Chapter 3

Terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel

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Introduction

Over the past decade, North Africa has become a hot bed of terrorist activity, creating an arc of instability stretching across the Sahel. Terrorism is not new to the region. In the early 1990s, Algerian mujahideen, returning from fighting alongside Al-Qaeda against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, helped to form the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which quickly began a campaign of terrorism in a bid to transform Algeria into an Islamic state ruled by sharia law. However, in recent years, North Africa and the Sahel region have experienced a rapid increase in the frequency of terrorist attacks and prevalence of violent jihadist organisations. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and, more recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Libya, are two of the most prominent organisations operating in the region today.

There are a number of common structural, social and economic drivers which, to varying degrees, make countries in this region vulnerable to instability, criminal trafficking and violent extremism. However, to gain a better understanding of why violent jihadist organisations have been so successful in North Africa and the Sahel, it is important to examine both the colonial and post-colonial history of its countries, as well as the often complex trajectories and relationships between the various criminal and militant organisations, which have entrenched themselves in the region. In Mali, for example, AQIM has proven adept at fielding loyalty and developing relationships with local jihadist organisations, embedding itself with groups in the north who have grievances against the state, exploiting local clan conflicts, and creating connections with the criminal networks that maintain the region's trafficking routes. In contrast, ISIS in Libya has used the chaos caused by the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, and relied on the magnetism of its extremist narrative, attention to communications, and the drawing power of its grand idea to create a 'caliphate', to establish itself in the country.[1]

Noting the complexity of the security landscape in North Africa and the Sahel, and the importance of understanding the diverse goals and modi operandi of the militant groups that operate within it, this chapter seeks to provide a history and overview of both AQIM and ISIS in the region,

including their distinctive strategies, historical origins, ideological differences, and recent successes and failures. In addition, several other, less prominent, violent jihadist groups are discussed, as well as what strategies might best serve both governments and civil society to improve security in the region.

Setting the scene

North Africa is a broad region that extends from the Atlantic Ocean on the western coast of Morocco to the Suez Canal and the Red Sea on the north-east of the African continent. The region includes the modern-day countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Sudan, as well as the territory of western Sahara. The French referred to the region as *Afrique du Nord* during the colonial period, while the Arabs named it the Maghreb, which translates from Arabic as the 'place of setting (of the sun), and hence West'.[2] A salient feature of the Maghreb region are the mountain ranges that dominate its landscapes, including the Rif in Morocco, the Tellian Atlas in northern Tunisia and the Aures in Algeria.

Despite the fact that the Berbers were the first to dwell there, the majority of the inhabitants in the region today identify themselves as Arabs. Berbers are an ethnic group that can be traced back to the Roman occupation of North Africa, their name being derived from *barbari,* denoting the non-Latin speaking people of the region.[3] After conquering the Maghreb in 705, the Arabs named the local ethnic group the Barbar (Berber), borrowing the term from the previous occupiers.

Culturally and religiously, the Arab Muslim conquerors had a greater influence over the local population than their predecessors. As McKenna (2011) notes, within less than four centuries after the Arab conquest, 'Berbers had become Islamised and in part also Arabised. The region's indigenous Christian communities, which prior to the Arab conquest had constituted an important part of the Christian world, ceased to exist.'[4] It is important to note that the Berbers were not forcibly converted to Islam, nor were they systematically indoctrinated, as previous conquerors had attempted.[5] The Maghreb remained under Muslim rule until the advent of European colonisation in 1830, which is encapsulated by the French capture of Algiers.

Despite the French occupying, often brutally, the wider region for more than a century, Islamic religious and cultural practices remained strong. After studying the cultural history of the Maghreb region, Zartman (1973) presciently noted, 'the basic ingredient of North African attitudes is the area's Islamic background'.[6] When assessing the present-day situation through the lens of colonial history, it is clear that during the period, the oppressed found a sense of identity and belonging through their religion and its values.

