



UNPACKING THE  
CHALLENGE OF

**Jihadism**  
**in North Africa**

Origins, Evolving Trends and the Way Forward

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# Foreword

Terrorist activities and attacks in the MENA region, especially in North Africa, had witnessed remarkable growth during the first years following the Arab uprisings, as compared to pre-2011. The power vacuum that followed the unprecedented events which led to the ouster of long-standing autocrats in the region resulted in the destabilization of some countries in the region, for instance Libya, notably on the security level.

Although Jihadist threats are not a novelty in the region, many factors led to the rise and eventually, to some extent, the fall of this threat. This is true after the defeat of ISIS in the Levant and the successful hunt down of terrorist leaders, mainly in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya which forced these terrorist groups to seek a safe haven in the Sahel. Indeed, the movements of Jihadist groups between the Maghreb-Sahel borders is perceived by many as a presentation of a new Jihadist hub based in the Sahel. Jihadist threats, although no longer imminent, are yet still existent and worthy of a close look at its development and possible scenarios that could redefine the region as a whole.

It is in this context that the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PoDiMed) publishes this study to give a better understanding of the Jihadist landscape in North Africa and shed light on the shifting dynamics of the different Jihadist groups, their financing and recruitment techniques, building alliances and mergers. The study concludes with the focus on the Tunisian case: the evolving trends of Islamist groups and the threat of returnees.

We would like to thank our respective distinguished editor and authors, Lina Raafat, Eya Jrad, Djallil Lounnas and Emna Ben Arab, for their valuable contribution and their dedication towards this project and through this study, we hope to build a valuable knowledge on such a relevant topic. This study is a part of KAS PoDiMed's activities, which works on the political developments in the South Mediterranean region and aims to implement cross-national projects with reference to the South and East Mediterranean, also, but not only, in regard to security and stability in the region.

**Thomas Volk**

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# Introduction

Jihadist terrorism is a global phenomenon that poses a genuine threat to peace and stability in various regions around the globe, and North Africa is no exception. Indeed, against the backdrop of the political upheavals stemming from the 2011 Arab Spring Uprisings and the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, jihadist groups in the region were provided with an unparalleled opportunity to reframe and reposition themselves, posing a serious threat to security dynamics in the region at large.

According to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), during the period between 2002 and 2019, the Middle East and North Africa recorded the largest number of deaths from terrorism with more than 96,000 - accounting for 40% of the global total deaths from terrorism.<sup>1</sup> However, as a result of coordinated counterterrorism responses, the Islamic State's territorial footprint has since been severely diminished. In March 2019, the US led coalition against the Islamic State and its partners announced the territorial defeat of the Islamic State's "caliphate" after regaining control over the group's last stronghold in Baghuz, Syria.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the Middle East and North Africa region has recorded substantial improvement, with the region showing the largest improvement in terms of the overall impact of terrorism during the last two years. Deaths from terrorism in the region have fallen by 87%, reaching their lowest level since 2003.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the overemphasis on Iraq and Syria in popular discourse as the primary hubs for global jihadist movements over recent years, miles away in North Africa, reverberations can be felt and North African jihadist groups have been provided with a second chance to re-establish their presence and expand their reach. It is specifically due to the territorial defeat of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq that these groups have been forced to think in broader geographical terms and expand effectively into other regions such as North Africa and the Sahel.

It is of crucial significance in this regard to underscore that, while the national context and manifestations of the challenge of terrorism are unique to every context and country, the regional dimension of such developments cannot be ignored or understated. The challenge of terrorism in North Africa cannot be confined to one specific country; it is not a problem unique to only Libya or Tunisia or Morocco; rather, it extends to the region as a whole, with developments in each country contributing to a ripple effect impacting neighboring countries and bordering regions.

It is also important to underscore that jihadist groups are often riven by internal conflicts and are in many instances motivated by local objectives as much as they are driven by a global jihadist mission. They are deeply entrenched within local and regional dynamics and networks. Across North Africa and the Sahel, the lines between jihadist terrorism, organized crime and local communal grievances and tensions are

often blurred and ambiguous. Therefore, to discuss the challenge of jihadist terrorism confronting North Africa, it is essential to recognize the complexities involved.

It is equally important to avoid treating various jihadist groups in the region as one and the same. Jihadist groups have time and again demonstrated a surprising ability to morph into different forms to adapt to changing landscapes and security threats. It is, therefore, crucial to adopt a nuanced approach when examining jihadist groups, moving away from grouping them together as static actors and as prisoners of radical ideologies, and toward perceiving them as agile and highly adaptive political actors; constantly reframing their ideology and strategy to advance their proclaimed objectives and adapt to emerging threats.

This study aims to unpack the complexities and ambiguities associated with understanding the jihadist landscape across North Africa. It comprehensively maps the evolution of the Jihadist threat in North Africa over the last two decades, looking specifically at the historical origins of different groups and how they have expanded their reach or fragmented over time, in the face of persistent threats and geopolitical developments. The study offers a comparative analysis, contrasting the divergent strategies and modus operandi employed by various groups over time, and examining how such strategies have impacted their overall trajectory and survival prospects.

Furthermore, the study tackles the increasingly prevalent regional dimensions of jihadism in North Africa by examining how local groups have fostered regional and transnational networks to sustain their operations over time. More specifically, the study examines the direct interlinkages between North African and Sahelian jihadist movements, and in doing so, highlights the recent shift in the global epicenter of jihadist operations from North Africa and the Middle East towards the Sahel region.

Additionally, the study examines the case study of Tunisia as an instance of how global and regional dynamics can impact and greatly shape jihadist dynamics in national contexts. By tracing the evolving trends exhibited by Islamist groups in Tunisia over time, the study highlights various factors that have led to the exacerbation of the jihadist terrorism threat within Tunisia. The study further sheds light on the challenge of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and the potential security threat they pose—a challenge that many countries around the globe are grappling with against the backdrop of mounting caseloads of individuals formerly associated with the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, who have been captured or surrendered.

In the first chapter, Eya Jrad comprehensively maps the jihadist landscape across North Africa. She examines the ramifications of the 2011 Arab Spring Uprisings for national and transnational jihadist group operations in the region, which effectively provided such groups with an unparalleled opportunity to advance their strategic objectives and widen their reach within the region. Jrad takes a deep dive in highlighting divergent strategies used by the various jihadist actors across Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya, providing a thorough analysis of inter-jihadist dynamics and interactions and sheds light on their modus operandi and strategies including, most notably, leadership structure, group

<sup>1</sup> "Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism" (Institute for Economics & Peace., November 2020). Available at: <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>.

<sup>2</sup> "Islamic State Group Defeated as Final Territory Lost, US-Backed Forces Say," *BBC News*, March 23, 2019, sec. Middle East. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47678157>.

<sup>3</sup> "Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism."

management, financing mechanisms, recruitment strategies and public discourse narratives. Jrad's chapter puts forward an intricate roadmap, anchoring subsequent analysis in a robust understanding of jihadist strategies and tactics across North Africa.

In the second chapter, Djallil Lounnas considers the regional dimensions of jihadist group operations, specifically looking into the interlinkages between North African and Sahelian jihadist groups. Lounnas traces a shift in the global epicenter of jihadist movements from North Africa and toward the Sahel region; the latest proclaimed theatre of global jihad. Lounnas's chapter offers rich insights on the fluidity of allegiances and relationships between jihadist groups in North Africa and the Sahel, culminating in the successive fragmentation and rebranding of various organizations under different banners. He examines the impact of the civil strife in Algeria and Islamist upheaval in Libya in the 1990s on jihadist mobilization into the Sahel; the importance of the Sahel region as a source of financial and material support for North African jihadist groups; the nexus between terrorism and organized crime and how jihadist groups exploited existing Sahelian illicit criminal networks to advance their objectives. Finally, he looks at the tensions, alliances and re-compositions that ultimately led to the creation of the new, dominant jihadist group in the Sahel: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). Lounnas's chapter underscores the importance of paying attention to the growing regionalization of the threat of terrorism, and how the North African and Sahelian jihadist scene fits into global jihad discourse.

In the third chapter, Emna Ben Arab evaluates the impact of the aforementioned national and regional jihadist dynamics on the challenge of terrorism in the Tunisian context. Ben Arab explores emerging trends exhibited by Islamist movements in Tunisia, trends that have been largely shaped by evolving national, regional and international developments. From the demise of Ennahda party and its ousting from power in July 2021 to the constantly unraveling security situation in Libya and the proliferation of foreign terrorist fighters to the recent abrupt US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover of the country and, finally, the heightened insecurity and jihadist tensions festering in the Sahel region—these developments create a multifaceted and complex landscape, posing serious risks of exacerbating the terrorism threat confronting Tunisia. More specifically, Ben Arab examines the risks attached to the repatriation of Tunisian FTFs returning from Syria and Iraq, and the threats they might potentially pose to Tunisian national security. Ben Arab's chapter provides a nuanced, nationally focused analysis of the challenge of terrorism facing Tunisia; a challenge that cannot and should not be ignored, and one which requires a comprehensive and integrated response.

The study concludes by drawing concrete policy recommendations and considerations for the way forward. It puts forward specific policy guidelines and interventions addressing actors at the international, regional and national levels. These recommendations outline the parameters of a more integrated, coherent and comprehensive response to the common challenge posed by North African states grappling with the threat of jihadism while emphasizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and that responses to confront the challenge of terrorism must be anchored in the local and national context underpinning each country.

## About the author:

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Chapter

1

# Mapping the Jihadist Landscape in North Africa: A Witches' Brew

*By: Dr. Eya Jrad*

## OVERVIEW

In the recent few decades, North Africa has been of strategic importance to major external powers, located as it is on the edge of Europe, spanning South–North migration poles along with the abundance of its natural resources. It has, however, also recently become of strategic concern for several reasons, related to the proliferation of African-based national and transnational jihadist groups, the resurgence of terrorist activity, and their growing grassroots appeal, making North African countries increasingly important strongholds for jihadist movements. The latter have manifested themselves in a spectrum of networks with varied organizational capacities and priorities, while sharing the overarching objective of establishing an Islamic 'Ummah' based on Salafist precepts and using jihad as the overarching method to achieve this goal.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the North African context of perceived weak states, porous, mountainous, and ungoverned, or at best poorly governed borders, and citizens' grievances against their own governments, has provided a conducive environment for jihadist groups to emerge and flourish. Furthermore, and because these organizations are, by nature, opportunistic, unique domestic conditions in North African countries since the 2011 uprisings they have provided them with a new space to operate, shifting these groups' attention toward this region, to capitalize on such events, to advance their visions and to increase their reach. A report<sup>5</sup> released in 2012 revealed that "Al Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL) issued strategic guidance to followers in Libya and elsewhere to take advantage of the Libyan rebellion. AQSL's strategic guidance was to gather weapons, establish training camps, build a network in secret, establish an Islamic state, and institute sharia."<sup>6</sup>

Further complicating this landscape is the more recent loss of ground in the Middle East previously held by jihadist groups, leading to the shift in the epicenter of the Islamist jihadist movement to sub-Saharan Africa, as highlighted by the 2020 Global Terrorism Index<sup>7</sup>. However, after 'stirring up the hornet's nest', the French-led counter-terrorism mission against Islamist groups in Africa's Sahel region, Operation Barkhane, led to the dispersal of terrorist groups, fleeing and regrouping in Libya.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence,

instability in the latter had a ripple effect on the rest of the region, heightened by an unprecedented influx of arms throughout the region. Additionally, the covert and overt return of battle-hardened foreign fighters from conflict zones to their home countries<sup>9</sup> has further elevated the regional terrorism threat. Against this backdrop, jihadists thriving in the region post-2011 was not solely due to their strategic and operational mastery,<sup>10</sup> rather, it was a result of a combination of contextual and structural factors. In this setting, North African countries have become the scene of rivalry between groups of the broader global jihadist movement, each claiming a higher number of affiliates, greater popularity and a stronger ability to stage attacks in countries of the region and beyond.

While the nature, objectives, and evolution of these groups might differ, they remain an insidious and highly dangerous threat. This chapter is organized as follows. The first section starts by mapping the jihadist groups operating in and across North Africa. The second section outlines group strategies and actions.

## Understanding the Jihadist Landscape in North Africa

### Mapping Jihadist Groups in North Africa

The jihadist threat posed today is not new to North African countries. Algeria lived through the devastating black decade when terrorism was used as a tactic against the state and the population, thus, the new appointment of an Algerian, Abu Ubaidah Yousef al-Annabi, as the current emir, or leader, of the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, comes as no surprise.

This section explores the Jihadist Landscape in North Africa before discussing examples of Intra-jihadist dynamics and interactions. It maintains that to understand the current terrorist threat at the regional level, one must be aware of its historical developments at the national level.

While sharing a common perspective, that violence is the only tool for attaining social change, Jihadism in the region is split with regard to agendas and operational tactics. Therefore, North Africa represents a microcosm of global jihadist rivalries, those of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.

Attempting to map jihadist groups in the region seems like a challenging endeavor for several reasons: 1) Group members shift back and forth between these groups, 2) Coalitions are constantly being built and fragmented, and 3) The lines between domestic and transnational terrorism are blurred and ambiguous. Notwithstanding the afore-

<sup>4</sup> Joas Wagemakers, *Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism*, in *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's Power*, (ed. F. Cavatorta (Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile*. August 2012. Available at: <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/aq-libya-loc.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Produced by the federal research division of the Library of Congress (LOC) in conjunction with the Defense Department's Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office.

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, (Sydney, November 2020, p05). Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Samir Amghar, *Jihadism in Northern Africa and the Sahel*, IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2015, p. 60. Available at: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/jihadism-in-northern-africa-and-the-sahel/>.

<sup>9</sup> Due to the absence of official figures, as well as imprecise and often conflicting estimates, numbers of North Africans who actually made it into the conflict zones vary between 3,000 Tunisians, 1,600 Moroccans, 600 Libyans, and 260 Algerians (as of 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Jensen, *How the Taliban did it: Inside the 'operational art' of its military victory*, August 2021.

mentioned challenges, the section below provides a comprehensive mapping of the prominent operating jihadist groups; disaggregated at the country level.

## In Algeria

<b>The Armed Islamic Movement (MIA)</b>	Founded in 1981, the MIA was the first to opt for a military approach to uphold its vision. Confrontations between the MIA and the Algerian state from 1982 to 1987 resulted in "inflict[ing] serious reverses on the security forces on several occasions" <sup>11</sup> before the killing of their leader and the dismantling of the group. The remaining MIA leaders and followers have been prosecuted and a year later had received amnesties, leading to the reformation of some of the group's units.
<b>The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)</b>	The FIS is an Islamist opposition party, established in 1989. The party had won both local and legislative elections (in 1990 and 1991, respectively) before the military cancelled the results after the first round. However, internal divisions have marked the movement following the negation of the Islamist electoral victory; between a faction that worked at making peace with the regime and those who decided to take up arms instead.
<b>The Islamic Salvation Army (AIS)</b>	The FIS's armed wing, formed in 1993 as a coalition between the MIA and the Movement for the Islamic State in Algeria (created in the late 1980s), after the military cancellation of the elections. The AIS has also attracted members of the oppressed FIS but limited its attacks to military targets. By October 1997, in an attempt to distinguish the AIS and the GIA, the AIS declared a unilateral ceasefire.
<b>The Armed Islamic Group (GIA)</b>	The GIA is regarded as the deadliest group in Algeria's civil war. It was formed in 1992 by three main groups 1) Afghan Mujahideen 2) MIA veterans and 3) Algerian youth mosque-based activist networks in the 1980s (some of whom were initially members of the FIS). Later, the group was divided over the issue of attacking civilians, and a group of combatants, split to form the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat.
<b>The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)</b>	The GSPC was established in 1998. Following the election of President Bouteflika, GSPC was critical towards those who accepted amnesty and even targeted other members of Islamist organizations. This is worth noting because the GSPC was most successful in eastern Algeria, the hometown of the Algerian Berber community, where the perception of support, at least passive, was created. As both shared a common enemy since the central government had initiated a cultural inhibition process towards Berbers, later, the group reactivated structures in the center and the east to grant the group's further access. <sup>12</sup>
<b>Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM)</b>	In 2006, the GSPC became a formal affiliate of Al-Qaeda and changed its name to AQLIM.

<b>The Sons of the Islamic Sahara Movement for Justice (SISMJ)</b>	<p>The SISMJ is an armed separatist movement in southern Algeria, founded in 2004 to establish Sharia law in Algeria. The group was based in Algeria and also operated out of northern Niger and western Libya but did not take up arms until 2007. Its first serious attack took place at the airport in Djanet, Algeria.</p> <p>After carrying out more attacks in 2007, the SISMJ entered talks with the Algerian government and allegedly agreed to lay down its arms.</p> <p>The SISMJ did not resume attacks until the Malian coup in March 2012 when it allied with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and later with the Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade.</p> <p>In May 2013, Abdul Salam Tirmon (one of the founders of the group) released a video that stated the SISMJ would no longer ally with MUJAO or the Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade; the reasons for the break in alliances remain unclear.</p> <p>In 2015, the movement ceased all armed activity against the authorities unilaterally and some of its members surrendered to the army in 2016.</p>
<b>The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)<sup>13</sup></b>	The MUJAO was formed in 2011 as a splinter group of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The MUJAO declared its formation in October 2011 after it kidnapped three European aid workers from a refugee camp in Tindouf, Algeria. Following the 2012 coup d'état that ousted the Malian government, the MUJAO occupied territory in northern Mali, around the city of Gao.
<b>The Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade</b>	<p>The Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade, also known as Al Mulathamun, was founded in December 2012 when Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his battalion broke away from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).</p> <p>Despite its split from AQIM, the Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade still swore its allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and claimed to act in the group's name. However, the group was never formally recognized by Al-Qaeda.</p> <p>The Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade quickly became known for its large-scale attacks, most notably its January 2013 attack on the In Amenas natural gas facility in Algeria,<sup>14</sup> which killed more than 38 civilians (a joint action with SISMJ). Throughout its history, the Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade often coordinated attacks with the MUJAO.</p>
<b>Al-Murabitun</b>	In August 2013, the Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade merged with the MUJAO <sup>15</sup> to form Al-Murabitun. The group primarily operated in Mali and pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda, although the extent of its direct ties to Al-Qaeda was unclear. In May 2015, the Emir of Al-Murabitun, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, pledged the group's loyalty to the Islamic State but, shortly after, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a founder of Al-Murabitun, released statements that the group's allegiance lay with Al-Qaeda and not the Islamic State. On December 4, 2015, Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of AQIM, announced that Al-Murabitun would merge with AQIM.
<b>Jund Al-Khalifa</b>	Jund Al-Khalifa was initially the AQIM brigade operating around Algeria's Tizi Ouzou. The group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2013, "because the Al-Qaeda branch had deviated from the true path." In September 2013, the group assassinated Hervé Gourdel, a French hiker.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: local politics and rebel groups*, (Cambridge University Press, UK, 2020), p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Namely The el-Feth Katibat, The el-Arkam Katibat, The Abu Bakr Seddik group, El Ansar Katibat, The Zamouri Katibat.

<sup>13</sup> Designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the US and the UN in 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Following which the US Department of State designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

<sup>15</sup> It remains unclear whether or not all of the MUJAO's fighters joined Al Murabitun or if a small faction continues to operate independently under the name MUJAO.

## In Morocco

Morocco's jihadist movements were fewer, compared to the rest of the region, and were suppressed at an early stage.<sup>16</sup> It is important to highlight that this section excludes the study of the groups who were coopted by the monarch,<sup>17</sup> as well as those that have remained covert.<sup>18</sup>

Moroccan Islamic Combat Group (GICM)	The GICM was founded in the late 1990s, by a faction that split from the Moroccan group Shabaab Islamiyah. GICM was mostly formed by Afghan Mujahideen. At one point, the group was considered to have several cells in Europe that financed much of the group's activities in Morocco. It has participated in several attacks, such as the 2004 Madrid bombings. The GICM was initially conceived as an Al-Qaeda facilitator network in Morocco, but later the group rethought its strategy. Its military wing was tasked with setting up camps in the Rif and Atlas Mountains, and in the Jebala area bordering Europe, and the group motivation was "defending Islam against foreign intervention." <sup>19</sup> The group trained recruits and sheltered members of other jihadist groups in these areas. At a later stage, the GICM started recruiting Moroccan fighters for Iraq. Today, the group is considered to be extremely weak or even dissolved. <sup>20</sup>
Salafia Jihadia or the Jihad for Pure Islam	Jihad for Pure Islam was established in 1992 as a reaction against Arab states, including Morocco and Saudi Arabia, for having joined the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1991. The group is considered to be a "loose umbrella organization made up of a cluster of independent cells," <sup>21</sup> formed by former Mujahidin (this further fueled speculation about linkages to Al-Qaeda), and radical jihadists in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and North African immigrant communities in Europe. Moroccan authorities have accused the group of perpetrating the 2003 Casablanca bombings. <sup>22</sup>
A few splinter groups have emerged from the Jihad for Pure Islam movement, including:	
The Righteous Path	This group is said to be "fueled by a hatred of Western values." <sup>23</sup> Accused of having participated in the 2003 Casablanca bombings. <sup>24</sup>
Al-Takfir wal Hijra:	This group is said to have had ties with foreign networks in Egypt and Afghanistan, including with al-Qaeda figures. The stoning of a man to death (in 2002) for drinking alcohol signaled their passage to extremist violence. Later plots were discovered by security forces including an "attack on Western shipping in the Straits of Gibraltar with a speedboat manned by suicide bombers." From 2004 onwards, Moroccan security forces have dismantled numerous cells accused of plotting terrorist acts. <sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Emad Eldin Shahin, *Political Ascent Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, (Westview Press, USA, 1998), p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Including the Association of Islamic Resurrection.

<sup>18</sup> Including the Muslim Brotherhood in Morocco.

<sup>19</sup> Alison Pargeter, *Localism and Radicalization in North Africa: Local Factors and the Development of Political Islam in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya*, International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 85, No. 5, North Africa in Transition (September 2009), p. 1034.

<sup>20</sup> Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC). *Mapping Militants*. Available at: <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants>.

<sup>21</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Tracy Wilkinson and Sebastian Rotella, 'Local Hands' Accused in Morocco Blast, Los Angeles Times, May 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Keith B. Richburg, *Most of Suicide Bombers Identified as Moroccans*, The Washington Post, May 19, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Tracy Wilkinson and Sebastian Rotella, 'Local Hands' Accused in Morocco Blast. Op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> A cell was dismantled in 2004 in Agadir, southern Morocco, accused of preparing to carry out acts of sabotage against undisclosed targets. In 2006 a group called Group of New Muslims, was accused of preparing for and carrying out terrorist acts. In the same year, 317 members of the Ansar al-Mahdi group were arrested for setting up training camps in the Rif Mountains with the aim of establishing an Islamic government in Morocco. In 2007, a cell called the Unification and Jihad in the Maghreb (suspected to have links to the GSPC) was dismantled, along with the Islamic Liberation Army.

## In Tunisia

Historically, Tunisian Salafi jihadism dates back to the 1980s, with the formation of the Tunisian Islamic Front. Severely repressed, starting from 1990, the group scattered to feed transnational terrorism operations in Afghanistan, Europe, Iraq and Algeria rather than engage in direct operations in Tunisia. This, however, changed with the onset of the 2011 uprising. The following table enumerates groups operating in Tunisia, pre- and post-2011 events.

### pre-2011

Tunisia National Branch of the Islamic Liberation Party <sup>26</sup>	Membership of the group included military personnel. In 1983, the government prosecuted them for "establishing a clandestine organisation with a political objective."
The Islamic Jihad	The Islamic Jihad group claimed responsibility for the explosions in hotels in the coastal cities of Sousse and Monastir <sup>27</sup> in 1987. <sup>28</sup>
Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI)	At first, the movement claimed to be 'apolitical'. However, later on, the MTI adopted a more confrontational strategy. <sup>29</sup> The group's request to become a political party was rejected and independent members who won seats at the legislative elections were arrested. This was followed by a government crackdown, during which officials allegedly uncovered a plot to assassinate President Ben Ali by a suicide attack, led by Mondher Ben Mohsen Baazaoui, a member of Ennahda and also a Bosnian Mujahid with connections to Al-Qaeda.
Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites linked to Al-Qaeda	The Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites claimed responsibility for the attack on the Al-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba. <sup>30</sup> Members of multiple nationalities were involved in the attack (a Tunisian arrested in Tunisia, a Polish and a Moroccan living in Paris, and a German was also identified as involved through a phone call the perpetrator had conducted an hour before the explosion).
Tunisian Combatant Group linked to Al-Qaeda	The Tunisian Combatant Group was founded in 2000 by Tarek Maaroufi and Saifallah Ben Hassine. The group was suspected of plotting to attack the US, Algerian and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. The group's main mission was to recruit Muslim fighters and provide them with forged documents to travel.
The Zarzis group or the Prophet Brigades	Members of The Zarzis group were mostly high schoolers and university students. In 2004, the group was sentenced for plotting a terrorist attack against a port security official.
Tawhid and Jihad in Tunisia	In 2007, the website of the Youth of Tawhid and Jihad in Tunisia declared jihad on President Ben Ali.

<sup>26</sup> Founded in Jerusalem in 1948 and which aimed at the establishment of an Islamic state and the restoration of the Caliphate.

<sup>27</sup> No deaths reported, but 13 people were injured.

<sup>28</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*. Op. cit. p. 114.

<sup>29</sup> July 1987 violent demonstrations were organized by MTI. Later, the group was implicated in a plot to overthrow the Tunisian government.

<sup>30</sup> On April 11, 2002, a gas truck fitted with explosives drove past security barriers at the ancient El Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba. The truck detonated at the front of the synagogue, killing 14 German tourists, three Tunisians, and two French nationals. More than 30 others were wounded.

