



**COUNTERING IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES  
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**Subject: (REPORT) Fighting between terrorist groups in the Sahel region.**

**Introduction:**

Since the foundation of the Islamic State of the Great Sahara (ISGS) in May 2015 and its later recognition as an Islamic State (IS) affiliate by Abou Bakar al-Bahgdadi in April 2019, this jihadist terrorist group has co-existed in Mali with the terrorist convergence called *Jama'at Nusratr al-Islamn wal-Muslimin* (JNIM). This has taken place with some proximity to *Al Qaeda* (AQ), although not effective submission to AQ.

The common Sahelian roots, and the non-hostility between their main leaders has allowed the cooperation of both groups until late 2019. There have even been some specific common actions between them to face and reach shared aims. This mentioned cooperation in the Sahel is comparatively strange to others areas of the world, where the competition and collision between AQ and DAESH is quite usual.

**Situation:**

Nevertheless, several confrontations between cells from both groups have been recently reported in 2020. These confrontations have taken place along the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, affecting the Liptako-Gourma region in Mali, as well as the Soum province in Burkina Faso; they consist of small attacks and skirmishes between them, with few casualties and prisoners among factions. However, a major clash occurred northeast of Aribinda (Soum) on April 16<sup>th</sup>, which apparently caused significant damage on both sides.

The changing loyalties of the combatants in the jihadist groups, along with the evolution of events promote the transfer of terrorists between groups and sporadic friction between them. Some fighting is also caused by the dispute of the scarce resources available in the area. However, the frequency of the attacks perpetrated, as well as the size of the incident not far from Aribinda, could reveal what seems to be a rupture of that coexistence & entente. The ultimate reason that may have fuelled the confrontation is unknown. It could have a local origin, or, perhaps, it could get guided by the central core of one or both terrorist groups.

March 2020 was prolific in messages and communiqués from the central core to both groups, in coincidence with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They show the pandemic as a punishment by Allah against the West. However, they make no specific mention of group confrontation. They do not even emphasize the need to increase attacks, although the loss of effectiveness that the pandemic exerts among Western armies is revealed. COVID-19 has not only kept the terrorist attacks up in the Sahel region, but has also caused confrontation between terrorist groups.



### Assessment:

Even if it is unknown the existence of a specific guidance for these confrontations, it is assessed by C-IED COE that they started at the Sahelian regional level. The existing cooperation between Boko Haram and ISGS during the year 2019 was inspired by the central core of IS, and this could induce to a false incidence of the core in these fighting. Meanwhile, JNIM is closer to a convergence of terrorist groups finding unity for operational purposes, than the result of a unity of command, or AQ's preponderance over the rest of factions.

It is rather considered that these confrontations are coming from the competition between jihadist groups, because they have to operate both on the common border line, with operational areas less defined than Mali. The competition for the supply of local resources and control of trade roads in the province of Soum is a relevant reason. The evidenced poorness of the security reaction of Burkina Faso in the region also avoids both terrorist groups could get affiliated to face their common enemy.

This aforementioned confrontation brings some relief to the counter-terrorist forces involved on the ground. But COVID-19 is pushing in coincidence a major impact on the national and international military response to the terrorist phenomenon. The pandemic might create a delay in the organization of the so-called "Tabanka Force", composed by European special operations forces that France tries to create under its leadership in response to jihadist terrorism in the Triple Border region. If the Tabanka's original purpose is to have this joint force operatively prepared before the end of the year 2020, COVID 19 could alter the schedule in which to have effective forces in the area on time. C-IED COE recommendation is in consequence to accelerate the organization and support of this operational force, in order to take advantage of this fighting between terrorist groups.

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