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# Jihadism in Africa

Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances

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ISSN 1863-1053

*Translation by Meredith Dale*

(Updated English version of  
SWP-Studie 7/2015)

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## **Jihadism in Africa:**

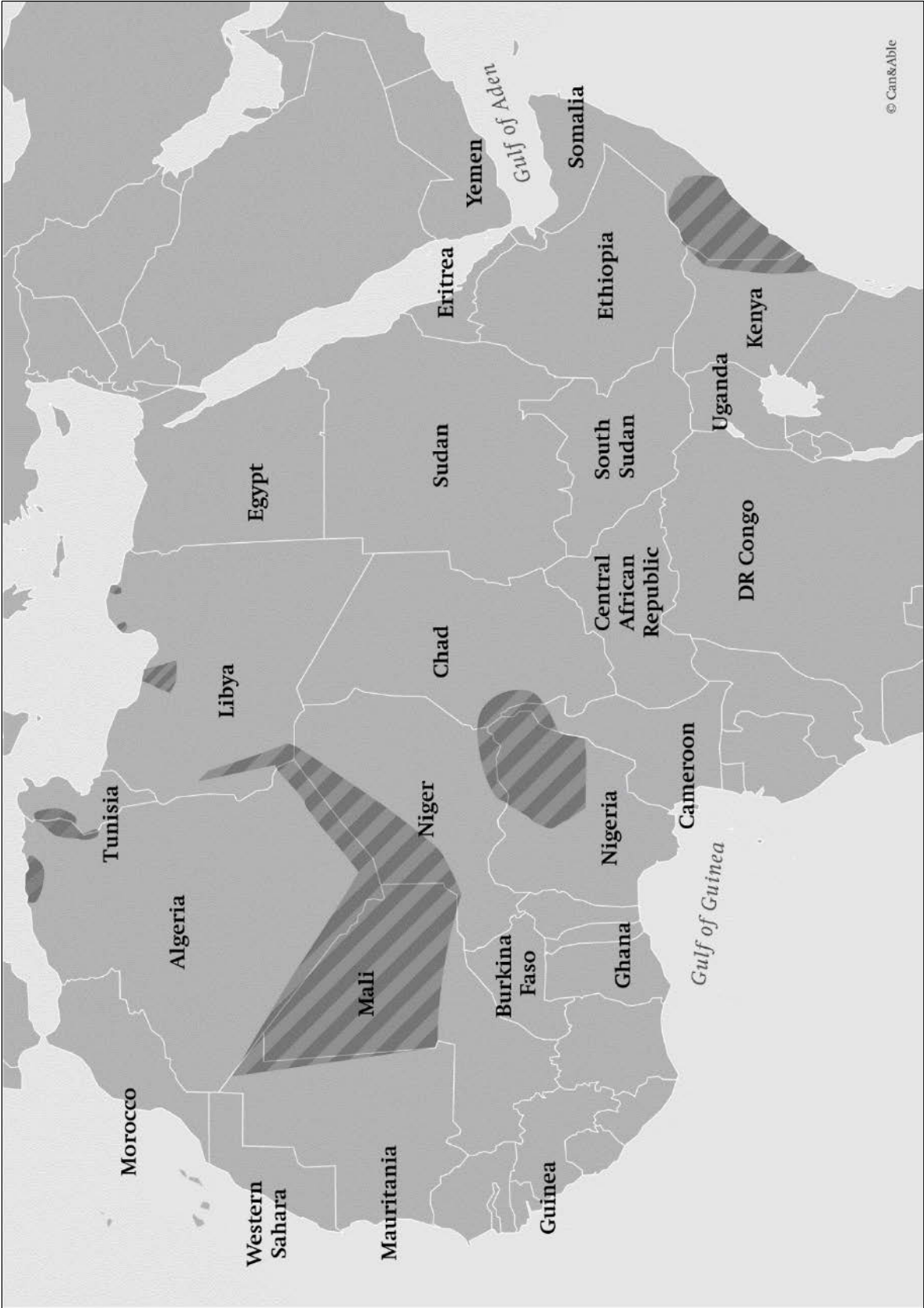
### **Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances**

The transnational terrorism of the twenty-first century feeds on local and regional conflicts, without which most terrorist groups would never have appeared in the first place. That is the case in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Syria and Iraq, as well as in North and West Africa and the Horn of Africa. Groups like al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in Somalia, Nigeria and Algeria operate within and profit from local conflicts. Anyone wishing to understand (and counteract) such forces must delve into the specific circumstances within these countries, as well as others such as Mali and the region they are based in. The effects of the multitude of personal ties, recruiting networks and ideological influences connecting jihadist movements are felt across countries, regions and even continents. Yet understanding the specific conditions on the ground remains key to analysing events currently playing out in a group of countries running from East Africa to Mauritania and extending as far north as Tunisia and south to the Swahili coast.

Research, politics and public debate frequently emphasise the supra-regional and global aspects of jihadism, while underestimating the local anchoring of individual groups and national differences between them. For these reasons the picture of a jihadist threat directed towards large parts of the continent also shapes the solutions put forward by the West, where sweeping approaches are prioritised at the expense of addressing local causes.

The African arc of instability discussed in this connection underpins a Western approach to counter-terrorism that often transpires to be counter-productive. But the narrative also serves the interests of governments in the affected countries themselves. Pointing to the rising risks of terrorism allows them both to secure security cooperation with Western countries, and to justify increasingly restrictive security legislation.

Map 1: Jihadist activities in Africa



# Jihadism in Africa: An Introduction

*Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber*

## The State, the Economy and Terrorism in Africa

### The State

One great problem of the African continent is the weakness of its states. Few succeed in penetrating all the territory nominally belonging to them. Frequently the central state governs the periphery through representatives (Ethiopia), permits proxies to establish minor quasi-state entities of their own (Somalia) or appears primarily in the guise of the forces of order, especially the army and border police (Nigeria).

In some of the countries in which jihadist organisations have emerged, the state possesses little in the way of legitimacy, with governments failing to guarantee security or offer social services. The population also lacks confidence in the organs of state, in fact often perceiving them as a source of threat. The state exists above all in the capital, where the country's political elite is based. Depending on the degree of democracy, the socio-economic, geographical and cultural periphery is represented to a greater or lesser extent there.

Especially in states characterised by large distributional disparities in conjunction with elite economic interests in the periphery (such as resources, oil), it is not necessarily advantageous for the outlying areas to attract greater attention from central government. Populations in border regions and groups operating in the black economy may in fact benefit from the centre's neglect. And moving up the agenda of the political centre will not automatically mean resources being distributed more equitably or improvements being made to physical and political infrastructure.

In many African states, especially those adjoining the Sahel, population groups on the peripheries often enjoy closer ties across borders than to their own governments in the mostly coastal capitals. For example, Tuareg in Algeria are closer to Tuareg in Mali than to the political elite in Algiers. Examining African countries and regions in terms of their peripheries reveals networks and ties a great deal older than those of modern jihadism. Historically, it was the kingdoms of the Sahel, not the port cities, that symbolised wealth and civilization: Timbuktu, the kingdoms of northern Nigeria. It was the Middle Passage – the triangular slave trade of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – that made the port cities into the locus of trade and political power. This is when the Sahel became the hinterland. Such a change of perspective is vital for understanding jihadism in Africa, as well as for tackling the growing problems associated with it.

Where states prove unwilling or unable to ensure security, enforce the law or distribute public goods, smaller entities often assume these roles in

their place. The ethnic group, tribe, clan, armed movement, smuggling network or jihadist group takes over where the absent state leaves a vacuum. This also offers political and criminal entrepreneurs such as provincial grandees or smuggling gangs opportunities to exploit jihadist influence for their own ends or to exercise political violence in its shadow. Alarming collaborations appeared in the 2003 Nigerian elections, where a local politician mobilised Boko Haram to campaign for him in the mosques and to intimidate opponents.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the liberation movements of the 1960s, today's jihadist groups are not principally seeking to capture government power in their capitals. In Mali, for example, we see the armed groups in the north showing a great deal more interest in neighbouring regions of Niger, Libya, Algeria and Mauritania than in their own country's south or its capital Bamako. For many jihadists the nation-state model has been superseded by a transnational perspective where national frontiers are increasingly irrelevant. Ever more frequently, their actions are guided by a vision of a global "Islamic community".

Nevertheless, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda groups in Mali (at least until the French intervention in January 2013) exhibit growing interest in controlling captured territory and establishing state structures. This is sometimes reflected in changes in their military tactics: whereas Boko Haram long concentrated on car bombings and suicide attacks, it now also pursues conventional military methods, such as attempting to capture military bases.<sup>2</sup>

### Society

Both the collapse of a society and its opposite – tightening of social ties and associated hierarchies – can make it easier for jihadists to recruit. The destruction of social networks in Somalia through more than two decades of state failure and violent conflict made it easy for al-Shabaab to recruit new fighters. In the countries of the Maghreb, as well as in Kenya, broken promises of social advancement represent important reasons for joining the armed struggle. In particular young people who experience initial success, such as a state school qualification, develop high expectations of state and society that are then often disappointed. With few jobs waiting, many school-leavers see no possibility to marry and found a family. Whether the social structure is eroding or functioning, what both cases share is ideas about the future – in particular young men's ideas – colliding with reality. Jihadist organisations offer them an attractive alternative that addresses historical and personal traumas such as colonialism, repression

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Christophe Hoste, *Tackling Terror in Africa: What Local Roles for Insurgency Groups?* Africa Policy Brief 10 (Brussels: Egmont, Royal Institute for International Relations, July 2014), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *The New Jihadism: A Global Snapshot* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, in collaboration with the BBC, 2014).



and displacement and permits the fighting “mujahid” to perceive himself as a hero.<sup>3</sup>

Where some jihadists understand their new role more as judge than potential breadwinner, this also calls into question the authority of the traditional leaders. Sufi sheikhs, clan elders and patriarchs find themselves virtually powerless against the terror. Where jihadists gain the upper hand, the brutalisation of society through public executions, draconian *hudud* punishments, the destruction of entire villages and the kidnapping of children destroys their connections to their traditional base.

Alongside social mobility and dysfunctionality of social networks, fundamentalist religious education also promotes openness towards militant groups. In Somalia for example, the destruction of state education structures was followed by a proliferation of Saudi-funded private schools teaching primarily religious content of Wahhabi provenance.

## The Economy

Weak statehood favours the emergence of alternative partly criminal or terrorist structures. Distribution conflicts concerning access to resources, political participation, and provision of common goods such as education and health make it easier for jihadists to recruit. In the countries of the Sahel, and also northern Nigeria, certain population groups that are marginalised by the state instead organise themselves without heed to existing borders. This insight has also found its way into the EU’s Sahel strategy, which identifies the region not merely as a climatic zone along the southern margin of the Sahara Desert, but an intersection of economic and human movements and an area of operations for jihadist organisations.<sup>4</sup> The mostly pastoral groups in the Sahara were involved in organised crime long before the rise of jihadism. Like human trafficking, drug smuggling via Nigeria, Mali and Niger through the Sahara to Libya and on to Europe is frequently conducted by locals who neither accept the state nor have anything positive to expect from it.<sup>5</sup>

The networks in the Sahel function so well that the economy of violence is also able to exploit jihadism, with ideological roles tending to play a subordinate role. Instead the criminal groups have discovered a new resource, now adopting jihadist practices such as kidnapping for ransom. Here they profit from their smuggling experience and knowledge of the trade routes through the Sahel.

In Somalia and the East African coast on the other hand, mobilisation for the armed struggle tends to be driven by the opposite motivation. Here

3 Maleeha Aslam, *Gender-Based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islam and Terrorism* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2012).

4 *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, European External Action Service, [http://eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel\\_strategy\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2015).

5 “Not-so-Ideological, al Qaeda-linked, Islamist Narco-terrorists on the Run in Mali”, *Selected Wisdom*, 29 January 2013, <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=954> (accessed 20 January 2015).

it was not the cohesion but the collapse of social structures through conflict and traumatising that severely weakened society. The clans, embroiled in conflict and corruption, also lost legitimacy. Here, al-Shabaab proclaims a community much larger than a subclan and a system of authority comprising more than the territory between two roadblocks.

In Africa, as in other parts of the Islamic world, the view that Islam is under attack and must be defended against the West and its local collaborators is gaining increasing credence. Financial incentives appear equally crucial, whether in the form of direct payments or the prospect of loot. This applies especially in regions where youth unemployment is high, earning possibilities poor, land questions unclarified and advancement within traditional structures difficult. Especially under such circumstances, membership in a self-funding armed movement that offers opportunities for advancement is extraordinarily attractive and lucrative.

As well as the expectation of immediate access to cash, other motives play a role too. One northern Nigerian reported that he wanted to join Boko Haram in the hope of benefiting an amnesty of the kind declared in Niger, which would have guaranteed him a job.<sup>6</sup>

### **Jihadism between Local Embeddedness and Transnational Networks**

Just as there is no such thing as an African arc of instability for Europe to tackle with a single concept, nor is there a global terror network controlled by al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan. This point is clearly illustrated by the example of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, which was regarded as a branch of al-Qaeda but in fact always operated as an independent organisation. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the IS caliphate in June 2014 left no doubt about this. In fact jihadists always operate in a continuum between local anchoring and transnationalist aspiration, where their actions are often much more strongly shaped by the situation in their home country than one might think from their ideological vocabulary with its talk of solidarity with the community of all Muslims (*umma*) and shared objectives such as the liberation of Palestine. Since 2003, and even more so since 2011, clear signs of a "regionalisation" of jihadist activity can be observed, in the sense of terrorist groups increasingly concentrating on their own home region. This applies to North Africa, where jihadist activity has proliferated following the collapse of the Libyan state and the weakening of the state apparatus in Tunisia. The same applies to the sub-Saharan region, where ideological, religious and cultural ties to the east of the Arab world – where the ideology of al-Qaeda originates – are weaker than in North Africa.

The localism of jihadist movements has tended to strengthen since 2011, ending a long trend towards internationalisation. From the mid-

<sup>6</sup> Alexis Akwagyira, "Islamist Radicalism: Why Does It Lure Some Africans?", *BBC Africa* (online), 30 May 2013.

1990s jihadists from different countries joined forces following the failure of uprisings and coups in their home countries. Examples include Egypt and Algeria, where at roughly the same time in 1995 it became clear that the Islamists would not succeed in toppling their governments. Many Arab jihadists subsequently regrouped in Afghanistan, where in 1997 they founded al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama bin Laden and Aiman az-Zawahiri. Some of them had moved to Sudan with bin Laden at the beginning of the 1990s, where they had established contacts with both Arab organisations and African ones such as the Somali al-Ittihad al-Islami. The consequence was terrorist attacks on US targets in East Africa, Yemen and ultimately in the United States itself.

From 2001 the jihadist movements turned back to their home countries again, and from 2003 a number of al-Qaeda regional organisations formed. Although they are often referred to as “branches” or “offshoots”, they are independent from the al-Qaeda centre and operate as its allies. They chose to call themselves al-Qaeda in the hope that the label would help them to bind more internationally-minded recruits, attract financial donations from wealthy al-Qaeda sympathisers in the Gulf states, and give them an aura of strength and invincibility. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula formed in Saudi Arabia in 2003 (and was defeated by 2006), al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (which later became IS) in Iraq in 2004, and a new al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen in 2009. A small al-Qaeda group already operating in Africa was central to the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam that killed hundreds. The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat, GSPC) was the first North African organisation to take this step, renaming itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb at the beginning of 2007. Despite suffering repeated setbacks, it was ready and waiting in 2011 when the toppling of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya offered new opportunities for action.

One important reason for the regionalisation of jihadism has been the weakness of the al-Qaeda centre in Pakistan, where the organisation has lost numerous leaders and fighters to US drone attacks in the tribal regions since 2008. By 2010 al-Qaeda had concluded that there was a need to establish new structures in Africa, and to that end sent fighters to Somalia to assist al-Shabaab, which was already seeking to join al-Qaeda (although it was not actually permitted to do so until 2012, under Bin Laden’s successor Zawahiri). But the powerlessness of the al-Qaeda centre was so glaring that the regional organisations made little effort to disguise their unwillingness to follow orders from Pakistan. This intensified following the death of bin Laden in May 2011, as his successor lacked the authority required to impose his will on recalcitrant regional leaders from his hiding place in Pakistan.

The process of regionalisation received another boost through the “Arab Spring” of 2011. As a whole, the regimes weakened by the unrest had for decades suppressed terrorism extremely brutally – but also effectively. This was revealed dramatically in Syria, but also in Libya, where government

forces surrendered when Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was killed in October 2011 after a brief civil war. In the subsequent years Libyan jihadists exploited the ensuing power vacuum to expand their influence. But the consequences were gravest in Mali and neighbouring regions in the Sahara, where the Sahara fighters of the Algerian al-Qaeda joined an uprising against the central government in Bamako that had been sparked by Tuareg mercenaries returning from Libya. In alliance with these and other jihadist groups, al-Qaeda succeeded in gaining control over the whole of northern Mali. It took a French military intervention in January 2013 to stop the jihadists, most of whom then withdrew, at least partially and temporarily, to Libya.

The loss of state control in Libya encouraged increasing activity by jihadist groups in North Africa, the Sahara and the Sahel. No other region in the world demonstrates quite so clearly just how greatly weak statehood plays into the hands of jihadists. This also applies to Somalia, where the grip of a bloody civil war since 1991 is what made the rise of al-Shabaab possible in the first place. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has been able to expand its operations and engulf the mainly Muslim north in crisis because northern Nigerians feel excluded from the considerable oil revenues and disadvantaged in the distribution of power in the capital. The same applies to Mali, where the jihadists adroitly joined a local uprising that exploited dissatisfaction among the northern population, first and foremost the Tuareg. And even in Tunisia groups like Ansar al-Sharia profit from major socio-economic imbalances between regions as well as the state's great difficulties controlling its territory and its borders to Algeria and Libya since the fall of the dictator Ben Ali. What the African jihadists all have in common, especially those south of the Sahara, is that their activities are more strongly local than is the case with their Arab counterparts to the north. To comprehend them, one must examine the specific local causes and motivations in each case. While that does not mean there are no transnational influences, they are often weaker than would appear at first sight.

# Al-Shabaab: Youth without God

Annette Weber

Somalia's Mujahideen Youth Movement (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen) is not only the leading jihadist organisation in the Horn of Africa, but also the essence of Somalia's problem as a failed state with a dysfunctional society. Decades of clan-based warlordism have left the country a fragmented formation of diverse state entities and competing forces.

While the group's focus was initially on Somalia, it most recently hit the headlines with its April 2015 attack on a Kenyan University in Garissa, near the border with Somalia, in which 148 people were killed, mainly students. Al-Shabaab first gained global infamy with a previous spectacular attack in Kenya. In September 2013 the group attacked the Westgate Shopping Mall in the Kenyan capital Nairobi. In fact the group has been fighting for years against the government and the African Union's mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Since 2008 it has shifted from a guerrilla strategy to more terrorist tactics, such as suicide attacks, kidnappings and bombings. In 2012 al-Shabaab was accepted as an official member of al-Qaeda. In their structure and objectives, parts of al-Shabaab are similar to the Taliban. And while al-Shabaab professes loyalty to al-Qaeda in its ideological rivalry with the Islamic State (IS) and uses the al-Qaeda label to recruit fighters, the group actually continues to operate largely autonomously.

Al-Shabaab's origins lie in earlier Somali Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Union (al-Ittihad al-Islami, AIAI), which for decades conducted relatively unspectacular terrorist operations across the entire region. As well as bringing clan-backed violent non-state actors to power, the conflicts that have wracked the country since the fall of Siad Barre in 1991 have also eroded established mechanisms of social order and weakened traditional authorities. In the process, the widely practised Sufi-oriented Islam of the majority Muslim population has increasingly been challenged by Wahhabi influences. Since 1991 Somalia has been embroiled in a civil war that has destroyed the state and created the breeding ground for al-Shabaab's successful recruitment of male youth. In a context of state failure, al-Shabaab became a locally anchored, regionally operating and internationally recruiting jihadist organisation.

Various external actors have pursued interests in Somalia. One need only mention the failed US invasion of 1992, which was planned as a humanitarian intervention to address famine, but ended in disaster after the mission took the side of one of the two warlord factions. After a Black Hawk helicopter was shot down and its crew killed on the streets of Mogadishu, the Americans withdrew and the United Nations took over the mission – but proved unable to make any progress towards stabilisation or a peace agreement. The Ethiopian intervention of 2006, which was moti-

Map 2: Horn of Africa



vated primarily by concerns about Ethiopia's own security, is regarded in Somalia as a violation of sovereignty and ultimately represents a mobilising factor for al-Shabaab. These outside interests and the actions of external actors have left deep scars in the country's social and political matrix and currently determine the reality – one could almost say the normality – in Somalia. It remains to be seen how the future of al-Shabaab will shape up after its leader Ahmed Abdi Godane (alias Mukhtar Abu Zubair) was killed in American air strikes on 1 September 2014.<sup>1</sup> But the increasing frequency of attacks in both Kenya and Mogadishu underline that al-Shabaab is certainly not going to disappear any time soon.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Also known as Mukhtar Abdirahman Godane and Ahmad Abdi Godane.

<sup>2</sup> "US Confirms al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane Killed", *BBC News Africa* (online), 5 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29086800> (accessed 5 September 2014). On the future of al-Shabaab see Abdi Aynte, *Al Shabaab after Godane* (Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, September 2014), <http://www.heritageinstitute.org/shabaab-after-godane/> (accessed 3 September 2014).

## Political Islam in the Horn of Africa

One cannot understand al-Shabaab historically without considering the dynamic of political Islam in the Greater Horn of Africa. Sudan became home and training camp to a multitude of violent and Islamist organisations after the National Islamic Front took power there in 1989, serving as an ideological and physical base for forces such as Hezbollah, Abu Nidal, Osama Bin Laden and Carlos “the Jackal”. The networks of Sunni Islamists, first and foremost al-Qaeda in East Africa, proliferated far beyond Sudan’s own borders.

At the same time the influence of Wahhabi preachers and schools expanded in Somalia, leading – in a situation without a state school system – to the dissemination of revivalist practices throughout society. This also lends a symbolic meaning to al-Shabaab’s destruction of the Sufi shrines in Mogadishu in 2010. Those acts of desecration demonstrated that it would act not only against “unbelievers” and the government, but also against Somalia’s widespread Sufi “folk Islam”.

The al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), founded in 1983 by Sheikh Ali Warsame, understood itself as a political and military movement. Like Hasan at-Turabi’s National Islamic Front in Sudan, the AIAI’s leaders were also influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and some of them had studied in Cairo, Mecca or Medina. The organisation’s goals were to restore Greater Somalia and introduce sharia. For AIAI’s charismatic leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, global jihad was of secondary importance.<sup>3</sup> While the group failed to overcome the structurally defining order of the Somali clans, AIAI splinter groups were central to the emergence of both political Islam and jihadist organisation at the Horn of Africa. It is out of them that al-Shabaab later arose. After its founding in 2004, al-Shabaab was commanded by Aden Hashi “Ayro”, an Afghanistan veteran and confidant of Osama bin Laden.<sup>4</sup> Mukhtar Robow (alias Abu Mansoor) and the later emir Sheikh Mukhtar Abu Zubair (alias Godane) also rose to particularly prominent positions in al-Shabaab.

## Historical Context

During the final period of Siad Barre’s dictatorship the Somali state split into warring clan-based factions, none of which succeeded in conquering power in the civil war that followed. After the fading of Cold War clientelism in the Horn of Africa, Somalia slid into oblivion and was largely ignored by the international community, and above all by its neighbours. The north-west, formerly British Somaliland, declared independence immediately after the fall of Barre and has since functioned as an autonomous state without international recognition.

<sup>3</sup> Medhane Tadesse, *Al-Ittihad: Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia* (Addis Abeba: Mega Printing Enterprise, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Marchal, “A Tentative Assessment of the Somali ‘Harakat Al-Shabaab’”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (April 2009): 381–404.

Two missions, the American UNITAF and the United Nations UNOSOM I and II, sought to supply humanitarian aid between 1992 and 1994, but were unable to quell the conflict. Taking sides for one of the two warlord factions that controlled Mogadishu became UNITAF's downfall and further exacerbated the conflict. It was during this phase that Somalia became a refuge for al-Qaeda East Africa, which used the country as a base to plan and conduct both the US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998 and the attacks on an Israeli hotel and airliner in Mombasa in 2002.

Numerous outside attempts by the international community to mediate a government of national unity ended in failure. In 2006 warlords and businesspeople joined forces in the so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism, which was funded by Washington and also regarded as neighbouring Ethiopia's favourite.<sup>5</sup> In June 2006 the militia of the Union of Islamic Courts – which was later to become al-Shabaab – defeated the Alliance and the Islamic Courts took power.

The Union of Islamic Courts was an alliance of the sharia courts that still retain primary responsibility for regulating family matters in Somalia today. After decades of absence of state structures, many parts of the population therefore welcomed the restoration of public order by the militias.<sup>6</sup>

But the reign of the Islamic Courts was not to last. After just half a year, in December 2006, they were driven out by an Ethiopian intervention force determined to stamp out any Islamist government in its neighbourhood. The political leaders of the Courts fled to Eritrea, their armed wing remained in the country. The Ethiopian occupation generated enormous support for al-Shabaab, with many Somalis regarding neighbouring Ethiopia as the arch-enemy. This applied especially to the irredentist forces looking to return the Ogaden to Somalia, and the Islamists, who declared war on the Christian majority in the Ethiopian leadership. Under these conditions al-Shabaab succeeded in mobilising both nationally-minded and jihadist fighters to produce the hybridisation of national liberation and jihadism it has come to embody so successfully.

Ethiopia withdrew from Somalia in 2009, after an African Union mission (AMISOM) arrived in 2008 to guarantee the security of the successive transitional governments. To al-Shabaab AMISOM is a crusader operation that must be fought not only within Somalia, but also in the countries from which its forces originate. Above all Uganda and Kenya, both of which are AMISOM troop providers, have suffered attacks on their territory. The government of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, which took power in September 2012 but faces opposition from al-Shabaab, is the first since 1991 to be based in Mogadishu.