<p><b>Katibat (Brigade) Assad Ibn Al Fourat also known as the Soliman Group</b></p>	<p>This armed group carried out an attack in the city of Soliman in January 2007 against Tunisian security forces. These attacks happened shortly after GSPC pledged Bay'a (allegiance) to Al-Qaeda, an indication of the linkages between the networks.</p>
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**Post-2011**

<p><b>Ansar Al-Sharia Tunisia (AST)</b></p>	<p>Established in 2011, AST united former members of the Soliman group with former prisoners, all committed to their leader Abu Iyadh.<sup>31</sup></p> <p>Initially, AST supported Al-Qaeda; however, in July 2014, AST's spokesman, Seifeddine Rais, swore allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State. It is unclear whether or not he spoke on behalf of AST or solely himself.</p> <p>The first attack by AST was on September 14, 2012, when the group organized riots and looting targeting the US Embassy and a nearby American school in Tunis, following an attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi (4 killed, 29 wounded).</p> <p>On August 27, 2013, AST was designated a terrorist group by the Ennahda-led government. This designation came after the group was accused of assassinating two politicians<sup>32</sup> through its secret military wing. It was also prompted by members joining Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafi. It is worth mentioning that the group is reported to have strong linkages with Ansar Shariaa Libya.</p>
<p><b>Those who Pledge Allegiance unto Death</b></p>	<p>This group was accused of committing the two failed terrorist attacks<sup>33</sup> in Sousse and Monastir in 2013.<sup>34</sup></p>
<p><b>Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafi: Al-Qaeda branch in Tunisia<sup>35</sup></b></p>	<p>Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafi was established following the French intervention in Northern Mali against Al-Qaeda. As a result, Al-Qaeda restructured its assets to be deployed in Tunisia along the borders with Algeria.<sup>36</sup></p> <p>Tunisia's Minister of the Interior acknowledged the group's existence in 2012, announcing in a press conference that "the security services had discovered a terrorist cell that was preparing to set up a camp in the western region of the country on the Algerian border... and that the cell wanted to establish a branch of Al-Qaeda in Tunisia."<sup>37</sup></p> <p>In July 2015, Tunisian authorities declared that 90% of the group's members had been killed.<sup>38</sup> This defeat could be explained by defections from below that had triggered fragmentation within the Al-Qaeda affiliated Katiba, leaving it open to debilitating attacks from the state and rival groups.</p>

<sup>31</sup> Seifallah Ben Hassine, also known as Abu Iyadh. He was one of Bin Laden's closest lieutenants and was said to be close to Abu Moussab Al Zarkau. Ben Hassine had gained his first militant experiences in the 1980s as part of MTI, before getting involved in what would later become the Al-Qaeda.

<sup>32</sup> The assassination of the leftist politician Chokri Belaïd in February 2013, followed by another assassination of opposition politician, Mohamed al-Brahimi, on July 25, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Adrienne Sigel. *Tentatives D'attentats en Tunisie: Le Tourisme Pris pour Cible?* BFM.TV. October 2013. Available at: [https://www.bfmtv.com/international/afrique/tunisie/tentatives-d-attentats-en-tunisie-le-tourisme-pris-pour-cible\\_AN-201310310077.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/international/afrique/tunisie/tentatives-d-attentats-en-tunisie-le-tourisme-pris-pour-cible_AN-201310310077.html).

<sup>34</sup> A suicide bombing took place on a deserted beach in Sousse, and caused no victim apart from the suicide bomber, on October 30, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> However, the group did not openly declare its affiliation until 2015.

<sup>36</sup> This was confirmed by Tunisia's Mol Lotfi Ben Jaddou. Half an hour later, a second attack targeting the mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba, the former president, in his hometown of Monastir was uncovered.

<sup>37</sup> France24. *الداخلية التونسية تعلن أن «مجموعة الشعاني» تضم عناصر من «أنصار الشريعة»*. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20130531-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A>

<sup>38</sup> Kapitalis. *Najem Gharsalli: "90% des capacités de la Katibat Okba Ibn Nafaa anéanties"*. July 2015. Available at: <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/07/13/najem-gharsalli-90-des-capacites-de-la-katibat-okba-ibn-nafaa-aneanties/>.

**In Libya**

<p><b>Al-Qaeda In Libya:</b> The group controlled large portions from the Southwestern desert up through the coastal north-east to the point that it seemed like a shortcut for any Islamic extremist group, including those officially unaligned with the global franchise. Anecdotaly, "everyone called everyone else Al-Qaeda."<sup>39</sup></p>	<p><b>Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)</b></p>	<p>The LIFG was formed around 1989. Its founders were Libyans who had fought jihad in Afghanistan and returned to Libya. Between 1995 and 1996, the LIFG waged an insurgency in Eastern Libya and sought to assassinate Al-Qaddafi, who they considered an infidel and an illegitimate ruler.</p> <p>On November 3, 2007, the LIFG joined the Al-Qaeda network. Even though it officially ceased to exist, it is suspected to be still active, especially in the south.</p>
<p><b>The Islamic State</b> These are the armed Islamist groups that have pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The latter has allegedly accepted the pledge on Nov. 13, 2014 and declared three provinces in Libya.<sup>40</sup></p>	<p><b>The Consultative Council of the Youth of Islam (MSSI): The Barqa Province</b></p>	<p><b>Ansar al-Sharia</b> was formed in the aftermath of the Libyan uprising against Al-Qaddafi, led by Sufian Ben Qhumu, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee. Because of the prominence of Mujahidin and former jihadists among the revolutionaries, Qaddafi accused the revolutionaries of being dupes of agents for al-Qaeda.</p> <p><b>Ansar al-Sharia</b> fights the Libyan government and its armed forces, spurring anti-Western discourse, and at the same time seeks to gain popular support through extensive charitable actions in Libyan communities.</p> <p>In 2013, ASL expanded its operations, effectively occupying territory in Benghazi (led by a former Abu Salim inmate), Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya. In February 2015, after the Libyan military targeted Islamist groups during Operation Dignity, ASL lost most of the territory it occupied to Libyan forces.</p>
<p><b>Tripolitania Province of the Islamic State</b></p>	<p><b>Tripolitania Province of the Islamic State</b></p>	<p>In 2014, the group, which is made up of youth returnees from Syria and extreme hardliners and has foreign leadership that implemented its court and its Hisba (accountability),<sup>41</sup> flogged and executed accused criminals in Derna.</p> <p>Six months after its formation, the group pledged alliance to the Islamic State, officially becoming Wilayat Barqa (Eastern Libya Province), the first ISIS province outside Iraq and Syria.</p> <p>Since 2016, the Islamic State has suffered further setbacks in Libya at the hands of government-aligned forces, supported by US airstrikes.</p>
<p><b>Fezzan Province</b></p>	<p><b>Fezzan Province</b></p>	<p>Headquartered in Sirte since early 2015. The group claimed responsibility for attacking foreign symbols, including a diplomatic security building, the Algerian Embassy, and the Corinthia Hotel, and the beheading of Coptic Christians. It also attacked state-controlled buildings such as a prison inside Tripoli air base and detonated a truck bomb near a police training college in Zliten.</p> <p>Headquartered in southwestern Libya. The group claimed responsibility for attacking an army checkpoint outside Soukna.</p>

<sup>39</sup> Sarah A. Topol. *Guns and Poses Smuggling and subterfuge in the North African desert*, Harper's Magazine (December 2014). Available at: <https://harpers.org/archive/2014/12/guns-and-poses/>.

<sup>40</sup> Reuters. *Islamic State leader urges attacks in Saudi Arabia*: speech. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-baghdadi-idUSKCN0IX1Y120141113>

<sup>41</sup> For instance, MSSI established its vigilante style Islamic police, holding people accountable for their non-Islamic behavior.

Other smaller groups operating in the country	<b>The Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade (ASMB)</b>	The ASMB is named after the Qaddafi regime massacre <sup>42</sup> of inmates in the Abu Salim facility in Tripoli in 1996, following their attempt to escape. Following the Libyan uprisings, former group members became active. They were suspected of the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi in 2012 that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. The group has also waged violent attacks against residents, tribes and other armed groups.
	<b>Consultative Council of the Mujahidin of Derna (DMSC):</b>	The DMSC stood against a merger with the Islamic State and was formed as a result of a merger between ASMB and the Derna wing of Ansar al-Shari'a, in December 2014. Similar councils were formed in Benghazi and Ajdabiya.

The above sections confirm that it is highly relevant to understand the national differences in the nature and sources of the jihadist threat in North Africa. For instance, in Algeria, the threat originates from large recognizable structures. However, in Morocco, it comes from smaller cells, highly compartmentalized and decentralized, making it more difficult for security forces to identify and infiltrate those groups.

## INTRA- AND INTER-JIHADIST DYNAMICS AND INTERACTIONS

It is important to highlight that Jihadist groups are not static actors and have proven to be extremely fluid; shifting their allegiances and structures continuously to adapt to new and evolving conflict landscapes. Jihadist groups engage in different dynamics ranging from cooperation, to merger, to competition and infighting. This being the case, North African countries have presented jihadist groups with different scenarios, including:

### Interactions within the Jihadist Movement

First, a common form of inter-jihadist engagement is to forge **Alliances**. Jihadist groups forge alliances to increase their capabilities, thereby generating greater lethality of attacks. Prominent examples can be found in the early alliance between Al-Qaeda and GSPC. Linkages between Al-Qaeda and GSPC have long been established. Indeed, Algerians have contributed heavily to Al-Qaeda manpower; many of them have been trained in Afghanistan and in Sudan, where reportedly "Bin Laden opened training camps, including for Algerians, or those willing to participate in the conflict in Algeria. This step led ultimately to the cancellation of diplomatic relations with Sudan."<sup>43</sup> Al-Qaeda has also managed to facilitate GSPC reach in Europe.

The second is **Incorporation**, which happens when "a jihadist coalition expands by absorbing blocs."<sup>44</sup> An example of such interaction is when the Algerian GIA drew in a wide anti-state group (mosque-based activists as well as neighborhood-level networks of armed youth). Third comes **Mergers**. In Libya, the ASMB and the Derna wing of Ansar al-Shari'a merged to form the Consultative Council of the Mujahidin of Derna. Other forms of inter-jihadist engagement include **Co-optation** such as the case of how the Islamic State in Tunisia co-opted infrastructures and networks of AST.

At the other end of the spectrum of inter-jihadist interaction come Rivalries, Tyranny or Mismanaged Expansions, Schisms, and Violence or Fratricide. **Rivalry** can operate through various means including media contestation. In Tunisia, Shabab al-Tawhid, a pro-Islamic State media outlet that had previously been associated with AST was viewed as the mobilizing structure for foreign fighter recruitment, to turn AST members away from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State. As for **Tyranny or 'mismanaged expansion'**,<sup>45</sup> the GIA trajectory represents a textbook case of how tyrannical internal politics of large groups can destabilize what was at a time considered to be "one of the most successful coalitions,"<sup>46</sup> because of uncompromising standings in addition to leadership clashes and turnover. **Schisms** take place when one or more field commanders break away from the mother organization, motivated by divisions over vision, strategy and/or tactics. For instance, the GIA schism led to the formation of the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the predecessor organization of AQIM. A similar division occurred when Belmokhtar and his divisions split from AQIM, forming the Al-Mulathamun. Similarly, defectors from KUIN had stated support for the Islamic State and later on started conducting attacks in the name of the Islamic State. Notably, those attacks were located in Jbal al-Maghilah and Jbal Salloum, while KUIN attacks remained concentrated in Jbal Chaambi and Jbal Samamma. Finally, **Violence or Fratricide** takes place when competing groups resort to extreme violence to remove the competition. In North Africa, reconciliation processes often lead to violent reactions from antagonistic commanders against those who decide to surrender. For example, in Algeria, Abdelmadjid Broche, also known as Abu Moukatil, GSPC emir in Collo, Skikda, killed approximately 10 of his own men in August 2004 after suspecting them of planning to surrender. Another example can be found in Libya, where violence between the DMSC and the Islamic State, with the assassination of leaders of the DMSC, prompted a full-scale war between factions of jihadists, ending with the expulsion of the Islamic State from Derna. It is noteworthy that this 'fratricide' gave General Haftar the time he needed to fully control Benghazi and advance into southern Libya to capture Derna.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Reportedly, over 1,200 inmates were executed.

<sup>43</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*. Op. cit. p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*. Op. cit. p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca, NY: (Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*. Op. cit. p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ayman al-Warfalli. *Haftar's forces say they have captured Libyan city of Derna*. June 2018. Reuters. Available from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-derna-idUSKBN1JQ339>.

## Interactions beyond the Jihadist Movement

It is very important to note that Jihadist groups' interactions are not confined to those that take place with other actors within the jihadist movement; they can also happen with other actors beyond the jihadist sphere such as criminal networks and other political actors. An example of this is jihadist **collusion** with drug trafficking networks and human trafficking networks,<sup>48</sup> whereby jihadists and those networks cooperate but maintain deniability about their alliance.

Another example is **Accommodation**, when the jihadist coalition reaches an explicit or tacit nonaggression pact with an external actor (jihadist or non-jihadist). For example, note the LIFG participation in the Tripoli government and the democratic process under the leadership of Abdelhakim Belhadj. Another example is when ASMB provided security for the chairman of the National Transitional Council (Mustafa 'Abd al-Jalil in al-Bayda) during his visit to Derna in July 2011. The ASMB argued that it was an act of realpolitik, while the Islamic State has accused them both of **dilution**; arguing that these organizations went so far in accommodating state actors that they ceased to be jihadists.

To sum up, jihadist groups in the region have proven to be flexible and agile in adapting and changing to what local, regional and international environments require. Arguably, these adaptive dynamics have enabled them to expand their outreach and improve their efficiency.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF JIHADIST GROUP STRATEGIES AND MODUS OPERANDI

Split between two major tendencies, localism and transnationalism, jihadist movements in North Africa have alternately used what seemed to be irreconcilable strategies and methods. The following section surveys the most dominant features of these strategies, namely the target profile and modus operandi that jihadist groups chose to adopt to attain their strategic objectives.

### Target Profile: The Enemy Hierarchy

Different jihadist groups adopt different target preferences, to reflect the organization's objectives. These targets can be summarized as the 1) Near Enemy, 2) Far Enemy, and the 3) Enemy Within.

**First of all, we will examine The Near Enemy: "Jihad Starts at Home".** *The choice of targets is often motivated by available resources and capabilities, as well as existing threats and opportunities. At first, jihadists divide a country into three factions: the Mujahidin, the government and the people. The first two groups are the combatants, while the third, or the civilian population, must in no circumstances be targeted.*

<sup>48</sup> In 2005, Morocco's Territorial Surveillance Directorate released a report suggesting that resources used to finance the March 11 attacks in Madrid had come from drug trafficking.

Arguably, the primary targets of local groups are security officers as government representatives, symbols of the country. Even with North African countries being Muslim-majority countries that have constitutionally established Islam as a state religion, local jihadist groups strive to replace Muslim governments with 'true Islamic' governments. This goal emerged with the return of Afghan Mujahidin to their home countries. Therefore, there cannot be a *modus vivendi* if those regimes remain in place.

In Algeria for instance, at first, jihadist groups (such as GIA) targeted military bases, security forces, general infrastructure, government employees and specific individuals who were opposed to their cause. Similarly, in the Casablanca bombings, for example, the attackers targeted a Jewish cemetery and a Jewish social center, the Farah hotel, owned by the Kuwaiti government, and a Jewish-owned Italian restaurant, near the Belgian consulate. It can be deduced that they have targeted the "cosmopolitan and modern identity and religious moderate nature of Morocco."<sup>49</sup>

Subsequently, an ideological shift has been observed according to which one Muslim can declare another Muslim an apostate, or nonbeliever, thus justifying killing him. According to this view, there are only two factions: the rebels and everyone else, justifying indiscriminate attacks that cause civilian casualties. This shift signals a transition to indiscriminate killings and feeds on fatwas issued by the emirs of the groups, advocating for religious sentences against the enemies of Islam (killing, expropriation of their property and kidnapping of their wives).<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, in the summer of 1992, GIA employed indiscriminate violence toward civilians who 'have forsaken religion and have been contaminated by Western values'; namely intellectuals, women activists, journalists, lawyers, artists, foreigners and later the entire population. Amnesty International has reported on the "pattern of massacres of large numbers of civilians, many of them women and children...with the aim of terrorizing and punishing the population hostile to them, or who formerly supported them but who had recently withdrawn their support."<sup>51</sup>

It can be argued that this brutal and unsparing treatment of civilians was not caused by loot-seeking "thuggishness." Instead, it reflected a strategic and political vision that intrinsically relied on coercion and social control, to deter and punish local constituents and civilian populations.<sup>52</sup> This is substantiated by the fact that violence coincided with major political events and developments such as the 1995 presidential elections and the 1997 legislative elections.<sup>53</sup> Other examples are found in the AQIM and Islamic State priorities and targets (re)arranging post-2011. Indeed, AQIM has prioritized the local

<sup>49</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*. Op. cit. p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, in Algeria in September 1996, a fatwa was issued, called: Al mufassala al kubra (the great demarcation). In June 1997, another document officially emanating from the GIA movement made the murder of women and children alongside the "enemies of Islam" "lawful."

<sup>51</sup> Amnesty International, *Algeria: Civilian population caught in a spiral of violence*, November 1997, p. 11. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/mde280231997en.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*. Op. cit. p. 136.

<sup>53</sup> Financial Times. *Algeria's 30 turbulent years — a timeline*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/2c439010-3e6c-11e9-9bee-efab61506f44>.

over the global, shifting its attention to the near enemy, making the national military its preferred target.

This positioning might have been motivated by myriad reasons. The first is the diminishment of the group's capacities after the elimination of prominent leaders, including Saleh al Somali (2009) and Bin Laden (2011).<sup>54</sup> The second is the competition with the Islamic State over hegemony, followers and resources, starting from 2014 onwards. However, while Al-Qaeda shifted its targeting to the near enemy, it has not restrained itself from attacking civilians, which remained its second favorite target.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, the Islamic State seems to prefer attacking citizens and private property.<sup>56</sup>

To conclude, whether a group opts for discriminate or indiscriminate killings, the decision depends on the group's aims and objectives, whether that is to create a sense of strength, to coerce, intimidate, and/or co-opt civilian local populations and security forces alike.

**Now, we move on to examine The Far Enemy: Going Global.** *Attacking countries that are supporting local governments that are considered illegitimate, non-believers, is 'the absent duty,' hence Jihad against them is legitimized. The GIA's internationalization strategy began with the attacks on the airport, foreign correspondents, journalists and residents as well as in perpetrating attacks on foreign soil (France throughout 1995).* Later on, internationalization developed into recruiting and training nationals from neighboring countries first to conduct operations within Algeria, as well as planning and perpetrating attacks in the region.<sup>57</sup>

In the same vein, in June 2004, the GSPC initiated the "transnationalization" of its domestic terrorism by declaring war on foreign nationals and companies, including humanitarian and diplomatic representatives.<sup>58</sup> These developments coincided with GSPC developing a communication strategy through websites (www.jihadalgeria.com) to disseminate statements and explosives manuals, as well as using videos of attacks for mass recruitment. Such efforts were commended by Al-Qaeda's leaders.<sup>59</sup>

This strategy culminated in 2007 with the change in the name from Salafist Group for Combat and Preaching (GSPC) to Al-Qaeda Organization for the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM). Notably, the change was accompanied by a restructuring of zones and resources. Indeed, before this change, GSPC was divided into nine zones in Algeria alone, and it later restructured its operations into four zones: Central (Algeria), East (Tuni-

sia), South (Sahel), and West (Mauritania). This regional expansion occurred when the group realized its popular support had declined within Algeria, forcing it to think outwards.

For AQIM, Spain and France are considered "its foremost far enemies... and its government continues to provide political and military support to local regimes (the group) opposes."<sup>60</sup> This strategy's objective is to deter those states from supporting the near enemy. Particularly, under the leadership of Abdulmalek Droukdel, France, burdened by its substantial colonial legacy in Africa, became AQIM's primary target. Furthermore, regular threats to France emanate from AQIM leaders, while commending attacks taking place on foreign soil such as the infamous Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015.<sup>61</sup>

By comparison, since its creation the Islamic State has outnumbered AQIM with regard to attacks against both the near and far enemies, to attract the attention of would-be recruits. Indeed, in Libya, the Islamic State was responsible for the majority of attacks targeting foreign and diplomatic personnel and premises,<sup>62</sup> international hotels, commercial and oil installations. Bearing in mind that the Islamic State's overarching aim is expansion; "Baqiya wa Tatamadad" which translates as "enduring and expanding." These attacks also served as a recruitment strategy.

**Finally, we examine what constitutes The Enemy Within: "If Thy Right Eye Offend Thee."** The Salafi jihadist movement had undergone considerable rhetorical wars and infighting, as different groups claimed that others were "destroying the jihadist movement and its goals from the inside."<sup>63</sup> The above section on intra-jihadist dynamics has explored these interactions in detail. The jihadist groups' target selection in North Africa is divergent and varies quite significantly depending on the national and local context. These differences were driven by distinct values, objectives, (un)limited capacities, and a strategy of avoidance.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, the ways these movements organize and act are quite diverse.

## Modus Operandi

Groups operating within the jihadist spectrum in North Africa adopt varied operational trends and tactics to achieve their proclaimed strategic objectives and goals. The following section examines these different modi operandi and tactics in detail, covering overall visions on how to attain a "New Muslim Ummah"; operational tactics; financing strategies, recruitment techniques; group management and communication platforms and methods.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Qaeda's external operations chief.

<sup>55</sup> Asaad Almoammad, *Seven Years of Terror: Jihadi Organisations' Strategies and Future Directions*, The International Center for Counter-Terrorism. The Hague, August 2019, p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> An attack on an army patrol in Mauritania in June 2005 that was claimed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, attests to such shift in reach. Subsequent attacks in Mauritania (in Nouakchott and Attar) have followed.

<sup>58</sup> December 10, 2006, assailants attacked a bus carrying BRC employees on their way from their offices to the Sheraton Hotel in Bouchaoui, 15 km west of Algiers. Soon after, a statement from Abu Musab Abdul-Wadud, leader of GSPC/AQLIM on January 8, 2007, confirmed the escalation of attacks against foreign, especially French, interests, on Algerian and French soil.

<sup>59</sup> September 2006, and September 2007, al-Zawahiri produced a video message in support of GSPC. Also, Osama Bin Laden wrote a support letter in February 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, (Council on Foreign Relation, March 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Reuters, *Al Qaeda's North Africa branch praises gunmen for Paris attack*, January 2015.

<sup>62</sup> To list a few: In Sirte, an IS stronghold; 20 Egyptian Christians were beheaded by IS in 2015. Also, few months after being declared defeated, IS targeted a Dutch journalist. Also, eight foreign nationals were kidnapped in south-west Libya in November 2017 and in July 2018.

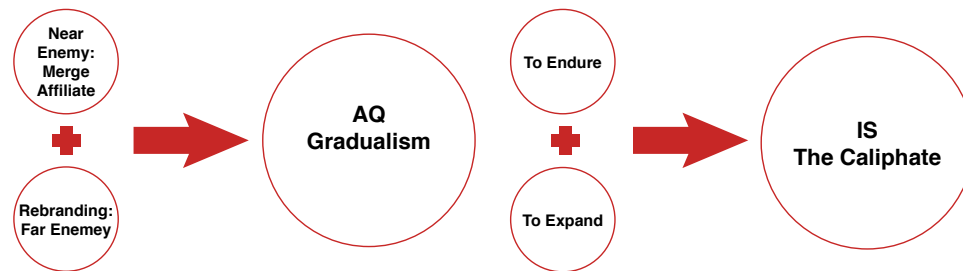
<sup>63</sup> Asaad Almoammad *Seven Years of Terror. Op. cit.* p. 05.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 15.



**How different jihadist groups believe they can reach their envisioned New Muslim Ummah is not uniform.** Indeed, these differences are epitomized by the divergence in doctrine adopted by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in their search for a new Ummah,<sup>65</sup> yet this search is marked by a process of and fights over hegemony.

While the global Al-Qaeda strategy is gradualism; or the gradual attainment of the 'Ummah', this objective is to be attained by primarily targeting the near enemy through the merger of affiliates, yet the group rebranding strategy has necessitated attacks against the far enemy as well. By contrast, the Islamic State strategy is embodied in the creation of "The Caliphate" or the proto-state building, claiming that the 'Ummah' objective should not be further delayed. For it to do so, several sub-strategies are used including 1) Enduring through (i) Polarization (ii) Guerilla Warfare targeting the near and far enemy and to secure Baya'a (allegiance), and 2) Expanding, by activating (i) local and (ii) transnational cells using co-optation or coercion and targeting the near and far enemy and the enemy within to secure Baya'a. Below is a visualization of the two organizations' approaches:



It is also worth noting that other groups have adopted a more localized strategy to achieve their vision of a Muslim Ummah. These groups, while affiliated with neither of the global networks, have no transnational ambitions, hence focusing their attacks on the near enemy.

With regard to methods and tactics employed to attain each group's envisioned Muslim Ummah, jihadist groups' weapons and tactics have evolved, and the pace and sophistication of the attacks have varied. North African countries have witnessed complex patterns, including multiple bombs and multiple, often suicidal, synchronized attacks. These methods are characterized by an increased success rate and an increased number of casualties. For example, on the night of May 16, 2003, Casablanca lived through twelve synchronized suicide bombers in five locations.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Present in North Africa mainly through AQIM and AST/ASL.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Bright, Paul Harris, Ali Bouzerda and Emma Daly. *Horror in Casablanca as al-Qaeda toll hits 41*. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/18/alqaida.terrorism2>.

Group Tactics and Methods range from adopting clandestine methods in rural and mountainous areas, such as laying ambushes and planting random mines, to large scale attacks,<sup>67</sup> to combining community service, proselytization, and violence, to discrediting rivals, to promote their vision. For example, AST always repeated the slogan "your sons are at your service,"<sup>68</sup> and this strategy granted AST great outreach. Others, such as Katibet Ukba Ibn Nafaa (KUIIN), alienated and terrorized the population by raiding local businesses and homes for supplies and planting mines, without offering anything in return.

In Libya, when the Islamic State failed to co-opt other jihadist groups, it tried to discredit them, including by saying that the ASMB had absorbed the taint of "kufr" or disbelief by protecting a "taghut" or tyrant, namely Mustafa Abd al-Jalil, when enrolling as a militia with the Ministry of the Interior.

## Risk-Taking or Aversion

Jihadist groups' propensity for risk-taking or aversion largely depends on each group's respective capacities and resources. Groups have resorted to less confrontational tactics, such as mobilization calls and explosives; to allow the best use of their fighters' experience while minimizing human losses.

For instance, in Algeria; starting from 1998, groups had suffered considerable losses,<sup>69</sup> which provoked a change in tactics, including explosives attempts, car bombs and fake roadblocks. Similarly, by 2018, KUIIN attacks in Tunisia employed tactics that were less risky for its members. This came as a direct consequence of its loss of members, due to defection, arrests and/or eliminations. As a consequence, KUIIN called support from "every honest Muslim" to conduct low-scale operations, mobilizing what has been referred to as 'homegrown terrorists', or 'self-radicalized terrorists' or "lone-wolf" attacks.

