

Three Historical Impacts Caused by Islamic Violence in the Sahel

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze three impacts caused by Islam from the 8th century to the present day. The history of this great African region narrates chapters that are darker than the skin of many of its inhabitants, which, taken together, may be the ones that have suffered the most in universal history, not just in African history. Racism based on the skin color of its populations, xenophobia for the same reason, slavery to supply the markets of Antiquity, Islamic ones, and later European ones, along with colonialism, droughts, famines, dictatorships, civil wars, and so on. This is the history of the Sahel, which, despite all its evils, stays on the map and maintains the hope that freedom will one day come, like that achieved by Francis Bok, a South Sudanese, but that is not the only example.

Keywords

History, Slavery, Emigration, Religion, Corruption, Dictatorships

1. Introduction

In recent years, I have devoted some studies to the countries of the Maghreb and the Sahel, although more to the latter, a geographical strip that almost connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Red Sea (Junquera Rubio, 2007; Pastor Martínez & Junquera Rubio, 2008, 2021; Junquera Rubio & De la Fuente, 2013: pp. 43-54; Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2016, 2017; Junquera Rubio, 2024: pp. 578-613). I have made these contributions in collaboration with some of my university teaching assistants; others alone. The last time I traveled through this vast territory was in July and August 2023, taking advantage of the fact that I was already retired from my university obligations. They were two months of true adventures.

Fortunately, I was able to avoid kidnappings conducted by various jihadist groups, as they come in a wide variety of forms, not all associated with Islamist

terrorism. I had no problems when the Russian mercenaries of the Warner Group asked for my passport. This essay deals exclusively with three violent impacts, distant in time, but part of global and local history at each of those moments, causing profound upheavals in local societies.

In the Sahel, and depending on the region, Muslim, Christian, and animist beliefs are present. Although the former professes to be followers of Allah, Muhammad, and the Quran, the reality is that they use religion to function as criminals against whomever they see fit at any given time, especially against European and North American citizens. Traveling through Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad is dangerous at this time, as travelers often lack the advantages developed by Lawrence of Arabia¹, who knew how to disguise himself in time at many points in his life.

The reason for making these trips during the two months mentioned above was motivated by my scientific interests, which were aimed at detecting whether there are merged governments in the Sahel or whether these countries lack authority. This was a consequence of wanting to compare current societies with those of the years 2004 to 2018, since during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible for me to travel beyond my front door. In the years mentioned above, I have traveled two months a year, and these trips have allowed me to gain a comprehensive view of what was happening, not what is happening, since today's present may have nothing to do with tomorrows or yesterdays. My experience, that of 2023, has nothing to do with earlier ones.

The Sahel is a vast African expanse dominated by aridity and dryness, with a length of 6300 linear kilometers and a width ranging between 100 and 1000 kilometers. In the early months of 2025, I can assure you that the Sahel lacks authority in all the countries settled in this vast African region and that emerged with decolonization. Authorities are present in certain parts of their respective countries, but none affect the entire territory or population; they even have no influence on the areas where foreign military forces operate, especially Russian mercenaries, whom I will refer to later. This situation is detectable in that the Sahel, in its entirety, is immersed in civil wars and regional confrontations, and it does not seem that the end is near; on the contrary, changes are occurring continuously. On April 25, 2025, a change in the leadership of Niger took place, with General Abdourahamane Tiani ascending to absolute power. Official reports say that this change was previously agreed upon, but the international press does not believe this (Trémolières et al., 2025; Berthemet, 2025).

The Tuaregs² know their territories well and have moved freely with their camel caravans throughout centuries of history; However, for some years now, they have reported feeling fear when traveling along traditional routes, as they report that,

¹His personal identity was Thomas Edward Lawrence. He lived between 1888 and 1935 (Mack, 1976).

²The Tuaregs live in a vast territory that encompasses parts of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Jihadist violence, and terrorism, have affected them in recent years, as they are followers of Muhammad but do not see the Ramadan fast. Men cover their faces, but unlike other Islamic societies, their women do not wear veils, which the jihadists consider blasphemous.

when they least expect it, unknown people armed with automatic weapons appear, who may even be other Tuaregs. Let us not forget that the Sahelian countries lack paved roads, and these are present between 10 and 30 kilometers on the routes that begin and end in the capitals of these nations. However, beyond these longitudinal spaces, the journey continues on unpaved dirt roads, and when you reach these sections, you may meet sand dunes in places that obscure the path. An excellent exposition of land communications throughout the Sahel appears in a recent publication (Trémolières et al., 2025).

Many of the problems that spread to the entire Sahel, of North Africa, and European regions are found in northern Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, and Niger. Of particular concern are those related to personal safety and insecurity. Taking advantage of the lack of strong governments, impunity normally prevails, and this occurs in the absence of authority. In this regard, various mafias operate throughout the Sahel, primarily in the following areas: 1) Migrant trafficking; 2) Trafficking in women, who are deceived by promises of promising jobs in Europe and forced into forced prostitution upon arrival; 3) Colombian drug trafficking is already established in the seaports of the Atlantic Ocean and in inland areas. Colombian cocaine production reaches the African coasts and is re-exported to Europe; 4) The sale of automatic weapons; the *fearful Tuaregs* are involved in all these businesses, as they are the ones who best know the routes mapped out and the alternative routes, which are the safest for them; 5) Jihadism in its various forms, as terrorists control the kidnapping of strangers and the collection of ransoms demanded from relatives and businesses, since the latter, for work reasons, must send their employees to this part of the world.

Along with these images and others, which I will expand on later, we can see the decline in tourism, as cities like Niamey and Agadez (Niger), which were heavily visited by Europeans in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, now lack appeal, as terrorism imposes an unwritten but real, and negative prohibition: the fear of what might happen. Something similar is happening in Bamako and Kigali (Mali), and in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. In all these localities, groups of young women and men dedicated to prostitution abound. They all want to make money, save up, and pay for a trip to one of the mafias that promise to take them to Europe. We can also consider *the Sahel as an advanced frontier of southern Europe*, even though it is in Africa, and between the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea.

Everything is bought and sold, because the one who enforces the law in the Sahel is the same man who owns a fleet of Toyota vehicles, always ready to cross the desert with travelers and goods. In the past, a camel caravan, guided by Tuaregs, took three weeks to cross the Sahara Desert. Today, six or seven Toyotas can make the same journey in a week. Each vehicle can carry people and drugs, but it also returns with weapons. Business is business, and you must take advantage of the journey there and back. Colombian drug traffickers pay a steady fee to the clans, even supporting marriages between geographically distant families to have

support on both sides of the desert. Money can do anything, even break traditional ties and relationships.

France was the former metropolis that always tried to control the region and keep it calm. Today, as things stand, we can safely say that colonialism failed, as the separatist and Muslim north has never accepted the standards of the southern regions, which have always lived in animism. One issue that comes into play is the traditional ethnic conflict, as the Sahel has been home to numerous ethnic groups for millennia, and they are not exactly friendly, as the various colonialisms deepened the rift of enmity (Pastor Martínez & Junquera Rubio, 2008, 2021; Junquera Rubio, 2024: pp. 578-613). A Tuareg is not a Haussa, nor is a Lobi a Mursi. Moreover, the differences persist despite the conventional borders, those imposed by colonialism after 1960, both internally and externally.

Two facts to keep in mind: 1) France is no longer in the region, nor is it currently considered a part of it; 2) What has happened since decolonization is the responsibility of military coups, very common in these countries, which have practically expelled their former masters and replaced them with new ones: mainly Russian and Chinese. Russia is savagely hit in areas of the Sahel, and its mercenaries, the so-called Wagner Group, also known in these countries as the Afrika Korps³, are acting with great violence. What is clear is that they all act with impunity. These Russian soldiers have proved strongholds in Niamey, Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Tripoli, for example, and have occupied every location, albeit in a novel way, as they have replaced the traditional tourists. In other words, they are present everywhere where the state has failed, as the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are now pro-Russian, and Moscow's influence is felt. For now, the three countries have already left ECOWAS⁴ since January 28, 2024, and Mauritania had done so before that. Morocco applied for entry but was rejected.

Russia has expanded its influence by reaching agreements with the coup-mongering military, providing them with training and weapons in exchange for raw materials, primarily minerals. The problem for the European Union is that the Russians are now ideally positioned to manage the migrant quota that transits the desert routes. In other words, while the European Union deployed diplomatic and military missions to eliminate the mafias in several of these places, Russia can now encourage them, since for Russians, Western Europe is an enemy for many reasons, but primarily because of the freedom its citizens enjoy, something unthinkable in Russia, and the well-being that has been achieved.

This essay isn't about something fictional, but about something that has already happened and continues to happen. When Russian air forces brutally bombed re-

³The term Africa Korps is a sort of act intended to exalt the work of these soldiers, who should not be confused with the German army corps of World War II, which was used in North Africa under the command of Field Marshal Rommel.

⁴On May 28, 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was created. On that day, fifteen countries signed the Lagos Treaty, and its main aim was to promote economic integration, since each country could not achieve this on its own. As an institution, it has endured various crises. At the time of its creation, eight countries were francophone, five were anglophone, and two were lusophone.

bel cities in Syria in 2014 and 2015, they weren't just seeking to give victory to their ally Assad, now overthrown and a refugee in Moscow, but also to create a problem for the European Union: having to accommodate a million Syrian refugees, who had to cross the Aegean Sea thanks to the mafias. The tyrant Putin knew that managing this influx would harm the European Union and its leaders. Immediately afterward, Belarusian President Lukashenko, loyal to Putin, once again trafficked in immigration, directing migrants from the Middle East toward Poland. All of this is in the press, and on television newscasts. What must be clear is that for Russia, everything must be turned into a weapon of attack and defense, because international communism has not yet triumphed in all countries.

China has also been present in Africa and the Sahel for years. The Chinese are interested in selling their products, and African markets have been recipients due to the low prices consumers pay. China is another expanding empire, and what remains to be seen is how long it will take for China to clash with Russia as a competitor. Despite their similarities, Russians and Chinese have clashed several times, from when the former appeared along the Amur River, and remained there until they completed the colonization of Siberia and used the seaports of East Asia to reach the northern coasts of the Americas (Junquera Rubio, 2016a: pp. 619-659, 2017a, 2017b: pp. 95-135, 2022, 2023b: pp. 88-110). Other emerging powers may settle in the Sahel if they think it is proper, and they can do so, as is the case with India.