Further south of the Maghreb is the Sahel-Sahara zone that connects the Mediterranean world and sub-Saharan Africa. Geographically, the Sahel belt comprises parts of North and West Africa and passes through Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, as well as parts of Libya, Burkina Faso and Chad. The Tuaregs – descendants of ancient Berber speakers – are one of the most prominent ethnic tribes that call the Sahel home and the main inhabitants of the region, with their traditional range extending 'through five countries, Algeria, Mali, Libya, Niger, and Burkina Faso'.[7]

The other major ethnic groups in the Sahel include the Hassaniyya-speaking Arabs, the Fulbe/Fulani and the Songhai. Home to such a variety of ethnic groups, the Sahel has always been a trading hub. As Gregoire (1997) notes, 'sustained trade has linked the Sahel with North Africa for many centuries' with a multitude of products being exchanged, including gold, ivory, cotton and ostrich feathers.[8] With these vast trade routes connecting various market cities in different countries, both products and ideas were exchanged.

While trade and commerce in the Sahel may have preceded Islam, North African Muslims, who played a crucial role in the trans-Saharan trade, helped to spread the religion in West Africa. The population of the Sahel subsisted on agriculture and hunting. However, this would change drastically with the advent of colonisation as it spelt an end to the trans-Saharan trade. In the mid-19th century, the French would occupy most of the Sahel. In 1879, they began the conquest of *Soudan Française* (which would later become Mali).

In 1895, the French established an administrative grouping under its rule known as the Federation of French West Africa, which comprised the modern-day states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal. By the 1920s, the French forces had effectively gained control over the remotest corners of the Sahara Desert.[9] In the aftermath of the Second World War, there was an increase in nationalist movements who opposed colonial rule in French West Africa. These movements were demanding self-determination in the form of independence from their colonisers, and by the 1960s, all of France's former colonies had become independent republics.

After the independence of its colonies, France still wanted to maintain its presence in Africa so it designed a project to establish a partnership with its former subjects. The *Loi Cadre* (a law passed by the French government that provided each colony with semi-responsible government in 1956) set the foundation for such a project. This has been critical in the formulation of a framework for French foreign policy in Africa in the post-colonial period.

As Chafer (2002) highlights, the aim of the framework was to 'protect French strategic interests by maintaining France's presence in the region, but without incurring the costs of direct colonial rule'.[10] This was achieved

slumber, as the FIS won 54 per cent of the votes to the FLN's 28 per cent.[30] Late in the evening of 26 December 1991, the results were made official: out of the 231 contested seats in the national assembly (430 in total), the FIS won 188; the FFS (Socialist Forces Front), the main opposition party, captured 25; and the FLN came third with 15 seats.[31] Not only did the FIS win by a huge margin but they also won by a majority, which meant they would have the power to change the constitution. The people had made their choice and the results were proof that they believed the FIS would bring about the change that Algeria needed. Consequently, a change in the political horizon was imminent.

In 1992, the FIS, positioned to win the second round of the general elections and become the first democratically elected government, was denied victory. The military seized control and forced President Chadli to tender his resignation.[32] Furthermore, the leaders of FIS were imprisoned and the party was banned, forcing the group's members into hiding. Consequently, when the military banned Islamist political parties from the political platform, the only option to achieve change was through violent clashes with the state.

The FIS struggled to regain its original unity after the coup as its leaders were imprisoned. It eventually splintered and the majority of its members joined militant Islamist groups to lead an armed resistance against the state. Among these militant groups was the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), which was considered the military wing of the FIS, and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The latter not only consisted of Salafist members who were disenchanted with the ideals of the FIS, but also Algerian veterans who had returned from the Afghan jihad, fighting alongside Al-Qaeda against the Soviet Union.[33]

The Armed Islamic Group (GIA)

The GIA, formed in 1993, and led by Abdelhak Layada, became one of the most dangerous and feared Islamic militant groups during the Algerian civil war. Its attacks, based on the concept of *takfir*, included both local (government and civilians) and transnational (French) targets. The tactics of the GIA were diametrically opposed to those of the MIA (Armed Islamic Movement) or the AIS – who were both prepared to negotiate with the government in their bid to ascend to power. Another tenet that separated the GIA from other armed groups such as the MIA or the AIS was the group's adoption of violence. According to Rudolph (2008), the 'sweeping use of *takfir*' meant that any person who did not participate in the fight against the government was perceived as an enemy of the GIA and hence Islam.[34] Although the GIA and the MIA shared the same goal of Islamising Algeria, their means to achieving this end differed radically.