Furthermore, in 2007, Algeria witnessed a change in jihadist tactics with the adoption of methods that created an "impression of strength,"<sup>70</sup> but these tactics were unpopular among Algerian society, particularly the resort to suicide attacks.<sup>71</sup> A similar approach was adopted by the Islamic State in Libya, basing its methods on an "aura of toughness and discipline."

<sup>67</sup> On April 11, 2007, AQIM carried out simultaneous bombings in Algeria of the regional UN headquarters and the Algerian Constitutional Court in Algiers.

<sup>68</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin. *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*. Columbia University Press, February 11, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> *Due to myriad reasons, villagers created Groupes de Légitime Défense (GLD) or better known as the Patriots to defend themselves, the strengthening of counter-terrorism mechanisms, the adoption of a reconciliation strategy, internal divisions within jihadist groups.*

<sup>70</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*. Op. cit. p. 57.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

## Financing and Recruitment Techniques

Strategies by jihadist groups to raise funds in the regions relied heavily on illicit networks and activities including kidnapping, extortion, forging banknotes, and participation in the drug, arms and human trafficking trade in the region.

As for recruitment efforts, these primarily targeted younger followers,<sup>72</sup> unknown to security forces, who can easily be manipulated and are often idealists. Furthermore, payment was also used as a recruitment tool. In addition to group members, jihadist movements mobilize support networks to assist in the form of documentation, firearms and hiding places, as well as recruits. They often involved family and friends' networks, and if the group is transnational, included more than one nationality.

In Morocco, jihadist groups' early mobilization strategies targeted the illiterate population<sup>73</sup> as a large group which was considered "more vulnerable to fanatical and puritanical views of Islam."<sup>74</sup> The spread within the uneducated community facilitated access to universities and schools.

## Group Management and Organizational Structure

With regard to jihadist groups' organizational structure, we are faced with two predominant approaches: decentralization versus centralization of power across group ranks. More specifically, while fostering linkages with the global jihadist network, North African jihadist groups, Localism should not be disregarded.

Al-Qaeda adopted a more decentralized approach to its activities in North Africa. Vulnerable to 'decapitation', the group has focused on decentralizing and delegating decision-making. This approach was said to be "creating confusion through name changes and obfuscated relationships."<sup>75</sup> As a result, it took the US Department of State three years to designate Libyan and Tunisian Ansar al Sharia groups as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).<sup>76</sup> It was not until November 2014 that the UN Security Council blacklisted these two branches of the Islamist extremist group Ansar al Sharia in Libya and Tunisia. This decentralized approach also allowed the group to claim deniability for terrorist attack responsibility. For example, while the Moroccan government blamed AQIM for the 2011 Marrakech bombings,<sup>77</sup> the group was able to deny responsibility.

<sup>72</sup> Reportedly, in September 2007, Algerian security forces broke up a training camp for children in Thenia, Bourmerdes. Of the 13 suspects arrested, ten, aged between 14 and 18.

<sup>73</sup> In 2004, Morocco literacy rates equaled 52.31%. According to the World Bank Data. Available at : <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=MA>.

<sup>74</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*. Op. cit. p. 88.

<sup>75</sup> Katherine Zimmerman, *Terrorism, Tactics, and Transformation the West Vs the Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, American Enterprise Institute, November 2018.

<sup>76</sup> US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar al-Shari'a Organizations and Leaders*, January 2014.

<sup>77</sup> April 28, 2011, a bomb killed 15 in Marrakech café frequented by Westerners in first major attack in country since May 2003.

By contrast, the self-proclaimed Islamic State has opted for a rigid group hierarchy and organizational structure. The Islamic State functions according to an "organizational setting wherein the authority, oversight, and decision-making power follow a top-down structure."<sup>78</sup>

With regard to compartmentalisation or 'internal secrecy,' group members tend "to conceal information and knowledge from other fellow members."<sup>79</sup> Numerous factors impact each jihadist group's level of internal secrecy, namely the size of the group, the threat posed by external actors (security forces and population). Accordingly, cells are organized according to functions, geographic spread, and social strata.

## Communication Strategies

Jihadist groups might not always wish to publicize their attacks. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operations are often carried out rather 'quietly'. Katibat Ukba Ibn Nefaa low-level attacks in Tunisia were regarded as "initial training before sending the fighters to more advanced AQIM camps in Algeria or Libya."<sup>80</sup> It was only two years later that it had established an online presence (a Facebook page and Twitter account called Fajr al-Qayrawan), five days before what was considered to be the deadliest attack against the Tunisian military since independence.<sup>81</sup> This shift in the communication strategy can be read as a response to the Islamic State's advances in the region.

It is also important to note that jihadist groups often make concerted efforts to rebrand their public image. Katibat Ukba Ibn Nefaa's media presence remained inactive since the arrest of its administrators in 2014 until late March 2015, following the elimination of its leader, Khalid Sha'ib, and the affirmation of its affiliation to Al-Qaeda, when KUIN created its own Facebook page under the group's name and a new official logo. Since then, KUIN statements were signed off with KUIN and AQIM emblems, and recently also uses the AQIM letterhead.

## CONCLUSION

Miles away from Iraq and Syria, jihadist groups have risen in North Africa, following the defeats in the Middle East and setbacks in the Sahel, yet these groups have recently suffered some degree of weakening,<sup>82</sup> due to growing national expertise in anticipating terrorist attacks, as well as foreign military aid and intelligence assistance. However, claiming that such counterterrorism operations sounded the death knell for these jihadist groups is unrealistic, as the threat persists even with seemingly degraded capabili-

<sup>78</sup> Asaad Almomhammad *Seven Years of Terror*. Op. cit. p. 03.

<sup>79</sup> Francesco Marone, *Dilemmas of the terrorist underworld: the management of internal secrecy in terrorist organisations*, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 16 July 2021. p03.

<sup>80</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, *Not Gonna Be Able to Do It: al-Qaeda in Tunisia's Inability to Take Advantage of the Islamic State's Setbacks*, (Perspectives on Terrorism Volume 13, Issue 1), p. 65.

<sup>81</sup> BBC News. *Tunisian soldiers killed in attack near Algerian border*. July 2014. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28341318>.

<sup>82</sup> Security forces are succeeding on many fronts: such as the elimination, arrest, discovery of laboratories or manufacturing cells, or safe houses or storage depots.

ties for some, and “while the self-proclaimed Islamic State has dominated the headlines and preoccupied national security officials for the past four years, Al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding.”<sup>83</sup>

This context might, therefore, be seen as an opportunity to rise and project power and the ability to attract new recruits. More specifically, and as discussed throughout this chapter, Al-Qaeda has established and consolidated its presence in the region, is well-integrated in the local economy, well-informed about the region’s geography and environment, and well-preserved after decades of being the target of various counter-terrorism efforts.

Due to the still volatile and poorly governed context of the region and the clandestine nature and resources of jihadist groups, analysts warn against their comeback.<sup>84</sup> This is evidenced by the recent two deadly bomb attacks on Libyan security forces in Fezzan province, southern Libya, on June 7 and 14, 2021, that IS claimed responsibility for<sup>85</sup>.

Furthermore, in Algeria, the threat of future attacks against national and foreign targets remains high. With the prospect of the Africa–Europe gas pipeline, this threat is of particular concern. In Morocco, because the sources of threat are smaller cells, thus smaller in scale, and because of the limited resources and organizational complexity, these cells nurture a high likelihood of threat and a persistent sense of insecurity. This indicates that the size of the source of the threat does not mean that the population is not being radicalized. As a matter of fact, in 2004, one of Spain’s leading counter-terrorism judges, Judge Baltasar Garzon declared that “Morocco has about 100 Al-Qaeda-linked cells... capable of suicide attacks and skilled at slipping through the continent’s southern gateway.”<sup>86</sup> These cells serve as a ‘barometer of public sentiment,’ and their number would indicate how many people share certain standpoints and frustrations.

Reportedly, in Morocco, “several members of the security forces had been implicated in jihadist cells,”<sup>87</sup> which led Moroccan authorities to adopt a strategy to curb radicalization within the security forces’ ranks, which included the suspension of military service, religious scholars visiting military bases and barracks to instruct on tolerant Islam, a control and monitoring program of any suspicious behavior and the dismissal of army officers accused of having adopted extremist views.<sup>88</sup>

This chapter shows that now, more than ever, there is a pressing need for a more integrated and comprehensive strategy to confront the threats posed by jihadist groups in the region of North Africa.

## About the author

Dr. Eya Jrad is a Tunisian researcher and practitioner with a multi-disciplinary academic background in Law, Security Studies and Political Science. With over 10 years of experience specializing in the Institutional Governance and Reform, P/CVE, Social and State Resilience and the Rule of Law, in conflict and post-conflict settings with focus on Tunisia as well as Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, and Kurdistan Iraq. Dr. Jrad has gained vast experience facilitating discussions, as well as presenting at conferences and roundtables, and publishing research papers, reports and briefs on P/CVE and radicalization.

<sup>83</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection*, Council on Foreign Relations, Expert Brief, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, “ISIS Could Rise Again,” *The RAND Blog*, December 15, 2017. See also Thomas Joselyn, “Analysis: ISIS hasn’t been Defeated,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, February 22, 2018.

<sup>85</sup> 218TV. *ISIS in Libya: New attacks warn of old concerns*. June 2021. Available at: <https://en.218tv.net/2021/06/17/isis-in-libya-new-attacks-warn-of-old-concerns/>.

<sup>86</sup> China Daily. *Spain: Europe’s biggest terrorist threat is Morocco*. 2004.

<sup>87</sup> Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*. Op. cit. p 99.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Chapter

# 2

## **The Shifting Jihadism Landscape in North Africa and the Sahel: From AQIM to JNIM**

*By: Dr. Djallil Lounnas*

On March 1, 2017, Iyadh Ag Ghali, the then leader of the Ansar Al-Din group in the Sahel read a proclamation announcing the creation of the Group to Support Islam and the Muslims, commonly known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). This group was created as a result of the merger of four jihadist organizations including Ansar Al Dine itself, the Mecina Brigade led by the emblematic Amadou Koufa, Al-Mourabitoun led by the Algerian al-Qaeda veteran Mokhtar Belmokhtar and, most importantly, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) led by the Algerian Yahia Abou Houmam. In this proclamation, Ghali pledged allegiance to Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Algerian supreme leader of AQIM, thus marking JNIM as an affiliate of AQIM. Moreover, he pledged allegiance to Ayman Al Zawahiri, supreme leader of Al-Qaeda as well as to Haibatullah Akhundzada, supreme emir of the Taliban, clearly marking JNIM's allegiance to Al-Qaeda central leadership at a more global level.

In November 2020, three years later, Abu Numan al-Shanqiti, a Mauritanian religious scholar affiliated with JNIM, released a lengthy video in which he paid tribute to Abdelmalek Droukdel, killed five months before by French troops, and announced in a very casual and brief—almost trivial—manner, the designation of his successor Abu Ubaidah Yusef al-Annabi as the new emir of AQIM before continuing at length on the exploits of Iyadh Ag Ghali and JNIM.

This proclamation marked a major shift in jihadist dynamics that would shape the jihadist scene for years to come. It marked the shift of the jihadist epicenter from North Africa and towards the Sahel region, as the new proclaimed theatre of Jihadism. The proclamation also stood contrary to conventional wisdom whereby the announcement of succession was not made by the AQIM Shura council as was customary, but rather, by Numan al-Shanqiti, an important yet nonetheless secondary figure of jihadism of the Sahel compared to Iyadh Ghali himself or Amadou Koufa, the JNIM's second most important leader.

Furthermore, one would note that Iyadh Ag Ghali never paid tribute to Droukdel during those five months, nor did he pledge allegiance to the successor as 'the tradition dictates.' The manner in which the name of Al-Annabi was very briefly mentioned, as though it was a casual appointment of a brigade commander, serves to showcase the deliberate effort to belittle the gravity of this event, demonstrating the little importance that was to be attributed to it compared to the actions of the JNIM. It would not be an overstatement to say that this event marked the end of an era of Jihadism. Indeed, the Sahel had until that point been considered a rear base compared to North Africa, rather than the epicenter of the Jihadist movement.

Indeed, the first *katiba* (brigade) to be deployed in the Sahel came directly from Algeria in the early 1990s. The strategy and goals of those first jihadist groups were initially totally subordinated to the events in North Africa, essentially as an evolution of the civil strife that was going on in Algeria at the time. Historically, this was a part of a trend whereby North Africa had provided large contingents of foreign fighters to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and was perceived as a land of jihad (Algeria and Libya in the 1990s, Tunisia since 2013).

Thus, this reversal in the type of leadership from major leader to, at best, a junior follower marked a decisive turning point in North Africa–Sahel inter-jihadi relations, and more globally on Jihadist violence across the region at large. This chapter aims to analyze and understand both the trajectory of the relationship between the North African–Sahelian jihadi groups and the main reasons behind the aforementioned shift in the epicenter and its ramifications.

## THE DEPLOYMENT OF JIHADIST GROUPS IN THE SAHEL

### From civil strife in Algeria (1992–1998) to Islamist upheaval in Libya (1995–1998): The Impact on Dynamics in the Sahel

The initial deployment of jihadist groups in the Sahel finds its roots in the Algerian civil strife of the 1990s. Indeed, the Algerian Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA), the most violent and powerful terrorist organization combating the Algerian authorities at the time, was founded in 1994 in an attempt to secure additional sources of weapons supply. In this context, the GIA considered southern Algeria, commonly referred to as “Zone 9” in the GIA geographic division of the country, as a potential source for this dynamic, given its interlinkages with the Sahel region known for the proliferation of weapons trafficking. In this regard, several members of the GIA logistical support groups in southern Algeria including a certain Mohamed Ghadir, who would later become a major AQIM brigade commander in the Sahel under the nom de guerre of “Abu Zeid,” were started by 1994 to buy food and weapons from Libyan smugglers on the Algerian–Libyan border as well as from the grand Sahara.<sup>89</sup>

As for dynamics in the Sahel, and according to Salima Tlemcani,<sup>90</sup> at the very early stages a certain Hassan Allal, a GIA brigade commander leading around 40 men, wanted to engage with the various smuggling networks operating between Southern Algeria and Northern Mali to get access to weapons. One of Allal's men, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran of the Afghan jihad, rapidly ascended the ranks to lead the group and formed a GIA brigade known as the “*Katibat al-Shuhada*” or the Martyrs Brigade, effectively becoming the main interlocutor between the Northern GIA brigades and Sahelian weapon smugglers. At that point, Belmokhtar also became the leader of Zone 9 for the GIA.<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, Zone 9 remained a marginal area in terms of both its participation in the operations of the GIA and as a source of weapons, as the bulk of the conflict was taking place in Northern Algeria.

<sup>89</sup> See Mohamed Mokkedem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique : Contrebande au nom de l'islam* (Algiers: Les Editions la Casbah, 2010), 19.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Salima Tlemcani, journalist at El Watan and specialist of jihadi organizations, Algiers, Algeria (September 2012).

<sup>91</sup> Discussion with Lemine Ould Salem, journalist and specialist of Belmokhtar, 2017. Ould Salem is the author of the authoritative biography on Belmokhtar, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara, sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (Paris: Editions de La Martinière, 2014).

Concurrently with the conflict taking place in Algeria, a separate major Islamist uprising was unravelling in Libya against the Qaddafi regime led by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Essentially composed of Libyan Afghan returnees, the LIFG, led by Abu Laith al-Libi and Abu Faraj al-Libi, triggered a major guerrilla war against Qaddafi in the period between September 1995 and 1998.<sup>92</sup> The LIFG was also simultaneously establishing strong relations with the GIA in Algeria, including sending fighters to support the GIA.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, the GIA became increasingly extremist, deviating from Salafi Jihadism, the ideology adopted by Al-Qaeda affiliates, and towards takfirism. This was manifested in the GIA committing atrocities against civilian populations, engaging in inter-jihadist fighting with rivals, and eventually severing ties with the LIFG. This culminated in the killing of the Libyans present in Algeria as well as the launching of a purge against the Algerian Afghans within the ranks of the GIA itself, deemed traitors by the group leadership.<sup>94</sup>

In Libya itself, by 1998, the Qaddafi regime was able to quench the LIGF uprising after violent repression took place. Many of those who managed to survive and evade capture fled to Afghanistan to assume leadership positions within Al-Qaeda. Among those were Ibn al-Cheikh al-Libi who became the leader of the Khalden training camps; Abu Faraj al-Libi and Abou Laith al-Libi who successively became the military commanders of Al-Qaeda and Abu Yahya al-Libi who became one of the most important theologians within Al-Qaeda, acting as a link between the North African jihadi groups and Al-Qaeda central command.<sup>95</sup> Among the most prominent religious leaders of Al-Qaeda one must also cite Atiyah Abdul Rahman, another Libyan leader. Apart from a former LGIF member who fled to Afghanistan, others chose to instead flee to southern Libya, into the Sahara where they remained in hiding and connected with the various groups operating there, while also re-establishing links with their acolytes in Afghanistan.<sup>96</sup>

By 1997, and as a result of the extreme violence it grew to espouse, the GIA in Algeria started facing major fragmentation and divisions within its ranks. Hassan Hattab, a prominent leader within the GIA and commander of the Kabyle region, decided to split from the organization and founded a separate movement. He was accompanied in this move by several other prominent GIA brigade commanders, including, most notably, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and other Algerian Afghans who Hattab appointed to leadership positions within his nascent movement. In 1998, Hattab officially announced the formation of the Salafist Group for Predication and Combat commonly known under its French acronym GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat). The GPSC aimed to unify all Salafist jihadists

in Algeria, overthrowing the Algerian government and replacing it with an Islamic State based on Salafist principles.<sup>97</sup>

Hassan Hattab embarked on a process of unification of the various jihadist organizations with an operational presence in Algeria under the banner of the GSPC.<sup>98</sup> The fact that former Algerian Afghans such as Belmokhtar occupied key positions in the GSPC facilitated this process immensely and allowed Hattab to, as Isselmou Ould Salem argues, acquire “a Salafist legitimacy” and provided the GSPC with its “*salafi lettres de noblesse*” permitting the organization to establish links with Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden,<sup>99</sup> which had been severed after the GIA turned to takfirism in 1996.

It was especially important for Hattab to get this kind of support from Bin Laden despite a noticeable strategic divergence between the two groups on several issues. Indeed, as a former major Jihadist leader close to Al-Qaeda explained, most of the North African Jihadist organizations at the time, including the GSPC, were more concerned with overthrowing the regimes in place in their home countries deemed the near enemy (*Al Adou al karib*) and less about an international jihad against the Western countries (*Al Adou al baiid*)<sup>100</sup> as Bin Laden and his right-hand man Ayman Al Zawahiri did.<sup>101</sup> Another point of contention was the fact that the North African jihadist movements, including the GSPC, did not want to pledge allegiance to Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda and instead were in favor of a tactical alliance rather than a full merger.<sup>102</sup> Notwithstanding these differences, both maintained good and cordial relations and the cooperation was deemed largely acceptable by Bin Laden.

It is also important to note that these shifts were taking place at a time when the Algerian army had achieved decisive successes against all of the terrorist organizations in the country in 1997–1998. This culminated in the signing of a ceasefire between two major groups: the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and Islamic League for Dawaa and Combat (LIDC) in 1997 while the GIA itself collapsed and was eventually eliminated by 2004. Additionally, in April 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected President on a platform predicated on engaging with terrorist groups in a dialogue with the ultimate aim of ending civil strife. This strategy, which became known as the National Reconciliation, offered amnesty and certain social and economic benefits to terrorists who would, in exchange, surrender and become reintegrated into the Algerian security services.<sup>103</sup> A major success, this strategy

<sup>97</sup> Guidere, *Al Qaida a la Conquete du Maghreb*, 61–63.

<sup>98</sup> Mokkedem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique*, 150–151.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Isselmou Ould Moustapha, director of Tahalil newspaper and specialist of Jihadi movements in the Sahel, Nouakchott, Mauritania (November 2011).

<sup>100</sup> The Egyptian Islamic Jihad from which Ayman Al Zawahiri came had been established since the 1970s, following its then leader Muhammad Faraj reasoning a dichotomy between the regime in place in Cairo, and by extension, those in the Arab world, called the near enemy (*Al Adou Al Karib*) vs the far enemy (*Al Adou Al Baiid*) which was deemed to be Israel. For Faraj, a victory against Israel was subordinated by the destruction of its local support, the Sadat Regime, called the near enemy. In 1997, Al Zawahiri who had become the right-hand man of Bin Laden, argued that local jihad against the near enemy in the 1990s in Algeria, Libya and Egypt failed because of Western countries called the far enemy (*Al Adou Al Baiid*) support to these. Thus, he called for a reversal of strategies, by focusing on attacking the far enemy to force the Western countries to stop supporting the Arab regimes and then to attack them.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with a former Jihadi leader close to Al-Qaeda, (March 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Id.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with a high-ranking Algerian official, September 2012, Algiers, Algeria.

<sup>92</sup> Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qaeda and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi, 2010), 70–71.

<sup>93</sup> Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 92–97.

<sup>94</sup> Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 127–130.

<sup>95</sup> Mathieu Guidere, *Al Qaida a la Conquete du Maghreb : Le terrorisme aux portes de l'Europe* (Paris : Les Editions du Rocher, 2007), 226.

<sup>96</sup> Guidere, *Al Qaida a la Conquete du Maghreb*, 226.

led thousands of Algerian terrorists to surrender while the extreme violence itself led the population in general to reject terrorist organizations. By 2000, violence had decreased dramatically; positioning a weakened GSPC as the sole fighting organization in the country.

These developments naturally propelled Hattab to look not only at all the possible ways to strengthen his position but also to acquire both weapons and ammunition given the difficulty of doing so in Northern Algeria in light of the Algerian security services regaining control and power. Accordingly, the GSPC started to look at Southern Algeria with a renewed and major interest, and its two main brigades in operation there would become major actors in this new interest: *Katibat al-Fath al-Moubin*, in the central south led by Abderezzak Al Para, a very close associate of Hattab and *Katibat al-Shuhada* led by Belmokhtar, by then well established in the region.

For Hattab, a region neglected by previous Algerian jihadist groups during the 1990s, Southern Algeria and the Sahel had the potential to serve as the backbone of the renewal of Jihadism in Algeria. Indeed, the Sahel, composed of weak States, especially Mali, with little or no control over their territories, paired with widespread poverty and marginalized populations, and against the backdrop of the recurrent Touareg rebellions<sup>104</sup> and established networks of illicit smuggling and trafficking networks, attracted GSPC leadership attention, which was in dire need of weapons, ammunition and money in its bid to restart the jihad.

This stood to change terrorism dynamics in the Sahel for years to follow.

## The Sahel as a Source of Financial and Material Support for GSPC-AQIM

To consolidate power in Southern Algeria, Hattab sent one of his close associates, Malik Nacer Eddine to the region to coordinate the operations of the GSPC brigades and personally monitor all logistical aspects of operations aimed at acquiring weapons and ammunition from the Sahara.<sup>105</sup>

Nacer Eddine linked up with Belmokhtar and with Abu Zeid who by then had joined *Katibat Fath al-Moubin*.<sup>106</sup> At this point, Al Para and Abu Zeid had developed a strong personal relationship, leading the latter to become the second in command of the *Katibat Fath al-Moubin* before taking the lead of a new movement in 2002, *Katibat Tarek Ibn Ziyad*. In this capacity, Abu Zeid was charged, along with Belmokhtar, to cross into the Sahel to establish training camps and reinforce the flow of weapons and ammunition to GSPC-affiliated groups in northern Algeria.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> See François Gaulme, "États Faillies", "États Fragiles": concepts jumelés d'une nouvelle réflexion mondiale," *Politique étrangère* 1 (Spring 2011): 17–29; Alain Antil et Sylvain Touati, "Mali et Mauritanie: des pays sahéliens fragiles et des États résilients," *Politique étrangère* 1 (Spring 2011): 59–69; Serge Michailof, "Révolution verte et équilibres géopolitiques au Sahel", *La revue internationale et stratégique* 80 (Winter 2010); Mathieu Pellerin and Yves Trotignon, "Les enjeux sécuritaires du rivage sahélien," *Sécurité et stratégie* Vol.2, 4 (2010): 43–56.

<sup>105</sup> Mokkedem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique*, 20–21.

<sup>106</sup> Mokkedem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique*, 20–21.

<sup>107</sup> Mokkedem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique*, 20–23.

However, lack of funding and resources was a major impediment that hampered the ability of Belmokhtar, Al Para and Abu Zeid to effectively fulfill their mission as had been the case with the GIA during the 1990s. As a result, Zone 9 of the GSPC remained a marginal zone with a limited impact on the ongoing events in Algeria; with the pressure of the army as well as a mass surrendering of GSPC fighters to benefit from the National Reconciliation packages.

However, this fate would soon be altered, in a series of pivotal events that would later unfold.

## Abductions and Hostage-Takings

The first decisive event that would tilt dynamics in the region and have major consequences was a hostage situation in 2003. In March 2003, Abderezzak Al Para's brigade kidnapped 32 Western tourists in Algeria. While seventeen of them were released during an assault launched by the Algerian army, 12 others remained in the custody of Al Para and 40 of his men. Considering a full military assault as too dangerous, the Algerian authorities decided to offer them safe passage to Northern Mali where Al Para had the hostages released in exchange for a ransom of 5 million euros paid by the governments of the hostages—Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Austria. At the same time, Algeria deployed its army along the Malian–Algerian border to prevent any attempted return by Al Para and his men. Consequently, they found themselves virtually locked in Northern Mali.

This event changed everything. This ransom finally provided the Algerian jihadist groups with what they had lacked for years: sufficient financial resources to acquire weapons and the requisite support. As Serge Daniel explains it, "The GSPC realized that Northern Mali was lucrative. They can kidnap western hostages in the whole region and their governments will pay the ransoms to have them released."<sup>108</sup> Thus, as Daniel explains, hostage-taking became a prevalent phenomenon in northern Mali with tens of Western citizens kidnapped over the years and released in exchange for money.<sup>109</sup> According to Daniel, the Sahel was transformed into a "warehouse for hostages." A whole business around this phenomenon emerged and a whole array of "*new professions*" surfaced including mediators, intermediaries and subcontractors (transport of hostages, food, supplies etc.), each carrying out a specialized function and receiving money for it.<sup>110</sup>

With money garnered from ransoms, the GSPC acquired weapons and ammunition to be used in Algeria. Indeed, in those early years, most of the GSPC men in Northern Mali were Algerians as were almost all brigade commanders, with very rare exceptions. They were all extremely loyal to their central command in Algeria and followed a highly hierarchical leadership structure.<sup>111</sup> To that extent, these brigades functioned in supporting

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Serge Daniel, Journalist at RFI and specialist of Jihadi Groups in the Sahel Bamako, Mali (February 2017).