2. First Impact: Islam Arrives in Africa

Studying the history of the present-day Sahel countries is a serious challenge, as all of them lacked their own written form. Ethiopia is an exception, as it has the Amharic⁵ language, a Semitic language.

The arrival of Arabs and Berbers marked the beginning of a change, and this occurred beginning in the 8th century, roughly between 661 and 750; that is, when the Umayyads reigned in Damascus (Syria) (Madelung, 1997; Hawting, 2000). Muslim chroniclers gathered information about the new territories, previously unknown to them. Geographers and historians provided information about the then "Sudanese" societies, which was the first name given to all the ethnic groups settled in the Sahel. Thanks to these 8th-century contributions, we now have some basic knowledge about the different ethnic groups, states, royal dynasties, political history, economic systems, customs, local beliefs, and the progressive spread of Islam in the most important areas of this region (Ki-Zerbo, 1979; Monteil, 1980; Reader, 2002; Iliffe, 1998; Robinson, 2004; Hall, 2011).

A French citizen, Jean Baptiste Gaby, published a book in 1689 entitled *Relation de la Nigritie. contenant une exacte description de ses Royaumes & de leurs Gouvernemens, la religion, les Coutumes & rareté de ce País* (Relation de la Nigritie: Containing an Exact Description of its Royalties and Governments, Religion, the Customs and Rarity of this Country) (Gaby, 1689). The word Nigritie comes from the Arabic *Bilad as-Sudan*, meaning "country of blacks". This context referred to a ter-

⁵Amharic has 231 syllables resulting from combining 7 vowel phonemes and 33 consonant phonemes (Daniels et al., 1996: p. 573).

ritory stretching from Senegal to the Red Sea. Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima* (Ibn, 2008), written in the 14th century, provides an admirable synthesis, but it doesn't go any further.

In these contexts, it seems normal for a mixture of objective realities of great interest to occur with legends of all kinds. For better or worse, the writings available after the 8th century do not resolve the story; they simply outline a part of it. Prudence is what should guide any reflection on what might have happened. The historiographies all come from external cultures: mainly Muslim, French, British, German, Portuguese, and Spanish colonialism.

The European and Islamic contributions have many limitations. Even if an author narrates events they may have witnessed, the concise nature of previous contributions and their reliance on unreliable transmission models render their contribution worthless, especially if the information they use is limited to religious topics in which each individual lives their beliefs internally and, when they externalize them with others of the same belief, they do so in collective rituals and on very specific dates in the festive calendar.

Based on what has been expressed so far, the Islamization of the Sahel began in the 8th century, but there were no cities at that time, as the landscape contained villages, at best, small settlements and encampments (Junquera Rubio & De la Fuente, 2013: pp. 43-54). The city of Timbuktu, in present-day Mali, was founded by Tuaregs in 1100, therefore, in the 12th century, which means that Muslim penetration was slow and that caravan trade with camels may have predated the introduction of Islam. This slowness may have been since earlier societies were animistic, which is why the entire Sahel was considered pagan, and its people had to be taught the Quran and the benefits it would bring to their lives.

The first Muslim apostles in the Sahel were Maghrebi merchants, already Islamized and eager to collaborate with the spread of the creed preached by Muhammad (Levtzion, 1973: pp. 160-170; Robinson, 2004: pp. 38-41). And the first Sahelians to adopt the new religion would be precisely the local merchants, since Maghrebi colleagues and native traders needed each other and they were also useful in providing protection when business trips were made to areas previously unknown to them. Establishing alliances between Maghrebis and Sahelians could have led to stronger ties, such as early marriages, which were initially prohibited by Sharia law, since Sahelian societies were animistic and polytheistic, and Islam was monotheistic.

Becoming a Muslim requires living in accordance with Islamic law. In this sense, the multiethnic community fostered by the merchants that were being formed had to be governed by a single legal code, which required the presence of more familiar rules of the game, in whose context any problems that might arise were better resolved. Religious matters are not adopted overnight, so Islamization, as a religion originating from outside and managed by merchants, was bound to generate opposition, and these would disappear when business became profitable. In fact, in some areas, such as the Bambara country in Mali, this situation persisted well into the 20th century, as much of the population remained animist, and Islam

was considered peripheral and established only among Maraka traders of Soninke origin (Monteil, 1977; Roberts, 1987: pp. 46-75; Meillassoux, 1990: pp. 65-69).

The establishment of Islam in the Sahel was achieved through two convergent movements: 1) once the traders achieved social and economic status, religious specialists began to emerge: ulema and Sufis, as they were necessary to continue and consolidate the process; 2) the enrichment of the merchants forced them to seek new alliances and new places to sell their goods. These two aspects were combined with decisions that we can consider diplomatic, social, religious, and political; Furthermore, the desire to make money made merchants the best allies in converting natives of any ethnic group they encountered to the religion preached by the followers of Muhammad. Furthermore, the goods offered in trade were destined for the ruling classes, so they also favored the change of identity from animists to Muslims, which forced a break with centuries of local history (Lewis, 1996; Brenner, 1993; Bramon, 2002).

Once a religious belief is accepted, those who already live it require specialized clergy to perform daily rituals. Merchants were also responsible for finding and bringing priests to the Sahel, and once in missionary territory, these priests taught the five pillars on which every believer must rely: 1) The profession of faith (*shahada*); 2) Prayer (*salat*); 3) Almsgiving (*zakat*); 4) Fasting (*sawn*); 5) Journey to Mecca (*hajj*). Undoubtedly, the ingredients are not the only ones; there are others, but these are the fundamental ones (Latorre Remón, 2005).

Beginning in the 8th century, Islamization became a unifying agent of global society. This does not mean that it acted triumphantly from the outset, but rather that to achieve this situation, it had to operate on three distinct levels: 1) Appropriate action for each of the territories to be Islamized; 2) Appropriate activities among the different ethnic groups and other populations, adequately presenting the body of beliefs; 3) Religious relations with the different ethnic groups residing in each of the territories delimited by conventional borders traditionally agreed upon by all the herders who occupied the region. Likewise, this process meant having to comply with two additional aspects: 1) Becoming Islamized meant rising socially, and this primarily affected groups with high economic status in each of the pastoral societies because they were also merchants; 2) At the same time, a peripheral, semi-Muslim society formed primarily by shepherds emerged. We must consider the existence of a blurred boundary that made it difficult to identify those who were good Muslims and those who were halfway to achieving that reality (Nadel, 1942: pp. 234-236; Junquera Rubio, 2016b: pp. 155-190).

Islamization, even if partial, provided some benefits. First, it could provide a social justification for capturing slaves, since non-Muslims were considered infidels and could be enslaved based on jihad. Second, conversion to Islam could be used to establish a new adaptation to the newly formed identity, which could be shared with the entire aristocracies integrated into a vast territory. This integrative effect would be consolidated when conversion also reached the lower classes. Third, a beneficial effect on becoming Muslim occurs when the convert rises so-

cially and is recognized as an equal, because he has abandoned paganism and is therefore a subject with whom political and economic relations can be maintained without any suspicion of how he will act from that moment on.

The Islamization of the Sahel was functionally articulated through a process that led societies to abandon the nomadism imprinted by herds of cows, goats, and sheep, for example, and to accept, in equal measure, the sedentary lifestyle that emerged with the rise of new urban areas and cities, which remained unchanged until the massive arrival of European settlers in the 19th century (Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2017). As with many other human decisions, contradictions could also arise. If not, being Muslim became a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for being enslaved, then the progressive Islamization of the various populations would exonerate converts from this condition, forcing slave hunters to travel ever further afield to find infidels to capture and enslave (Meillassoux, 1990: p. 56).

For the same or similar reasons, conflicts could arise between Muslims and pagans, and between orthodox and heterodox Muslims, based not only on their respective religious identities but also on specific, everyday customs. These conflicts would arise when they chose to participate or not in rituals of great social significance, such as those previously performed in all the pastoral societies of the Sahel, enabling a man to obtain a woman as his legal wife. In this sense, what can unite on the one hand can be disunited on the other. In cases where Islamization was not profound and conflicts arose, those already experienced could turn to an individual versed in the Quran, who could be a preacher (*khatib*), a legislator or jurist (*faqih*), a theologian (*mufti*), etc. (Zaman, 2002; Adamec, 2009). If the Quran was not interpreted correctly, the individual presumed to be the most educated in the region was called upon to resolve any potential ideological conflict.

The next historical step should focus on the emergence of the various Islamic states in the Sahel; a topic I will not address so as not to make this essay too long. These institutions, in one form or another, continued to exist until the French and English appeared in the Sahel as colonizers, imposing criteria very alien to the region (Junquera Rubio, 2024: pp. 578-613).

3. Second Impacts: Slavery in the Sahel Managed by Islam

Before European slave traders arrived on the western coasts of Africa to obtain enslaved Black people and transport them to the Americas, where they were sold, Muslims were already experts in managing this aberrant business. They had obtained slaves in many areas of the Sahel interior and established trans-Saharan routes to supply the markets along the Mediterranean coast where they were sold, primarily in the following cities: Cairo, Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers (Wright, 1996). It should be noted that the trans-Saharan human trade has been known since ancient times; it was nothing new in the Mediterranean in the 1500s, for example (Wilson, 2017: pp. 189-208).

In turn, the Berbers⁶ practiced piracy to capture Europeans, whom they enslaved and then sold in the markets and others. The supply of European slaves came from Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Great Britain, Holland, Iceland, etc. Between 1530 and 1780, nearly one and a half million Europeans were sold in African markets by Barbary kidnappers and captors (Davis, 2003; Milton, 2005: p. 348; Lane-Poole, 2011; Braun & Passon, 2020).

Considering that the Sahel has been a source of supply for slaves, the question we must ask is: What does the Quran say about slavery? And if it does, how does it do so and with what intentions? Like all sacred books, it is complex, and Muslim believers are not free to interpret it; it is either accepted or rejected. The written version corresponds to the text established during the period considered to be the Orthodox Caliphate; That is, the one in force between 632 and 661, during which Muhammad's four friends acted as heirs: Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khat-tab, Uthman ibn Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib (Afsaruddin, 2008).

