

RESEARCH NOTE

The Islamic State in the Sahel: Understanding its Internal and External Dynamics and Attack Modalities

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Volume XVIII, Issue 2
June 2024

ISSN: 2334-3745
DOI: 10.19165/2024.3277

Abstract: The Islamic State in the Sahel (also known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, or ISGS) is one of the major jihadist groups operating in the tri-border region of the Sahel, and was formed by dissidents who shifted allegiance from al-Qaeda to ISIS. Despite their ideological affinities, there are a few internal and external factors that differentiate the ISGS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the region, such as JNIM. Drawing on evidence from previous studies and from an analysis of available data from relevant datasets, this Research Note provides a close examination of these factors to help better understand strategic choices made by ISGS leaders or militants in their external relations, their targeting logic, tactics, or attack modalities. A few recommendations are offered in the conclusion to help governments in their counter-terrorism efforts. Key among these recommendations is the necessity for African states to strengthen their cooperation and mutual support, especially at the legislative, financial, and military levels, in order to reduce the possibility for jihadist terrorist groups like ISS to survive and continue their operations on the continent.

Keywords: Terrorism, Islamic State, Sahel, tactics, violence against civilians

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Introduction

Throughout history, very few terror groups have equalled the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in terms of brutal violence against civilians. Even though its activities have decreased in the Middle East and North Africa, ISIL's affiliates remain active in other parts of the world – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where deaths attributed to ISIL affiliates have been increasing in recent years.¹ ISIL is in decline in the Middle East, where it has lost territory and sources of income, but it is not yet completely dead. Data on incidents attributed to ISIS affiliates show that the organisation is gaining strength in Africa through some of its franchises. This Research Note focuses on one of these franchises, namely the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), often called Islamic State in the Sahel (ISS), a group that was listed as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) in May 2018 by the US Department of State, and added in February 2020 to the ISIL and al-Qaeda sanctions list of the United Nations Security Council.²

Researching terrorist groups is both exciting and challenging, for it arouses our curiosity and, at the same time, leads us to realise how difficult it is to collect information and get sufficient knowledge of such groups. This is particularly true of the ISGS, whose leader, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, was declared by the US Department of State's Rewards for Justice Program as one of the most wanted persons, with a reward of up to USD \$5 million for information leading to his apprehension.³ To better understand and counter the numerous attacks officially claimed by, or attributed to this group in the Sahel's tri-border region (where the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger meet) – including an ambush in which four soldiers of Niger and four US Special Forces were killed on 4 October 2017 in Tongo Tongo (Niger) – this Research Note examines two under-researched areas: the internal and external factors that influence the group's functioning and the decision-making of its leaders, and the group's attack modalities. Although the primary focus of this study is not theoretical, this analysis will also help assess to what extent terrorists' selection of targets (especially civilians) is guided by rational choice and by ideology, as some scholars argue.⁴

The ISGS: Internal Dynamics and External Relations

The ISGS was formed by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, one of the leaders and dissidents of al-Mourabitoun, an affiliate of al-Qaeda. After al-Sahraoui's declaration of allegiance in May 2015 to al-Baghdadi was rejected by Moktar Belmoktar – the founding leader of al-Mourabitoun – al-Sahraoui left al-Mourabitoun with other fighters and started the Islamic State in Mali which later became the ISGS.⁵ Al-Sahraoui was born, reportedly, into a “well-connected and wealthy” family in 1973 in the disputed territory of Western Sahara, whose inhabitants felt repressed and marginalised by Moroccan authorities, a feeling that led to the formation of a secessionist pro-independence movement, the Polisario Front, which al-Sahraoui joined at a young age (as did other Sahraoui youth). To avoid arrest by the Moroccan security forces, al-Sahraoui fled to southern Algeria, where he lived and studied as a refugee before getting involved in cross-border smuggling between southern Algeria and northern Mali.⁶ Later, he joined Islamist militant groups connected to al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in northern Mali, such as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and al-Mulathameen Brigade, two groups that merged to create Al-Mourabitoun, the group in which he became a key leader before leaving in 2015.⁷

Based in Mali and Niger, ISGS has been operating in the tri-border region that encompasses northern Mali, the Tillabery region in Niger, and the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso that border Mali and Niger (see map below).⁸ ISGS was officially recognised in 2016 by ISIS, a year later after al-Sahraoui pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, while some

analysts contend that ISGS has been (since this official recognition by ISIS) receiving ideological and strategic guidance from the Islamic State central,⁹ others argue instead that the group only uses the label of ISIS' affiliate for international recognition, and that "for all practical purposes, it operates according to its own organizational structures, goals, and resources."¹⁰ Actually, after being "the Greater Sahara faction of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)" (an organisational relationship that began in March 2019), ISGS was declared a separate province of the Islamic State in March 2022.¹¹

