

RISKS AND THREATS IN THE WESTERN SAHEL RADICALIZATION AND TERRORISM IN THE SUB-REGION

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE WESTERN SAHEL SUB-REGION – II. RISKS AND THREATS BEFORE AND AFTER THE DIRECT IMPACT OF THE ARAB REVOLTS AND THE WAR IN LIBYA - III. THE EVOLUTION IN THE AREA – IV. CONCLUSIONS.

ABSTRACT: This article addresses the most important security challenges existing in the Western Sahel countries, an emerging sub-region encompassing Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The sub-region is very much affected by developments in neighboring countries such as Algeria, Libya, and Nigeria, among others. A number of recent processes – the Arab revolts and their effects in Libya and Egypt, the reinforcement of Boko Haram as a regional terrorist threat, etc – have contributed to aggravate insecurity in a region that suffers environmental problems, political instability, inter-communitarian tensions and illegal trafficking since a number of decades ago. All these risks and threats are inviting states and international organizations to become more and more involved in order to provide responses and, eventually, solutions.

KEYWORDS: Al Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Ansar Eddine; Boko Haram; CEMOC (Coordination of Major Staffs from Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania); G-5 Sahel Organization; illegal trafficking; MINUSMA (United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Mali); MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa).

RIESGOS Y AMENAZAS EN EL SAHEL OCCIDENTAL. RADICALIZACIÓN Y TERRORISMO EN LA SUBREGIÓN

RESUMEN: Este artículo se ocupa de los desafíos de seguridad más importantes que podemos inventariar en los países del Sahel Occidental, una subregión emergente que incluye a Burkina Faso, Chad, Malí, Mauritania y Níger. La subregión se ve muy afectada por los procesos que se viven en países vecinos como Argelia, Libia y Nigeria, entre otros. Algunos procesos recientes – las revueltas árabes y sus efectos en Libia y Egipto, el reforzamiento de Boko Haram como amenaza terrorista regional, etc – han contribuido a incrementar la inseguridad en una región que ya sufre desde hace décadas problemas medioambientales, inestabilidad política, tensiones intercomunitarias y tráfico ilícitos. Todos estos riesgos y amenazas invitan a los Estados y a las Organizaciones Internacionales a involucrarse cada vez más en el esfuerzo para encontrar respuestas y eventualmente soluciones a los mismos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Al Qaida en las Tierras del Magreb Islámico (AQMI); Ansar Eddine; Boko Haram; CEMOC o Coordinación de Estados Mayores de Argelia, Níger, Malí y Mauritania); Misión

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de las Naciones Unidas para la Estabilización de Malí (MINUSMA); Movimiento para la Unidad del Islam y el Yihad en África Occidental (MUYAO); Organización G-5 del Sahel; tráfico ilícito.

RISQUES ET MÉNACES DANS LE SAHEL OCCIDENTAL. RADICALISATION ET TERRORISME DANS LA SUB-REGION

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article s'occupe des défis de sécurité les plus importantes qu'on trouve dans la sub-région du Sahel Occidentale (le Burkina Faso, le Tchad, le Mali, la Mauritanie et le Nigér). Cette sub-région devient très touchée par les processus vécus en Algérie, en Libye et au Nigéria, parmi des autres pays voisins. Quelques événements tels que les révoltes arabes dans la Libye ou en Egypte et aussi le renforcement de Boko Haram en tant que groupe terroriste de dimension régionale ont contribué à aggraver l'insécurité dans la région. En plus, les pays du Sahel Occidentale sont affectés depuis des décennies par des problèmes tels que les crises environnementales, l'instabilité politique, les tensions inter-communitaires et les trafics illicites. Tels risques et telles menaces invitent les états et les organisations internationales à designer des réponses et, éventuellement, des solutions à ceux problèmes.

MOTS CLEFS: Al Qaida dans le Maghreb Islamique (AQMI); Ansar Eddine; Boko Haram; CEMOC (Coordination des états-majors de l'Algérie, le Mali, la Mauritanie et le Niger); Mission des Nations unies pour la Stabilisation du Mali (MINUSMA); Mouvement pour l'Unité et pour le Jihad dans l'Afrique Occidentale (MUJAO); Organisation du G-5 Sahel; trafics illicites.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE WESTERN SAHEL SUB-REGION

In security terms, the Western Sahel is a more than 3 million of square kilometers arid belt south of the Sahara where Jihadist Salafist terrorists and traffickers, among other threats, operate. These have been and remain much more concentrated in the Western Sahel, where they represent a threat for the African and Western countries. The Western Sahel sub-region is involving the five countries belonging to the G-5 Sahel Organization which was born in Nouakchott on 18 February 2014.² The building up of this International Organization is an additional effort in order to improve coordination on security and development among the countries of the Western Sahel.