In my case, I am neither a theologian nor do I claim to be one, so my interpretations are far removed from certain statements that I will not examine, since there is no certainty as to whether they were true or were merely legend. The Quran has 114 chapters (*suras*), and each of them is divided into verses (*ayats*). Slavery is present in this sacred book for believers in Allah, the supreme god. One of the first chapters dealing with slavery is 4.92, which describes the killing of a Muslim by another Muslim, and that this involuntary crime can be redeemed through the manumission of a slave. For this reason, we must understand that society was familiar with slavery, and that different families were likely to have a slave. The text uses the word *raqaba* to designate someone who is subjugated and lacking freedom but does not differentiate whether it should apply to men or women. The Arabic meaning is "head", and is used to count animals in a herd or a domestic corral⁷, so the slave must be included in the same category: he is denied the right to be human (Asad, 2001: p. 121).

Other Quranic texts are ambiguous when referring to the captive, whether male or female. Muhammad was clear that one-fifth of the people captured in war belonged to him by right of conquest, and that number would swell the victor's slave pool. This rule appears to have come from the Semitic culture, which dominated the Middle East and spread to the African continent with the Arabs, where it was already known. The southern part of the Arabian Peninsula and almost the entire area of Ethiopia have been associated with this culture since ancient times. From the 8th century onward, its borders expanded into North and South Africa, and it is now culturally present as far away as Rwanda (Chrétien & Kabanda, 2013). It is true that many African societies are not Semitic based on their blood origins, but they are so from a cultural point of view, as many Quranic customs are visible in

⁶The Barbary were Muslim pirates who operated in the Mediterranean for more than three centuries. Their most notable bases were in ports in present-day Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, although less so in the latter (Davis, 2003).

⁷The word "corral" can also be translated as "kraal", which is the term used throughout the Sahel. In reference to a corral used to house cows, we can also use "hogpen".

current ethnic groups (Anidjar, 2008).

The Quran differentiates between men and women when it comes to assessing their social status. The believer is free, while the slave is subject to his master. In the case of women, the expression used to indicate that they are slaves is “*ma malakat aimanukum*”, which is understood in the sexual sense; that is, the owner can have sexual relations with his slave without committing sin, which demonstrates that socially, women in this situation are considered inferior (Asad, 2001: pp. 217, 325).

In this sense, I believe it is worth considering the importance of women in Islam in shaping and confirming the ethnic group, both in consolidating a person's origin (*assl*) and that of the group to which they belong (*qabila*). From an ethnological perspective, men represent the patriarchal group and are responsible for the ideology that underpins social organization, but women are the ones who secure the family and safeguard its purity in Muslim societies (Barth, 1973: p. 67). The social importance of women is that, thanks to them, the social group ensures the connections of the lineage, since it is always certain that an individual knows who their mother is, but not who their father is. There is an Arabic saying that goes: “The maternal uncle, *khal*, is father, and Allah is witness” (*al khal walid va Allāh shahid*).

From the perspective of violence, which has the capacity to impose norms after ensuring that a foreign society belongs to it by right of conquest, the impact generated by imposing a new religion, monotheistic in this case, has been described as follows: “*Pre-Islamic man had such a permissive sexuality that the two Muslim rules, that of ‘idda’ (a period of widowhood imposed on divorced or widowed women, preventing them from remarrying before a certain number of months, thus ensuring the line of descent in the event of a possible pregnancy from the previous husband) and that of paternity, which establishes the kinship of the child with the father, seemed like enormous restrictions*” (Mernissi, 1987: p. 205).

The most common way to acquire slaves is to obtain them as war booty. The Quran cites this fact in two verses, signifying that it is God who authorizes this possibility, because He is all-powerful, as indicated in verse 8:67 (Asad, 2001: p. 246). Similarly, verse 47:4 mentions prisoners from holy war (*jihad*) and adds that after taking them prisoner, they must be punished, but they can then be released as a grace from Allah (Asad, 2001: p. 761).

In contrast to the violence of enslavement, there is also mercy toward the enslaved. The master has a moral obligation to assist his slave when he is close to liberation, and at the same time, the public treasury (*bait al-mal*) must provide resources to help free him, based on verse 9:60, which indicates this (Naqi, 1988: p. 23; Schouten, 2022).

After what has been said, in summary, since the topic of slavery in the Quran would require many books, the question we must ask ourselves is: Are Muslims responsible for the presence of violence in the Sahel? And the answer can only be ambiguous: it is possible that they are, and it is possible that they are not, since

there are many moments in history when it is not easy to detect how events have unfolded; that is, we can observe societies and their patterns of behavior, but what interests us, as Franz Boas pointed out, is knowing how we got to what we are now seeing (Boas, 1911: pp. 197-225).

The Boasian proposal may be sound, but it is difficult and complicated to fully satisfy because it is not easy to resolve. Society and its culture are no longer in a virgin state when we observe and study it; rather, it has received numerous influences from other groups with which it has been in contact throughout its history. In this sense, we must admit that we may be able to get close, but there will always be something that doesn't fit culturally, since societies have not been alone nor been they in the same territory, and it seems impossible for us to understand all the cultural interactions that have occurred throughout the history of each of them.

It must be kept in mind that social, political, and religious changes do not occur solely because people and their societies encounter outsiders; they are also influenced by many concepts. Other factors also influence these changes. In the Sahara and the Sahel, the introduction of the domesticated camel was of great historical importance. This event appears to have occurred at the end of the Roman period and began in Egypt, where it had been brought by the Persians. It became well acclimated to life in North Africa, the Sahara, and the Sahel (Conrad, 2005: p. 24; Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2016).

This animal was an agent of cultural change due to the goods it transported. In 525 BC, the Persians introduced them to Egypt, but it took centuries for them to appear west of the Nile River. As pack animals, they began to cross the Sahara Desert in the first century AD, when the area was already partly controlled by the Roman Empire, and they became essential from the fourth century onwards (Trimingham, 1962: p. 15). Camels began to be used extensively in that same century by nomadic societies scattered throughout the Sahara Desert (Ade Ajayi & Crowder, 1985: p. 20). These groups formed into large warring and traveling bands and facilitated connections between the north and south of the desert, thus bringing the interior of the Sahel under the influence of the Mediterranean (Trimingham, 1962: p. 15).

The first reason why Islam wanted to control the Sahara Desert and establish a presence in the Sahel was to seize the real and potential riches offered by those territories, still unknown and which they designated as the "land of the blacks". Abi Ubaida, a Quraysh⁸ soldier who participated in the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, led an expedition in 736 to "the land of the blacks", which was collected by Ibn Abd al-Hakam, from which he returned with a large quantity of gold. Trimingham notes that his son, Abd ar-Rahman, later established the caravan route to Awdaghust (Trimingham, 1962: p. 27). The vast region of West Africa began to be redefined precisely from the 9th century onwards.

Trade and the economy generated by all this exchange had a great influence on this redefinition. Considering the wealth of information recorded in Arab biblio-

⁸The Quraysh were an Arab tribe that controlled the territories near Mecca and the Kaaba.

graphic sources, gold represented the greatest temptation and attraction for Mediterranean traders to decide to penetrate the Sahel regions. By the late 7th and early 8th centuries, Muslims from Egypt, Ifriqiya (present-day Tunisia), and the Maghreb were already established in Sudanese markets (Conrad, 2005: p. 27), and many moved and settled in the small urban centers along the routes. Thanks to these decisions, they managed to become local agents for their caravan ventures (Conrad, 2005: p. 28).

The negative and violent impacts began in 783, when the Arab governor of the Maghreb sent an expedition to “the land of the blacks”, which was very successful, returning with gold and slaves (Conrad, 2005: p. 23). From this moment on, Sahelian gold and other products became priority commodities for the Islamic world, and specifically for the societies settled in the North African Mediterranean.

The camel became an excellent auxiliary, as its owners were able to promote and expand existing trans-Saharan routes. Furthermore, thanks to this animal, the Imazighen⁹ were able to maneuver politically and achieve a certain autonomy within Islam, possibilities that were previously unknown. Caravan trade developed considerably, and Sahelian cities flourished. The profitability achieved through the sale of enslaved Black people increased the Imazighen’s interest in the black populations settled beyond the Sahara, as they needed to supply the markets on the Mediterranean coast (Conrad, 2005: p. 20).

For David Conrad, there is no doubt that trade was the main cause of the spread of Islam in black Africa (Conrad, 2005: p. 20), since, for the first time in history, the Sahel was permanently connected to the Mediterranean through Islamic civilization, a factor that led to its introduction along the routes traced to the south (Trimingham, 1962: p. 20). These reasons are some of those that emerged centuries later, allowing anthropologists, ethnologists, and sociologists to offer explanations regarding the reasons why some black-skinned individuals are present among Berber families, for example (Caro Baroja, 1955; Junquera Rubio, 2008: pp. 261-277). I believe it can be added that all these routes continue to be used by the mafias that support the so-called illegal migration from the Sahel to the Mediterranean first and then to Europe.

Ade Ajayi & Crowder (1985: p. 32). Historical Atlas of Africa. Longman.

It could be argued that the Islamization of the vast stretch of Mediterranean Africa originated from the Arabian Peninsula. Without denying this possibility, the reality is that the Sahara Desert and the Sahel were Islamized by the Imazighen, since the Arab tribes arrived in the Maghreb in the 11th century, and by then they no longer appear to have had any interest in spreading the religion of Muhammad. The Islamization of the Black societies of the Sahel was the responsibility, as already noted, of traders from the Maghreb and primarily the Imazighen (Trimingham, 1962: p. 20).

Based on commercial exchange, the Quranic religion traveled as just another commercial product; however, it moved integrated into a broad and processed

⁹The Imazighen are Berbers and are also referred to as Amazigh (Goodman, 2005; Aïtel, 2014).

structure of commercial offerings that linked four cultural realities: 1) Arab-Islamic; 2) Berber; 3) Black African Sahelian; 4) Tropical sub-Saharan.