<sup>109</sup> See Serge Daniel, *L'Industrie de l'enlèvement* (Paris: Les Editions Fayard, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Serge Daniel, Journalist at RFI and specialist of Jihadi Groups in the Sahel Bamako, Mali (February 2017).

<sup>111</sup> Id.

roles for their counterparts in Algeria itself. As Mohamed Fall Ould Oumere explains, “60% to 70% of the money collected in the Sahel through those ransoms was to be used to support the GPSC brigades in Algeria in the North. These brigades’ primary function was to support their counterparts in Algeria.”<sup>112</sup>

Thus, between 2003 and 2013, it is estimated that around 150 million dollars was paid in ransoms by Western governments, mostly France, Germany, Spain and Canada, in exchange for the release of their abducted nationals—all of which was used to acquire weapons and supplies for groups in Northern Algeria. Some of these governments were strongly criticized, especially by Algeria, for paying such ransoms, which directly fed into supporting terrorism in the region.

## Nexus between Terrorism and Organized Crime: GSPC and AQIM Involvement in Illicit Trafficking

From 2003 onwards, the GSPC, followed by AQIM, deployed their brigades in the Sahel region. They relied on a strategy of “winning hearts and minds” of the local populations, but more importantly, they exerted a concerted effort to build powerful and complex alliances with local militias and armed groups. Predominantly tasked with providing funding and resources, GSPC brigades in the Sahel quickly became involved in local illicit trafficking networks.

Weapons and arms trafficking was the first type of trafficking AQIM got involved in. Initially and as we saw, 85% of the weapons used and smuggled by GSPC-AQIM in the early- to mid-2000s came from the local stocks of the Malian army, as a result of corruption in local authorities.<sup>113</sup> The GSCP was also connected with local trafficking networks operating in all Sahelian countries. According to UNODC, the mid-2000s witnessed an acute upsurge in weapons circulation in the Sahel/West Africa region. This upsurge was attributed to previous conflicts in the region, the proliferation of corruption of security services members, and to a much lesser extent from imported weapons from international traffickers.<sup>114</sup>

Limited state presence and government capacity in Sahelian states allowed such a proliferation of arms trafficking to take place and rendered efforts to prevent or combat them ineffective. Instead, a pacific cohabitation emerged between trafficking networks and jihadist groups even more so given that the GSPC had the money to pay for these weapons. Such patterns of illegal trafficking gained further momentum in 2011 after the collapse of Libya which led to the looting of ammunition stocks of the Qaddafi regime army. Indeed, a study by ‘*Conflict Armament Research*’ demonstrated that the majority of weapons used between 2012 and 2015 in the Sahel, as well as those seized for example in Gao, Kidal, Tessalit (areas with heavy jihadist presence), came from the Libyan army stocks and even included missiles and Kalashnikovs.<sup>115</sup>

As for human trafficking, allegations have circulated regarding the possibility of jihadist groups using illicit trafficking networks to smuggle their own fighters. However, there is little evidence to support this hypothesis. Some reports indicate that rather than get directly involved in trafficking networks, Jihadist groups often tried to convince migrants to join them voluntarily; this could be explained by the fact that there is a perception of trafficking being associated with exploitation, which stands contrary to Islamic principles. By contrast, other armed organizations in the Sahel such as the Group d’autodéfense Touareg Imghads et alliés (GATIA) a pro-Malian government militia, the Haut Conseil pour l’Azawad (HCA) and the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) have been involved in such trafficking operations.<sup>116</sup>

Nonetheless, and as opposed to human trafficking, jihadist groups are known to have been involved in varying degrees in drug trafficking activities. Indeed, since the early 2000s, drug traffickers from Latin America have utilized routes from western Africa, through the Sahel and to North Africa to smuggle drugs to Europe, most notably cocaine. Given that some of those areas were controlled by jihadist groups, drug smugglers were paying rent to such groups in exchange for protection and safe passage. However, this was not without its problems as some of the GSPC-AQIM brigade commanders, including Abu Zeid, were notoriously opposed to this business considering its illicit nature and its contradiction to Islamic principles. Nonetheless, others, including Belmokhtar, viewed such activities as acceptable, perceiving drugs as a weapon to use against the West.

To that extent, as long as the drugs were sent to Europe and not distributed to Muslims, it was deemed acceptable. Several fatwas by Al-Qaeda clerics, such as the Libyan Atiyah Abdul Rahman, were phrased in very vague and complex terms and used to provide religious justification for GSPC-AQIM involvement in drug trafficking.<sup>117</sup> However, other accounts claim that while AQIM and Belmokhtar, by association, were involved in drug trafficking, the bulk of engagement in such business was with the middle-level members, rather than at the level of group leadership.<sup>118</sup> While the issue remains highly controversial, especially regarding who and at what level the organization was involved, there is no doubt that it generated important revenues for the GSPC-AQIM.

Notwithstanding GSPC-AQIM involvement in various forms of trafficking over the years, it remained evident that the primary source of revenue was the ransoms received from kidnapping Western hostages. The latest of these abductions was by Iyad Ghali who released the French Sophie Petronin and two other Italian hostages for at least 20 million Euros in October 2020, a fortune, in addition to 200 JNIM prisoners released from jail.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Mohamed Fall Ould Oumere, Mauritanian journalist and specialist of the Sahelian Jihadist movement (May 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Serge Daniel, journalist at RFI and specialist of Jihadi groups (February 2017).

<sup>114</sup> Voir rapport de l’UNODC (l’Office des Nations Unies contre la Drogue et la Criminalité), “Traffics d’armes en Afrique de l’Ouest” (2013). Available at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTAWestAfrica/West\\_Africa\\_TOC\\_FIREARMS\\_FR.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTAWestAfrica/West_Africa_TOC_FIREARMS_FR.pdf)

<sup>115</sup> See “Investigation cross-border weapon transfer in the Sahel”, *Conflict Armament Research* (November 2016).

<sup>116</sup> Mark Micallef, “The Human Conveyor Belt Broken—assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel,” *The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime* (March 2018): 79–80.

<sup>117</sup> See on this Djallil Lounnas, “Al Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique et le trafic de drogue au Sahel”, *Maghreb Machrek* vol. 216 no.2 (2013): 111–128; Sergei Boeke, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?”, *Small war and insurgencies* Vol. 27, 5 (2016): 914–936; Luca Rainieri and Francesco Strazzari, “Drug Smuggling and the Stability of Fragile States. The Diverging Trajectories of Mali and Niger”, *Journal of Interventions and State building* (May 2021).

<sup>118</sup> Discussion with Lemine Ould Salem, journalist and specialist of Jihadi groups in the Sahel (2020).



It is also important to highlight that GSPC's involvement with local trafficking networks and abductions incurred additional unexpected and decisive consequences on the group's relationship with the local populations. Indeed, the strong deployment of the Algerian army on the borders, preventing the massive return of the GPSC brigades, led to a change of strategy on the part of the organization vis-à-vis the local populations. The Sahel turned from an area of transit to an area of permanent deployment. Thus, and starting with Belmokhtar himself, the GPSC followed a strategy of insertion into the Sahelian environment.

The GSPC's involvement in illicit trafficking activities turned the group into a dominant local economic actor in the Sahel. With this newfound position, the group provided important support to poor local populations including food, loans, and key services such as transporting sick people.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, and to reinforce their position, the GSPC recruited extensively in Mauritania, drawing especially on the religious schools known as *Mahadra* and tried to appoint scholars to local important positions within the group. As a result, it was commonplace to see Algerians occupying the position of brigade commanders while Mauritians would play the role of religious muftis. Moreover, the GSPC recruited among local youth populations, promising to help them join the Jihad in Iraq. However, once in the GSPC camps, the group provided ample financial incentives for them to stay; receiving competitive salaries ranging between 200 to 400 Euros.<sup>120</sup>

Belmokhtar also established strong links with locals who espoused more extremist views and incorporated them within his brigade whenever possible. The most famous case of this was the Mauritanian Khadim Ould Seman, who had already established radical jihadist cells even before linking up with the GSPC. His partnership with Belmokhtar was, thus, mutually beneficial and reinforced Belmokhtar's standing in the region.<sup>121</sup> Ould Seman would eventually create the local organization *Ansar Allah Al-Mourabitun fi bilad Chenguitt*, which later became affiliated with AQIM.

Ideologically, GSPC leaders positioned themselves at the local rather than the global level. Accordingly, and instead of resorting to the global anti-Western rhetoric of Al-Qaeda, they tended to position themselves as defenders of local populations in the Sahel; protecting them against power abuses from the local government, who were puppets of the West and exploited their local resources. Key to this quest was GSPC's deliberate effort to appoint to important positions within the organization locals such as Abdelkrim al-Targui, a nephew of Iyadh Ghali, and the only non-Algerian brigade commander at the time. Moreover, on a more religious level, they tried to avoid being involved in local religious practices. Indeed, while Muslims, the local populations in northern Mali/Sahel were mostly of Sufi obedience, considered *Bida'a* (innovation) by Salafists. However, as a Malian adviser for northern affairs explained, the GSPC preferred to resort to preaching Salafi Islam and a strategy of accommodation, rather, imposing their religious

views with the risk of alienating locals—which could have easily backfired.<sup>122</sup> As a former Al-Qaeda ideologue explained, “*there is no difference between Salafi, malekites, sufis, we are Muslims, what is important is to focus on what unites us.*”<sup>123</sup>

The combination of all these factors allowed the GSPC to gradually entrench itself in the region, recruit and become a major force to be reckoned with, being composed of several hundred men who were all highly motivated, well-trained and well-equipped.

## The New Jihadist Landscape in the Sahel: GSPC, AQIM, and Al-Qaeda

With the GSPC brigades in the Sahel becoming increasingly powerful, they attracted the attention of Al-Qaeda central leadership in its bid for internationalization. Indeed, Bin Laden started to exhibit increasing interest in the Sahel and the GSPC, which was heavily deploying and entrenching itself in the region. Bin Laden's interest in Algerian jihadist movements could be traced back to the 1990s when he had initially established links with the GIA, providing them with support and even asked to create training camps in Algeria.<sup>124</sup> However, as was witnessed, the extreme violence of the GIA and its turning to takfirism led to a break-up in the relationship between the two.

At the same time, and as he was in the process of fortifying the GSPC's position, Hattab's top priority was to get support from Al-Qaeda central leadership. In that regard, a former GSPC member explained that it was no coincidence that the GSPC was formally created on February 23, 1998, the same day Bin Laden announced the creation of his own organization: The Global Front to Combat the Christian Jewish Crusaders.<sup>125</sup>

From that point onwards, numerous contacts and exchanges took place between Abu Qutada al-Filistini, considered Al-Qaeda's mufti abroad, and Hassan Hattab.<sup>126</sup> By the summer of 2001, Bin Laden's interest in the Sahel had increased to the point where he sent an envoy to the region, Abu Muhammad al-Yamani. Al-Yamani was an important figure in charge of recruitment for Al-Qaeda, and met, during the summer and fall of 2001, with the leaders of GSPC brigades in the Sahel and Southern Algeria including Belmokhtar, commander of Zone 9 (South –Sahel), and Al Para, the commander of Zone 5 (South-East Algeria).<sup>127</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Interview with a high-ranking Mauritanian security official, Nouakchott, Mauritania (2011).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Discussion with a Malian adviser for northern affairs, Bamako, Mali (December 2011).

<sup>123</sup> Interview with a former Al-Qaeda ideologue Nouakchott, Mauritania (2011).

<sup>124</sup> Mohamed Mokeddem, *Les Afghans Algériens* (Algiers: Les éditions ANEP, 2002), 75.

<sup>125</sup> Mokeddem, *Les Afghans Algériens*, 78.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Mokeddem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique*, 69–70.

Realizing that the Sahel could be an area where Al-Qaeda, drawing on the GSPC's local networks, could similarly establish training camps as happened in Afghanistan, and potentially redeploy there after the fall of Afghanistan in October 2001, Al-Yamani advocated strongly for a rapprochement between Al-Qaeda and the GSPC.<sup>129</sup> This accorded with the wishes of GPSC leaders including Hattab and Belmokhtar who helped pave the way for such a rapprochement to materialize.

However, it is important to highlight that for Hattab such a rapprochement was meant to be more of an alliance and certainly not a pledge of allegiance nor an adherence to Bin Laden's global strategy. For Hattab, the GSPC was to remain focused on Algeria. He thus refused to endorse the 9/11 attacks; calling them a plot against the Muslim world. Worse, by 2002, realizing that the GSPC was extremely weak and that any chance of a victory against the Algerian authorities was out of reach, he became tempted to consider the offers of surrender by President Bouteflika within the framework of the then ongoing National Reconciliation.<sup>129</sup> To that extent, major differences remained between Al-Qaeda and the GSPC.

By the summer of 2003, a change of leadership had taken place within the GSPC, which would change the course of events that later ensued. Several commanders of the organization, who were in favor of joining Bin Laden's quest for a global jihad, eventually removed Hattab from his position of power. He was initially replaced by Nabil Al-Sahrawy, who immediately after taking power started a process of rapprochement with Al-Qaeda. His intended goal was to eventually have the GSPC formally join Bin Laden's global movement. In this context, the Sahel zone and especially its leader Belmokhtar, given his long-standing contacts with Al-Qaeda and his previous jihadist career in Afghanistan, would grow to play a pivotal role in this process.

Thus, when the decision was made, Belmokhtar, who had contacts with Abu Younis al-Muritani, a high-ranking member of Al-Qaeda with close ties to Bin Laden, sent a letter to Al-Qaeda central leadership indicating the intentions of the GSPC to establish closer ties with the potential of a formal pledge of allegiance. Concurrently, Libyan jihadist leaders from LIFG who were in the Sahel at the time, and with whom Belmokhtar also had strong ties, were contacted and asked to reach out to the Libyans in the hierarchy of Al-Qaeda to help plead with Bin Laden, in favor of the GSPC.<sup>130</sup>

In June 2004, Nabil Al-Sahrawy, emir of the GSPC since 2003, was killed by the Algerian army and replaced, in ambiguous conditions, by the more radical proponent of Al-Qaeda, Abdelmalek Droukdal, more commonly known as Abou Moussab Abdulwadoud. Droukdal's main initial goal was to accelerate the integration of the GSPC into Al-Qaeda. Shortly after taking over, he established a line of communication with Abu Mossab al-Zarqawi, leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), who committed to plead as well in favor of the idea that the GPSC integrate within Al-Qaeda. This proximity with

Zarqawi was illustrated by the kidnapping and assassination of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad in 2005. This marked a change in the rhetoric of the GSPC as it shifted its rhetoric from describing its enemies as "apostates" and "tyrants" to describing them as "Christian Jewish crusaders", which was more in line with Al-Qaeda central rhetoric. The LIFG was also asked to step up its support for the GSPC. In 2005, eventually, Al-Qaeda gave an agreement to integrate the GSPC in principle but under two conditions:<sup>131</sup> (1) A change in GPSC strategy from local (focused on the near enemy i.e., Algeria) to global enemy (regional attacks and potentially attack Europe), and (2) No takfirism and thus full endorsement of Salafist jihadism, Al-Qaeda's official ideology. During this process, the GSPC's Sahelian brigades, especially Belmokhtar, played an important role in contacts and communication exchanges. Eventually, Al-Qaeda agreed to place the GSPC under a one-year probation in 2005.

Droukdal, wanting to prove himself, attempted to unite all the jihadist groups remaining in Algeria and North Africa under his banner.<sup>132</sup> He also attempted to send fighters to AQI to confirm this endorsement of a global jihadist strategy. Thus in 2005, 150 Algerians were arrested in Iraq by the US army, all volunteers to join AQI and all of whom were allegedly sent by Droukdal.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, and around the same time, ideologues from Afghanistan and Algerian fighters from Iraq returned to Algeria to preach and instill Al-Qaeda ideology and methods into the ranks of the GPSC.<sup>134</sup> In parallel, Droukdal launched several attacks against western targets in Algeria to demonstrate his commitment to fight "the far enemy" everywhere. This endeavor was also accompanied by a multiplication of hostage-takings in the Sahel, especially Mauritania and Western targets there were entered into this strategy.

Under such circumstances, and by September 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced that Al-Qaeda had formally accepted the GSPC into its organization, calling this move "a bone in the throat of the United States and France." The GSPC, which was to become from then onwards called Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM),<sup>135</sup> was to strike both Western regimes and local regimes in North Africa–Sahel as a whole, no longer confined to just Algeria. Establishing and uniting all jihadist factions in the region under its banner became the major goal of AQIM.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Mathieu Guidère, "La tentation internationale d'Al Qaida", *Focus Stratégique* 12 (December 2008) : 15-16.

<sup>133</sup> Guidère, *Al Qaida*, 156.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>135</sup> Although the allegiance took place in September 2006, the GSPC changed its name to AQIM only in February 2007.

<sup>129</sup> Mokeddem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique*, 70–71.

<sup>129</sup> Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 183.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with a high-ranking Mauritanian security official, Nouakchott, Mauritania (2011).

## AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQIM) IN NORTH AFRICA–SAHEL: (2007–2017)

### The Collapse of AQIM in North Africa

The creation of AQIM in 2007 took place in a very difficult context for the organization in Algeria. This was due to several factors. The first was to be explained by the long-term consequences of both the Algerian civil strife, which had claimed the lives of nearly 100,000 people, leading to a rejection of jihadism by the Algerian masses. Directly related to this was the policy of National Reconciliation implemented by former President Bouteflika upon his arrival to power in 1999.

As explained by a former Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) fighter, in the context of extreme violence, especially from the GIA, in 1996, the Algerian authorities had opened a dialogue to put an end to the conflict with the AIS.<sup>136</sup> A ceasefire agreement was eventually signed in 1997, which included the liberation of the prisoners and renunciation of violence on the part of the AIS and another organization, the LIDC.<sup>137</sup> In 2000, this led to the dissolution of the two organizations and a return to civil life of around 4000 fighters while 5000 had been released from prison in July of the previous year.<sup>138</sup> The dramatic decrease in violence also propelled Algerian authorities to formally engage in a similar process with the groups that were still operational, including the GSPC; both directly with the group leadership, and at the local level with brigade leaders and even the fighters themselves.

As Farid Alilat explains, the rationale was to “empty the mountains of those groups by offering them an amnesty. According to the law, those who committed crimes against civilians were supposed to not benefit from these measures but in practice they did.” Terrorists would be allowed to surrender and, after a debriefing, they would be returned to civilian life.<sup>139</sup> Economically, and while officially no specific programs were adopted to reintegrate such fighters back into the society, in practice, those who surrendered or who were released from jail were reintegrated into their jobs whenever this was possible. The former fighters also benefited greatly from existing programs to boost the economy and from social redistribution programs as well, all of which were factors that facilitated their reintegration into civilian lives.<sup>140</sup>

Moreover, leaflets were dropped in the mountains so that jihadists in activity could see that there were possibilities for them to surrender. Families of jihadists, as well as emissaries, were sent to the mountains including former major emirs to reach out to the

brigades in activity there to convince them to surrender.<sup>141</sup> Part of this strategy was the successful attempt to discredit the religious discourse, which had legitimized the use of violence by using not only local imams in Algeria itself but even more by using major religious scholars especially from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others such as Youssef al-Qardawi, who endorsed the process of National Reconciliation.<sup>142</sup> At the same time, the Algerian army conducted massive military operations against those groups all over the country to increase the pressure on them. In 2005, the National Reconciliation law passed by a referendum; legalizing this process, which had been active on the ground since 2000 and showed popular adhesion to it.

This had a direct effect on the groups themselves, starting with their leaders. Hassan Hattab, the founder of GSPC was removed from his position because of his positive disposition to this process. In 2009, in an interview with Camille Tawil, and reflecting on the situation in the early 2000s, Hattab explained that, by 2002–2003, “I had realized that the situation was radically different from the 1990s. The regime policies had changed. The President was sincere in his will to reconcile. The attitude of the population had changed. One could not say that we still represented the aspirations of the society while the public aspired only to reconciliation. In addition, many religious authorities opposed us in our combat.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, Hattab entered into a formal truce in 2005 with the Algerian authorities and surrendered in 2007 with 300 of his men.<sup>144</sup> This was considered a major success by the Algerian authorities and a major blow to AQIM.

To that extent, when Droukdal assumed leadership of the GSPC and then transformed it into AQIM, he was leading an extremely weakened organization sapped by internal divisions and fighters surrendering to the authorities. An illustration of this was between 2007 and 2009 when 250 terrorists including 80 emirs (leaders) had been killed,<sup>145</sup> while between 2007 and 2010 another 1200 had been captured and thousands more had surrendered.<sup>146</sup> For Droukdal, this was a disaster, even more so as those losses could not be compensated as the numbers of recruits had dramatically decreased.

In this context, Droukdal had probably around 900 men left in addition to another 1500 members of logistical support groups involved at various levels in AQIM. Under such conditions of massive pressure, AQIM retreated to the difficult-to-access mountains of the Kabyle region.<sup>147</sup> Initially, benefiting from a lack of cooperation of the local populations with security services in this region, Droukdal isolated his men from the rest of the population to avoid the temptation of surrendering and also eliminated those suspected

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Mounir Idriss Lallali, Deputy-Director at the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), African Union Commission (October 2020).

<sup>143</sup> Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi, 2010), 182-183.

<sup>144</sup> See “Le fondateur du GSPC, Hassan Hattab s'est 'rendu' aux autorités algériennes fin septembre,” *Le Monde* (October 6, 2007). Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/10/06/le-fondateur-du-gspc-hassan-hattab-s-est-rendu-fin-septembre\\_963769\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/10/06/le-fondateur-du-gspc-hassan-hattab-s-est-rendu-fin-septembre_963769_3212.html).

<sup>145</sup> Mohamed Boufatah, “20 EMIRS FONT PARTIE DU LOT : 250 terroristes éliminés en deux ans,” *L'expression* (April 21, 2009).

<sup>146</sup> Fouad Imatene “RECONCILIATION NATIONALE : 7540 terroristes se sont rendus depuis 2005,” *L'expression* (September 4th, 2010).

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Mohammed Mokeddem, journalist and specialist of Jihadi groups (September 2012).

<sup>136</sup> Interview with a former Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) fighter, September 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Farid Alilat, journalist at Jeune Afrique and specialist of Jihadi movements (November 2020).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Akram Kharief, journalist and specialist of Jihadi groups (October 2020).

of being inclined to do so.<sup>148</sup> This allowed him to maintain himself for several years in the region but not to reinvigorate his declining organization. The Algerian security services for their part, encircled the areas hermetically and continued to conduct military operations while calling for the surrender of the remaining jihadists, thus further isolating AQIM. Droukdal, while he was able to keep his organization alive, was not able to prevent its inevitable decline.

The Arab Spring and the collapse of Libya and the Ben Ali regime did not alter this situation dramatically. Indeed while, initially, AQIM had benefited from these developments as Droukdal was able to send several of his men to Tunisia to create the *Katibet Ukba Ibn Nafaa* (KUIN) which was linked to AQIM directly,<sup>149</sup> and also benefitted from an initial inflow of weapons from Libya, which allowed AQIM to conduct several attacks in Algeria, things changed very quickly. The Algerian army deployed tens of thousands of soldiers along the Tunisia-Libyan-Malian borders tightening security measures to stop the flow of weapons into the country and to reinforce the isolation of the groups in Algeria itself to prevent any “revival of AQIM”.

As Mohammed Mokeddem explains, the priority for the Algerian services then was to cut off any existing link between the North and the South.<sup>150</sup> To that extent, forts were built every 50 km, observation aircraft were deployed to patrol the borders regularly supported by gendarmes, soldiers and special forces. If a convoy would enter Algeria, it would be immediately intercepted and eliminated.<sup>151</sup> Thus, tons of weapons were seized in Southern Algeria by the Algerian army in addition to preventing many jihadists from joining AQIM in the Sahel or vice versa.

Moreover, Algeria and Tunisia established strong security relations, which included sharing of information, regular meetings between security officials of both countries, joint patrols and coordination of military operations against terrorist groups along the Tunisian-Algerian borders.<sup>152</sup> This prevented AQIM from exploiting developments in Tunisia to its advantage. For its part, KUIN did conduct noticeable violent attacks in the country, especially between 2014 and 2016. By 2010, the Tunisian security services had reorganized themselves and were able to regain control of the situation. By the time of writing in 2020, while KUIN still exists, it is now a very weak organization. The fact of the matter is that thousands of volunteering fighters opted for the Jihad in Syria and Iraq, which further prevented AQIM from ever being more than a brigade in Tunisia.

Another element that further weakened AQIM in the north was the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) organization. Indeed, shortly after the proclamation of the caliphate in Syria-Iraq, several brigades from AQIM split and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and its self-proclaimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The most famous of these

brigades became known as *Jund Al Khilafa fi Ard al Djzaier* (Soldiers of the Caliph in Algeria),<sup>153</sup> responsible for the kidnapping and murder of a French tourist, Hervé Gourdel in September 2014.

For the Algerian army at this time (2014), the National Reconciliation had reached its end. Indeed, Merouane Azi, president of the Judicial Assistance Unit for the implementation of the provisions of the Charter for National Reconciliation, announced that only 25 terrorists had surrendered in 2013 and 23 in 2014 simply stating ‘We are at the end of our mission.’<sup>154</sup> The National Reconciliation as a strategy had reached its limits and there was no reason any more to continue its active implementation. In this context, starting from 2014 until 2018, the Algerian army conducted massive military operations all over the country against what was left of AQIM and of the Islamic State affiliates. By then, AQIM had lost the neutrality of the local populations in the Kabyle regions due to its resort to racketeering facilitated by the army operations.<sup>155</sup>

Hundreds of terrorists were killed or captured during those years, *Jund al-Khilafa* was practically annihilated by May 2015 and those brigades that also pledged allegiance to IS followed a similar fate. An Algerian security official explained “our orders were to eliminate them once and for all.”<sup>156</sup> Under extreme pressure and nearly destroyed, whatever was left of AQIM evacuated the Kabyle regions and shifted to other parts of the country such as Skikda and Jijel, which were even more difficult to access, or towards the Tunisian borders such as the Tbesa region.<sup>157</sup>

In 2017, Droukdal gave an interview to Al-Qaeda magazine “Inspire” in which he acknowledged that “...the Algerian front, which has been bogged down by a long-drawn-out war ... suffers from a rarity—and at times an almost complete absence—of those willing to support and assist, whether internally or externally. So this has had its impact (in Algeria).”<sup>158</sup> The collapse was so complete that in 2018, and for the first time in 20 years, no bombing attack had been recorded in Algeria while the report on World Threat Assessment of the United States’ Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) of 2019 did not mention Algeria as a risk country for terrorism. As Salima Tlemceni explained, the jihadi groups in Algeria, from all factions, have been almost destroyed. Also, while in the early 2010s, 15 to 20 terrorist incidents per month were still reported, these are now down to almost zero and have become very rare occurrences.<sup>159</sup>

Against this rapidly unraveling situation, Droukdal left Algeria probably in early to mid-2019 to the more secure Sahel and where Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups had become among the most powerful jihadist groups in the world. Indeed, and that is the paradox,

<sup>153</sup> See “Algérie : Jund al-Khilafa, des “soldats” pas si inconnus,” *Jeune Afrique* (October 2, 2014). Available at : <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/43194/politique/alg-rie-jund-al-khilafa-des-soldats-pas-si-inconnus/>

<sup>154</sup> Nissa Hammadi, “La réconciliation nationale sera élargie à d’autres catégories”, *Liberté* (September, 2015).

