



**Question (AR1.Q1):** *How will the future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq impact the presence of ISIS in Africa?*

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## Executive Summary

Dr. Sabrina Pagano, NSI

While the consideration of ISIS's fate in Syria and Iraq of course adds significant value to the question of ISIS in Africa, ISIS's next steps there appear to call upon a far broader set of considerations. Ultimately, the question of ISIS in Africa is complicated by the intricacies of local, state, and regional variation; competing factions and shifting loyalties, *as well as* the evolving situation in the Levant. Each of these issues could provide its own opportunity for a deep dive. As a first step, this report aims to provide an overview of the various considerations at play.

Three broad framing questions can be used to guide an assessment of what ISIS's presence in Africa might look like moving forward. These are: 1) whether ISIS's ideology and approach can sustain supporters in Africa, 2) whether African states are strong enough to withstand ISIS's influence, and 3) whether ISIS or Al Qaeda will prevail in Africa.

## Framing Questions

### *Can ISIS's Ideology and Approach Sustain Supporters in Africa?*

A key question is whether ISIS's ideology and approach hold appeal for the varying groups and communities in multiple regions across Africa. Na'eem Jeenah, director of the Afro-Middle East Centre, indicates that the vast majority of Muslim organizations oppose ISIS and even publicly reject its ideology<sup>1</sup> As Barfi (New America Foundation) indicates, the core tenets of ISIS's approach, including its focus on sectarianism, which finds favor in Iraq and less so in Syria, is "non-existent on the [African] continent." Similarly, he notes that ISIS's rigid and unyielding interpretation of Islam may hold little appeal to, and may even turn away, the populations of potential ISIS sanctuaries. As two examples, he notes the Bedouin in the Sinai Peninsula who

*A useful starting point in considering this question is to recognize that the threat from violent Islamist groups in Africa is not monolithic but is comprised of a variety of distinct entities.*

- Siegle, this volume

<sup>1</sup> Essa, A. & Patel, K. South African families among ISIL's newest recruits. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/south-african-families-isil-newest-recruits-150529094806722.html>

traditionally have adhered weakly to Islamic teachings, and Sahelian nationals who are Muslim in name only—and thus presumably would not be attracted to such an extreme version of the faith. In contrast, Siegle (National Defense University) indicates that when ISIS has had success in attracting African counterparts, its appeal has relied on its “reputational and ideological potency.” He notes, however, that the principal influence for militant Islamic ideology is not ISIS’s brand, but instead the highly conservative Wahhabi model of Islam, which continues to exert a strong influence supported by ample funding and social media and other forms of communication. In addition to its inability to fully root its ideology in Africa, specific groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) also appear to reject ISIS’s extreme tactics (Barfi).

Beyond a rejection of ISIS’s ideology and tactics, it may simply be that the focus in Africa is on more local concerns—such as local resource competition, grievances, or funding (Campbell, Council on Foreign Relations; Hansen, Harvard University / NMBU – Norway; Henneberg, Johns Hopkins University). Barring logistical support (Dele-Adedeji, University of London), ISIS has generally not provided or promised much in the way of resources to its affiliates and others (Campbell; Hansen; Siegle). As such, it cannot reasonably compete or make appeals on those grounds.

In contrast to the view that ISIS’s ideology holds little appeal, multiple contributors discussed counterpoints to this potential weakness. For example, ISIS won some respect due to its early victories, along with its innovative and successful use of social media tools and propaganda—the latter of which also has the potential to influence ISIS’s path forward (Barfi, Henneberg). Grievances against the central government (e.g., in the Sinai Peninsula) also may leave people open to ISIS influence (Barfi). For disaffected youth looking to demonstrate their agency, ISIS’s ideology and action also hold a specific appeal, particularly in Tunisia (Siegle). Finally, when ISIS was on an upward trajectory in the Levant, it enjoyed a reputation in Africa characterized by operational capacity, ability to gain and control large amounts of territory, and a singular vision and purpose—which greatly heightened its appeal among those enticed by jihad (Siegle).

ISIS appears to have had the most success with recruitment in Tunisia, with approximately 6,500 Tunisians having traveled to Syria and Iraq (Siegle). In other areas, despite an initial appearance of success, ISIS’s grasp is in fact tenuous. For example, though Libya has been considered a stronghold for ISIS, it does not particularly enjoy “homegrown support” there, and in fact was aggressively pushed out of Sirte by the Libyan militia and others who viewed ISIS as a hostile foreign presence (Barfi, Siegle). Though this lack of domestic support does not necessarily prevent ISIS from its destructive activities, at a minimum, it removes a source of support, and at worst for ISIS, may provide a source of active resistance. Siegle argues that ISIS’s ability to recruit and build alliances in Africa in fact will diminish as a function of losing influence and control of land in the Levant and the subsequent hits to credibility and reputation.<sup>2</sup> Its loss of two strongholds in Libya may also contribute to a perception that it is a failing enterprise (Barfi). ISIS’s symbolic defeat in the face of its increasing loss of territory in the Levant and losses elsewhere, along with its

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<sup>2</sup> See also, for example: Pearson, J. (2016). Defeat at Sirte may put paid to ISIL’s ambitions in Libya. Retrieved from: <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/defeat-at-sirte-may-put-paid-to-isils-ambitions-in-libya>

transition to insurgency, renders it less capable of differentiating itself from other groups, and thus undermines its very basis for calling itself a Caliphate.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, ISIS's broader lack of success in persuading broad segments of the African population to adopt its ideology and tactics serves to limit its reach and hold in Africa. According to Siegle, "ISIS is, by and large, not well-rooted in the communities where Africa's most active violent Islamist groups operate. This is particularly so in Sub-Saharan Africa. ISIS's closest ties appear to be in Tunisia and the Sinai, plus a cadre of fighters displaced from Sirte in southern Libya and the Sahel."

### *Are African States Strong Enough to Withstand ISIS's Influence?*

A second major question is whether African states are strong enough to resist ISIS's influence, irrespective of how local populations view the organization or its ideology. In Africa, as elsewhere, vulnerability to insurgent activity will depend in part on the strength, stability, and legitimacy of the state. All else equal, the weaker the state, the more likely it is to enable ISIS to carve out safe havens for operation. As such, the specific vulnerabilities within Africa will vary greatly based on location and current status—relative stability or chaos. ISIS's success may for example center around their focus on targeting rural communities, where little or no government presence is felt (Adeboye, University of Ibadan; Boukhars, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). A related factor is the degree to which formal entities (e.g., the state) or informal entities (e.g., communities) push back against these ongoing or emerging threats.

As several contributors (Barfi, Boukhars, Campbell) note, factors such as (local) ethnic tensions, social and economic dislocation, geography, political instability, weak public institutions, demographic challenges, poverty and unemployment, underdevelopment, and ungoverned spaces all contribute to making the African continent an appealing one to ISIS in terms of developing and strengthening affiliates—particularly in Egypt, Libya, and the Sahel (Barfi). ISIS's cause is also furthered by a growth in the Sahel and Sahara of radical interpretations of Islam and violent extremism (Boukhars).

ISIS's strongest presence and base of operations is in Libya,<sup>4</sup> where it has been able to exploit political conflict and the security vacuum (Henneberg), though it also faces significant opposition there, and was ultimately displaced from Sirte (as noted above). Siegle suggests that the future success of any ISIS-linked groups in Libya (e.g., a regrouping of ISIS elements combined with fighters displaced from the Levant) would be less a function of local support required for a sustained presence and more a function of the lack of capable and centralized governance. As Barfi notes, "Libya has proved to be both ISIS' most successful venture into Africa and its worst setback." Similarly, though extremism has taken hold in Somalia in the face of state weakness, a countervailing factor is clan dynamics, which may stifle ISIS's pursuit of additional territory there (Henneberg).