The GIA for its part rejected any means of dialogue or compromise with the Algerian government in its bid to transform Algeria into an Islamic state ruled by sharia. To attain these objectives, the GIA preferred 'short-term, spectacular terrorist attacks' that extended to suicide bombing and transnational terrorism.[35] In the beginning, the group killed 'diplomats, clergy, industrialists, intellectuals, journalists, priests, and foreigners. However, from 1996 they murdered tens of thousands of innocent Algerians.'[36] A campaign that began as a quest for an Islamic state in Algeria spiralled into an uncontrollable and brutal massacre that shocked the Islamic world.

The GIA became the first group to export jihadi terrorism to France. The first GIA attack on the soil of its European nemesis led to four dead and more than 80 injured when the group detonated a bomb at the Saint-Michel–Notre Dame metro station in Paris on 25 July 1995.[37] Two weeks later, a nail bomb at the Arc de Triomphe injured 17 people, among whom were 11 tourists. The GIA went on to detonate a further eight bombs in France between July and December 1995, three of which went off in Paris metro stations, killing 10 and injuring over 200 people.[38] The GIA was as relentless on the local scene as it was abroad. In March 1995, a bomb exploded outside the police station in Algiers resulting in 40 fatalities.[39] Between 1992 and 1997, the GIA's inexorable campaign claimed the lives of over 200 000 people, and as a result, popular support for the group dwindled, precipitating an eventual collapse. Support for, and the legitimacy of, the GIA reached its nadir after the group perpetuated an act that shocked even the most extreme fundamentalists. In March 1996, GIA militants raided a Trappist monastery in the village of Tibhirine and kidnapped seven monks. When the French government did not succumb to GIA's demands, its leader ordered that the monks be killed.[40] This was a crippling blow to the image of the GIA from which it never recovered. Soon afterwards, Al-Qaeda, which hitherto had supported the GIA, issued a communiqué denouncing the group's brutality and violence before severing all ties with them.

The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)

In 1998, Hassan Hattab, the former head of the GIA network in Europe, broke away from the group and established the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) as a reaction to the undiscerning and excessive violence of the GIA.[41] Similar to the GIA, the GSPC adhered to Salafist ideology and aimed to convert Algeria into an Islamic state governed purely by sharia law. To enhance their support among local people, the GSPC changed their tactics by attacking government and military targets only and in the process tried to mend the Salafi-jihadi image that the GIA had tarnished. The fact that the GSPC had become Algeria's most prominent terrorist group can be attributed

to two factors. The group had the support of Al-Qaeda and was able to operate outside of Algeria by drawing on its European networks.[42] Both sides realised that a partnership would not only be important but also mutually beneficial. The GSPC saw this partnership as producing global exposure and legitimacy in the eyes of the worldwide Salafi-jihadist movement. For Al-Qaeda, it had a practical basis as the group sought to access the widespread network of GSPC cells in Europe.[43]

In 2003, Nabil Sahraoui replaced Hattab as leader of the GSPC, and a few months later, orchestrated the kidnapping of 32 foreign tourists in the Sahara Desert.[44] In 2004, Sahraoui was killed by Algerian forces, resulting in Abdelmalek Droukdal assuming leadership of the organisation. Unlike his predecessors, Droukdal pursued closer relations with Al-Qaeda. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, according to Harmon (2010), 'became a major recruiting tool for the global *jihad* … [and] brought the GSPC and other national resistance *jihads* in line with al-Qaeda'.[45] Furthermore, the kidnapping and execution of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad in July 2005 signalled a rapprochement between Droukdal and Al-Zarqawi (the former leader of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq [AQI]). As such, an accord between the GSPC and AQI was sealed.[46]

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Merger and operations

On 11 September 2006, Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Al-Zawahiri, formalised the merger between Al-Qaeda and the GSPC. In response, the GSPC released a communiqué announcing 'the merging of the Salafist Group for Prayer and Combat in Algeria with Al-Qaeda, and swearing *bayat* [an oath of allegiance] to the Shaykh Usama Bin Laden'.[47] Hereafter, the group changed its name from GSPC to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[48]

AQIM opened its campaign of terror on 13 February 2007 with seven synchronised bomb attacks targeting police stations across Algeria, killing six people.[49] On 11 April 2007, AQIM led three simultaneous suicide bombings in Algiers, targeting the government palace, a police station, and a *gendarmerie* post.[50] At the government building, a dozen people were killed and approximately 118 injured, while the attack at the police station claimed the lives of 11 people and injured more than 40.[51] These attacks demonstrated the professionalism of AQIM in their use of explosives, car bombs, remote-control devices and suicide bombers. Prior to the emergence of AQIM, groups such as the GIA and GSPC hardly resorted to suicide bombings as a weapon of attack. Nonetheless, in an interview on Al Jazeera, Droukdal defended the group's use of suicide bombings, despite some members of AQIM disagreeing with him.[52]