The five countries and a number of neighbors (mainly Ivory Coast, Libya, Algeria or Nigeria, among others) we will deal with later must confront organized

² Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Mauritania has the Presidency of the G-5 Sahel Organization this year, and Chad will lead it in 2015. Other sub-regional organizations active in the area are the Senegal River Organization (involving Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal), and the 27 states' Sahel and Sahara Community (CEN-SAD). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), involving 15 states, will be addressed in other chapter of this article. Finally, the 13 states Committee of States Fighting Against the Drought and Desertification in the Sahel (CILSS, in its French acronym) is not a strong organization able to deal with security and defense matters.

crime, cross-border terrorism, clandestine immigration, drug trafficking, political corruption, economic problems and environmental crises. The region is also concentrating the largest density of poor people in the world if we take into account the human development list, mainly affecting countries such as Mali or Niger.

Also a number of these countries – mainly Mali – are politically unstable, wracked by ethnic and sectarian violence. Some of them can be considered failing states but they are not failed states in the terms that countries such as Somalia has been considered for years.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF A NUMBER OF NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

Ivory Coast, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, Libya, Algeria or Nigeria are countries bordering the Western Sahel. A number of them can be considered countries in crisis. For instance, Mali, a full member of the Western Sahel, is politically unstable, wracked by ethnic and sectarian violence.

Ivory Coast and Libya were for decades two countries of opportunities for the people in the region, providing jobs to hundreds of thousands of immigrants until a number of years ago. The war in Ivory Coast in the 2000s and the revolts and the civil war in Libya in 2011 transformed negatively the situation of both countries. In Algeria, Libya and Nigeria, a myriad of terrorist groups are able to carry out terrorist operations across the borders in the region.

Libya is today a sanctuary for terrorists, allowing them being active in the Sahel to regroup, train and avoid detection in the afterwards of Operation Serval was launched led by France in January 2013.³ The In Amenas attack in January 2013, and the two suicide attacks in Niger, in May 2013, were launched from the Libyan ground by a group led by an Algerian terrorist, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (aka Mr. Marlboro or Belouar). Algeria was very important in the past in terms of terrorist violence, with the Islamic Armed Group and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GIA and GSPC, in their French acronyms) projecting terrorism and radicalization in the Sahel in the last two decades. In addition to the terrorist activism, bad relations between Algeria and Morocco has traditionally been and already remains an additional negative input for the Sahel region in security terms.

In terms of drug trafficking, Guinea Bissau and Nigeria must also be pointed out. Guinea Bissau is deteriorating in security terms since the coup d'etat of 12

³ “Libyan capital under Islamist control after Tripoli airport seized”, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2014, in <www.theguardian.com>.

April 2012, and Nigeria is a key country when we deal with the Western Sahel in security terms not only because it is the place where the terrorist organization Boko Haram was born and is already acting but also due to the fact that drug production and drug trafficking is very much affecting this country.⁴ Burkina Faso has suffered a coup d'etat at the end of October 2014, and is also entering in a process of domestic deterioration of security with potential regional consequences.⁵

2. THE CENTRAL ROLE PLAYED BY NIGERIA IN THE REGION

Nigeria's population of 170 million, the biggest in Africa, is comprised of almost equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. The Boko Haram Jihadist Salafist offensive, very bloody in the last five years, is overlapped with a mix of tribal and religious animosity aggravated by political corruption, and growing rivalries over land and water resources. Boko Haram has gained the capacity to strike in increasingly urban centers and beyond national borders, towards Cameroon and also the Sahel.

Nigerians suffer real atrocities in the region around Lake Chad, which lies on the borders between Niger, Nigeria and Chad. Since the Nigerian Government declared a state of emergency in three states (Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe), in May 2013, nearly 100,000 people have fled to Niger, Camerun and Chad. In addition, more 1,5 million people is internally displaced inside Nigeria and more than 20,000 Nigerian refugees are in Niger. In this context, President Goodluck Jonathan appointed a new Defence Minister in March 2014, obliged by these circumstances. The massive kidnapping by Boko Haram of more than 200 girls in the Spring 2014 has contributed to place the Abuja's regime at the odds.⁶

Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, has killed thousands of Christians and also a number Muslim leaders in Nigeria, has threatened directly the US and other Western countries and, in a twenty eight minutes video published on 19 February 2014, has also threatened the Nigerian oil facilities.⁷ In sum, the year 2014 has been

⁴ Nigeria enacted a comprehensive Anti-Terrorism Legislation and a Money Laundering Act, both in 2011, and has reinforced its Armed and Security Forces but this country continues to be a disturbing element in the region.

⁵ BERRATO, L., "Burkina Faso: Le gouvernement décrete l'etat d'urgence", *El Watan* (Algeria), 31 October 2014, in <www.elwatan.org>.

⁶ In July 2013 the United Kingdom formally designated Boko Haram as a terrorist organization, with the US following in November 2013.