In turn, it acted under pressure from two main flows: 1) Toward the north, from the Sahara and Sahel toward the Maghreb, the Islamic world received numerous products such as salt, copper, Saharan dates, slaves, livestock, iron tools, weapons and utensils, animal skins, leather goods, woven and dyed cloth, ceramics, plant-based products such as baskets and sleeping mats, kola nuts, food products such as dried fish, rice, millet, spices and condiments, honey, fruit, elephant tusks and hippopotamus horns, ostrich feathers, and gum arabic, extracted from acacia trees and used as an emulsifier in the manufacture of writing ink, textile dyeing, and metals such as gold and copper (Conrad, 2005: p. 24).

2) Toward the south, the incoming supply consisted of manufactured goods and luxury goods produced in processing plants in the Mediterranean and Europe. Many metal products have been found, such as knives, scissors, needles and razors, copper and brass items, luxurious silk, felt, and brocade garments, glass and porcelain bead necklaces, along with other jewelry, mirrors, carpets, perfumes, paper, tea, coffee, and sugar (Conrad, 2005: p. 24).

Two highly valued goods arrived from the African Mediterranean: 1) Horses, which in sub-Saharan cultures signify power; 2) Cowrie shells of Asian origin (Conrad, 2005: p. 24). The latter were used as currency in many West African markets, as Ibn Battuta¹⁰ noted on several occasions (Insoll, 2003: p. 249).

What is certain is that trade relations were consolidated between the 8th and 11th centuries, coinciding with the widespread development and expansion of the Almoravids, and with them a strong commercial structure emerged. According to Timothy Insoll, by the year 1000, there was an extensive trade network between the Sahel and the Sahara (Insoll, 2003: p. 222). These exchanges have been detected by archaeology, and this discipline has discovered a cache of 50 elephant tusks near Gao (Insoll, 2003: p. 241). However, imported products have also been found, some of distant origin, such as the cowrie shells, originating in the Indian Ocean, colored glass believed to have come from India, carnelian beads, brass products (ingots, bracelets), and Egyptian coins (Insoll, 2003: p. 247).

The slave trade must have had its moments of crisis, and when slaves died, they were buried in mass graves. This aspect has also come to light thanks to archaeology carried out in the ancient city of Gao and in Kumbi Saleh (Insoll, 2003: p. 245). Not only slaves died; in Ijafen (Mauritania), but an entire caravan of camels has also been found buried, although the date of the burial is still being studied to verify its possible date. Among the objects found are cowrie shells and 2,085 brass ingots (Insoll, 2003: p. 249).

The trans-Saharan trade structure was organized by connecting cities, includ-

¹⁰Ibn Battuta was a Muslim explorer of the early 14th century in the Gregorian calendar and the 8th century in the Muslim calendar. He belonged to the Banu Battuta lineage. He was a distinguished traveler, geographer, merchant, and many others. Recently, it has been questioned whether his works are not the product of various plagiarisms taken from earlier Arab writers (Dunn, 2005: pp. 313-314). Some of his travels are also questionable (Dunn, 2005: p. 134, note 17).

ing the following: Sijilmasa, Tahert, Kairouan, Ghadames, Sawila, Awdaghust, Walata, Koumbi Saleh, Djenné, Timbuktu, Gao, and Agadez. For more than sixteen centuries, it proved to be the only form of communication across the desert. Most movements were controlled by the Imazighen, the greatest expansionists of Islam in the western Sahel. They are credited with the peaceful introduction of Islam, but there were also periods of violence, long before the arrival of Europeans.

Beginning in the 7th century, the Arabs arrived in North Africa and imposed Islam, which soon reached social and ethnic groups settled in the Sahara and the Sahel, serving as a bridge for trade to flourish. The Imazighen managed to introduce Islam to the Fulani or Peul, who currently number more than 40 million people spread across 18 countries. They speak a lingua franca, *Fulfulde*, to which I have personally made some contributions (Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2016: pp. 285-308). The slave trade, of which we have good evidence since Roman times, was strengthened and expanded by Muslims, who took advantage of their coreligionists to transport slaves from the Sahel to established markets on the African Mediterranean coast.

Between the 7th and 19th centuries, the Sahel was a region lacking state structures, so we can assume that instability was commonplace. A common characteristic to the entire region is the absence of political leaders with the military capacity to confront outside forces and consolidate their dominions for centuries. The Sahelian states of the centuries cited and with time limitations are: 1) The Ghana Empire, settled in territories that today belong to Mauritania and Senegal, between the years 100 and 900 AD (Levtzion, 1973); 2) The Mali Empire, which was in force between the years 1235 and 1350; 3) the Songhay Empire, which around 1500 was the largest territory in Africa; 4) the Kanem-Bornu that appeared in the surroundings of Lake Chad; the Fulani Empire emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. These last two coexisted until the arrival of European settlers in the 19th century (Crowder & Ikimi, 1970; Meyerowitz, 1975). The common peculiarity of these domains is that they were all subjugated to Islam; Since religious ideology drove all development and became the master of all caravan routes and the goods that entered, circulated, and left the Mediterranean to the Sahel and vice versa (Goucher et al., 1998; Mvuyekure, 2004).

Muhammad and the Quran did not prohibit slavery, so it was not a sin to commercialize it. It was a socially organized operation and protected by Islamic law, and nothing prevents us from thinking that it was even an everyday custom against which no one protested (Lovejoy, 1983; Manning, 1990). On the other hand, slaves were considered pagans, since we must assume that they did not practice Muhammad's commandments because they did not know them, which did not prevent them from being sold as just another commodity (Wright, 1989: p. 41; Segal, 2001).

Based on the law of supply and demand, the slave trade was highly profitable for centuries, and North African merchants received abundant supplies from the

Sahel so they could fulfill their commitments and supply buyers in the markets they controlled. The Ottoman Empire¹¹ also entered this business, coming to control many supply centers established in the Middle East (Erdem, 1996; Toledano, 2014). A good part of this human booty came from holy war, since prisoners of war, whether Black or white, became the property of the victors, who often offered them for sale as merchandise to the highest bidder. The relationship between war and slavery has its roots in antiquity, as do racism and xenophobia, negative impulses with which they are closely related (Junquera Rubio, 2020).

Because of the religious beliefs that governed them, a Muslim could not be enslaved; moreover, the situation of being subjected to someone was used by the owner to convert those who were still pagans to Islam. This image can have at least two interpretations: 1) accepting Islam does not imply emancipation; at most, the enslaved subject could receive better treatment; 2) if the enslaved person were a slave, they could be accorded a certain amount of consideration, especially if, in the short term, they would have offspring, which is one of the reasons why, in a Muslim family unit, Black people appear around the tent (*jaima*) where all the relatives reside (Caro Baroja, 1955; Junquera Rubio, 2008: pp. 261-277).

According to Quranic doctrine, slaves did not have to come from the “country of the Blacks” or other African regions; Of course, the Barbary pirates captured many Caucasian Europeans, as I point out in this essay. It is true that the largest portion of the slave population was of Black and African origin, but this reality is palpable between the 8th and 19th centuries. Muslims also trafficked individuals from Europe and other latitudes; they were even used as soldiers to intervene in war, as was the case with the Mamluks, who eventually formed a sultanate; and even at the beginning of the 19th century, they acted under Napoleon Bonaparte’s orders, possibly as mercenaries. I don’t think this section should be expanded upon here and now (Ayalon, 1996).

It is undeniable that the Sahel supplied slaves to Muslim merchants settled in towns along the Mediterranean coast. The main actors in gathering individuals for sale were the Imazighen, who operated in this context from the 8th century onwards. If what the Arab writers described is true, then we must admit that this group came to control almost 100 percent of the slave trade (Starratt, 1981: pp. 83-113; Engel, 2010: pp. 1-16). This detail highlights the importance of this trade, which spanned a wide African geography at the time and provided income even with the presence of European slave traders, who were also supplied with the collaboration of the chiefdoms that controlled certain territories (Crowder & Ikimi, 1970; Wright, 2007).

It is true that slave status is not achieved solely by being a loser in a war, or by being kidnapped by a slave trader for sale. This status is also achieved by relatives selling them to third parties, because debts in money or livestock have become impossible to repay, and so on. We do not yet have exact figures on how many

¹¹The territorial domains of the Ottoman Empire in North Africa reached as far as the mouth of the Kiss River in the Mediterranean, which the natives call “P’oued Kiss” (Tayed, 2005: pp. 191-206).

individuals sold in the markets for various reasons. We know that slaves from the Sahel were transported to northern African markets using six caravan routes. According to John Wright, the number of people extracted could have reached around 8700 per year during the 10th and 11th centuries, and that this number would decline until the end of the 16th century (Wright, 1989: p. 42).

As the Middle Ages ended, what is known as the Age of Geographical Discovery appeared on the historical horizon of Europe. This period, for West Africa, represented a new and more serious impact on slavery than that of the Muslims. The Kingdom of Castile, responsible for sending Christopher Columbus to discover America, sent the first Enslaved Black people at the end of the 15th century. The Laws of Burgos of 1512 protected American natives (Junquera Rubio, 1988: pp. 191-205; Pizarro Zelaya, 2013: pp. 31-78). This legal protection did not prevent the Castilian crown from granting permission to transport enslaved Black people to America in 1518, thus giving rise to *the asiento*¹² contracts (Weindl, 2008: pp. 229-257). The rest of the European powers soon learned that this business was profitable. In 1520, John III, King of Portugal, signed an agreement with Charles I of Spain. The result was an increase from 4000 slaves to 14,000 sent to the Spanish colonies (De Almeida Mendes, 2008: pp. 739-768).

The slave trade in the modern age became an international business, and slave traders from Spain, Portugal, England, France, and Holland developed a trade that encompassed some thirteen million displaced persons who now left the open ports of West Africa to cross the Atlantic. The markets of North Africa simply changed location, as the human merchandise remained the same but greatly increased, although the Mediterranean markets also continued with their traditional activity. Slave violence affected the Sahel until the 19th century and is one of the great scourges of history. Islam bears its responsibility here, but so do the various Christianities and, especially, the volume of business it generated.

4. Third Impacts: Current Terrorist Violence

A very present and widespread image of the Sahel today is that it is a region shaken by three very negative impacts: 1) Terrorist violence of Islamic ideology operating in various forms; 2) Violence managed by military dictatorships (Juntas); 3) The actions of foreign militaries.