After two coordinated suicide attacks on a United Nations office and the Constitutional Court in Algiers in December 2007, which killed over

60 people and injured approximately 180, AQIM claimed responsibility and released a statement labelling the foreigners who were killed as 'crusaders who are plundering our land and resources'.[53] The period between 2008 and 2009 witnessed a significant increase in suicide attacks on indiscriminate targets. To justify their methods of attack, AQIM appealed to the notion of sacrifice, extolling suicide bombers as 'the knights of the faith with their blood in defence of the wounded nation of Islam'.[54] As with the GIA, AQIM appealed to the concept of *takfir* to justify their attacks. However, the indiscriminate nature of these operations had a negative impact on the image of AQIM. Support for the group began to weaken among locals and its recruiting capacity was dealt a major setback. As a result, the group began to refrain from using suicide bombing as a method of attack.[55]

AQIM resorted to a range of activities to raise funds for their operations. These primarily included kidnapping and drug smuggling.[56] For instance, to name a few cases, the group has been responsible for kidnapping two Austrian tourists in Tunisia, two UN diplomats in northern Niger, and three Spanish aid workers in Mauritania.[57] In recent years, the number of attacks claimed or attributed to AQIM has declined – with the exception of the northern Mali insurgency in 2013. Some scholars attribute this to the fact that AQIM is moving away from terrorism towards organised crime. However, others argue that terrorist attacks are outsourced to smaller groups linked to AQIM.[58] An example is Al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the former commander of AQIM. The group claimed responsibility for the assault on a natural gas facility at Ain Amenas in January 2013 that claimed the lives of 67 people. They also claimed responsibility for restaurant attacks in Mali on 8 March 2015, where five people were killed.[59] In November 2015, Al-Qaeda and Al-Mourabitoun launched a joint operation, besieging the Radisson Blu hotel in the Malian capital, Bamako. A month later, Al-Mourabitoun merged with AQIM. The newly merged group conducted their first attack on two hotels in Ouagadougou on 15 January 2016. On 13 March 2016, AQIM launched their first attack in Ivory Coast when gunmen opened fire on tourists at the resort of Grand Bassam, killing 18 people and injuring 33.[60] These operations by AQIM not only signalled a resurgence of the group with the aim of consolidating Al-Qaeda's hold in West Africa, but also sent a message of defiance to ISIS, which has been rapidly expanding in power and influence in recent years.

On 2 March 2017, the AQIM Sahara branch merged with Ansar al-Din, Al-Mourabitoun and the Macina Liberation Front to form the *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims). The leader of the group is the former Ansar al-Din leader, Iyad ag Ghali, who was

instrumental in the Burkina Faso attacks. To commemorate the inception of the group, he pledged his allegiance as follows: 'On this blessed occasion, we renew our pledge of allegiance (*bayat*) to our honourable emirs and sheikhs: Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (*emir of AQIM*), our beloved and wise sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (*emir of Al Qaeda*) and … the emir of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, Mullah Haibatullah, may Allah protect them and support them.'[61]

The merger comes in the wake of growing insurgency in northern Mali, which since 2015, has seen 257 Al-Qaeda-linked attacks. In 2016, there were 150 per cent more jihadist activities in the greater region than there were the previous year, with the majority occurring in northern Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Niger.[62] All of the constituent groups have engaged in guerrilla warfare, using typical insurgent tactics such as ambushes and bombings with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). However, Al-Mourabitoun, with Mokhtar Belmokhtar as its leader, is usually the subgroup that is behind the larger, more spectacular assaults. This includes, for example, the massive suicide attack on a Malian military base in Gao, which left at least 50 people dead in January 2017.