⁷ OLUGBODE, M., "Nigeria: 25 Towns Under the Control of Boko Haram", *Allafrica.com*, 18 September 2014, in <<http://allafrica.com>>.

and continuous to be entral for Boko Haram' letal activism in Nigeria and in the sub-region.⁸

Nigerian organized criminal networks also remain a major factor in moving cocaine and heroin worldwide being Nigeria a transit country for these drugs destined mainly for Europe. Widespread corruption in Nigeria facilitates criminal activity and combined with Nigeria's central location along major trafficking routes enables criminal groups to flourish and make this African country an important trafficking hub.

II. RISKS AND THREATS BEFORE AND AFTER THE DIRECT IMPACT OF THE ARAB REVOLTS AND THE WAR IN LIBYA

Before the Arab revolts the deterioration of security in Ivory Coast had provoked tens of thousands of immigrants from Mali, Niger or Burkina Faso, among other countries, came back to the Sahel. Illegal trafficking and corruption were important risks in the region. Al Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram were becoming trans-border threats with their terrorist attacks and the increasing number of kidnappings, and, finally, the Tuareg rebellions in Mali or Niger were also a reality in historical terms as well as a non-solved problem for these two Western Sahel countries.

Nevertheless none of these risks, or even all of them together, was or were a strategic threat to Western Africa or to the West. Before 2012, anger in northern Mali was stoked by collusion between northern Tuareg leaders and Bamako officials in illegal activities such as trafficking and hostage-taking by terrorist groups, mainly AQIM, but it had not strategic consequences. The GSPC kidnapping of 32 Western tourists, in southern Algeria in 2003, initiated an additional terrorist activity in the area to be added to the traditional illegal trafficking, affecting in that time to countries such as Mali, Libya, Niger or Chad. AQIM was born from the GSPC early in 2007 as an Al Qaida's branch in the region: basically Algerian in leadership and membership, AQIM became also transnational operating mainly in Mauritania and Mali on a trans-border basis.⁹

⁸ "Nigéria: l'armée rejette le 'califat islamique' proclamé par Boko Haram", *Jeune Afrique*, 25 August 2014, in <www.jeuneafrique.com>.

⁹ See ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C., "Escenarios privilegiados de germinación del yihadismo salafista en la vecindad inmediata de Europa: del Magreb y el Sahel hasta Siria", in BELLO CRESPO, M. (Coord), *Yihadismo en el mundo actual*, Madrid, Ministry of Defence-Cuadernos de Seguridad y Defensa n° 62, September 2014, pp. 85-108, in <www.ceseden.es>.

But it was the remobilization of weapons and fighters from Libya since 2011 the fact that fed the contradictions in northern Mali and transformed the situation into a strategic threat for the region and for the Western countries as well.

1. THE DIRECT IMPACT OF THE LIBYAN REVOLTS AND CIVIL WAR IN MALI

The initial Tuareg revolt led by the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA in its French acronym) elements moved from Libya to Mali in January 2012 was kidnapped by Jihadist Salafist groups, and an enormous portion of the Sahelian country fell into the hands of a myriad of terrorist groups in the first months of 2012 overwhelming the Malian state. It was an unprecedented achievement for the terrorists – the emergence of a nucleic Al Qaida Jihadist state – requiring urgent and immediately countermeasures from the International Community, mainly from the West. The three main terrorist actors at that time in northern Mali were AQIM, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Eddine.

For the time being the main causes of Mali's 2012 instability have yet to be fully addressed by the Malian Government and its international partners, almost three years after the crisis started. Six causes must be pointed out:

- Communal divisions reflected in inter-communitarian tensions and conflicts remain. Disaffection in the north is demanding to reassert Governmental authority. Hundreds of thousands of either displaced or refugee people do remain. Almost two years after the Tuareg rebellion was launched the deep-rooted historical grievances of Tuareg people have not been addressed. Mali's Army was forced to pull troops from the Kidal region in May 2014, after losing a battle following a botched attempt to seize the town from the Tuareg separatists.

- The second cause of instability is a fractured military that is demanding reforms in the Malian Armed Forces. The political legitimacy was implemented through the presidential and general elections in 2013, but with the Mali's Armed Forces only slowly rebuilt, France has been forced to delay its troop withdrawal.¹⁰

- Persistent concerns remain over what many analysts believe might be as inevitable terrorist attacks staged now from southern Libya. AQIM's and other Jihadist groups' priority is to block the negotiations between Bamako and the

¹⁰ Operation Serval has been transformed in Operation Berkane in Summer 2014. See GUEYE, Bakari: "France renews Sahel commitment", *Magharebia*, 7 August 2014, in <www.magharebia.com>.

Tuareg leaders together with attacking the French, the UN Mission in the country (MINUSMA), the Malian and the Algerian forces and interests.¹¹ Concerning the MUJAO and the Belmokhtar's group "Those Who Sign With Blood", they announced their fusion in Summer 2013 as The Mourabitoun, and remain active as well.¹²

- Among the actors in the region we must also encompass Ansar Eddine, out of the negotiation processes held along 2014.¹³ AQIM is ready even to attack MNLA, the Arab Movement of Azawad and the High Council for the Azawad (MAA and HCA in their French acronyms) in order to avoid any arrangement between them and the Malian authorities.¹⁴ Confusion among Ansar Eddine and a myriad of Tuareg groups, movements, clans and tribes adds a difficulty for a definition of the negotiating actors.¹⁵

- A systemic corruption in the Malian state that is demanding to strengthen urgently the rule of law.