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Mohammed Mokeddem, journalist and specialist of Jihadi movements, Algiers, Algeria (June 2014).

<sup>156</sup> Discussion with an Algerian security official Algiers, Algeria (June 2015).

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Akram Khariief, journalist and security expert, Algiers, Algeria (January 2018).

<sup>158</sup> Abdelmalek Droukdel interview to “Inspire” cited in Geoff Porter, “AQIM Pleads for Relevance in Algeria,” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 12, 3 (March 2019).

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Salima Tlemceni, journalist at El Watan and specialist of jihadi groups, Algiers, Algeria (June 2019).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> See Fatma Bendhaou, “Tunisie: Okba Ibn Nafaa, une Katiba à l’ombre d’AQMI,” *Analyse Afrique* (June 11th, 2021). Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/tunisie-okba-ibn-nafaa-une-katiba-%C3%A0-l-ombre-d-aqmi/2270414>.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Mohammed Mokeddem, journalist and specialist of Jihadi groups (September 2012).

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Akram Khariief, journalist and specialist of security issues, Algiers, Algeria (January 2018).

<sup>152</sup> Interview with a very high-ranking Tunisian security official (September 2020).

while the GSPC followed AQIM, and deployed in the Sahel to provide support to AQIM in Algeria, the strategy of the Algerian army to prevent and suppress the links between the north and the south led to the gradual empowerment of the Sahelian brigades. Rather than a hierarchical authority, Droukdal's authority became increasingly informal and his grip over these brigades dwindled over the years.

The isolation of AQIM in the Kabyle region further loosened the relations between the two areas to the point where the affiliates had become more powerful and influential than the main organization and leadership. Furthermore, Droukdal's total mishandling of his relationship with Belmokhtar, the most powerful AQIM brigade leader in the Sahel, further weakened the relations between AQIM central command in Algeria and the Sahel. Thus, when he left Algeria for northern Mali in 2019, after the Algerian army had destroyed what was left of AQIM, he had become an isolated and discredited leader upon his arrival in the Sahel. Though regarded as the nominally supreme emir of AQIM and thus of JNIM, in reality, he had no real power or support base and no real authority except a sort of moral one due to his long leadership of AQIM. This rendered his attempt to exercise any effective authority in such situations nearly impossible.

## THE MAKING OF JNIM: TENSIONS, ALLIANCES AND RE-COMPOSITION OF JIHADIST GROUPS IN THE SAHEL (2010–2017)

The isolation of AQIM in Northern Algeria and the severing of its links with its Sahelian brigades due to the heavy military deployment of the Algerian army had double-edged consequences for the group. On one hand was the *de facto* independence of AQIM brigades in the Sahel, while on the other hand, and as they were generating more money and operating in an area where Sahelian States exercised little to no control, they were not able to go back to Algeria, becoming more powerful than AQIM in Algeria itself. This had tremendous long-term consequences that the group would be forced to reckon with.

### Division and Rivalries among AQIM Brigades

The first outcome of the cutting off of ties between AQIM in northern Algeria and its brigades in the Sahel was the deepening of the rift between Belmokhtar and Droukdal. Indeed, in 2004, after the death of Nabil Al-Sahrawy, killed in Algeria, Belmokhtar had plans to become the new leader of GSPC. However, Abdelmalek Droukdal assembled the *Shura* Council of the organization and was able to get himself elected as leader before Belmokhtar could potentially arrive in Algeria. This left heavy resentment between the two leaders, especially as it was Belmokhtar who had been a major jihadist figure for years and a former combatant in Afghanistan since the late 80s. In comparison, Droukdal had only been active in the region of Khemis el Khechna in Algeria since 1994 as part of the Abu Bakr Essedik brigade, a very minor GIA brigade at the time when Belmokhtar was already a brigade commander and the then head of the southern region

of the GIA.<sup>160</sup> Droukdal did rise over the years in the GSPC's leadership but remained a rather less important figure compared to Belmokhtar.

The tensions between the two emerged very quickly as Belmokhtar tended to ignore Droukdal's instructions and orders as the new leader of the group. The arrival of Abdezzak Al Para and then of Abu Zeid, both of whom were very close to Droukdal and opponents (in the case of Abu Zeid) to GSPC–AQIM's involvement in drug trafficking, also served to increase the rift with Belmokhtar.<sup>161</sup> Worse, Al Para and Abu Zeid favored hostage-taking as a main source of income, whereas initially, Belmokhtar opposed it as he believed it would create too many problems and risk potential foreign military involvement, although he eventually conducted several.<sup>162</sup>

These tensions rose in 2005 when Droukdal decided to remove Belmokhtar from his position of leadership of the South-Sahelian area and replaced him with a rather obscure member of the GSPC, Mohamed Nakia (commonly known as Abou Khabab), who had been active in the south but did not hold notable leadership positions.<sup>163</sup> This was perceived by Belmokhtar, and rightly so, as a major humiliation. Thus, from this point onwards, Belmokhtar acted in total autonomy from Droukdal, while officially remaining part of the GSPC and AQIM.

This was reflective of Droukdal's isolation in Algeria and that his authority over the Sahel rested essentially on informal personnel links such as those with Abu Zeid and Yahia Abou Houmam; another new rising figure in the Sahelian AQIM Brigades. Unable to handle the situation, Nakia eventually returned to Algeria and was killed in 2011.<sup>164</sup> Another leader was appointed in 2007, Yahia Djouadi, a close associate of Droukdal, who had been essentially active in Algeria and accordingly had little grip on the Sahel. Djouadi proved incapable of fending off the rift between Belmokhtar and Droukdal and eventually returned to Algeria.

Another manifestation of this rift between the supreme leadership in Algeria and the Southern brigades was Belmokhtar's decision to enter into an informal truce with the Algerian authorities in 2008–2009, without consulting with Droukdal or the other AQIM brigade commanders.<sup>165</sup> Asserting his autonomy and position further, Belmokhtar supported, if not orchestrated, the creation of the MUJWA (Movement for Unicity and Jihad in Western Africa) a splinter of AQIM, composed of Sahelian fighters disappointed by the fact that the organization favored Touaregs within its ranks in promotions and benefits.<sup>166</sup> The fact that Belmokhtar did not send the money he received from the ransoms to AQIM in Algeria as he was expected to do increased the conflict between him and Droukdal.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Mohammed Mokeddem, journalist and specialist of Algerian jihadi groups, Algiers, Algeria (September 2012).

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Mohamed Fall Ould Oumeire, journalist and specialist of Sahelian Jihadi Groups, Nouakchott, Mauritania (October 2011).

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Salima Tlemceni, journalist at El Watan and specialist of jihadi groups Algiers, Algeria (September 2012).

<sup>163</sup> Interview with a Mauritanian high-ranking official Nouakchott Mauritania (October 2011).

<sup>164</sup> Djillali B. "Après l'élimination d'Abou Al-Khabab à El-Oued: Un sérieux revers pour Aqmi" *Liberte* (December 14, 2011)

<sup>165</sup> See Belmokhtar's only known interview with Mauritanian journalist Mohamed Abou Al Maali Director of Agence Nouakchott-Info (ANI) in October 2011 and kindly shown to the author by Mr. Abou Al Maali in Nouakchott, Mauritania (October 2011).

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Mohamed Abou AL Maali, Director of Agence Nouakchott-Info (October 2011).

These developments, if anything, demonstrated the loosening of the links between Algeria's AQIM and the brigades in the Sahel, and the fact that Droukdal's authority depended first and foremost on personal links and allegiances rather than effective control on the ground. Droukdal tried to assert his authority once again in October 2012 by sending a letter emanating from AQIM's *Shura* Council to Belmokhtar rather than his men, accusing Belmokhtar of insubordination and mishandling of the money obtained from the ransoms. Droukdal also announced the removal of Belmokhtar from his brigade.

However, this move yielded no tangible impact. Indeed, loyalties being in this context first and foremost personal, Belmokhtar officially split from AQIM with his whole brigade and created his own organization "Those Who Sign with Blood" before eventually merging with the MUJWA in 2013 and creating the powerful *al-Mourabitun*. He pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and in effect severed his relations with AQIM. Belmokhtar also took advantage of the chaos in Libya to expand there and create powerful relations with local Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist groups there using his networks and connections.

However, ironically, Belmokhtar, who had refused Droukdal's authority, repeatedly challenging him, was himself the target of such behavior in May 2015, as his right-hand man and second-in-command, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawy, split from *al-Mourabitun* with a small group of followers and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, forming the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS). The splits and divisions within AQIM in the Sahel, in the end, did not prevent the organization from growing in power and making alliances, nor did it prevent it from entrenching itself in the Sahel and becoming the most powerful jihadist group in the region after Boko Haram.

## The Creation of JNIM: The Strategy of Alliances and Mergers

As soon as GSPC and then AQIM deployed themselves in the Sahel, this created a call for recruits, propelling the group to establish relations with other fellow jihadist organizations in the region.

Thus, very early on, AQIM welcomed Boko Haram fighters into its training camps in Northern Mali.<sup>167</sup> In a 2009 letter by Abu Zeid sent to Droukdal, he informed his superior that Boko Haram wished to send 200 of its men to northern Mali to receive training and that coordinated operations were already underway between the two groups. Abu Zeid also informed Droukdal that Boko Haram wished to establish a direct link with AQIM central command to expand the cooperation and to also include conducting coordinated attacks in Niger and Nigeria.<sup>168</sup>

Besides Boko Haram, AQIM's presence also attracted North African fighters either wishing to join AQIM or simply to establish contacts and receive training. In that regard,

several Moroccan jihadist brigades traveled to the Sahel to receive training, including Mohamed Adghiri, an important local jihadist figure who recruited men and received training in Belmokhtar's camps. Adghiri wanted to get support from AQIM to conduct attacks in Morocco and to that extent established connections with Belmokhtar. As a result, Belmokhtar is said to have sent weapons and supported some ultimately failed attacks in Morocco.<sup>169</sup> Nonetheless, it demonstrated that the Sahel could become a major rear basis for launching attacks against the countries of North Africa.

In this regard as well, tens of Tunisians traveled to Northern Mali and trained there, joining AQIM, some of whom returned to Tunisia to take part in the Jihad there.<sup>170</sup> However, and more than anything, it was the collapse of Libya and the weakening of the security apparatus in Tunisia that allowed AQIM to reestablish routes between its camps in Northern Mali and AQIM brigades in Algeria in 2011–2013, bypassing the Algerian military deployment in South-East Algeria, which had until then made it very difficult to smuggle weapons or money into Northern Algeria.

Besides this, the AQIM leadership cultivated good relations with all jihadist groups in the region and successfully avoided conflicts with potential rivals such as MUJWA and Belmokhtar's Al-Mourabitun. However, the most important effort AQIM undertook was to establish a strong strategic alliance with Ansar al-Din led by Iyadh Ghali, a major local Touareg figure. Ansar al-Din as described by Yahia Abou Houmam, who had become commander of AQIM by 2013, was "an Islamist local organization which chose the Jihad in the name of God."<sup>171</sup> Abou Houmam explained that, given the injustices that struck the Touaregs, Ansar al-Din emerged to combat such injustices and thus it was only natural that AQIM supported Iyadh Ghali. Given that the majority of the population in the region was Touareg and given Riyadh's prominent status, this alliance represented the key for AQIM to maintain itself in the region.

Indeed, despite all its strategies to be accepted by the local populations, at the end of the day, AQIM and al-Mourabitun were transnational organizations led by foreigners with an international agenda. Ansar al-Din, in a way, gave them access to permanent support from local populations. Given the ideological convergence and his status, Iyadh Ghali represented a critical key for AQIM to entrench itself locally and increase its recruitment base.<sup>172</sup>

At this point, and while French-led Serval and Barkhane operations temporarily weakened jihadist groups between 2013 and 2014, killing hundreds of them including major leadership figures, the groups were forced to retreat to the extreme north of Mali and southern Libya where they regrouped and gradually started to come back by 2014. At the same time, Ayman al-Zawahiri, supreme leader of Al-Qaeda, issued in 2013 a letter to his affiliates all over the world. Considered a major hallmark of Al-Qaeda's global

<sup>169</sup> See Kei Nakagawa, El Mostafa Rezrazi and Shoji Matsumoto, *Morocco's War on Terrorism: The case for security cooperation today* (United Kingdom: Gilgamesh, 2016), 126-129 and 45-149.

<sup>170</sup> See "La Tunisie, base arrière des djihadistes maliens," Radio France Internationale (January 22, 2013).

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Yahia Abou Houmam, realized by Abou al Maali, December 2015.

<sup>172</sup> Interview with an international observer close to those issues, Bamako, Mali (March 2017).

<sup>167</sup> Discussion with Gondo Ladiba, researcher in Njamena Tchad and specialist of Boko Haram (April 2017).

<sup>168</sup> This letter is available on Long War Journal website, Available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Letter-from-Abdallah-Abu-Zayd-Abd-al-Hamid-to-Abu-Mus-ab-Abd-al-Wadud.pdf>.

fight, the letter outlined the organization strategy to combat its enemies. Al-Zawahiri instructed his men to focus on combating the United States but especially its local allies' regimes in exhausting conflicts of attrition. He also instructed them to establish contacts with all armed groups, Islamist or not, opposed to these regimes. He advised groups to unite, merge or cooperate whenever possible and avoid conflict amongst themselves. This demonstrated a high level of pragmatism, and those orders were well-received and followed by brigades in the Sahel.

Accordingly, the already existing Ansar al-Din/AQIM alliance sought to reestablish relations with al-Mourabitun led by Belmokhtar. This did not pose any problems as despite their 2012 split, there had been no conflict of any kind between the two organizations (AQIM and al-Murabitun), who converged on everything including allegiance to Al-Qaeda. As we witnessed, the main reason for the division was personal and nothing else.

By 2015, Abu Zeid had been dead for two years, while Droukdal, who had lost grip over the Sahel, was propelling him to endorse any process of rapprochement with jihadist brigades that was open to a reconciliation with Belmokhtar. For his part, Yahia Abou Houmam, leader of AQIM in the Sahel, had always had excellent relations with Belmokhtar. Thus, in 2015, it was officially announced that al-Mourabitun, from that point onwards, would coordinate its operations with AQIM, a move that was publicly praised by Droukdal. Moreover, in central Mali, a major rebellion had developed, starting in 2015, and was led by the local predicator Amadou Koufa who had formed Katibat Mecina, a close friend of lyadh Ghali.

Against this backdrop of shifting allegiances and tacit cooperation, in March 2017, the decision was made to merge and unite those four organizations, giving birth to the JNIM—*Jamā'at nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn* or Group to Support Islam and the Muslims, led by lyadh Ghali. This marked the "Sahelization" of the global jihad movement. Officially, JNIM pledged allegiance to AQIM and its leader Droukdal, to Al-Qaeda's supreme emir Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as to the emir of the Taliban's Haibatullah Akhundzada, placing the newly created organization with Al-Qaeda's support directly under AQIM control. In practice, however, AQIM had come to realize the major importance of the Sahel not just as a rear basis but as a front in its own right; naturally supporting this move. The designation of lyadh Ghali was to that effect a natural consequence. lyadh translated Al-Qaeda's rhetoric into *tamasheck* (the local dialect spoken by the Touareg)—the global jihad became a local one.<sup>173</sup>

These shifts took place in the context of the collapse of AQIM in Algeria, while in the Sahel JNIM multiplied attacks further fortified its alliance with other jihadist groups such as Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso.<sup>174</sup> In the Sahel, Malian and the Nigerian armies proved unable to counter JNIM. French troops of operation Barkhane struck major blows to JNIM killing hundreds of its men and major leaders such as Yahia Abou Houmam, Hassan Al Ansari and Abu lyadh Al Tunisi, and in all likelihood, Belmokhtar. However, these

leaders were rapidly replaced by new ones, close to lyadh Ghali and appointed by him, all of whom came from the Sahel leading to a further Sahelization of the organization as most of the North African leaders at every level had been killed.

Moreover, in the spring–summer of 2020, major inter-jihadist fragmentation took place between JNIM and ISGS, which resulted in a victory for lyadh Ghali's men and the expulsion of the ISGS back to eastern Mali-Niger, in the three-borders area, while another pro-IS organization, Jund al-Khilafa in western Mali, was quickly eliminated in February 2020.

Thus, by the summer of 2020, lyadh Ghali and the JNIM had emerged as the most powerful and unchallenged Jihadist group in the Sahel. It is in this context that there was a bolt from the blue: in June, Abdelmalek Droukdal, aka Abu Mossaab Abdelwadoud, founder and supreme leader of AQIM for 16 years, one of the most wanted men in the world, believed to be hiding somewhere in Algeria, was killed near Tessalit in Northern Mali.

## THE REVERSAL OF FORTUNE: JNIM AS THE NEW DOMINANT JIHADIST ORGANIZATION IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

### The Droukdal–Ghali Relationship in Question

As was demonstrated in previous sections, the operations launched by the Algerian army between 2014 and 2018 had resulted in the near annihilation of AQIM in Algeria and, thus, posed a major blow for Abdelmalek Droukdal even more so that he had lost key associates in such attacks. In 2016, Droukdal's right-hand man and second in command of AQIM, Djamel Hannad, was killed by Algerian special forces.<sup>175</sup> At the same time, some AQIM brigades continued to split and pledge allegiance to the Islamic State such as Katibet al-Ghoraba,<sup>176</sup> and Katibet al-Fath al-Mubin,<sup>177</sup> both of which were also quickly eliminated by Algerian security services.

This constituted another major blow to Droukdal. In Tunisia itself, Katibet Ukba Ibn Nafaa, created by AQIM and commanded by several Algerian leaders sent by Droukdal, had not been able to launch an effective Jihad and by 2016 had been contained and weakened.<sup>178</sup> Most of its commanders, who were Algerians close to Droukdal and sent specifically by him, including Lokmane Abou Sakhr, Bilel Kobi, Bechir Neji and Adel Sghiri, were killed by Tunisian security services between 2016 and 2019<sup>179</sup>. Thus, Droukdal was heading an extremely weakened, declining organization.

<sup>175</sup> Farid Allilat, "Securite Algérie : un ancien lieutenant du chef d'AQMI abattu par les forces spéciales," Jeune Afrique (October 7, 2016).

<sup>176</sup> Ines Boukhalfa, "Dans une opération menée par l'ANP (l'Armée Nationale Populaire) : L'émir de katibat Al-Ghoraba éliminé à Constantine," Liberté (March 27, 2017).

<sup>177</sup> Zineb Hamdi, "Une nouvelle Katibat fait allégeance à Daech en Algérie," TSA (Tout sur l'Algérie), May 23 2017. Available at: <https://www.tsa-algerie.com/une-nouvelle-katibet-fait-allegeance-a-daesh-en-algerie/>.

<sup>178</sup> Bendhaou, "Tunisie: Okba Ibn Nafaa, une Katiba à l'ombre d'AQMI", Afrique Analyse (June 11, 2021).

<sup>179</sup> Adlène Meddi, "Sahel : le déclin d'Abdelmalek Droukdal était aussi celui d'Aqmi," Le Point (June 6, 2020).

<sup>173</sup> Interview with an international observer close to those issues, Bamako, Mali (March 2017).

<sup>174</sup> Indeed, an Islamist rebellion had broken out in Burkina Faso in 2017, led by Ibrahim Dicko and then Jafar Dicko, close friends of Koufa, crippling the authorities there and in effect taking control of northern Burkina.

Worse, one of the few important figures left standing, Abou Oubeida Youssef Al-Annabi, the head of the AQIM's *Shura* Council, had had notoriously bad relations with Droukdal since the mid-2000s as he had opposed the allegiance of GSPC with Al-Qaeda and had voiced his criticism of Droukdal for his lack of coordination with the Council.<sup>180</sup> In this context, while there is no clear information on how, why precisely, nor when it happened, Droukdal most likely left Algeria for Mali between 2018 and 2019. Videos of him that emerged during that year were focused on Mali and none focused on Algeria where the Hirak had started in February 2019. Instead, it was Abu Oubeida who intervened on behalf of AQIM to comment on the events in Algeria, which created speculation regarding the exact date of his departure.

The choice by Droukdal to migrate toward the Sahel seemed to be the most logical as it was the last haven where he would potentially enjoy some authority as Yahia Abou Houmam, JNIM's second in command was one of the last close people to Droukdal left. However, in February 2019, Abou Houmam was killed. He was the last major Algerian leader of JNIM who maintained ties with Droukdal. To that extent, although in theory, Droukdal was the leader of JNIM, by virtue of JNIM's affiliation to AQIM, in practice he could not exercise any real power since at that point JNIM was under the firm command of Iyadh Ghali.

This was further complicated by the fact that there were major differences between Iyadh Ghali and Droukdal on several key issues. Indeed, the whole strategic set up of Iyadh Ghali contradicted the orientations of Droukdal starting with the conflict between ISGS and JNIM. Indeed, and whereas in 2018 to early 2019, there was an attempt at a rapprochement between the two organizations in the context of the fall of the Islamic State in Syria–Iraq, things had rapidly devolved by late 2019. A conflict started to erupt in late 2019, first through disputes between local JNIM–ISGS emirs in central Mali due to the defection of JNIM men to join ISGS as well as due to issues related to the local distribution of lands and overlapping spheres of influence.<sup>181</sup>

By early 2020, those disputes had escalated to very localized clashes which started to erupt between ISGS men and the Mecina Brigade. As Lemine Ould Salem notes, in those early months, the clashes were primarily driven by local dynamics rather than organizational or structural divisions. However, by spring of the same year, and after failed attempts at reconciliation, the conflict escalated to a full-scale war between the two rival organizations, rather than just local rivalries between their men.<sup>182</sup> By the early summer of 2020, JNIM, which had been declared an apostate organization by the Islamic State at the initiative of Adnane al-Sahrawy, had scored major successes against ISGS and was on the verge of victory. However, Droukdal and Iyadh diverged on how to end the conflict. Indeed, JNIM's leadership, mostly Ghali, who was initially open to a dialogue with ISGS, was less inclined to reconciliation once the conflict had escalated to that degree, whereas Droukdal was still in favor of appeasement and a rapprochement with ISGS. In

that regard, it is said that Droukdal may have tried to contact the Islamic State in Libya to ask them to convince the ISGS to agree to comprise. Some claim that the day Droukdal was killed, he was engaged in active mediations between al-Sahrawy and Ghali.

The increased tensions between Droukdal and Ghali were bound to take place since the former's arrival in the Sahel.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, while the two had been in touch for years, they had never met face to face.<sup>184</sup> When Droukdal arrived in the Sahel, he was a weakened man with an almost destroyed organization facing a rising major jihadist leader, Ghali, who had been a major leadership figure in the region for 30 years and the unchallenged leader of JNIM since 2017. The two men could only clash. These tensions were most likely further exacerbated by the clear and official disposition of Iyadh Ghali made public in February 2020 to engage in a dialogue with Bamako to end the conflict.<sup>185</sup> This served to irritate Droukdal who had systematically rejected any offer of negotiation of truce and reconciliation during his years as leader of GSPC and AQIM.

This was the primary divisive issue that had led to Hattab's removal from GPSC, a move that Droukdal personally orchestrated and saw through. An important element that tends to support this hypothesis was the fact that Iyadh Ghali never released any statement or video paying tribute to Droukdal, who was supposed to be his superior and "brother in arms" after his death. The only tribute came in November 2020 from al-Shanqiti in a video that praised at length the achievements of Ghali. This also indicated that although Al-Annabi was the new leader of AQIM, the real new leader and the real power in the jihadi groups in North Africa–Sahel was now Ghali himself. One also must note that there was no pledging of allegiance on the part of the JNIM to al-Annabi.

The death of Droukdal in effect marked the end of the North African domination over the Jihad and the Sahel becoming the new epicenter of global jihadism. Nonetheless, it remained to be seen how the relations between what was left of AQIM in North Africa and JNIM would then unfold.

## The New Relationship between Jihadist Groups in the Sahel and North Africa

Many expected that the death of Droukdal and his replacement by the less-than-charismatic Abou Oubeida Youssef al-Annabi would either result in a potential final break between AQIM and JNIM, or to the absorption of AQIM by the then more powerful JNIM.<sup>186</sup> However, none of these predictions materialized; notwithstanding a brief power vacuum

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Akram Khariief, journalist and specialist of jihadi groups (September 2021).

<sup>181</sup> Discussion with Lemine Ould Salem, Journalist and specialist of Jihadi groups in the Sahel (June 2020).

<sup>182</sup> Aïssatou Diallo et Benjamin Roger, "Mali : que faut-il attendre du dialogue avec les jihadistes Iyad Ag Ghaly et," *Jeune Afrique* (February 11, 2020) and "Mali : le groupe de Iyad Ag Ghaly prêt à négocier avec Bamako à condition que la France et l'ONU s'en aillent."

<sup>183</sup> See for example Djallil Lounnas and Akram Khariief, "The consequences of the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel, the supreme emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) for the North African-Sahelian jihadi insurgencies," *Preventing Violent Extremism (PRE-VEX)* paper analysis (June July 2020); Morten Boas and Natasja Rupesinghe, "When the dust settles: what will Droukdel's death mean for the jihadist project in the Sahel?" *The Broker* (June 29, 2020), Geoff Porter, "NARCO ANALYSIS: Droukdel's Death & an Era's End," (June 9, 2020).

<sup>180</sup> "Une grande opération de ratissage à Ouled Sidi Brahim (Bordj Bou-Arréridj) Deux terroristes abattus," *Liberte* (2010).

<sup>181</sup> See "Au Mali, le jihadiste Amadou Koufa sous la pression de l'État islamique au grand Sahara", *Jeune Afrique* (February 3, 2020).