The Sahel region may be most deeply at risk, given its expanse of ungoverned space, which ISIS is likely to target (Adeboye). As Campbell notes, the Sahel also may be the poorest majority-Muslim

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<sup>3</sup> Pearson, J. (2016). Defeat at Sirte may put paid to ISIL's ambitions in Libya. Retrieved from: <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/defeat-at-sirte-may-put-paid-to-isils-ambitions-in-libya>

<sup>4</sup> For additional discussion of Libya, see also these contributors in this volume: Adeboye, Barfi, Boukhars, Campbell, and Siegle.

territory in the world, with generally weak governments in the region, and an absence of national identity within the specific states. The Western Sahel may prove particularly vulnerable to ISIS, given its combination of several factors indicated just above (Barfi).<sup>5</sup> In West Africa, we would expect politically fragile countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, and Nigeria also to be at risk (Adeboye). While the mix of vulnerability and resilience vary in these and other countries of West Africa, they share a large mixture of factors, all of which contribute to structural fragility (Boukhars).

Campbell argues that the littoral states (with the exception of Tunisia and Libya) generally are in a better position to resist ISIS's influence (similar to Egypt) than are countries further to the south. Barfi nonetheless suggests that Egypt<sup>6</sup>—while buffered by a strong sense of nationalism, relative state stability, and a strong military—may become vulnerable in the Sinai Peninsula as its attacks on ISIS's affiliate cause civilian casualties, resulting in the population's subsequent sense of alienation.

### *Will ISIS or Al Qaeda Prevail in Africa?*

The third key theme invoked by multiple contributors is the rivalry between ISIS and Al Qaeda (and their affiliates), referred to elsewhere as a “war within a war.”<sup>7</sup> Campbell notes that, while ISIS and Al Qaeda share the goal of a pure Islamic state administered according to their interpretation of Islamic Law, the groups vary in the tactics they use and are hostile to one another. The relative and absolute influence of these groups also varies as a function of geography and socio-politics.

Al Qaeda—which has a much longer history in Africa—may be better positioned to maintain and increase its power. Al Qaeda affiliates such as AQIM have also been extremely agile in adapting strategy and tactics both in response to counterterrorism operations as well as to jihadi competition, and have been working to expand their footprint in Africa (Boukhars). While ISIS has, and will likely continue to have, minor footholds across Africa, their influence may be comparatively limited<sup>8</sup> and perhaps dwindling. Several of the factors that are indicated as facilitating ISIS's success are not unique to ISIS, but instead could be leveraged by competing groups such as Al Qaeda. These factors include leveraging social cleavages and communal distrust, migrant populations that provide a ready recruiting pool, people's disillusionment and distrust of state institutions, ineffective counterterrorism operations, and several others (Barfi, Boukhars).

ISIS has some tangible advantages, such as significant funding enabling it to draw in potential adversaries and attract new recruits, a social media arm that is superior to that of its competitors, and a large supply of human resources that can be leveraged to send operatives to global locations while preserving its base (Barfi). ISIS also may enjoy an advantage to the extent that it is seen as having succeeded where Al Qaeda failed (e.g., fighting where Al Qaeda was less willing to fight)

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<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Sahel is difficult to reach from Syria and Iraq and is thus not a “likely option for ISIL foot soldiers”—and there also is no precedent for outsider participation in indigenous Sahelian jihadist movements, argues Campbell.

<sup>6</sup> For additional discussion of Egypt, see also Adeboye and Siegle, both in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, J. (2016). Isis and al-Qaida turf wars in Africa may push fragile states to breaking point. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/oct/06/isis-al-qaida-turf-wars-africa-may-push-fragile-states-to-breaking-point>

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, S. J. (2016). The Islamic State is losing in Africa. Retrieved from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/13/the-islamic-state-is-losing-in-africa/>

(Hansen). Similarly, ISIS has had other symbolic victories, such as Boko Haram’s pledge of allegiance, loyalty from at least one faction of al Mourabitoun in Mali, and support from leaders such as Abdiqadir Mumin, who defected from al-Shabab—though ISIS has ultimately been unable to unseat Al Qaeda from its position of dominance.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Hansen notes that ISIS affiliates are geographically on the periphery of the more powerful Al Qaeda affiliates (AQIM and Al-Shabab), with the potential exception of the Abu Musab al-Barnawi group of Boko Haram.

There are also tensions growing out of competing loyalties that exist within the leadership of other extremist groups. For example, the senior leadership of Al-Shabab is split between those who align with ISIS and those who align with Al Qaeda (Henneberg). However, these loyalties can be transient and oft-changing, as well as subject to convenience (Boukhars). As Siegle discusses, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), while affiliated formally with Al Qaeda, also has splinter groups who have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Within this context, Siegle notes, another possibility is that ISIS may gain traction over time as fighters relocate from Iraq and Syria, strengthening these splinter groups.

Further complicating this rivalry, both ISIS and Al Qaeda are also fighting a variety of armies and counter-terrorist organizations as well as fighting one another—the outcome of which will have an effect on Islamic militancy in Africa in the long-run.<sup>10</sup>

## SME Input

### Response to AR1, Question 1

Wale Adeboye

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The status and future of ISIL in Syria and Iraq is one that is shifting from a terrorist organization running a state to an organization instigating, mobilizing and supporting other terrorist organizations across the world and particularly Africa. Over the next few years, ISIL break apart would have various dynamics but with sole aim to give momentum to terrorism operations in ‘ungoverned’ spaces places and territories across the Middle East and Africa. To remain relevant, ISIL would probably set aside temporarily the creation of ‘caliphates’ by courting secretly neglected rural areas of North Africa, East Africa, West Africa and the Sahel.

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<sup>9</sup> Hansen, S. J. (2016). The Islamic State is losing in Africa. Retrieved from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/13/the-islamic-state-is-losing-in-africa/>

<sup>10</sup> Burke, J. (2016). Isis and al-Qaida turf wars in Africa may push fragile states to breaking point. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/oct/06/isis-al-qaida-turf-wars-africa-may-push-fragile-states-to-breaking-point>

There has been research that validates that terrorist groups such as ISIL's successes rest on their establishment among rural societies, where little or no government presence persists. The future of ISIL will therefore affect Africa as ISIL attempts to create not necessarily new affiliations, but to support and manipulate existing terrorist groups in communities that feel the state is absent, or non-responsive to their socio-political and developmental needs.

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ISIL future challenges require reshaping of the US or, and African states response to reconsider methods and ways to address ISIL presence in Africa. Nowhere is this more evident in Africa, than within North Africa. North Africa region due to proximity to the Middle East is strategic to ISIL's inroad to Africa. Similarly, North Africa through the Sahel and then West Africa provide the route and platform for transnational criminal networks, which ISIL and other terrorist groups can easily leverage. The last two years has witnessed the progress presence of ISIL affiliates in Sirte, Libya and Sinai peninsula. These are two places of strategic importance to ISIL.

The Sahel region of Africa is another problematic area prone to ISIL presence and operations. Sahel region host the largest span of ungoverned spaces in Africa. ISIL will most likely exploit the circumstances of these ungoverned spaces to create new loyalists and base for attacks. In this context, the Sahelian countries include Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Notable, the Boko Haram in Nigeria will be looking for momentum from ISIL, meaning Boko Haram is not really being degraded but rather the Boko Haram threat is just changing patterns. Since ISIL and Boko Haram are both in the phase of remaining and surviving, both would look forward to collaborations that can lead to their survival. One direction to consider in tracking this would be the social media connections of ISIL and Boko haram loyalists.

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My Phd dissertation entitled "*Military Operations Against Boko Haram: Implications for Human Security in northeast Nigeria*" outlines how Boko Haram by its very nature, does not define itself by geographical boundaries. This became evident in their patterns of attacks in Nigeria, Niger and Cameroun. Boko Haram is popular for appealing to people's sense of victimhood and deprivation. Hence, proper attention or lack of attention given to such appeals would in West Africa and Lake Chad basin determine how the Boko Haram re-emerge now that they are on the back foot.

ISIL threats in West Africa would be shaped by politically fragile countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria. We have seen over the past years, terrorist attacks in cities of Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire. Other countries not in West Africa but close to the region with tendencies for ISIL inroad are CAR and Cameroun. This must be the focus of any US led interest in Africa. In 2016, Boko Haram had more attacks in Cameroun than in Nigeria.