- To forge a lasting peace, the Malian regime must create economic opportunities in the north but the region is too dry for agriculture and lacks the mineral resources of the south. Government is seeking to attract companies to start oil production in the northern Taudeni basin, closed to the Algerian border, in the next five to ten years, but anything will occur before a lasting peace is restored and the terrorist threat is dismantled. In the absence of alternatives to criminality old networking will again take control of the north.

In this context, to analyse what is the role played by the most affected neighbors becomes a necessity.

¹¹ "Mali: UN peacekeepers killed by roadside bomb", *BBC News Africa*, 18 September 2014, in <www.bbcnews.com>.

¹² See "Les Almoravides, le nouveau groupe djihadiste de Belmokhtar et du Mujao", *El Watan (Algeria)*, 23 August 2013, in <www.elwatan.com>.

¹³ Ansar Eddine remains as the greatest terrorist group in the region, with about 800 members, and AQIM has around 700. Ansar Eddine's leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, supports not only to AQIM but also to the MUJAO and Boko Haram. See "Iyad Ag Ghali: une video pour signer la rupture avec Alger", *El Watan (Algeria)*, 8 August 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

¹⁴ MUJAO killed around 30 Tuareg in Tamkoutat, near Gao, on 6 February 2014.

¹⁵ OUAZANI, Ch., « L' Algérie, diplomate au long cours », *Jeune Afrique*, 27 October 2014, 4 pages, in <www.jeuneafrique.com>.

2. ALGERIA, NIGER, MAURITANIA, AND SENEGAL AS THE MOST AFFECTED NEIGHBORS

The Arab revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya fully aggravated the situation in the region from the Algerian perception. Algeria tries to play the leadership in the Western Sahel, through bilateral contacts, and also through regional instruments such as the Coordination of the Joint Military Staffs (CEMOC, in its French acronym) since 2010.¹⁶ For instance, Algeria has traditionally played a role of mediator in the context of the Tuareg revolts, and considers the region as a risky one concerning Jihadist terrorist activities.¹⁷ Algiers is very much concerned by the fact that Sahel countries are stepping up their efforts with international partners to deal with the security threats confronting them, and tried to avoid in 2012 foreign intervention in northern Mali, mainly a Western one led by France.¹⁸ According to the Algerian perception, the biggest Maghreb country is surrounded by the south and the east by weak governments and nebulous borders in a region facing rising extremist activity. The Algerian Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Ramtane Lamamra; of African and Sahel Affairs, Abdelkader Messahel; and of Religious Affairs and Wafks, Bounabdallah Ghlamallah, are particularly active in the region. For instance, the Minister Ghlamallah announced on 9 March 2014 the coming opening of a School for Imams in Tamanrasset, to be forming 150 imams per year for Algerian and the surrounding countries.¹⁹

Algeria is very active vis-à-vis Mali and the Western Sahel in large, not only due to historical reasons and the direct neighborhood, but also in order to confront the growing Moroccan presence in the area. The Algerian and Moroccan mutual rivalry is being very much reflected in the Western Sahel, a region where Algiers perceives with misperceptions the increasing presence of Morocco, a non Sahelian state, in Mali.²⁰ In 2013, the King Mohamed VI contributed to the Economic Community

¹⁶ The CEMOC is involving the Chiefs of Staff of the Algerian, Malian, Mauritanian and Niger Armed Forces in terms of coordinating efforts, and is not a regional organization as such.

¹⁷ President Liamine Zeroual visit to the Sahel countries in 1996 was very much connected with the GIA terrorist projection in that time in the region.

¹⁸ The traditional Algerian opposition to the interference in the internal affairs of third states is behind the Algiers' diplomatic effort in order to facilitate dialogue and negotiation among the different groups fighting each other in Libya. See RAMZI, Walid: "Algeria ready to host Libya dialogue", *Magharebia*, 17 September 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

¹⁹ "Algérie: hausse de 10% du budget militaire, à 13 milliards de dollars", *Jeune Afrique*, 9 September 2014, <www.jeuneafrique.com>.