According to data compiled by FDD's *Long War Journal* (2017), in the first few months of 2017, over 50 Al-Qaeda-linked attacks in Mali and neighbouring countries were recorded. Most of the operations were carried out inside Mali, mainly in the southern half of the country. However, at least 12 were perpetrated in Burkina Faso and Niger. Depending on whether these groups will be willing to assert their presence, the most likely scenario is a continuation of localised attacks in northern and central Mali, as well as in the country's extended border regions.[63]

AQIM continues to transform and adapt to the changing conditions of the Maghreb and is currently venturing into West Africa, with the attacks in Burkina Faso being the first major operation in the country by any Al-Qaeda affiliate. It is this ability to survive that makes the group an inherent danger to North African countries and the wider Sahel region. However, in recent years, Al-Qaeda's former associate, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has challenged its dominance in the Middle East by controlling large swathes of land in Syria and Iraq. ISIS has also received pledges of allegiance from groups that were formerly allied to Al-Qaeda, such as Boko Haram and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia. However, while ISIS as an entity has not replicated their territorial accomplishments in the Middle East on the African continent, they, nonetheless, have managed to secure a point of entry in Libya.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
ISIS is an extremist group formed from an Al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq and Syria. While ISIS's immediate aim is to create an Islamic state in the Levant, a

region consisting of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus and southern Turkey, its long-term goal is to bring all Muslims under its rule. Aside from being a terrorist group, it is also a political and military organisation that holds a radical interpretation of Islam as a political philosophy and seeks to impose that worldview by force on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Expelled from Al-Qaeda for being too extreme, ISIS claims to be the legitimate ruler of all Sunni Muslims worldwide. From its emergence in 2014, ISIS has established what they regard as a state, which includes large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, governed from Raqqa in Syria.[64]

Originally led by Musab al-Zarqawi, the one-time head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS gained support within Iraq as a Sunni insurgency group fighting a partisan Shiite-led Iraqi government, which was often perceived by Sunni locals to be a US-puppet government. In 2013, the group joined the Syrian civil war, but rather than focus on defeating the regime of Bashar al-Assad, they quickly began their Islamic state. ISIS rapidly became a dominant regional force, and was able to recruit more than 20 000 fighters from around the world.[65] On 29 June 2014, ISIS officially declared the territory under its control in Iraq and Syria as a caliphate and the group's new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as caliph. In his acceptance speech for the caliphate, Al-Baghdadi made it clear that ISIS's activities were not limited to any one region, as the group sought global governance of all Muslims. Controlling territories stretching from north of Aleppo to south of Baghdad, including the cities of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, in 2014, there were roughly six million people on either side of the Syrian and Iraqi border living under ISIS's rule.

Similar to its predecessor in Iraq (Al-Qaeda), ISIS's governance structure is hierarchical, multi-faceted and comprehensive. It consists of a core leadership group, a *Shura* council, 24 governors and various subordinate councils, which include military, security, intelligence, religious affairs, finance and media. This structure is further mirrored at each of the lower-level provincial, district and town levels.[66] ISIS divides governance into two main categories, namely administration (religious education and enforcement, courts and punishment) and services (humanitarian aid, essential food supplies and key infrastructure, such as power and water).[67] In the early stages of governing an area, ISIS focuses on religious administrative matters and eliminating opposition, a process first used to rebuild its influence in Iraq's Sunni areas and counter the impact of the 'tribal awakening'.

ISIS's overarching belief centres on re-establishing an Islamic caliphate. Unlike Al-Qaeda, which views a global caliphate as a long-term goal, ISIS considers the present conditions ripe for its immediate establishment. Since its official founding in June 2014, this doctrinal commitment has been translated

can bring into their fold in the Sahara and north Africa coastal regions'.[73] The delegate leader of ISIS in Libya has publically stated that the reason Libya remains an important part of ISIS's overall strategy is due both to its location and abundant resources.[74]

According to the United Nations Security Council (2015), ISIS in Syria and Iraq has a close relationship with its members in Libya. A significant number of Libyan nationals, about 800, who fought for ISIS in Syria and Iraq, now fight for ISIS in Libya. Furthermore, 'ISIS in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic continues to send emissaries with instructions, albeit infrequently, to ISIS in Libya'.[75] This pattern of ISIS in Iraq and Syria sending emissaries has not been observed in other areas in which other ISIS affiliates operate.