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Can the Somali Crisis Be Contained?* Africa Report 116, 10 August 2006, 5, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/Can%20the%20Somali%20Crisis%20Be%20Contained> (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Annette Weber, "Islam and Symbolic Politics in Somalia", in *The Challenge of Islamists for EU and US Policies: Conflict, Stability and Reform: Joint Publication of SWP and United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, ed. Muriel Asseburg and Daniel Brumberg, SWP Research Paper 12/2007 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2007), 37–43.



## The Origins of al-Shabaab

The movement in Somalia presently numbers between seven and fifteen thousand fighters. The number of foreign jihadists is in the three-figure region, including about four hundred Kenyans and at least sixty Americans.<sup>7</sup> Impressive growth for an organisation that began with a few hundred Islamic Court militiamen. It is not known how many fighters operate under the banner of al-Shabaab in the broader region, but the spate of attacks claimed by al-Shabaab in various parts of Kenya suggests growth in the number of its fighting associates there.

The influence of Islamic revivalist movements, all of which oppose the traditional Somali Sufi Islam, has grown since the 1960s. The Muslim Brotherhood group al-Islah, many of whose members are represented in the serving government, stand for a pragmatic political Islam. Al-Ittihad al-Islami and al-Shabaab on the other hand belong to the Salafist current that seeks to establish Islamic rule by force, whether as a state (AIAI) or a caliphate (al-Shabaab).<sup>8</sup>

Religious marginalisation within Somalia plays no role in participation in al-Shabaab. It is the perception of a global threat to Islam that is decisive.<sup>9</sup> The emergence and acceptance of al-Shabaab in certain parts of Somalia needs to be discussed in the context of Somali politics. The collapse of state order, privatisation of security and occupation by neighbouring countries might explain the rise of an armed group, but not necessarily of a jihadist movement. Not even religious motivation supplies a convincing explanation. The ideological positioning of al-Shabaab is in fact not terribly far removed from that of the government. When President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed introduced sharia in 2009 the move was widely welcomed. Nor does the conservative bent of the serving government of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who formerly belonged to al-Islah, stand in strong contrast to the ideas about the umma expounded by al-Shabaab. But in the doctrine of global jihad, al-Shabaab follows a backward-looking Salafist ideology. Some of its international jihadists regard Somalia as a base

<sup>7</sup> The BBC gives the number of fighters as seven to nine thousand; official AU estimates speak of fifteen thousand. The number of jihadists from the United States and the United Kingdom is put at three hundred. "Who Are Somalia's al-Shabab?" *BBC News Africa* (online), 16 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15336689> (accessed 30 September 2014); David Smith, "Al-Shabaab Rebuilds Forces in Somalia as African Union Campaign Stalls: Extreme Islamist Group Is Now 'an Extended Hand of al-Qaida', Declares Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud", *Guardian* (online), 28 October 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/28/al-shabaab-somalia-african-union> (accessed 30 September 2014); "Letter Dated 12 July 2013 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) Concerning Somalia and Eritrea Addressed to the President of the Security Council", *United Nations Security Council*, S/2013/413, 12 July 2013, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2013\\_413.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_413.pdf) (accessed 30 September 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Abdurahman "Aynte" Ali, *The Anatomy of al-Shabab*, 8 July 2010, 12ff, <http://de.scribd.com/doc/34053611/The-Anatomy-of-Al-Shabaab-by-Abdi-Aynte> (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, *Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia*, ISS Paper 266 (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies [ISS], September 2014), 6.

from to plan and organise the armed struggle in other regions. Others believe Somalia should be governed by al-Shabaab under a strict Islamist order.

This ambivalence between national political agenda and global jihad presents absolutely no obstacle to recruitment, offering as it does the possibility to bind fighters with widely differing motives to the organisation.

### **Leadership and Organisational Structure: Personnel and Social Base**

Al-Shabaab's leadership is in permanent flux. The original core is genuinely Somali, and includes Hashi Ayro, Mukhtar Robow and Abdullahi Nahar (Abu Qutaiba). The first cell formed as a militia of the Islamic Courts under the spiritual mentorship of Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys.<sup>10</sup> After the Union of Islamic Courts took power in Mogadishu in 2006 it established an eighteen-member executive committee largely comprising members of AIAI and al-Shabaab, whose secretary-general was Mukhtar Abu Zubair "Godane". Godane succeeded to the leadership after Aden Hashi Ayro was killed in an American air strike in 2008. In the course of the transition it became very clear that al-Shabaab had two wings: one pursuing a primarily national agenda, a second dedicated to global jihad. The famine that afflicted Somalia in 2011 also supplied evidence, with al-Shabaab leaders like Mukhtar Robow arguing to supply food to the suffering population, because they saw the group as the authority on the ground. But the senior leadership around Godane blocked aid deliveries to underline their rejection of Western humanitarian organisations, and the needs of the Somali population controlled by al-Shabaab had to take second place.

Godane originated from Somaliland. Although he possesses no great clan base in southern Somalia, his influence within the organisation quickly grew. His international orientation, successful recruitment of international jihadists, dissolution of the shura leadership council and establishment of an elite security and intelligence force (the Amniyat) quickly made him untouchable. After all Godane's remaining critics were killed in 2013 he appeared invincible, until he was killed by a US drone in September 2014.

Abu Ubaidah, a close confidant of Godane's who had played an important role in the Amniyat, succeeded Godane as leader. Abu Ubaidah comes from the border region with Ethiopia but was born in Ogaden and belongs, like Godane, to none of the powerful southern clans.<sup>11</sup> Like his predecessor, he immediately declared his loyalty to al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab's spokesman Mohammad Ali Mahmoud Rage "Ali Dheere" also belonged to Godane's circle. Others, such as Fuad Shongole, see themselves more serving a national duty. The conflict between national and global interests

<sup>10</sup> Roland Marchal, *The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War: Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujaheddin in Somalia* (Paris: SciencesPo, March 2011), [http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/art\\_RM2.pdf](http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/art_RM2.pdf) (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>11</sup> "New Al-Shabaab Chief Said to Be Experienced But Difficult", *Voice of America*, <http://www.voanews.com/content/new-al-shabab-chief-ubaidah-said-to-be-experienced-but-difficult/2442960.html> (accessed 7 May 2015).

has already cost founding members like Mukhtar Robow their positions, and others such as Ibrahim al-Afghani their lives.<sup>12</sup>

Although the inner circle consists largely of Somalis, foreigners play a major role in the organisation.<sup>13</sup> Omar Hammami “Abu Mansour al-Amriki”, a Syrian-American jihadist, has conducted successful publicity work and internet recruitment; Abu Suleiman al-Banadiri (Yemen) was an adviser to Godane. Sheikh Mohammed Abu Faïd (Saudi Arabia) is funder and manager, Abu Musa Mombasa (Pakistan) chief of security and training. Mohamoud Mujajir (Sudan) is responsible for recruiting suicide bombers.<sup>14</sup> Three prominent figures who could have posed a threat to Godane all died in unexplained circumstances in 2013: Ibrahim al-Afghani, Omar Hammami al-Amriki and Maa’lim Hashi.

After the drone strike against Godane in September 2014 several other high-ranking members of al-Shabaab were killed, including Tahlil Abdi-shakur, intelligence chief responsible for suicide attacks and successor to Zakariya Ismail Ahmed Hersi, who was killed in December 2014.<sup>15</sup> Abdi Nur Mahdi alias Yusuf Dheeg, al-Shabaab’s Chief of External Operations with responsibility for intelligence and security planning was killed by drone in January 2015, and Adnan Garaar, a top al-Shabaab official suspected of masterminding the 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi was also killed by drone attack in March 2015.

Olow Barow, senior commander of Al-Shabaab in Somalia’s Middle Shabelle region was reportedly captured by the Somali National Army in February 2015, along with Sheikh Hassan Dhubow and Sheikh Abdi Barow.<sup>16</sup>

Intelligence chief Zakariya Ismail Ahmed Hersi surrendered to Somali government forces in December 2014 followed in March 2015 by Bashaan Ali Hassan aka Mohamed Ali, senior intelligence officer in Lower Shabelle and Bakool.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On the al-Shabaab leadership, see Daniel E. Agbibo, “Terrorism without Borders: Somalia’s Al-Shabaab and the Global Jihad Network”, *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 1 (special issue, February 2014): 27–34 (27ff.).

<sup>13</sup> The connections between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda are explained in: ISVG (Institute for the Study of Violent Groups), *Al Shabaab: Visualizing East Africa’s Most Notorious Terrorist Group* (Boston: University of New Haven, 8 September 2011), <http://www.isvg.org/follow/blog/2011/09/08/al-shabaab-visualizing-east-africas-most-notorious-terrorist-group/> (accessed 9 February 2015).

<sup>14</sup> ICG, *Somalia’s Divided Islamists*, Africa Briefing 74 (Nairobi and Brussels, 18 May 2010), 8, fn. 45, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/B74%20Somalias%20Divided%20Islamists.pdf> (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>15</sup> “US Strike Killed Shabaab Intelligence Chief”, *BBC*, 31 December 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30635240?print=true> (accessed 11 May 2015).

<sup>16</sup> “Al Shabaab Commander Captured in Somalia”, *Goobjoog*, 3 February 2015, <http://goobjoog.com/english/?p=9765> (accessed 12 May 2015).

<sup>17</sup> “US Strikes Target Top al-Shabaab Militant”, *Topnews*, 30 December 2014, <http://topnews.az/en/news/138591/US-strike-targets-top-alShabaab-militant.html> (accessed 10 May 2015).

## Structure and Administration

Al-Shabaab quickly built organisational and administrative structures. The top of the hierarchy of fighters is the leadership council (*qiyadah*), followed by foreign fighters and Somalis with foreign passports (*muhajirun*); the lowest level is the *ansar*, the local Somali fighters.<sup>18</sup>

When it controlled large parts of southern Somalia, al-Shabaab appointed various ministries (*maktab*) and regional administrations (*wilayat*), which concerned themselves above all with the implementation of sharia. Here there was no strict separation between civil administration, military structure and religious moral policing.

Al-Shabaab's most important ministries are defence (*difaa*), intelligence and security (the Amniyat), the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Orientation (*daawa*), a kind of interior ministry concerned above all with questions of governance in the areas controlled by al-Shabaab (Siyasaada iyo Gobolada), the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Information, which is responsible for public relations work, also operates the Twitter accounts, blogs and other social media used for purposes of recruitment.<sup>19</sup> There is also a religious police to enforce the implementation of sharia. If regulations such as the ban on television are ignored they impose immediate punishment and are not afraid to kill. This zealotry in particular has made them extremely unpopular among the population.<sup>20</sup>

## Ideology and Motivation

Al-Shabaab is driven by a backward-looking vision that it seeks to realise through a postmodern fighting strategy. Its concept of the future is based on both the life of the Prophet and the "golden age" when the Sultans of Zanzibar ruled the Swahili coast from what is now Tanzania as far as Somalia. Trade (including slaves from the East African interior) with the Arabian Peninsula as well as India and China brought wealth and influence. Today the jihadists see themselves surrounded by states with Christian majorities and governments that treat their Muslim populations as second-class citizens.

Somalis claim direct descent from the Hashemite branch of the Prophet's Quraysh tribe.<sup>21</sup> The golden age when Islam united all the clans and nomadic tribes and Islamic sultans ruled the entire Swahili coast is not only conjured in the idea of the caliphate. The loss of the Ogaden to Ethiopia, the civil war during the end of Siad Barres' reign and the warlordism that followed left the people disempowered, and millions of Somalis left

<sup>18</sup> Abdirahman "Aynte" Ali, *Anatomy of al-Shabab* (see note 8), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Marchal, *The Rise of a Jihadi Movement* (see note 10), 21.

<sup>20</sup> "Inside an al-Shabaab Training Camp", *Channel 4 News*, 16 December 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enRVsBDz1oo> (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, "Islam in Somali History: Fact and Fiction", in *The Invention of Somalia*, ed. Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 1–27.

the country. In particular the experience of powerlessness towards external actors and watching one's own political elite fail, paired with an idealised view of the past, produces anger and frustration that strengthen the willingness to sacrifice oneself for "the cause".<sup>22</sup>

## Violence as a Tool of Social Advancement

The means al-Shabaab chooses for achieving its goals include guerrilla warfare against the government and AMISOM, terror as a political and military instrument, and a media strategy of international recruitment and legitimisation. The prospect of personal glory is dangled before every mujahid, whether in the here and now or the hereafter. Al-Shabaab follows the specifically jihadist doctrine that distinguishes not only between Muslims and non-Muslims but also declares all those not following the only true belief to be apostates (*murtadd*) and as such legitimate targets of jihadist destruction.<sup>23</sup>

The spectacular violence this brings forth can be interpreted as referencing both the Saudi-Arabian practice of corporal punishments and teachings from the time of the Prophet. The aspect of cleansing violence, as found for example in the writings of al-Qaeda propagandist Abu Bakr Naji,<sup>24</sup> can also be read into the acts of al-Shabaab. In fact, al-Shabaab's culture of violence appears closer to the rituals of ancient cults of violence than to the industrialised mass killing practised by terror regimes of modernity such as the Nazis.

In their tactics al-Shabaab are not entirely dissimilar to totalitarian terror regimes like the Cambodian Khmer Rouge. The glorification of the in-group and the derivative legitimisation to destroy others, be they close or distant enemies, however, extends beyond the nationally bounded rule of terror embodied by such regimes. Self-aggrandisement and the promise of exercising practically unrestricted power – indeed the obligation of true religion to do so – is particularly attractive to young men. It allows them to overcome the restrictions of clan and generation, to compensate a subjective emasculation (for example from seeing more successful sisters or independent mothers), but also to obliterate the weakness of the fathers that is experienced in many diaspora and war families. The opportunities for ideological identification offered by jihadism integrate historical and experienced personal traumas such as colonialism, occupation, repression

<sup>22</sup> Michael Shank, "Understanding Political Islam in Somalia", *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 1 (2007): 89–103.

<sup>23</sup> ICG, *Somalia's Divided Islamists* (see note 14), 4.

<sup>24</sup> "Meanwhile, the mujahids engages [sic] (in destruction) for the sake of truth, justice, and the victory of the religion of God and to prevent the punishment of God from descending upon the Umma." Quoted in Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Umma Will Pass*, trans. William McCants, (Boston: Harvard University, May 2006), 247.

and displacement and permit the fighting mujahid to become a hero, or at least to feel like one.<sup>25</sup>

Their new roles turn the male jihadists from breadwinners into judges. Their destructive operations, their brutalisation through public executions, beheadings, corporal punishments, the destruction of whole villages and the kidnapping of children alienate the fighters from the base they originate from. In that sense, they also challenge the authority of the traditional leaders, the Sufi sheikhs, the clan elders, the patriarchs, who can do nothing to oppose their terror.

There is little in the way of theology to be found in the recruitment videos on the al-Shabaab website “al-Kataib” (The Battalion) or in its social media.<sup>26</sup> Instead they present a male-bonded action group where images of military drill alternate with portraits of individual mujahideen.<sup>27</sup> Al-Shabaab’s videos intersperse depictions of spectacular violence, such as the beheading of prisoners, with reassuring images of the group and the community of brothers in arms, conveyed via the shared flag and uniform.<sup>28</sup>

## Strategy and Tactics

After participating in an asymmetrical guerrilla war against the occupation, al-Shabaab had to regroup and set new objectives when the Ethiopian troops withdrew in 2009. Following its relatively rapid spread across large parts of Somalia, al-Shabaab had already been attempting to establish an “Islamic state” since 2006, assuming administrative tasks and enforcing the Salafist moral and behavioural code.<sup>29</sup> As the increasing frequency of attacks on women and children and targeted killings of clan elders since 2013 reveal, the new al-Shabaab is increasingly distancing itself from its Somali roots. At the same time, it instrumentalises both the clans and the government (which it has infiltrated) to achieve its ends.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Maleeha Aslam, *Gender-Based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> “Nasheed – Bikataibil Imaan [The Battalions of Faith]”, 24 November 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-2YVv7SBQQ> (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Abu Mansuur al-Amriiki, *The Story of an American Jihaadi, Part 1*, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/omar-hammami-abc5ab-mane1b9a3c5abr-al-amrc4abkc4ab-22the-story-of-an-american-jihc481dc4ab-part-122.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2015).

<sup>28</sup> For a comparison of jihadi and gang videos, see A. Aaron Weisburd, “Comparison of Visual Motifs in ‘Jihadi’ and ‘Cholo’ Videos on YouTube”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 12 (December 2009): 1066–1074.

<sup>29</sup> Abdulkadir Khalif, “Al-Shabaab Militants Destroy Khat in Southern Somalia”, *Africa Review* (online), 14 October 2013, <http://www.africareview.com/News/Al-Shabaab-militants-destroy-khat-in-southern-Somalia/-/979180/2031832/-/puhsk8z/-/index.html> (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>30</sup> On the targeted killing of clan elders, see ICG, *Somalia: Al-Shabab – It Will Be a Long War*, Africa Briefing 99 (Nairobi and Brussels, 26 June 2014), 14, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/b099-somalia-al-shabaab-it-will-be-a-long-war.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2015). On the interaction of clans and al-Shabab, see Stig Jarle Hansen, “An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab’s Internal Divisions”, *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (special

Godane formally applied for al-Shabaab to join the al-Qaeda network in 2008, but it was to be four years before the application was accepted.<sup>31</sup> His interest in al-Qaeda came at a point where al-Shabaab had been militarily weakened by the successes of AMISOM. Instead of governing regions, the group now increasingly switched to suicide attacks against international targets in Somalia and kidnappings of tourists, Kenyan police and humanitarian aid workers in the Kenyan-Somali border region. Attacks intensified on infrastructure in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, in the region bordering Somalia (including the exceptionally brutal attack on the university in Garissa in April 2015), and in the tourist resorts on the coast. Although membership of al-Qaeda was motivated above all by attracting foreign fighters, Kenyan jihadists fighting in the network regard al-Shabaab rather than al-Qaeda as their model and ally.

Al-Shabaab increasingly seeks out targets in countries supplying AMISOM troops, above all Kenya, having suffered major territorial losses after AMISOM forces, joined by an Ethiopian contingent in 2014, experienced success with their strategy of military strikes against a small number of carefully selected Shabaab strongholds such as the port of Kismayo. While Al-Shabaab was originally concentrated in the south and centre of the country, the military operations have scattered it across the entire territory, but without complete control over any significant contiguous areas. It is nonetheless still capable of attacking well-protected and strategically important targets within the country. At the beginning of July 2014 the group conducted its second assault within a space of months on the presidential palace in Mogadishu, and at the beginning of September attacked the state security prison.<sup>32</sup> Assassination attempts on Somali parliamentarians have also cumulated in recent months.<sup>33</sup>

As well as attacks within Somalia and in neighbouring countries, there has been an increase in executions, including of clan elders, and in the abuse of women for violations of the un-Somali Wahhabi dress code. Efforts to maximise popular support have given way in at least some parts of the country to the rule of terror. Al-Shabaab also earns approval for its

issue, February 2014): 9–12 (10), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/an-in-depth-look-at-al-shababs-internal-divisions> (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>31</sup> “Somalia’s Al-Shabaab Join al-Qaeda”, *BBC* (online), 10 February 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16979440> (accessed 20 August 2014); “Ayman al-Zawahiri Says Somali Militant Group Joins al-Qaeda Ranks”, video of al-Zawahiri on *Al Arabiya News*, 9 February 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/09/193669.html> (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>32</sup> “Fighting Rages at Somali Presidential Palace”, *al-Jazeera* (online), 8 July 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/07/fighting-rages-at-somali-presidential-palace-2014781711483719.html> (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Between early January and early August 2014 five parliamentarians were killed in al-Shabaab suicide attacks in Mogadishu. “Somali MP Shot Dead outside Mosque by al-Shabab”, *BBC* (online), 1 August 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28614601> (accessed 2 October 2014).

rigorous methods, however, because in some of the areas under its control crime has fallen and security improved.<sup>34</sup>

### The Regionalisation of al-Shabaab

The most deadly attack by al-Shabaab took place in April 2015, when the group claimed responsibility for the killing of 148 people, mainly students, at the Garissa University College Campus in northeastern Kenya, near the border to Somalia. The attack appeared to reference the targeting of schools and students by Boko Haram, and was a clear signal that the organisation had not been weakened by the death of its leader Godane in 2014.

In September 2013 a small group of jihadists attacked the Westgate Shopping Mall in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, killing sixty-seven before most of the group escaped unapprehended. The operation earned al-Shabaab great kudos in jihadist circles. Westgate was the organisation's most successful attack, with the Kenyan police and army requiring days to regain control of the shopping centre, when the jihadists had in fact long since fled.<sup>35</sup> The operation to recapture an empty complex degenerated into a humiliating embarrassment for the Kenyan security apparatus.

Deploying only limited resources, the Westgate attack succeeded in making a laughing stock of the Kenyan security forces and revealing their ties to Western backers (United States, United Kingdom, Israel). And the attack has placed the Kenyan population, especially the local middle class and expatriates who most commonly frequent such facilities, in a state of permanent alert. Al-Shabaab commentated the events live on Twitter, as it also does for its military confrontations with AMISOM forces in Somalia.

The frequency of attacks in Kenya has risen since the Westgate operation, with churches, buses, police stations and individuals attacked in Nairobi, on the Kenyan coast and in the border region to Somalia. Within the space of a few weeks hundreds of civilians died in multiple attacks.<sup>36</sup> This has affected not only Kenya's tourist industry, but also its economy as

<sup>34</sup> "Inside an al-Shabaab Training Camp" (see note 20).

<sup>35</sup> Ken Menkhaus, "Al-Shabab's Capabilities Post-Westgate", *CTC Sentinel*, 7, no. 2 (special issue, February 2014): 4–9 (6f.), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-shababs-capabilities-post-westgate> (accessed 20 August 2014).

<sup>36</sup> "Kenya Attack: Mpeketoni Near Lamu Hit by al-Shabab Raid", *BBC* (online), 16 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27862510> (accessed 1 October 2014). In December and January al-Shabaab operations were reported above all from the region along the border between Somalia and Kenya. The attack on the hotel accommodating Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's delegation drew particular attention, because Turkey has been steadily expanding its presence in Somalia. For a timeline of recent attacks, see "Somalia", *New York Times*, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/somalia/index.html>, and Murithi Mutiga, "Kenyan President Sacks Security Minister after Latest al-Shabaab Attack", *Guardian* (online), 2 December 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/02/kenyan-president-sacks-minister-shabaab-attack> (accessed 17 February 2015).



a whole.<sup>37</sup> Al-Shabaab's Kenyan sister organisation al-Hijra (formerly Muslim Youth Centre, MYC), recruits actively to al-Shabaab and was already contributing to its funding.<sup>38</sup> The repressive measures against all Kenyans of Somali origin with which Nairobi responded to the attacks unintentionally strengthened the jihadist elements in Kenya's Muslim population.<sup>39</sup> Entire Somali quarters in Nairobi were combed by the police, residents held for hours in sports stadiums, hundreds of Somalis deported. Figures associated with al-Hijra, such as the influential Sheikh Makaburi and Sheikh Aboud Rogo, were assassinated in Mombasa without perpetrators being identified.<sup>40</sup>

Al-Shabaab has recently begun conducting attacks in other countries too. At the end of May 2014 there was a double explosion in a French restaurant in Djibouti mainly used by foreigners. This was the first time al-Shabaab had used a female suicide bomber, justifying the attack as a response to the French intervention in the Central African Republic (where they were fighting against a coalition of Muslim rebel groups called the Séléka).<sup>41</sup>

Several planned attacks have also been reported from Ethiopia, most of them prevented by the Ethiopian security agencies.<sup>42</sup> In 2013 a bomb exploded prematurely, before the two Somali suspects were able to detonate it in a crowded sports stadium in the capital Addis Abeba. The Ugandan government issued several terror warnings in 2014, and in June 2014 al-Shabaab members attempted to enter Uganda using fake UN registration plates.<sup>43</sup> The prosecutor in the al-Shabaab "World Cup" bombing of

<sup>37</sup> Kenya is planning to construct a refinery and shipping terminal on the island of Lamu for oil arriving along the projected transport corridor from South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia; <http://www.lapsset.go.ke>.

<sup>38</sup> Security Council Report, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2060 (2012)*, S/2013/440, 25 July 2013; Fred Mukinda, "Masterminds Target Youth to Execute Terror Attacks", *Daily Nation* (online), 3 March 2014, <http://mobile.nation.co.ke/news/Masterminds-target-youth-to-execute-terror-attacks/-/1950946/2228164/-/format/xhtml/-/a542q3z/-/index.html> (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>39</sup> "Kenya Police Admit 'Extrajudicial Killings'", *al-Jazeera* (online), 8 December 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2014/12/kenya-police-admit-extrajudicial-killings-201412894130719731.html> (accessed 15 December 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Benard Sanga and Stanley Mwahanga, "Radical Cleric Sheikh Abubakar Shariff alias Makaburi Shot Dead", *Standard* (online), 2 April 2014, <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/thecounties/article/2000108386/radical-cleric-makaburi-shot-dead> (accessed 2 October 2014); "'Al-Shabab Supporter' Aboud Rogo Mohammed Killed in Kenya", *BBC News Africa* (online), 27 August 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-19390888> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Hamza Mohamed, "Al-Shabab Claims Deadly Djibouti Blasts", *al-Jazeera* (online), 27 May 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/05/al-shabab-claims-deadly-djibouti-blasts-2014527154632977410.html> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>42</sup> "Ethiopia Arrests 25 Al-Shabaab Suspects in Terror Sweep", *AllAfrica* (online), 5 June 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201406060131.html> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Godfrey Olukya, "Suspected Al-Shabaab Terrorists Enter Uganda in 'UN' Registered Vehicles", *The Africa Report*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.theafricareport.com/East-Horn-Africa/suspected-al-shabaab-terrorists-enter-uganda-in-un-registered-vehicles.html> (accessed 9 February 2015).