ISGS assumedly shares the Salafi-jihadist ideology (a conservative, revolutionary, and anti-imperialist stream of Islam) that is embraced by ISIS, al-Qaeda and their respective affiliates such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa Province, the Islamic State in Central Africa Province, al-Shabaab, and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM). Considering the example of the Prophet and his early companions (*sala'af*) as the standard for authentic Muslim faith and behaviour, the grand strategy of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and arguably their affiliates in the Sahel includes primarily restoring the Caliphate in the Muslim world, a political order based on the divinely-revealed law of the Sharia, through violent means if necessary. Nevertheless, ISGS does not seem to be driven by a consistent ideological narrative, but rather by a desire to expand its territorial control at the expense of its al-Qaeda-affiliated rival JNIM. Further, the youth who have joined the group, mainly from Fulani backgrounds, were in most cases driven by a need for social significance, a desire to protect their cattle, and grievances against their national governments or against other rival ethnic groups (e.g., the Tuaregs), rather than by a strong adherence to jihadist ideology.¹²

In terms of demographics, most members of ISGS are dissidents from MUJAO, al-Mourabitoun, and Katiba Macina, who followed al-Sahraoui.¹³ According to a recent study by Heni Nsaiba, "Its members belong to the Fulani, Arab, Tuareg, Daoussaks, Songhai, and Djerma ethnic groups, although its core leadership was historically composed of Western Saharan militants."¹⁴ Another study by Raineri Luca confirms that ISGS recruited many of its militants from the disgruntled ethnic Fulani and Daoussaks, who are nomadic communities in the Northern Tillabery region of Niger and central and northern Mali.¹⁵ Through field research in these regions, Raineri found that the Fulani became hostile to the government in Niger and Mali after the latter sided with other communities (such as the Tuaregs) against them in inter-community conflicts. As a result, he concludes that "ISGS supplied an opportunity to fulfil the protection demands by Fulani dwellers of the Mali-Niger borderland, feeling marginalized, abandoned, and eventually discriminated against by their own state authorities."¹⁶ In fact, tensions, alliances, and disputes between ethnic communities (Arabs, Tuaregs, Fulanis, Dogons, Songhai, etc.) are among the key factors that have been influencing the relationships between armed groups and their recruitment efforts in the Sahara-Sahel region for many years.

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, one of the leaders of the *Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad* (a Tuareg-led movement that fights ISGS alongside the French forces), revealed in an interview that the men of ISGS move in small units (usually on motorbikes), and that most of them are citizens of Niger who hail from the region of Tillabery.¹⁷ While it is often assumed that some jobless youth are driven towards groups like ISGS by frustrating socio-economic conditions or radicalisation, field research in northern Tillabery did not find any evidence corroborating that young militants of ISGS were primarily motivated by ideology, religious conviction or financial gain.¹⁸

As regards the size of the group, according to estimates by Jason Warner and Charlotte Hulme, ISGS had about 300 to 425 fighters by the end 2018, and is very likely the fourth largest ISIS affiliate in Africa after ISWAP (about 3,500 fighters), the Islamic State in Sinai (about 1,250

fighters), and the Islamic State in Libya (about 500 combatants).¹⁹ However, during the last couple of years both ISGS and ISWAP have lost hundreds of fighters and key leaders (including al-Sahraoui) in violent clashes with JNIM, with the French Barkhane forces in the tri-border region, or with the armed forces of Nigeria and Chad in the Lake Chad region.²⁰

Troubled Relationships with the Local Populations, National Governments, and al-Qaeda Affiliates

After several years of exceptional collaboration between ISGS and JNIM in jointly coordinated operations, according to data collected by Heni Nsaiba and Caleb Weiss, 46 clashes erupted between the militants of these two jihadist organisations in Mali and Burkina Faso from July 2019 through July 2020, leaving several hundred of fighters dead on both sides and reigniting the rivalry in the Sahel between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.²¹ This rivalry has been accompanied by ideological and tactical differences on the battlefield. Al-Qaeda's affiliates (like JNIM) are more open to negotiation with some local ethnic communities, such as the Bambaras or Dogons, as well as with the French and the government of Mali. These al-Qaeda affiliates tend to follow the Taliban's model and exercise more restraint in their attacks. In contrast, ISGS mocks JNIM's soft approach, rejects negotiation with their "enemies," and opts for brutal, indiscriminate violence targeting both the military and civilians.²² For example, after the incorporation of ISGS into ISWAP in March 2019, both groups increased their targeting of civilians, including Christians in churches in north-eastern Nigeria and Burkina Faso.²³

However, a January 2024 report by the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team noted important strategic developments in the relationships between ISGS and JNIM (its rival), and with the local civilian populations. According to their analysis:

A localized détente between ISGS and JNIM raises concerns about the possible establishment of a terrorist sanctuary. By implicitly dividing the territories where they operate, these groups can concentrate on targeting security forces and continue to embed within local communities. This is a worrying trend, as it enables them to conduct attacks and facilitate operations beyond borders of neighboring countries. Unlike the previous strategy of terror, ISGS in Mali is pursuing a new strategy to reinforce its acceptance among the population, thus increasing its influence, funding, and recruitment capabilities.²⁴