One of the major milestones of the Islamic State's 'official' presence in Libya came immediately after the Islamic Youth Shura Council, a militant group that had been in control of Derna, declared allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and Ansar al-Sharia in Derna, in October 2014. [76] The Islamic Youth Shura Council or *Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam* (MSSI) announced its existence on 4 April 2014, when masked members of the group took to the streets of Derna.[77] In the spring of 2014, an ISIS delegation visited the Islamic Youth Shura Council in Derna and talked them into pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Soon afterwards, the council declared eastern Libya an ISIS '*wilayat*', naming it the *Barqa* (Cyrenaica) province. In addition to the declaration of this new province in eastern Libya, ISIS prioritised its expansion in the west. On 19 February 2015, a convoy of Islamic State vehicles arrived at Sirte in central Libya and declared it *Wilayat Tarablus* (Tripoli Province).[78]

In Derna, ISIS attempted to consolidate control through a campaign of intimidation and violent clashes with militia and tribal rivals. Soon, they began displaying their traditional style of draconian governance in the city. The group confiscated cigarettes and other banned items, and set up its own police force and court system. They segregated schools, banned certain subjects from the curriculum, and implemented a strict dress code for women. They also carried out public lashings and executions.[79] Due to its style of governance, the group soon faced strong resistance from local tribes. In return, ISIS retaliated by attacking its opponents, using tactics that included beheadings and crucifixion. As indicated in a special report by the Crisis Group: '[ISIS] Militants began to publicly execute security officials and residents accused of spying or engaging in unIslamic practices; demand young girls be handed over for forced marriage and de-facto rape; and, at checkpoints along Libya's main coastal road, arrest individuals identified as state employees or oil sector workers.'[80]

While it is a challenge to uncover ISIS's funding sources in Libya, some

commentators believe that the group imposes local taxes (including on smuggling), loots banks, has wealthy sponsors and uses extortion and kidnapping to fund themselves. According to the Crisis Group, although ISIS ransacked oil fields and attacked ports and refineries, there is little evidence to confirm the group smuggles oil.[81] ISIS in Libya also sources funds by taxing and facilitating migrant smuggling. A 2016 report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC) noted that, 'this creates incentives whereby the Islamic State can increase profit by exacerbating the migration flow by targeted attacks on civilians in their stronghold areas'.[82] The report further indicates that in 2015, 'illegal migrants coming to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean from Libya (the so-called 'Central Mediterranean Route'), make up roughly 60% of all illegal migrants to Europe'.[83]

Drug smuggling and arms trafficking are other forms of funding for ISIS in Libya. ISIS and Ansar al-Sharia coordinate with criminal groups and benefit from local criminality in the areas under their control. Azoulay (2015) writes that ISIS has 'nurtured alliances with Al-Qaeda-linked groups, profiting from criminal activities to expand its reach in the country'.[84] ISIS in Libya managed to overcome the dissension between Al-Qaeda and ISIS by co-opting local jihadi groups and nurturing alliances with Al-Qaeda-linked groups.[85] Ansar al-Sharia, which remains loyal to the Al-Qaeda leadership, provides assistance to ISIS in Sirte, Dernia and Benghazi, while thus far managing to preserve its identity separate from ISIS.[86]

The long-term goals of ISIS in Libya

It is important to note that ISIS's choice to expand along the Libyan coastline, starting from Derna all the way to Sirte, was part of a greater plan. This decision forms part of the group's overall strategy to take areas where human traffickers are highly active to ensure themselves an ever-fresh and steady supply of foreign recruits. Furthermore, given the group's propensity to attack and seek control of oil-production facilities, it can be safely anticipated that they will continue sweeping along the coast to gain control of as much of Libya's oil as they can. Since oil has been their preferred source of funding in Syria and in Iraq, it is highly likely to be the same in Libya, where Sirte is one of the major points of interest in the 'oil crescent' region.[87]

ISIS habitually divides countries in which they have a military presence into '*wilayat*', or 'provinces'. In Libya, ISIS divided its territory into three: Barqa (encompassing the east), Tripoli (the central and western parts) and Fezzan (the south). Given the political and military context, these are not provinces in the true sense of the word as much as they are part of the group's propaganda attempt to use geography and history to create a political and military status

quo. The primary strategic objectives of ISIS in Libya are to eradicate the borders between Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, thereby turning the region into a strategic gateway to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.[88] In the words of Abu Irhayyim al-Libi, a former high-ranking leader within Al-Qaeda and supporter of ISIS in Libya: 'There are some who don't realise the (strategic) importance of Libya, which encompasses sea, desert and mountains, and provides access to Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia.'[89]