Lastly, for East Africa, ISIL impact is a potential source of threat to the region. With al-Shabaab continued trends of terrorism, Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, are places ISIL would likely explore. The ISIL desire for vengeance rather than just recruiting and expanding territories may

be the driving force for operations in East Africa. Obviously, as ISIL expansion and activities are limited in Syria and Iraq, ISIL will find East Africa a region to be alive.

In respect to the question, the ISIL has two options of impacts across Africa: 1) to provide momentum for Africa based terrorist groups who are losing steam, just like them. 2) ISIL would be looking to consolidate operations in ungoverned spaces of Libya, the Sahel (Chad, Niger and Burkina-Faso) and West Africa (Mali and parts of northern Nigeria).

## Response to AR1, Question 1

Barak Barfi

New America Foundation

In his introduction to Che Guevara's Bolivian diaries, Daniel James seeks to explain why the legendary revolutionary failed to win over the locals to his insurrection. James details the mistakes Che made in not following the guidelines he specified in his guerilla warfare manuals. Though Che targeted the right community in Bolivia, it was in the wrong geographical setting. The exploited agrarian population in other parts of the country which he had pinned his revolutionary hopes on were landowners in southeastern Bolivia. They identified with the military which was drawn from the same ranks, persuading them to inform on the foreign insurrectionist in their midst. And though Che needed to recruit from the communists, miners and students, he made inroads with none. Che's inability to plot out an effective strategy doomed his campaign and ultimately led to his death.

In seeking its sites on Africa, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is not hamstrung by the same limitations. The continent provides a number of theaters it can fall back on to take advantage of unique opportunities. Ethnic tensions, geography, political instability, underdevelopment and ungoverned spaces all combine to make the continent an appealing haven to strengthen existing affiliates and develop new ones. This paper will examine three potential theaters in Egypt, Libya and the Sahel.

ISIS possesses several advantages over its jihadist rivals as it encroaches on their territory. Its state has generated revenues that allow it to coopt potential adversaries and entice new recruits. Its prolific social media arm, far superior to that of its competitors, is well placed to attract them. And its pool of human resources is so large that it can send operatives all over the world without diluting its core base.

The chief dilemma ISIS faces in Africa is that the sectarianism that is its *raison d'être* in Iraq and to a much lesser degree in Syria is non-existent on the continent. Egypt's Sinai Peninsula is 100% Sunni. Libya's ethnic minorities (Berber, Tebu and Tuareg) are as well. ISIS' rigorous interpretation of Islamic law is also a potential pitfall. The populations of prospective African sanctuaries either have tenuous ties to Islam or eschew its demanding practices. The Bedouin which populate Sinai have been historically known for their weak adherence to Islam. Nevertheless, jihadists have demonstrated that they are able to temporarily diffuse these potential hazards as they consolidate power.

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## The Sahel

One fertile region for an ISIS fallback is the Western Sahel, a region extending from Mauritania to Niger on the fringes of the Sahara Desert. A confluence of factors including political instability, poor governance, underdevelopment and vast ungoverned spaces makes this region conducive to ISIS penetration. Social cleavages are ripe for exploitation in northern Mali where sedentary-pastoralist strains reign. Ethnic tensions, which pit Arabs against Tuaregs, were only exacerbated by a jihadist takeover in 2013.

Relations with host groups have been key for jihadist proliferation in this area. Though the Arab Barabiche tribes initially welcomed the jihadists, they have expanded ties with the Tuaregs, who have waged an on again off again insurrection against governments for more than 50 years.

This area has traditionally been an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) stronghold. However, the organization has been severely hampered by internal strife and its propensity to favor capital accumulation at the expense of traditional jihadism. Rival fiefdoms in the Sahel have emerged whose leaders refuse the central leadership's orders.

The allure of the unparalleled African opportunities the Sahel offers have already enticed ISIS. It has secured the loyalty of elements of al-Murabitun, an AQIM splinter group which recently merged with its mother organization. It has carried out attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger. Despite this, the flow of ISIS operatives into this region has been limited. The organization has instead favored Libya as its chief operational base in Africa.

The challenge for ISIS is here is the repercussions employing its strict brand of Islam entail. Many Sahelian nationals are only nominally Muslim. They are more likely to fall back on pagan practices than to embrace shari'a. AQIM has eschewed the harsh tactics ISIS advocates and any takeover of territory and the implementation of these strictures are likely to result in a backlash.

## Libya

Libya has proved to be both ISIS' most successful venture into Africa and its worst setback. Rival governments, Somalian like warlords and expansive space fused to provide the organization a potential haven. But geography doomed the jihadist experiment. Based in the coastal town of Sirte, ISIS was squeezed between rival government forces who temporarily set aside their differences to defeat jihadists. The small town could not provide the refuge to sustain a long urban campaign necessary to attrite opposing forces. Like Che, ISIS erred through hubris.

The ISIS model is better suited to being developed in the interior of the country. The landscape affords the group better egresses and fallbacks than it held in Sirte. Extended logistical lines would preclude enemy offensives from the coastal rival governments.

The Fezzan provides suitable cover for ISIS operations. The rival governments are largely absent and the organization can blend in with smugglers. The migrant population—both workers and those seeking to reach Europe—provide a large recruiting pool. Other jihadist organizations have been active on the Algerian-Libya border in the remote areas of Fezzan.

ISIS faces several constraints in this theater. The population is not as susceptible to its message as it was in Sirte. As the birthplace of deposed leader Mu'ammār al-Qadhafi, it lost its privileged position in the post-revolutionary era and was eager to lash out. Former Qadhafi loyalist families who have joined ISIS such as the Karamis illustrate this. Fezzan's non-Arab minorities may not be susceptible to a purely Arab endeavor. And ISIS' defeatist reputation, it has lost two Libyan coastal strongholds, will not win it many adherents. Nevertheless, the organization may be able to exploit tribal and ethnic tensions to make inroads among the region's heterogeneous population.

### **Sinai Peninsula**

A *prima facie* examination of Egypt would reveal disadvantageous conditions to ISIS. As the only nation-state in the region, its citizens are bound by a powerful nationalism. The state is relatively stable and controls the strongest Arab military. But its strengths are detrimental to its objectives. In attacking ISIS' affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula, the army relies on armor rather than pinpoint strikes, causing high civilian casualties, thus alienating the population.

Ungoverned spaces, local grievances against the central government and an influx of Arabian Peninsula Salafism have combined to offer ISIS a safe haven. Local fighters have trained in ISIS' home territory and have brought back effective fighting techniques. Strategic depth may also be an asset. Yahya Sinwar, the new Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, reportedly favors expanding ties with ISIS as a way to weaken the Egyptian blockade against his territory.

A potential lure is the region's proximity to Israel, a chief jihadist objective. But the ISIS affiliate has only attacked Israel on a handful of occasions. Wary of Israeli reprisals, any jihadist focus on Israel here is largely rhetorical and is unlikely to be acted on.

While the local Bedouin population is ripe for exploitation on socio-political grounds, religious factors may impede the ISIS agenda. The Bedouin abjure the organization's intolerant enforcement of Islamic law. Financial constraints may equally hamstring the group. Sinai is too poor to generate self-sustaining revenue streams and the smuggling opportunities available elsewhere in Africa are limited to the equally impoverished Gaza Strip.

Regardless of whether ISIS expands or contracts, it will set its sights on fertile ground in Africa. Unstable states and vast spaces provide it prospects largely unavailable elsewhere. Though its home caliphate may be waning, ISIS's hopes are waxing elsewhere.

## Shifting Landscapes of Militancy in the Sahel Sahara

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Transnational extremist organizations operating in the Sahel and West Africa have gained prominence amid a toxic cocktail of crises and an intricate web of militant rivalries. The rash of deadly attacks in the region by terrorist groups demonstrates the deep reach of militant groups affiliated with AL-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). These networks of extremist militancy are often embedded in shifting alliances of 'convenience' with complex lines of cooperation and competition traversing a highly contested landscape. As militant groups shift and morph into new offshoots and affiliates groups, their threat to the Sahel Sahara and West Africa expands, affecting countries hitherto spared from terrorist violence. The groups' menace is further amplified by the pervasive distrust of state institutions, particularly in marginalized rural communities, and by heavy-handed and indiscriminate counter-terrorism operations. Militant groups and their parent organizations thrive on the back of disillusioned clans, communal, and ethnic organizations. They have repeatedly proven adept at exploiting long-simmering communal distrust, local conflicts, and regional rivalries.

