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The other dimension of the G-5 Sahel Force: Employing local militias

Given the escalating and intensifying terrorist threat in the Sahel region of Africa, regional states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) have banded together to form a regional counter-terrorism military force – the G-5 Sahel. Some analysts have hailed G-5 Sahel as an example of successful counter-terrorism cooperation on the African continent. Formed in July 2017, the G-5 Sahel is a 5 000 strong joint force whose primary objective is to robustly engage with militant Islamists in the region. The above-mentioned five countries have also agreed to facilitate the movement of French Operation Barkhane troops through their respective countries and share intelligence. France and Germany have meanwhile agreed to provide training and infrastructure as well as to supply [weapons, ammunition and military vehicles](#) . Funding for the G-5 Sahel have been sourced from the European Union (50 million euros), Saudi Arabia (100 million euros), and the United Arab Emirates (30 million euros), the United States (60 million euros) and a further 10 million euros from each of the [five G-5 Sahel states themselves](#) .

Some analysts such as Daphne Benoit are of the opinion that the size of the force is much too small given the [enormity of the territory covered](#). The G-5 countries are essentially a collection of desert states the size of Europe. Also emphasizing the same point, Ralph Peters notes that Niger, alone, is [twice the size of California](#). In all probability, geographic expanse is one of the reasons that despite the staggering amounts paid, the equipping of the force as well as training provided, the terrorist threat continues to escalate across the region. This was aptly demonstrated when jihadists [killed 42 people](#) (civilians) in a motorcycle attack in the north of Mali on 14 December 2018. Militants claimed even more lives in Mali six days later when a [landmine in central Mali](#) claimed six innocent lives.

In a desperate bid to regain control over security, states have turned to tribal militias to serve as a force multiplier. The Malian armed forces have made use of Songhai ethnic militias in northern Mali as a force multiplier (See Further Reading: Boisvert, 2015:273). These Ganda Koy (Masters of the Land) and Ganda Iso (Sons of the Land) militias, however, engaged in human rights atrocities which further incensed Tuareg and Arab populations in the north, preventing the emergence of a truly inclusive Malian state. To illustrate the point, one Ganda Iso recruit spoke of what he learned at his training camp: *“Lets’ face it! Tuaregs do not want to share the country with us. They feel that we are inferior. Before the 2012 crisis, we did not understand that this is our land that they want. Before they invented Azawad [Tuareg desire for an independent homeland called Azawad], this was the Songhai Empire, the Ghana Empire, and the Mali Empire. They would have to understand that we Black sedentary people, we are the owners of the land. The time when we are divided and controlled by enslavers [reference to Tuaregs historically enslaving Africans] is over. Before, we did not realize this. This is what I have learned here, as well as making good friends. And we are ready to die to defend our land against these narco-terrorists”*. (See Further Reading Boisvert, 215:285).

A similar dynamic is at play in the Lake Chad Basin. Concerned about the infiltration of Boko Haram in the area, Chad has armed local ethnic militias. However, given the tensions over the fertile region whose territory supports agriculture, pastoralism and fishing, adding arms to the mix merely served to escalate existing tensions to armed violence. Some of these armed ethnic militias [accused the Buduma ethnic group](#) inhabiting the Chad Basin of colluding with Boko Haram and promptly attacked them. This was clearly a case of local groups appropriating the discourse of global jihad to increase control of fertile territory.

In the Sahel region, counter-terrorism elements of the tactics and instruments states employ include training local militias. This latter practice served to further undermine human security, harden the region’s ethnic, racial and religious fault lines and have thus made reconciliation almost impossible. The concomitant polarization between ethnic groupings may well assist terror groups to recruit from the marginalized and discriminated. The cases of Mali and Chad remind us that governments in the Sahel need to think of the long-term consequences of arming local ethnic militias in the fight against jihadists. As one Tuareg elder in Kidal, northern Mali stated, *“We need a new definition of the nation that includes us”*. Without inclusive nation-building and democratic governance, (two key pillars of countering extremism and resultant terrorism) it will be impossible to defeat terror in the Sahel. The blunt or naïve use of ethnic militias undermines the goal of effective counter-terrorism.

Further Reading

Boisvert, M.A. 2015. "Failing at Violence: The Long-Lasting Impact of Pro-Government Militias in northern Mali," *African Security*. Vol. 8 No. 4. pp. 272-298.

Rezard, S. and Shurkin, M. 2015. *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement*. Rand Corporation. Santa Monica, California.

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