In June 2023, the Ordinary Summit of the Economic Community of West African States was held in Bissau¹³. Among the attendees was the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, who reflected on the current situation in the region: “*Insecurity remains a major concern for the stability of our subregion. Terrorist attacks, inter-communal violence, and organized crime continue to have disastrous humanitarian and security consequences throughout the subregion*”, and urged

¹²The *asiento contract* was signed between the Castilian crown and one or more merchants who were to supply slaves to the American colonies (Weindl, 2008: pp. 229-257).

¹³Bissau is the capital of Guinea Bissau, although there are studies that cite it as Guinea Bissau (former Portuguese colony).

those gathered there that a concerted effort be made at the national, regional, and international levels to address the numerous challenges facing West Africa (CPA, 2024).

I caution, before continuing my reflection, that global information on what is happening in the Sahel right now is partial and fragmented, since the alliances, ruptures, support, etc., that occur between the various terrorist groups reach us long after they have occurred; moreover, the analysis offered by analysts yields the same partial results. Working hypotheses must be continually changed. One doubt must be put aside: the jihadists, perhaps more slowly than desired, are continually gaining ground.

This demonstration reflects concern for a region where the various jihadist groups are expanding their influence across the Sahel landscape and the persistence of their actions, while at the same time increasing efforts to disseminate and teach their radical ideology among local communities. On the other side, state armies aim to curb terrorist activity with harsh reprisals against civilians who heed the message of Islamic radicals, whose clear message is deterrent. At the same time, Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group and pro-government militias compete using violence to test whether they are crueler than the jihadists. The resulting context is a civilian population subjected to a vicious cycle of brutality and poverty in increasingly large areas less under the control of states, but much more trapped under the control of terrorists.

Things north of the Sahel have evolved. The violence that emerged with the Arab Spring has decreased considerably, considering that deaths caused by terrorism in Libya were 220 in 2024, compared to 3650 in 2013 and 2014; and the same has happened with the number of terrorist attacks (Trémolières et al., 2025: p. 23). In contrast, in the Sahel, violence has increased far beyond any calculation. Based on *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data* (ACLED), a research organization that collects and analyzes data on political violence worldwide, deaths in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) countries reached a record 7,620 in the first half of 2024, an increase of 9% compared to the same period in 2023, 37% in 2022, and a staggering 190% compared to 2021. This organization's data is available online and freely accessible¹⁴.

This increase in violence demonstrates that terrorist organizations have sufficient grounds to continue expanding and threatening both left and right. Ten or fifteen years ago, there was an urgent need to respond with comprehensive and coordinated actions, as it has been clearly detected that, in the central Sahel, once violence sets in, it tends to take root and become so deeply entrenched that it becomes impossible to eradicate, and it does not appear that peace and security can be achieved in the short term.

We are concluding the first quarter of 2025, and the Sahel continues to suffer cruel violence, as the subregion that the military, primarily, has designated as Central concentrates the largest active focus of violence in West Africa (Trémolières

¹⁴Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) (database). 2024. <https://acleddata.com>.

et al., 2025: p. 30). The example of Burkina Faso, a country where more than thirteen thousand people were murdered in 2024 alone, demonstrates the state of insecurity in that part of the world¹⁵ (OECD/SWAC, 2025: p. 82). The possibilities of achieving a stable and lasting peace will be realities in the very long-term future, but not in the present or short term, as we warned a few years ago when observing what was happening in a Tuareg camp in Mali, where we were certain to observe only 5% of what was happening there. We were prevented from visiting some tents (*jaimas*) under the pretext of being told not to contaminate the female spaces designated for cooking with our presence, which are apparently culturally controlled by married women (Junquera Rubio & De la Fuente, 2013: pp. 43-54).

A fact I have already pointed out is that most of the Sahelian territory was colonized by France, and in the countries that emerged with decolonization, the foreign and common language for getting around is French; although in certain places, English may be used. This reality does not exclude the use of other languages, with Arabic and other local languages predominating, among which the Ffulde spoken by the Fulani or Peul predominates, an aspect I have already mentioned (Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2016: pp. 285-308). It is possible, but not in the short term, that Russian and Chinese languages will gain clientele due to their current presence for military (the Wagner Group of Russian mercenaries), mining, commercial, and political reasons. Some countries (France, Germany, Spain, and the United States, for example) have had military troops to contain terrorists, but the Sahelian governments, especially those controlled by military juntas and dictatorial regimes, decided to expel all traces of what might be considered Western, and these areas are being occupied primarily by Russia and China. What is happening now pollutes a violent future.

All terrorist groups operating in the Sahel are controlled by Al-Qaeda, although various factions that claim to be independent appear. We know the names of some of them, but not all, since those who are spies or terrorists do not readily confess to being so. The predominant ones are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM), which is the main terrorist group operating in the central Sahel, and in the so-called Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), formerly known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. The change of name, and multiplication of the groups, is due to internal rifts, but they maintain contacts to support each other, including with Boko Haram operating in northern Nigeria (Trémolières et al., 2025: pp. 57-59).

Both JNIM and IS Sahel have managed to firmly root their beliefs in the local populations, assuring them that they are their protectors against state forces first, then against troops from European countries, and now against the Wagner Group mercenaries. This alliance has been detected by several researchers in the last ten years of regional history (Filiu, 2016: pp. 337-348; Fernández de la Cigoña, 2018:

¹⁵This territory includes Mali and Burkina Faso in their entirety, together with parts of Mauritania, Niger and northern territories of countries that have maritime coastline from Senegal to the Gulf of Guinea (Trémolières et al., 2025: pp. 65-66).

pp. 1-17; Aly Mbaye and Signé, 2022; Eizenga & William, 2020). This position is what allows them to continue expanding throughout the Sahel countries, including all the northern areas of the countries with Atlantic coastlines. A good analysis of the current situation was provided by Liam Karr in late January 2025, along with Kathryn Tyson, which is available online as a publication of the Institute for the Study of War (Karr & Tyson, 2025).

Terrorists establish short-term strategies, as various groups join and separate as their leaders so decide, usually remaining hidden and well protected. In this sense, JNIM is the result of the merger of four Salafi-jihadist groups that joined in 2017: 1) Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), 2) Ansar al-Din, 3) Makina Liberation Front, and 4) Al-Murabitoun (Eizenga & Williams, 2020). When more support is needed, they seek out local support. These four occasionally turn to another group: Ansar al-Islam, which currently operates exclusively in Burkina Faso. Officially, Ansar al-Islam does not belong to JNIM, but it executes orders received from that organization, so it is a component at the disposal of whoever asks for a favor (Estelle Pérez, 2025a, 2025b).

JNIM's organizational structure is pyramidal and rigid, as this is the only practical way to coordinate the different subgroups. This behavior does not preclude the possibility of also granting freedom of action to operate in their own local contexts, integrating themselves into the political and social structures of each specific location, to control from behind the scenes the decisions that must be made daily and for which local leaders must be held accountable throughout the Sahel (ICG, 2025).

JNIM controls its followers by applying the doctrine of the Quran, at least in appearance; that is, they collect the stipulated tax (*zakat*). Similarly, schools are closed and eliminated so that children remain outside the teachings that are perceived as Western and induced by Satan. Likewise, if each person must vote, their vote is monitored, and their choice is indicated. When the decision is made to kidnap a person or group, the order is carried out without question. We have good personal experience with the latter.

Currently, at the end of the first quarter of 2025, JNIM may be the most effective and strongest group in Mali and Burkina Faso. Furthermore, it has been detected that it is expanding toward Niger and the countries located along the coast and Gulf of Guinea. JNIM attacks against military forces and civilians have caused a high number of casualties, and these acts demonstrate their power, and, in the areas, they control, demonstrate their terrorist character. Moreover, they display pride in being terrorists and laugh in your face when they detect that they instill fear in you during a routine check on travelers traveling in a Toyota vehicle (Fournier, 2008; MotorPasion, 2016; Fuente Cobo, 2025).

IS Sahel being a group that emerged from a split within Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), because of its followers' pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015. However, and for our reference, this allegiance was not recognized until March 2022 (Zimmerman, 2020). The Sahel is the most active group in the so-

called tri-border region, which is mapped and includes Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Furthermore, it has significantly consolidated its position since the French military disappeared in 2022 (Pinto Cebrián, 2023).

Its development has solidified its role as a regional entity, and it should not be surprising if, in the short term, it becomes integrated into any activity carried out by the Islamic State in Europe. It has been detected that among the migrants arriving by boat on European shores, there are some who belong to this organization and do not come to seek work or tourism, but rather to regularize their status and then kill in the name of their god (Junquera Rubio, 2016b: pp. 155-190; Karr, 2025a).

To avoid attacking each other, IS Sahel and JNIM established a temporary non-aggression pact, which was supposed to last until 2020, but without making the news public, as it became known much later (DeAngelo, 2025). Subsequently, both groups have clashed, as the focus is on achieving regional jihadist primacy, and this desire has not changed, despite everyone shouting, "Allah is Great!" when they shoot you with a Kalashnikov or stab you with a knife. For terrorism, any weapon is good, as the objective is to eliminate those, they consider an enemy, and even more so if that enemy is a pagan with respect to the authentic religious creed contained in the Quran. The world of beliefs is too complicated to understand all the ingredients that grant identity to a person who professes to be religious and fundamentalist (Junquera Rubio, 2023a).

The heart of the Sahel is represented by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These three countries are considered the most terrorist-affected of all those in the Sahel. The first of the three, Mali, was long considered the focal point from which terrorism radiated in all directions. As a result, the national army, with the support of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, carried out military operations in the northern region, where Kidal is located, as it was suspected that the highest authority of JNIM was located there. This was the opinion, ever since it was detected that the Ansar al-Din subgroup was fighting alongside separatist rebels during the 2012 Tuareg uprising (Thomas & Falola, 2020).

Although jihadist militants ignored the Tuareg revolutionaries, considering them more secular or semi-Muslim, during the 2013 offensive in central Mali, the two groups have maintained contact after the Ansar al-Din subgroup was tangentially admitted to JNIM in 2017, covering their areas of operations and coordinating closely since 2021 to confront IS Sahel (Baché, 2023).

On November 15, 2023, the Malian army and Wagner Group mercenaries managed to recapture the city of Kidal, which had been captured on March 30 of that year by MNLA¹⁶ rebel forces and was one of the objectives of the Tuareg uprising that sought to segregate the Azawad region and make it an independent country. The same troops that operated in Kidal on November 15 extended their actions and recaptured two smaller enclaves: Aguelhok and Tessalit (Masoliver, 2023).

