

Sahel: in search for new strategies?

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Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the most exposed countries of the G5 Sahel to terrorism, have been facing repeated attacks since this year beginning. It is in this worrying context that the French president announced on 10 June, the “end of Operation Barkhane”, and a strategic partner in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. The silence surrounding that statement indicates that, on both sides, time has come to seek new avenues to overcome the jihadist scourge.

Terrorists have stepped up massacres of civilians in all three countries in recent months. In Burkina Faso, the month of June was most deadly. On the night of 04-05, Solhan, in the Sahel province, suffered terrorist attacks, with an official death toll of 138 civilians massacred. On the 21st, eleven policemen, on a relief mission, were killed in an ambush in the center-north of the country. In Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (Minusma) recorded 4 dead and 50 wounded in attacks against peacekeepers between March 26 and June 1. On June 20, ten inhabitants were killed in the village of Dinangourou, Mopti region, already under a jihadist blockade since May 02, 2021. It should be added that the village of Faraboubou, Ségou region, has been under the same jihadist cruelty since October 2020. On June 25, 25 soldiers were killed in Boni, center-east of the country.

What a massacre of civilians!

In Niger, 100 people were killed in the attack on two villages on January 2, 2021. On March 15, jihadists attacked vehicles returning from the large weekly market of Banibangou, Tillabéry region, located in the area known as that of the “Three Borders” (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger). Another neighboring village was submitted to same violence: 66 dead while vehicles and warehouses were set on fire. On March 21, armed men attacked villages in the Tahoua region, close to Mali, and murdered 137 civilians. On June 24, again in the Tillabéry region, motorcycle attackers killed around ten civilians in the villages of Danga-Zouani and Korombara. On the other hand, the Chadian army confirmed its good form, despite the unexpected death of its leader, Marshal Idriss Deby Itno, on April 19, 2021. On May 9, 2021, it announced a victory over the rebels of the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT), which had crossed the border between Libya and their country since April 11, 2021. As for Mauritania, spared by terrorists' attacks since 2011, it can only remain vigilant in the face of threats on its borders and of the recent arrest of its citizen involved in funding terror attacks in Cote d'Ivoire. Lately, fighters from the jihadist movement, the "Macina Front", affiliated to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), are said to have entered, on motorcycles, without firing a shot, precisely in the village of Bali, only 17 km from the Mauritania border...)

Furthermore, each of the G5 Sahel countries is finding itself at a specific moment of its historical experience. In Burkina Faso, breaking a long consensus on the security challenge, the political opposition calls for protests, given "the government's inability to find solutions for the security of the Burkinabè". Long before this "appeal", the cities of Dori, Titao and Kaya had started vigorous marches, denouncing "the abandonment of the populations to their own fate by the state". In Mali where, in eight months two successive coups d'état have taken place, under the leadership of Colonel Assimi Goita, soldiers are accused, by some of their fellow citizens, of being more interested in the management of political power, in Bamako, than to the resolution of security problems on the ground. Others link that instability to the country deep structural political fragility. In Niger, the

authority of the elected president, Mohamed Bazoum, is still not recognized by the political opposition. It is not certain that the growing insecurity would cause a sort of social "truce", which would further consolidate the government inaugurated on April 2, 2021 in Niamey. Mauritania is going through an unprecedented period, with the detention of its former president, actor of the political alternation to power in the country. In Chad, too, the Transitional Military Committee faces challenges: a legitimacy that continues to be disputed by part of the political opposition and civil society and by recurrent rebellions.

The "end of Operation Barkhane? "

It is in this context, full of uncertainties, that President Emmanuel Macron, who should face elections in only ten months, announced to his compatriots, as well as to the Sahelians, the "end of Operation Barkhane. ". He took into account, among other things, the evolution of public opinion in his country, largely unfavorable to that military deployment, due to its cost to taxpayer - nearly one billion euros per year - and its human losses, fifty soldiers killed. An undisputable anti-French development in the Sahel may also have contributed.

If France has announced the "end of Operation Barkhane", it continues to review the continuation of its support for the G5 Sahel ... and its surgical strikes aimed at the "neutralization" of major jihadist leaders, with the reaffirmed support of the new US administration. Algeria, the guarantor of the various inter-Malian "Agreements", seems to be preparing its public opinion for possible armed intervention in Mali, in order to contribute to the fight against terrorism. Russia, said to be in waiting in the Sahel, since the Sochi summit in October 2019, may take advantage of intervention opportunities in particular in Mali. Libya is still perceived as a danger, by the G5 Sahel, at a time when western powers are pushing its deep crisis protagonists to begin the process of dismissing foreign mercenaries.

Since president Macron announcement, the G5 countries have not yet met. Proof that the Five, as well as their several external partners, in a thoughtful and serious atmosphere, are looking for new strategies to fight the terrorist hydra. The emerging "new warrior doctrine" is roughly what follows. Only the G5 Sahel national armies would be in charge on the field, France ceasing to act as a Team Leader, or commander-in-chief. In this rise in power and in command, these armies would benefit from technical and human resources from their technical partners: Minusma, France, the United States, Germany, the European Force Tabuka, Russia, China and many others.

Steps should be taken to prevent abuses against civilian populations. A red line, not to be crossed: no negotiations between governmental authorities and the terrorist groups! Such an initiative would result in the ending of French support and probably of that of other external partners.

Good governance, of the management of resources made available by their partners and of their owns, would imposed itself on the G5 Sahel States. This approach should have prevailed, from the star of the interventions of Minusma and Barkhane, in 2013, as many financial scandals have been denounced in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. An immediate return of the state to the liberated territories will also be required from them.

The puzzle is being assembled on both sides. An emergency, given the political crises that could shake the vastness of the Sahel's sand ...