The killing of civilians by ISGS militants has arguably damaged its relationships with most of the population of the Sahel region. As mentioned above, the organisation took advantage of violent clashes between ethnic militias to recruit youth from disgruntled ethnic groups, especially the Fulani.²⁵ However, because of its brutal attacks against civilians, ISGS has often lost the support of some local people and turned local militias against itself. For example, after attacks in northern Mali, two local militias (*Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad* and GATIA) joined the Mali government forces and the French Barkhane Force to fight ISGS, killing more than a hundred of its combatants.²⁶

According to Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, these local militias were able to fight ISGS more effectively than the government or foreign forces because they knew the actors, the territory, the customs, and the mentalities of the local people better and could better monitor the movements of ISGS.²⁷ Does this suggest that locally recruited law enforcement or military personnel – if they are adequately trained and equipped – might see better results in the fight against terrorist groups than the national government and international forces who come from outside and usually have poor knowledge of the local terrain and context? It would be difficult

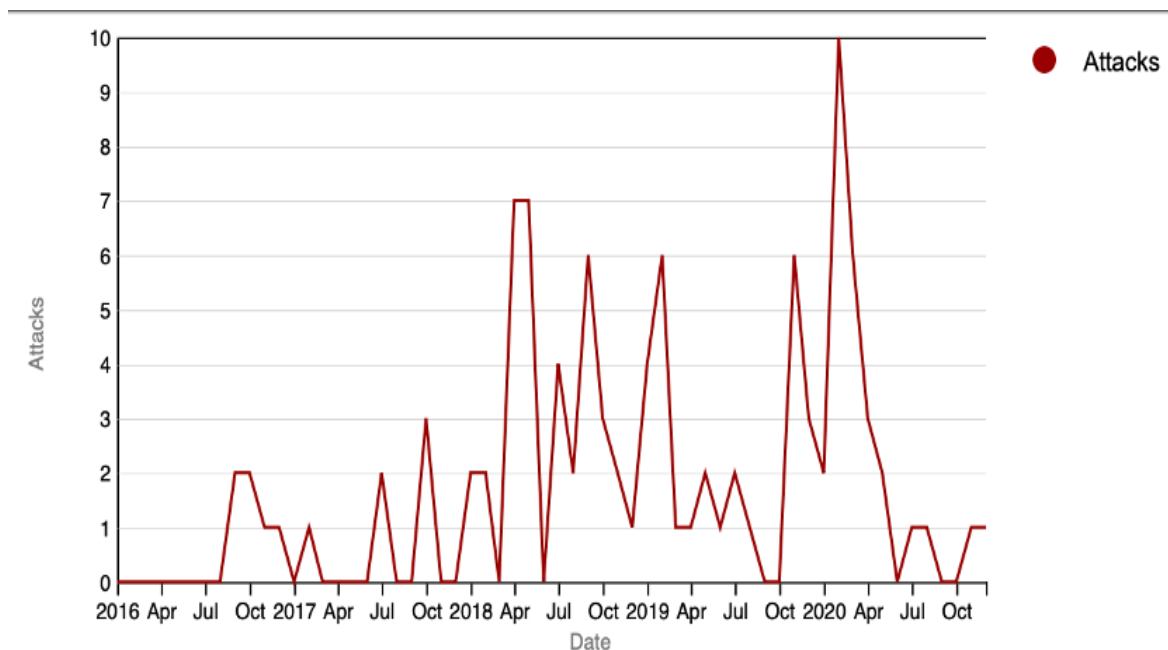
to make such a claim without further research and more evidence. To stay within the limited scope of this Research Note, let us now examine what has influenced ISGS' selection of targets in the incidents in which its militants were involved.

The Targeting Logic and Operational Objectives of the Islamic State in the Sahel

From 2016 to 19 November 2020, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Events Database project (ACLED), about 746 incidents were claimed by (or attributed to) ISGS. These incidents include battles with the military, violence against civilians, explosions or remote violence through improvised explosive devices, extortion, looting, and property destruction. A close look at those incidents suggests that the group has been strategically targeting government representatives, police and military personnel, foreign troops deployed in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, militants of al-Qaeda affiliated groups (especially those of the JNIM coalition that it views as rivals), local militias that fight it, and (more importantly) civilians. They have also targeted private property such as cattle, businesses, and other resources for its strategic developments.²⁸

Restricting inclusion in its database to incidents that meet its three defining criteria of terrorism²⁹, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) from 2016 to 2020 identified 102 incidents that it considered terrorist and attributed to ISGS (see Figure 1), 51 of which targeted the military, the police, non-state militia groups, or other terrorist groups.