2010, which killed seventy-six people watching the final on television in Kampala, was shot dead in March 2015 in the Ugandan capital.<sup>44</sup>

## Publicity Work

Al-Shabaab was quick to begin disseminating its ideology via the media. There is an interesting disjoint between the strict media ban enforced by the al-Shabaab police among the population and the organisation's enthusiastic use of social media to communicate and recruit.<sup>45</sup> Al-Shabaab's audience is the population of Somalia and East Africa, as well as young diaspora Somalis. The languages of communication are Somali and English, with little in the way of websites in Arabic.

During the Ethiopian occupation al-Shabaab recruited new members and propagated its ideology largely through local radio stations. Today they hijack stations or use their own such as al-Andalus and al-Furqaan.<sup>46</sup>

Speeches by senior officials to al-Shabaab graduation classes at training sites for recruits in jihadist warfare and ideology, and sermons at mosques are the means of choice for disseminating al-Shabaab's ideas. Poems, which enjoy great significance in Somali narrative culture, are especially widely used. Godane was renowned for his propensity to quote his own and others' poems in his rare public speeches. In so doing he was referencing the Somali national hero and poet Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (the "Mad Mullah"), who led an uprising against British colonial rule in Somaliland at the beginning of the twentieth century, and communicated his thoughts on liberation in letters to the British public.

Tweets, YouTube videos and Al-Shabaab blogs are widely disseminated.<sup>47</sup> Foreign jihadists in particular have circulated the call to join the jihad in Somalia in rap lyrics and social media messaging. The Al-Kataib Foundation for Media Productions creates professional recruiting videos, such as the series "Mujahideen Moments".<sup>48</sup> Abu Mansur al-Amriki hit the headlines with his autobiographical "Story of an American Jihadi",<sup>49</sup> and his tweets found a wide audience. A series of videos dedicated specifically to the AMISOM forces castigates them as African "crusaders".<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> "Uganda Prosecutor in al-Shabaab Bomb Case Shot Dead," *BBC*, 31 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32125134> (accessed 11 May 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Since 2014 Al-Shabaab has banned access to the internet in Somalia, but commentates its own attacks live on Twitter. "First Smoking, Football, Films and Bras – Now al-Shabaab Has Banned the Internet", *Independent* (online), 10 January 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/first-smoking-football-films-and-bras-now-alshabaab-has-banned-the-internet-9052045.html> (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Nel Hodge, "How Somalia's al-Shabab Militants Hone Their Image", *BBC News Africa* (online), 5 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27633367> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Marchal, "A Tentative Assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabab" (see note 4): 46.

<sup>48</sup> "Mujahideen Moments", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6rN-iugM-g> (since removed).

<sup>49</sup> Abu Mansuur al-Amriki, *The Story of an American Jihadi* (see note 27); Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadist Next Door", *New York Times*, 27 January 2010.

<sup>50</sup> "Al-Kataib Foundation for Media Productions Presents: 'The African Crusaders'", <http://jihadology.net/2010/06/29/al-kataib-foundation-for-media-productions-presents-the-african->

## Funding

Although al-Shabaab lost its revenues from Somalia's largest market, the Bakara Market in Mogadishu, and from the lucrative charcoal trade (2012: \$25 million) after it was driven out of Mogadishu (in 2011) and Kismayo (in 2012), its financial situation is by no means poor. In fact, a United Nations report of July 2013 speaks of increasing revenues.<sup>51</sup> Through its connections to local authorities, specifically to the quasi-state entity of Jubbaland whose territory includes Kismayo, and to criminal networks within the AMISOM forces, al-Shabaab continues to profit from commerce in Kismayo. For a time it also controlled the port city of Barawe, which lies between Mogadishu and Kismayo and was captured by AMISOM forces in October 2014. The revenues are reinvested in goods imported to smuggle to neighbouring states,<sup>52</sup> sugar for the Kenyan market being just one example.<sup>53</sup>

Other sources of funding include taxes and levies on all commercial activities, mafia-like protection schemes and kidnapping for ransom.<sup>54</sup> There are also reports of income from piracy and connections to ivory smugglers.<sup>55</sup> Al-Shabaab also generates steady revenues through collecting social and religious levies (*zakat*) and a jihad tax, and through financial donations from supportive individuals and states.<sup>56</sup> Finally, al-Shabaab generates ransoms by kidnapping staff of humanitarian organisations, while certain Islamic charities are suspected of making donations.<sup>57</sup>

## External Contacts

Despite its regional networking and international recruitment, al-Shabaab remains an independent and largely Somali organisation whose external contacts are in the hands of individual members. Even though al-Shabaab's cadres have gathered experience abroad and fight alongside foreign jihadists inside Somalia, its operational network barely extends beyond East Africa.<sup>58</sup> But there, and especially in Kenya, it is spreading rapidly, con-

crusaders/ (not available any more). Still available at <https://archive.org/details/The-African-Crusaders> (accessed 20 January 2015).

<sup>51</sup> "Letter Dated 12 July 2013 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) Concerning Somalia and Eritrea" (see note 7), 427.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>53</sup> Bosire Boniface, "Kenya: Sugar Imports from Somalia Fund Al-Shabaab, Kenyan Officials Say", *Allafrica* (online), 24 April 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201304250180.html?viewall=1> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>54</sup> On al-Shabaab's funding, see also *Money Jihad: Combating Terrorist Financing: Al Shabaab* [blog], <https://moneyjihad.wordpress.com/tag/al-shabaab/>.

<sup>55</sup> Nir Kalron and Andrea Crosta, "Africa's White Gold of Jihad: Al-Shabaab and Conflict Ivory", *Elephant Action League* (online), 2011/2012, <http://elephantleague.org/project/africas-white-gold-of-jihad-al-shabaab-and-conflict-ivory/> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>56</sup> *UN Monitoring Reports S/2014/726* (13 October 2014) and *S/2012/571* (13 July 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Andre Le Sage, "Islamic Charities in Somalia", in *Understanding Islamic Charities*, ed. Jon B. Alterman and Karin von Hippel, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), 147–65.

<sup>58</sup> ICG, *Somalia's Divided Islamists* (see note 14).

necting with local groups, and finding support among Kenyans of Somali origin and other Kenyan Muslims. For a brief spell Yemen was regarded as a relevant connection, and in 2010 Godane called for support for al-Qaeda in Yemen.<sup>59</sup> Following the successful AMISOM offensive in 2012, foreign al-Shabaab cadres in particular fled to Yemen. Although there are reports of letters between al-Shabaab and Boko Haram promising mutual support, one cannot speak of networking in that case.<sup>60</sup>

Even before the founding of al-Shabaab there were East African al-Qaeda groups operating in Somalia,<sup>61</sup> but the country was regarded as impenetrable and unsuited for foreigners.<sup>62</sup> For Somali jihadists from the United States, however, who often find themselves at the receiving end of resentment in the Arab world, such as Syria and Iraq, al-Shabaab remains the first port of call.<sup>63</sup> Al-Shabaab's media strategy devotes particular attention to them.<sup>64</sup> Somalis from Minneapolis and other diaspora communities represent the largest contingent of foreign jihadists joining al-Shabaab, although volunteers from the same communities do also join IS in Syria and Iraq.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>59</sup> "Shabab Militias Pledge Fighters to Support Yemeni al Qaeda", *France 24* (online), 1 January 2010, <http://www.france24.com/en/20100101-al-shabab-muslim-yemeni-al-qaeda-somalia/> (accessed 2 October 2014)

<sup>60</sup> "Al-Katāi'b Media Presents a New Video Message from Ḥarakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn's Shaykh Mukhtar Abū al-Zubayr: 'Muslims of Bangui and Mombasa: A Tale of Tragedy'", *jihadology* (online), 21 June 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/05/14/al-kataib-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-mukhtar-abu-al-zubayr-muslims-of-bangui-and-mombasa-a-tale-of-tragedy/> (accessed 2 October 2014); Robin Simcox, "Boko Haram and Defining the 'al-Qaeda Network'", *al-Jazeera* (online), 6 June 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/boko-haram-al-qaeda-201463115816142554.html> (accessed 2 October 2014); Cleophus Tres Thomas III and Fuad Ahmed, "Al-Shabaab Support for Boko Haram Reflects Group's Own Sordid Past with Children", *Sabahi* (online), 16 May 2014, [http://www.sabahonline.com/en\\_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2014/05/16/feature-01](http://www.sabahonline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2014/05/16/feature-01) (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Bill Roggio, "Bin Laden Urges Jihad against New Somali Government", *The Long War Journal*, 19 March 2009, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/03/bin\\_laden\\_urges\\_jiha.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/03/bin_laden_urges_jiha.php) (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>62</sup> Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro and Vahid Brown, *Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Centre, July 2007) (Harmony Project).

<sup>63</sup> Seth G. Jones, "The Terrorist Threat from Al Shabaab: Testimony Presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on October 3, 2013" (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT400/RAND\\_CT400.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT400/RAND_CT400.pdf) (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>64</sup> "Al-Katāi'b Media Presents a New Video Message from Ḥarakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn: 'The Path to Paradise: From the Twin Cities to the Land of the Two Migrations'", *jihadology* (online), undated, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/07/al-kataib-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-the-path-to-paradise-from-the-twin-cities-to-the-land-of-the-two-migrations/> (accessed 2 October 2014). See also "The Rageh Omaar Report: From Minneapolis to Mogadishu", *al-Jazeera* (online), 15 July 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/ragehomaarreport/2010/07/201071583644674720.html> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>65</sup> On the case of an American rapper who went to fight with ISIS in Syria, after a classmate had already joined al-Shabab in 2008, see Laura Yuen and Sasha Aslanian, "Minne-

Aside from personal networking, Al-Shabaab fighters receive military training abroad, and the organisation also receives external financial support. In the past Eritrea was conspicuous for military aid and Qatar for financial support, although evidence of Eritrean training assistance has dried up in recent years.<sup>66</sup>

## The Future

The killing of Godane ushered in a new phase in the history of al-Shabaab.<sup>67</sup> His death places the organisation in a precarious position, given that he only shortly beforehand, in 2013, had almost all the other influential leaders killed including his designated successor Afghani. The power struggle that has flared up over the succession could lead to a further strengthening of regional cells and satellites such as al-Hijra. With the Somalis within the organisation likely to secure the support of the clans, one could expect a process of Somalisation and fragmentation not unlike that observed with the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Somali warlords in the 1990s. As Godane's successor al-Shabaab has named Abu Ubaidah (Ahmed Omar, Ahmed Dhere), who hitherto commanded parts of the country under its control.<sup>68</sup>

Since Godane's death more al-Shabaab functionaries have been killed by drones, and the organisation has increasingly lost territory and consequentially sources of income. If funding remains scarce and the leadership divided, the government's offer of amnesty might even become attractive to some of its fighters.<sup>69</sup> On the other side, al-Shabaab attacks continue to increase in the Kenyan border region and on the Kenyan coast, so al-Shabaab's future lies more in regionalisation than in the pursuit of national Somali interests.

sota Pipeline to al-Shabab", *Minnesota Public Radio News* (online), 25 September 2013, [http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/ongoing/somali\\_timeline/](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/ongoing/somali_timeline/) (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>66</sup> Colum Lynch, "Qatar's Support for Islamists Muddles Its Reputation as Neutral Broker in Mideast", *Washington Post* (online), 28 November 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/qatars-support-for-islamists-muddles-its-reputation-as-neutral-broker-in-mideast/2012/11/28/a9f8183a-f92e-11e1-8398-0327ab83ab91\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/qatars-support-for-islamists-muddles-its-reputation-as-neutral-broker-in-mideast/2012/11/28/a9f8183a-f92e-11e1-8398-0327ab83ab91_story.html) (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>67</sup> "US Targets Al-Shabaab Leader in Somalia Air Strike", *Daily Nation* (online), 2 September 2014, <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/US-targets-Al-Shabaab-leader-in-air-strike/-/1066/2438990/-/n7mkk/-/index.html> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Tres Thomas, "Analysis: Is al-Shabaab Stronger or Weaker after Godane's Death?", *Somalia Newsroom* (online), 22 September 2014, <http://somalianewsroom.com/2014/09/22/analysis-is-al-shabaab-stronger-or-weaker-after-godanes-death/> (accessed 2 October 2014).

<sup>69</sup> "Somalia Offers al-Shabab Members Amnesty", *BBC* (online), 3 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29044368> (accessed 2 October 2014).



# Libya: A Jihadist Growth Market

Wolfram Lacher

If Algeria was central to North Africa's jihadist movements in the past, Libya is where their future lies. After decades underground or abroad, Libya's jihadists grasped the opportunity offered by the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. Like all political forces that have emerged since the 2011 uprising, Libya's jihadist groups are first and foremost local phenomena that have gained a foothold only in individual cities. But they are far more closely networked transnationally than other actors, and have been able to turn their strongholds into hubs of regional exchange with the Maghreb, the Sahel and Syria. Their rapid growth at the local level was initially driven by a strategy of operating openly amidst society, with their provision of charitable and state-like services cultivating a positive or at least ambivalent public image. Subsequently, they exploited the escalation of political tensions into renewed civil war. With the ongoing conflicts preventing any rebuilding of the state, Libya's role as the epicentre of North African jihadism is set to grow in coming years.

## Origins and Evolution

Three successive generations of Libyan jihadists have been shaped by very different experiences – and consequently responded differently to the possibilities opened up by Gaddafi's demise. Most of the older generation, to the extent they are still politically active, have arrived in the mainstream Islamist spectrum or even joined non-Islamist currents. This generation includes those born in the 1960s and early 1970s, whose activities peaked between 1988 and 2001. Their formative experiences began with the armed struggle in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s. Many were not only motivated by the idea of anticommunist jihad, but were also fleeing the repression of the Gaddafi regime, which imprisoned thousands of young Islamists in 1989.<sup>1</sup> From 1993 onwards, some Libyan Afghanistan veterans went to Algeria, where they joined the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Most of those who escaped death in battle and survived the internal purges returned home disillusioned by the organisation's brutality.<sup>2</sup> Others followed those jihadists to Sudan from whose ranks the al-Qaeda leadership was later to emerge.

<sup>1</sup> Fathi al-Fadhli, "The Political Alternative in Libya and the State after the Revolution" (Arabic), part 10, 18 March 2007, <http://www.libya-watanona.com/adab/ffadhli/ff22047a.htm> (all websites cited in this contribution accessed 10 September 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Kamil al-Tawil, *Al-Qaeda and Its Brothers: The History of the Arab Jihadists* (Arabic), (London, 2007), 125–32.

Map 3: Libya



Veterans of the Afghanistan war also founded the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libiya), which organised in secret for a number of years before announcing its existence in 1995.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting the international experiences of its leaders, the LIFG saw itself not only as the spearhead of jihad against the tyrannical Gaddafi regime, but also as an integral component of a global jihadist movement. Between July 1995 and July 1998, LIFG cells clashed frequently with Libyan security forces. Three attempts to assassinate Gaddafi failed, one of them only narrowly.<sup>4</sup>

The regime responded ruthlessly, including by sending the air force to bomb LIFG positions in the mountains surrounding the port city of Derna. Mass arrests of supporters of the organisation and relatives of its members also swept up many others suspected of holding radical ideas. More than 1,200 prisoners died in a massacre at the infamous Abu Salim prison in Tripoli in June 1996, most of them Islamists of various currents.<sup>5</sup> This wave of repression prepared the ground for the emergence of the next generation of jihadists.

<sup>3</sup> Omar Ashour, "Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23 (2011): 377–97.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Fadhli, "The Political Alternative" (see note 1).

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Libya: June 1996 Killings at Abu Salim Prison* (New York, 2006).



Although its members originated from all regions of Libya and conducted operations in the Greater Tripoli area, the LIFG had two main strongholds: Benghazi and Derna in the north-east. These two cities supplied a disproportionate number of known LIFG members, and bore the brunt of their attacks.<sup>6</sup> This peculiarity had historical roots, as Benghazi and Derna had been the seat of urban elites that enjoyed great sway during the monarchy (1951–1969) but were marginalized by Gaddafi and subsequently went into opposition. Like the north-east as a whole, Benghazi and Derna were also economically neglected by the regime, all the more so after the insurgency of the 1990s. Regime repression hit both cities especially hard, thus giving a further boost to radical local currents.

By mid-1998, the LIFG had been practically destroyed within Libya, and many of its leaders had fled back to Afghanistan, where they came into contact with the al-Qaeda leadership. Although, by their own account, they maintained ideological distance and warned against using Afghanistan as a base for direct attacks on the United States,<sup>7</sup> they still attracted the scrutiny of Western intelligence services after 11 September 2001. Several high-ranking LIFG members were detained outside Afghanistan and rendered to Libya by the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

In 2005, Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam initiated a dialogue between the imprisoned LIFG leadership and the regime, mediated by Libyan and foreign Islamic scholars. When LIFG members in Afghanistan announced in 2007 that the group had joined al-Qaeda, this was immediately denied by the imprisoned leadership in Libya.<sup>9</sup> The dialogue ultimately led six members of the LIFG leadership council (majlis al-shura) to revise their understanding of jihad on theological grounds, now arguing that violence should not be used to bring about political change in Muslim countries.<sup>10</sup> In the course of this process, more than four hundred of the group's members and sympathisers were released from prison between 2007 and 2011 – the last 110 on 16 February 2011, the first day of the uprising against Gaddafi.<sup>11</sup> Many of them, having just renounced the armed struggle against the regime, now played a leading role in the revolution.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the list of LIFG members killed between 1995 and 1998 in al-Fadhli, “The Political Alternative” (see note 1).

7 See for example the statements by Abd al-Wahhab Gaid and Sami al-Saadi in David Kirkpatrick, "Political Islam and the Fate of Two Libyan Brothers", *New York Times*, 6 October 2012, and Human Rights Watch, *Delivered into Enemy Hands: US-Led Abuse and Rendition of Opponents to Gaddafi's Libya* (New York, 2012), 25.

8 The former leader of LIFG, Abd al-Hakim Belhaj, his deputy, Khalid al-Sharif, and the group's leading scholar, Sami al-Saadi, are three particularly prominent cases. Human Rights Watch, *Delivered into Enemy Hands* (see note 7).

9 "Libyan Islamists 'Join al-Qaeda'", *BBC News*, 3 November 2007.

10 Sami al-Saadi, Muftah al-Dhawadi, Mustafa Qanaifid, Abd al-Hakim Belhaj, Abd al-Wahhab Gaid and Khalid al-Sharif. *Revisions of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group: Corrective Studies on the Understanding of Jihad, Moral Policing and Rule over People* (Arabic), ed. Salman al-Auda (Cairo, 2010).

11 Al-Sadiq al-Raqi'i, "The Islamists in Libya: History and Jihad (2)" (Arabic), 26 December 2011, <http://www.alwatanlibya.com/more-18910-23-ايبيل يف نويم السال-2011-10-18> .. (2) داهجو خيرات. ايبييل يف نويم السال-2011-10-18; also Ashour, "Post-Jihadism" (see note 3), 389.

Meanwhile, a second generation of jihadists had come through. The dismantling of the LIFG made it harder for jihadists to organise in Libya, and following 11 September 2011, resistance against the American “war on terror” moved centre stage. The period from 2001 to 2010 was therefore characterised by two different types of jihadist socialisation. Firstly, a new generation was radicalised during imprisonment at Abu Salim. Most of the activists concerned had not been LIFG members, and paid only lip service (if even that) to the revisionist turn.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, networks emerged to funnel Libyan recruits into Iraq, where they came into contact with what was then the most radical current in jihadism. According to documents seized by US forces in Iraq, Libyans formed the second-largest group among seven hundred foreign fighters who joined the al-Qaeda offshoot Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) between August 2006 and August 2007. In relation to national population, the Libyans were first by a long way. Even more telling was the cities they came from. More than half originated from Derna, which has a population of only about 100,000, while almost a quarter came from Benghazi.<sup>13</sup> So Libya’s jihadists remained strongly characterised by their local origins, though their networks increasingly detached themselves from those of the LIFG.

Finally, members of the third generation gathered their first combat experiences during the revolution or joined jihadist groups after the fall of the regime. Their radicalisation largely occurred after the end of the 2011 civil war. Although jihadists of various stripes had been prominently involved in the struggle against Gaddafi, the units they fought in were never exclusively Islamist. In many groups, former LIFG members and younger jihadists fought side by side with non-Islamist revolutionaries; this was the case in the Martyrs of Abu Salim brigade from Derna, the Umar al-Mukhtar brigade from Benghazi and Ajdabiya, the Rafallah al-Sahati brigade from Benghazi and the Martyrs of the Capital brigade based in the western Libyan city of Nalut.<sup>14</sup> Former LIFG supporters generally sought to present themselves first and foremost as revolutionaries rather than jihadists. This applied all the more to former senior leaders like Abd al-Hakim Belhaj. In summer 2011, Belhaj established direct relations with Qatar, which allowed him to mobilise arms deliveries for the group in Nalut, and became head of Tripoli Military Council following the fall of the capital in August 2011.<sup>15</sup> Former LIFG members thus rose to prominence through the revolution, but not as jihadists.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place: Libya’s Islamists during and after the 2011 Uprising”, in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, ed. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (London, 2015), 177–204.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point: CTC Harmony Project, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with former members of these groups, Benghazi, Tripoli and Nalut, November 2012 and February 2014. See also Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place” (see note 12).

<sup>15</sup> Peter Cole, “The Fall of Tripoli”, in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, ed. Cole and McQuinn (see note 12), 55–104.

Soon after the uprising had begun, however, signs emerged that extremists would use the revolution to promote interests extending beyond the fight against the regime. In Derna, two figures said to have connections to al-Qaeda began forming armed groups. Sufian bin Qumu, who had followed Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan to Sudan in the 1990s, had been arrested in 2001 in Pakistan, then rendered from Guantánamo Bay to Libya in 2007. Abd al-Basit Azuz appeared in Derna in May 2011, supposedly on behalf of al-Qaeda's number two, Aiman al-Zawahiri.<sup>16</sup> When General Abd al-Fattah Younis, Gaddafi's interior minister who defected to command the rebel forces in the north-east, was assassinated in July 2011, militant Islamists immediately came under suspicion. Circumstantial evidence pointed to the Abu Ubaida Ibn al-Jarrah brigade led by former Abu Salim inmate Ahmed Abu Khattala.<sup>17</sup>

The chaos that followed the collapse of the regime offered ideal conditions for local armed groups, regardless whether tribal militias, brigades controlled by politicians and businessmen, criminal gangs – or jihadists. After the unifying goal – the fall of Gaddafi – had been achieved, revolutionary brigades began to differentiate along political lines. Many volunteers who felt their task had been accomplished with the end of the regime returned to civilian life. Countless new recruits filled their places. The looting of state arsenals created a virtually limitless supply of weapons, while the weak transitional government soon began registering and paying the numerous armed groups. These cemented their local positions and prevented the restoration of state control. Jihadist elements increasingly separated out, but continued to benefit from relationships and sympathies established during the revolution. Many of them remained integrated in the funding flowing to parastatal units, and tolerated in their respective local contexts. Whereas representatives of the first generation of jihadists were now claiming leadership positions and playing by democratic rules – at least no less than their political opponents – the second generation was free to recruit members of the third to new jihadist splinter groups.

## Libya's Jihadists in the Post-revolutionary Era

Most post-revolutionary jihadist groups formed openly in the midst of society. While distancing themselves from the state in their public statements, they stood in continuous exchange with state representatives – at least until mid-2014, when power struggles led to a split in state institutions and two rival governments emerged. These ambivalent relations were not only conditioned by state weakness, but also enabled by the growing

<sup>16</sup> Rob Nordland and Scott Shane, "Libyan, Once a Detainee, Is Now a U.S. Ally of Sorts", *New York Times*, 24 April 2011; Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "Source: Al Qaeda Leader Sends Veteran Jihadists to Establish Presence in Libya", *CNN*, 30 December 2011; Nic Robertson, Paul Cruickshank and Jomana Karadsheh, "Libyan Official: U.S. Drones Seeking Jihadists in Libya", *CNN*, 7 June 2012.

<sup>17</sup> David Kirkpatrick, "A Deadly Mix in Benghazi", *New York Times*, 28 December 2013.

influence exercised by former LIFG leaders and other non-jihadist Islamists in state and parastatal structures.

### **Political Moderation, Ambivalence and Fluid Boundaries**

Most former LIFG leaders had softened ideologically and in some cases undergone remarkable transformations. Before the July 2012 elections to the General National Congress (GNC), Abd al-Hakim Belhaj founded the Al-Watan Party, which brought together former LIFG members with moderate Islamists and non-Islamists (in a combination that transpired to be less than successful electorally). The LIFG stamp was more clearly identifiable in the Al-Umma Party, in which Sami al-Saadi, Abd al-Wahhab Gaid and Khalid al-Sharif played leading roles. Nonetheless, Al-Umma was also based on a clear commitment to the democratic process, theologically underpinned by al-Saadi.<sup>18</sup> Gaid later became a prominent GNC member and mediated in numerous extra-parliamentary conflicts. Many former LIFG leaders ended up in top government positions.<sup>19</sup> Khalid al-Sharif was appointed deputy defence minister in January 2014, filling a post already occupied by another former LIFG member before him: Saddiq al-Mabruk al-Ghithi, who switched to the federalist camp after his dismissal and thus joined the political opponents of Islamist currents in north-eastern Libya. In the shape of Abd al-Jawad al-Badin, another former LIFG fighter was already active among the federalists. Other former members of the group, such as the Afghanistan veteran Isa Abd al-Quyum, even became vehement critics of all Islamist tendencies.

Their political enemies often simply labelled former LIFG members as “al-Qaeda” – without any evidence for the attribution, and ignoring all signs of a genuine change of heart on the part of the activists. However, for all its political centrism, the milieu around the former LIFG preserved ambivalent relations with extremist circles of the younger generation. For example, the “National Guard” that Khalid al-Sharif created soon after his liberation from Abu Salim in August 2011 also included – alongside groups organised along local or tribal lines – brigades of jihadist character such as the Al-Nur brigade in Derna.<sup>20</sup> On paper, the National Guard was integrated into al-Ghithi’s border guards, ensuring access to pay and equipment.