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### Evolution of Violent Militancy

The rise of violent militancy in the Sahel Sahara is the outcome of armed Islamist insurgency that was unleashed in Algeria in 1992, after the military-controlled government nullified the country's first multi-party parliamentary elections won by Islamists. This resulted in one of the most brutal and dirty civil wars that the region has ever experienced. Unfortunately for Algeria's fragile Sahelian neighbors, the ruthless emasculating of the armed insurgency in the late 1990s had inevitable spillover effects. The ending of the insurgency in Algeria forced the geographic repositioning of its base area and theater of operations, leading to the spread of violence to other parts of the Sahel Sahara region.

The introduction of the Al Qaeda franchise in the region in 2007 allowed the gradual development of Algerian-centric militancy into a broader regional phenomenon. Affiliates of Al Qaeda sprang up in local settings divided by ethno-racial differences, as well as fierce competition over shrinking resources. The groups skillfully exploited opportunities created by festering local conflicts, separatist tensions, the proliferation of criminal networks and lingering geopolitical distrust between neighboring countries. The weakening state authority in marginalized peripheries or remote borderlands and the decline in the capacity of the traditional elite to resolve conflicts linked to the 2011 political upheavals across North Africa exacerbated the conditions that aided the expansion of AQIM and its affiliates. State collapse in Libya and the political crisis that

culminated in a coup in Mali in 2012 enabled AQIM to transform its hidden bases in the Sahel Sahara into hubs for regional militancy. A dramatic demonstration of this development was the hijacking of a local Tuareg insurgency launched by a separatist group known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) by a group of AQIM-affiliated militants.

### **Realignment of the Militant Landscape**

This rapid rise to prominence fed into the fragmentation of militant groups. Long-simmering tensions between AQIM's central leadership based in the Kabylia Mountains in Northern Algeria and its Saharan Katibas or brigades degenerated into fractious disputes over authority, strategy, tactics, and allocation of revenues from kidnapping for ransoms and racketeering. The French-led intervention in January 2013 further destabilized AQIM. It pulverized the organization's already weak chain of command and control, and eliminated a number of its field commanders and operatives.<sup>11</sup>

The penetration of, and expansion of IS franchises into the Sahel Sahara compounded AQIM's travails in the region.

Characteristic of its past trajectory and resourcefulness, AQIM and some of its breakaway factions put aside their differences and joined forces in the face of ever-shifting allegiances and rivalries. The successive deadly assaults against soft targets in Mali (November 2015), Burkina Faso (January 2016) and Côte d'Ivoire (March 2016) have proved the value of this realignment of relations between militant groups.<sup>12</sup> However, it remains to be seen how long the latest alliances will last before competing leadership egos and factional interests flare up again. For now, the expansion of the theater of operations beyond the trans-Saharan regions of the Sahel and Maghreb demonstrates the groups' renewed transnational mobility, and relative ability to outpace American and French anti-terrorism efforts. The immediate results of this comeback can be seen in the gradual replenishing of the groups from the ranks of disgruntled groups in marginalized rural areas. For example, angry nomadic Fulani are featuring prominently in recent terrorist violence in West Africa.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is unclear how the ongoing transformations within the landscape of militancy will affect the fragile stability of the Sahel and West Africa. The degrees of vulnerability and resilience vary within the region. But all countries of the region share the same sources of structural fragility: weakness of public institutions, growing demographic challenges, youth unemployment, dysfunction in the agricultural sector, rural poverty, tensions over access to, and management of shrinking resources, exacerbation of ethno-racial fractures, and proliferation of small arms and mafia-like networks. These factors, compounded by the absence of the state in rural contexts, and the crisis-riven regional environment stretching from Libya to the Lake Chad basin, provide fertile recruitment grounds for community-based militias, armed predators, criminal networks and violent extremist organizations.

To address these emerging insecurities, national governments and their international partners need to re-evaluate and re-orient their 'militarist' counter-terrorism policies. It is recommended

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Nguembock, "Pourquoi la Côte d'Ivoire est-elle à son tour touchée par le terrorisme?" IRIS, March 15, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Olivier Guitta, "The re-emergence of AQIM in Africa," 20 March 2016

that:

- Governments should focus on developing policies aimed at curtailing state corruption, promoting good governance of land and natural resources, and investing in long neglected rural and pastoral economies in order to restore
- Invest massively in expanding access to education and social protection systems targeted at the most vulnerable populations as a strategy for significantly reducing social tensions
- Rather than focus exclusively on counter-terrorism, foreign aid should equally be deployed towards promoting accountability, social justice and inclusive development.

*Originally published piece can be found here:*

<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/20556/how-west-africa-became-fertile-ground-for-aqim-and-isis>

## Response to AR1, Question 1

Ambassador John Campbell  
Council on Foreign Relations

ISIL's future trajectory in the African Mediterranean littoral will likely be different from that in sub-Saharan Africa. The littoral is closely tied to Europe and the Islamic Middle East. ISIL is already present in Libya and, to a lesser extent, in Egypt's Sinai. However, Morocco, Algeria, and even Egypt are relatively strong states with a distinct national identity. North Africa is much more developed economically than West and Central Africa. With the exception of Libya and Tunisia, the littoral states are better positioned to resist the spread of ISIL, as Egypt is doing, than the countries to their south would be. Hence, the focus here is on the ISIL potential in that region rather than the very different Mediterranean littoral where the dynamics more resemble those of the Middle East than sub-Saharan Africa.

The area south of Libya is part of the 'Sahel' ("shore" in Arabic), the borderland between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Even in good times, the Sahel is probably the poorest majority-Muslim territory in the world, and despite the production of gas and other commodities that benefit elites, most of its residents are getting poorer. Poverty contributes to, but probably does not cause, the Islamic religious revival underway all across the region. Exacerbating poverty, climate change, especially desertification, results in social and economic dislocation that is conducive to indigenous jihadism. With a few exceptions, governments in the region are weak and largely alienated from most of their populations. National identity hardly exists except among elites who benefit from the status quo and have little interest in reform. Smuggling, kidnapping, trafficking in arms, cigarettes, narcotics, and persons, and other criminal activities are widespread throughout the region. Criminal networks overlap with jihadist groups. The famous jihadi Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former al-Qaeda commander, is also known as "Mr. Marlboro" from the brand of cigarettes he smuggles. Though of Algerian origin, he operates across the Sahara desert and the Sahel.

Local radical, jihadist movements separate from ISIL are already well established in the Sahel: Boko Haram is far from defeated in northeast Nigeria and it operates in culturally similar areas in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. Despite its leader Abubakar Shekau's 2015 high-profile pledge of allegiance to ISIL, the group appears to have little or no operational control over Boko Haram. In Mali, jihadism has an important ethnic dimension, with the Tuaregs, especially, not reconciled to the black dominated Bamako government. In that particular venue, it is al-Qaeda that is active, crowding out a potential ISIL presence. At present, ISIL presence in the Sahel appears minimal, apparently involving little more than a small number of individuals. There is little evidence that the movement provides significant financial or tactical support for the indigenous jihadist movements.