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Lemine Ould Salem, journalist and specialist of jihadi groups in the Sahel (April 2020).



in the immediate aftermath of Droukdal's death until his successor was announced, the relationship between AQIM and JNIM, against all odds, improved. This improvement in relations could be attributed to several factors.

On the ground, AQIM in Algeria continued to suffer further losses and was unable to mount any significant attacks besides some isolated ones, while several of its fighters continued to surrender. In 2020, 21 AQIM fighters had been killed, 12 captured or surrendered, while 108 members of logistical support groups had been arrested.<sup>187</sup> In December of the same year, a new disaster struck AQIM. During a major operation in Jijel against one of the last hideouts of the organization, three terrorists were killed.<sup>188</sup> Among them was Leslous Madani (commonly referred to as Abou Hayane) the head of the Eastern region for AQIM and a member of the Sharia Council. Among the fallen leaders in this operation was also Herida Abdelmadjid (referred to as Abu Mussa Al-Hassan), head of the propaganda apparatus of the organization,<sup>189</sup> in addition to Abou Dahdah, an important leader who was also captured during the same operation.<sup>190</sup>

The constant pressure from Algerian security services against the remnants of AQIM, the destruction of many of the group's support networks, combined with the difficulty of moving around especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, made conditions unbearable for these groups.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, the capture of Abou Dahdah and his interrogation provided information that led—in a matter of days—to the destruction of five AQIM hideouts, and the discovery of 80,000 Euros that had come from the JNIM. The money originated from a 20 Million Euro ransom paid by the French government to JNIM in October 2020 in exchange for the liberation of the Western hostage, Sophie Petronin, in addition to the freeing of 200 major terrorists of JNIM in October 2020.<sup>192</sup>

This discovery substantiated rumors regarding a rapprochement between AQIM and JNIM. The death of Droukdal had removed an obstacle to the relations between the two organizations, given the aforementioned power dynamics between Droukdal and Ghali. Al-Annabi, by contrast, was more concerned about the survival of his organization in Algeria, and did not attempt to impose his authority or his leadership over JNIM.<sup>193</sup> Iyadh Ghali was also now in a position of real power in the Sahel, without any rivals and willing to mend his relationship with AQIM, ready to reconnect and support his former organization.

This mending of relations was even more important as many Algerian nationals were still active within the ranks of JNIM, though not in the same important positions they used to occupy in earlier periods.<sup>194</sup> Among them was Abu Ossama al-Djazairi who is said to have replaced Abou Houmam as brigade leader, and Hamza Al Djazairi, another

important Algerian figure in JNIM. Furthermore, among the 200 prisoners released as part of the ransom deal were several Algerians who were also reintegrated into JNIM,<sup>195</sup> including former major figures of AQIM such as Tahar Abu Saad who, although physically crippled, was well-known and respected.<sup>196</sup> Some of them have tried since then to return to Algeria, including Mustapha al-Djazairi, one of the former AQIM fighters released during the exchange but later captured in Northern Algeria by state security services.<sup>197</sup> While Mustapha al-Djazairi claimed to have abandoned jihadism, to have returned at his own will and not by JNIM, there was no evidence to support this assertion. Worse, it highlighted JNIM's growing power in light of the quasi-disappearance of the Malian State in Northern Mali, thus paving the way for Jihadists to return to Algeria and potentially for JNIM to send men to Algeria. The discovery of 80,000 Euros with direct links to JNIM in the Jijel raid confirmed this fear.

The revitalized relationship between AQIM and JNIM was logistically facilitated by the change in leadership, but also the repositioning of AQIM and what was left of it in the extreme North-East and South-East parts of Algeria close to the Tunisian and Libyan borders.<sup>198</sup> This facilitated the provision of support by JNIM to AQIM as the primary route between the two was used predominantly by traffickers in Northern Mali–Libya; South-East Algeria; and the Northern Mali–Libya–Tunisia–Northeast Algeria borders. The existence of routes controlled and used by traffickers combined with the weakness of the state presence in these areas allowed JNIM to send support to al-Annabi.<sup>199</sup> These trafficking routes were difficult for Algerian security forces to exert control over, making it possible for JNIM to send material supplies to AQIM within Algeria itself.

However, it is important to highlight that despite the improvement of relations between AQIM and JNIM, this has no noticeable impact on dynamics on the ground. The weakening structure of AQIM in the face of strong Algerian state surveillance made it difficult to provide Al-Annabi with more extensive support. Still, the prospect of the end of the French-led Operation Barkhane and the demonstrated inability of the Sahelian States to effectively counter the threat posed by JNIM stands to potentially transform Northern Mali into a major base for jihadist groups and directly impact those still existing in North Africa.

It is also important to highlight that attempts by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are edifying. ISGS, weaker though more violent than its rival JNIM, was considered to be oriented towards the Sahel. This, however, started to shift in early 2021 with many rumors circulating indicating that Al-Sahrawy was interested in establishing

<sup>187</sup> "Lutte contre le terrorisme: 37 terroristes mis hors d'état de nuire en 2020," *Algérie Press Service* (January 2021).

<sup>188</sup> "Un troisième terroriste abattu mardi après-midi à Jijel" *Algérie Presse Service* (December 2020).

<sup>189</sup> Madjid Zerouk, "La lente agonie d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique dans le nord de l'Algérie," *Le Monde* (December 5, 2020).

<sup>190</sup> "Arrestation du dangereux terroriste Rezkane Ahcene dit 'Abou Dahdah' à Jijel," *Algérie Presse Service* (January 2020).

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Akram Kherief, Journalist and specialist of jihadi groups (January 2021).

<sup>192</sup> "Mali: Alger affirme avoir récupéré une "tranche de la rançon des otages," *Jeune Afrique* (December 29, 2020).

<sup>193</sup> Interview with Akram Kherief, journalist and specialist in security issues (September 2021).

<sup>194</sup> Discussion with Lemine Ould Sale, Journalist and specialist of jihadi groups in the Sahel (June 2021).

<sup>195</sup> Salima Tlemceni, "De retour du Mali, un terroriste algérien revient sur la libération des otages maliens et français: 30 millions d'euros et plus de 200 terroristes libérés," *El Watan* (October 31, 2020).

<sup>196</sup> See mainstream twitter, "Mali: An event not completed without prayer and feast." Available at: <https://twitter.com/menastream/status/1315028517713829890>.

<sup>197</sup> Salima Tlemceni, "Païement de rançons en contrepartie de la libération d'otages : Les révélations accablantes d'un terroriste," *El Watan* (December 7, 2020).

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Akram Kherief, journalist and specialist in security issues (September 2021).

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

links with Islamic State affiliates in North Africa. These include Jund al-Khilfa in Tunisia (JAK-T), and even more surprising, the almost extinguished Jund al-Khilafa (JAK-A) in Algeria.<sup>200</sup>

Moreover, the presence of an estimated 100 jihadists of Tunisian origin in the Sahel active in both JNIM but also ISGS,<sup>201</sup> paired with the fact that JAK-T still represents a tangible threat in Tunisia, made this hypothesis plausible. ISGS has invested massively in its logistical network since its creation, establishing links with various traffickers including weapons smugglers and human trafficking networks in Libya. Additionally, an estimate of 600 Tunisians are fighting in Libya especially within the ranks of the Islamic State in Southern Libya facilitating ISGS's linking with JAK-T.

In March 2021, the Libyan National Army announced the arrest of Abu Omar, a prominent Islamic State leader in Libya who coordinated action with ISGS.<sup>202</sup> This demonstrated an attempt by ISGS to turn towards North Africa after several years of solely focusing on the Sahel. Regarding the possibility of establishing links with JAK-A, it remains more ambiguous as the group count ranges from 15–20 men located near Algiers, far away from any borders, totally isolated in the mountains. This would make any linking nearly impossible.<sup>203</sup>

Overall, ISGS's attempts to reconnect with North African jihadist groups seemed to be extremely limited if not marginal. The extreme weakness of jihadist organizations in North Africa with the exception of Libya, the strict border control, paired with JNIM and ISGS's primary focus on the Sahel, means that in a best-case scenario, linking with North African jihadist groups was difficult to realize. The epicenter of jihadism has now shifted decisively towards the Sahel and those left in North Africa are now regarded as the most peripheral groups.

## CONCLUSION

The year 2020–2021 witnessed a major change in the dynamic of jihadist violence in North Africa and the Sahel. For almost 40 years, North Africa was a major center of violent extremism, with numerous uprisings, powerful jihadist organizations, and home to thousands of foreign fighters who traveled to Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and Syria. The region is also the origin of many leading global jihadist figures who have occupied major positions of influence within Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State over the years.

Comparatively, the Sahel region, while extremely unstable, was not historically linked to jihadism. At best, it was regarded as a rear base that was used as a haven to acquire weapons and financial resources. However, the weakening and suppression of the jihadist groups in North Africa, simultaneously with the strengthening of regional States, especially Algeria, led to the severing of links between North African jihadist groups and their counterparts in the Sahel. State services exerted concerted efforts to dismantle trafficking networks and smuggling routes to prevent the movement of weapons or fighters between the two regions. The collapse of jihadist groups in North Africa was thus inversely proportional to the growing power of those in the Sahel.

Today, the concern is not so much the links between North African and Sahelian jihadist groups, rather, it is the possibility of North African Foreign Fighter returnees from Syria–Iraq, who have not ideologically disengaged and who may decide to continue to fight by going to Libya, and from there cross into the Sahel to join the growing jihadist movement there.

So far, there is no concrete evidence of such occurrences, but the threat and fear of such a scenario unfolding are very high, outweighing fears regarding a re-eruption of violence in North Africa. The most pressing threat today remains the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Sahel in the wake of the end of the French-led Barkhane Operation. Sahelian armies have proved unable to control the situation and the jihadi groups, despite incurring heavy losses, including the recent death of Abu Walid Al-Sahrawy, are now in a position of renewed force and control huge swathes of territory. This, could directly destabilize North Africa in the near future.

## About the author

Dr. Djallil Lounnas is an associate professor of International Relations in Al Akahwayn University. His research, since 2011, has focused on Jihadi organizations in North Africa and the Sahel where he has conducted extensive field work. He is the author of the book “Le Djihadisme en Afrique du Nord/Sahel: d’AQMI a Daech” published in L’Harmattan/ Les Presses de la Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique as well as of numerous publications in academic journals including Political Violence and Terrorism, Mediterranean Politics, Middle-east policy, Maghreb-Machreck, Politique Etrangere.

<sup>200</sup> Indeed, since 2015, JAK-A was considered almost extinguished. In January 2021, six terrorists of this organization were killed by the Algerian army.

<sup>201</sup> Michael Ayari, “Jihadisme en Tunisie : éviter la recrudescence des violences” International Crisis Group (June 4, 2021), 7.

<sup>202</sup> See Luca Raineri tweet, [https://twitter.com/raineri\\_lu/status/1379384342116450311?lang=da](https://twitter.com/raineri_lu/status/1379384342116450311?lang=da), (March 2020).

<sup>203</sup> Supporting this scenario was the arrest in Libya of Ali al-Ajili al-Hasnawi in Libya, a logistical member of ISGS who was assigned with transferring weapons to his acolytes in Tunisia and Algeria.

Chapter

# 3

## **Evolving Trends of Islamist Groups in Tunisia and the Threat of Returnees**

*By: Dr. Emna Ben Arab*

Ten years have passed since the 2011 uprising in Tunisia, an event that shook the country to its foundations and had far-reaching implications for the political system and practices, on society, the economy and the security environment, including the jihadist movement and its ongoing evolution.

This chapter will look into how the jihadism trends discussed in preceding chapters played out in the Tunisian context including, most notably, the phenomenon of returning foreign terrorist fighters (henceforth FTFs). The chapter aims to provide a thorough analysis of how emerging trends have impacted the evolution of local militant groups in Tunisia.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section explores emerging trends of Islamist movements in Tunisia while taking into account recent national and international evolutions that are likely to have an impact on their trajectory. This evolving landscape includes 1) the demise of the Ennahdha party and its ousting from power following the July 25, 2021 exceptional measures taken by President Saied; 2) the rapidly unraveling security situation in Libya and the related proliferation of foreign fighters and mercenaries; 3) the fall of Afghanistan to Taliban control and the prospect of its becoming a new haven for terrorists; and 4) the impact of transnational organized crime networks and growing insecurity in the Sahel on the national security environment in Tunisia. These developments are examined while bearing in mind the skillful evolution and proliferation of jihadist groups that have shown a surprising capacity to morph into various forms and to change their strategies according to changing landscapes and circumstances.

The second section discusses the threat that FTF returnees pose to Tunisian national security, and how Tunisian authorities have responded to this challenge. Significant numbers of Tunisian nationals have joined jihadist extremist groups in Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters. One particularly troublesome aspect of the FTF phenomenon for Tunisia is the challenge posed by returnees to the country. Battle-hardened, ideologically radicalized and with strong links to the global jihadist movements, returning FTFs are a serious threat to national security. This is underscored by the fact that FTF returnees have carried out some of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Tunisian history.

## Why is Terrorism Still a Threat in Tunisia?

Although the number of terror attacks in Tunisia has dropped considerably between 2016 and 2021, the threat of jihadist terrorism will remain a key security concern for a long time to come. Islamic State- (henceforth IS) and Al-Qaeda- (henceforth AQ) affiliated local militants and sympathizers have proven widely capable of carrying out deadly attacks and of posing a direct threat to the security of Tunisian citizens and institutions. The Tunisian Armed forces have recently conducted a series of operations targeting terrorist cells in various regions. On April 2, 2021, in an operation led by the Tunisian army, a terrorist cell in Kasserine was dismantled, and two leading terrorist figures who had recently joined the IS-affiliated Jund Al-Khilafa were killed.<sup>204</sup> On May

12, 2021, another terrorist cell in al-Kef made up of 14 terrorists suspected of planning an attack during the Eid period was also dismantled,<sup>205</sup> and on May 18, the AQIM-affiliated Katibat Ukba Ibn Nefaa (KUIIN) leader was killed in Kasserine.<sup>206</sup> These operations all highlight the persistence of the jihadist threat facing Tunisia.

Terrorism remains a serious issue in Tunisia predominantly due to two causes: one is linked to the legacy of the Islamic State Caliphate, and the other to the root causes of terrorism that remain unaddressed and continue to fuel grievances and impel individuals to become involved in terrorist-related activities.

The Islamic State's territorial loss has not in itself signaled the end of the caliphate. Its legacy in terms of people and ideas is there to stay for years to come in Tunisia and its neighboring countries in the Maghreb and beyond, including Europe. The caliphate was at once a conventional army, a guerilla force and a global terrorist network whose defeat requires more than solely a military defeat and expulsion from territories it had once occupied. The IS caliphate's territorial contraction does not mean an end to the jihadist threat it posed. This is due to the unprecedented contingent of violent extremists it helped create including FTFs and FTF returnees, "frustrated travelers" and "sympathizers"<sup>207</sup> who continue to be a key asset for the caliphate, which has already managed to relocate and waits for the opportunity to strike.

Indeed, in March 2017, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered his farewell address in which he asked his followers to disperse and encouraged them to carry out "lone-wolf" attacks all over the world. Additionally, the scope of the Islamic State's radicalization process has reached an unprecedented number of Muslims around the world. Its ideological/theological component continues to inspire post-caliphate "fringe extremists" also called "lone wolves", "lone actors" "impulsive terrorists" or "fanatics,"<sup>208</sup> and its structural-psychological component (identity-based, socio-economic, cultural and political in essence) persists and remains unaddressed.

Paradoxically, the threat is most likely to remain high because IS is no longer holed up in besieged cities but is everywhere through its ideology and devoted disciples who have long been exposed to a global jihadist agenda, brands, objectives, and tactics. The territorial defeat of IS, though necessary, is not enough to put an end to the radicalization "conveyor belt": the conditions that help would-be terrorists to move from being empathetic to being sympathetic, to being a source of active supporters, to finally becoming active participants.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>205</sup> تونس.. القبض على خلية إرهابية كانت تخطط لهجمات في العيد، العربية، May 12, 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Ff7gkm>.

<sup>206</sup> القاعدة تفقد أذرعها بتونس.. تصفية زعيم خلية إرهابية ومساعديه، العربية، May 18, 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ld9gSk>.

<sup>207</sup> Thomas Renard, "The Caliphate's Legacy and Fringe Extremists", January 18, 2021. Available at: [http://www.thomasrenard.eu/uploads/6/3/5/8/6358199/iccthe\\_caliphate%E2%80%99s\\_legacy\\_and\\_fringe\\_extremists.pdf](http://www.thomasrenard.eu/uploads/6/3/5/8/6358199/iccthe_caliphate%E2%80%99s_legacy_and_fringe_extremists.pdf).

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Alex Schmidt, "Public Opinion Survey Data to Measure Sympathy and Support for Islamist Terrorism: A Look at Muslim Opinions on Al Qaeda and IS" The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 8, no.2, February 2017.

<sup>204</sup> "انتصارات 'القمرين' التونسية.. الجيش يقتل إرهابيين ويفكك خلية"، accessed October 26, 2021. Available at: <https://al-ain.com/article/tunisia-army-terrorists-kasserine-victories>.

Recently-thwarted plots in Tunisia confirm the still effective organizational and operational capability of terrorist groups. Since the territorial defeat of the caliphate, however, such groups' affiliation, whether to the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda, is no longer of much importance and the divisive issues among the jihadist movement ideologues and leaders have faded—thus transcending the jihadist movement's heterogeneity and fostering convergence between different actors towards a common goal of fighting “infidels” and establishing an Islamic caliphate/emirate for the global Muslim community. This union of intent between diverse militants has played in favor of the emergence of a leaderless jihad especially with the elimination of several top local leaders.<sup>210</sup>

This approach to “Leaderless Jihad” in Tunisia is not new. To build up its ground network in Tunisia, IS did not establish an official affiliate in Tunisia, a wilayat or province, even though multiple Tunisian jihadists have publicly pledged allegiance to the group, but rather, engaged in what can be described as a public courtship of Kati-bat Ukba Ibn Nefaa (KUIN). The Islamic State has relentlessly attacked and criticized Al-Qaeda affiliates in most conflict theaters where the two groups have been competing for influence but, despite KUIN's close affiliation to Al-Qaeda, it somehow managed to escape the Islamic State's public slander. On the contrary, in one statement, IS even referred to its “brothers on Mount Chaambi,”<sup>211</sup> a likely reference to KUIN, whose primary area of operations is in and around Mount Chaambi.

The disappointment of a segment of Tunisian society with the outcome of the 2011 uprising was as great as their expectations with regard to alleviating widespread poverty and unemployment and expanding political and socioeconomic rights and opportunities, which created a fertile indoctrination atmosphere for Salafi jihadist groups. Data from a 2018 contextualized field study involving 82 detainees in Tunisian prisons on terrorism charges show that the involvement of young Tunisians in terrorist activities is due to several push factors.<sup>212</sup> The study has shown that the vulnerability of their socio-economic conditions represents a turning point, which pushed them to rebel against their environment and current social reality and to find alternatives that enable them to change their life trajectories and overcome some of the accumulated psychological complexes.

Indeed, the combination of low educational achievement, economic hardship and social exclusion is one of the most cited injustices by interviewed detainees who emphasized the absence of opportunities for leading a decent life and the lack of economic development in their localities. As clearly demonstrated in the figures below,<sup>213</sup> most detainees had limited educational attainment, insecure and fluctuating incomes which varied between 300 and 700 TND/a month (around 60 to 220 euros), and no more than 19.5% of respondents benefited from social security packages.

<sup>210</sup> “القاعدة تفقد أذرعها بتونس.. تصفية زعيم خلية إرهابية ومساعديه” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ld9gSk>.  
<sup>211</sup> “Message to the People of Tunisia,” [Arabic] al-I'tisaam Media, December 17, 2014. Available at: <https://videopress.com/v/8ZY0kRYN>.  
<sup>212</sup> Emna Ben Arab et al., *Assessing the Threat Posed by Tunisian Foreign Fighters*. Tunis: Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018.  
<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

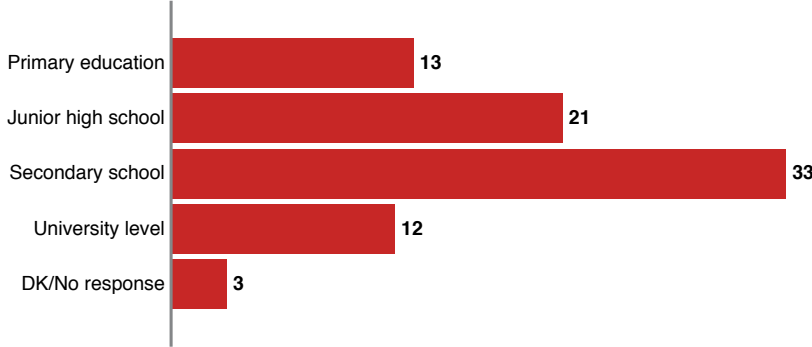


Figure 1: Respondents' Educational Level (in figures)

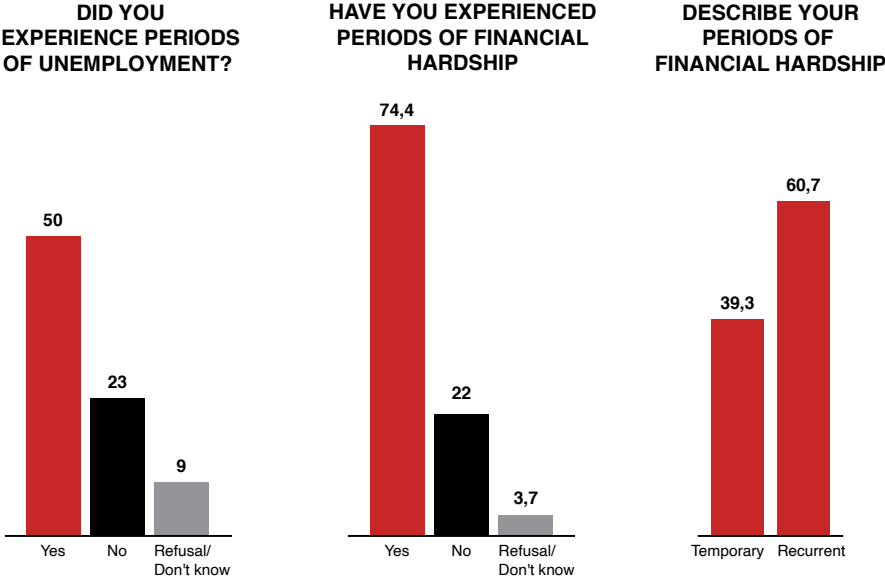


Figure 2: Respondents' Unemployment Level  
 Figure 3: Respondents' Financial Hardship (in %)

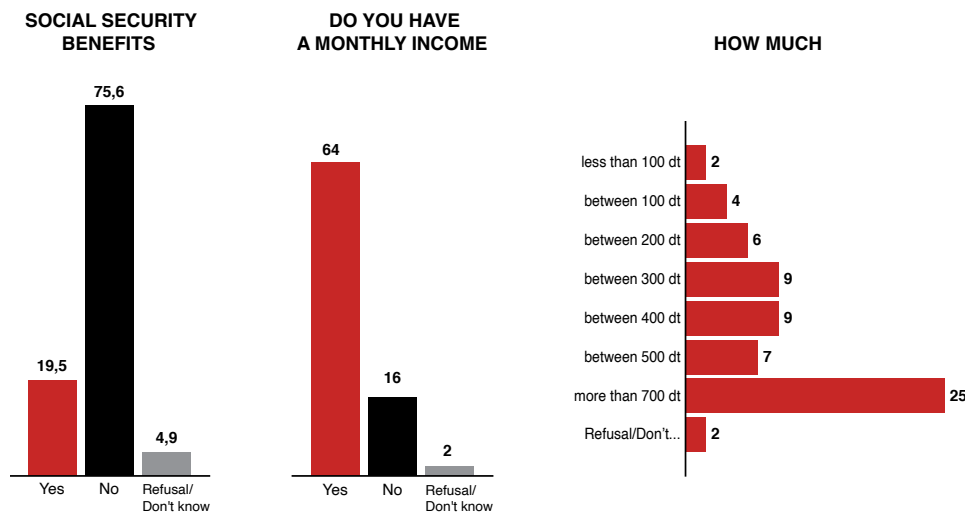


Figure 4: Respondents' Access to Social Security and Pensions (in %)

Figure 5: Respondents' Household Income (in figures)

**NATURE OF VOCATIONAL ACTIVITY/EDUCATIONAL LEVEL**

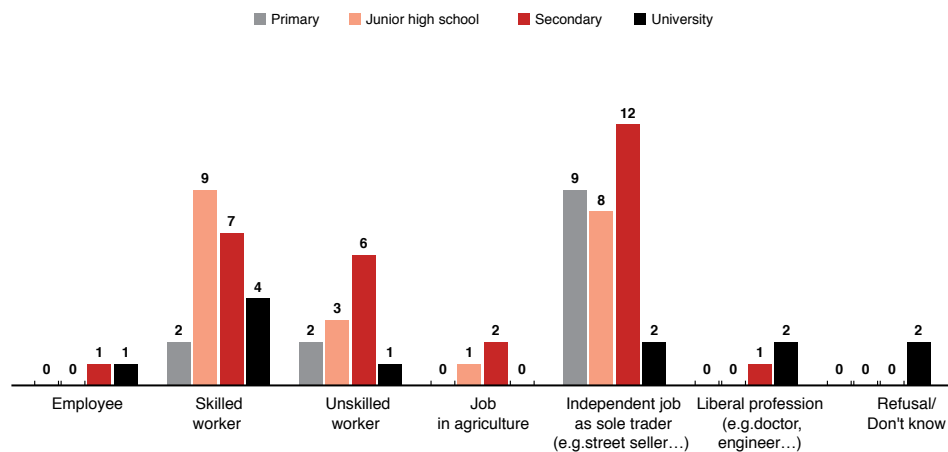


Figure 6: Cross-sectional Analysis of Respondents' Occupation and Educational Level (in figures)

These root causes have not been seriously addressed. Since 2011, the near permanent political crisis, the persistent economic downturn and the social upheaval, all exacerbated by the absence of reforms at all levels, paired with the catastrophic handling of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, helped bring the country to its knees. All indicators underscore that the situation today is economically and financially worse than at the onset of the uprising: growth has more than halved since 2010, the public deficit is at 13.4%, unemployment is close to 16% and endemic among young people who make up 85% of the jobless, and public indebtedness is at a level never seen before, approaching 90% of the GDP.<sup>214</sup> All this is contrary to the indicators before the 2011 uprising.<sup>215</sup>

The two factors described above (the caliphate's legacy and the persistence of root causes behind indoctrination) remain part of the narrative of the constellation of jihadist groups operating in Tunisia, which will continue to carry out the *franchise* activities of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, and which will continue to constitute "proximity weapons" prepared to "kill and die,"<sup>216</sup> a threat which is emphasized all the more by recent developments in the national and international landscapes leading up to new trends in the activities of the Jihadist movement. Indeed, the capacity of militant groups to morph into various forms and to change their strategies accordingly has always caught us by surprise, testifying to our failure to predict their skillful evolution and proliferation: arguably, the attacks of 9/11, the emergence of IS and the loss of Afghanistan are all examples of that.