Despite this triumph and success, they failed to dominate the remote support

¹⁶NMLA: National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad.

zones controlled by JNIM in northern Mali; moreover, they failed to stem the escalation of their actions against Malian security forces during the government's planned offensive in Kidal in June and July 2024, despite the fact that, during this time, attacks doubled compared to those carried out between January and May 2024 (Trémolières et al., 2025: p. 20).

The outcome of this development in the armed clashes in northern Mali temporarily ended with a spectacular defeat suffered by Malian troops and Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group near Tinzauten, Kidal region. This debacle began on July 22, 2024, when Tuareg rebels, integrated into the Strategic Framework for the Defense of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA), allied with JNIM terrorists and supported by Ukrainian troops, ambushed a mixed convoy of Malian troops and Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group. The first attack involved two car bombs, killing at least 100 Malian and Russian soldiers after the Tuareg rebels forced them to retreat from the town of Tinzauten, near the border with Algeria (Naranjo, 2024a). Although the details are still unclear, the fighting continued until July 27.

Defeats intimidate those who lose, and they embolden those who win. I don't think the battle fought can be considered significant except at a local level, but it had a symbolic rather than real effect, as it served to reveal that the Malian troops and the Wagner Group mercenaries were not as effective as previously believed. The victors reaped the benefits, and the JNIM leaders decided to attack the national capital, Bamako, which occurred on September 17, 2024. On this day, they attacked two very specific and important targets: 1) The national gendarmerie academy; 2) The international airport. The latter is important from a security perspective, as it has three notable activities: 1) Passenger entry and exit; 2) It is the main airbase of the Malian army; 3) Russian mercenaries receive war materials with planes arriving from Russia.

The rebels' victory in late July 2024 and the two attacks against the aforementioned targets in the city of Bamako raised several issues to consider: 1) The military junta's attempt to subdue the jihadist groups was seen as a failure; 2) At the same time, the military junta decided to cancel the international stabilization system centered on France's Operation Barkhane, as the UN-sponsored MINUSMA¹⁷ had already been rejected in 2023, after ten years of presence; 3) The military junta has made the Wagner Group mercenaries its preferred partner. We will see in the short term if this decision is the right one or if it ends up worse than all the previous ones, which is what I fear.

In the short term, the problem facing the Malian military junta will come from the attitude adopted by the Tuaregs. While a minority in Mali, they are the majority in the northern region of the country and have extensive contacts throughout the Sahel, thanks to their excellent knowledge of all routes, as I have previously

¹⁷By Resolution 2100, dated April 25, 2013, the United Nations decided to support stability and security in Mali by sending troops to establish peace. UNMISMM is the acronym for United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali.

indicated. If the Tuaregs achieve autonomy, and even if they declare independence for the Azawad region, using the position provided by the military, then Mali will not only lose that area, but the same will happen to the important areas of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, which are rich in natural and mineral resources. These resources would be under the control of the Tuareg rebels grouped within the Strategic Framework for the Defense of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA), the coalition of political and military movements in northern Mali, which was formed in May 2021 with the clear objective of defending the Tuaregs' jurisdictional claims.

And if such an event were to occur, the Wagner Group mercenaries would oppose it and, since they are already in the area, would receive further support from President Vladimir Putin, a tyrant following in the footsteps of the nefarious Stalin, but who already has contracts signed with the military junta to exploit mineral resources. The only international adversary the Russians would have would be the Chinese, who want the same thing. In short, the Sahel is changing colonizing powers and has been in this situation for centuries. Its populations remain marginalized and do not seem to have any Messiah willing to provide them with a bit of well-being, a fact that is still unknown to all but a very small minority.

On the other hand, the Tuaregs, faced with potential independence, have established alliances with other Sahelian societies in a similar situation, such as the Tubu, an ethnic group settled in northern Chad, southern parts of Libya, and with settlements in Niger and Sudan. They also have contacts with other rebel groups close to Niger's borders. If these alliances consolidate and they decide to resort to military conflict, then this would lead to an uncertain scenario, one that I believe will be highly uncertain.

In Burkina Faso, for example, this country is subject to a continuous surge in violence. Armed clashes began in August 2015 and have already forced the displacement of more than two million people and resulted in the deaths of ten thousand civilians and military personnel. Throughout 2024, JNIM launched several offensives in the areas known as the North-Central and Eastern Sahel. These attacks resulted in a high number of military deaths, as well as deaths of people enrolled in paramilitary groups known as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP). These groups were created in January 2020 as auxiliaries to the Armed Forces to fight jihadist rebels (Schmauder & Willeme, 2025).

JNIM is constantly seeking to expand, and to achieve this goal, it must destabilize the military junta led by Ibrahim Traoré. To achieve this goal, it plans attacks that are carried out when it believes that, in addition to being harmful, they also have an impact on public opinion. This could be the case with the massacre perpetrated in Barsalogo, in central Burkina Faso, on August 24, 2024. That day, JNIM murdered civilians and soldiers who were building trenches to protect the town (Naranjo, 2024b). There is clear evidence that JNIM has troops outside Burkina Faso, and if they manage to establish a presence in the northern regions of all countries with an Atlantic coastline, they could destabilize all West Africa and significantly expand their Islamic influence.

Niger is another country facing numerous security challenges due to the presence of several rebel groups within its territory. The most powerful group here is ISIL Sahel, which has consolidated its position along the border with Mali. Furthermore, due to its geographical position, it could very well enter northeastern Nigeria and establish direct contacts with Boko Haram. It would also have the additional support of an Islamist guerrilla group called Lakurawa, which in the Hausa language means “the recruits”. IS Sahel’s modus operandi simple and effective: extorting livestock farmers in the region, appropriating their herds or parts of them, in exchange for providing them with “protection”. It is at least suspect that these tactics have been copied from some mafia, but not from their Islamic faith; nevertheless, it is a sure strategy to finance the purchase of weapons and keep nomadic populations subservient.

Similarly to how I have been describing this third impact, in Niger, JNIM, a competitor of IS Sahel, has maintained strong activity in the Tillaberi region, which shares a border with Burkina Faso and Mali. From this territory, it has considerably expanded its maneuvers southward, along the borders with Benin and Nigeria. Its movements have also expanded northward, and in October 2024, it carried out its first attack in the Agadez region against Nigerien soldiers. Even further north, the JNIM claimed to have carried out an attack on a border post near Algeria. There are well-founded suspicions that this action may have been carried out with the collaboration of the Tuareg rebels (Karr, 2025a), since the objectives to be achieved are very similar.

Reciprocal ties with the Tuareg rebels, with whom they also share ethnic kinship (Junquera Rubio & De la Fuente, 2013: pp. 43-54), would provide assistance in establishing permanent camps for JNIM members in the northern Sahel, at the confluence of the borders between Niger, Mali, and Algeria, which is where one of the most important migratory routes leading to the Mediterranean runs. Should this situation consolidate, the JINM could have the capacity to turn northern Niger into a rearguard area in the event of increased intimidation by Malian forces and Russian mercenaries, while weakening the Nigerien government’s ability to assist its Malian allies and Russian mercenaries in any offensive action aimed at the Algerian border.

What must be clear is that the JNIM is persevering in its violent operations to strengthen its hold on the border regions of southern Niger, specifically in the Dosso area, which is very well connected to the Republic of Benin and Zinder, Niger’s second largest city. This group claimed responsibility for its first operations in 2024. The presence of IS Sahel in the northwestern part of Nigeria, bordering Niger, puts pressure on both Nigeria and Niger to undertake coordinated military actions, which could provoke a response from IS Sahel militants, who, covertly and overtly, have been infiltrating the region without incident since at least 2018.

The result of all this is a context of constant instability, which has become a chronic issue in the border areas between Niger and Nigeria, which are becoming

refuges and places of relative safety for both the JNIM and IS Sahel. Both terrorist groups are gaining territorial control to exert coercive influence over local populations while secretly vying for primacy in regional terrorism.

4.1. Changes in Terrorist Operations

Both IS Sahel, the regional proxy of the Islamic State, and its al-Qaeda-affiliated rival JNIM, have renounced taking over cities, instead settling for instilling fear by surrounding them. This attitude may possibly be due to avoiding the mistakes the jihadists made in 2012, when the crisis erupted in northern Mali and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups dominated the region's main cities for several months. Their presence in urban areas exposed them to attacks by French military forces that arrived in Mali in January 2013. The French inflicted heavy casualties and drove them out of the cities (Trémolières et al., 2025: p. 58).

The terrorists, observing this temporary failure, chose to operate in rural areas, and this change has since impacted Burkina Faso and western Niger, the two regions currently most affected in the countryside, in small towns and in the encampments of nomadic livestock farmers. In this context, national capitals and urban centers appear to be largely safe, but they may suffer isolated and damaging impacts. This strategy has resulted in cities becoming islands in the countryside; islands that are increasingly encircled to disrupt land communications between urban centers, making it increasingly difficult for them to obtain supplies of even the most essential items. This strategy, developed in desert and semi-desert areas, is preventing government forces from communicating and assisting one another in the event of an attack (Trémolières et al., 2025: pp. 20-21).

This growing isolation of urban centers is driving jihadists to force government forces to feel their blockades, and to make them feel them, there's nothing better than to act with lightning attacks, but without invading the cities. However, this regional strategy may change as rapid urbanization,¹⁸ and the jihadists' strategic targeting of urban areas spread the strategic impact of terrorist actions against them. The temporary success of the offensives against the capitals Bamako and Niamey in 2024 demonstrates the growing weakness of urban centers.

The current situation throughout the Sahel may be complex, but conflict is developing between rural areas and cities, which creates security problems, and military juntas use their soldiers at the entrances to cities to control who enters and leaves them. However, these detachments are perfectly located, and the terrorists know their locations and the possibilities of receiving help from within should they decide on a lightning attack. The jihadists have cells inside the cities that provide them with information on what's happening inside.