The relationships between the big revolutionary brigades of Benghazi and Ansar al-Sharia were also obscure. The latter emerged out of the 17

<sup>18</sup> See for example a speech by al-Saadi on the topic of democracy in January 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHEPb6Fib8Q>.

<sup>19</sup> As well as those already mentioned, two others are worth highlighting: Muftah al-Dhawadi, a former member of the LIFG Shura Council, who became Deputy Minister of Martyrs’ Affairs under Prime Minister Abd al-Rahim al-Kib and retained the post under al-Kib’s successor Ali Zeidan until February 2014, when he died in a plane crash in Tunisia; and Abd al-Basit Abu Hliqa, also a former member of the Shura Council, who became Deputy Interior Minister under Zeidan.

<sup>20</sup> According to a National Guard document of September 2012, “The Units That Have Adhered to the Flag of the National Guard” (Arabic). See also Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place” (see note 12).

February and Rafallah al-Sahati brigades, whose leaders were associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or the former LIFG circles, but which also included more radical elements. In early 2012, the extremists split away to found Ansar al-Sharia, led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, a former Abu Salim inmate and representative of the second generation of jihadists. But the extremists continued to maintain relations with their former brothers in arms. Such connections also enabled the group's first public appearance in June 2012 at a "forum for implementation of sharia" held in central Benghazi. Ansar al-Sharia and like-minded groups paraded dozens of pick-ups mounted with heavy guns, and condemned democracy as heresy.<sup>21</sup> Whereas the 17 February and Rafallah al-Sahati brigades provided security for the July 2012 vote, Ansar al-Sharia opposed the elections.

As well as LIFG veterans, many other interest groups succeeded in exploiting the weakness of the transitional government to their own ends, and to the advantage of the jihadist milieu. For example, the government sought the repatriation of "political prisoners" of Libyan extraction from countries like Iraq and Russia,<sup>22</sup> but it remained unclear whether this occurred at the behest of relatives or of former comrades. That also applied to the case of a former LIFG member and Afghanistan veteran who was for a time wanted by the Americans in connection with the 1998 East African embassy bombings, yet managed to return home in February 2014 on board a plane bringing the Libyan national football team back from South Africa.<sup>23</sup> The family of the Libyan jihadist Mohamed al-Drissi, who was imprisoned in Jordan, was suspected of being behind the kidnapping of the Jordanian ambassador in Tripoli in April 2014. Al-Drissi was later returned to Libya in exchange for the ambassador.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The al-Faruq brigade from Misrata and groups from Derna, Ajdabiya, Sirt and Sabra-atha were represented at the forum. Some vehicles from the 17 February and Libya Shield (Dar' Libiya) brigades also participated. Author's observations, Benghazi, 7 June 2012, and discussions with former members of the Rafallah al-Sahati brigade, Benghazi and Tripoli, June and November 2012.

<sup>22</sup> The prisoners in Russia are mostly veterans of the Chechen war. Libyan negotiators sought to exchange them for Russian and Belarusian mercenaries captured during the civil war. "Furtia: We Are Seeking the Release of 150 Libyan Prisoners in 30 States" (Arabic), *Libiya al-Jadida*, 5 September 2013 (no longer available online).

<sup>23</sup> The individual concerned was Ibrahim al-Tantush, who stated that he was free to leave South Africa because the international arrest warrant against him had already been withdrawn and there were no other charges open against him. Television interview with Ibrahim al-Tantush on Libiya li-kull al-Ahrar, 22 April 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Libyan government negotiators had already designated al-Drissi a "political prisoner" and sought to secure his release. Al-Drissi was serving a life sentence for his involvement in a planned attack on Amman airport. Upon his return, he joined the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries. Rana Sweis und Kareem Fahim, "Ambassador from Jordan Freed by Captors in Libya", *New York Times*, 13 May 2014; "Libya Identifies Kidnappers of Jordanian Ambassador Faiz al-Itan" (Arabic), *Kermalkom*, 12 May 2014.

## Conflicts over Benghazi and Derna

However, the development of Ansar al-Sharia and other jihadist groups in Benghazi and Derna was not only facilitated by state weakness. It also occurred in a specific local context characterised by vicious power struggles over control of both cities.

The first isolated assassinations of former or active members of the army, police and intelligence services occurred in spring 2012. Several assassination attempts on Western diplomats in Benghazi failed. Events accelerated after the attack on a US diplomatic compound and a building used by the CIA in Benghazi on 11 September 2012, during which the US ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed. According to media reports, Ahmed Abu Khattala's group and members of Ansar al-Sharia were involved in the attack.<sup>25</sup> However, the demonstrations that followed the attack were directed not only against Ansar al-Sharia, but also against the Rafallah al-Sahati and 17 February brigades, which both officially stood under state control. Members of army units exploited the disorder to seize parts of the groups' arsenals, and a power struggle flared between the revolutionary brigades and the remnants of the old security forces. A similar dynamic developed in parallel in Derna, where fragments of the old security apparatus faced off with the Martyrs of Abu Salim brigade, which had formed around two former LIFG members, Abd al-Hakim al-Hasadi and Salim Darbi.

The conflict in Benghazi gained further momentum in June 2013, when a demonstration in front of the base of the officially recognised Libya Shield brigade degenerated into clashes in which thirty-one people were killed. The government responded with the formal dissolution of the unit, which was made up of Islamist-leaning revolutionary brigades.<sup>26</sup> It remained unclear who was responsible for the now steadily accelerating assassination spree targeting former and active members of the security forces in Benghazi and Derna, as not a single investigation was brought to completion. Acts of revenge on Gaddafi's henchmen for the repression of the 1990s certainly formed a central element, given that feuding was still established custom in north-eastern Libya. Where jihadists declared members of the security apparatus fair game as "infidels", this was at least partly a rationalisation of a lust for vengeance. Beyond the jihadists, the suspects had to include not only the revolutionary brigades jostling with the old security forces, but also criminal gangs. Proponents of the revolutionary camp, for their part, pointed the finger at former regime elements or machinators seeking to manipulate former army officers into a confrontation with the revolutionaries. In all probability, a combination of these factors was behind the killings, even if jihadists were likely responsible for the single largest part of them.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Kirkpatrick, "A Deadly Mix in Benghazi" (see note 17).

<sup>26</sup> David Kirkpatrick, "Violence against Libyan Protesters Threatens to Undercut Power of Militias", *New York Times*, 9 June 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Supposed jihadi hit lists were circulating in north-eastern Libya by the end of 2012, if not earlier. Suspicions that jihadists were responsible for most of the killings hardened in

The killings led to acts of retribution and ultimately an open conflict between old army units and Ansar al-Sharia, which increasingly drew in the revolutionary brigades. February 2014 witnessed the first open fighting between the army's Saeqa special forces on one side and Ansar al-Sharia and the 17 February brigade on the other. In May 2014, officers of the old army, supplemented by civilian recruits and led by General Khalifa Haftar, launched a major offensive against Ansar al-Sharia and revolutionary brigades in Benghazi – under the cover of counter-terrorism and in defiance of the military leadership.<sup>28</sup> Units that sided with Haftar, including Saeqa, temporarily lost almost all their bases in the city. Haftar's assault united his adversaries, who joined forces in June 2014 in the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries.

Even if the Shura Council initially refrained from jihadist rhetoric, it turned Ansar al-Sharia from a marginal to a central force in Benghazi, boosting its recruitment. Its fighting strength, long estimated at about two hundred fifty to three hundred (with several thousand sympathisers) rose to three to five hundred by mid-2014.<sup>29</sup> With Egyptian assistance, Haftar turned the tables again from September 2014. In the meantime, he had also acquired the official support of the House of Representatives in Tobruk – elected in June 2014 – and its new army leadership. Haftar's forces and neighbourhood militias gradually forced the Shura Council out of all but a few quarters of Benghazi. Heavy fighting weakened Ansar al-Sharia, with a series of leaders including Zahawi meeting their deaths.<sup>30</sup> Parts of the group joined forces with returnees from Syria to operate under the flag of the Islamic State (IS). A wave of suicide bombings demonstrated that the switch to IS went hand in hand with a tactical radicalisation, and numerous foreign fighters were now among its ranks.<sup>31</sup>

### The Rise of Ansar al-Sharia

The public protests against the killing of US Ambassador Stevens in 2012 represented a formative moment for Ansar al-Sharia. The organisation began de-emphasizing its armed wing, instead focusing public attention on its charitable activities.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, it successively established a presence in other cities outside Benghazi, successfully spreading local

April 2014, when the Shura Council of Islamic Youth was set up in Derna. It gave former members of the state security forces the opportunity to publicly repent for their erstwhile deeds – implying that those who complied would be protected from future assassinations. See the Shura Council's Twitter account at [http://twitter.com/shabab\\_IsIs](http://twitter.com/shabab_IsIs) (now blocked).

<sup>28</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Transition: Towards Collapse*, SWP Comments 25/2014 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2014).

<sup>29</sup> E-mail communication with Mary Fitzgerald, September 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a former leader of a revolutionary brigade in Benghazi, location withheld, December 2014.

<sup>31</sup> See for example the list of nine "martyrs" killed in Benghazi (including five Tunisians, two Egyptians and two Libyans), published in November 2014 in the name of the IS province of Cyrenaica (Wilayat Barqa).

<sup>32</sup> Aaron Zelin, "Libya's Jihadists beyond Benghazi", *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2013.

roots and adapting its approach to specific local characteristics. Unlike al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates, Ansar al-Sharia claimed no responsibility for attacks and killings, instead openly seeking an exchange with society. But in communicating its ideology, the group was unequivocal from the outset. Its message was that democracy was dictated by the West, whose Libyan stooges had to be fought as infidels. Libya's jihad had by no means ended with the fall of the tyrant Gaddafi, it argued; instead, the fight against all the lesser tyrants had only just begun. As long as the state was not based upon pure Islamic principles, it was an expression of apostasy.<sup>33</sup>

In Benghazi, the group cleaned streets, guarded the largest hospital, opened a clinic for women and children, and mobilised humanitarian aid for victims of war and flooding in Syria, the Gaza Strip and Sudan.<sup>34</sup> Ansar al-Sharia's initiatives against drug consumption were particularly successful, and gained the sponsorship of Benghazi's popular football club. The forums that such activities opened up were also used to call for jihad within Libya.<sup>35</sup> The strategy was plainly successful, with the second "forum for implementation of sharia" in June 2013 considerably better attended than the first a year earlier.

About the same time as the appearance of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi, Sufian bin Qumu in Derna founded a brigade with the same name that also operated outside state structures.<sup>36</sup> The two groups claimed to have arisen independently and initially denied any connection.<sup>37</sup> Only when Ansar al-Sharia developed into an organisation with a central leadership, the Shura Council, and branches in multiple cities in the course of 2013 did it become clear that the group in Derna also belonged to it.<sup>38</sup> Its two other new centres were Ajdabiya and Sirt, where it established branches in summer 2013. In all three, Ansar al-Sharia was able to count on a local base; like Benghazi and Derna, Ajdabiya and Sirt had also seen disproportionate numbers of local young men travelling to Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> "Ansar al-Sharia's Doctrine and Methods" (Arabic), leaflet, Benghazi, undated; Mu'asasat al-Raya li-l-Intaj al-I'lami, "A Theological View on the Ongoing Struggle in the Libyan Arena" (Arabic), Benghazi, August 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Aaron Zelin, "When Jihadists Learn how to Help", *Foreign Policy*, 7 May 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Wissam Salem, "The Ansar al-Sharia Forum at Benghazi University: Advertising for the Group or Campaign against Drugs?" (Arabic), *Elkaf*, 28 May 2013, [http://www.el-kaf.com/ViewNews.aspx?News\\_id=330](http://www.el-kaf.com/ViewNews.aspx?News_id=330).

<sup>36</sup> Al-Markaz al-I'lami Darna Libiya, "Interview with Sufian bin Qumu, commander of the Ansar al-Sharia Derna Brigade, in a Forest" (Arabic), 2 April 2012, <http://tamimi.own0.com/t97883-topic>.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Fitzgerald, "It Wasn't Us", *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2012; Aaron Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia", *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2012.

<sup>38</sup> In October 2013 Ansar al-Sharia distributed sheep for the Feast of Sacrifice in Benghazi, Derna and Sirt, and publicised the initiative in a PR campaign. On the television station Libiya li-kull al-Ahrar on 25 November 2013, Mahmud al-Bar'assi from Derna referred to himself as a member of the Shura Council of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya. In March 2014 a member of the Shura Council and a member of the Derna branch of Ansar al-Sharia participated in a public dialogue in Derna.

<sup>39</sup> Felter and Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (see note 13).



The group's initiatives in these three cities resembled those in Benghazi, including anti-drugs campaigns and collecting donations to distribute sheep to the needy. In all four cities Ansar al-Sharia functioned both as armed group and as charitable organisation, setting up checkpoints and conducting well-publicised nighttime patrols. At the same time, there were significant differences between the local approaches. In Ajdabiya, the group's situation was comparatively precarious and its actions accordingly more cautious. In Sirt, which was riven by internal conflicts, Ansar al-Sharia mediated after clashes. Here the group's roughly two hundred fighters incrementally established themselves as a security force, assisted in the process by the numerous assassinations of local members of the state security forces.<sup>40</sup>

The influence of Ansar al-Sharia and other jihadists extended furthest in Derna, where the police, old army units and courts were gradually paralysed by killings and intimidation. By mid-2013, the state presence in the city had been restricted to a small army unit at the port. Jihadists prevented local citizens from participating in the elections to the constitutional committee in February 2014 and to the House of Representatives in June. The assassinations were now no longer restricted to members of the security forces, but increasingly also affected judges, activists and politicians. Together with other jihadists, elements of Ansar al-Sharia's Derna branch established the Shura Council of Islamic Youth, which patrolled openly in the city for the first time in April 2014. About one hundred to one hundred fifty fighters took part in the parade, then representing probably one third to one half of the contingent available to jihadists of the al-Qaeda or IS persuasion in the city. In May, the Shura Council took over the seat of the local council and set up an Islamic court there. In August, the court executed an Egyptian after he admitted having murdered a local citizen. It also dealt with minor offences and mediated local land ownership disputes.<sup>41</sup> Finally, in October 2014 the Shura Council declared its allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State, at the same time proclaiming Derna the seat of the IS province Barqa (the Arabic name for Cyrenaica).<sup>42</sup>

However, the ambitions of the Shura Council, and later of the IS offshoot in Derna, to create the foundations of statehood met with determined resistance from the Martyrs of Abu Salim brigade. The latter remains Derna's strongest military force, with more than one thousand fighters, according to local observers. The group's leaders are first-generation jihadists far removed from the former LIFG's reformed wing, who had also pushed to enforce their Islamic values in the city. Yet the younger extremists designated Abu Salim as apostates, pointing to the brigade's ad-

<sup>40</sup> See for example the interview by Free Radio Sirt on 6 July 2013 with Fawzi al-Ayat, a spokesperson of the group in Sirt; as well as Ansar al-Sharia, "Declaration Concerning Armed Clashes between the Tribes of Sirt" (Arabic), Sirt, 11 December 2013.

<sup>41</sup> See the @shabab\_IsIs Twitter feed in August 2014 (account now blocked).

<sup>42</sup> "Shura Council of Youth of Islam Paves Way for Establishment of Caliphate in Derna" (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 6 October 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/40449/>.

herence to parastatal units in 2012.<sup>43</sup> Abu Salim also differed from its adversaries in having no foreigners among its ranks.<sup>44</sup> The conflict between the two camps, which peaked in June 2014, cost numerous lives on both sides.<sup>45</sup> Abu Salim refused allegiance to IS, and in December 2014 joined with an Ansar al-Sharia faction and other jihadist splinter groups to form the Shura Council of Derna Mujahideen, as a counterweight to IS.<sup>46</sup>

It remains largely unclear how Ansar al-Sharia and other jihadist groups have funded their rapid growth. Their charitable ventures were obviously not self-financing, despite public fundraising and business sponsorship. Amidst the institutional chaos, some members of the groups probably remained on the public payroll. Frequent robberies of banks and cash transporters, as well as kidnappings for ransom suggest that revenues from criminal activities probably played a role in Derna and Sirt. Ansar al-Sharia also ran a network that smuggled illegal migrants from the Sudanese capital Khartoum via Kufra in south-east Libya to Ajdabiya, for onward travel to Europe from ports along Libya's Mediterranean coast.<sup>47</sup> Beyond this, Ansar al-Sharia was probably able to rely upon support from wealthy sponsors at home and abroad. In contrast with the Islamic State's well-funded operations in Syria, there is no evidence that Libyan jihadist groups have directly tapped into oil revenues. In early 2015, IS factions attacked several oilfields in central Libya, causing their shutdown, but made no attempt to seize control of, or siphon off, production.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the levels of violence associated with their emergence, Ansar al-Sharia and like-minded groups were long able to count on the benevolence or at least ambivalence of parts of their local milieu – to which Ansar al-Sharia's charitable activities made a central contribution.<sup>49</sup> Other groups repeatedly forced Ansar al-Sharia out of the Al-Jala hospital in Benghazi, only for hospital staff to insist each time on its return to guard the facil-

<sup>43</sup> "Details of Killing of Ansar al-Sharia Leader in Clashes between Extremists in Derna" (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/21974/>.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with an observer from Derna, location withheld, November 2014.

<sup>45</sup> For example "Details of Killing of al-Qaeda Leader Ali bin Tahir in Derna" (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 9 April 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/12398/>; "Clashes between al-Qaeda and the Abu Salim Brigade in Derna" (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 7 June 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/21561/>.

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the Abu Salim brigade and the Ansar al-Sharia faction, the Mujahideen Council also initially included the "Army of the Islamic State of Libya". The latter, not to be confused with the local IS affiliate, had appeared in November 2013. See Mathieu Galtier, "The Army of Islamic State of Libya: Derna's Mystery Militia", *Libya Herald*, 7 November 2013; Martyrs of Abu Salim brigade, "Letter Concerning the Supreme Security Committee" (Arabic), Derna, 28 April 2015.

<sup>47</sup> According to a Syrian refugee who travelled to Europe by this route in 2014 and was housed by the Ansar al-Sharia branch in Ajdabiya. Interview by Nizar Sarieldin with refugee, name and location withheld, December 2014.

<sup>48</sup> "New Attacks on Libya's Oil Assets Shake Nation's Stability, Energy Markets", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 2015.

<sup>49</sup> In March 2013 several of the author's interlocutors in Benghazi downplayed the danger Ansar al-Sharia posed to the city and emphasised the group's positive sides.

ity.<sup>50</sup> Nor was there any end to attempts to integrate active jihadists into mainstream society through dialogue, for example in the consultations for the National Dialogue held in Derna in March 2014.<sup>51</sup> As late as May 2014, Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Gharyani was still calling a government statement indirectly designating Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist group “premature”.<sup>52</sup> Soon after, he found himself forced to call on the group to distance itself from members condemning the government and army as apostates.<sup>53</sup>

Only with the escalation of political tensions into a nationwide conflict in mid-2014 did jihadist groups shift fully from charitable work and dawa (preaching) back to open armed struggle. This was evident in Ansar al-Sharia's communications, now focused on the war in Benghazi. Together with other jihadist splinter groups and foreign fighters, some Ansar al-Sharia factions now morphed into IS affiliates, which adopted a much more radical approach. In sharp contrast to Ansar al-Sharia, the IS branches now publicized their suicide bombings and assassinations of foreign hostages.<sup>54</sup> The jihadist presence imposed growing costs on its local strongholds. Large parts of Benghazi suffered major destruction and large-scale displacement in the war between the Shura Council and IS, as well as their adversaries. Forces loyal to the Tobruk House of Representatives began cutting off fuel and other supplies to Derna; only the Martyrs of Abu Salim brigade was still able to secure occasional fuel deliveries and cash transports for salary payments. After the Sirt IS affiliate entered into confrontation with units from Misrata from February 2015 onwards, Sirt was equally cut off from essential supplies and services. While these developments put an end to any ambivalence in relations between local communities and jihadist groups, and undermined the latter's local state-building efforts, they also brought a new wave of recruitment and radicalisation.

### Jihadist Localism

For all the success Ansar al-Sharia's strategy apparently enjoyed, there are clear limits to the ambitions of jihadist groups in Libya. This is due to the pronounced localism that characterises all of the country's political forces, including jihadist movements. The difficulties jihadists have experienced in expanding beyond their local strongholds are striking.

In north-eastern Libya, Derna's neighbours were almost completely spared jihadist activity, and instead became strongholds of political forces

<sup>50</sup> “Staff Ask Ansar al-Sharia to Protect Al-Jala Hospital in Benghazi” (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 1 April 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/11290/>.

<sup>51</sup> “Outstanding Representation of Women and Islamist Currents at Official Hearing in Preparation for National Dialogue in Derna” (Arabic), posted on <http://www.facebook.com/ndpc.ly>, 6 March 2014.

<sup>52</sup> “Mufti: Accusations of Ansar al-Sharia Involvement in Events in Benghazi Are Premature” (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 6 May 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/16494/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Mufti Calls on Ansar al-Sharia to Drop Condemnation of System as Godless” (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 8 June 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/21673/>.

<sup>54</sup> For an overview of IS and Ansar al-Sharia communications, see Aaron Zelin's Jihadology project, <http://jihadology.net/category/countries/libya/>.

opposed to the revolutionary and Islamist camp.<sup>55</sup> In central Libya, an Ansar al-Sharia cell in the small town of Naufiliya in early 2015 evolved into a major IS faction, which maintained its independence from the larger IS affiliate in Sirt, 120 kilometres to the west but with a different tribal makeup – and neither group was able to seize control of the village of Harawa, situated between the two towns and populated by yet another community.<sup>56</sup> In the north-west, jihadist cells failed – despite persistent efforts – to gain a foothold in cities like Misrata, Bani Walid and Zintan, even when their efforts involved members from those cities. In all three cities, strong local decision-making and consultative structures, as well as opposing interests blocked the establishment of jihadist groups. In Misrata, jihadist cells had emerged after the revolution from a longstanding subculture, but were quickly driven out of the city. They subsequently re-emerged as part of Ansar al-Sharia and, later, the IS affiliate in Sirt.<sup>57</sup> In Bani Walid, local recruits into jihadist factions faced tenacious resistance to their attempts to operate in the city, and established themselves in the no man’s land between Bani Walid and Sirt.<sup>58</sup> In Zintan and many other cities in the north-west, the strong influence of arch-conservative Saudi-leaning Salafists posed an obstacle to jihadists. While regarding democracy as an expression of unbelief, they condemn jihadism as a deviation from the doctrine of absolute obedience to the state.<sup>59</sup>

In north-eastern Libya, an ethno-political discourse that has gained currency among Haftar’s forces and tribal politicians has hardened the lines of conflict. Certain agitators in this camp equate the Islamists with groups that are separate from the Sa’adi and Murabitun tribes of Cyrenaica: families that came to Benghazi and Derna from Tripolitania centuries ago,

<sup>55</sup> On Libya’s political camps, see Wolfram Lacher, *Fault Lines of the Revolution: Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya*, SWP Research Paper 4/2013 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2013), and International Crisis Group, *Libya: Getting Geneva Right* (Brussels, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> Eleven young men from Naufiliya had travelled to Iraq in 2006; one of them later emerged as commander of the local IS branch, which also included two relatives of prominent figures in the local Magharba tribe, Abd al-Rahman al-Atyush and Usama al-Jadran. “Al-Naufiliya ... from Koranic Study Centers to Jihadi Thought” (Arabic), *al-Wasat*, 30 March 2015, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/68165/>; “A Young Man Gets to Know IS from the Inside”, *al-Nas*, 28 April 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Numerous young men from Misrata had gone to fight in Iraq in 2005–7. In June 2012, an attack targeted the Red Cross office in Misrata. The same month, members of the al-Faruq brigade from Misrata participated in the Ansar al-Sharia forum in June 2012. Parts of the brigade subsequently relocated to Sirt. The then commander of al-Faruq, Ahmad Ali at-Tir, later emerged as leader of the Ansar al-Sharia brigade in Sirt, where he died in combat in August 2013. In early 2015, two members of a prominent Misratan family, Usama and Hassan al-Karami, emerged as leading figures in the Sirt IS affiliate. “Terrorists Strike in Misrata”, *Libya Herald*, 12 June 2012; “Some Answers to Understand IS in Sirt and Libya” (Arabic), *al-Nas*, 7 April 2015; “La catena di comando dello Stato islamico in Libia”, *Il Foglio*, 19 March 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Interviews with local politicians and observers, Bani Walid, April 2014 and January 2015.

<sup>59</sup> This tendency is represented in Zintan by the influential local organisation and brigade Ansar al-Haqq.

as well as the Karaghla descendants of Ottoman administrators and soldiers, who also settled principally in Benghazi and Derna.<sup>60</sup> The aim of the war in the north-east, in this increasingly popular discourse, was about the expulsion of “foreign” elements.<sup>61</sup> Although this reading is far removed from the reality – both the LIFG and later Ansar al-Sharia included many members from the Sa’adi and Murabitun tribes – it has impeded jihadist expansion into cities largely populated by members of these tribes, such as Tobruk, Qubba, al-Bayda and Marj. Nor are the jihadists above indulging in the unabashed localism that pervades Libya’s post-revolutionary power struggles. A graphic distributed in summer 2014 by the Shura Council of Islamic Youth proudly proclaims: “Derna – lion’s den of jihad, forge of men”.<sup>62</sup>

## The Local and the Global: Transnational Networks

As the LIFG’s origins demonstrate, Libyan jihadists have always been closely integrated into the transnational networks surrounding al-Qaeda Central (or its precursors). Following the revolution, the connections to Syria acquired outstanding significance in this respect, and were key to the advent of IS in Libya. But relationships built to support the struggle there also facilitated Libyan jihadist networking with the Maghreb states and the Sahel.