²⁰ Morocco is occupying the Western Sahara since Autumn 1975, together with Mauritania until

of West African States (ECOWAS) Summit in Yamoussouko (Ivory Coast) and attended the arrival to the Presidency of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in Bamako. In February 2014 the King visited again Mali and also attended, in Guinea Conakry in March, a regional summit with sub-regional implications.²¹ Morocco is the country where the Community of States of the Sahel and the Sahara (CEN-SAD) annual ministerial meeting was held in November 2013.²² Finally, Morocco has also been dealing with the sensitive Tuareg question increasing with that the concerns in Algeria.²³

Together with these tensions, Algiers and Rabat are also and previously confronted due to the conflict in the Western Sahara, a territory fully connected with the Western Sahel. In this context, only 17 African states have recognized the RASD, a full member of the OAU since 1984, and Zambia in 2011 and Burundi in 2010 decided to change their positions becoming supporters of the Moroccan approach on an autonomy for the territory within the Kingdom. The Moroccan diplomatic and financial deployment in the African continent is very much connected with this effort in order to attract as many African countries as possible to its position. At the same time, Morocco continues doing an enormous lobby in order to transmit the message that the Polisario Front is a part of the global threat emerging from the Western Sahel, with direct connection with the jihadist groups.²⁴

Historically, the Moroccan dynasty helped to export Islam to Africa south of the Sahara and still maintains influence in a number of “Zawiya” (Islamic religious bodies) such as the Tijani in Mali and other Sufi groups. The increasing visibility of Mohamed VI in West Africa and the Sahel is a big concern for Algeria. At the multilateral level, Morocco is providing ground for the CEN-SAD sub-regional organization. Also in Maghreb regional terms, Algiers has enhanced its influence

1979 and as the unique occupant since then. The Organization for African Unity (OAU) recognized the Arab Saharwi Democratic Republic (RASD, in its French acronym) in 1984, and Morocco is absent from the continental African Organization (OAU/AU, African Union) since then.

²¹ Guinea Conakry is a country where the Muslim Zawiyas are very much influenced by Moroccan religious actors.

²² “Maroc: démantèlement d’une cellule terroriste liée aux radicaux islamiques”, *El Watan (Algeria)*, 13 September 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

²³ In January 2014 Mohamed VI met the MNLA Secretary-General Bilal Ag Achérif, in Rabat. In parallel, Algeria is trying to keep its role with a number of armed groups in northern Mali.

²⁴ See *The Truth about the Polisario. Security in the Sahara and Sahel. The growing threat posed by the Polisario run camps near Tindouf*, Government of Morocco, The Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP), 13 October 2014, 12 pages, in <www.moroccoonthemove.com>.

over neighboring Tunisia under the guise of increased security cooperation.

Coming back to Algeria, the country continues suffering in 2014 the AQIM terrorist activism. At the same time, AQIM leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, has refused to recognize the Islamic State (IS), preferring to renew his allegiance to Al Qaida. On 13 September 2014 an unknown Algerian terrorist group, Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria (Djound Al-Khilafa en Algérie), announced its split from AQIM and pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi's group, the IS.²⁵

Northern Niger, with its central point in Agadez, is one of the key routes between southern Libya and northern Mali, an often-used route for terrorists and traffickers, the latter trafficking mainly human beings, weapons and drugs. For years, Niger has been locked into its own contentious negotiations with Paris over the future of uranium mining in northern Niger.²⁶ In addition, Niamey is trying to leverage its concerns over instability in Libya to gain concessions from its former colonizer.²⁷

In security terms, Niger has led in 2014 the Flintlock military exercise annually sponsored by the US, and the Government successfully lobbied Washington to place a drone surveillance facility in Niamey as is likely seeking greater cooperation, training and military aid from France. Niger suffered a double suicide terrorist attack in May 2013, with terrorists coming from southern Libya, and is very much concerned by the regional situation due to the fact it also has a complex relation with its own Tuareg community. Massoudou Hassoumi, Interior Minister of Niger, demanded a French foreign intervention in southern Libya – a region he defined as an “incubator for terrorist groups” - on 5 February 2014. On 10 October 2014, in northern Niger, French forces destroyed an AQIM convoy transporting weapons from Libya to Mali.

The Libyan jihadist group Ansar Al Sharía is based in Benghazi but also has branches in Ajdabiya, Derna and Sirte. On 29 April 2014 the Libyan Government labelled Ansar Al Sharía as a terrorist organization for the first time. Algerian

²⁵ See FETHI, N., “ISIS offshoot raises questions in Algeria”, *Magharebia*, 17 September 2014, in <www.magharebia.com>.

²⁶ Since the expiration of its contract on 31 December 2013, the French company AREVA and the Niamey Government started negotiations to renew the contract, albeit on more favorable terms for Niger. Niger is the world's fourth largest producer of uranium after Khazajstan, Canada and Australia. However, uranium has not added wealth to Niger, one of the poorest countries with more than 60% of its 17 million people surviving on less than 1US\$ a day.