Despite the gains made by ISIS in Libya, there are two main obstacles that hinder the organisation's primary objective. First, ISIS is unable to leverage the sort of broad-based sectarian grievances that have fuelled Sunni support for the group in Syria and Iraq. Unlike Syria and Iraq, Libya has a homogenously Sunni population, and does not suffer from sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Second, ISIS in Libya currently lacks the capacity to provide administrative and social services to local populations. In war-torn Iraq and Syria, ISIS was able to raise money through ransoms and the control of oil. In Libya, however, oil continues to be controlled by the state-run National Oil Company. The government controls foreign oil sales and then distributes revenues to both the rival Tobruk- and Tripoli-based governments.[90]

With this in mind, it is more probable for ISIS in Libya to raise the appeal of its brand through high-profile attacks to attract supporters from Libya's defecting jihadist movements. Meanwhile, it will continue to attack oil fields and destabilise the country, hoping to create an environment conducive to attaining its objectives.

Countering ISIS in Libya

As demonstrated in Iraq and Syria, degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS has proved to be a difficult task for the United States and its allies. Yet, through several counterterrorism measures the United States has been able to make strategic gains in limiting ISIS's access to funding, its recruitment pool and its strategic territory.[91] The expansion of aerial bombing campaigns and targeted drone strikes in Iraq and Syria has greatly contributed to restricting the momentum of the rapid ISIS advance.

As Hashim (2014) pointedly remarks, 'It [the campaign of airstrikes] has even allowed the dispirited Iraqi army and the vastly overrated Kurdish Peshmerga to push IS back from some of the territories it had conquered.'[92] Although ISIS was driven from its main areas of control in Libya in December 2016, and oil production has rebounded to a three-year high, Libya still remains polarised and more fragmented than ever.

It is important to note that over-reliance on airpower is not the solution to destroying ISIS. Airpower can degrade but it cannot uproot an entire system

of control by ISIS over territory, people and infrastructure. ISIS militants have learnt to disperse, to tunnel, to use camouflage and to go to ground in the cities. ISIS is capable of reverting to pure terrorism, a tactic in which it is thoroughly adept.[93] According to US officials and the Pentagon's Africa command, the fact that ISIS was driven from its stronghold in Sirte has resulted in several hundred fighters dispersing across Libya, who now pose a threat to the country, its neighbours and potentially Europe.[94]

ISIS is a prime example of how, over the past few years, violent jihadist movements have become more powerful than ever. Standard counterterrorism measures such as designations, financial sanctions, travel bans, targeted killings and special-forces operations, among others, are insufficient against movements that control cities, towns and supply lines, provide public goods, generate revenue locally and have tens of thousands of fighters. Furthermore, some jihadist leaders' ideology and aspirations prevent a situation where they can be engaged politically to formulate a peace agreement.

Reversing jihadist gains in Libya will depend on resolving rivalries between local forces and persuading them to collaborate against ISIS. This may also involve giving areas associated with the Gaddafi regime, which are most vulnerable to ISIS recruitment, a stronger position in the national fabric, and probably also self-defence capabilities. As demonstrated in Syria and Iraq, a bombing campaign could hamper ISIS operations, especially near oil facilities, and thereby degrade its revenues. In the context of Libya, such targeted strikes may make sense. However, as long as rivalries between its enemies persist, it will continue to hold the area around Sirte and may extend further east.

As Crisis Group (2016) have noted, 'If the USA or others decide to press ahead with heavier bombing, better they do so without demanding that the fledging, contested unity government invite or endorse foreign military action'.[95] Doing so may contribute to reducing the credibility of the unity government among the local population. Rather, more can be done to engage with diverse Libyan security actors – and promote contact between them – to build support for the political process and find potential partners against ISIS.

As noted earlier, airstrikes and targeted killing by drone strikes may be effective if used in a limited manner. Another military measure commonly used to combat jihadist groups is the elimination of the group's leaders, often referred to as 'decapitation'.[96] Targeted killings can disrupt extremist networks and their ability to undertake sophisticated attacks and, in the case of drones, do so without immediate risk to military personnel – as has been demonstrated in the targeted killings of several prominent Al-Shabaab leaders in recent years. Certainly, they have disrupted Al-Qaeda in the Pakistani tribal areas and appear to have impacted ISIS's ability to operate in Afghanistan by hindering leaders'

movements. However, their greatest strength is also a weakness. The deaths of non-combatants in drone strikes have, in several cases, destabilised local political conditions and fuelled anger among local civilians. Hence, unless they are integrated into a broader strategy to calm a conflict, their tactical gains come at a cost.