### Syria and Its Repercussions

The establishment of networks to send Libyan fighters and weapons to Syria began soon after the demise of the Gaddafi regime.<sup>63</sup> As well as LIFG veterans, this also involved revolutionaries hoping to continue their fight against the region’s dictators in Syria. Recruitment was initially completely open and drew in a spectrum far beyond the jihadists. For example, Mahdi al-Harati’s al-Umma brigade, in which numerous Libyans fought alongside the Free Syrian Army (FSA), could hardly be called extremist.<sup>64</sup> But this changed as jihadists gained the upper hand in the Syrian civil war. Idealistic volunteers returned disillusioned, and recruitment increasingly became the preserve of networks within the jihadist spectrum.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the

<sup>60</sup> On the Sa’adi and Murabitun tribes see Emrys L. Peters, “The Tied and the Free”, in idem, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in Personal and Corporate Power* (Cambridge, 1991), 40–58; on the Karaghla and migration from Tripolitania to Cyrenaica see Faraj Najem, *Tribe, Islam and State in Libya: Analytic Study of the Roots of the Libyan Tribal Society and Interaction up to the Qaramanli Rule (1711–1835)*, PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2004, 109–34, 186–90.

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with local tribal politicians, Tobruk, April 2015.

<sup>62</sup> See the @albattarly Twitter feed, August 2014 (account now blocked).

<sup>63</sup> UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Concerning Libya*, S/2014/106, 15 February 2014, and “In Turnabout, Syria Rebels Get Libyan Weapons”, *New York Times*, 21 June 2013.

<sup>64</sup> “Exclusive – Libyan Fighters Join Syrian Revolt against Assad”, *Reuters*, 14 August 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Discussions with local observers of the recruitment efforts, Misrata, April 2013. See also “Young Libyans Head to Join ISIS in Syria and Iraq”, *Libya Herald*, 8 September 2014.

Libyan contingent in Syria – as in Iraq – remained one of the strongest of foreign fighters, especially in relation to the size of Libya’s population.<sup>66</sup>

At the end of 2012, Libyan jihadists formed the al-Battar brigade, whose founding declaration thanked the “people of Derna” and a foundation from Misrata for their support.<sup>67</sup> Shortly afterwards, the brigade joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and participated in its operations against the al-Nusra-Front, the Islamic Front and the FSA. The recruitment of Libyan jihadists into the ranks of al-Battar and ISIS is likely to have contributed significantly to further radicalisation of the milieu they originated from. Al-Battar obviously possessed close connections to Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi and the Shura Council in Derna. When the fighting with Haftar’s forces broke out in summer 2014, parts of al-Battar returned to Benghazi. Al-Battar subsequently published death notices for jihadists killed fighting with Ansar al-Sharia, as well as an obituary for a prominent Ansar-al-Sharia member it called its “military commander”, who had been killed near Derna in clashes with the Martyrs of Abu Salim brigade.<sup>68</sup>

These connections ultimately led to parts of Ansar al-Sharia and jihadist splinter groups mutating into IS offshoots, while other parts of Ansar al-Sharia struggled to maintain their independence from IS. By relying on backing from the Shura Councils in Benghazi and Derna, Ansar al-Sharia factions were able to withstand the intense pressure from IS affiliates to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In Sirt and al-Naufiliya, IS acquired clear dominance, making it impossible for Ansar al-Sharia to continue operating as a separate organization.<sup>69</sup> As a Sirt notable observed in March 2015, the local IS affiliate was Sirt’s Ansar al-Sharia branch under a new name.<sup>70</sup> But the advent of IS also brought larger contingents of foreign fighters – particularly from Libya’s North African neighbours – and several prominent figures dispatched by the IS leadership.<sup>71</sup>

The significance of the Libyan-Syrian networks was not restricted to their role in ensuring the arrival of the ISIS brand of jihadism in Libya. They also connected the Libyan jihadist strongholds with the Maghreb

<sup>66</sup> Aaron Zelin, *Foreign Jihadists in Syria: Tracking Recruitment Networks* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Near East Policy, 19 December 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-jihadists-in-syria-tracking-recruitment-networks>.

<sup>67</sup> “Announcement of the Libyan al-Battar Brigade in Syria” (Arabic), 13 December 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tH7me\\_yigUs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tH7me_yigUs).

<sup>68</sup> “Details of killing of Ansar al-Sharia leader” (see note 43).

<sup>69</sup> “Some Answers to Understand IS” (see note 57).

<sup>70</sup> “Marzuq: The Daesh Fighters in Sirt are Members of Ansar al-Sharia, We Know Them Personally” (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 24 March 2015, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/67257/>.

<sup>71</sup> In Derna, headquarters of the IS province of Barqa, this includes the leading figures Abu Nabil al-Anbari (an Iraqi national, formerly head of the IS province Salah al-Din); the Yemeni scholar Abu al-Bara al-Azdi; and the Saudi judge Abu Habib al-Jazrawi. The IS branch in Tripolitania, headquartered in Sirt, has hosted the leading IS preacher Turki al-Banali from Bahrain for public sermons, while Mauritanian and Saudi IS operatives intermittently assumed leading roles in al-Naufiliya. “Some Answers to Understand IS” (see note 57); “La catena di comando” (see note 57); “Daesh Gives the Residents of al-Naufiliya Three Days to Repent” (Arabic), *Al-Wasat*, 12 February 2015, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/60966/>.

states and Egypt, with recruits arriving to train before travelling on to Syria, via Turkey. Ansar al-Sharia appears to have been central to these networks.<sup>72</sup> There was also some evidence for ties with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>73</sup> These networks have generated a steadily growing flow of foreign fighters, especially from Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, joining Ansar al-Sharia and later the IS offshoots in Benghazi, Derna and Sirt.<sup>74</sup>

Sabratha, from where several prominent former LIFG figures hailed,<sup>75</sup> has emerged as an important node in networks between local extremists and Tunisian jihadists. The city is said to have hosted training camps for Tunisian jihadists before their dispatch to Syria. Tunisian media have repeatedly placed the leader of the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia, Abu Ayadh (originally Saif Allah bin Hussain), and one of his most important aides, Ahmad ar-Ruissi, in Sabratha.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, no open Ansar al-Sharia or IS presence has emerged in Sabratha. Political opponents like to label leading figures in Sabratha “al-Qaeda” or “Ansar al-Sharia” – without citing any evidence.<sup>77</sup> That the city hosts an emerging jihadist presence and serves as a conduit for Tunisian jihadists is, however, confirmed by a range of concordant sources, as well incidents in Sabratha itself.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> See for example Aaron Zelin, *New Evidence on Ansar al-Sharia in Libya Training Camps* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Near East Policy, 8 August 2013); Nancy Youssef, “Benghazi, Libya, Has Become Training Hub for Islamist Fighters”, *McClatchyDC*, 12 December 2013; Alfred Hackensberger, “Islamisten sind schlimmer als Assad”, *Die Welt*, 15 December 2013. In June 2014, extremists from Derna even kidnapped nine adolescents in order to secure the release of an Egyptian recruit detained at Al Bayda Airport for using a forged Libyan passport and prevented from travelling on to Turkey. “Nine Jebel Akhdar Youths Kidnapped then Freed in Exchange for Arrested Egyptian”, *Libya Herald*, 3 June 2014.

<sup>73</sup> One indication being the career of the Libyan jihadist Mahmud al-Wuhayshi, who was killed fighting in Benghazi on 1 September 2014. According to his death notice, he had spent seven years in northern Algeria with AQIM and GSPC (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat), before returning to Benghazi in 2011. See post on <http://www.facebook.com/pages/329638893879010/101520948142538790>, 4 September 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Interviews with a former leader in the Rafallah as-Sahati brigade, Tripoli, April, June 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Muftah al-Dhawadi and Abd al-Mun'im Mukhtar al-Madhuni, along with several of their family members.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Ruissi was reportedly killed fighting with IS in Sirt, in clashes with Misratan forces, in March 2015. “Leader of Tunisian Group Ansar al-Sharia Dies in Libya” (Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 31 December 2013; “Salim ar-Riyahi, Naufil al-Wartani and Basma al-Khalfawi on death list of bin Qardan group” (Arabic), *Assabahnews*, 3 June 2014, <http://www.assabahnews.tn/article/86622/مقتل قيادات تنظيم داعش في ليبيا: نوافيل الورتاني وسليم الريحي وبasma الخلفاوي>; “‘Tunisia Now’ network confirms detention of terrorist Ahmad ar-Ruissi by Libyan revolutionaries” (Arabic), *Tunisia Now Network*, 29 August 2014, <http://www.tunisianow.org/باهر الامل عضو بقة الدقوت بن ال اس نوت تحت قبضش>.

<sup>77</sup> See for example the statements about Umar al-Mukhtar al-Madhuni, Muftah al-Dhawadi and Abd al-Rahman al-Zlitni in “Libyan Sabratha Exports Terrorism to Tunisian Cities of Sfax and Gabès” (Arabic), *al-Ikhbariya al-Tunisiya*, 9 September 2014, <http://alikhbariya.com/index.php/alikhbariya-ettounisia/al-a5bar/32061-2014-09-09-08-11-12.html>, and “Killing of Ansar al-Sharia Leader Abu al-Walid al-Zawi” (Arabic), *Afrigatenews.net*, 7 September 2014, <http://www.afrigatenews.net/content/مقتل ابي الوليد الزاوي>.

<sup>78</sup> An extremist background was suspected after the killing of a British citizen and a New Zealander near Sabratha in January 2014. In June 2014 there was an attack on a local

## The Mali Connection

By early 2012 at the latest, extremists from Derna and Benghazi had established contacts with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its offshoots in northern Mali. According to the Moroccan authorities, several Moroccans at that point travelled via Benghazi to northern Mali with the assistance of Ansar al-Sharia, to join the Group for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), before returning to Benghazi.<sup>79</sup> In late 2012, Ansar al-Sharia sent at least one convoy of fighters and arms to northern Mali, crossing Libya without difficulty, apparently with an official permit.<sup>80</sup> From January 2013, several dozen jihadists from Derna and Benghazi participated in the fight against the French army in northern Mali.<sup>81</sup> In June 2014, a leader of the Ajdabiya branch of Ansar al-Sharia was killed in Mali, according to his own circles.<sup>82</sup> In view of these networks, it comes as no surprise that the IS branch in Tripolitania published a video in January 2015 featuring Tuareg fighters with northern Malian accents calling on their brothers in Mali and Algeria to join IS in Libya.

Connections between northern Mali and north-eastern Libya also played a role in the attack on the Algerian gas plant at In Amenas in January 2013.<sup>83</sup> The attackers were a multinational group including a conspicuous number of Egyptians and Tunisians.<sup>84</sup> Particularly the large Egyptian contingent was atypical for AQIM and its offshoots, and should be seen in the light of the exchanges between Cyrenaica and northern Mali. According to French intelligence sources, several of the attackers had been trained by Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi; Algerian sources even claimed that some of those involved had been implicated in the 2012 attack on the US compound in Benghazi.<sup>85</sup>

Southern Libya, on the other hand, has served above all as a transit region. Following the launch of the French intervention in northern Mali and the In Amenas attack, both of which occurred in January 2013, Western media outlets spread rumours based on intelligence sources that southern Libya hosted numerous jihadist camps. However, In Amenas

radio station said to have offered a forum for jihadists. Other reports, such as one in July 2014 claiming fourteen soldiers killed near Sabratha, have turned out to be deliberate disinformation.

<sup>79</sup> Report by Salé criminal investigation department, on record with the author, Salé, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Discussions with militia leaders and politicians, Sabha and Ubari, September 2013. See also Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fractious South and Regional Instability*, Security Assessment in North Africa, Dispatch 3 (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, February 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Discussions with associates of those concerned, Benghazi, March 2013.

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/alshaheed.hamza.yaseen.omar>.

<sup>83</sup> On the In Amenas incident, see the contribution by Wolfram Lacher and Guido Steinberg in this volume, p. 79.

<sup>84</sup> African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, "Updated Incident Preliminary Analysis: The In-Amenas Terrorist Attack, in Algeria", January 2013, <http://www.caert.org.dz/Medi-review/Special-editions/TIGUENTOURINE-Analysis.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> "Some Algeria Attackers Are Placed at Benghazi", *New York Times*, 22 January 2013; "Al Qaeda's Widening North African Jihad Confounds Foes", *Reuters*, 9 August 2013; "Militants in Benghazi Attack Tied to a Qaeda Affiliate", *New York Times*, 20 November 2014.



proved only that groups based in northern Mali could move through southern Libya with the aid of local accomplices. Even if some extremists fleeing northern Mali also found refuge there, they did not reconstitute their groups in southern Libya. Headlines claiming that southern Libya now found itself “under the control of al-Qaeda” were certainly grossly misleading.<sup>86</sup> Unlike the cities in the north, where jihadist currents have grown rapidly, the conflicts in the south are defined by mobilisation along ethnic and tribal lines.<sup>87</sup> In these conflicts, conflicting parties have used the al-Qaeda label to tarnish their adversaries, to date without any evidence. This has remained the case even after the advent of IS in Libya. The IS offshoot in Fezzan, which first came to attention in January 2015 when it claimed responsibility for deaths of fourteen soldiers north of Brak al-Shati’, appears to have emerged from the Ansar al-Sharia milieu in Sirt, and has not moved south.<sup>88</sup> There have been no signs of IS operating in the southern conflict areas of al-Shati’, Sabha and Ubari.

## Outlook

There are many facets to the milieu of former and active jihadists in Libya. Politicians who have in fact gravitated towards centrism are often branded “al-Qaeda” without reason, or solely on the basis of their past. On the other hand, some very real extremists have appeared as harmless dignitaries within their communities. Clearly, however, jihadist currents are by now deeply rooted in several Libyan coastal cities, and Libyan jihadists are playing a key role in exchanges between the Islamic State and North African as well as Saharan networks.

Containing the jihadist threat in Libya first of all requires the country’s stabilisation. As long as this remains out of sight, Libyan jihadists will further cement their influence in individual local strongholds. Since mid-2014, the split through the state institutions and the rise of two rival poles of power has made this problem sheer insoluble. The “counter-terrorism” that the government in Tobruk and al-Bayda has committed to is based on painting all its political adversaries with the same brush as IS, and lobbying for external assistance by grossly exaggerating the problem. In Benghazi, this approach drove moderate groups into an alliance with jihadists and persuaded influential actors in Misrata to lend logistical support to the Shura Council. While former LIFG leaders and other Islamist-leaning elements have played an important role in the loose “Libya Dawn” coalition that took control of Tripoli in summer 2014, the coalition did not include jihadi groups as such. Tactical cooperation between “Dawn” and jihadist groups has been largely restricted to Benghazi. However, leading proponents of “Dawn” have maintained an ambivalent stance towards

<sup>86</sup> “Samuel Laurent: ‘Le désert libyen est devenu un haut lieu de la contrebande et du terrorisme’”, *Radio France Internationale* (RFI), 9 June 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Lacher, *Libya’s Fractious South* (see note 80).

<sup>88</sup> Relatives and commanders of the victims came to this conclusion. E-mail communication with an observer in Brak al-Shati’, January 2015.

hardcore jihadi factions. Both the first prime minister of the self-appointed government in Tripoli, Umar al-Hassi, and his successor Khalifa al-Ghwell have defended Ansar al-Sharia and lent their explicit support to the Benghazi Shura Council. Despite attacks conducted by the Tripolitanian IS offshoot in January 2015 on embassies and a hotel in the capital, representatives of the Tripoli government refused to recognise the jihadist threat, instead asserting that the “enemies of the revolution” had been responsible for the attacks.<sup>89</sup> Others within the Tripoli-based camp have sought to distance themselves more clearly from jihadists, in particular since the appearance of IS. Since February 2015, Misratan forces have been involved in a confrontation with IS in Sirt and al-Naufiliya. However, as long as both camps’ focus lies on the overall political power struggle, confronting jihadist groups comes a distant second. For actors on both sides, counter-terrorism serves to strengthen credibility with external actors and thereby improve one’s negotiating position, at least as much as it serves the aim of local stabilisation.

Jihadism in Libya is a long-term challenge, and by far the greatest of its kind in North Africa. This increases the pressure on Western leaders to act. But as long as the current state of polarisation persists and the two opposing camps prevent the formation of a unity government, tackling this growing problem will be impossible. Supporting the “counter-terrorism” of Haftar and his allies offers no realistic prospect of success, directed as it is against the whole range of this camp’s political opponents – which in fact further increases the attraction of the jihadists as tactical allies for Haftar’s enemies. While Libyan jihadism moves up Europe’s security agenda, the prospects for negotiations on a government of national unity remain uncertain. Even if these efforts fail, the task remains to develop responses where political solutions are not trumped by counter-terrorism.

<sup>89</sup> Discussions with GNC members and advisers to Hassi, Tripoli, January 2015.

# Going “Glocal”: Jihadism in Algeria and Tunisia

*Isabelle Werenfels*

Algeria’s militant Islamists were among the African continent’s very first jihadists in the early 1990s. Only in Egypt had Islamists been quicker to take up arms. The origins of the Algerian jihadist groups are to be found in national conflicts that had festered since independence and erupted into civil war in the 1990s. These groups internationalised in the 2000s, not least after losing support and influence at home. Tunisia, on the other hand, had but a scattering of jihadist actors before 2011.

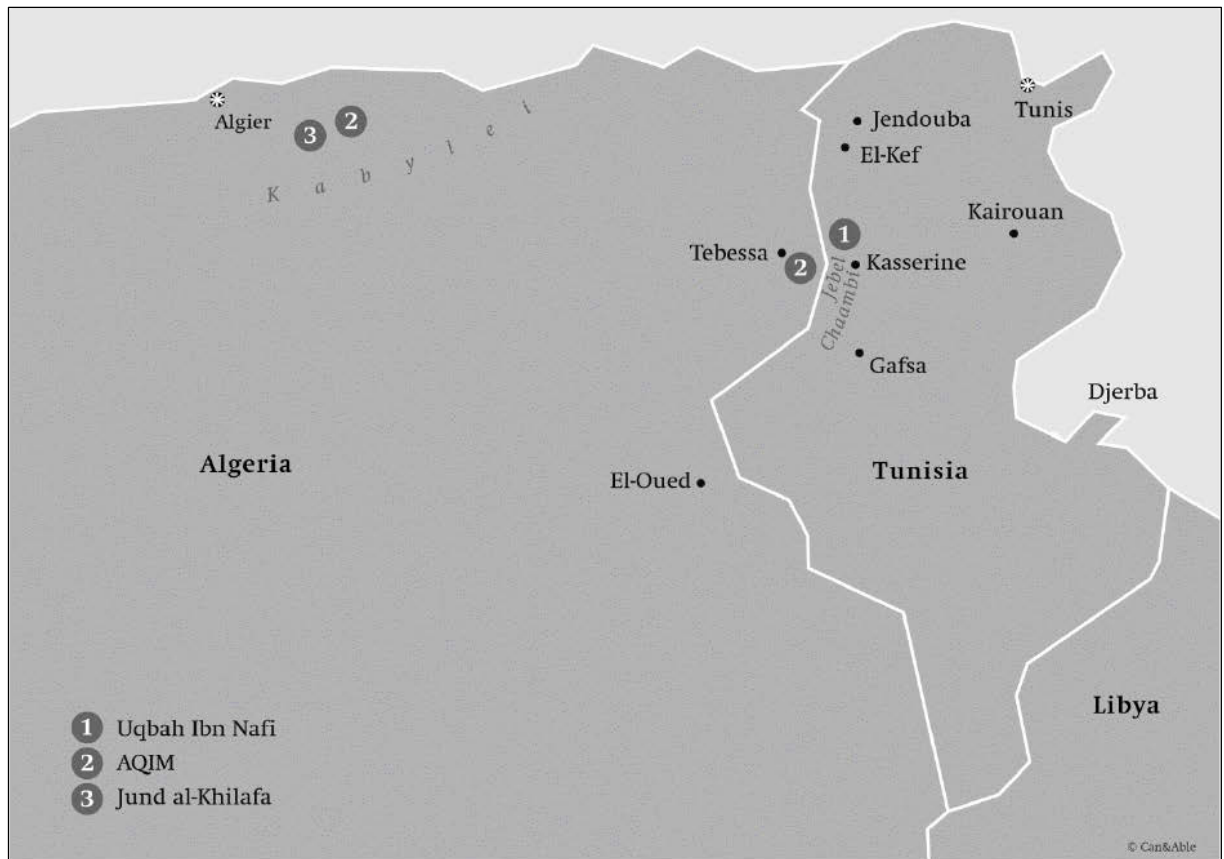
The “Arab Spring” was a game-changer for Algerian and Tunisian jihadists, largely in their favour. New geographical vistas opened up: the jihadist triangle of Algeria–Mali–Mauritania, existant since the mid-2000s, has been joined by a new Algeria–Tunisia–Libya axis, while the civil war in Syria and the massive strengthening of the Islamic State (IS) in the Levant have further intensified jihadist networking between the Maghreb and the Near East. But the developments in Syria and Iraq have also had negative effects on jihadist dynamics in the Maghreb, massively heightening competition for new members and splitting the spectrum between supporters of al-Qaeda and of IS.

All Maghreb jihadists operate within a permanent tension between local social and political circumstances, national goals, and global objectives. Although their propaganda is directed particularly loudly against the “far enemy”, meaning above all the French, the Americans and Israel, their immediate target remains the Maghreb regimes, the “near enemy”. The fact that global jihad possesses local and national dimensions generates ideological contradictions and intra-jihadist conflicts. Tactical differences between individual groups and periodic signs of pragmatism can thus be explained in terms of local particularities.

## Local Conflicts and Precursors

At first glance one might think that a similar combination of circumstances encouraged the emergence and rise of militant groups in Algeria and in Tunisia. First and foremost, the interaction of various factors created dissatisfaction and a lack of perspectives for many young men. These factors include the failure of the development models of the post-colonial elites, and ensuing socio-economic and identity crises within society. Major roles were also played by a youth bulge and the fact that the average age of marriage has risen for economic reasons while premarital sexuality remains a taboo. The frustration produced by these developments often leads not only to attempts to flee to Europe or escape in drug consumption or petty crime, but also a turn to extremist religious positions.

Map 4: Algeria and Tunisia



Another absolutely fundamental factor has been the political exclusion and repression of particular Islamist actors, which has caused one part of that spectrum to become increasingly radicalised. Western interventions and what are felt to be one-sided Western positions in conflicts such as Palestine have further boosted this tendency. The return of battle-hardened jihadists from Afghanistan, Bosnia and Iraq proved especially fateful as they went on to form or support cells in their home countries. Finally, in both states (brief) periods of great political upheaval and the resulting new freedoms gave militant groups space to flourish.

Yet, despite the many parallels, there are important differences between Tunisian and Algerian jihadist groups. They formed in different epochs and have to a certain extent been shaped by different international conflicts and different religious leaders. And their members have been socialised in different national social and political contexts. This has produced different approaches, positions, funding methods, and recruitment mechanisms as well as distinct “corporate images”.

### Algeria: From Politics to Jihad

In multiple respects the development of the Algerian groups represents the model for the trajectories of many jihadist organisations. While

Algeria's jihadists began as (radical) Islamist oppositionists with a purely domestic political agenda, they developed over the course of time into transnationally operating jihadists with global propaganda and a closeness to al-Qaeda – but without relinquishing their local anchoring and national objectives. The Algerian militant groups also represent an early example of the close interconnection between religious militancy and organised crime.

As far as Algeria is concerned, 1991 and 1992 were decisive for the formation of jihadist groups. This was when the armed forces cancelled democratic parliamentary elections after the Islamist party FIS (Front islamique du salut) triumphed in the first round. The military coup was followed by massive repression not only against FIS functionaries, but also against tens of thousands of its sympathisers, comparable with the hounding of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood following the coup against President Morsi in summer 2013. The radical wing of the FIS went underground, marking the beginning of a civil war that was to last until the end of the 1990s.

However, while the cancellation of the elections massively boosted jihadist activities, it was not their trigger. The first militant cells had already formed a decade earlier.<sup>1</sup> Their emergence, like that of the FIS a few years later, was the outcome of a combination of several factors. The post-colonial elites had marginalised the religious wing of the independence movement and ignored its demands for a dominant role for Islam in the new social and political order. This generated growing resistance in the ranks of these “cultural losers” among the former revolutionaries. And when economic crisis loomed in the 1980s – with the failure of the import substitution development model and a dramatic fall in oil and gas prices in 1986 – the ruling party was left without the financial means to continue buying social peace and political legitimacy. This paved the ground for the strong emergence of an Islamist protest party, the FIS, which wanted to replace a regime it perceived as corrupt, repressive, unjust and un-Islamic. After the FIS was cheated of its election victory, increasing numbers of Algerian Salafists came to believe that this objective could only be achieved by force of arms and went underground.

Many of the leaders of the new armed cells were returnees from Afghanistan, in other words international jihadists. But their fight was nevertheless directed (almost) exclusively against the Algerian state, its elites, cadres and officials. Whenever they did focus on the “far enemy”, the French and other Western foreigners, inside Algeria and sometimes in France, they did so in the first place because these were the backers of the Algerian military regime.<sup>2</sup>

The more differentiated the armed spectrum became, the more diffuse and contested its goals. While the AIS (Armée islamique du salut), as the military arm of the banned FIS party, targeted the state's security forces, representatives and infrastructure, the GIA (Groupement islamique armé)

<sup>1</sup> Michael Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History* (Reading: Ithaca University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and the ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (November 2007): 407–13.

conducted indiscriminate massacres of the civilian population.<sup>3</sup> Disagreements about attacking civilians led to a split in the GIA, out of which the GSPC (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat) emerged. The latter continued to target primarily state actors and symbols; until 2006 the content of its pronouncements was 90 percent Algeria-related.<sup>4</sup>

### The Internationalisation of Algerian Jihadism

The successive internationalisation of the Algerian armed groups can be explained in terms of their growing weakness in a changing national and international context. The militant groups came under increasing pressure from 2000 onward, in particular through the state’s reconciliation initiatives in 1999 and 2005, which included amnesties for repentant armed actors. About six thousand fighters responded by laying down their arms. Additionally, several large-scale massacres caused logistical support for the fighters to evaporate in an increasingly war-weary populace. Such acts of violence were also one reason for the decision by the AIS to disband from 1997.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 initiated an international paradigm shift, and permitted the Algerian government and armed forces to successfully present their domestic conflict retrospectively as a fight against international terrorism. Now Algeria received military counter-terrorism technology that had hitherto been withheld, and cooperation with Western intelligence services intensified. This led to a thinning of the ranks of the armed groups, whose recruiting pool shrank. From 2005 the GIA practically ceased to exist.