The assumption here is that ISIL will continue to lose territory in Syria and Iraq. Yet, holding territory is essential to the concept of the caliphate. Hence, as the ISIL position erodes and following the expected loss of Mosul and perhaps Raqqa, ISIL leaders may be tempted to decamp to North Africa, especially Libya if their presence in that country can recover from its current round of defeats at the hands of rival Libyan forces. From there, they might filter south into the Sahel. However, in the Sahel they would likely face deadly opposition from local jihadi leaders,

especially if they were bringing few new resources. Among black Sahelian Africans there is a widespread view that Arabs are racist. Tensions between rival 'Arabs' and 'blacks' were particularly evident during the 2012 jihadist occupation of northern Mali. Nor is the Sahel a likely option for ISIL foot soldiers. It is hard to get there from Syria and Iraq, with the transportation infrastructure poorly developed. There is no history of participation from outside the region in indigenous Sahelian jihadist movements. In contrast to the estimated 25,000 foreigners that went to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIL, virtually none have gone to the Sahel, and there is no evidence that Europeans or Americans would in the future travel to a region remote from the Middle East ISIL heartland and its "end times" vision of paradise. An exception might be the small number of black African ISIL foot-soldiers. But, their number is likely too small to be transformative, should they return to the Sahel. If driven out of Raqqa, ISIL leaders would likely find Yemen a more attractive refuge. Or, they might hunker down in small enclaves away from urban areas in Syria and Iraq, as Boko Haram has done successfully after being driven out of the territory it once occupied in northeast Nigeria.

However, a distinction should be made between ISIL as a formal organization and the variety of Islamic theology and related practices that characterize it. If ISIL has a minimal personnel and organizational presence in the Sahel, the theology that animates it is already widespread, including the anti-modern, anti-Western dimensions. ISIL and certain jihadist groups such as Boko Haram appear to be more closely related than they really are because they share a similar theology and rhetoric that is an eccentric outgrowth of the broader Islamic religious movement called Salafism. To a greater or lesser extent, ISIL, Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda focus on a literal reading of the Koran and other 7<sup>th</sup> century texts and the teachings of a few medieval theologians.

The three share the common goal of the establishment of a pure, Islamic state conducted according to their interpretation of Islamic law. But, their tactics are different and their leaders are mutually hostile. They are rivals rather than allies. Local jihadi movements often share this same rhetoric, but their focus is much more on local grievances than on the "end times" and other theological visions. There is no united jihadist "comintern" such as existed to coordinate communist parties under Stalin.

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Hence, an ISIL collapse in Syria and Iraq is likely to have minimal impact on continued, even accelerating, indigenous jihadism in the Sahel. Independent of ISIL, jihadism in the Sahel is driven by the confluence of a religious revival, weak governance, and elite exploitation of the population. These movements are unlikely to pose a threat to the security of the United States. But, they do threaten American interests in a peaceful, developing West Africa on a democratic trajectory. The dilemma is that indigenous jihadism is largely the result of factors specific to a particular region. They are poorly understood by outsiders, but are usually related to a history of poor governance. Current governments are weak, often corrupt, and detached from their people. Yet the United States would be associated with them were it to seek to counter indigenous jihadism through military means.

## Response to AR1, Question 1

Ini Dele-Adedeji

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The first juncture from which to begin is to understand that while there are several ISIL-related movements in Africa. With that said, not all, if any, of these terrorist organisations have direct links with ISIL in Syria and Iraq. However, the trend of “new” emerging terrorist organisations assuming titles with reference to ISIL is likely to continue for as long as ISIL in Syria and Iraq continues to be perceived as a powerful global jihadi force. I should now offer a qualification of my above contention. There is evidence to show that through the use of couriers, some ISIL-related movements have been able to receive logistical support from “the main ISIL”. For example, analysts have noted a vast difference in symbolism employed and audiovisual quality between the videos released by Boko Haram before the sect declared its *ba’ya* (loyalty) to Imam al-Baghdadi and after.

Alternatively, if ISIL continues to lose territory in Syria and Iraq, there is a strong possibility of its fighters seeking to move en masse towards north Africa, hoping to exploit the notoriously-porous borders between Libya and Mauritania. If this happens, it could change the terrain in Africa, where terrorist activity is concerned.

## Response to AR1, Question 1<sup>13</sup>

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In order to fully provide an answer to the above question, one has to present a crude map of ISIL support in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA). ISIL supporters in SSA can be divided into two large groups; Passive supporters and Armed groups whom have declared support for ISIL. The former can provide fighters and finances to the latter, but also to ISIL in the Levant, as proven by the fact that several sub Saharan countries have been the origin of ISIL fighters.<sup>14</sup> ISIL sympathizers may have stimulated some recruitment networks in the African diaspora.<sup>15</sup> However, in some instances groups of supporters lacks the infrastructure to travel to Syria/Iraq, or to join other groups. They may also be prevented from doing so by Al Qaeda affiliates.

Perhaps more serious are the armed groups that has declared allegiance to the Islamic State. The strongest of these groups are probably the Abu Musab al-Barnawi group of Boko Haram, highly

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis (underlined phrases) is the contributor’s.

<sup>14</sup> For examples of the first category see: Amba Mpoke-Bigg (2015) “The Allure of ISIS Has Reached Long-Stable Ghana” *Defense one*, August 31; Staff writer(2016) “How Two Kenyan University Students May Have Joined ISIS In Syria” *Tuko*, <https://www.tuko.co.ke/17544-two-kenyan-university-students-may-joined-isis-syria.html>; in Somalia/Somaliland, the son of opposition leader Faisal Ali Farah Warabe traveled to Iraq; Mahmoud A. Suleiman (2015), *ISIS- Daesh entering Sudan without a deterrent*, *Sudan Tribune* 1 July, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article55547>.

<sup>15</sup> For example see Dina Temple–Raston(2016), “For Somalis In Minneapolis, Jihadi Recruiting Is A Recurring Nightmare” *NPR*, February 18<sup>th</sup>; Robert Spencer (2015), “The Twin Cities have an ISIS problem” *Jihad watch*, September 14

active in Southern Borno (Nigeria), the so called Islamic State's West African Province.<sup>16</sup> Further North, Adnan Abu Walid Sahraou's group the Islamic State in the greater Sahara are especially active in the border areas between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. These two groups are far stronger than the East African groups.

In Somalia, Abdul Qadir Mumin, formed the Islamic State of Somalia, operating in the Puntland region of Somalia (which captured the remote city of Qandela late in 2016 (note it was not garrisoned by Puntland at the time and was a weak target, its conquest has been read as a sign of strength, it was not). In the border areas with Kenya, another group the so called Jabha East Africa formed around the now dead German fighter Martin Andreas Mueller. It should be noted that all of the above groups save perhaps the Barnawi group are geographically on the periphery of the existing and more powerful Al Qaeda affiliates (AQIM and Shabaab).

There are few signs that there have been direct military support to the armed ISIL affiliates in Africa, rumors of support to the Islamic State of Somalia coming from the Islamic State in Yemen are unsubstantiated. In this sense, a weakening of the Islamic State in the Levant will not affect the group's material situation, as most of the resources and manpower are gathered locally, some of it, in at least three of the cases, through tribal/clannist channels.

The groups exist in harsh geographical peripheral areas weakly controlled by states, and this situation will not be altered by Islamic State defeats in the Levant. The groups sell themselves into the local population; partly as a more successful international alliance than the Al Qaeda affiliates, but also higher ethics for example when it comes to the protection of Muslim civilians, and of not using forced recruitment. The two last arguments will not be changed by any defeat of the Islamic State.

The groups are in general small (Barnawis probably being the largest, and closely-knit, and, tied together by small group dynamics). This makes group control easier (including information control, controlling and filtering news) and minimizes the risk of defections caused by Levant battlefield defeats. This researcher does not believe in any increased defection rate caused by defeats of ISIL in the Levant.

The recruitment question is a bit more complicated. The Islamic State affiliates do not in general use forced recruitment, and thus either dependent on sympathizers or appeal to the economic interests of potential recruits. The defeats of the Islamic state in the Levant will weaken the appeal somewhat. However, several mechanisms will potentially negate this effect. In the short run, the symbolic effect of the Islamic States achievements such as the declaration of the caliphate and its rapid expansion in the Levant, might overshadow defeats. Showing ISIL as having fought with efficiency where Al Qaeda was less willing to fight, it can enhance the trademark of ISIL despite the latter suffering defeats. It should also be remembered that early ISIS propaganda focused on end-time symbolism and was to a certain extent militaristic. Defeats in the Levant might be interpreted as "end-time signals," confirming ISIS narratives. However, more important is the fact that the groups are small and have a limited absorption capacity for new recruits—thus a decline

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<sup>16</sup> The shekau faction of Boko Haram broke loose from the Islamic States west africa province when Barnawi was declared leader of the latter. Shekau have not yet distanced himself from ISIL centrally.

will be less felt. All considered, the recruitment to the groups could decline, but not drastically and will probably not hamper the groups in any meaningful way.