²⁷ CHERFAOUI, Z., “Les Français dissent non à Niamey”, *El Watan (Algeria)*, 12 February 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

jihadists' presence in Libya has improved the sophistication of Jihadist actions. For instance, Algerian media confirmed on 17 May 2014 that two Algerians were killed and another was injured while fighting alongside Ansar Al Sharía in Benghazi. In Libya, the terrorists of Ansar Al Sharía have reiterated that security and stability in the country are dependent on the establishment of Sharia (Islamic Law) and not democracy, calling on "every Muslim to unite against infidels and traitors". Among the latter they situate the retired Libyan army officer General Khalifa Haftar who began military operations on 16 May 2014 against Islamist militias in Benghazi. General Haftar's operation, together with the proclamation of the Islamic Caliphate in northern Iraq in June 2014, have served as a further catalyst for Islamist militias in Libya to increase their cooperation. While increasing co-operation between Libyan jihadists has allowed those militants to co-ordinate and to extend co-operation with jihadists elsewhere in the region.²⁸ Close relations between Ansar Al Sharía in Libya and Mokhtar Belmokhtar has been evoked recently by a number of analysts in the region, as an example of how Libya is being transformed into a theatre for the battle for ascendancy between a number of Al Qaida regional wings and global Jihadist groups such as the IS.²⁹

Mauritania is playing a pivotal role in confronting terrorism and other risks and threats such as illegal trafficking in large. The Mauritanian Government considers one third of the total production of cannabis in Morocco transit by the Sahel through Mauritania, the Western Sahara and Algeria, northern Mali and Niger, and Latin American cocaine also transits by the Sahel strip.

AQIM has stated on a number of occasions that it views Mauritania as a legitimate target and has previously demonstrated a capability to carry out kidnappings and attacks using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). For instance, three VBIEDs were intercepted on 1 February 2011 while travelling from Mali towards the French Embassy and government targets in Nouakchott, and three Spanish aid workers were kidnapped in November 2009 on the highway between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.

The main Islamist party in Mauritania is Tawasoul, a Mauritanian affiliate of the international Muslim Brotherhood organization licensed as a political party in 2007.

²⁸ See "Militia- Libya tackles Islamist militant groups", *Janes's Islamic Affairs Analyst (Section: Africa. Country: Libya)*, 28 May 2014.

²⁹ OUMAR, J., "Jihadist forces vie for influence", *Magharebia*, 19 September 2014, in <www.magharebia.com>.

Tawasoul's spiritual leader, Sheikh Mohamed Hasan Ould Dedew, who leads the charitable and cultural organization Moustakbel (Future) has traditionally presented himself as a champion of Muslim causes abroad while avoiding to appear to give support to domestic extremism at home. Concerning Jihadist projection, Mauritania has created a TV Channel providing moderate Islamic propaganda, the Mahdhara Fadharia, on 1 March 2014.³⁰

Finally, Senegal, who shares 800 kilometers of borders with Mauritania and Mali, is also very much concerned by radicalization and by illegal trafficking.

III. THE EVOLUTION IN THE AREA

Sahel countries are stepping up their efforts with international partners to deal with the security threats confronting them.

The region needs to be secured by the support of foreign forces and other foreign instruments but there is no a permanent military solution for the threats these countries face. In the long run, economic development, good governance and sweeping counter-radicalization strategies are necessary to drain the swamps in which Jihadists festers.

National efforts remain central in security terms in the area, with Algeria as the central country.³¹ In terms of the most recent examples of operations, Algerian security forces arrested 20 alleged criminals attempting to cross the border with Niger on 6 October 2014.³² The Algerian&Moroccan competition in the area not only remains but it will increase in the next coming months and years. Unfortunately, this competition between the two Maghreb powers in the Western Sahel will increase the presence of religion and religious actors in the area, a potential additional problem for the future.³³

Also situated at the sub-regional dimension, the role played by the ECOWAS, an

³⁰ See "Foregone conclusion- Incumbent favourite for Mauritanian presidential election", *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst (Section: Africa. Country: Mauritania)*, 13 June 2014.

³¹ See on the re-organization of the military deployment in the 4th (Ouargla) and the 6th (Tamanrasset) Military Regions in Algeria "Ministère de la Défense Nationale (MDN): Quatre nouveaux secteurs militaires pour le grand sud", *El Watan (Algeria)*, 24 June 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

³² On this arrest see RAMZI, W.: "Algeria tightens Niger border security", *Maghrebia*, 8 October 2014. On previous interventions of heavy weapons in the deep south borders see "Dix terrorists éliminés à Tinzaouatine (Tamanrasset). La menace persiste aux frontières sud", *El Watan (Algeria)*, 7 May 2014, and "L'armée algérienne saisit des armes de guerre près des frontières avec le Mali", *El Watan*, 9 April 2014.

³³ See "Foregone conclusion" *op. cit.*

organization involving 15 states, must be evoked. ECOWAS is the most important actor in terms of international subregional organization. In Mali, for instance, the ECOWAS imposed the Burkina's President Blaise Compaoré negotiation with a number of Tuareg groups since the year 2013. A new of these negotiations between Bamako and Tuareg and MINUSMA elements initiated in 2014 was led by Algerian diplomats and was not involving the Burkinabe Mediator any more.