The military also succeeded in forcing part of the GSPC south, out of the population centres in the north and east. This, however, intensified the entanglement of armed Islamists with smuggling networks, and increasingly blurred the boundaries between jihadism and international crime.<sup>5</sup> The process was associated with an internationalisation of the jihadist cells, which now included Mauritians, Libyans, Tunisians, Moroccans and even a few Nigerians.<sup>6</sup> The orientation toward the “far enemy” intensified – for pecuniary reasons: from 2003, ransoms for releasing kidnapped Western tourists filled the jihadist coffers.

Finally, in 2006 what was then Algeria’s last relevant jihadist group, the GSPC, moved at least symbolically closer to al-Qaeda’s global network, by renaming itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In December 2007

<sup>3</sup> The theory that GIA cells were infiltrated by the intelligence services and manipulated to discredit Islamist actors at home and abroad is commonplace among Algerian opposition circles. To date, it has been neither proven nor disproven.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel R. Torres Soriano, “The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals”, *Mediterranean Politics* 16, no. 2 (July 2011): 279–98 (283).

<sup>5</sup> See the contribution on the Sahel in this volume, pp. 64ff.

<sup>6</sup> Widespread racism among Arab jihadists is one reason why the Algerian groups have never included many fighters from Sub-Saharan Africa.

the group conducted attacks under its new name on a UN building and the seat of government in Algiers, causing dozens of civilian victims.<sup>7</sup>

### **Tunisia: Internationalisation as a Consequence of a “State without Islamists”**

Militant Islamists are not a new phenomenon in Tunisia either, although the dimensions of jihadism there since 2011 certainly are. A few armed cells had already existed in the era of the dictator Ben Ali (1987–2011). In several incidents in the 1990s Tunisian police and security forces were killed in attacks on the border to Algeria that can be regarded as spill-over effects of the Algerian civil war and entered the public sphere only as rumours.<sup>8</sup> The 2002 synagogue attack in the popular tourist resort of Djerba was the first for which al-Qaeda was responsible. In 2006 and 2007 confrontations occurred close to Tunis between security forces and a Tunisian cell that had trained with the GSPC in Algeria and intended to attack tourist targets.

In Tunisia, too, the roots of jihadism extend back several decades and are partially rooted in an identity conflict. One factor contributing to the rise of the religious counter-movement is the marginalisation of religious actors, structures and symbols in the course of the social modernisation project pursued under Tunisia’s first president, Habib Bourguiba. In the 1980s an Islamist movement with a radical wing prepared to use violence grew in Tunisia too. After Islamist candidates received a respectable showing in the 1989 parliamentary elections, Bourguiba’s successor Ben Ali turned to repression, from the early 1990s banning all Islamist activities, even charity, and equating Islamism with terrorism.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, the state forced even moderate Islamists to go underground or into exile. Without national Islamist authorities, many identity-seeking Islamist Tunisians resorted to the internet and satellite television, and thus turned to often militant preachers and organisations from the Gulf states.<sup>10</sup> The growing wealth gap vis-à-vis the coastal regions also contributed to a youth radicalisation in the south and along the border with Algeria.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?* Carnegie Papers, Middle East Program 104/2009 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with local politicians in southern Tunisia, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Isabelle Werenfels, *Between Integration and Repression: Government Responses to Islamism in the Maghreb*, SWP Research Paper 39/2005 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2005).

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, Middle East/North Africa Report 137 (Brussels, 13 February 2013), 11ff., <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/137-tunisia-violence-and-the-salafi-challenge.pdf> (accessed 2 September 2014).

### **The “Arab Spring”: Booster for Jihadism in Tunisia**

Violent Tunisian Salafists are without a doubt among the beneficiaries of the Arab uprisings since 2011. The turbulence of the Tunisian “revolution” temporarily weakened the state’s authority. Above all, the forces of order became not only less repressive, but also less effective. On top of this, control over mosques and radical Salafists fell away more or less overnight. In the 1980s numerous Tunisians had left to join the jihad in Afghanistan and later Bosnia and/or Iraq, after which they lived in exile or sat in Tunisian prisons. These Tunisian jihadists were now able to return or profit from amnesties. Some of them turned from 2011 to non-violent pietistic or purely political Salafism and founded political parties.<sup>11</sup> Others continued to pursue the path of armed conflict.

Developments in other Arab states affected by turmoil have also worked to the advantage of jihadism in Tunisia. According to official figures up to three thousand Tunisians have been drawn to the fight against the Syrian dictator, often only becoming (or being made into) jihadists after reaching Syria. Many of these have already returned to Tunisia. The collapse of state power in neighbouring Libya has made that country into a staging post, training camp and refuge for Tunisian jihadists. It is an easy matter to smuggle arms across the porous border.

Not least, the governing coalition led by the moderate Islamist party Ennahdha (2011–2013) initially gave potentially violent Salafists a largely free hand. With the not entirely unreasonable argument that repression merely leads to radicalisation, as experience had shown, Ennahdha worked to integrate them into the political process.<sup>12</sup> An eye to Salafist votes may also have played a role here.

But the policy of tolerance was not to last. The nails in the coffin were the Salafist storming of the US embassy in September 2012, the killing of two left-wing opposition politicians in 2013, which was also attributed to Salafists, and a rapidly rising number of attacks on security forces. Since the 2013 break between Ennahdha and the militant Salafists, the latter can no longer operate legally and have been forced underground.

### **The Current Protagonists: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Sharia**

Various jihadist groups exist in both Algeria and Tunisia. In northern Algeria AQIM remains the largest and in many places only one. A string of other groups operate in the southern Algerian regions bordering Mali and Libya, some of them splits from AQIM.<sup>13</sup> In the first years after the revolu-

<sup>11</sup> Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, “The Emergence of Salafism in Tunisia”, *Jadaliyya* (online), 17 August 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6934/the-emergence-of-salafism-in-tunisia> (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ennahdha leader Rachid Ghannouchi, Tunis, September 2012.

<sup>13</sup> See the contribution on the Sahel in this volume, pp. 64ff.



tion Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST) and Katibat (Brigade) Uqbah Ibn Nafi emerged as the central actors in Tunisia.

### AQIM in Northern Algeria: Structures, Opportunities and Social Base

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb consists of several regional so-called brigades (centre and north and in particular Kabylia, eastern provinces close to the Tunisian and Libyan borders, western provinces through to the Moroccan border, southern Algeria and Mali).<sup>14</sup> The brigades differ in their levels of activity, with the lowest clearly in the west, and operate with varying degrees of autonomy.

There is no “official” organigram of AQIM, but it is known that its official leader (emir) is Abu Musab Abd al-Wudud, alias Abd al-Malik Droukdal, who previously headed the GSPC from 2004. Droukdal is suspected to be hiding in the Aurès Mountains of north-eastern Algeria. The organisation’s central organs include the Shura Council (executive) and the so-called senate, which includes the heads of the committees for military affairs, finance, sharia, medical care, politics, international relations and media.<sup>15</sup>

For some years the organisation has found itself facing growing competition in southern Algeria, where Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who led the AQIM brigade in the Sahel until he was ejected by Droukdal, founded a group of his own in 2012 (“Those Who Sign in Blood”). With his spectacular attack on the gas plant at In Amenas in southern Algeria in January 2013 Belmokhtar outstripped Droukdal as a “man of action”, and his exclusion may also have caused financial losses for Droukdal.

AQIM funds itself through ransom payments, cigarette, drug and arms smuggling, and protection money extorted from smugglers,<sup>16</sup> generating considerable resources that permit it to pay its fighters rather than having to rely solely on ideological loyalty.<sup>17</sup> But since Belmokhtar’s departure and the emergence of new groups in the Sahel some of the revenues gen-

<sup>14</sup> *La situation sécuritaire dans les pays de la zone sahélienne*, ed. Assemblée Nationale, Rapport d’information No. 4431 (Paris, 6 March 2012), <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/pdf/rap-info/i4431.pdf> (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Abu al-Walid, “Al-Qaeda’s Organisation: An Attempt to Understand the Strategy and Structure: The Example of the Organisation of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” (Arabic), *Anba as-sahel* (online), 9 October 2013, <http://www.anbasahel.com/index.php/2013-07-10-00-30-24/912-2013-10-09-16-27-39> (accessed 2 September 2014); “Who Are the Emirs of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb?” (Arabic), *France 24* (online), 24 September 2010, <http://www.france24.com/ar/20100924-emirs-aqmi-terrorism-africa-maghreb/> (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Between 2003 and 2012 AQIM is reported to have received \$89 million in ransom payments alone; Christian Nünlist, *Kidnapping for Ransom as a Source of Terrorism Funding*, CSS Analysis in Security Policy 141/2013 (Zürich: Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, October 2013), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/CSS-Analysis-141-EN.pdf> (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Xenia de Graaf, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Political Economy of Terrorism”, *ISN ETH Zurich* (online), 17 January 2012, <http://isnblog.ethz.ch/conflict/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-aqim-and-the-political-economy-of-terrorism> (accessed 2 September 2014).

erated there no longer accrue to AQIM. Although it has expanded its “kidnapping business” to Kabylia in northern Algeria, the victims there are Algerians, from whom generally only modest sums can be extracted. Moreover, the local Berber population is increasingly resisting kidnappings by denouncing supporters of the jihadists’ group.<sup>18</sup> This is bringing AQIM under increasing pressure in northern Algeria, where it is reliant on local assistance for its supplies.

Fundamentally, there is a certain amount of evidence that AQIM’s geographical leeway in this part of Algeria has shrunk. Any major recent attacks for which Droukdal has claimed responsibility have been concentrated with few exceptions in regions to the east and south-east of the capital and in particular Kabylia (for example an attack that killed fourteen soldiers on the eve of the 2014 presidential election). It has been some years since a spectacular attack in the west of the country comparable to the one on the ChercHELL military academy in 2011. The beheading of a French hostage in Kabylia in September 2014, which attracted great attention in the international media, was the work of a small AQIM break-away named Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), which claims to have joined the Islamic State (IS). However, despite growing competition from renegade jihadists, new possibilities have opened up for al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, namely in the Algerian-Tunisian border region and in Libya.

For more than a decade estimates of the strength of AQIM within Algeria have ranged wildly between four hundred and one thousand fighters.<sup>19</sup> However, such figures must be treated with caution. For instance, every week local media report the “elimination” of one or more “terrorists” in northern Algeria. If those killed were indeed jihadis and the above estimates of AQIM membership were correct, the group would have been wiped out long ago in northern Algeria – or it must possess formidable recruiting power.

Algerian media reports about jihadists killed or captured suggest that the age range of the militants is broad and their social backgrounds quite varied. Alongside young fighters (the most prominent being the son of the former deputy leader of the FIS), the list includes ageing veterans of the independence struggle now disillusioned by developments in the post-colonial state and amnestied civil war fighters, so-called “repentis”, who have found themselves unable to resume normal lives.

### Signs of Ideological Pragmatism in the “Arab Spring”

At first glance the ideology, propaganda and overarching goals of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb do not differ substantially from those of al-Qaeda in Pakistan. The essence is to establish an Islamic state that sweeps away the

<sup>18</sup> “Algeria Gains Crucial Help in Fight against Al Qaeda”, *New York Times* (online), 3 November 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/world/africa/algeria-gains-berber-help-in-pushing-out-al-qaeda.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/world/africa/algeria-gains-berber-help-in-pushing-out-al-qaeda.html?_r=0) (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>19</sup> For new estimates see Assemblée Nationale (ed.), “La situation sécuritaire dans les pays de la zone sahélienne” (see note 14).

colonial borders dividing the Islamic world and ends the “occupation of Islamic soil” by unbelievers (“the alliance of Jews and crusaders”). In essence this is a late decolonialisation discourse, propagating the fight against the local elites who are perceived as the extended arm of the “far enemy”. In an interview in 2008 Droukdal said with respect to the “near enemy”: “But most importantly [sic] is to rescue our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion, and their people.”<sup>20</sup> Droukdal’s statements (including a document apparently written by him that journalists from Associated Press found in 2013 in Timbuktu) reflect a fundamentally political and strategic approach. Droukdal himself explains that expressing himself in political rather than religious terms is a tactic to mollify potential local partners and disguise AQIM’s strategic global expansion plans.<sup>21</sup>

Droukdal’s tactical pragmatism was also seen in the “Arab Spring”, where jihadist forces played absolutely no role in the uprisings and were initially sidelined by the new freedoms and associated euphoria. Droukdal issued bombastic statements welcoming the toppling of the dictators and urged Tunisian jihadists to exercise restraint during the first year of the government led by the Islamist Ennahdha. When the jihadists lost the support of the population under their control in northern Mali in 2012, Droukdal condemned the destruction of Sufi shrines and argued for sharia corporal punishments to be introduced gradually, not imposed too abruptly.<sup>22</sup> This demonstrates that AQIM finds itself forced to take heed of local moods.

When increasing numbers of Maghrebi youth set off to join the jihad in Syria, Droukdal called on to them to stay and fight at home rather than “emigrate”.<sup>23</sup> This appeal may be a result of recruitment difficulties and a loss of attractiveness of his organisation. Unlike jihadists in Syria and Iraq, AQIM has neither had major operational successes of its own for years, nor can it boast of control of territory. Another handicap is that the Maghreb al-Qaeda, unlike other groups, has brought forth no religious authorities with global appeal. Droukdal’s religious/ideological charisma is confined to the region itself. This may be partly due to the organisation’s own self-presentation. It runs its own media platform under the name of al-Andalus, symptomatically the Arabic name for the parts of the Iberian Peninsula that stood under Muslim rule until 1492. Its videos comment on current political developments in the Maghreb and show, often in poor-quality images, statements and actions by generally ageing fighters in worn-out

<sup>20</sup> “An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdal”, *New York Times* (online), 1 July 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>21</sup> “Confidential Letter from Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Emir of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, to His Fighters in Mali”, [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf) (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “Al-Qa’idah in Maghreb Objects to Sending Jihadists to Syria”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 9 April 2013.

clothing, living underground under obviously uncomfortable conditions. This neither radiates success nor serves the power fantasies of male youth. In the Maghreb, as elsewhere, it can be assumed that the younger generation of potential jihadists identifies more strongly with the celebrations of masculine brutality and territorial conquest transported via the visual language of the Islamic State.

### **Uqbah Ibn Nafi and Ansar al-Sharia: Structures, Actors and Social Base**

The Tunisian jihadist spectrum has been undergoing a process of differentiation of groups and alliances since 2011. Ansar al-Sharia and Uqbah Ibn Nafi have emerged as the jihadist heavyweights. There are also autonomous local jihadist cells that have emerged since 2011 and are sometimes networked with the larger groups.

The relatively small Uqbah Ibn Nafi has turned into a major challenge for the Tunisian security forces. According to the Tunisian government, the group stood behind the March 18 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, which left more than twenty people dead, most of them tourists. The Uqbah Ibn Nafi operates in the border region to Algeria where it is also involved in smuggling. It first appeared in 2012, when it killed a border guard in an exchange of fire. In summer 2013 the group conducted an attack in which eight soldiers lost their lives. Despite close cooperation with the Algerian army, the Tunisian security forces have failed to stop its activities. The reason for this is not least the increasingly close networking between jihadists and smugglers in the Algerian-Tunisian border region, where above all fuel, drugs and arms are trafficked. Acting against the networks, which are widely connected and clearly outnumber the security forces, is also a delicate matter for the Tunisian government because the local population in the impoverished border regions also profits from smuggling and the associated black economy.<sup>24</sup>

According to official Tunisian sources the rank-and-file of Uqbah Ibn Nafi consists principally of Tunisians, but it is led by Algerians. Estimates of the number of fighters range between several dozen and up to about one hundred. In 2012 the Tunisian government declared that Uqbah Ibn Nafi was a direct offshoot of Droukdal's AQIM.<sup>25</sup> But members of the group are also reported to have appeared at demonstrations by Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>26</sup> There is much to suggest that Uqbah Ibn Nafi originates from the AQIM milieu but has gravitated ever closer to Ansar. In September 2014, how-

<sup>24</sup> ICG, *Tunisia's Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing 41 (Tunis and Brussels, 21 October 2014), 8–10, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/b041-tunisia-s-borders-II-terrorism-and-regional-polarisation-english.pdf> (accessed 28 January 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Dorra Megdiche Meziou, “Al Qaïda, menace-t-elle vraiment la Tunisie?”, *Business News* (online), 21 December 2012, <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Al-Qa%C3%AFda,-menace-t-elle-vraiment-la-Tunisie-,519,35278,1> (accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>26</sup> ICG, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge* (see note 10), 5.

ever, the group (or parts of it) declared its loyalty to the Islamic State.<sup>27</sup> This move set it somewhat apart from AQIM and Ansar, which are respectively negative and ambivalent towards the IS.

Ansar al-Sharia appeared on the scene just a few months after the fall of Ben Ali and rapidly gained support. In May 2012 between five and fifteen thousand sympathisers gathered in Kairouan for its first anniversary. In its first year Ansar could be regarded as a radical Salafist, but not yet clearly violent group. By 2013 it was rapidly radicalising and increasingly openly supporting jihadist activities in Tunisia that it had hitherto only advocated in Syria.

Given its leader's biography, Ansar's radicalisation is unsurprising. In the mid-1980s Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi already played a role in the small violent Islamist scene in Tunisia and was later socialised into the international militant Salafist milieu while in exile in London. In the 1990s he went to Afghanistan, where he moved in Osama Bin Laden's circles and is reported to have been involved in al-Qaeda's 2001 attack on the Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. After his capture in Turkey in 2003 Abu Iyadh was imprisoned in Tunisia until a general amnesty of all political prisoners in 2011. He went underground shortly after the storming of the American embassy in Tunis in September 2012 and is said to have been in Libya for some time.

Little is known about the organisational structures of Ansar al-Sharia. It possesses a five-member shura council (leadership body). Its principal public face is spokesman Seifeddine Erraies, who was detained in Kairouan at the end of July 2014 on suspicion of recruiting jihadists for Syria. Arrests of individuals officially stated to have led or supported Ansar military cells indicate a web of cells operating across large parts of the country. Because Ansar was able to operate legally for more than two years during which its (visible) focus lay on charitable work, there may still be associations in this field that look to it. In summer 2014 the Tunisian government – in a clampdown that was criticized by local and international human rights and democracy activists – arrested a number of charity workers and banned more than one hundred charities suspected of money-laundering or links to violent groups.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to AQIM, Ansar has not (yet) been primarily funded through organised crime. According to official Tunisian sources, it has received donations from home and abroad, including Yemen, Libya and Mali.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> “‘Katiba Uqbah Ibn Nafi’ Swears Allegiance to ‘Islamic State’” (Arabic), *al-Hayat* (online), 20 September 2014, <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/4686594/نافع-بن-عقبة-كتيبة-الإسلامية-الدولة-تبايع-التونسية> (accessed 12 March 2015).

<sup>28</sup> “Charity Workers Held in Tunisia on Suspicion of Funding ‘Terrorism’”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 16 May 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Yasmine Najjar, “Al-Qaeda Funds Ansar al-Sharia, Tunisia Reveals”, *Magharebia* (online), 29 August 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201308300788.html> (accessed 12 March 2015). Bassam Hamdi, “Tunis: Terrorist statements reveal funding sources of Ansar Al-Sharia” (Arabic), *al-Masdar* (online), 26 February 2014, <http://ar.webmanagercenter.com/2014/02/26/22155/الشرعية-أنصار-تنظيم-تمويل-مصادر-تكشف-إرهابي-اعتراقات-تونس> (accessed 2 September 2014).

There are indications that the group has been supported by about one hundred twenty foreign organisations, including Kuwaiti and Saudi foundations,<sup>30</sup> whose contributions go to front organisations that combine charity, such as distributing medicines, food and clothing, with preaching and missionising. Funds are reported to have flowed to AST via the Tunisian Society for the Preservation of Islamic Heritage, and been used to fund jihadist activities. Within Tunisia donations for Ansar are collected in unofficial mosques outside state control.<sup>31</sup> The extent to which Ansar profits from the increasing confluence of jihadism and organised crime in the Tunisian-Algerian border region remains an open question.

At the beginning of 2013 Ansar is reported to have had up to ten thousand supporters,<sup>32</sup> including above all (young) Tunisians who found themselves unable to identify with the transition process because they saw no economic fruits and rejected the new political order as un-Islamic.<sup>33</sup> Mosques have been important venues of radicalisation and recruitment. In December 2014 there were still about ninety unofficial places of worship (mosques) that the state was seeking to bring under its control.<sup>34</sup>

Ansar is especially well anchored in the socio-economically disadvantaged interior provinces and in the border regions (such as Bizerte, Kébili, Kef, Jendouba, Kairouan, Gafsa, Kasserine). Media reports suggest that it can count upon loyalty or at least silence in small towns and rural areas where “everybody knows everybody else” and mistrust towards the government is strong.<sup>35</sup> Even if its supporters have become practically invisible in public since the repression began in summer 2013, that does not mean that their sympathy for “the cause” has disappeared. A part of its following appears, like its leaders, to have turned to splinter groups close to AQIM or IS.<sup>36</sup>

**30** “Organisations and Associations from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia Implicated in Funding of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia” (Arabic), *Turess*, 3 June 2013, <http://www.turess.com/africanmanager/18005> (accessed 2 September 2014); Mona Yahia, “Tunisia: Ansar al-Sharia Threatens Tunisia” (interview with Sami Braham, Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, ITES), *Magharebia* (online), 13 December 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201312150228.html> (accessed 2 September 2014).

**31** Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aaron Y. Zelin, “Uncharitable Organizations. Islamist Groups Are Bankrolling Terror Groups across the Middle East and Pretending It’s Aid Work”, *Foreign Policy*, 26 February 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/26/uncharitable\\_organizations](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/26/uncharitable_organizations) (accessed 2 September 2014).

**32** Anne Wolf, “Tunisia: Signs of Domestic Radicalization Post-Revolution”, *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 1 (January 2013): 1–4.

**33** Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, *Salafist Mouissance and Sheikh-ism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition*, Working Papers in International Studies 7/2012 (Dublin: Dublin City University, 2012).

**34** Interview with the “Chef de cabinet” in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, 12 December 2014.

**35** Frida Dahmani, “Tunisie: ‘Mon voisin est jihadiste’”, *Jeune Afrique*, no. 2787 (8–14 June 2014): 16.

**36** ICG, *Tunisia’s Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation* (see note 24), 4.

## Vacillating between Preaching and Violence

Ansar al-Sharia also wants to establish an Islamic state. But at least in its early days, its style of action and articulation differed decisively from other jihadist organisations due to its initial ability to operate legally and to the local socio-cultural context. Tunisian society is altogether more consensus oriented, educated and secular than most other Arab societies. This is likely to have persuaded Ansar to pursue a pragmatic strategy of initially largely non-violent persuasion.

In its media offerings up until its prohibition in August 2013 the group presented itself above all as the defender of the poor. Its propaganda videos show helpers in orange vests bearing the Ansar logo engaged in social work in poor quarters, or enthusiastic chanting masses at the organisation's mass rallies. In fact, Abu Iyadh adopted an ambiguous stance on the use of violence from the outset, saying that he shared the call of the global jihadists to take up arms against the "far enemy",<sup>37</sup> but declared Tunisia the land of preaching (*dawa*). He placed his faith in "*hisba*", the enforcement of Islamic norms, and in the control of social behaviour. So for example Ansar demonstrated for the legalisation of the face veil at Tunisian universities. Their early, in some cases already violent actions were directed against artists, intellectuals and media outlets they regarded as heretical.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless Abu Iyadh's agenda in 2012 still looked like the programme of a political party. Ansar al-Sharia propagated both the founding of Islamic trade unions and the Islamisation of the finance, media, education and tourism sectors.<sup>39</sup> Its attempts to sell itself as a political actor put the group outside the Salafist mainstream, which strictly rejects participation in political processes not based on sharia.

After it was banned in 2013, Ansar's ideology radicalised with respect to the "near enemy", and from then now on Ennahdha was classed as heretical. Ansar, unlike AQIM and other jihadist groups, still refrained from publishing videos of military actions, and in fact rejects its classification as "terrorist" – claiming instead to be a humanitarian organisation with broad support.<sup>40</sup> But at the same time violence has come to play a growing

<sup>37</sup> M. Khayat, *A Review of Ansar Al-Shari'a in Tunisia's Facebook Page*, Inquiry and Analysis Series Report 1095/2014 (Washington, D.C. et al.: Middle East Media Research Institute, 28 May 2014), <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8005.htm> (accessed 9 September 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "An Escalation in Tunisia: How the State Went to War with Ansar al-Sharia", *War on the Rocks* (online), 24 February 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/an-escalation-in-tunisia-how-the-state-went-to-war-with-ansar-al-sharia/#> (accessed 3 September 2014).

<sup>39</sup> For example Lin Noueihed, "Radical Islamists Urge Bigger Role for Islam in Tunisia", *Reuters* (online), 21 May 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/05/21/tunisia-salafis-idINDEE84K03420120521> (accessed 3 September 2014).

<sup>40</sup> David Gartenstein-Ross and Oren Adaki, "Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Social Media Activity", *jihadology* (online), 6 June 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/06/guest-post-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia-social-media-activity-in-2014/> (accessed 3 September 2014).

role in the group’s blogs and Facebook pages. In April 2014 it launched a “Jihad Umma” competition on Facebook where aspiring jihadists who could not make it to the front themselves could donate weapons for the “land of jihad”.<sup>41</sup> In spring 2014 a new media platform linked to Ansar surfaced under the name Shabab at-Tawhid, whose activities include propaganda for the Islamic State.<sup>42</sup> Finally, at the end of Ramadan 2014 an Ansar statement for the first time praised an attack within Tunisia, which had caused fifteen deaths among the security forces.