Current technological developments have facilitated the emergence of drones, which are used equally by government forces and terrorist strategists. These de-

¹⁸The city of Niamey, the capital of Niger, began as a military barracks in the 1890s. The French colonial authorities' decision to do so was because they considered the site ideal for housing soldiers of the colonial army. It currently has an estimated population of 800,000, but the number may be higher, as a census has not been conducted for years (Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2017).

vices allow for remote violence, posing an additional risk to human security and infrastructure. The use of drones by military forces, both as representatives of the state and by Wagner group mercenaries, as well as by JNIM terrorists and insurgent forces such as CSP-DPA, represents a significant shift during warfare, which until now was defined using more traditional means. A clear example that supports what I have been stating is that half of the engagements between Malian security forces and JNIM rebels in the central Koulikoro region since early 2023 have been carried out with drones. This fact also demonstrates the preference for this type of weapon, which will be more easily used as government control over the territory diminishes (Trémolières et al., 2025: p. 81).

The use of commercial drones, modified for military operations, has become more sophisticated and widespread, as all involved use them not only for surveillance but also to carry out selective attacks against targets using explosives fired from the drones, or even directly using so-called kamikaze drones (Trémolières et al., 2025: p. 31). These new weapons represent significant technical and tactical advances, enabling precision attacks and improved surveillance and monitoring of the vast Sahelian areas. Although they are still emerging, their use is expected to become more widespread soon, especially as they are refined, and their operational range is increased. This last detail does not depend on the actors involved in the war, but on the engineers who serve the weapons manufacturers.

4.2. Another Development in the Region: IS Sahel Prevails in the Tri-Border Area

As things stand right now, IS in the Sahel appears to have prevailed over JNIM in the border region between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, allowing it to consolidate its power and control over the areas near the regional capitals of Gao and Menaka, and thus increase its operations into Niger.

The opposition between the two jihadist groups emerged in the second half of 2022, following the withdrawal of French troops from Mali. The victory of IS Sahel was reversed, dislodging JNIM from the Menaka region and the southern areas of the city of Gao by the end of July 2023, with a human cost of more than 700 supporters killed between the two groups. This victory was noted in United Nations reports, which attributed it to IS Sahel doubling the area it controlled between 2022 and the first half of 2023 (Lederer, 2024).

Since then, IS Sahel and JNIM have continued their clashes in the border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, but have done so with considerably less intensity and aggression. The volume of fighting has decreased considerably, from 600 in 2022 to just over 100 in 2024 (ACLED, 2025). This figure appears to reflect the consolidation of ISIL in the Sahel as the dominant group in the region, whose hold is reportedly expanding towards the northeastern Nigerian region of Tillaberi, which connects to neighboring Mali, as well as around the eastern flank of the capital Niamey. This is evidenced by the fact that, since the July 2023 coup, economic extortion stemming from the collection of *zakat*, as well as religious coer-

cion, has been spreading in these areas (Bencherif, 2023: pp. 473-494).

There has also been an increase in increasingly lethal attacks by the Sahel against the Nigerien army, likely with the aim of keeping it out of these areas. The most significant of these attacks was the massive ambush carried out by IS Sahel on Nigerien security forces in October 2023, which resulted in the deaths of more than 100 soldiers. The IS Sahel used advanced weapons such as suicide vehicle-borne explosive devices (VBIEDs).¹⁹ These elements indicate a growing operational capacity of this Islamist group, as well as greater technological sophistication in the means it employs (Mula, 2024).

This progressive dynamism suggests that IS Sahel is increasing its area of influence, shifting its operational center of gravity from northwestern Niger to the southeast of the capital Niamey in the Dosso region, as this terrorist group has freedom of movement and faces little resistance there. These details demonstrate that it has a significant degree of control over the region.

Meanwhile, JNIM is also focusing its attention on Niger, carrying out incursions into the southwest of the country despite its disagreements with ISIL in the Sahel and the military junta's considerable efforts to expel its refuge zones along the border with Burkina Faso. In early 2024, JNIM planned an offensive against security forces and militias near the border with Burkina Faso, successfully expelling them from the area. However, this was a one-time campaign that tapered off as the year progressed, although it maintained some pressure on the territory to prevent government forces from re-entering the area. At the same time, JNIM is reportedly competing with Nigerien security forces for control of the area south of the capital, Niamey, in the Ouro Gueladjo region, where it has significantly increased IED²⁰ attacks and ambushed government forces in the last year. The terrorist strategy is designed to isolate Nigerien forces and surround them within the city; that is, it would proceed exactly as it did in Mali a year earlier, in September 2024, avoiding attacks on Bamako but prioritizing control of areas between 110 and 300 kilometers from the capital (Karr, 2024b). The continued regularity of JNIM attacks and its progressive aspiration to become increasingly operational indicate a certain prestige in achieving its objectives. And, at the same time, government forces are showing their difficulties, as they are unable to achieve any success against the jihadists in the area (Karr et al., 2024).

4.3. Another Novelty: Including the Gulf of Guinea Countries in the Orbit of Terrorist Expansion

Recently, we are witnessing a new line of action for jihadist terrorism, which is to move geographically southward. This decision is novel in that jihadist activity has historically developed primarily in the Sahel, and this phenomenon has been known, with due regard for time, since at least the 18th century, but in that area, where not one jihad has occurred, but several, concentrated, I repeat, in the Sahel

¹⁹Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device.

²⁰Improvised Explosive Device.

region (Miles, 2018: pp. 187-205). However, recent events may contradict this historical reality, as it is difficult for a “jihad zone” to exist over time without sooner or later affecting the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea.

To our knowledge, in recent years, JNIM and IS Sahel have begun to operate in the border regions of the Gulf of Guinea states (Carter, 2025). Furthermore, despite attempts by European collaborators to insulate these nations from the impact of the jihad, these actions are ineffective in the face of the advance of jihadist propaganda emanating from the Sahel. Moreover, terrorist advances are significant, as is the increase in insecurity (Iweze, 2020: pp. 319-327). JNIM is demonstrating greater operational and aggressiveness in the northern areas of the Gulf of Guinea countries, and IS Sahel is deploying similar forces, albeit with less capacity in those areas.

Clearly, these expansions are supported by the fact that corruption is endemic in these countries and social assistance for the population is minimal. In places where discontent reigns, tensions between individuals and communities are fostered, and there is a tendency to seek a Messiah to resolve all illnesses. In this case, jihadists could occupy that position. Although I believe they will never adequately resolve anything, except to control populations to apply the zakat tax, to meet the payments demanded by those who supply them with weapons. It is a strategy to integrate into and control local communities (Estelle Perez, 2025a).

The spread of violence from the Sahel to the northern regions of the Gulf of Guinea countries is not a temporary issue; rather, it seeks to establish itself in border areas, particularly in northern Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Togo, countries with low population density but abundant natural parks, which provide resources and very favorable conditions for jihadist groups on their way south. These inland regions have historically been marginalized by their states, both economically and politically, providing an ideal context for jihadists to skillfully exploit the situation and leverage it to their advantage, expressing the grievances suffered by local communities.

At the same time, in these countries, it seems understandable that jihadists are expanding more rapidly, as the northern regions of the state's offer many characteristics like those of the Sahel: the impotence of security forces, the ability to establish alliances with like-minded local groups, ease of financing illegal activities, and taking advantage of political weakness to strengthen Islam.

As jihadists move into areas, they had previously been unacquainted with, they also gain control of the resources that pass through the region or are produced locally, including agricultural crops, gold mining production, and, especially, the ability to acquire herds of cattle for free, as cows are easy to transport and resell (Junquera Rubio & Pastor Martínez, 2016). The income generated by all these businesses has led to a context in which terrorist organizations have become more self-sufficient and much more feared. Indeed, Abdoulaye Diassana,²¹ a resident of the city of Menaka, told me in July 2023: “*The terrorists are lurking about 15 km from here and demand payment for vehicles crossing from Menaka to Niger or Gao, while stealing livestock from communities to eat or sell.*”

²¹Fictitious identity. I believe that an informant cannot be exposed in times dominated by terrorism.

Of all the Jihadist groups, JNIM has emerged as the most active. From western Mali, it has targeted the Kayes region bordering Senegal. This terrorist activity has doubled annually since 2022, demonstrating that it has troops at its command. The Kayes area suffered 21 attacks in 2023 and 25 in 2024, which is an achievement compared to the only ten attacks in 2022 (ACLED, 2025).

JNIM has also expanded its areas of action in eastern Burkina Faso, extending to the border region with Benin and Togo, where expansion has been very rapid. The development of terrorist actions reproduces the patterns of siege methods previously used in Burkina Faso and Mali; that is, they proceed to isolate areas hosting government forces or cooperate with them by surrounding them so they cannot move (Trémolières et al., 2025: p. 91). The success of this tactic has forced them to rely almost entirely on drones to dismantle the jihadists, who move freely through tropical forests and rural areas (Trémolières et al., 2025).

Local communities in Burkina Faso have tried to reach agreements with the jihadists to lift the sieges in exchange for certain concessions. However, any attempt at negotiation has been rejected by the leader of the Burkinabe junta, Ibrahim Traoré, whose strategy is curiously based on mobilizing the civilian population to confront the jihadists. The result of this policy has been increased violence against civilians by both the government and the terrorists. Terrorist actions bring misfortune, death, injustice, insecurity, etc.; in short, a deterioration of everything (Gonzalvo Navarro, 2019: pp. 98-137).

Since early 2023, JNIM has directed its attacks against the roads surrounding Bamako. This act is intended to further degrade Malian land communications, and destroy its weak economic structure (Carter, 2023). This terrorist group has benefited from the porous borders that exist throughout West Africa; And it has done so, and is doing so, to establish new support zones in the rearguard, which, in this case, can be used to expand further into the Kayes region, bordering Senegal. Similarly, in 2024, JNIM carried out its first attacks near the Guinean and Senegalese borders.

In Benin, jihadist attacks appear to be a result of JNIM's ambitions to control eastern Burkina Faso. In early 2022, the objective appeared to be to reduce the capacity of Beninese security forces in case they became a threat to JNIM bases in Burkina Faso. This objective has since changed or been modified, as the current focus is on creating a large buffer zone by exploiting the tropical forests that occupy the region (Bruijne, 2022). However, it is still unclear whether the expansion through Benin could serve as a platform for expanding into northwestern Nigeria, where Boko Haram is present, having operated primarily in parts of Nigeria and Cameroon.