## Recently Emerging Trends of Islamist Movements in Tunisia

Although the terrorist threat in Tunisia might not be as high today as during the 2012–2016 period, which witnessed more than 80 terrorist activities ranging from high-profile large-scale attacks to thwarted plots, to logistical preparations for attacks, with 2013, 2014 and 2015 being the peak years, the spate of terror attacks across the country continued, albeit spaced out over time and became inspired rather than directly perpetrated by the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda or other associated groups.

The deadly attacks of March 6, 2020, in which a policeman was killed and five wounded around the US Embassy site in Tunis, and the attack on September 6, 2020, when a member of the National Guard was stabbed to death and another critically wounded, underscore the threat to Tunisian national security posed by ideologically inspired jihad. How things will evolve depends in part on the impact that the recent national and international developments will have on the trajectory of militant groups in Tunisia.

<sup>214</sup> Lilia Blaise, "En Tunisie, la petite musique nostalgique du 'c'était mieux avant,'" Le Monde, 17 décembre, 2020 p. 4. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/12/17/en-tunisie-la-petite-musique-nostalgique-du-c-etait-mieux-avant\\_6063767\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/12/17/en-tunisie-la-petite-musique-nostalgique-du-c-etait-mieux-avant_6063767_3212.html)

<sup>215</sup> According to the AFDB economic brief "The Revolution in Tunisia: Economic Challenges and Prospects" of March 2011, the account deficit in Tunisia was at 2.9% in 2009, fiscal deficit was 2.6% of GDP in 2010, unemployment was at around 14% and public debt level was around 43% of GDP in 2010.

<sup>216</sup> Claudio Bertolotti, and Chiara Sulmoni, "How the Twenty-Year Afghanistan War Paved the Way for New Insurrectional Terrorism" 10 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/charting-jihadism-twenty-years-after-911-31626>

At the national level, an unexpected move by President Kaies Saied put an abrupt end to a decade-long rule of the Islamist Ennahdha party, a period notorious for weak economic performance, unemployment, corruption and mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic response, which led to widespread popular dissatisfaction.

On July 25, 2021, Tunisians hit the streets to express their discontent with the ruling coalition, an opportunity seized by President Saied to declare a nationwide state of emergency, freeze the parliament, dismiss the prime minister and amass all government powers in his hands—moves that Ennahdha labeled as a coup against its legitimacy. On July 26 the Ennahdha Party's executive board issued a statement criticizing President Saied's exceptional measures, followed by another statement on August 16 in which it claimed that Saied's actions have had a *“negative impact politically, economically, and on Tunisia's status and democratic experience.”* The statement called the continued suspension of parliament *“a threat to the democratic experience, a violation of rights and freedoms, and an infringement of basic principles of the Republic and the separation of powers,”* demanding that the president resolve the country's crises through dialogue rather than the suspension of parliament.<sup>217</sup>

At the international level and against all predictions, the Taliban took over Afghanistan, an event that is likely to have ripple effects around the world, Tunisia included. Previous “veterans” of jihad returning home from Afghanistan impacted the renaissance of these groups in Tunisia following the 2011 uprising. Historically, Afghanistan was the training ground for notorious Tunisian terrorist leaders. Seifallah Ben Hassine, known as Abu Iyadh Attounisi is one of them. He fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya and founded the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) in 2000, which mobilized Tunisians for global jihad, provided support to Algerian jihadists linked to AQIM and plotted attacks in Europe. He also founded Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) after the 2011 uprising, which became a major terrorist network that helped recruit and facilitate the travel of Tunisians to Syria. Nizar Ben Muhammad Nasa Nawar, known as Seifeddine Attounisi, is another one. He is a veteran fighter who had been trained in Afghanistan in Al-Qaeda camps in the late 1990s and carried out the 2002 attack on a synagogue in Djerba which killed 19 people.<sup>218</sup>

Today, there is a consensus among analysts that against the backdrop of the Taliban's “victory” in Afghanistan, the specter of Afghanistan becoming again a safe haven for militant groups operating in and from the country is real and empowering for the global jihadist movement and its regional affiliates in North Africa, the Sahel and elsewhere. Its impact, if left unchecked,<sup>219</sup> will be transformative and defining, and is likely to have long-lasting effects.

The Taliban's experience will continue to be a source of inspiration. There are concerns that it will be instrumentalized by jihadist groups of all horizons to promote militancy and underscore the idea that the outcome is worth the effort, which is likely to instill renewed enthusiasm among veterans and attract recruits for the Jihadis' political project. Robin Wright suggests that *“jihadism has won a key battle against democracy... The Taliban are likely, once again, to install Sharia as law of the land. Afghanistan will again, almost certainly, become a haven for like-minded militants, be they members of Al Qaeda or others in search of a haven or a sponsor”*.<sup>220</sup> In the same vein, Michael McKinley argues that *“Afghanistan will again become a haven for terrorist groups”* and that *“... the resurgence of a terrorist threat will develop more quickly under a future Taliban government than it would have otherwise.”*<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, former UK intelligence chiefs have warned that the Taliban takeover could turn the country into an “operating space” for other extremist groups. Indeed, Al-Qaeda has welcomed the “historic victory” of the Taliban in Afghanistan and urged followers to respect the group's authority and abide by its “sharia-based policies.” It urged Muslims to rise up against their governments across the Arab world. This could prove to be one of the most significant boosts to global jihad since the 9/11 terror attacks.<sup>222</sup>

Another important development in the global security landscape is the security situation in Libya and the presence of foreign operatives on the ground, which poses yet another challenge to security in Tunisia. On August 23, 2021, the Libyan National Army (LNA) Brigade reported that it had confiscated weapons that were being smuggled to “armed groups and terrorists.”<sup>223</sup> On September 3, the LNA-affiliated Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade (TBZ Brigade) arrested a suspected AQIM operative, al-Ajili Ali al-Ajili al-Hasnawi, near Brak al-Shati in southwestern Libya. Ajili was reportedly responsible for arms and ammunition transfers to terrorist organizations in Mali, Jabal al-Abyad (Sinai Peninsula), Algeria, and Tunisia. On the same day, and echoing events on the ground, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, circulated a report to the United Nations Security Council in which he urged countries supplying arms and equipment to foreign fighters and mercenaries present in Libya to cease violations of the UN arms embargo in place since 2011. Guterres claimed that these foreign fighters continued to operate *“with no discernable abatement of their activities”* and called for the implementation of *“a comprehensive plan for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all mercenaries and foreign forces from Libya, with clear timelines”*.

<sup>217</sup> الإذاعة التونسية، “الإذاعة التونسية”، مجلس شوري حركة النهضة يعقد غدا الاربعاء اجتماعا للنظر في الوضع العام بالبلاد، August 3, 2021, Available at: <https://shorturl.at/ejxjV>.

<sup>218</sup> Aaron Zelin, “Fifteen Years after the Djerba Synagogue Bombing,” CTC Sentinel, 2017, 10:4.

<sup>219</sup> The UK is hoping Qatar and other international partners will help prevent terrorist groups from bubbling up under the Taliban regime.

<sup>220</sup> Robin Wright, “Does the Great Retreat from Afghanistan Mark the End of the American Era?” The New Yorker, August 15, 2021.

<sup>221</sup> P. Michael McKinley, “We All Lost Afghanistan: Two Decades of Mistakes, Misjudgments, and Collective Failure,” FP, August 16, 2021.

<sup>222</sup> Josie Ensor, “Al-Qaeda Welcomes Taliban's ‘Defeat of US Imperialism’ and Urges Supporters to Respect Group's Rule”, The Telegraph, September 1, 2021. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/09/01/al-qaeda-welcomes-talibans-defeat-us-imperialism-urges-supporters/>.

<sup>223</sup> “Libya Security Monitor,” Libya Security Monitor, accessed October 26, 2021. Available at: <https://libyasecuritymonitor.com/>.

In Tunisia, although the National Security Council declared in 2019 that there would be no immediate opening for a wave of returnees,<sup>224</sup> ex-combatants, Islamic State-associated women who actively supported the war crimes committed by the Caliphate, and orphaned children stranded in Libya will seek to return, and dealing with them will be a challenge for the security and justice systems.<sup>225</sup>

Another major development in the security landscape since 2011 has been the centrality of the Maghreb and the Sahel to regional trafficking and other transnational organized crime networks, as was articulated in detail in the preceding chapter. Growing insecurity in the Maghrebi–Sahelian bordering territories has arisen from the spread of the jihadist insurgency across the region, especially after the Arab uprisings and the collapse of the Malian state in 2012. This, paired with the interconnections between transnational organized criminal networks and the financing of terrorism through illicit activities such as drugs and weapons trafficking, has played to the benefit of the jihadist panoply in the region. Dominated by the existence of an informal economy and characterized by limited state presence whether in terms of law enforcement, public services delivery or state and private investments, the Sahel region has become a haven for terrorist groups who have turned Libya, Tunisia, Mali and the wider Sahel region into the latest theatre for their activities. Two of the most powerful franchises of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, respectively, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP), with its Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) branch, operate in the Sahel region. On August 15, 2021, the Financial Times published an editorial by Nigerian President Buhari warning the international community not to lower its guard as a new front of the global jihad has opened in Africa, suggesting that the War on Terror should shift its focus more toward Africa. French President Macron's announcement of Operation Barkhane's withdrawal by the end of 2022, the largest counterterrorism force in the Sahel, is considered by many a risky move potentially conducive to the emergence of a caliphate in the Sahel, especially as it coincides with the fall of Afghanistan.

The fallout of these recent developments could potentially reignite jihadist resurgence in the region. In Tunisia, with the persistence of political uncertainty and socio-economic and regional inequalities, new trends in the local Islamist movement are discernible. A peaceful outcome remains possible, but so does the threat of severe violence. With President Saïed invoking article 80 of the 2014 Constitution giving the president emergency powers and dethroning the Islamist Ennahda party, the last bastion of Muslim Brotherhood in the so-called Arab Spring countries, the direction of events seems uncertain.

One of the first repercussions of the aforementioned developments involves the receding of Jihad in Tunisia. The loss of clout of Islamist leaders,<sup>226</sup> who previously offered an inspiring platform for many young people to make sense of the post-2011 political environment, might lead to disillusionment with Islamism as an ideology and with militancy at large, as a way of achieving political goals. This might signal that institutional Islamism<sup>227</sup> will either burn out on its own as all politico-religious movements tend to do or will eventually be forced to accommodate the practical realities of political life and the challenges of being in and out of power.

The second repercussion of the aforementioned development, one that is more concerning, has to do with the entrenchment of a more extreme form of politico-religious expression, already in existence through the Karama Alliance Party, signaling confrontation between institutional Islamists and extremists. It is the fact that institutional Islamists, when in power, did not change politics but instead, politics changed them, that is, drawing the more extreme factions away from the party though they initially and fundamentally shared the same politico-societal agenda and a common commitment to the remaking of the Arab and Muslim regional order and ultimately the world.

Indeed, because Ennahda, which, as an underground force and as an ideology of opposition, came to power and failed to deliver what it had always promised (primarily a sharia-based state),<sup>228</sup> its extremist offshoots are expected to grow even more radical than they already are. Jihadists, who are referred to by Institutional Islamists sometimes in a paternalistic tone as young enthusiasts who need to be guided and contained, and sometimes referred to in an embittered way as “radical pockets”, are an integral part of the Islamist movement. Sharing the same goal of creating a sharia-based religionized political order, the two differ only over the timing, style and means to reach this common worldview.

Institutional Islamists seem to have evolved not only in response to changes in the political environment in which they operate, but also according to an international agenda to which they have adjusted. In contrast, Islamists who have cut themselves off to form communities based on their understanding of what the correct practice of Islam is (Salafism) or who have taken on the burden of jihad seem to be less sensitive to changes in their political environment, which is likely to lead to a confrontation between the two sides of the movement. Indeed, Institutional Islamists in Tunisia have demonstrated great caution in realizing their electoral victories by following a “participation, not domination” rule. Besides, events in Egypt, where within one year the Islamists were

<sup>224</sup> Christophe Cotteret, “The Returnees Who Can't Return,” April, 2021. Available at: <https://inkyfada.com/en/2021/04/16/tunisia-justice-antiterrorism-episode-3-returnees-daech/>

<sup>225</sup> According to Christophe Cotteret, in “The Returnees Who Can't Return,” April, 2021. Available at: <https://inkyfada.com/en/2021/04/16/tunisia-justice-antiterrorism-episode-3-returnees-daech/>. Around 1000 surviving combatants are still active in Libya including several hundred Tunisian prisoners, 500 of whom have been listed by the Tunisian Observatory for Human Rights (OTDH) according to family declarations.

<sup>226</sup> Rached Gannouchi, Head of Ennahda Party and Speaker of the House, has, for months, seen his approval rating tumble over his handling of his party (growing friction inside the party and resignations from the party structures) and parliament, and is no longer the inspiration he used to be for religious zealots.

<sup>227</sup> Within Islamism there is a distinction between what Bassam Tibi calls “Institutional Islamists” and radical jihadists (Islamism and Islam, Bassam Tibi). Institutional Islamists go to the polls and participate in politics within institutions with the aim of taking power and implementing the Islamist agenda for changing the existing political order at the regional and international levels. Radical jihadists are known for their commitment to a war of ideas and to violence redefined as legitimate Islamic jihad with the objective of remaking the international order with a different balance of power favorable to them.

<sup>228</sup> M. Zeghal, “Tunisia: A New Caliphate or A New Republic”, Oasis, 2011. Available at: <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/tunisia-new-caliphate-or-new-republic>.



ousted from power, made them re-evaluate their surroundings and adjust their agenda momentarily. Extremists, on the other hand, are likely to maintain a low profile, given the current political context, and then re-radicalize or reconnect with jihadism once the next opportunity presents itself.

The third repercussion, and perhaps the most alarming, concerns the re-emergence of violent extremism in the form of political assassinations, terror attacks and traveling to havens for training and engaging in a new jihadist project, such as Afghanistan which is likely to become one. Feeling angry, humiliated, and defeated, some would undergo a process of radicalization that would provide them with an ideational frame that could explain the political struggle they are facing and the legitimate means to be used in this struggle. To some, embracing the jihadi ideology that offers answers to these questions and joining violent groups that allow them to regain power and implement their political project especially that they have begun to feel besieged by a hostile state apparatus and a sizeable middle-class cultural elite, is a viable path to victory as is confirmed by the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan.

While the eventual outcome of the July 25 developments and their corollary decisions of September 22<sup>229</sup> is still far from ordained, there is little doubt that post-Islamism is not yet in sight and that Islamism in both of its forms, institutional and radical will, in years to come, play a significant role, taking full advantage of religion and unfavorable socio-regional inequalities around which they will continue to articulate their political agenda and goals.

Concerning active jihadi groups in Tunisia, one of the most noticeable trends is the increasing convergence between previously competing models of jihadism (ISIS vs AQ) leading to what Claudio Bertolotti and Chiara Sulmoni call the "New Insurrectional Terrorism" (NIT),<sup>230</sup> a concept which essentially includes all attempts at disrupting the national and/or international political order through violence. The aim of this new concept of terrorism is not to incite followers to target governments with a view of overthrowing them, but rather to persuade Muslims around the world to join the fight against the "infidels," using a discourse that is now being validated by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's victory, which represents tangible proof that Jihad is a viable path to achieve political ambitions.

This trend seems to be materializing and is likely to gain momentum in the future. Given the Tunisian military's pressure on terrorist groups in and around their mountain havens and ongoing counterterrorism efforts including effective leadership decapitation strikes, jihadist groupuscules have been kept weak and off-balance. Jihadist groups now find themselves hunted down when they want to establish cells, re-group, recruit or prepare for attacks. Therefore, the advent of this concept, based on providing ins-

piration and decentralized activity rather than on direction, and favoring the disparate cells and sympathizers as well as weakly-connected attackers, helps them to persist in the face of tremendous pressure and to periodically outmaneuver security forces. Thus, "leaderless jihad" has emerged as a new model of jihadism not constrained by ideology and personal affinities but motivated by a unity of intent, and is usually less deadly, and unfortunately harder to predict and prevent.

## Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Unmet Threat

The mobilization of Tunisian fighters to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq was nothing short of impressive. Previously, hundreds of Tunisians had fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s against the Soviet Union, but the magnitude of the post-2011 phenomenon was unprecedented. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition, veteran fighters such as Seifallah Ben Hassine, who had fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya and established in 2000 the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) associated with Al-Qaeda, mobilized Tunisians for global jihad and helped build recruitment networks that facilitated travel to Iraq between 2002 and 2010, and later during the Syrian civil war through his Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST).

Tunisia gained an infamous reputation during the 2013–2016 period for being the country of origin for the highest number of FTFs per capita in the world. Indeed, according to official sources, the number of Tunisians joining terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq was around 3,000,<sup>231</sup> that is excluding an additional 27,000 Tunisians who were prevented from traveling to these conflict zones.<sup>232</sup> Some of these FTFs sought to return home, while others were stranded in Libya or possibly moved to other jihadist theatres such as the Sahel where around 100 Tunisians have joined armed groups affiliated with AQ and IS, while many others were captured and possibly executed.

Those who returned to Tunisia pose serious challenges to the country's national security.<sup>233</sup> This section will explore these challenges as well as the efforts undertaken by Tunisian authorities to manage returnees. However, before looking into the challenges and policies, it is important to reflect upon the root causes that drove this particularly large contingent to travel from Tunisia to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq.

As is the case with most countries grappling with individuals leaving to become Foreign Fighters and join jihadist movements elsewhere, Tunisia is characterized by a presence of a significant proportion of disenfranchised youth who struggle with some sort of "identity

<sup>229</sup> On September 22, 2021 President Saïed expanded presidential powers, suspended indefinitely the parliament and removed parliamentary immunity. He also introduced measures that would allow him to rule by decree and form a new government without approval from parliament as stipulated by the 2014 Constitution.

<sup>230</sup> Claudio Bertolotti, Chiara Sulmoni, "How the Twenty-Year Afghanistan War Paved the Way for New Insurrectional Terrorism," September 10, 2021. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/charting-jihadism-twenty-years-after-911-31626>.

<sup>231</sup> Counter-terrorism Judicial Pole Spokesperson Sofien Selliti reported the number of 2929 without specifying the exact method used for this calculation. "Nous ne pouvons pas refuser le retour des éléments terroristes," May 11, 2018. Available at: <http://www.lapresse.fr/component/nationals/?task=article&id=147935>. This number seems to be an underestimation as it only includes identified departures and excludes Tunisian fighters who left for Syria unidentified either clandestinely or with fake passports. According to Christophe Cotteret, in "The Returnees Who Can't Return," April 2021. Available at: <https://inkyfada.com/en/2021/04/16/tunisia-justice-antiterrorism-episode-3-returnees-daech/>, the number of deportees should be somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 among whom a significant proportion (about 1100) died in conflict zones, an estimate made by Tunisian authorities confirming previous American and Russian reports. +

<sup>232</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PN55, 2018.

<sup>233</sup> Around a thousand made their way to Tunisia by March 2018 according to then Counter-terrorism Judicial Pole Spokesperson Sofien Selliti.

crisis”; unmet socio-economic aspirations and political expectations. This led to a general sense of disillusionment with the post-2011 political transition and provided fertile ground for terrorist mobilization. Nevertheless, additional factors specific to the Tunisian context explain the unprecedented waves of departure to conflict zones in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

First, the permissive post-revolutionary political environment that reigned after 2011 was particularly striking. Jihadists were allowed to re-group under the umbrella of AST, which was given broad leeway and were allowed to engage in proselytizing activities and to occupy public spaces: mosques, streets, associations, etc. and become a major vehicle for indoctrination and mobilization for jihad.<sup>234</sup> Furthermore, the interim government's policies toward Syria were in harmony with calls from prominent religious figures to support the Sunni population in Syria in its fight against the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. This included breaking diplomatic ties with Syria, hosting the “friends of Syria Group” and welcoming Sheikhs who were given plenty of opportunities in mosques and elsewhere to glorify jihad and impact potential volunteers.<sup>235</sup>

Second, the once-powerful security services were deeply weakened and were, therefore, in no position to monitor jihadist recruiters especially against the backdrop of the release of large numbers of Islamist militants including convicted terrorists from prison following a post-2011 general amnesty.

Finally, the security situation in neighboring Libya, where the fulgurant ascendance of jihadist groups and the anarchic environment after the fall of the Qaddafi regime allowed for a greater freedom of movement and provided training opportunities for Tunisians on their way to Syria, caused a large contingency of motivated young volunteers to flock to the ranks of AQ and IS. Indeed, 70% of Tunisians arrested for jihadist-related offences received training in Libya.<sup>236</sup>

With a significant contingent of returnees of around 1,000 FTFs,<sup>237</sup> Tunisia is faced with serious challenges. Returnees were indeed involved in two of the deadliest terror attacks in the country's recent history, the 2015 Bardo National Museum attack and the Sousse Beach mass shooting killing respectively 22 and 38.<sup>238</sup> The masterminds behind these attacks were Tunisian foreign fighters and senior IS members based in Libya, Moez Fezzani and Noureddine Chouchane, and the executive teams implementing these attacks were trained in Libya and came back with a mission. The scope of their attacks

crystallizes the threat of returnees and confirms that at least some returning fighters pose a direct security threat and could far surpass local terrorists in terms of lethality.

Despite the receding threat of terrorist attacks in Tunisia over the past few years, as no large-scale jihadist movement has threatened Tunisia between 2016 and 2021, a fraction of returnees are still likely to engage in jihadist activities. Those who made their way to Europe did exactly that. Inspired by the Salafist–jihadist ideology, four Tunisians were responsible for four terror attacks in France and Germany during this period.<sup>239</sup>

The threat posed by returning fighters goes beyond merely the risk of future attacks. While in prison, they may actively engage in recruitment and act as a force multiplier given their profile and experience—indeed, prisons and detention centers have become infamous radicalization hubs. History has shown that prisons were used by convicted returnees to strengthen their networks with other jihadists and to radicalize other prisoners. Although radicalization in prison is not a new phenomenon, it became even more prominent with the advent of IS and the ensuing unprecedented mobilization of disenfranchised youth. Returnees in this context become potential radicalizing agents. This was notably the case of the “Arab Afghans.” The imprisonment of returnees from Afghanistan in the 2000s led to the massive radicalization of common law prisoners and the recruitment of jihadists inside Tunisian prisons. It only took a handful of returnees such as Abu Yadh to do exactly that in the early 2000s. Their battlefield knowledge, experience and extensive networks earned them prestige and credibility among inmates and allowed them to activate local sleeper cells. This was the case in the March 2016 attempt to occupy the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerden.<sup>240</sup>

The mixed model of the detention regime adopted by Tunisia in its management of the returnees has not helped much in avoiding the phenomenon of radicalization in prisons. Former US Ambassador to Tunisia between 2012 and 2015, Jacob Walles, claims that “*the country's overcrowded prisons continue to serve as a breeding ground for jihadists.*”<sup>241</sup> Strict security measures or solitary confinement are reserved only for those engaged in recruitment activities whereas the less dangerous inmates are dispersed among the regular prison population. However, it is important to highlight that this detention system is adopted not by choice but rather by necessity, given the lack of appropriate facilities for jihadist terrorists and FTF returnees. Prisons are overcrowded and penitentiary personnel lack the requisite training and resources to deal properly with returnees and other terrorist detainees.

<sup>234</sup> Emna Ben Arab, “Returning Foreign Fighters: Understanding the New Threat Landscape in Tunisia”, in *Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia*, eds. Thomas Renard and, Brussels: Egmont Institute, April 2019, p. 41.

<sup>235</sup> For more on the government's role during this period see Emna Ben Arab, “Returning Foreign Fighters: Understanding the New Threat Landscape in Tunisia”, in *Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia*, eds. Thomas Renard and, Brussels: Egmont Institute, April 2019, pp. 40–42.

<sup>236</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya,” Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PN45, 2018.

<sup>237</sup> Tunisian authorities estimated the number of official returnees between 2011 and 2017 to be around 800, and since then, there have been reports of 200 to 300 additional returnees according to Christophe Cotteret in “The Returnees Who Can't Return,” April, 2021. Available at: <https://inkyfada.com/en/2021/04/16/tunisia-justice-antiterrorism-episode-3-retourne-es-daech/>.

<sup>238</sup> Thomas Renard, “Jihadi Veterans in the Maghreb: Lessons from the Past and Challenges for Tomorrow”, in *Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia*, eds. Thomas Renard and, Brussels: Egmont Institute, April 2019, p. 52.

<sup>239</sup> International Crisis Group Briefing N° 83 “Jihadism in Tunisia: A Receding Threat?” June 4, 2021. Available at: <https://www.crisis-group.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b083-jihadisme-en-tunisie-eviter-la-recrudescence-des-violences>.

<sup>240</sup> Raouf Ben Hédi and Mohamed Garoui, “Les Terroristes Passent aux Aveux : Leur Plan pour Instaurer l'Emirat de Ben Guerdène”, Business News, March 8, 2016. Available at: <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/Les-terroristes-passent-aux-aveux-leur-plan-pour-instaurer-l-e2-80-99-c3-a9mirat-de-ben-guerd%C4-8Dne.519.63003.3>.

<sup>241</sup> A. Zelin and J. Walles, “Tunisia's Foreign Fighters”, Policy Watch 3053, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 17, 2017.

Returnees, once out of jail, can remain involved in non-violent activities spreading the Salafist-jihadist ideology among disillusioned youth and building networks to use for the next jihadist mobilization,<sup>242</sup> thus repeating the cycle (the “veteran effect”). They could also remain in contact with international returnees (mainly European returnees) in the future, building on ties developed under the caliphate or in the Kurdish prisons. This international dimension of returnees’ networks will further complicate the situation and force international intelligence and security services to continue exchanging information regularly.