With regards to the more passive support groups, this researcher established that there were many of these in for example Kenya. These groups do send recruits and sometimes finances, but also have the potential to change into groups that are more militant (Tanzania should be watched carefully on this account). A weakening of ISIL would probably have a stronger impact here. Many of these groups exists in areas where the respective local states have only relative control; existing as clandestine networks, rather than wielding semi-territorial or territorial control themselves. This means that they will be more exposed to the news from the Levant, and that group control mechanisms are weaker. It is amongst these groups that defeats will be most heavily felt. However, even where groups do still wield control mechanisms, defeats in the Levant might still be interpreted as either end-signs, or as showing the will of ISIL to commit and sacrifice for the cause. Such messages can be negated by CVE efforts. CVE efforts should thus be refined and fine-tuned in order to take advantage of the defeats in the Levant. Here, there is a larger potential to weaken the ISIL support after offensives in the Levant, but it has to be done in a proper way.

### **Conclusions**

This researcher believes that the ISIL defeats in the Levant will have little effect on existing organized and militarily active ISIL affiliates in sub-Saharan Africa. These groups draw their finances from local sources, receive little material support from ISIL centrally and are so closely knit that defeats can be reinterpreted.

This is not the case for more clandestine support networks. They have some of the same control mechanisms, but are less able to shield their members from outside information. A positive effect is however dependent on CVE efforts against these groups in the aftermath of battlefield victories in the Levant.

## Response to AR1, Question 1

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As the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's (ISIL's) strength in Iraq and Syria appears to crumble, its future—according to experts<sup>17</sup>—may take one of two directions. Some analysts envision the entire movement gradually weakening, while others suggest it may follow the model of al Qaeda in morphing into a group that operates through smaller branches in North Africa and Southeast Asia. In either case, the future of the group's presence in Africa cannot be separated from the underlying local conditions there.

ISIL's deepest African presence is in Libya, where it has taken advantage of an ongoing political conflict and security vacuum to establish a base for operations<sup>18</sup>. It conducted operations in Libya and neighboring countries throughout 2015, and at the end of the year began advising fighters wishing to join the movement to go to Libya rather than Iraq or Syria. Yet ISIL's ability to retain and strengthen this presence is uncertain: conflicts between local militia are driven more by competition for economic resources rather than ideology, and for 18 months ISIL was unable to conquer new territory. A political compromise in Libya could also weaken its ability to continue operating there<sup>19</sup>.

*Yet ISIL's ability to retain and strengthen this presence is uncertain: conflicts between local militia are driven more by competition for economic resources rather than ideology, and for 18 months ISIL was unable to conquer new territory. A political compromise in Libya could also weaken its ability to continue operating there.*

In Somalia, some factions of the al Qaeda affiliate al Shabab have declared allegiance to ISIL, and ISIL has been recruiting among Somalis in Africa and abroad. There is little evidence of significant ISIL presence in other parts of East Africa. Senior leadership in al Shabab has now reportedly split between those aligned with/declaring allegiance to ISIL and those remaining affiliates of al Qaeda. As in Libya, extremism has thrived off state weakness or failure; at the same time, clan dynamics may also prevent IS from gaining more territory in the country.<sup>20</sup> Thus, relationships between al Shabab and ISIL are murky and shifting, and the influence of al Qaeda, changing clan relations, and governance conditions all need to be factored in to considerations of future ISIL presence in East Africa.

The most threatening African extremist group to declare allegiance to ISIL is in West Africa: Boko Haram, which operates mainly in five states of northeastern Nigeria and in 2015 announced a change in its name to ISWAP (Islamic State in West Africa Province). Like al Shabab, Boko Haram arose out of particular experiences of social and economic decline over the last several decades and has thrived on the social marginalization of the Muslim populations in those states. ISWAP/Boko Haram has also shown a remarkable ability to adapt to changing local and regional

<sup>17</sup> Winter, Charlie and Colin P. Clarke. 2017. "Is ISIS Breaking Apart." The Rand Blog, January 31 Available at <http://www.rand.org/blog/2017/01/is-isis-breaking-apart.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Sasso, Alessandra. N.d. "The Origins and Affiliations of Islamic Terrorism in Africa." In *Daesh and the Terrorist Threat: From the Middle East to Europe*, 46. Rome, Italy: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Fondazione Italianieuropei.

<sup>19</sup> See Abderrahim, Kader A. N.d. "Libya: Daesh on Europe's Doorstep." In *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Blanchard, Lauren Ploch. 2016. "The Islamic State woos Jihadists in Africa but faces Competition." Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, April 14. Also see Sasso (n.d.), 43-44.

conditions<sup>21</sup>. It has also become the most deadly extremist group anywhere (that is, more deaths are attributed to Boko Haram than any other extremist group, including ISIL)<sup>22</sup>. Yet while there is evidence of propaganda influence and media cooperation between Boko Haram and ISIL and adoption of IS tactics, the alliance does not appear to have changed much for Boko Haram operationally<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, subsequent declarations of the establishment of a “caliphate” in Nigeria left unclear whether the group’s leader was continuing his allegiance to the leader of ISIL<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, Boko Haram has always targeted local politicians or Christian communities, with the exception of one attack on a U.N. facility in Abuja in 2011. Thus, again, the future of ISIL in Iraq and Syria may contribute to a strengthening or weakening of this African affiliate, but until now Boko Haram appears able to generate resources and strength and operate largely independently. Elements from one other extremist group in West Africa, the Mali-based Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), have reportedly declared allegiance to IS, but because other leaders have rejected this declaration and reaffirmed loyalty to al Qaeda, the impact of this on ISIL’s West African presence remains unclear.

Overall, local conditions in Africa have caused and allowed extremist groups, whether affiliated to ISIL, al Qaeda, or both, to emerge and thrive. Naturally, other factors will influence ISIL presence in Africa as well, such as changes in al Qaeda influence<sup>25</sup> and the continued movement of refugee and migrant populations<sup>26</sup>. The future of the Islamic State’s propaganda/media use will also matter, as it has been apparently effective in places like Libya in garnering local support<sup>27</sup>. Thus, regardless of whether ISIL’s apparent decline in Iraq and Syria strengthens or weakens, its presence in Africa will be equally if not more influenced by local conditions and other local factors.

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<sup>21</sup> Pham, J. Peter. 2016. “Boko Haram: The Strategic Evolution of the Islamic State’s West Africa Province”. *The Journal of Middle East and Africa* 7 (1), 1-18. For instance, Boko Haram took advantage of AQIM activity in Northern Mali in 2013 to recruit and train.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, Lynn E., Jeffrey Martini, and Kim Cragin. 2017. “A Strategy to Counter ISIL as a Transregional Threat”. RAND Corporation, 7. Available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE228.html>.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. punishing smoking and carrying out brutal executions. See Pham (2016), 12. Boko Haram even lost territory in Nigeria following its declaration of allegiance to ISIL.

<sup>24</sup> Pham (2016, 15).

<sup>25</sup> While some experts have posited that ISIL and al Qaeda have a relationship, most believe the two groups compete for influence. See Blanchard (2016) and Davis, Martini and Cragin (2017).

<sup>26</sup> See Schmid, Alex P. 2016. *Links Between Terrorism and Migration: An Exploration*. The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism Research Paper, May.

<sup>27</sup> Winter and Clarke (2017).

## ISIS in Africa: Implications from Syria and Iraq

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At the end of 2016, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), announced that the group had “expanded and shifted some of our command, media, and wealth to Africa.” ISIS’s *Dabiq* magazine referred to the regions of Africa that were part of its “caliphate:” “the region that includes Sudan, Chad and Egypt has been named the caliphate province of Alkinaana; the region that includes Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda as the province of Habasha; the North African region encompassing Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Nigeria, Niger and Mauritania as Maghreb, the province of the caliphate.” Leaving aside the mismatched ethno-linguistic groupings included in each of these “provinces,” ISIS’s interest in establishing a presence in Africa has long been a part of its vision for a global caliphate.