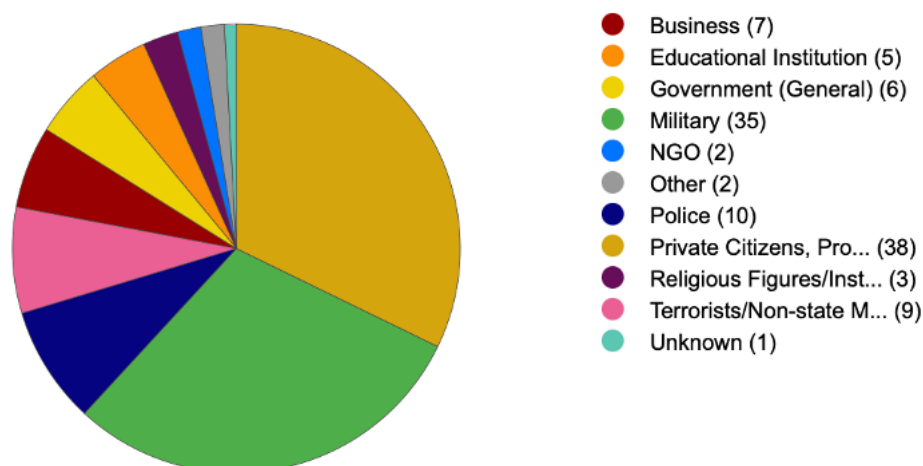
Figure 1. Terrorist incidents attributed to ISGS: 2016-2020



Data source: Global Terrorism Database

A more detailed typology of the targets or collateral victims shows that they included businesses; general government or diplomatic personnel; the security forces (police and military); educational institutions who continue to provide Western education instead of teaching the Quran and Arabic; NGOs; private citizens and property; religious figures or institutions (mainly churches), other terrorist groups or non-state militia groups; tourists; and a few unknown or other types of targets (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Targets of terrorist incidents attributed to ISGS between 2016 and 2020



Data source: Global Terrorism Database

All these incidents were perpetrated in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, especially the tri-border region, except one in Ghat (Libya) in 2016 against a business. But the terrorist character of some of the 102 incidents is doubtful, and according to the GTD researchers, only 71 incidents meet without doubt all the three defining terrorism criteria – namely, the requirements that they should be acts aiming at achieving a political, religious, or social goal; that they involve coercing, intimidating, or conveying a message to a broader audience; and that they should be acts posed outside the parameters of international humanitarian law.

Although one may have the feeling that ISGS is indiscriminate in its violence because its attacks target both combatants and civilian noncombatants, an analysis of the available data about the targets and fatalities in the incidents claimed by (or attributed to) ISGS suggests that the leaders and field commanders of ISGS select their targets based on their perception of who is to be regarded as an enemy. Besides personal or psychological motives such as revenge or retaliation, this enemy's perception is greatly shaped by their ideology and their operational objectives. Thus, the following are considered enemies: the military and citizens of “infidel” powers of the West, the “apostate” regimes that cooperate with them, and civilians who collaborate with the government military or do not support the jihadist activists.³⁰

In line with their Salafi-jihadist ideology, ISGS militants forbid the selling and consumption of alcohol and tobacco, require that women be veiled, and that schools teach the Qu'ran (and in Arabic) in the regions where they operate. This ideological agenda, along with (in some cases) contextual operational objectives, explains their targeting and destruction of liquor stores and schools, their kidnapping or killing of teachers, other civil servants, Westerners, and suspected collaborators of government security forces.³¹ Besides the ISGS militants' determination to punish the local civilian population for not supporting the jihadist cause or for collaborating with enemy forces, both the data and the literature suggest that these militants are often motivated in their attacks against civilians by the desire to grab the attention of the media and by purely economic reasons, as in the case of cattle theft. Nonetheless, in many incidents, the perpetrators' specific motivations cannot be clearly determined.

A Growing Lethal Potential in the Sahel

Among the factors that are critical to the selection of targets, and to the operations and survival of a terrorist organisation such as ISGS, one needs certainly to consider its human, financial, physical, and logistical resources, and its sources of income.³² Very likely, the sources of funding for ISGS include direct support from ISIS-central, as well as income acquired from extortion, cattle rustling, and kidnapping for ransom. Narrative reports of attacks attributed to ISGS in the ACLED database also suggest that the organisation acquires some of its weapons from attacks against police stations, military units, or military patrols, attacks during which some military equipment was often seized and taken away by the assailants.

As regards the logistical and other physical resources that ISGS enjoys, a leader of the *Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad*, which took up arms to fight the jihadist organisation after its militants killed many civilians in northern Mali, revealed the following in an interview:

The terrorists [that is, the ISGS militants] usually set up camp in a rather dense forest—the trees allowing them to escape the surveillance of planes—and surrounded by shrubs, which deters patrols from entering. In a base, there are between ten and thirty people, who communicate with each other with walkie-talkies. There is fuel, in drums or jerry cans, but also food—spaghetti, rice, tea, sugar, water.³³

Like other jihadist groups operating in the region, ISGS purchases motorbikes and food items from local markets and from neighbouring countries, and has established a network of collaborators who provide them information and the material assistance they need.³⁴ Drawing on information gathered from former members of terrorist groups (including ISGS) operating in Eastern Burkina Faso, journalist Atiana Serge Oulon revealed that terrorist groups in each locality have people who provide them information in return for money; they also have supporters from whom they receive in-kind donations and cash, nurses who take care of their wounded or sick members, business people from whom they buy what they need either in Burkina Faso or in neighbouring countries.³⁵ Thus, some civilians, who are not members of the terrorist groups, unknowingly or intentionally support terrorist activities.