Mali and other countries in the region need to be secured not only by African forces but also by broader international actors. Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz is already the President of the AU, and he has tried to involve the continental organization in the efforts to restore peace and stability in the Western Sahel. In fact, neither the ECOWAS nor the AU have been able to play a rapid, active and effective role in the years 2012 and 2013, and then the UN was invited to pay attention to the conflict in the area through the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).³⁴ The MINUSMA is authorized to involve 12,640 troops and police, and waiting to arrive to its full capacity the US, French and European (the European Union Training Mission EUTM-Mali) militaries are training African forces contributing to MINUSMA.³⁵

Since July 2013 up to 31 MINUSMA members have been killed by Jihadist terrorists.³⁶ Ten Chadian members of MINUSMA were killed in September 2014 and nine, all of them from Niger, were killed on 3 October 2014 between the towns of Menaka and Ansongo, in the Gao region.³⁷ An additional MINUSMA soldier, from Senegal, was killed on 7 October 2014 in Kidal.³⁸ On 9 October 2014 Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop urged the UN Security Council to send a rapid intervention force to fight terrorists in the north of his country.³⁹

³⁴ "Mali conflict: UN urges to send more troops", *BBC News*, 10 October 2014, in <www.bbc.co.uk>.

³⁵ SCHMITT, E., "US Trains Africa Commandos To Fight Terrorism", *The New York Times*, 26 May 2014.

³⁶ "Mali. L'ONU condamne l' attentat qui a coûté la vie à quatre Casques bleus", *El Watan (Algeria)*, 13 June 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

³⁷ "Nine UN peacekeepers from Niger killed in ambush by rebels in Mali", *The Guardian*, 3 October 2014, in <www.theguardian.com>.

³⁸ "Mali. Durcissement du dispositif anti-terroriste au Mali, un Sénégalais tué à Kidal", *Jeune Afrique*, 8 October 2014, in <www.jeuneafrique.com>.

³⁹ BALDÉ, A., "Crise au nord-Mali: Bamako appelle au secours", *Afrik.com*, 9 October 2014, in <www.afrik.com>.

Niger is contributing with 600 military to MINUSMA since 2013. The recently inaugurated French military facility of Madama, north-east of Niger and 200 kilometers from the Libyan border, is a partial and late contribution to the security of the area. In this north-east portion of the country French forces destroyed an AQIM convoy transporting weapons from Libya to Mali on 10 October 2014.

Concerning again the West we must point out the role played by a number of European countries and the EU, on one side, and that of the US on the other side. Among the EU member countries the role played by France has been and remains central. Concerning the EU, its *Regional Strategy for the Sahel* was approved in March 2011, and since the year 2013 an Europe the EUTM-Mali is in charge of the training of Malian military.⁴⁰

Concerning the US, in 2013 the US Special Operations Command begun a program to instruct and equip hundreds of handpicked commandos, in Libya, Niger, Mauritania and Mali.⁴¹ At the diplomatic level, the Summit on African Security, held in Washington DC in August 2014 under the Presidency of Barack H. Obama, provided the political and doctrinal background to the USA approach to security in the area.⁴²

Going to the south and involving Nigeria in our study, the terrorist activism of Boko Haram must be pointed out. This jihadist group remains very active in the last five years but it does exist since the year 2002. In July 2013 the UK formally designated Boko Haram a terrorist organization, with the US following suit in November 2013. Boko Haram is overlapped as a terrorist actor with a mix of tribal and religious animosity aggravated by political corruption, and growing rivalries over land and water resources focused mainly in northern Nigeria. Boko Haram has gained the capacity to strike increasingly in urban centers and beyond national borders, towards Cameroon and also to the Sahel.

Boko Haram has become a global threat, an enormous Jihadist Salafist threat, larger in scope than the international community may presume. The export of both Boko Haram's actions and its operatives is increasing concern not only in Cameroon but also in the Sahel. Boko Haram captured Gwoza in Summer 2014 and declared

⁴⁰ Concerning NATO, a number of allies have begun plans to train some 20,000 Libyan military in Europe through 2014, but the Alliance as such is not implicated either in Mali or in other Western Sahel countries. Mauritania is a member of the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue Initiative since the 1990s.

⁴¹ See SCHMITT, E., *op. cit.*

⁴² "Alger appelle au renforcement du partenariat sécuritaire afro-américain", *El Watan (Algeria)*, 8 August 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

its “Caliphate” there. They captured armoured personnel carriers and even tanks in this town and continued its offensive in north-east Nigeria. Boko Haram has carried out incursions into Niger, Cameroon and even Chad, and in Autumn 2014 the Nigerian Army was preventing the terrorist group from capturing cities such as Maiduguri and Konduga, but the effort against this threat becomes more and more urgent and must be multinational in scope.

Nigeria and its neighbors Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger have recently decided, in Niamey on 8 October 2014, to deploy since November this year a 700 military joint force to combat this terrorist group. The Niamey meeting was a follow-up of a May 2014 Summit in Paris, where the leaders who attended promised to improve cooperation in the fight against Boko Haram after the terrorist group kidnapped more than 200 school girls in Chibok, north-east of Nigeria.⁴³ Unfortunately, the region and even the international community did not define an approach to a common reaction against Boko Haram until that massive kidnapping arrived.