### **The Transnational Dimension: Cooperation, Competition and Conflict**

The political upheavals in the Arab world, specifically in Libya and Syria, and the developments in Mali, have opened up opportunities for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Sharia, but also created considerable new challenges for their external relations. On the one hand, circumstances have greatly improved for more intense and to a certain extent even open cooperation between Maghrebi jihadists and like-minded operators from Nigeria to Iraq. On the other hand, major shifts in supply and demand have affected the jihadist market as new groups arise and their mobility improves. This sharpens competition between jihadist organisations and fosters infighting over leadership of the global jihadist spectrum. Moreover, conflicts have flared between jihadist groups concerning tactical questions such as the form and dimensions of use of armed force, and are sometimes reflected in different attitudes towards local political actors.

### **Disseminating Know-how – Logistical Cooperation**

For a good decade informed circles have been aware that the Algerian GSPC and its successor al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have been giving firearms training to jihadists from neighbouring Maghreb states and the Sahel.<sup>43</sup> In 2010 Droukdal announced that he would also support Boko Haram with arms and training,<sup>44</sup> and the mastermind behind the Boko Haram attack on the United Nations in Abuja 2011 had trained with AQIM.<sup>45</sup> This dissemination of know-how by the Maghreb Qaeda is hardly surprising, given that the Algerian jihadists have now accumulated more than twenty years of experience in underground armed struggle.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, *Shabab al-Tawhid: The Rebranding of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia?* PolicyWatch 2250 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 9 May 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Samuel L. Aronson, “AQIM’s Threat to Western Interests in the Sahara”, *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 4 (April 2014): 6–10 (7).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.: 7.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Cocks, “Boko Haram too Extreme for ‘al Qaeda in West Africa’ Brand”, *Reuters* (online), 28 May 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/28/us-nigeria-bokoharam-analysis-idUSKBN0E81D320140528> (accessed 3 September 2014).



The conditions under which AQIM runs training camps and acquires arms have also been greatly improved by the “Arab Spring”. By November 2011 it was already boasting that it had taken possession of arms from Gaddafi’s depots,<sup>46</sup> and Libya has become a refuge for Algerian jihadists. It cannot be verified whether the Maghreb al-Qaeda is running its own training camps in Libya – or even in Tunisia, as Algerian media assert. But it is known that the fighters that attacked In Amenas, who belonged to the group led by former AQIM commander Belmokhtar, entered Algeria across the border from Libya. The Tunisian nationality of eleven of the attackers is also a clear sign of the regionalisation of this originally Algerian group.

There are also indications of cooperation between Ansar al-Sharia and the Libyan jihadists. In 2014 the latter placed a video showing a kidnapped Tunisian diplomat and a message for the Tunisian government on the AST-linked platform Shabab al-Tawhid.<sup>47</sup> Ansar leader Abu Iyadh is suspected to be in Libya, and the country became a hub for Tunisian jihadists travelling to Syria and Iraq. Jihadists from Tunisia appear to represent the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>48</sup> According to official Tunisian figures, at least 2,400 Tunisians had travelled there by June 2014, of whom 376 are reported to have returned home by summer 2014.<sup>49</sup>

In relation to the size of the Tunisian population as a whole there are disproportionate numbers of Tunisians in jihadist groups from Syria to Pakistan. The number of Algerians estimated to have left for Syria is significantly smaller, with about five hundred fighting for the IS,<sup>50</sup> somewhat fewer for the al-Nusra-Front. These – for the Maghreb context modest – figures could reflect the success of Droukdal’s exhortations to fight the “near enemy”. Widespread war-weariness in Algeria after the long civil war could be another reason.

<sup>46</sup> “Aqmi affirme être en possession d’armes issues du conflit libyen”, *France 24* (online), 11 November 2011, <http://www.france24.com/fr/20111111-aqmi-affirme-etre-possession-armes-issues-guerre-libye-benghazi-islamiste-cnt-mali/> (accessed 4 September 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Stefano M. Torelli, “Tunisian Jihadists Establishing New Networks with Libyan Islamists”, *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 11 (May 2014): 5f.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Allen Greene and Inez Torre, “Syria’s Foreign Jihadis: Where Do They Come From?” *CNN* (online), 1 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/09/syria-foreign-jihadis/?sr=fb090114foreignfightersinsyria7pinteractivephoto> (accessed 10 September 2014).

<sup>49</sup> “Tunisia Improves Security, but Terrorist Threat Remains: Government Reports 367 Arrests of Jihadists Returning from Syria”, *ANSamed* (online), 28 August 2014, [http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2014/08/28/tunisia-improves-security-but-terrorist-threat-remains\\_efdacadf55f5-4e9b-a41b-3b27da5b189f.html](http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2014/08/28/tunisia-improves-security-but-terrorist-threat-remains_efdacadf55f5-4e9b-a41b-3b27da5b189f.html) (accessed 4 September 2014); “Ministry: Around 2400 Tunisians Fighting in Syria”, *Al-Arabiya* (online), 23 June 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2014/06/24/Ministry-around-2-400-Tunisians-fighting-in-Syria.html> (accessed 4 September 2014).

<sup>50</sup> “500 Algerians Fighting with ISIS in Iraq” (Arabic), *El-Hayat* (online), 30 June 2014, <http://www.elhayat.net/article5119.html> (accessed 4 September 2014).

### Complicated Positioning in the International Jihadist Spectrum

The flip side of the new freedoms and opportunities for cooperation for al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia is growing conflict with other jihadist actors. Here personal rivalries and competition for personnel and financial resources play just as much a role as tactical and ideological differences between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the two dominant jihadist currents in the Arab world.<sup>51</sup> It is not easy for al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and Ansar Tunisia to reconcile these diverging interests in their external relations.

For example, AQIM’s leadership backs the al-Qaeda centre in its ideological conflicts with the Islamic State.<sup>52</sup> In Syria AQIM consequently supports the al-Nusra-Front, which is also allied with al-Qaeda. But Droukdal’s appeal to Maghrebi jihadists to fight at home rather than in the Near East has strained relations with al-Nusra.<sup>53</sup> Nor is the decision to join forces with the al-Nusra-Front uncontested within al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, with leading figures declaring support for IS.<sup>54</sup> The decision by AQIM breakaway Jund al-Khilafa to swear allegiance to IS leader Baghdadi confirms that even significant figures from al-Qaeda in the Maghreb are not immune to the ideological offensive of IS.

The leader of Ansar Tunisia, Abu Iyadh, has promised support to both the Islamic State and the al-Nusra-Front and offered to serve as a mediator between them.<sup>55</sup> Whether his prime interest is to strengthen the jihadists through reconciliation or to further personal ambitions remains an open question. Rivalry or cooperation between Tunisian jihadists could also play a role in these choices of position by Ansar, as a number of important IS commanders are Tunisians.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the Algerian and Tunisian groups are fighting for positions and resources in a rapidly changing jihadist environment. Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and Ansar Tunisia must, as already mentioned, compete for recruits with a growing spectrum of transnational groups. They have no

<sup>51</sup> See the introduction to this study, pp. 7ff.

<sup>52</sup> “AQIM Invites ISIS to Consultations and Underlines Duty of Allegiance to az-Zawahiri” (Arabic), *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (online), 15 July 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=193536> (accessed 4 September 2014).

<sup>53</sup> “Algerian Security Says Al-Qa’idah Envoy in Region to Meet AQIM Leader”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 11 September 2013.

<sup>54</sup> For example, “Islamic State Receives Aid from Abu Abdallah Uthman al-Asmy, ‘Judge’ of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” (Arabic), *YouTube* (online), 27 June 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmaUmbKseo> (accessed 4 September 2014).

<sup>55</sup> “Declaration on Assistance and Support for Our Fellow Believers in Syria (Sham) to Sheikh Abu ‘Aiad al-Tunisi” (Arabic), *YouTube* (online), 14 January 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgbZ5V4xRv0> (accessed 28 January 2014). Official statements by Abu Iyadh provide no confirmation of repeated IS claims that Ansar Tunisia had joined it.

<sup>56</sup> “Tunisians Implicated in Iraq War Crimes: Recent Atrocity Highlights Need for Investigations”, *Human Rights Watch*, 25 June 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/25/tunisians-implicated-iraq-war-crimes> (accessed 4 September 2014). According to rumours circulating in Tunisia, members of Ben Ali’s secret police joined the fighting in Syria for financial motives.

option but to take a position on IS as the world's most powerful jihadist actor. But simply to escape the magnetic pull of IS they have to verbally ramp up the fight at home and build contacts with local non-jihadist political actors. Relations between Ansar and members of Ennahdha until 2013 represent one example of this, AQIM's (transient) arrangements with local non-jihadist actors in Mali another. Beyond this, simply by virtue of their funding channels AQIM and AST are reliant on networking with other jihadist organisations in the Sahel and Libya. Whether the Algerian and Tunisian groups can continue to flourish will be strongly determined by the trajectory of Libya's statehood.

The future strength and tactics of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia will thus depend to a decisive extent on how well they succeed in manoeuvring between their local circumstances and national objectives on the one side and the opportunities and imperatives of the global jihadist spectrum on the other.



## Spreading Local Roots: AQIM and Its Offshoots in the Sahara

*Wolfram Lacher and Guido Steinberg*

In January 2013, French forces launched an offensive in northern Mali to stop local rebels and jihadist groups advancing on cities in central Mali and dislodge them from their northern strongholds. While the French achieved their objectives within three weeks, most jihadists did not stay to fight but blended into local communities or fled to neighbouring countries. Coordinated attacks on a French uranium mine and a military base in neighbouring Niger in May 2013 and numerous smaller attacks in northern Mali have since demonstrated that the jihadists remain active.

In the preceding years, northern Mali had become an important refuge for the Algerian al-Qaeda affiliate (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM) and allied groups. Algerian militants had settled in the region since the end of the 1990s and established contacts with the local population. Over time, groups emerged that were largely composed of northern Malians and recruits from other Sahel states. They used the Tuareg rebellion that broke out in early 2012 – and ultimately led to the French intervention – to gain control over most of northern Mali in alliance with local warlords. Their operations threatened the integrity of the Malian state.

The leading jihadist figure was Mokhtar Belmokhtar (alias Khalid Abu al-Abbas), an Algerian field commander who fell out with the AQIM leadership in northern Algeria at the end of 2012. Belmokhtar was responsible for the spectacular attack on the Algerian gas plant at In Amenas in January 2013, and subsequently conducted the aforementioned attacks in Niger together with the Group for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya), which is known under its French acronym MUJAO (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest).

The jihadist scene in the region is not dominated by a single large organisation, but instead characterised by changing alliances between numerous smaller groups such as MUJAO, Ansar al-Din and al-Mulaththamin; its leading figures have been Belmokhtar, Abu Zaid and Iyad ag Ghali. Now that the French intervention has broken the alliances forged in 2012 between local warlords and the jihadist hard core, the number of militant jihadists in the region is likely to have shrunk back to several hundred fighters, after the temporary recruitment spike of 2012. There are, however, no reliable sources on their strength. Belmokhtar, who was able to evade capture by the French, and his new group al-Mourabitoun, which was joined by many former AQIM fighters and some members of MUJAO, has become the most significant terrorist threat in the Sahara. Jihadist groups continue to profit from the region's long-running crises, above all the unresolved conflict in northern Mali, and from the collapse of state

control in Libya. In this environment of instability, the jihadists can rely on solid and longstanding local ties, particularly in northern Mali.

### **Conflicts and Collusion: The Regional Context**

The development of jihadist groups in the Sahel and Sahara has been strongly shaped by a changing regional environment. Three phases can be distinguished. During the second term of Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré (2007–2012), corruption and the proliferation of criminal networks created ideal conditions for the emergence of jihadist groups in northern Mali. After conflict broke out in northern Mali and Touré was ousted by a military coup in 2012, these groups expanded their control across vast expanses of northern Mali, recruited many fighters among the local population and consolidated alliances with the region's elites. When the French-led intervention began in January 2013, most of these alliances successively dissolved. Some of the jihadists moved to neighbouring countries, while others remain in northern Mali but on the defensive.

The Saharan regions of the Sahel states, where a small group of Algerian jihadists took hold from 2003, were by no means outside of state control. But to exercise their influence there, central governments have been dependent on allies in their northern regions. Such local strongmen often enjoy extensive freedoms, which they exploit not least to profit from the region's thriving smuggling economy. In this game, the central government risks either losing control over its powerful allies, or provoking attempts by local rivals to violently contest these power relations.

Under these circumstances, Algerian jihadists succeeded between 2003 and 2011 in establishing local roots in northern Mali. To suppress a Tuareg rebellion that broke out in 2006, President Touré relied increasingly on militias mobilised by local rivals of the rebels. The Malian government gave the leaders of these militias, which were recruited above all from Arab groups in the regions around Timbuktu and Gao and from Imghad Tuareg, a free hand in regional drug smuggling. The head of State Security in Timbuktu even mediated successfully in 2007 in a local conflict over a delivery of cocaine.<sup>1</sup> Close connections arose between local allies of Touré, criminal networks and armed groups, which in turn maintained connections to AQIM. Alongside drug smuggling, the business of kidnapping Western citizens played a central role. Leaving aside one initial spectacular case in 2003 (see below, p. 75), the series of AQIM kidnappings began five years later. Between early 2008 and November 2012 thirty-nine Western citizens were kidnapped in the Sahel/Sahara region. By May 2015 twenty-nine of them had been released, one had been freed in a commando operation, seven had died or been killed, and two were still in captivity. The kidnappings took place in southern Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and

<sup>1</sup> "Tuaregs and Arabs Clash over Drugs in Northern Mali", diplomatic cable, US Embassy Bamako, 31 August 2007, [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAMAKO961\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAMAKO961_a.html) (accessed 20 January 2015).

southern Tunisia, but in all cases where hostages were released this was done by AQIM or MUJAO in northern Mali.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is no hard information, ransoms were probably paid in all cases that ended without bloodshed. On the basis of various sources the average sum involved can be put in the low single-digit millions of euros per hostage.<sup>3</sup> This would mean that between €35 and 50 million in ransoms were paid between 2008 and 2012.<sup>4</sup> In northern Mali these were significant sums, which played a decisive role in helping AQIM put down local roots. Notables and politicians from northern Mali, mostly close allies of Touré, received shares for their roles as mediators. An entire network of interests was built on the kidnapping business, and the revenues turned AQIM in northern Mali into a financially powerful actor with influential allies.

The ambivalent stance of the Malian leadership towards AQIM created tensions with Mauritania and Algeria, which protested vehemently against connivance with the organisation, and later refused to cooperate with Mali on counter-terrorism, not least because information exchanged with the Malians sometimes found its way to AQIM's accomplices.<sup>5</sup> European governments worsened these tensions by successfully urging Mali and Mauritania to exchange imprisoned criminals and AQIM members for European hostages.<sup>6</sup> In northern Mali itself, the complicity between Touré's circles and criminal networks led to a progressive erosion of state control. According to Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, first defence minister, later foreign minister under Touré, such complicity completely dominated the government's actions in the north in the late Touré era.<sup>7</sup> Rivalries over control of the shadow economy further exacerbated tensions in the north. The leading actors – influential politicians, businessmen and militia leaders – probably pursued their individual interests above all. But they generally recruited their militias among individuals from their own tribal back-

<sup>2</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, Carnegie Paper (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012), [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel\\_sahara.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf) (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Principal sources include concurring media reports, statements by the former US ambassador to Mali, and a Swiss parliamentary document concerning approval of special funds; "6. ordentliche Tagung der Finanzdelegation der eidg. Räte", *Die Bundesversammlung – Das Schweizer Parlament*, Bern, 20 November 2009, <http://www.parlament.ch/d/mm/2009/Seiten/mm-finde-2009-11-19.aspx>; "Mali Conflict: French Ransom Cash 'Funded Militants'", *BBC News*, 8 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21391518> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Lacher, *Organized Crime* (see note 2), 8–9. This estimate matches that of Rukmini Callimachi ("Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror", *New York Times*, 29 July 2014), who puts the ransoms paid in the Sahel between 2008 and 2013 at €96 million, of which €50 flowed in 2013 alone.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfram Lacher, "The Malian Crisis and the Challenge of Regional Cooperation", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 18 (2013): 1–5.

<sup>6</sup> Lacher, *Organized Crime* (see note 2), 14; Wolfram Lacher, *Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel*, WACD Background Paper 4 (Geneva: West Africa Commission on Drugs, August 2013), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Interview by Wolfram Lacher with Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, Bamako, 14 July 2012.

ground, giving rise to conflicts between groups defining themselves in terms of their ethnic or tribal loyalties.

The situation in northern Mali was therefore ripe for open conflict when hundreds of former members of Muammar al-Gaddafi's armed forces returned from Libya in September and October 2011 in convoys of vehicles mounted with artillery. Most of these Malian Tuareg had served for years in Libya, or had grown up there.<sup>8</sup> After arriving in northern Mali they divided into different camps. The largest joined with deserting Malian officers to form the military backbone of what was later to become the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad, MNLA). The rebellion finally began in January 2012, with Malian government forces quickly suffering devastating defeats. After the March military coup against Touré, the Malian army in the north collapsed.

AQIM and its offshoot MUJAO were able to profit decisively from the conflict in northern Mali because it involved not only a rebellion against the government in Bamako, but also a power struggle between northern Malian actors. Contrary to widespread belief abroad, the conflict in northern Mali was not rooted in a supposed "Tuareg problem". The MNLA only represented some factions among the Tuareg community, which in turn constitutes a minority in northern Mali. Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith) formed in January 2012 around a handful of influential Ifoghas Tuareg politicians, first and foremost Iyad ag Ghali, as a rival rebel group to the MNLA. In order to assert their claim to leadership, the Ifoghas politicians formed a close alliance with AQIM, whose financial and military strength allowed it to tip the balance in the internal conflicts in northern Mali. In the region around Gao, businessmen and politicians of the Tilemsi Arabs and Songhai joined forces with MUJAO to drive the MNLA out of the city. In the Timbuktu region, parts of the Arab militias formed the Arab Movement of Azawad (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad, MAA), which pulled back to the Mauritanian border; others joined Ansar al-Din, which ran the city together with AQIM. The pro-government Imghad Tuareg militias led by al-Hajj Gamou fled to Niger; a smaller group also went over to Ansar al-Din. As a consequence, Gao and Timbuktu were under the control of MUJAO, AQIM and Ansar al-Din from July 2012. The Ifoghas leaders of Ansar al-Din controlled Kidal. The MNLA had been driven into peripheral areas, with some of its fighters joining Ansar al-Din for opportunistic and financial motives. The latter group appeared to have significant resources at its disposal through its connection to AQIM.<sup>9</sup> The situation opened up completely new possibilities for AQIM and MUJAO to recruit and operate freely, but at the same time confronted them with the challenging task of building an Islamic state in northern Mali.

<sup>8</sup> Denis M. Tull and Wolfram Lacher, *Die Folgen des Libyen-Konflikts für Afrika: Gräben zwischen der AU und dem Westen, Destabilisierung der Sahelzone*, SWP-Studie 8/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2012).

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Mali: Eviter l'Escalade*, Rapport Afrique 189 (Dakar and Brussels, 18 July 2012), 17–18.



The French-led intervention in January 2013 quickly skewered the jihadists' tentative efforts to administer the north, and the tactical alliances created in 2012 crumbled. The Ifoghas aristocrats in Kidal parted ways from Iyad ag Ghali and his allies in AQIM, and founded the Islamic Movement of Azawad (Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad or MIA; later High Council for the Unity of Azawad, HCUA). Like the MNLA, they now also wanted to cooperate with the French army. Some of the Arab militias in the regions around Timbuktu and Gao returned to the government side, although without giving up their arms, in order to retain bargaining power. The Imghad militias initially returned as units of the Malian army and later formed the core of the pro-government GATIA militia (Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés). Parts of MUJAO henceforth operated as a splinter group of the MAA. One contingent of regional jihadists probably decamped to neighbouring states, although there is no evidence to suggest that they regrouped in Libya. In northern Mali itself, the remnants of the jihadist groups were driven back underground, always on the lookout for operations by the French army and its African allies, which considerably restricted their movements. But even after the end of major operations, frequent attacks on French, African and Malian forces showed that the jihadists retained a presence.

The French intervention in early 2013 was successful to the extent that it deprived the jihadists of their northern Mali refuge. Beyond that, however, little progress was made on resolving northern Mali's conflicts. Militias and rebel groups kept their weapons and regular clashes continued to occur; in May 2014 the Malian army again withdrew from large parts of the north following fighting with the MNLA. And the fragmentation of the armed groups frustrated mediation attempts. After the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta as president in August 2013, there were growing signs of a revival of the Touré-era alliances between central authority and local leaders, from which allies of the jihadists also profited.<sup>10</sup> Despite the French presence, ongoing conflicts in the north continued to offer opportunities for jihadist groups, which were by now deeply rooted in local society.

## AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar al-Din

Until 2012, the Saharan units of AQIM had been the leading jihadist group in the region. Its predecessor GSPC (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat) had been operating in the Sahara since the late 1990s, already under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Belmokhtar is today far and away the best-known Algerian terrorist and personifies the shift of the

<sup>10</sup> For example, a former MUJAO member detained by the French army in August 2014 was quickly released by the Malian justice system. The same month, the former head of the Islamic court in Timbuktu (an institution established by AQIM and Ansar al-Din) was released from prison. "Mali: l'ancien membre du Mujao Yoro Ould Daha relâché", *Radio France Internationale* (RFI), 9 August 2014; "Mali: libération critiquée du chef du tribunal islamique de Tombouctou", *RFI*, 25 August 2014.

armed struggle from northern Algeria to the Sahara. In fact, Belmokhtar is only one among many jihadist commanders operating in the region, sometimes cooperating, sometimes competing with each other. Factionalism is one of the essential characteristics of Saharan jihadism in recent years.

### **Mokhtar Belmokhtar**

Mokhtar Belmokhtar (alias Khalid Abu al-Abbas) was born in 1972 in Ghardaia, southern Algeria, and by his own account spent a year and a half in Afghanistan in 1991–1992, where he trained in various camps run by the Arab Afghanistan fighters and also saw combat.<sup>11</sup> After returning to Algeria in 1993 he joined the Armed Islamic Group (Groupement islamique armé, GIA) and operated in the Sahara and Sahel. In the mid-1990s he rose to become Amir (commander) of the Saharan unit. In 1998 Belmokhtar moved to the newly formed GSPC, where he retained his position. Because the security forces kept a strong presence in southern Algeria, in comparison to neighbouring states, he was unable to settle there permanently. But he profited from the permeability of the borders. As well as the desert zones of southern Algeria, his area of operations encompassed northern Mali and regions of Niger and Mauritania. One of the most important functions of the Saharan group was to procure and smuggle weapons and other equipment for the GSPC headquarters in northern Algeria, and from 2007 for AQIM.<sup>12</sup>

However, Belmokhtar did not restrict himself to logistics for AQIM. At least according to the pro-government Algerian press he also funded his activities by smuggling cigarettes on a grand scale (and according to some reports also cocaine). This earned him the nickname of “Mr. Marlboro”, which is rather unbecoming for a Salafist. In view of these activities his rivals within AQIM frequently accuse him of being more a profit-driven criminal than a convinced jihadist. Belmokhtar, however, consistently rejects such charges in interviews. Controversy over his role sharpened as the Sahara units of AQIM gained in prominence through numerous kidnappings and the ensuing ransom payments from European governments. In the first incident, in February 2003, an AQIM group under the command of Amari Saifi “al-Para” kidnapped thirty-two European tourists, mostly Germans, Austrians and Swiss, who were released several months later after payment of a ransom said to have amounted to €5 million.<sup>13</sup> Belmokhtar was only tangentially involved at that point, but entered the kidnapping business in a big way from 2008. Various AQIM units were

<sup>11</sup> Biographical information sourced from an interview given by Belmokhtar in the first half of 2006 and published on a jihadist website: “Interview with Khalid Abu l-Abbas – Commander of the Sahara Region of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat” (Arabic), <http://www.tawhed.ws/pr?i=6711> (accessed 12 August 2014).

<sup>12</sup> On AQIM see the contribution by Isabelle Werenfels in this volume, pp. 51ff.

<sup>13</sup> Callimachi, “Paying Ransoms” (see note 4). One German hostage, Michaela Spitzer, died of heatstroke.

responsible for the series of kidnappings that then ensued, which are described in greater detail on page 70.

The proceeds enabled the jihadists to buy support in northern Mali and thus deepen a process that had already begun years earlier. Belmokhtar and other field commanders integrated themselves into northern Malian society, including by marrying into local tribes. Their wealth turned them into attractive business partners and allies for local elites. It also placed them in a position to expand their arsenal and recruit in northern Mali, Mauritania and other states of the Maghreb and Sahel. Soon Algerians were in a minority in the Saharan AQIM units.<sup>14</sup> The ransoms, largely paid by European governments, were the single most important factor behind the groups' growth in northern Mali, and their eventual takeover during the conflict of 2012.<sup>15</sup>

### Conflict between Belmokhtar and Abu Zaid

The enormous influx of funds was not purely positive for AQIM as an organisation, because it offered field commanders like Belmokhtar the possibility to operate even more independently of their leadership, which is based in the mountains east of Algiers. The consequence was conflicts between Belmokhtar and AQIM Amir Abd al-Malik Droukdal, and rivalries with other field commanders in the Sahara. While Belmokhtar had long functioned as the Amir of AQIM's Saharan group, the latter consisted of many smaller units and he enjoyed most effective control over his own, known as "al-Mulaththamin" or "the masked ones". The extent of his authority over the other units fluctuated over the years. This applied in particular to the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade led by Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid, who was Belmokhtar's most dangerous rival for leadership of AQIM in the Sahara from 2008 until his death in February 2013. Abu Zaid (originally Abid Hammadou or Mohammed Ghadiri) originated from Touggourt in the Algerian Sahara. He fought for several years at the side of AQIM leader Droukdal in northern Algeria, before he was sent to the Sahara and like

<sup>14</sup> In June 2010 the Algerian government asserted that of 108 identified members of Saharan AQIM units, thirty-four were Mauritanian, twenty-one Algerian, twenty-one Malian, fourteen from Niger, seven Chadian, six Libyan, five Moroccan and three Tunisian (the total named in the Algerian source – cited below – does not correspond to the sum of listed nationalities). Although the Algerian authorities have an interest in playing down the Algerian component of AQIM, their figures tally with those from other sources. For example, the Mauritanian journalist Mohamed Mahmoud Abu al-Maali, who travelled through AQIM-controlled areas in 2012 and spoke with leaders of the group, reported that northern Malians made up the largest contingent of AQIM fighters, followed by Mauritians and Algerians. But the leadership remained dominated by Algerians. Interview by Wolfram Lacher with Mohamed Mahmoud Abu al-Maali, Nouakchott, July 2012; "Algerian Newspaper Reveals: Most Fighters in Armed Groups in the Sahara Are Mauritians" (Arabic), *Elbidaya*, 15 June 2010, <http://www.elbidaya.net/spip.php?article6139> (accessed 20 January 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Morten Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali", *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 4 (April 2014): 1–6 (2).