Recidivism among released terrorist offenders, when the opportunity arises, is also another major concern. Returnees could potentially fall back into violent extremism in the future especially after their experience in prison. Indeed, the perception of terrorists, especially returnees, about their present and future, according to a field study by the author, seems to be impacted by prison conditions and concerns for their prospects of social reintegration after their release.<sup>243</sup> They mention a traumatic experience in prison as well as cases of abuse. In addition, they claim to have suffered from inconvenient sanitary conditions and from what they call ‘discrimination’ because they are isolated from the other inmates and treated differently. Other difficulties that are also mentioned, such as the prospects of being hired after they leave prison (and thus their ability to earn livelihoods to sustain themselves), and altercations with and ill-treatment by the police during the probationary period they are subjected to after their release from prison, are all conditions that could be very conducive to recidivism. Most of the 2,200 prisoners charged with terrorism-related offences are scheduled to be released over the next three years with a risk of resumption of militant activity or criminal involvement upon their release.<sup>244</sup>

Below are some excerpts from their statements about how they see their present and future:

	Present	Future
<b>Negative Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative</li> <li>• Tragedy</li> <li>• Mysterious</li> <li>• Obscure</li> <li>• Very difficult</li> <li>• Unfortunate</li> <li>• A major crisis</li> <li>• Very hard conditions</li> <li>• Injustice</li> <li>• I feel annihilated</li> <li>• Psychically exhausted</li> <li>• Not clear</li> <li>• Pessimistic</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Bad</li> <li>• A tragic situation</li> <li>• Life is over for me</li> <li>• I do not feel well</li> <li>• I lost everything</li> <li>• Psychological Difficulties</li> <li>• Everything finished the day I was arrested</li> <li>• Bitter reality</li> <li>• Difficulty in all its aspects</li> <li>• Oppressed: I was convicted in the place of another person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult</li> <li>• Unhappy</li> <li>• Mysterious</li> <li>• Pessimistic</li> <li>• Unknown</li> <li>• Unclear</li> <li>• Negative</li> <li>• Fear : I'm not optimistic</li> <li>• Fear of. probation period</li> <li>• Fear of 5 forthcoming years of administrative inspection and of people's opinion (about former prisoners)</li> <li>• Fear about myself and my family</li> <li>• A little afraid</li> <li>• I am afraid of reintegration into the community after being convicted and sentenced for terrorism</li> </ul>
<b>Neutral Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I expected it: either death or imprisonment</li> <li>• I expected that I will be arrested or prosecuted</li> <li>• I'm thinking about my mistakes</li> <li>• Normal</li> <li>• I live without thinking</li> <li>• I lead a prisoner's daily life There is good and evil</li> <li>• Normal; like the others</li> <li>• That's normal, what I've done is wrong</li> <li>• It's fate!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm waiting for the final court verdict</li> <li>• I don't know</li> <li>• No idea</li> </ul>

<sup>242</sup> Though it has faded from view in the country, including among the most vulnerable sectors of the population according to the International Crisis Group Briefing N° 83 “Jihadism in Tunisia: A Receding Threat?” June 4, 2021. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b083-jihadisme-en-tunisie-eviter-la-recrudescence-des-violences>.

<sup>243</sup> Emna Ben Arab et al., Assessing the Threat Posed by Tunisian Foreign Fighters. Tunis: Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018.

<sup>244</sup> International Crisis Group Briefing N° 83 “Jihadism in Tunisia: A Receding Threat?” June 4, 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b083-jihadisme-en-tunisie-eviter-la-recrudescence-des-violences>.

	Present	Future
<b>Optimistic Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temporary Period</li> <li>• I read the Qur'an to fill a vacuum</li> <li>• My sentence is hard, I try to forget</li> <li>• I want to prove my true value optimistic</li> <li>• Temporary period in the destiny of a jihadist</li> <li>• I study to fill a vacuum</li> <li>• I've learned new things</li> <li>• I don't worry as I didn't do anything (wrong)</li> <li>• I hope to leave Tunisia</li> <li>• I learned a lot of things</li> <li>• Not bad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will return to my normal life (5)</li> <li>• I want to resume my studies and the state must help us</li> <li>• Family stability</li> <li>• Reintegration into society</li> <li>• I will work</li> <li>• I will get married</li> <li>• Optimistic, I will pursue my studies</li> <li>• Optimistic and positive</li> <li>• Good</li> <li>• Make up for lost time with my children and I will work normally, I fear the reaction of others</li> <li>• Without injustice</li> <li>• Normal, I am optimistic</li> <li>• Marriage and I will work</li> <li>• Not clear, but optimistic</li> <li>• I will leave Tunisia</li> <li>• Carry on my studies</li> <li>• I will marry Insha-Allah</li> <li>• I want to spend the probationary period with dignity</li> </ul>

The multifaceted social and security challenge of returnees puts Tunisian authorities and civil society in a difficult situation and underscores the need to adopt a more comprehensive approach to counterterrorism that goes beyond mere prosecution.

So far, Tunisia's approach to FTF returnees has been largely security-centered based on the counterterrorism law enacted in July 2015, which imposes severe sentences on convicted terrorists including the death penalty. As detainees, and due to stringent security measures, returning FTFs are neither prepared for a post-prison life through adequate psycho-social support and disengagement programs, nor equipped for professional life through aid-to-reintegration programs as is common in penitentiary centers for common law prisoners.

Furthermore, monitoring returnees outside jail is almost exclusively limited to draconian administrative controls, which could increase their chances of re-engaging with terrorist networks. Authorities as well as civil society organizations are ill-equipped and lack resources to cope with the challenge, which includes not only fighters but also a substantial number of their children who have either been taken to Syria and Libya or born there and who are a potential vehicle for ideological continuity.

Although 61% of the returnee sample covered in the aforementioned study believe they need assistance when the time for being reintegrated into society comes, only around 2% (only 3 respondents) were contacted by associations and organisations to

offer help for reintegration back into society. Two of them were contacted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and another respondent by an association called "Freedom and Justice."

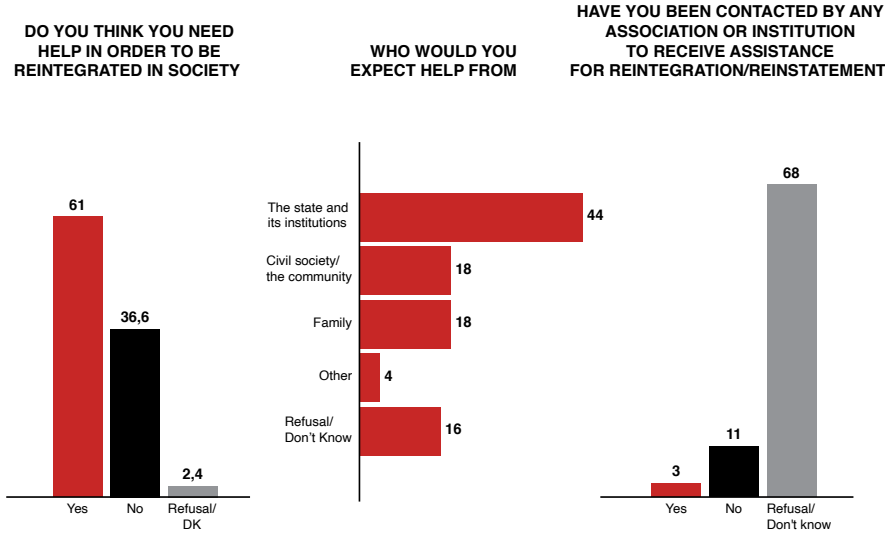


Figure 7: Assistance for Reintegration (in percentage) and Reintegration Initiatives (in figures)

The FTF phenomenon presents Tunisian authorities with a threefold dilemma: a sizeable radical milieu that needs to be monitored, heterogeneity of profiles that makes it difficult to assess the risk and come up with a one-size-fits-all response,<sup>245</sup> and overwhelmed security forces, courts and penitentiary administration, undermining the justice system and other support systems.

The complexity of the situation has led to quick fixes through a series of piecemeal security-focused policies (legislation monitoring charity associations, surveillance of homegrown networks and sympathizers, travel ban, etc.), rather than reliance on more comprehensive, long-term solutions based on an integrated approach that takes into account this multifaceted and multi-dimensional threat.

That being said, the policy response to returnees has started to take shape following the adoption of The National Strategy for Counter-Terrorism in 2016, which underscored the axes around which the authorities would tackle the problem more holistically, including through prevention, protection, judicial proceedings and retaliation.

<sup>245</sup> The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) distinguishes between four main returnee profiles: the disillusioned (deceived by the experience of war or traumatized); the opportunistic (still driven by ideology but seeking better life conditions); the soldier (sent back home with a mission); and the unwilling returnee (captured and repatriated). RAN Manual: Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families. Brussels, 2017, p. 7.

This comprehensive approach, which signaled a change of direction in the fight against extremism was, nonetheless, not accompanied by a preventive operational strategy that takes into account all these aspects. While security services were reinforced thanks in part to collaboration with international partners (logistic support, surveillance of communication and information-sharing, etc.) and increased cooperation with foreign intelligence services and law enforcement agencies, which have contributed to a much better capacity to identify departees and detect returnees, the core grievances and root causes that motivated Tunisian youth to join jihadist groups abroad have not only remained unaddressed but also exacerbated by the unsatisfactory governmental responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to tensions and socio-economic fragility mainly in historically marginalized regions of Tunisia. Thus, at least a fraction of returnees, with the prospect of their rehabilitation being minimal, will continue to pose a concern for security in Tunisia. However, despite the difficulties inherent in generating a comprehensive policy that targets such a complex phenomenon, we can point to several general trends that could elucidate potential scenarios.

First, increased repression by Tunisian authorities is likely to lead to more terrorism. Part of the narrative adopted by FTFs is the continued heavy-handed and uncompromising repression of the State apparatus targeting them inside and outside of prison; one which they consider a driver pushing them toward further radicalization and political violence. This scenario is most probable if Tunisian Salafist groups establish a narrative of victimization that feeds into their recruits' negative view of the government. Additionally, perceived anti-Islamic bias on the part of civil society and authorities could galvanize wider support for Salafists or extremist groups.

Second, civil unrest is likely to ensue especially with the political confusion and uncertainty that have prevailed since July 25, and could potentially have destabilizing effects for Tunisia. Some members of the more fundamentalist Salafist segments of society view the new situation as repressive and reneging on the promises of revolution. Additionally, previously uninvolved or moderate segments of the population may find themselves pushed toward radicalization as a result of heavy-handed government policies. This is also taking place at a time when dominant security agendas and state concerns about terrorism have intensified. While the Tunisian government may be adept at enforcing the rule of law within its territories, recent uncompromising and unrelenting anti-terrorism laws have raised concerns about human rights abuses. Therefore, it remains a distinct possibility that renewed social unrest among all portions of Tunisian society, be they moderate or Salafist, could increase in the face of additional anti-terrorism laws that are overly oppressive. Third, the convergence of unrest and violent Salafist narratives is another possible scenario based on a consensus that the uprising, with its promises of increased economic opportunity and freedom, is an abject failure. If the jihadists adopt narratives claiming the mantle of radical political change as a result of continuing unfavorable socio-economic conditions, they could conceivably acquire more support. Social or economic discontent could help fuel a nascent insurgency. A possible narrative that successfully ties the jihadists' political project to social dissatisfaction and draws upon promises of economic change could have a destabilizing effect. The new

narrative could include promises of prosperity and success in a hypothetical Islamist state in Tunisia. Alternatively, on a less extreme scale, Salafist groups could coalesce around this economic insecurity and utilize it to their advantage electorally.

Finally, corresponding with the above scenario, escalation of the insurgency in Tunisia remains a possibility. With the jihadist factions in the Syrian Civil War and the Iraqi insurgency rapidly de-territorializing, many will seek to return and join efforts with local jihadists to draw on the general feeling of dissatisfaction exacerbated by the poor handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

The combination of strengthened security services, military pressure and intelligence cooperation in the last few years has weakened jihadist groups who are now stranded across the mountains in border areas. As a result, fewer and less lethal attacks have been recorded. Nevertheless, Jihadist terrorism will not go away anytime soon, and Tunisia is overdue to move beyond a security-centered approach and address the multiple interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors with more inclusive and holistic responses to confront the terrorism challenge.

Thus far, the danger jihadist groups pose has been somewhat manageable. Nevertheless, heading off large-scale as well as isolated attacks will still require ongoing counterterrorism efforts, which should not be directly focused on preventing extremism and on retaliation only but rather on creating adequate and equitable opportunities and social safety nets, which lie at the root of curbing radicalization and violent extremism.

## About the author

Dr. Emna Ben Arab holds a PhD in Culture Studies, and her main areas of research are American studies, International relations, and security issues. She currently serves as an assistant professor at The University of Sfax, Tunisia where she Lectures on American foreign policy, history of political ideas, political discourse analysis and Public Relations and Leadership Competencies. She is the Author of the book entitled "A Future Made Perfect? The Image of the Coming Millennium in American Science Fiction" published in 2009, and has numerous publications in academic journals. Furthermore, she held different positions as Nonresident Fellow at the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES) 2016-2018; Member of the Mediterranean Discourse on Regional Security (George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies) 2016-2020; and as a Women's Initiative Fellow at Southern Methodist University; in addition to her former role as member of parliament.



Conclusion

# **A Multi-tiered Approach to Address the Threat of Jihadist Terrorism in North Africa**

*By: Lina Raafat and Dr. Eya Jrad*

The prominence of jihadist terrorism in North Africa is not a new phenomenon and, as was demonstrated in this study, it finds its roots in national and regional dynamics that date back to the early 1990s. While North African states are not a homogeneous bloc, each with its own history, culture and unique dynamics, there is a common thread underpinning the proliferation of jihadist terrorism across their borders, and that is a deepening gap between people's aspirations on one hand and the political realities they are confronted with on the other, a phenomenon that was heightened and brought to the fore with the onset of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. This development was acutely exploited by jihadist groups to put forward their agendas and present their proposed model as a legitimate means of achieving desired social change and political agency.

The proliferation of jihadist groups in North Africa over the last few years is also directly linked to the loss of ground in the Middle East by major jihadist players, namely the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, whose territorial diminishment in their former strongholds has driven them to shift the epicenter of their operations towards the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa; in doing so, they contributed to hard-felt ripple effects on North Africa, resulting in a heightened influx of arms, weaponry and battle-hardened foreign terrorist fighters. Taken together, these contextual and structural factors have grown to shape the new jihadist landscape across the region.

Whereas most jihadist groups are united by a common conviction that violence is the only tool to achieve the desired social change they seek to instill, they are also split by stark differences in their approach, agendas, and modus operandi. These differences are further accentuated against the backdrop of fierce contestation between global jihadist movements in the region, namely the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, each seeking to demarcate its spheres of influence vis-à-vis its competitor, and in doing so, attracting and securing the backing of local jihadist movements.

This extremely fluid and constantly shifting landscape underscores the fact that jihadist groups are not static actors imprisoned by rigid ideology, nor are they locked into path dependency. On the contrary, jihadist groups in the region, if anything, have proven to be extremely agile and highly adaptive, constantly shifting their allegiances and alliances to serve their strategic purposes. Thus, responses to mitigate the threat they pose cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model. What works in one context may not work in another, and a strategy that proved to be effective with one group may yield counter-productive outcomes with another.

Another crucial dimension to consider when dealing with jihadist groups in North Africa is the increasing regionalization of the jihadist threat, necessitating an equally regionalized response that addresses cross-border dimensions. In this regard, it is of crucial significance to examine the interlinkages, not only between North African jihadist groups themselves, but more broadly the interlinkages between North African and Sahelian jihadist group operations; including the growing nexus between terrorism, organized crime and illicit trafficking networks, which serve as a source of material support for jihadist organizations.

Equally important is evaluating the threats and risks pertaining to the repatriation of returning foreign terrorist fighters from diminished conflict theatres, such as Syria, Iraq and North Africa. This process of repatriation should be underpinned not only in a robust prosecutory approach to ensure that justice is served for individuals implicated in terrorism-related offences, but more importantly, in an equally robust rehabilitation and reintegration process to ensure that such individuals, upon serving their sentences, are able to return to the community and reassume their roles as active citizens, able to secure jobs to sustain their livelihoods and take part in civil life. Central to this process are tailored disengagement and deradicalization programs for individuals who are ideologically radicalized; as well as proper follow-up mechanisms to monitor the trajectory of reintegration of FTFs, to ensure that the initial drivers to join the cause of jihadism are addressed at root, effectively minimizing the risk of recidivism.

Against this backdrop, the evidence presented in this study demonstrates that now, more than ever, there is a pressing need to rethink existing responses and assess the degree to which they are fit for purpose. A shift towards more nuanced and holistic approaches has become of paramount importance in the face of the persistent jihadist threat confronting North Africa. Such a shift in approach must be anchored in national leadership and ownership, reinforced by reinvigorated regional coordination, and supported by international partners.

## The Pillars Underpinning a Multi-tiered Response to Jihadism in North Africa

### Bolstering National-level Responses

Notwithstanding the aggregate decline of reported incidents and attacks relating to jihadist terrorism in the last couple of years across North African states, national governments should still steer away from underestimating the ever-present jihadist threat that is still very much alive and well, and continues to destabilize communities and regions.

While North African governments should capitalize on the loss of momentum within the jihadosphere as witnessed by significant loss of territory and resources over the past period to further alienate them and curb their recruitment capacity, this should not by any means translate into a false assumption that the threat they pose has been fully neutralized. As repeatedly highlighted throughout this study, history has demonstrated that jihadist actors possess a high degree of resilience and adaptive capacity and have on multiple occasions exploited evolving dynamics to rebrand and revitalize themselves. Accordingly, North African governments must continue to anticipate and provide counter-narratives to future nostalgia messaging circulated by jihadist groups such as the Islamic State.

When devising responses to the threat posed by Jihadist groups, North African governments must pay equal attention to both the local embeddedness and entrenchment of jihadist groups, as well as their linkages to global jihadist movements.

While localism has increasingly been adopted as a clear strategy by various jihadist groups in recent years, this must not translate into a false assumption that such local entrenchment entails isolation of such groups from transnational and global jihadist dynamics. Notwithstanding the cultivation of local ties by certain jihadist groups, the evidence points to the involvement of these same local groups in broader trends of enmity and contestation between dominant global jihadist players in their bid to exert hegemony and expand their respective spheres of influence. This degree of nuance and fluidity must be accounted for in the design and implementation of counter-terrorism responses.

In this regard, North African states must exert a concerted effort to enhance border security schemes and focus on high priority regions. As demonstrated in many conflict theatres around the world, the proliferation of jihadist groups does not arise in a vacuum, rather, it comes as a direct result of governance deficiencies and weaknesses, particularly in rural areas and border zone communities where the presence of the state is weak and governance and service provision is lacking. Some regions have been identified as key hubs of Islamist militancy and rulers' opposition, characterized by a persistent weak sense of national identity. At the origins of such a tendency lies 'regional favoritism,'<sup>246</sup> contributing to a deepening sense of marginalization, confrontation and bitterness, creating a resentment towards the 'secular' regimes, perceived as unable to fight poverty, which was expressed through support for Islamist movements.<sup>247</sup> **This calls for a paradigm shift, one that moves away from over-reliance on securitized approaches and towards factoring in local populations' development and security needs,** in a manner that bolsters state legitimacy and reawakens a sense of national identity among locals; thus curbing jihadist groups' ability to capitalize on this void.

There is an equal need to adopt contextualized approaches that address radicalization as experienced by specific countries across North Africa. To address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism more effectively, there is a need to **adopt a more far-reaching approach that encompasses dimensions relating to socio-economic conditions, political participation, and governments' legitimacy.** Understanding the local context and drivers to terrorism is crucial to move past the outdated 'containment' approach, and towards more tailored and informed responses that meet the specific needs of each country and region.

Additionally, there is a growing need for North African countries to **steer away from path-dependency and critically review and revise existing counter-terrorism strategies.** Unfortunately, some strategies adopted by North African governments in the realm of counterterrorism have proved to yield some unintended negative outcomes. As demonstrated in this study, and especially within the context of dealing with returning

Foreign Terrorist Fighters, certain state policies have aggravated grievances and feelings of exclusion among individuals suspected of having been formerly involved in terrorism-related activities. Researchers have investigated cases where such measures have led to radicalization of individuals subject to such measures and policies.<sup>248</sup>

**Such measures, though sometimes absolutely justified, must not be overly punitive, so as not to risk the further alienation and radicalization of individuals who might otherwise be driven to join jihadist groups. A dual-pronged approach of holding perpetrators accountable while concurrently promoting restorative justice and reconciliation must be adopted and maintained,** to ensure that counterterrorism strategies do not become counterproductive. **Relatedly, there is also a need to review penal strategies and codes and explore alternatives to prosecution and imprisonment;** including, most notably, amnesties and pardons to incentivize defections from jihadist groups and encourage compliance.

**Of equal significance is the need to establish robust nationally led deradicalization and disengagement programs, especially within prison contexts. Research makes clear that prisons have recently become active radicalization hubs and this cycle must be disrupted,** especially in light of the high recidivism rates exhibited among terrorist offenders upon their release from prison. Examples of this include the case of Abdelfettah Raydi, one of the perpetrators of one of the suicide attacks of 2007, who was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in 2003 for his alleged involvement in the Casablanca attacks. He had, however, been pardoned in 2005. Similarly, in Tunisia, only a month after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the decree-law 2011-1 was issued, granting amnesty to 1200 Salafists, including 300 ex-combatants. This included members of the Soliman group, among whom figured Seifallah Ben Hassine, also known as Abu Yadh. Libya was no exception, In September 2010, as part of the reconciliation between the Qaddafi regime and the LIFG, Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, a hard-line jihadist who had fought in Afghanistan and was detained in Guantanamo Bay, was released. Bin Qumu emerged as a militia leader following the fall of Qaddafi. He later led ASL in Derna.

## Reinforcing and Enhancing Regionalized Approaches

While the fight against jihadist terrorism must be led and owned by national governments, national responses alone cannot solely be relied on to fully respond to a threat that permeates across national demarcations and borders. In this regard, there is a need for regionalized approaches to complement, reinforce and advance the implementation of national efforts.

To reinforce national efforts, there is an equally pressing need to strengthen regional cooperation, intelligence-sharing and operational coordination between North African states. Indeed, with the rise of 'jihadism without borders,' North African states will fail to tackle it without addressing its growing regionalized dimensions. The recent breakdown

<sup>246</sup> North African élites are associated with certain regions, for instance; Morocco's elites hail from Fez, Tunisia's from Sahel, in Libya those associated with the Al Qadhafha tribe.

<sup>247</sup> For instance, in Morocco, special attention needs to be reserved to areas around the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, situated in Morocco yet under Spanish control, as they constitute breeding grounds for extremists' ideologies. Young males hailing from Tetouane have been implicated in several international terrorist attacks (in Madrid and Iraq). Similarly, in Libya, Derna seemingly continues to be a hotspot for Libyan fighters abroad. The Sinjar Records have revealed that Libya was the second-highest country of origin for foreign fighters, and nearly half of the Libyan fighters came from Derna. Derna continues to provide high numbers of recruits a decade later with the IS as highlighted in a new report.

<sup>248</sup> Hedi Yahmad, *I was in Raqqa*, House of Arabic inscriptions, 2017.



of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco in August 2021 took place at a time when cooperation between the two countries was much needed. Accordingly, **there is a need for stronger cooperation and coordination between states on security matters to ensure a more efficient counterterrorism response to a threat that equally undermines the national security of different states.** A good example in this regard is the Tunisian–Algerian border cooperation, which has been well-established since 1991; when Tunisia granted the Algerian special forces the right to conduct ‘terrestrial hot pursuit’ on its territories.<sup>249</sup> Today, border cooperation between the two countries is based on joint border surveillance, IT and intelligence-sharing.

There is also a growing need to foster unified regional stances to bolster individual states’ fights against terrorism, grounded in a belief that **a terrorism threat that confronts one North African State is a threat to all.** Recent instability and the proliferation of foreign terrorist fighters and mercenaries in Libya is not a burden that Libya alone should shoulder as it affects the region at large and poses direct spillover impacts that can prove quite catastrophic to all countries in the region. This necessitates the uniting of North African states to support individual countries grappling with more heightened terrorism challenges.

Relatedly comes the need for a stronger Maghreb–Sahel coordination. As detailed in this study, **there are direct interlinkages and a symbiotic relationship between jihadist groups across the North Africa and Sahel regions.** Instability in North Africa is directly correlated with events taking place with its southern neighbors. Linkages have been established<sup>250</sup> between AQIM and the Mali-based group Ansar al-Dine (ADD), MUJAO and the Al-Qaeda umbrella Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) formed by the merger of four jihadist groups operating in the Maghreb-Sahel region.<sup>251</sup>

## Redefining the Parameters of International Support

At the international level, there is a need to rethink and redefine the parameters and modalities of international support, in a manner that best supports national and regional efforts in their bid to confront the jihadist terrorism challenge. **Similar to how national governments need to review and revise existing counterterrorism frameworks and strategies, a parallel exercise must also be undertaken by international donors and partners to evaluate their modalities of support and engagement and assess the extent to which they are achieving the desired outcomes.** In this regard, there is a **need to define a new metrics for “success” and “impact” as well as employ adequate monitoring mechanisms to track progress against these metrics.**

<sup>249</sup> In search for Emir Djaffer al-Afghani’s GIA group.

<sup>250</sup> The US State Department **noted** that “AAD has received support from AQIM since its inception in late 2011, and continues to maintain close ties to the group.”

<sup>251</sup> Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina, al-Mourabitun, and the Sahara branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Relatedly, there is a need for international partners to shift away from short-term activities and funding and towards longer-term programming and interventions that support national and local efforts to achieve sustainable development. The key to ensuring the success of such interventions is ensuring national ownership and the buy-in of local communities, who are at the receiving end. Additionally, **a multi-stakeholder engagement that extends beyond state actors must be cultivated, to also include partnerships with civil society and private sector partners** who have a local presence on the ground. This is particularly significant in high-priority regions that have been identified as experiencing heightened fragility and structural weaknesses.

International partners must also steer away from overemphasizing the security dimension of counterterrorism and expand the scope of their support to include efforts geared towards development and addressing the root drivers of violence and terrorism. Notwithstanding the importance of security assistance in supporting North African militaries and security forces to fight terrorism on the ground through military assistance or capacity-building, assistance must be extended beyond the security realm and into the socioeconomic and development domains. Many of the drivers to extremism and recruitment into terrorist organizations across North Africa have been fueled by socioeconomic grievances and lagging development. A failure to address these root causes of violence and invest in inclusive sustainable development projects that meet the needs of local populations will only serve to prolong and exacerbate an already complex terrorism challenge.



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