Battlefield setbacks in ISIS’s strongholds in Iraq and Syria since 2015, however, raise questions of what impact this will have for ISIS’s African aspirations. A useful starting point in considering this question is to recognize that the threat from violent Islamist groups in Africa is not monolithic but is comprised of a variety of distinct entities. For the most part, these groups are geographically concentrated and focused on local territorial or political objectives. Specifically, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies has identified 5 major categories of militant Islamist groups in Africa (see map): <http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Africas-Active-Militant-Islamist-Groups-November-2016.pdf>. In order of lethality on the continent, these include Boko Haram, al-Shaabab, ISIS-linked groups in North Africa, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Sinai-focused groups.

ISIS’s ties and influence with each of these groups varies widely. Consequently, ISIS’s future prospects in Syria and Iraq can likewise be expected to have varied implications across Africa. Let’s walk through these groups more precisely.

### Boko Haram

While Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, publicly declared allegiance to ISIS in 2015, tangible ISIS support to Boko Haram since that time has been marginal. There is some evidence of subsequently improved public relations materials generated by Boko Haram, however, there are few signs that ISIS has provided meaningful strategic direction, organizational control, funding, assets, or fighters to support Boko Haram operations. Instead, Boko Haram fighters continue to be largely drawn from northeastern Nigeria with a focus of operations in Nigeria and the border areas of Cameroon and Niger. A continued downgrading of ISIS capabilities in Syria and Iraq, accordingly, is not likely to have a significant impact on Boko Haram’s operational capacity or focus. Similarly, if ISIS were to regain territory and resources in the Middle East, it is not expected that this would translate into significant additional support for Boko Haram in the near future.

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<sup>28</sup> Contributing Author: Wendy Williams, Assistant Research Fellow, Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

ISIS's main influence on Boko Haram, in contrast, has been reputational. At its height, ISIS represented a dynamic, successful force that animated a vision for a global Islamic caliphate. This image was highly appealing to young militants drawn to jihad. In this way, Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to ISIS in March 2015 was widely seen as an opportunity to associate Boko Haram's flagging fortunes in northeastern Nigeria with a broader cause. Thus, it is on the ideological front that the future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq will likely have the greatest impact on Boko Haram. If ISIS is defeated, and with it prospects for its leadership of a global caliphate, then this ideological attraction and motivation for Boko Haram fighters and recruits will likely dissipate.

### **Al Shaabab**

Al Shaabab has been resurgent in 2016 taking offensive action against the still fragile government in Somalia and AMISOM forces. Al Shaabab is almost entirely focused on Somalia, having emerged from the fractious political and clan competition in Somalia as the face of violent Islam in the country. The group has had a long affiliation with al-Qaeda and has been actively hostile to ISIS. Efforts by breakaway elements of al Shaabab to establish ISIS affiliates in Somalia in 2016 were aggressively put down by al Shaabab.

The fate of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, therefore, is not likely to have a meaningful direct or near term effect on al Shaabab. Rather the trajectory of violent Islamist extremism in Somalia will be more significantly shaped by other forces (e.g., legitimacy and effectiveness of the new Somalia government, Somali clan dynamics, Wahhabi ideological influences and funding).

### **ISIS-Linked Groups in North Africa**

ISIS-affiliated groups emerged in Tunisia and Libya in 2014, shortly after ISIS's rise in Iraq and Syria. However, the roles of these two affiliates have differed significantly. Tunisia has served as a key recruitment pipeline for ISIS into Syria through Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia. Some 6,500 Tunisians—more than any other outside country—are believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq, the majority of which are presumed to support the jihad there. The ideological appeal of ISIS's call for a global caliphate evidently resonated deeply with many of Tunisia's alienated youth.

ISIS setbacks in Iraq and Syria could result in a significant reverse pipeline of Tunisian fighters returning to Tunisia and fostering instability there. While Ansar al Sharia has been responsible for a number of high-profile attacks in Tunisia (and to a lesser extent Algeria) in recent years, for the most part Ansar al Sharia's significance has been its facilitation of the flow of fighters to the Middle East. A large influx of returning experienced fighters, however, could change that. These fighters would have the capabilities and cultural familiarity to potentially create a formidable and sustained destabilizing force in Tunisia. Thus, Tunisia appears to be the African country most closely linked to ISIS's viability in Iraq and Syria.

In Libya, the seizure and defense of Sirte has been the most publicized activity of an ISIS entity in Africa. However, ISIS does not enjoy significant homegrown support in Libya. Instead, ISIS drew aggressive and sustained resistance from Libyan militias intent on dislodging what they saw as a foreign and rival presence – efforts that were eventually successful. Reports suggest that some ISIS fighters subsequently fled south to regions southwest of Misrata.

A regrouping of the remnants of ISIS elements in Libya would likely serve as a magnet for other ISIS fighters displaced from Iraq and Syria. However, the viability of any ISIS-linked groups in Libya is more a reflection of the absence of a capable central governance authority, rather than an indication of the local support that would be needed to sustain their presence.

### **AQIM**

While affiliated with al-Qaeda, there are splinter groups that have pledged allegiance to ISIS. This raises the prospect that additional relocations of ISIS fighters from Iraq and Syria could strengthen the capacity of these ISIS-linked groups to strike targets in the northern Sahel. These splinter groups have provoked strong resistance from established AQIM factions, however.

Unlike other violent Islamist groups in Africa, AQIM is not linked to a particular local context or agenda. Nor does it hold territory. Rather, its loose configuration of groups have a regional scope with an aim of mounting periodic attacks on government and Western-affiliated targets across the region. By and large, these attacks seem intended for their sensational, rather than strategic, effect. Some observers have suggested that their use of violence is intended to show their continued relevance in the face of growing global media coverage of ISIS attacks. Any influx of ISIS fighters, accordingly, would likely be seen as a threat, potentially triggering increased AQIM activity.

### **Sinai-Based Groups**

There have long been a number of Sinai-based violent Islamist groups that have planned and undertaken attacks against Israel and Egyptian government targets. With its emergence, ISIS was able to negotiate a declaration of allegiance in December 2014 from one of these groups, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) or State of Sinai, which had suffered significant leadership attrition at the hands of the Egyptian military. After this declaration, ABM adopted propaganda and battlefield tactics more closely resembling ISIS in Iraq and Syria. This included attacking certain international targets such as: the bombing of a Russian airliner taking off from Sharm el-Sheikh, the beheading of a Croatian expatriate, and an attack on the Italian consulate in Cairo. However, most ABM actions are hit-and-run tactics aimed at the Egyptian military.

A loss of territory by ISIS in Syria and Iraq would likely result in the return of more Egyptian jihadists to the Sinai where they could strengthen ABM's insurgent activities. This could pose a greater challenge for the Egyptian military, which has been on the offensive against these groups since 2014. An ISIS revival in Syria and Iraq, meanwhile, would likely result in increased funding, weapons, and technical support for ISIS's Sinai affiliate.

### **Upshot**

ISIS is, by and large, not well-rooted in the communities where Africa's most active violent Islamist groups operate. This is particularly so in Sub-Saharan Africa. ISIS's closest ties appear to be in Tunisia and the Sinai, plus a cadre of fighters displaced from Sirte in southern Libya and the Sahel. The key effect of ISIS's continued loss of territory and operational capacity in Iraq and Syria will be an increase in the number of ISIS fighters returning to regions in Africa already facing a threat from violent Islamists. These fighters may attempt to perpetuate the ISIS brand. Without ISIS funding and technical support, however, these fighters are more likely to simply melt into the complex matrix of violent Islamist groups already active in these regions.

ISIS's main attraction within Africa, however, has been less about resources and more about its reputational and ideological potency. When it was ascendant, ISIS's reputation for operational capacity, territorial control of large swaths of Iraq and Syria, sensational violence, and a sense of purpose and vision for a global Islamic caliphate generated palpable enthusiasm and momentum among young African Muslims drawn to jihad. As ISIS's influence and territorial control in the Arab world have waned and the credibility gap for its utopian governance model grown, so too has its reputational appeal. This will diminish its recruitment and alliance building in Africa.

