

Sahel: towards a policy other than “security”

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Violence continues in the Sahel. While the junta in Mali, with Wagner mercenaries, is adopting a strategy of total war against the jihadists that is causing many civilian casualties, the governments of Niger and Burkina Faso are sketching out an initial dialogue with the armed groups that cannot be viable without a strong economic and social commitment on the part of these governments.

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The Malian junta keeps talking about the successes of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) against the various Islamist groups in the country. The reality is unfortunately very different, and the lists drawn up by the authorities of terrorists put out of harm’s way include many civilians.

The all-military strategy adopted by the Malian junta remains a danger for populations and the tragedy of the villages of Diallassagou, Dianweli and Deguessagou, where more than 130 people were murdered by the Islamists of the Katiba Macina led by the preacher Amadou Koufa, is a tragic illustration of this.

The Malian army’s headlong rush

In central Mali, Amadou Koufa’s men control entire regions, particularly those of Mopti and Ségou. They impose their law. Villagers must respect the precepts imposed by the Islamists, women must veil themselves, men must wear beards, the inhabitants must pay zakat, a kind of tax, and above all they must not collaborate with the military forces. When the FAMa intervened, they used some villagers as a guide in their confrontation with the Islamists. In other words, the army forced the villagers to break their pact with the Islamists, without being able to ensure the protection of the villages. Once the armed forces left, Katiba members burned houses, destroyed small businesses and took the men two kilometres away to execute them. It was a massacre in retaliation for the village’s collaboration with the army.

But not collaborating with the army is to risk being accused of complicity with the Islamists and being the victim of summary executions as was the case, at the end of March, in the village of Moura where more than three hundred people were killed by the FAMa and the Russian “instructors” of the Wagner group.

Civilians are suffering from the war between Islamists and the Malian army and are paying a high price. Government authorities do not place the protection of civilians first. Conducting a total confrontation against armed groups without having the real possibility of protecting civilians from the revenge actions of these groups is an irresponsible policy. Especially since the inhabitants deplored the fact that the Malian army did not intervene despite the alerts.

Exploring the avenues of dialogue

While the authorities of Niger and Burkina Faso continue to wage war against the jihadists, with the help of the French army, they have decided in parallel to start a dialogue. For both countries the method is roughly similar. A strong symbolic action at the state level and talks as close as possible to the populations.

In Burkina Faso, Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, head of the junta that took power, made a statement “to his brothers who are lost.” He reiterated his idea that the stabilization of the country cannot be won only by war. To begin talks, local dialogue committees for the restoration of peace have been set up. They are grouped at the national level in a coordination led by Yéro Boly, the Minister of National Reconciliation.

In Niger, the authorities have also decided to change their strictly security-based approach. In February, President Mohamed Bazoum released prisoners accused of being jihadists without having participated in bloody actions and received them at the presidential palace. This invitation is also accompanied by the establishment of dialogues at the local level, led by religious leaders, customary chiefs and other notables with Katiba leaders.

This policy of openness is rather too recent for making any balance sheets. It is clear, however, that these dialogues must be accompanied by responses at the national level, both economically and socially. Defining, with the support of the state, the modalities of living together between the different communities, should make it possible to dry up the main sources of recruitment for jihadist movements.

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P.S.

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