ISGS, in the footsteps of the Islamic State central and other Islamic State affiliates, takes advantage of governance weaknesses that plague states in the Sahel, as well as local conflicts and the grievances of some ethnic communities (for example, the Fulani) against the government to recruit militants.³⁶ More generally, jihadist groups in the region use “a calibrated mix of coercion and co-option” and “adapt to shifting dynamics.”³⁷ ISGS has claimed responsibility (or was attributed) for many attacks against civilians, the military, and the French Barkhane force, mainly in the border regions of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. High-profile attacks that give an idea of the operational capabilities of the group include the ambush of Nigérien soldiers in the village of Tongo Tongo at the border between Mali and Niger in which 28 soldiers were killed in May 2019; a suicide attack with a bomb-loaded truck against a convoy of the Barkhane forces in northern Mali in January 2018; and in October 2017, an ambush of a joint-patrol of Nigérien forces and American special forces outside Tongo Tongo.³⁸ On 19 August 2019, early in the morning, more than 100 ISGS militants on motorbikes attacked with rockets a military camp in Koutougou, in the Soum province, in northern Burkina Faso, killing at least 24 soldiers, wounding several others, and burning down buildings, cars, and motorbikes.³⁹ By the end of 2020, the most lethal attacks attributed to ISGS (or claimed by them, through a post to a website or blog) were directed against the military. For example, ISGS' attacks against military positions left 166 dead in Chinagoder in Niger in January 2020, 115 dead in two separate attacks in December 2019 in Arbinda (Burkina Faso), 60 and 49 dead in Mali respectively in Tabankort on 18 November 2019, and in Indelimane on 1 November 2019. According to data on wounded and killed terrorists from the GTD, ISGS had lost about 239 of

its fighters or leaders by the end of 2020. Many of their bases have been and continue to be destroyed in counter-terrorism operations, while their equipment is either destroyed or taken away by government armed forces. Nonetheless, ISGS (like JNIM) remains resilient and has been expanding its operations across the Central Sahel.

The attacks mentioned above, and many others against military and police outposts in the region, were attributed to ISGS by both ACLED and the GTD.⁴⁰ This suggests that the group still has significant combat capacities, including heavy weaponry and fighters who received military training and acquired technical expertise in the manufacturing and use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) from either the Islamic State central or al-Qaeda's affiliates in the region. Repeated attacks by ISGS militants against military barracks and patrols, which are rather hard targets that enjoy a high level of protection, also suggest that the group is confident in its capacities and has a high-risk threshold that is bolstered by its familiarity with the security environment in the region of Tillabery and in other localities where it operates.

The Tongo Tongo Ambush: The Modalities of a Deadly Attack

A frequency analysis of the GTD data on attack types or tactics employed by ISGS militants to achieve their ideological or operational objectives shows that they favour armed assaults with guns (67.2 percent), explosives (10.3 percent), projectiles such as rockets, mortars, RPGs (5.2 percent), vehicles (5.2 percent), landmines (3.4 percent), automatic or semi-automatic rifles (3.4 percent), arson/fire (3.4 percent), and finally, suicide attacks (1.7 percent). But in at least 16.7 percent of the incidents attributed to ISGS militants, the tactics or types of weapons employed were unknown or could not be clearly determined.

A closer look at one high-profile attack claimed by ISGS can help get a better idea of the tactics employed by this group. On 4 October 2017, five military vehicles in which about thirty men – including eight American military instructors and more than twenty Nigerien soldiers of the Security and Intelligence Battalion – were attacked near the village of Tongo Tongo, close to the Mali border, South of Menaka, one of the major jihadist strongholds in northern Mali.⁴¹ A violent shootout erupted between the assailants and the soldiers, who strongly repelled the attack and started to hunt down the assailants. However, as they were more familiar with the terrain, the attackers hid and ambushed the soldiers. An undetermined number of assailants were killed or injured; five Nigerien soldiers and four American instructors were left dead. The injured soldiers were urgently taken to hospitals in Niger or to the AFRICOM's headquarters in Germany. Nigerien, French, and American forces then launched huge land and air operations to hunt down the attackers.

The Tongo Tongo attack – and a more recent attack that left 51 Burkinabe soldiers dead on the Deou-Oursi road in the border region between Mali, Burkina and Niger on February 27, 2023⁴² – illustrate one of the tactics favoured by ISGS and other jihadist groups against the foreign and national military in the Sahel region. Narratives of attacks reported by newspapers have shown that these groups wage an asymmetrical warfare against much stronger government and international armed forces by using ambushes, improvised explosive devices planted on the trajectories of military patrols, and then armed assaults by their combatants. This has usually led to shootouts that resulted in varying numbers of casualties on both sides. Sometimes, these casualties included civilians who were escorted by security forces or happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. In border regions of Burkina Faso and Niger, jihadist groups who had their bases in safe havens in northern Mali often crossed the border and perpetrated attacks, and then they fled back to their hideouts in northern Mali through roads in the desert

that they were very familiar with.