ISIS-related developments in Africa must be kept in context, however. The most lethal violent Islamist groups in Africa (Boko Haram and al Shaabab) predate ISIS, are well-grounded in their local communities and grievances, and do not rely on ISIS for resources or operational support. Moreover, the dominant ideological influence for militant Islam in Africa has never been ISIS but the ultra-conservative Arab-infused Wahhabi model of Islam that has been propagated from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States for decades. With deep pockets and increasing reach from satellite communications and social media, this continues to be a powerful influence that is shaping the mindsets of millions of young African Muslims.

*ISIS-related developments in Africa must be kept in context, however. The most lethal violent Islamist groups in Africa (Boko Haram and al Shaabab) predate ISIS, are well-grounded in their local communities and grievances, and do not rely on ISIS for resources or operational support.*

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### Wale Adeboye

Wale Adeboye, who is 2016 Global Peace Index Ambassador for the Rotary International and the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) is a consultant in Peace threats and Stability Management. He is also a Ph.D. research student at the Institute for Peace & Strategic Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He is in the final stages of a Ph.D. study on Military Operations against Boko Haram and Human Security in Northeast Nigeria. He is West Africa Focal Point for, Global Action against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC II), Africa Working Group Committee.

His specialty includes but not limited to, counterterrorism, Responsibility to Protect (R2P), negotiation, mediation and strategic thinking & planning. 'Wale has a culture of meeting clients' expectations with high quality, effective and efficient solutions on projects in diverse industries, such as: in private/public sectors, government and the military.

He is the Country Coordinator, Terrorism Research Initiative, a research fellow, French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA), Nigeria. Wale consults/advises organizations such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Africa Regional Service Centre, The United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU), Global Centre for Responsibility to Protect, The Stanley Foundation and many others.

Wale received a certificate in Genocide Studies and Prevention from Keene State College, New Hampshire, USA.

### Barak Barfi

Barak Barfi is a Research Fellow at the New America Foundation, where he specializes in Arab and Islamic Affairs. Previously, Barak was a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution. His articles have appeared in the *Washington Post*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Foreign Policy*, *Daily Beast*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Republic* and *Politico*, in addition to being regularly featured in Project Syndicate. He has also extensively published in leading foreign publications such as Australia's *The Australian*, Austria's *Der Standard*, England's *The Guardian*, Germany's *Die Welt* and Spain's *El Pais*. Barak has published several monographs and encyclopedia articles on topics such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Libya, Syria and Yemen. He has been quoted in every major international publication, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *TIME*, the *Atlantic*, *Le Monde* and the *Daily Telegraph*. He has appeared on ABC's *World News Tonight*, NBC's *Today Show* and CBS' *This Morning Show*. He is a frequent commentator on CNN, BBC, MSNBC and Fox News, appearing on such programs as *Anderson Cooper 360°*, *Hardball with Chris Matthews* and *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. Barak often testifies before Congress on issues ranging from al-Qaeda to the Syrian conflict. Before entering the think tank world, Barak worked as a correspondent for Associated Press and as a producer for ABC News affiliates where he reported from countries such as Iraq and Lebanon. He has lived in half a dozen Middle East countries including Libya and

Yemen. Since 2011, he has visited Syria more than a dozen times, traveling in regime areas, Kurdish regions and rebel held territory. Barak did his undergraduate work at the University of Michigan and his graduate studies at Columbia University. He is fluent in Arabic and French and proficient in German.

### **Anouar Boukhars**

Anouar Boukhars is a nonresident scholar in Carnegie's Middle East Program and associate professor of international relations at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. Boukhars is a former fellow at the Brookings Doha Center and author of *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2010). He is also a co-editor of *Perilous Desert: Sources of Saharan Insecurity* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013) and *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms and Geopolitics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). His other publications have appeared in a number of peer-reviewed outlets, including the *Journal of Conflict Studies*, *African Security Review*, *International Political Science Review*, *World Politics Review*, *European Security*, and *Orient*.



### **Ambassador John Campbell**

John Campbell is the Ralph Bunche senior fellow for Africa policy studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Rowman & Littlefield published his book [\*Morning in South Africa\*](#) in May 2016. Rowman & Littlefield also published his book, [\*Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink\*](#). The second edition was published in June 2013. He writes the blog "[Africa in Transition](#)" and edits both the [Nigeria Security Tracker](#) and the [Sub-Saharan Security Tracker](#).

From 1975 to 2007, Campbell served as a U.S. Department of State Foreign Service officer. He served twice in Nigeria, as political counselor from 1988 to 1990, and as ambassador from 2004 to 2007. Campbell's additional overseas postings include Lyon, Paris, Geneva, and Pretoria. He also served as deputy assistant secretary for human resources, dean of the Foreign Service Institute's School of Language Studies, and director of the Office of UN Political Affairs.

From 2007 to 2008, he was a visiting professor of international relations at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He was also a Department of State mid-career fellow at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Prior to his career in the Foreign Service, he taught British and French history at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia.

Campbell received a BA and MA from the University of Virginia and a PhD in seventeenth century English history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

### **Ini Dele-Adedeji**

"Ini Dele-Adedeji is a Junior Teaching Fellow in the Politics and Development Studies departments at the School of Oriental & African Studies, London (SOAS). He has an undergraduate degree in Law, and a postgraduate degree in Security and Intelligence Studies. Ini's doctoral Thesis, in Politics, is an anthropological study of the mobilization of the Boko Haram sect in northern Nigeria".

### **Dr. Stig Hansen**



Dr. Stig Jarle Hansen works primarily within the fields of organized crime (especially piracy) and religion and politics (including religious terror). He has previously worked at the University of Bath and the NIBR institute in Oslo and headed Norway's only Master's program in international relations. His latest book, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, was critically acclaimed in *Foreign Policy* and *The Economist*, amongst others. Hansen is a globally known expert on Islamism in the Horn of Africa and has provided commentary for CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, Reuters, CCTV 4, and many other international media outlets.

He will be engaged in research on jihadist war economies during his fellowship, focusing on the war economies of Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

### **Sabina Henneberg**

Sabina Henneberg is a Ph.D. candidate in the African Studies program of the Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C. Her doctoral dissertation is on the current political transformations in North Africa. Ms. Henneberg has worked for Creative Associates International in international education and civil society development in Africa and the Middle East and with other organizations on human rights and gender issues. She also taught English for two years at Nankai University in Tianjin, China. Ms. Henneberg is a 2015 Cosmos Scholar and Boren fellowship recipient. She holds a Bachelor's degree in international political economy from Colorado College and a Master's degree in International Relations from SAIS.



**Dr. Sabrina Pagano**

Dr. Sabrina Pagano is an experienced project leader and principal investigator, with almost 15 years of experience leading teams and projects both in academia and industry. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology (minor in Statistics) from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a dual BA with highest honors in Psychology and Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has led and been an active contributor to work in both the government and commercial domains. Though supporting a wide variety of projects and proposals, her work at NSI has focused in three main areas, including serving as the Principal Investigator and Project Manager for a multi-year contract investigating progress in conflict environments, providing project oversight as the project manager for two AAA titles at a top gaming company, and as one of two developers of a corporate offering focused on enhancing dignity in interactions with customers and employees. Prior to NSI, she served as the Director (Acting) of a growing behavioral sciences program, as well as a Faculty Fellow Researcher and Lecturer at UCLA. Dr. Pagano's work has spanned a wide variety of topics, with particular depth in intergroup relations, injustice, basic and moral emotions (e.g., empathy, moral outrage), and prosocial/antisocial behavior. She maintains an active knowledge base in the broad field of social psychology, and knowledge that spans multiple fields given over a decade of experience and leadership specifically on multidisciplinary projects.



**Joseph Siegle**

Joseph Siegle is the Director of Research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Dr. Siegle's research focuses on Africa-wide security challenges and trends, stabilization strategies for fragile states, and the relationship between democratic governance, economic development, and security. He is also an adjunct senior research scholar at the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland. He has worked as a practitioner and scholar in roughly 20 conflict-affected and transitioning contexts in Africa, Asia, and the Balkans.