Despite the fact that assassinations can help disrupt a leader's and the groups' ability to operate, they tend to be high risk and have little impact.[97] The impact is particularly uncertain against large insurgent movements in war zones, particularly those like ISIS whose inner workings and command structures are opaque. Although in some instances it may fragment a group, in the case of a well-organised organisation such as ISIS, a more radical and violent replacement is likely to quickly emerge.[98] In short, there is little evidence that targeted killings are helpful in ending conflicts with jihadists or that they decisively weaken their movements.

Another method to combat ISIS in Libya is to do so on the ideological level. The failure of purely military approaches to combat terrorism has seen the emergence of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives in recent years. P/CVE agendas tend to include: (1) civic engagement with communities; (2) a push-back or a 'counter-narrative' against intolerant strands of religion; (3) a focus on stemming the flow of foreign fighters; and (4) efforts to address the perceived 'root causes' of radicalisation.[99]

Different states and international bodies, including the United Nations (UN), emphasise different aspects in their P/CVE agendas. These range from socio-economic root causes, to countering specific ideological and religious recruitment narratives. For instance, the UN Secretary-General's recent Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism calls on states to develop their own plans of action, which include measures that address diverse sources of fragility.[100]

While it is important to recognise the diverse factors that can drive extremism, and shift resources toward efforts to tackle them, there are some important caveats to remember. First, while creating jobs for youth is sensible, it prevents them from joining extremist groups in only some and not all environments. Second, helping marginalised communities is a vital component of reconstruction, but if the motivation behind the project is to win support against extremists, it can work against the provision of aid and those delivering it. Third, in many instances, governments and the UN may not be best positioned to develop locally relevant counter-narratives. Furthermore, co-opting 'friendly' imams may result in them losing legitimacy among their followers and thereby empower more radical religious voices.

Governments should allow, and protect space, for diverse Muslim voices, Salafi and otherwise. Perhaps more importantly, ideology's role in driving the

rise of extremists is not straightforward. Although Salafi proselytising and often state-sponsored Islamisation of parts of society have helped set the stage, the consolidation of groups such as ISIS owes more to the jihadists' exploitation of war and state collapse, or armed groups adopting more extreme tactics as crises deepen. During crises, the support extremists may enjoy from communities is, in most cases, based less on shared values and more on what else they provide when things fall apart. These include protection against a hated regime, quick dispute resolution, social advancement or opportunity for profit.

Despite some of its setbacks, the P/CVE agenda has value. It can be an effective tool in tackling ISIS recruitment, which in many places pivots less on imams and religion than on social media and appeals to fraternity, belonging and purpose. It might, for example, advance deradicalisation in prisons where many are radicalised and recruited, and contribute to assisting particularly vulnerable youth groups, which are often a primary target of ISIS recruiters.

In developing approaches to counter the influence of extremist movements, governments and civil society actors should narrow P/CVE to a handful of context-specific activities and contribute to funding research on radicalisation and its patterns – a subject which is under-researched. Additionally, there should be a greater focus on efforts to address the root causes of instability and conflict. In this regard, donors can usefully shift resources from military and security spending to addressing those underlying factors. A wide range of stakeholders should be engaged whenever possible, and efforts made to draw from civil society, the religious community, women and youth groups, and other relevant parties.

Conclusion

The rise of ISIS in Libya and the growing strength of Al-Qaeda-linked groups over the last few years pose a significant threat to both state and human security across North Africa and the Sahel. In recent years, countries like Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, which until now have been relatively isolated from terrorism, have been a target of AQIM's expanding operational footprint, while ISIS networks now run through Egypt, Libya and into Algeria.

These organisations continue to destabilise nations desperately trying to consolidate democracy, while discouraging tourism and economic growth. The extreme ideologies they espouse make mediation difficult and traditional peace agreements improbable. Furthermore, their links to transnational criminal networks serves to perpetuate illicit drug and human-trafficking networks that generate immense suffering across the region.

Defeating organisations such as AQIM and ISIS is difficult, and there seem to be few precedents from which lessons can be learnt. What is clear is

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