The favourite targets of these groups for armed assault or kidnapping for ransom include the American and French forces that support the national government forces of the G5 Sahel to fight jihadist groups in the region, and citizens of Western countries.⁴³ For example, in 2020, the Islamic State claimed responsibility in its magazine *Al Naba* for the killing and burning of six French volunteers (employees of the humanitarian organisation ACTED), along with their Nigerien guide, near a giraffe reserve in Koure (Niger) on 9 August 2020, as well as for the kidnapping of two other French individuals, who are still held hostages.⁴⁴ Both of these incidents were perpetrated by ISGS militants.

Even though reports on terrorist attacks attributed to ISGS rarely include information on the specific type of weapons used by the perpetrators, some statistical reports and pictures of equipment taken from killed perpetrators suggest that mostly small arms and light weapons of the Kalachnikov type are used. Further, according to the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, as of January 2019, about 63 percent of the weapons used by terrorist groups to attack their targets across Africa – mostly civilians (53 percent) and security and military forces (32 percent) – were small arms and light weapons (63 percent or more) and explosives (27 percent).⁴⁵ Subsequent reports by the same research centre show little variation in the type of weapons and techniques used in the reported attacks, which suggests a low propensity of terrorist groups operating in Africa to innovate, and no indication of interests to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction. However, attacks against hard targets, such as the one of Tongo Tongo, indicate that ISGS has a very high-risk threshold, suggesting its leaders and militants are ready for suicide attacks in which they have little chance of escaping and surviving.

It would be interesting to know whether the decision-making process within ISGS regarding their selection of targets – especially military targets – is decentralised (that is, left to field commanders) or is centralised. If centralised, it can be assumed that al-Sahraoui or the leaders of ISWAP have been making decisions and giving orders for high-profile attacks. Thus far, the available data does not provide any definitive answers to this question. However, it is clear that the perpetrators seek to affect the behaviour of national governments and of Western powers, such as the United States and France, whose troops they want to drive out of what they consider to be Muslim lands.⁴⁶ Further, the disappointment of local populations and military leaders towards the foreign forces has led them to call for the French (and other foreign) forces' withdrawal from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, with some suggesting that the French military presence in the Sahel is aimed primarily at serving French interests rather than resolving the terrorist crisis that has been worsening despite the increasing numbers of foreign troops deployed in the region.⁴⁷

This study suggests that the reasons that motivate ISGS fighters to attack national and foreign military targets are related to their ideological and policy goals, for they perceive the military (and collaborators) as their primary enemies and as key obstacles to the implementation of a Sharia-based political order. Nevertheless, ISGS' attacks against civilians – including in villages where they operate – have often been indiscriminate, reducing popular support for the group. Rather than rational choice, the leadership's stupidity and their poor control of their militants are a more plausible explanation for their repeated and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, as Max Abrahms suggested in his book *Rules for Rebels*. As he explains, given the reputational costs of attacks against the civilian population for insurgent groups, it is difficult to argue that rational choice or strategic calculus accounts for terrorist indiscriminate violence against civilians. If these groups attack civilians indiscriminately, it is most often because their leaders are either inept and ignore that such a strategy will make them unpopular and lead them to

failure, or because they have poor control of their foot soldiers, which is most likely to be the case in decentralised insurgent movements such as ISGS.⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

ISGS has been operating mostly in poorly governed regions located along the porous borders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – three landlocked, impoverished countries of the arid, semi-desert Sahel region, south of the Sahara. Due to their geographic location, demographic configuration, and economic situation, these countries and north-eastern Nigeria have been fertile ground for the expansion of the jihadist movement in West Africa. Mali and Niger neighbour the Maghreb, a region that is predominantly Arab, Muslim, and the birthplace of several militant Islamist groups. Further, all three countries have a fast-growing population, the large majority of which is Muslim, below 25 years old, and in need of education, employment, and economic opportunities, thus constituting a great reservoir of potential militants, in which ISGS and other jihadist groups can easily tap. Beyond this human potential, ISGS has been taking advantage of local conflicts, the grievances of some ethnic communities against the government, the fragility of the state, and the weakness of the state security apparatus in these three countries to recruit fighters and mobilise supporters from the local population. Thus, besides the Salafi-jihadist ideology, identity and security concerns account for the mobilisation of supporters and militants who join the local armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS against what they consider as “infidel” Western powers and “apostate” political regimes of the Sahel that cooperate with the latter.

A key asset that ISGS and other jihadist militants in the region have in this war, in comparison to their enemies who come from outside, is that they most often know the terrain better and can more easily find their way around. The Tongo Tongo deadly ambush, which ISIS claimed responsibility for, in many ways illustrated key factors and attack modalities that shed light on the ideology, functioning, and *modus operandi* of ISGS. However, a significant weakness of ISGS is the hostility that the group’s brutal violence against civilians has generated toward it among some local civilian populations and its rivals of the JNIM coalition. Counter-terrorism forces might leverage this weakness to accelerate the military defeat of their common lethal enemy.