In any case, despite the deadly nature of the terrorist attacks, the jihadists are still in the training and recruitment phase. It is also possible that their strategies assume that the Gulf of Guinea countries are more useful to them as rear bases and refuge areas than as military targets; in this case, they should remain outside the reach of terrorist attacks.

Further west, northern Togo also faces an increase in jihadist activities. This is proven by the fact that, in July 2023, an alleged JNIM attack killed at least twelve soldiers patrolling the village of Sankortchagou, near the border with Burkina Faso (Lepidi, 2023). Although everything suggests that the script projected and applied to other Gulf of Guinea countries is being followed, which includes acts of banditry, gold smuggling, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and fuel trafficking, Togo appears destined to become a transit zone for jihadists (KAS, 2022).

In the case of Ghana, the country has so far remained safe from terrorist attacks. The residence of some jihadist cells appears to be primarily related to their military activities in Burkina Faso, as terrorists view this country as a haven and a very suitable route for smuggling their useful products, perhaps for this reason why direct attacks are not being carried out. The fact that Ghana is Anglophone may restrict JNIM recruitment prospects there, supporting the hypothesis that Francophone West Africa is more favorable to jihadist infiltration than other areas in the region (Moody, 2022).

Finally, there is the case of the Ivory Coast, a country that lives in relative calm, as gold mining is highly sought after by jihadists, as well as other illegal economic operations within the country (Assanvo, 2023).

4.4. Does Jihadism Have a Future in the Sahel?

Recently, countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have suffered military coups. All three countries are governed by juntas, which have abruptly severed their relations with the West; moreover, all three have withdrawn from ECO-WAS.²² The vacuum left by the expulsion of Western troops has been filled by calling in Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, who, so far, have been unable to resolve the security problem in any specific region. The presence of mercenaries has increased violence, and with it, the insurgents receive oxygen to maintain their positions in each of their territories.

The situation in the Sahel is increasingly alarming, as jihadism is increasing primarily in Mali and Burkina Faso. The military juntas of these two countries are losing control of large swathes of their territory, which are now being controlled by jihadists. This situation is already clear in the Malian territories near Gao and Menaka. Currently, in Burkina Faso, almost half of its territory may already be under jihadist control, and this is evident as soon as you leave the capital, Ouagadougou.

The situations are alarming from a European security perspective, as the expansion of the countries located in or near the Gulf of Guinea, especially from Guinea to Benin, has a vast periphery with few cities, low demographics, and many national parks that could provide safe havens for jihadists. A common characteristic of these countries is that the Atlantic areas are Christian while the interior is Muslim. Furthermore, the latter are very well connected to the Sahelian regions, both culturally and economically, which favors the incursion of jihadist groups, which

²²The three countries left ECOWAS on January 24, 2024.

are already established in the social fabric of each of these countries.

Given this situation, it seems logical that the jihadists seek to exploit the lack of national integration between the north and the south, a characteristic of all the Atlantic littoral countries, seeking to entice the local populations into their arms, achieving a similar approach to that employed with some success in central Mali. In these countries, the main objective at this time is to create alliances with local leaders that will allow them to consolidate their territorial position. This task is accomplished through persuasion, threats, and violence, which they use indiscriminately and at the convenience of the jihadists. This phenomenon, still small, is steadily increasing in Benin and Togo and, if consolidated, could end up becoming a threat to the national security of the Atlantic countries. Moreover, given their potential for dominance on the coast, Jihadist groups could act against the maritime routes connecting primarily with Europe and the Americas.

There is difficulty in achieving success in the project I just mentioned. The development and growth of Jihadist groups in these Atlantic littoral countries struggles to establish alliances with local communities and ensure their long-term stability. In the northern areas of these countries, jihadists are numerically few and rarely can maintain territorial control. These geographies offer many differences from those controlled by jihadists affiliated with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who traveled from northern Algeria to the Sahel in the early 2000s and developed extensive networks with local tribes in northern Mali, especially the Tuaregs.

This process, which took years, seems unlikely for the moment to be replicated along the West African coast, a region that is very different from the Sahel, economically, socially, linguistically, and religiously. As Jihadist groups move south, their operational environment becomes more complicated because the desert or savanna is not the same as the tropical forest. In these new landscapes, they lose much of their ability to move undetected among a local population, which is intertwined with at least three different religious identities: Christian, Muslim, and animist. Furthermore, the state has greater control, although sometimes lacking.

Consequently, the most likely scenario for the countries established in the Gulf of Guinea will be a jihadist presence, but a tenuous and diffuse one for the time being. The situation could change if they managed to seize power in the countries of central Sahel, then they would have the capacity to act freely in this part of West Africa. For the time being, the jihadists are content to carry out opportunistic attacks to signal their presence, and when they do, they choose poorly defended targets. However, they are far from seeking control of any of these countries' northern territories.

Ultimately, the expansion of Jihadist groups toward the Atlantic will depend on the decisions made by coastal countries, whose security structures are more capable of militarily combating the insurgents than those present in the Sahelian countries. In recent years, we have witnessed a process of state reaction that is already underway in the region. From Côte d'Ivoire to Togo, West African coastal states

have approved political, legislative, and operational frameworks to improve synergies between security forces, representative civil society organizations, and populations, supporting local authorities. The goal is to propose and develop a coordinated response to transnational terrorism by countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Togo, which could be joined by Mali and Niger.

The Accra Initiative, established in 2017 between these countries, is a step in the right direction, as is the United Nations-supported Integrated Border Stability Mechanism for West Africa, which seeks to improve the ways in which West African governments can establish and train their security forces, in a context where civilian populations can interact, all within a framework that can curb the presence and expansion of jihadists.

Europe has been expelled from the central Sahel by the three military juntas, but Europe is not weak and still has much to say when it comes to supporting the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, supporting military and social decisions that help prevent and curb violent jihadism. It's not just about ensuring these Atlantic countries are free from terrorist concerns, but also about preventing the continued strengthening of jihadist insurgents in the Sahel from threatening to overwhelm any containment strategy and ultimately affect Europe.

Let us not forget that the Wagner Group mercenaries are soldiers loyal to the tyrant Vladimir Putin and that Russian destabilization policies began with decolonization and have not yet concluded, as the Sahel lies behind Europe, and intelligence services have long detected that among the migrants crossing the Mediterranean there are those sworn to violent jihad. I don't like to be a prophet or predict the future. The actions of Russia and China in the Sahel should be analyzed in a few years, but not before. We are now assessing the results of European colonialism that began in the 19th century. Current events must be analyzed as *a posteriori*, never *a priori*. When we have reliable data, we will be able to determine how they have developed.

The development of the short-term process requires correcting the errors that affect the strategic approaches that have been in place until a few months ago. If mistakes were made in the past, the time has come to avoid repeating them. The weaknesses of an adversary can favor the strengthening of the jihadists, and they constantly seek to expand their capabilities and control ever-larger territories while ensuring that their populations remain loyal to them.

The goal must be to contain the jihadists so that they cannot consolidate their position or create insecurity, which could pose a threat to all West Africa. The countries bordering the Sahel must be supported so they can control their economies, their societies, and their food and water resources. Achieving this goal will require greater and more sustained attention and a greater and more demanding commitment over the coming decades. It remains to be seen whether Europe will live up to the demands this time, especially in terms of human rights, logistical support, and friendly advice. It's not about being with one side or the other; it's about living in peace, which all Sahelian ethnic groups and societies so desperately need.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I address exclusively three historical and Islamic impacts that have affected the Sahel. The impacts discussed here are not the only ones, nor do they represent the totality of the impacts. Nor are they related to others that I have previously mentioned, which can be found in the bibliography. The Sahel, from beginning to end, offers a negative global history, as foreign cultures appeared in its history to plunder its riches, mistreat its populations, adulterate them with religions, policies, and lifestyles foreign to the region, and much more.

I intend to use these three impacts as a reflection primarily for social scientists and those interested in supporting societies that have suffered impositions of all kinds for too long. I also intend, and I know I will not succeed, to warn against the new colonialisms and their actions in the Sahel. If the previous ones have been bad, the current ones are following the same path, but with one difference: the mistakes of others do not seem to be reasons to correct ourselves and choose another cultural model.

The United Nations proclaimed the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1948. In that year, there were only four independent countries on the entire African continent, and they had only weak independence: Egypt, Liberia, Ethiopia, and South Africa. The rest of the continent was divided among various European powers. Decolonization began in 1960, and within a decade, almost all the republics that appear on the map today emerged.

In those early years, three leaders emerged who sought to establish a socialism of a distinctly African kind: Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), and Modibo Keita (Mali). Their speeches, typical of an era of decolonization, proved hollow and useless. In these 65 years, what has been most prevalent are military coups and dictatorships, along with a few civil wars. Democracies, short on time, have not prospered. Elections, when they do occur, are riddled with corruption. The Sahel remains mired in poverty, a lack of healthcare services, corrupt governments, and so on. The pretensions of those early leaders, eager to modernize their new countries, remained just that: pretensions.

The current new owners will not satisfy any of the population's needs or any of their aspirations; at best, they will exploit the resources that interest them, and when they exhaust them, they will disappear. The subsequent explanations, intended to be credible to the population, will be absurd, like the injustices we have known throughout history, but unfortunately, they will produce suffering at the expense of the selfishness of those in power, whether religious, political, social, or economic.

In these days of March 2025, the media has echoed the personal story of Francis Bok. A Muslim family kidnapped him as a child, enslaved him, and turned him into a goat herder. He had to sleep with the animals, since his owners would not even allow him to enter their home. As a young man, he was able to escape his captors and emigrate to the United States. As an adult, he has returned to the country of his birth: South Sudan. He is currently working on the new airport

project for the capital, Juba (Rojas, 2025).

Exploitation, subjugation, slavery, and many other details of negative impacts are sad realities in the Sahel, a region also occasionally plagued by drought and famine. Mining resources do not remain in the area, nor do they benefit any of its inhabitants, except those belonging to the social and military elite. The long history, which stretches from the 8th century to the present, offers many more negative chapters than positive ones; and, given the current social climate, it does not seem that things will improve in the short term, as political leaders and terrorists will continue to act against their populations. Despite all the negative aspects, we must believe that at some point, the redemption that has been waited for centuries will come.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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