overestimated.

Commentary

ON 1 MARCH 2017 five senior leaders of militant organisations primarily active in the Sahelian zone of North and West African countries (Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger) announced in a video the creation of the “Group to Support Islam and Muslims” (GSIM). This new entity results from the merger of the Islamist group Ansar Dine and its affiliated Macina Liberation Front. Other organisations involved in the merger include Al Murabitoun (AM), a well-connected brigade of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and AQIM’s “Emirate” in the Sahara.

The head of the GSIM pledged allegiance to leaders of the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda. A few days later, GSIM claimed its first attack which resulted in the death of 11 Malian soldiers.

AQIM is faced with challenges and opportunities in asserting its influence and presence in Western Sahel. The establishment of the GSIM confirms the sustainability of Al Qaeda’s North Africa branch, but the ability of the Group to affirm its position as a key player raises more questions than answers.

Flip Side of the Coin

Three centres of influence related to AQIM -- its leadership, AM and local groups connected to AQIM and AM -- have suffered major setbacks over the last four years.

In Algeria, the army has intensified its campaign against the “Emir” of AQIM Abdelmalek Droukdel and his associates, achieving some success in targeting top members of the organisation. The “Islamic Emirate of Azawad” which AQIM planned to run in Northern Mali was eliminated in 2013 by French military intervention. Hundreds of militants were killed in the process, including mid and high-level commanders, but tactical progress came at a strategic cost.

Structural conditions that favoured the implantation of AQIM in Northern Mali still prevail, including poor governance and weak state control. Fighters have fled to neighbouring zones of transit and conflict such as Southern Libya and Northern Nigeria, making the aggravation of security crisis in these countries more likely.

In addition, the rise of IS led to increased factionalism and the escalation of inter-group violence. This is reflected in the creation of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in May 2015 and its formal recognition by the leadership of IS in October 2016. A small organisation responsible for several attacks against Burkinabe security forces, ISGS is a breakaway wing of AM.

Gaining the Upper Hand

The GSIM is intended to address organisational and strategic objectives. Achieving unity between militant groups active in Northwest Africa and the Sahel is a central goal pursued by AQIM. The latter has been successful in building a porous network of contacts, partners and allies in Western Sahel. Reaching a higher level of integration is consistent with Droukdel’s regional ambitions.

From an operational perspective, joining means and resources has become a necessity rather than an option for AQIM and AM, the respective “Emirs” of which used to be at loggerheads between 2012 and 2015. Confronted with shared imperatives such as the need to restore each organisation’s strength and avoid more defections to IS, both leaders set aside their differences and reunified their ranks in December 2015. The GSIM thus needs to be seen as the latest iteration of a long-standing dynamic of coordination which AQIM has been forcefully engaged in.

Representatives of AQIM and AM who institutionalised the GSIM are Algerians, while the heads of Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front are Malians from the Tuareg and Fula communities. This diversity mirrors ethnic and geographic recompositions, as the command and control structure of AQIM was dominated by Algerians and its range of action used to be restricted to Northern Algeria. Sub-Saharan African fighters are now more numerous and hold more senior positions, which illustrates the southward expansion of the organisation and its potential interest in taking root among local Muslim populations.

Public Relations Stunt?

In practice however, the GSIM is unlikely to be more than a loose association of disparate forces and a convenient label for the latter to further their respective

agendas.

Ideological motivations, strategic approaches and paramilitary capabilities of Sahelian armed groups differ a great deal. These gaps will not be closed by virtue of common pledges of fealty. As the French presence in the region makes it difficult for large brigades of fighters to congregate, militants will not necessarily have the capacity to share and pool their know-how, experience and expertise.

Distinct chains of command are also involved. For example, a group like AM is officially subordinated to the leadership of AQIM but it enjoys a very large degree of autonomy on the ground. This will limit the ability of AQIM to be anything other than an authority in name only.

The launching of the GSIM coincides with the crumbling of IS' "Caliphate". By presenting itself as the parent organisation of a common front in which groups linked with Al Qaeda are clearly identified, AQIM may be ultimately looking to reinforce its attractiveness as a Jihadist hub. Personal branding is timely, as thousands of North and West African foreign fighters who survived the Iraqi, Syrian and Libyan civil wars are expected to look for new battlefields.

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