However, by the end of 2023, the situation seemed to be turning to the advantage of ISGS and JNIM in the tri-border region after the military coup in Niger and the departure of international forces, as requested by the military junta. Apparently, as the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team anticipated, this departure leaves a vacuum that “ISGS might exploit these weaknesses to strengthen its logistical corridor to Nigeria, enabling it to secure supplies and potentially recruit from other communities.”⁴⁹ In any case, the great power rivalry between Russia and Western states and the divisions within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – divisions caused by the threat of military intervention against the putsch leaders in Niger who now enjoy the support of Russia and the military juntas of Burkina Faso and Mali – have weakened ECOWAS as well as national and international counterterrorism capacities. These developments are likely to lead, at the regional level, to a deterioration of the security situation while harming regional integration efforts.

A few suggestions may be made based on the findings of this study to contribute to more effective counter-terrorism efforts in West Africa. First, given that ISGS continues to lose fighters, sympathisers, logistical resources, and military equipment as a result of government counter-terrorism operations, it is logical to assume that this group could not survive and pursue its operations unless it obtains new fighters, arms, funding and other type of support. Consequently, governments should focus not only on eliminating individual terrorists but also on tackling their sources of funding and arms provisions both within and outside Africa, as

these sources of funding and supplies greatly contribute to their resilience over the years. This would require not only the mobilisation of a peace enforcement or counter-terrorism force by regional organisations but also more cooperation, more trust, targeted and coordinated actions among African states, and between the latter and foreign states who are known or suspected of providing arms, funding, ideological or logistical support to ISGS and other terrorist groups operating in Africa. In that regard, the Sahel states must realise that they need the cooperation and support of their neighbours within ECOWAS, as well as that of the international community to contain terrorist violence. To obtain meaningful results in that area, negotiations and other diplomatic tools will not be enough. The African Union and individual member states will need to make bold decisions, including sanctions against state and non-state sponsors of terrorism.

Second, as demonstrated clearly in this study, no terrorist group can survive without a minimum level of support and complicity among the local population, so it is essential that civilians in the localities where terrorist groups operate and in neighbouring countries are made aware of the risks of unknowingly contributing to terrorism by passively collaborating with members of these groups or trading with unusual and unknown individuals who might be associated with them. To more effectively police and stem the flow of goods and arms contributing to terrorism, states within ECOWAS and the Lake Chad Basin need to strengthen their cooperation, take stronger measures to improve the control of transactions at their borders, and detect and punish acts or attempts of corruption in the course of these transactions. Better, instead of waiting for terror groups to attack them on their territory, African states should mobilise and unite to support each other financially and militarily in fighting jihadist terrorist groups wherever they operate on the continent, for these groups have become a major threat to peace and security in Africa. Divisions and disagreements among African states or among international partners who intervene in the region to help them fight terrorism will only strengthen their common enemy, namely the terrorist groups.

And lastly, as this study and others have suggested, the complexity of the history and the relationships between ethnic communities – including tensions, rivalries, and alliances – shape much of the evolution of the armed groups operating in the Sahara-Sahel region. Knowing these complex relationships and history, as well as the local cultures, contexts, and terrain, is necessary for national and international actors to achieve their objectives in dealing with these groups.

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Endnotes

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2 *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, United Nations Security Council, 2020. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-greater-sahara-isgs>

3 Rewards for Justice is the US Department of State Counter-terrorism Bureau's rewards program. For details, see its website <https://rewardsforjustice.net/english>

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10 Leroux, P., "Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," 2, 2020.

11 Heni, N., Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 13 January 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/01/13/actor-profile-the-islamic-state-sahel-province/>

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13 Zenn, J., "ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate's Next Frontier." *Center for Global Policy*, 26 May 2020. <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-caliphates-next-frontier/>

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15 See Raineri, L., "Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara." *Terrorism and political violence*, 22 October 2020, 8.

16 Ibid.

17 Ag Acharatoumane, M., Interview with Baba Ahmed: « L'État islamique au Grand Sahara ne sera pas vaincu par des forces étrangères ». *Jeune Afrique*, 19 April 2018. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/552759/politique/mali-moussa-ag-acharatoumane-msa-letat-islamique-au-grand-sahara-ne-sera-pas-vaincu-par-des-forces-etrangeres/> (Accessed November 28, 2020).

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19 Warner, J. & Hulme, C., "The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers Across the Continent." *CTC Sentinel*, August 2018, vol. 11, Issue 7, 22. <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-state-africa-estimating-fighter-numbers-cells-across-continent/>

20 Nsaibia, H. & Weiss, C., "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and Al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa." *CTC Sentinel*, July 2020, Vol. 13, Issue 7, pp.6 ff. Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram, died reportedly by detonating a suicide vest during a battle with ISWAP in the Sambisa Forest and was replaced by Abu Musa al Barnawi in 2021. See Hinshaw, Drew; Parkinson, Joe., "Boko Haram Leader, Responsible for Chibok Schoolgirl Kidnappings, Dies". *The*

Wall Street Journal, 21 May 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/boko-haram-leader-responsible-for-chibok-schoolgirl-kidnappings-dies-11621608392> . Likewise, Adnan Abu Walid was killed in a French drone strike in the tri-border region in 2021.

