



TERRORIST GROUPS IN WEST AFRICA SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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For many decades, most countries have been impacted by the rampant ubiquity of terrorist groups; since 2012, the West African region has slipped into the clutches of this scourge. Despite the spread of these groups in almost all countries of the region, we find that some of these countries are paying an extremely high price for their activities on their territories, especially Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Mauritania. Each of these countries has different experiences, depending on how each group operates.

POINTS OF SIMILARITY

Niger is the first country in West Africa to sustain the activity of a terrorist group; it has suffered greatly due to the practices of Boko Haram. Although these terrorist groups had presence in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, they did not rise to prominence to the general population until after the fall of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi in 2012, when terrorist groups tightened their spread in all West African countries.

These groups have adopted a similar approach when initially established. They first recruited their members from the pariah or neglected groups in societies, who believed that they had found the right religion by joining these groups. They made all the leaders in these groups from the people of the country belonging to the nationality of the state in which they are on in, and influential in their societies before they joined such terrorist movements. In Burkina Faso, the leadership fell to Malam Ibrahim, who was succeeded by his younger brother after he died of thirst; in Mali, to Iyad Ag Aghali, from the Tuareg of Mali, a former rebel and a government employee; in Niger to TIAFORI of the Fulani community; and in Nigeria to ABU BAKRI CHIKAU.

RULING STYLE

Each commander follows the appropriate policy for his area of control to be accepted by the people of his community. Among the policies used by the leaders of the groups is the demand of those societies for what they called the jihad for the sake of Allah; they say in some areas that the domination of the infidels with the democracy imposed by the Westerners has gone forever. Such groups seek to attract shepherds by reducing grazing fees, while declaring that imposing a royalty on green pastures is forbidden; they successfully recruited quite a few shepherds in their areas.

Joining these groups achieves success and reputation in the community, owning transportation, and bearing arms. This is what drives the marginalized and socially outcasts to join such groups, which found that the best policy to control the area tightly was to give power to groups that had no value in the Fulani environment.

These groups cooperate with all segments of society in their areas of expansion and control, whether they are tribal leaders, religious leaders, notables and famous figures, youth, boys, and women. Tribal and religious leaders mediate between other groups and such groups. Women and children are employed to gather intelligence, and if there is any problem in a village, the first people to contact him for consultation are the village chiefs and religious leaders before any decision is made.

The Sharia judges in several villages were chosen from among the imams and teachers of the Holy Quran; however, in the areas where these groups are located, they handle everything. These groups organized all the structures of society, determining dress codes for men and women, how women travel, making marriage unhindered by social hierarchy, and banning cultural and seasonal festivals everywhere. These groups assist groups that do not have sufficient resources, provide aid to victims of abuse, eliminate animal theft in their areas of control, and protect pasture areas in response to the demand of the population.

It can be said that all terrorist groups have a similar system of government, they attempt to involve the villagers in their religious activities, kidnap the people who oppose their rule, leading them to the jungle so that the group's leaders decide their fate, and pass judgments in the middle of the jungle far from society and state institutions. When a person is kidnapped, no one can contact them, often until they are released for ransom.

ERADICATION OF DEVELOPMENT

Terrorist groups have taken many measures to get closer to local communities, but they have eliminated development in all areas of their control. All schools were closed, and some others were burned down, forcing all state officials to escape these areas except for nurses, assistants, and some doctors. All workplaces are closed; employees have left permanently; access to basic social services has become a major challenge; health centers are no longer accessible to all due to transportation problems.

The election of city councilors was banned; almost all telephone antennas were broken; access to drinking water became difficult due to the deterioration of the few water towers; the militants refused to build new water towers on the pretext that they did not trust the people from the cities. Few asphalt pavement roads have deteriorated or completely ruined, and all development projects initiated by countries have stopped due to the inability of their officials to reach the areas under the control of terrorists; some NGOs can access these areas by some influential people in the area.

POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

Kidnappings of women and children are widespread in Nigeria, while in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, kidnappings in most cases are males or state representatives, or accused of collaborating with the security forces and the West. All groups attack Western schools, but Nusrat Al-Islam and the Macina Brigade do not kidnap students. Al-Qaeda and allies are more tolerant of Westerners than Boko Haram, ISIS, and their allies.

The policy and style of ruling of the Macina Brigade and Al-Qaeda differ from that of Boko Haram and ISIS; the former often reaches consensus on ruling based on customary rules, which is something that irritates ISIS, including the acceptance of the Macina Brigade in the pastoral spaces in the delta to manage the pastures of the «Bargo» on the basis of customs and traditions, and to allow the customary owners to keep their possessions from the pastures, provided that the amount collected from the collection of royalties does not exceed half a million CFA francs. This ruling was opposed by ISIS and allies, which caused many fighters from the Macina Brigade to defect and join ISIS.

Nusrat Al-Islam often accepts holding elections in the territory under control, which is strongly opposed by ISIS, which rejects any model of the Western system of government. Al-Qaeda operatives are willing to work with elected local officials and

NGOs, which is also what ISIS opposes. Posters of government fees are sold in some Al-Qaeda-controlled territory, but this will not be seen in the ISIS-controlled territory.

Another big difference between Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Greater Sahara is that all the local leaders in the Nusrat Al-Islam group of Al-Qaeda are from the countries in which they conduct their activities, while the leader in ISIS is only Sahrawis. As for development structures or social services, each group provides its own members except for health workers, but Al-Qaeda is more tolerant of NGO employees than ISIS and Boko Haram.

It is also noted that Al-Qaeda respects women more than ISIS; in the Macina region, women have a prominent position in society. Before the Macina Brigade took control of the territory, women did not have the right to inherit in the pastures of the delta region. Some women were even expelled from their fathers' homes after their death. Today, women have found their places in their families; some of them even built their own homes from the inheritance of their fathers. As for violence, ISIS and Boko Haram are more violent than Al-Qaeda and the Nusrat Al-Islam group. All the major massacres were committed by the first two organizations. They are more similar in actions and practices than Al-Qaeda.

FINANCING TERRORIST GROUPS

ISIS and Boko Haram receive generous external funding. The groups operating in Burkina Faso and Mali are financed by levying taxes and spoils of war, especially seizing livestock and goods in villages that oppose such groups and their work. Groups often get ransom money from the release of kidnapped Western hostages. However, nowadays this source is no longer common after some countries were blacklisted as dangerous red zones for Westerners.

The spoils of war often include items captured after attacking an army camp or base in Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger. Certain people are responsible for selling the livestock they get on the pretext of collecting zakat, and they are not fighters; they are sympathizers with terrorist groups. Also, some residents in the territory under the control of such groups do not belong to their armed wings and do not participate in the fighting, but they contribute financially to their activities by paying specific monthly installments.

In conclusion, terrorist groups in the Sahel have similarities and differences. ISIS and Boko Haram are closer to each other in action and practice than Al-Qaeda; they are alike in terrorism.