

The Targeting Logic of Terrorist Groups in the Sahel

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Abstract : Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated groups such as Ja'amat Nusra al Islam Wal Muslimim (JNIM) and the Islamic State-Greater Sahara Faction, which is now part of the Boko Haram splinter group, Islamic State in West Africa, were responsible, between 2018 and 2020, for at least 1.333 violent incidents against both military and civilian targets, including the assassination and kidnapping for ransom of Western citizens in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the Central Sahel. Protecting civilians from the terrorist violence that is now spreading from the Sahel to the coastal countries of West Africa has been very challenging, mainly because of the many unknowns that surround the perpetrators. To contribute to a better protection of civilians in the region, this paper aims to shed light on the motivations and targeting logic of jihadist perpetrators of terrorist violence against civilians in the central Sahel region. To that end, it draws on relevant secondary data retrieved from datasets, the media, and the existing literature, but also on primary data collected through interviews and surveys in Burkina Faso. An analysis of the data with the support of qualitative and statistical analysis software shows that military and rational strategic motives, more than purely ideological or religious motives, have been the main drivers of terrorist violence that strategically targeted government symbols and representatives as well as local leaders in the central Sahel. Behind this targeting logic, the jihadist grand strategy emerges: wiping out the Western-inspired legal, education and governance system in order to replace it with an Islamic, sharia-based political, legal, and educational system.

Keywords : terrorism, jihadism, Sahel, targeting logic

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