Early in October 2014, the release of 27 hostages captured by Boko Haram meant that the group had received money and that a number of Jihadist prisoners in prisons of Cameroon had likely been liberated. That group of 27 hostages included 10 Chinese construction workers and the wife of a Vice-Prime Minister of Nigeria, among others.⁴⁴ Boko Haram does continue with its atrocities even if a negotiation effort, developed in Chad and in Saudi Arabia, for obtaining a cease fire and the release of many of the school girls kidnapped in Chibok, created expectation at the end of October.⁴⁵ In fact, the bloody offensive of Boko Haram does continue.⁴⁶

Finally, a non-regional issue must be pointed out in terms of potential additional instability in the region. Returning jihadist already combating in battlefields such as Syria and Iraq can feed additional radicalization and terrorism activity in our region encompassing the Western Sahel, the Maghreb and Nigeria, and even in

⁴³ “Regional leaders step up Boko Haram fight with troops, command centre”, *Reuters*, 8 October 2014, in <<http://af.reuters.com>>.

⁴⁴ “Nigerians doubtful of girls’ release after Boko Haram “truce” breached”, *Reuters*, 19 October 2014, in <<http://af.reuters.com>>, and JOHNSTON, Ch., “Fears grow that Nigeria ceasefire won’t secure girls’ release amid fresh attacks”, *The Guardian*, 18 October 2014, in <www.theguardian.co.uk>.

⁴⁵ ELORRIAGA, G., “Boko Haram saquea una gran ciudad y desata el pánico en Nigeria”, *Diario de Navarra*, 31 October 2014, p. 9.

⁴⁶ “Nigeria: la trêve avec Boko Haram rompue par un nouvel enlèvement et la reprise des combats”, *Jeune Afrique*, 27 October 2014, in <www.jeuneafrique.com>.

Europe.⁴⁷ Previous generations of combatants in Afghanistan proved that Jihadist activists possessed leadership capabilities, organizational skills, high fighting spirit and strong momentum, playing very serious roles in the reinforcement of terrorist groups such as the Algerian GIA and the Libyan Islamic Combatant Group (GICL, in its French acronym). A new generation of terrorists who have gained combat experience, even as suicide bombers, have been trained and continuous being trained in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁸

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In addition to the traditional risks and threats affecting the countries in the Western Sahel area, the Arab revolts which were initiated in the Maghreb in Autumn 2010, have transformed and enlarged negatively the region in security terms, also affecting neighboring areas such as the Western Sahel, and mainly Mali.

In addition, traditional rivalry between Algeria and Morocco in the Maghreb was and remain an additional negative input for the Western Sahel sub-region in security terms.

The Operation Serval, transformed into Operation Berkhane since 1 August 2014, has been an achievement in terms of avoiding the Jihadist total conquest of the Malian state. Nevertheless, the terrorist threat has not been defeated, and AQMI, the MUJAO and Ansar Eddine, the three main terrorist actors since 2012, remain active in the area.⁴⁹

Northern Mali is suffering a sharp increase in strikes on foreign forces, particularly on MINUSMA. The spike in attacks against the MINUSMA members comes as France has redeployed some of its forces away from Mali since August 2014. This reduction of the French troops and the absence of the Malian Army from northern Mali are contributing to the upsurge of terrorist activism.

From the south, Boko Haram is emerging as a global problem, an enormous Jihadist Salafist threat, larger in scope than the international community may presume. The export of both Boko Haram's mission and its operatives is an

⁴⁷ A former ISIS member killed four people in Brussels in May 2014. See Musée juif de Bruxelles. Un suspect arrêté à Marseille”, *El Watan (Algeria)*, 1 June 2014, in <www.elwatan.com>.

⁴⁸ LAHCEN, M., “Caliphate bell tolls for the Maghreb”, *Maghrebia*, 11 July 2014, in <www.magharebia.com>.

⁴⁹ OUMAR, J., “MUJAO member claims Mali peacekeeper attack”, *Maghrebia*, 7 October 2014, in <www.magharebia.com>.

increasing concern not only in Cameroon but also in the Western Sahel and neighboring countries such as the Central African Republic and Chad. The group is gaining influence in the region and will continue killing and kidnapping in order to reinforce its Jihadist enterprise. Boko Haram, together with the IS acting in Iraq and Syria, have both money, weapons and logistic equipment, and many fighters, and are gaining dangerously ground in their respective scenarios of activity increasing the global Jihadist threat.

Western Europe and Western interests in broad that are present in the Western Sahel and the Maghreb can suffer the extension of this Jihadist growing violence. Direct attacks against foreign forces deployed in Mali and the practice of kidnapping Western citizens in the Maghreb and the Sahel remain central in terms of threat. Additional terrorists to add to those already acting in the Maghreb, the Sahel or northern Nigeria could be the returning jihadists coming back from Syria and Iraq skilled in multiple systems of weapons and explosives.