21 Nsaibia, H. & Weiss, C., “The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and Al-Qa’ida Finally Came to West Africa.” *CTC Sentinel* (July 2020), Vol. 13, Issue 7, pp.6 ff

22 Ibid., 8.

23 Zenn, J. (2020).“ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate’s Next Frontier,” 13.

24 UN Security Council, Thirty-Third Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 29 January 2024, p.10. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/431/79/pdf/n2343179.pdf?token=jZF3cMvidecpnZ6ZNB&fe=true>

25 See Mapping Militant Organizations, “The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.” Stanford University, July 2018.

26 Ag Acharatoumane, M., “L’État Islamique au Grand Sahara ne sera pas vaincu par des Forces Etrangères”, 2020.

27 Ibid.

28 See Clionadh, R., Linke, A., Hegre, H. and Karlsen, J., “Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.” *Journal of Peace Research*, 2010, 47(5), 651-660. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310378914> Data from the Global Terrorism Database on the types of targets attacked by ISGS militants confirm my analysis.

29 For an incident to be considered terrorist and be included in its database, the Global Terrorism Database, the National Consortium for the Study and Responses to Terrorism requires that the incident meets the following three criteria: i) the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal; ii) there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims, and iii) the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities, i.e. the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law (particularly the admonition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants).

30 See Naji, A. B., *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through which the Umma Will Pass*. Translated from the Arabic by W. McCants. Boston: Harvard University, John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, 41-84, 2006.

31 See Oulon, S., *Comprendre les attaques armées au Burkina Faso*, 38, 2019. See also Nabons Laafi Diallo, N.L., *Le terrorisme au Sahel: Dynamique de l’Extrémisme Violent et Lutte Anti-terroriste : Un regard à partir du Burkina Faso*. Paris : L’Harmattan, 96-97, 2020.

32 The exact size of the group and its funding sources are still unknown, according to the *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019* published by the Bureau of Counter-terrorism of the US Department of State, see p. 270. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/>

33 Ag Acharatoumane, M. “L’État Islamique au Grand Sahara ne sera pas vaincu par des forces étrangères”, 2020.

34 See Oulon, S., *Comprendre les Attaques Armées au Burkina Faso*, 37, 2019.

35 Ibid., p.38.

36 International Crisis Group. “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.” *Crisis Group Special Report* (March 4, 2016), Executive summary, 1. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state.pdf> . See also Leroux, P., “Comment l’État Islamique dans le Grand Sahara exploite les frontières au Sahel”, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 21 June 2019 <https://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/comment-letat-islamique-dans-le-grand-sahara-exploite-les-frontieres-au-sahel/>

37 Ibid.

38 United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, 23 February 2023. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-greater-sahara-isgs>

39 France 24, “Attaque d’envergure” contre l’armée au Burkina Faso., 20 August 2019 <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190820-burkina-faso-attaque-envergure-armee-morts-soum>.

40 See Raineri, L., “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara,” 8, 2020.

41 See the report of the attack by RFI. “Niger: des soldats nigériens et américains tués à la frontière du Mali”, *Radio France Internationale*, 5 October 2017. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20171005-niger-tongo-tillabery-nord-mali-frontiere-embuscade-bsr-soldat-mort-americain-sahra>

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43 Several citizens of Western countries were kidnapped and held as hostages in Niger, Burkina Faso, or Mali, prompting Western governments to advise their citizens to avoid travelling to many parts of the region, except when necessary.

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45 African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism, *Africa Terrorism Bulletin*, 1-15 January 2019, No: 001, 5. <https://caert.org.dz/Medi-review/Terrorism-bulletin/Bulletin-1.pdf>

46 See Fathali, M., *From the Terrorists’ Point of View: What they experience and why they come to destroy*. London: Praeger Security International, 5, 2016. See also Diallo, N.L., *Le terrorisme au Sahel: Dynamique de l’Extrémisme Violent et Lutte Anti-terroriste : Un regard à partir du Burkina Faso*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 47-48, 2020.

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48 Abrahms, M., *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History (First edition)*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

49 See UN Security Council, *Thirty-Third Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individual and entities*, 29 January 2024, pp. 9-10. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/431/79/pdf/n2343179.pdf?token=jZF3cMvidecpnZ6ZNB&fe=true>. Since the coup d’Etat of 26th of July 2023 by General Abdourahamane Tiani, the number of terrorist attacks against the military and civilians in the tri-border region has been increasing following the suspension of joint counter-terrorism operations conducted by the Nigerien and French forces in the region. See Georges Ibrahim Tounkara, *Au Niger, les putschistes face aux réalités sécuritaires*. Deutsche Welle, 22 August 2023. <https://www.dw.com/fr/niger-pusch-tiani-djihadisme-sahel/a-66598881>.