Belmokhtar set up his base in northern Mali. His unit copied Belmokhtar's example and after 2008 took more than twenty Europeans hostage. Most of them were later released for large ransoms, but Abu Zaid had the British captive Edwin Dyers executed in June 2009, possibly because his country refuses on principle to pay ransoms. In 2010 his followers also killed the Frenchman Michel Germaneau, after a failed attempt by French and Mauritanian special forces to free him.<sup>16</sup> While these acts of violence earned Abu Zaid the reputation of being more strongly ideologically motivated than Belmokhtar, the latter's spectacular attacks in southern Algeria and Niger in 2013 erased any doubts that (for all his profiteering) he must also be regarded as a convinced Jihadist. Consequently, there are no clearly discernible distinctions between the two AQIM units.

Alongside the conflict with Abu Zaid, Belmokhtar also engaged in a power struggle with AQIM leader Droukdal. When Droukdal was appointed Amir of GSPC in 2006, Belmokhtar reportedly said he believed he should have been given the post. Subsequently, the AQIM leadership lost all control over its Saharan Amir, who concentrated above all on securing his refuge in northern Mali and running the kidnapping business. It is possible that Belmokhtar did not even share his revenues with the AQIM leadership. In communications to followers in the Sahara, the AQIM headquarters complained bitterly about Belmokhtar's insubordination. In a letter of 3 October 2012, for example, leading functionaries write that Belmokhtar ignores instructions and refuses to communicate with them.<sup>17</sup> By that point Droukdal and his entourage had already begun to draw consequences. The AQIM leadership now switched their support to Belmokhtar's adversaries among the Sahara commanders, who included Abu Zaid. But by this point Belmokhtar was already too powerful for such a move to present any danger. In December 2012 he left AQIM and formed a new group named "al-Muwaqqi'un bi-l-dam" (Those Who Sign in Blood), which was joined by the AQIM fighters under his command. In the following months he also worked increasingly closely with another group that had split from AQIM, the Group for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, MUJAO).

### **MUJAO and the Indigenisation of the Jihadists**

In October 2011 the group that later became MUJAO kidnapped an Italian and two Spanish citizens in the south-western Algerian town of Tindouf. The ransom they received enabled them to split from AQIM one month

<sup>16</sup> Edward Cody, "'Emir of the South' Abu Zeid Poised to Take over al-Qaeda in NW Africa", *Washington Post*, 20 October 2010.

<sup>17</sup> An Associated Press team found one of these letters in spring 2013 in a building used by AQIM in northern Mali. Rukmini Callimachi, "Rise of al-Qaida Sahara Terrorist", *AP*, 28 May 2013. The Arabic original and an English translation can be found at [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2015).

later.<sup>18</sup> MUJAO's emergence offered further evidence that the previously mostly Algerian jihadist groups were putting down roots in the Sahara. The core of MUJAO was initially formed by Arab jihadists and businessmen from the Tilemsi Valley north of Gao, and former AQIM members from Mauritania and Western Sahara.<sup>19</sup> Even more than Belmokhtar, MUJAO subsequently acquired a reputation as a link between jihadists and criminal networks, especially drug smugglers.<sup>20</sup>

The increasing tendency of jihadists to go local also applied to the AQIM units. A new AQIM unit named al-Ansar formed around 2010 and recruited above all among Malian Tuareg, and Abdelkrim al-Targui became the first non-Algerian to take command of an AQIM unit.<sup>21</sup> Another unit, the Al-Furqan brigade, consisted principally of Mauritania and Berabiche Arabs from the Timbuktu region, though it was led by an Algerian, Yahia Abu al-Hammam (originally Jamal Okasha). MUJAO and the Saharan AQIM units were the first armed groups to draw upon a transnational recruiting base in a region where rebel groups had hitherto formed almost exclusively along ethnic and tribal lines. With their strong local contingents the jihadists later became central actors in the conflict that broke out in January 2012 in northern Mali.

The "Saharisation" of the AQIM units was also reflected in their tactics. Unlike their counterparts in northern Algeria, the Saharan groups made little effort to attack Algerian security forces, with the exception of one operation just across the border in June 2010.<sup>22</sup> This only changed in 2012. In northern Mali, AQIM factions and the security forces apparently sought to avoid each other, with occasional signs of cooperation. According to concurring reports, AQIM's 2009 killing of the above-mentioned (S. 70) head of State Security in Timbuktu was attributable to a disagreement over business relations. After pro-government militias had suffered severe losses in pursuit of the suspected perpetrators, the Malian leadership returned to its policy of avoiding any confrontation with AQIM. Until 2011, the Saharan units of AQIM largely focused on the kidnapping business. Only in Mauritania did they conduct regular attacks, likely due to the prominent role of Mauritanian fighters in these units, which thereby provoked repeated Mauritanian military incursions into Malian territory.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lacher, *Organized Crime* (see note 2), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Maali, *Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara* (Arabic) (Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, April 2012); Andrew Lebovich, "Trying to Understand MUJWA", *al-Wasat*, 22 August 2012, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/trying-to-understand-mujwa/> (accessed 20 January 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Lacher, *Organized Crime* (see note 2), 15; Lacher, *Challenging the Myth* (see note 6), 5–6.

<sup>21</sup> Abu al-Maali, *Al-Qaeda and its allies* (see note 19), 5.

<sup>22</sup> "11 gardes frontières assassinés à Tinzaouatine", *Liberté*, 1 July 2010.

<sup>23</sup> *Mauritania's Goals in Its Struggle against al-Qaeda* (Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 25 July 2011).

### Taking Control in Northern Mali

While the uprising that broke out in January 2012 initially bore all the hallmarks of another Tuareg rebellion, it was usurped by the jihadists within just a few months. The reasons lay in their financial and military strength, which made them important allies for local conflict parties, as well as in the rivalries between local warlords, who therefore had every reason to cultivate such alliances.

Officially it was the MNLA that sparked the uprising, but it did not inflict the defeats suffered by the Malian army on its own. During the first weeks Ansar al-Din,<sup>24</sup> led by Iyad ag Ghali, and probably parts of AQIM, such as the al-Ansar brigades, fought alongside the MNLA.<sup>25</sup> Ag Ghali, a veteran of the 1990s rebellion and prominent Tuareg leader, had already embraced Salafist ideas over the years. However, his rivalries with the MNLA were not only ideological in nature, but also concerned the leadership of the rebellion.<sup>26</sup> In order to gain the upper hand, Ag Ghali and allied politicians entered a close alliance with AQIM and MUJAO.

After the Malian army had been defeated in the north, the three groups jointly turned on the MNLA, which by early summer 2012 ceased to play any role in the major cities of the north and was being driven to the margins. Subsequently, the jihadists divided the north amongst themselves: Ansar al-Din and the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade of Abu Zaid and set up their headquarters in Timbuktu, while Belmokhtar and MUJAO dominated Gao.<sup>27</sup> In both cities they set about laying the foundations of an “Islamic state”, in which they enforced their interpretation of Islamic law. From this now fully established safe haven they conducted two attacks on targets in southern Algeria in 2012.<sup>28</sup>

The jihadist takeover led to a further intertwining of regional extremism and local interests. Many Arabs from the Tilemsi Valley joined MUJAO largely because they regarded it as a protector against what they saw as a hostile MNLA,<sup>29</sup> and the jihadists were able to mobilise local manpower using revenues from the kidnapping business. MUJAO now also recruited increasingly among the Peul and Songhai, outside its initial ethnic base.<sup>30</sup>

The boundaries between the individual groups blurred increasingly. Unlike the fighters of MUJAO and AQIM, Ansar al-Din’s members were

<sup>24</sup> Different versions of the name, such as Ansar Dine, appear in press reports and research literature.

<sup>25</sup> ICG, *Mali: Eviter l'Escalade* (see note 9), 14–17.

<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Grégoire, “Islamistes et rebelles touaregs maliens: alliances, rivalités et ruptures”, *EchoGéo*, 3 July 2013, 7–8, <http://echogeo.revues.org/pdf/13466> (accessed 5 March 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Lacher, *Organized Crime* (see note 2), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Mali – Yero Ould Doha: ‘Le Mujao nous protégeait du MNLA’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 11 August 2014, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20140811174449/> (accessed 5 March 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Lebovich, “The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali”, *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 6 (June 2013): 4–10.

almost exclusively local and it pursued no agenda extending beyond Mali's borders. Its Tuareg fighters in the regions around Kidal and Tessalit did, however, maintain close relations with AQIM's al-Ansar brigade; after the defeat of the MNLA many of its fighters also joined Ansar al-Din. In Timbuktu, on the other hand, it was above all Berabiche Arabs who operated under the name of Ansar al-Din, some of whom had close contacts to the local AQIM unit or were in fact AQIM members.<sup>31</sup> It thus became increasingly difficult to distinguish between regional jihadists and local fighters.

The French intervention of early 2013 put paid to the jihadists' attempts at state-building. Most of the jihadists declined to stand and fight against clearly superior forces, and many succeeded in retreating in time. The possibilities that control over northern Mali offered to the jihadists were demonstrated five days after the beginning of the French intervention. On 16 January 2013, a group sent by Belmokhtar occupied an Algerian gas plant at In Amenas close to the Libyan border and took hostages. It took the Algerian army four days to recapture the complex. Forty staff and about thirty terrorists were killed.<sup>32</sup> While the perpetrators claimed that the attack was in response to the French intervention in Mali, they had most likely been planning the operation for months. More broadly, the attack had a strong political dimension, as it was directed against both the Algerian gas industry and the Western presence in the Sahara. Even if the operation may have aimed at hostage-taking for ransom, its primary objective was clearly political. This was even more obvious in the twin attack in neighbouring Niger in May 2013, for which the newly founded "Mourabitoun" commanded by Belmokhtar claimed responsibility.<sup>33</sup> Suicide attacks on an army base in Agadez and a French-run uranium mine in Arlit left twenty-one dead.<sup>34</sup> Economic motives demonstrably played no role here. With these three spectacular attacks, Belmokhtar underlined his claim to leadership among the region's jihadists.

### The Saharan Jihadists after the French Intervention

Since the attacks at Agadez and Arlit in Niger, jihadist groups in the Sahara have conducted no further attacks of comparable nature (as of May 2015). This would suggest that they have been weakened by the French intervention. Parts of the regional contingent were probably able to

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6–7.

<sup>32</sup> *The In Amenas Attack: Report of the Investigation into the Terrorist Attack on In Amenas*, Report Prepared for Statoil ASA's board of directors (n.p., February 2013), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Mourabitoun was founded by Belmokhtar and MUJAO in early 2013, and named after a North African dynasty that ruled the western Maghreb and Islamic Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Algerian jihadists have long emphasised references to the Mourabitoun (Almoravid) Empire, possibly pointing to a vision of an Islamic state in north-west Africa and Spain. "Interview with Khalid Abu l-Abbas" (see note 11).

<sup>34</sup> Adam Nossiter, "Suicide Bombings in Niger Kill Dozens in Dual Strikes", *New York Times*, 23 May 2013.

decamp to neighbouring countries, although not to regroup there – not even in Libya where state authority had completely broken down.<sup>35</sup>

In northern Mali regular attacks continued against MINUSMA forces (Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali), whose deployment began on 1 July 2013, and against local allies of the French, especially the MNLA.<sup>36</sup> Late 2014 saw a resurgence of attacks by MUJAO in the Niger-Mali border region and AQIM splinter groups around Timbuktu, suggesting that the groups were regenerating. Their stubborn resistance demonstrated how deeply rooted the jihadist groups have become locally. An attempt to kidnap two French journalists in MNLA- and HCUA-controlled Kidal in November 2013, which ended in the deaths of both victims, again revealed the fluid boundaries between AQIM, the former Ansar al-Din and the MNLA.<sup>37</sup> The depth of confusion over the distinction between local actors and regional jihadists was also demonstrated by controversy over the massacre of a Tuareg group in February 2014, which some observers attributed to MUJAO, others to tribal militias.<sup>38</sup> In fact, MUJAO remains a vehicle for certain militias, such as those of the Peul, to fight local adversaries from other ethnic groups.

Jihadists also remained political players in northern Mali. Iyad ag Ghali's threats against "France and the crusaders" should probably be interpreted as partly a protest against his exclusion from the talks between northern Malian groups and the Malian government, which began in July 2014 in Algiers.<sup>39</sup> But for various armed groups, the extremists continue to represent potential allies. Former members or affiliates of MUJAO and Ansar al-Din have been sitting at the negotiating tables under new names, and likely see the possibility of resuming the armed struggle with their former allies as an important means of pressure. Accordingly, the refusal of the negotiating platform formed by MNLA, HCUA and MAA to recognise the agreement negotiated with the Malian government in March 2015 in Algiers was a worrying sign.

Jihadists now possess a solid social base in northern Mali and adjoining regions. As long as the conflicts there continue to fester, they will be able

<sup>35</sup> On Libya see the contribution by Wolfram Lacher in this volume, pp. 31ff.

<sup>36</sup> For example "Nord du Mali: un jihadiste malien revendique l'attentat de Kidal auprès de l'AFP", *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), 14 December 2013; "Mali: Aqmi exécute un jeune combattant du MNLA", *RFI*, 19 January 2014; "Nord du Mali: un groupe jihadiste revendique des tirs de roquettes sur Gao", *AFP*, 14 February 2014; "Mauritanie: 'Almourabitoune' revendique des attaques à la roquette contre les aéroports de Gao et Toumbouctou", *Agence Nouakchott Info*, 2 March 2014; "Au Mali, un commando jihadiste tue des informateurs de l'armée française", *AFP*, 6 May 2014.

<sup>37</sup> "Mali: Qui est Ag Bakabo, le suspect n°1 du meurtre des deux journalistes de RFI à Kidal?" *Jeune Afrique*, 18 November 2013, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20131118185038/> (accessed 5 March 2015).

<sup>38</sup> "Mali: Le Mujao suspecté d'avoir commis un massacre à Tamkoutat", *Jeune Afrique*, 10 February 2014, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20140210183334/> (accessed 5 March 2015); "Massacre de Tamkoutat: Le ministre de la Réconciliation 'blanchit' le MUJAO", *La République*, 14 February 2014.

<sup>39</sup> "Iyad Ag Ghali, le leader d'Ansar Dine, réapparaît et menace la France", *RFI*, 7 August 2014.



to mobilise that base. And to the extent that there is any truth in reports that a record ransom was paid for the release of four French hostages in October 2013, jihadist groups in the region likely continue to enjoy access to considerable resources.<sup>40</sup>

## The Saharan Groups and the Jihadist Movement

Due to the role of Belmokhtar, the relationship between AQIM's Saharan factions and al-Qaeda is a particularly complex one. Even when he still belonged to AQIM, Belmokhtar accepted orders only reluctantly – if at all – and may have maintained closer relations with the al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan than to AQIM Amir Droukdal in northern Algeria. Neither Belmokhtar nor Abu Zaid adhered to Droukdal's ideas on strategy.

### Belmokhtar and AQIM

The AQIM leadership had no success with its efforts to bring Belmokhtar and his followers under their control. Nor did they succeed altogether in persuading AQIM units and MUJAO (let alone Ansar al-Din) to adopt Droukdal's ideas on strategy. This is revealed by an undated letter from Droukdal to his followers and Ansar al-Din in northern Mali, which was written sometime after the break with the MNLA in March 2012 but before the French intervention in January 2013.<sup>41</sup> Droukdal begins by pointing out the great dangers facing the attempt to establish an Islamic state in northern Mali, owing to the weakness of the jihadists. In order to remedy that weakness, he calls upon AQIM units to seek allies and expand their contacts into northern Malian society. The jihadists should keep a low profile, because building a state would overstretch AQIM. Nevertheless, Abu Zaid and Belmokhtar should remain in close contact with tribes and local rebel groups. In Droukdal's view, terminating the alliance with the MNLA was a grave error, which he urges his followers to correct. In order to protect their own position, AQIM should refrain from rapidly enforcing its own interpretation of sharia. In particular, Droukdal criticises the destruction of shrines in Timbuktu and the application of Koranic punishments by the jihadists in Mali.

With this advice, Droukdal was pushing the same line as the al-Qaeda leaders bin Laden and Zawahiri, who had for several years been demanding that their "branches" in the Arab world integrate themselves into existing rebel movements even if that meant making ideological compromises. In his letter, Droukdal went as far as demanding that AQIM in Mali conceal its jihadist character and its ties to al-Qaeda in order to avoid

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Follorou, "Otages d'Arlit: les dessous de la négociation", *Le Monde Afrique*, 30 October 2013.

<sup>41</sup> An AP team found the letter in an AQIM building in Timbuktu following the French intervention in January 2013. *Mali-Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook* (English and Arabic), [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2015).

drawing the attention of the jihadist project's enemies. This corresponded exactly to the approach of the al-Nusra-Front in Syria, which also originated in advice from al-Qaeda Central. Local leaders must have known that this was al-Qaeda's official stance, because it essentially echoed the advice given by Yemeni al-Qaeda leader Nasir al-Wuhaishi (alias Abu Basir) in a letter to AQIM.<sup>42</sup>

It is especially striking that neither Abu Zaid nor Belmokhtar and MUJAO appear to have followed the orders from northern Algeria, and that Ansar al-Din also followed a different line. The alliance with the MNLA was not mended, and the jihadists acted so provocatively that the French government ordered an intervention. In fact, Droukdal appears to have misinterpreted the situation in northern Mali, because it was less the AQIM leaders than their local allies who implemented their ideas about law enforcement particularly ruthlessly.<sup>43</sup> Notably, Abu Zaid and Ansar al-Din in Timbuktu exhibited rather less zeal in enforcing al-Qaeda's interpretation of sharia than MUJAO in Gao, and their enthusiasm ebbed yet further towards the end of 2012.<sup>44</sup> In sum, these events showed how weak the influence of al-Qaeda over local groups was, even if they had officially placed themselves under the authority of Bin Laden, Zawahiri or Droukdal. And if not even Droukdal was able to get his way with his field commanders, it can hardly be expected that al-Qaeda Central in far-off Pakistan would enjoy more success. There is to this day no evidence of Belmokhtar sharing the revenues from the kidnapping business with Bin Laden and Zawahiri.

### Transnational Networks: Libya

Nevertheless, AQIM's forces in northern Mali were not purely locally orientated, but clearly integrated into transnational networks. The takeover of northern Mali created the possibility to offer jihadists from other regions a refuge or training. Boko Haram, for example, appears to have made limited use of this.<sup>45</sup>

Connections to Libya were of particular importance to Saharan jihadists. From 2011 onwards, AQIM factions built contacts to like-minded Libyans and increasingly used southern Libya as a transit route. The country's special importance to Belmokhtar and his Mourabitoun was seen in the In Amenas attack in January 2013. The attackers came not only from Mali and Algeria, but also Egypt and Tunisia. Their participation became possible after Belmokhtar established contact with Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi in

<sup>42</sup> This letter, addressed to AQIM leader Droukdal, was also found in Timbuktu; Associated Press, *Al-Qaida Papers*, [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-papers-how-to-run-a-state.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-papers-how-to-run-a-state.pdf) (accessed 21 January 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Lebovich, "The Local Face" (see note 30): 9.

<sup>44</sup> Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers" (see note 15), 4.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's International Connections", *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 1 (January 2013): 7–13.

2012, and is even said to have spent some weeks in Libya.<sup>46</sup> At the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013, several dozen jihadists from Derna, Benghazi and Ajdabiya in north-eastern Libya travelled to Mali to fight with AQIM. Fighters travelling between north-eastern Libya and northern Mali were able to rely upon at least logistical support from actors in southern Libya.<sup>47</sup> Not by chance did the In Amenas attack target a facility close to the Libyan border. Coming from northern Mali, the group gathered on the Libyan side and may have hoped to be able to return there after the attack. The incident revealed the extent to which Saharan jihadists profited from state collapse in Libya. They may have lost their refuge in northern Mali, but in Libya they have gained a new alternative that would never have existed before 2011. According to local observers, Belmokhtar and part of al-Mourabitoun are believed to have been located largely in southern Libya since the end of 2013.<sup>48</sup> Ongoing conflicts in Libya will ensure that AQIM remains active in the region.

## Outlook

Within a decade, an initially very limited number of Algerian jihadists in the Sahara has developed into a firmly rooted local movement. A combination of factors contributed to this, the most important being European taxpayers' money in the form of ransom payments. There is no sign of this source of jihadist funding drying up in the near future. Another important factor has been local conflicts and the collapse of state structures, which jihadist groups have been able to exploit for their own ends. Both factors continue to exist in northern Mali despite the French intervention, and in Libya a new potential refuge has emerged. The case of northern Mali shows that building a local jihadist base requires time. The same applies in southern Libya. The French intervention likely marks only the beginning of a long confrontation between external actors and jihadist groups in the Sahara.

<sup>46</sup> "AQIM Chief Buying Arms in Libya: Source", *AFP*, 12 March 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fractious South and Regional Instability*, Security Assessment in North Africa, Dispatch 3 (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, February 2014), <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/R-SANA/SANA-Dispatch3-Libyas-Fractuous-South.pdf> (accessed 5 March 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Discussions and personal communication between Wolfram Lacher and observers from Ubari, November and December 2014.



# Boko Haram: Threat to Nigeria and Its Northern Neighbours

Moritz Hütte, Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber

The terror organisation Boko Haram has massively destabilised the northern federal states of Nigeria since 2009 and has come to present a serious threat to the Nigerian state. Measured by frequency of attacks and number of deaths – more than ten thousand in 2014 alone – Boko Haram is one of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups. Nigeria now occupies top places in two important terrorism indexes, with the number of deaths greater than in Syria or Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> With frequent attacks in neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger, Boko Haram's sphere of operations is of regional extent, although the rhetoric of its leader Abubakar Shekau concentrates largely on war within Nigeria. A large-scale attack on the United Nations compound in Nigeria's capital Abuja on 26 August 2011 has remained an isolated incident. The only sign of a more international agenda has been kidnappings of Western foreigners by a small splinter group named Ansaru. Without external assistance Boko Haram (and/or Ansaru) will find it difficult to conduct more frequent attacks on international organisations within Nigeria or outside its borders. Although Boko Haram maintains contacts to jihadist groups in Mali, these are not very intensive and have thinned since the French intervention in January 2013. The Boko Haram threat mainly concerns Nigeria and its northern neighbours: It has come to control large parts of the state of Borno and many areas along the borders to Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Its successive territorial gains spotlight the weakness of the Nigerian state in the north. The possibility of civil war can no longer be excluded.

## Boko Haram and the Nigerian State

With a population of 178.5 million, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country. It is deeply divided along political, socio-economic and religious lines. The fractures date back to British colonial rule, which began about 1860 in the Christian south and at the beginning of the twentieth century in the majority Muslim north. At that time large parts of northern Nigeria belonged to the Caliphate of Sokoto and the Emirate of Borno, whose origins lay in the Islamic reform movement of Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817). In 1804 dan Fodio launched a "jihad" against the neighbouring statelets in

<sup>1</sup> *Global Terrorism Index Report 2014*, ed. Institute for Economics and Peace, (New York, 2014); Peter R. Neumann, *The New Jihadism: A Global Snapshot* (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, in collaboration with the BBC World Service and BBC Monitoring, 2014), <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ICSR-REPORT-The-New-Jihadism-A-Global-Snapshot.pdf> (accessed 13 March 2015).

Map 5: Nigeria (north-eastern provinces)



northern Nigeria, southern Niger and northern Cameroon. He criticised the mingling of local religious traditions with Islam by Muslims in these areas, and enforced sharia in the realm he went on to found.

The British granted Nigeria its independence in 1960, with a federal structure reflecting its ethnic and religious diversity. Today about 50 percent of Nigerians are Muslims, 40 percent Christians and 10 percent adherents of indigenous religions. The political crisis of the Nigerian state, economic disadvantage in the north and increasing dissemination of Islamist and Salafist ideas among Nigeria's Muslims have all encouraged the rise of Boko Haram.

Until 1999 Nigeria was ruled by predominantly Muslim generals, and representatives of the north enjoyed great influence over the central government. That changed with the transition to democracy. It was originally agreed that the presidency would rotate between (Muslim) representatives of the north and (Christian) representatives of the south. Thus the Christian President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) was succeeded by the Muslim Umaru Musa Yar' Adua. When Yar' Adua died in 2010, he was followed by his deputy, the Christian Goodluck Jonathan. Confirmed in office in the 2011 elections, he was seeking a second full term in 2015, but lost the election to his Muslim rival Muhammadu Buhari. In the north of the country, this long period of rule by Christian presidents gradually consolidated an

impression that the north has been disadvantaged since the end of the military dictatorship. That feeling is confirmed by a glance at the main economic indicators. Despite its strong revenues from oil exports, Nigeria remains one of the world's poorest countries. About 62.6 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and the poverty rate is considerably higher in the north than in the south. It is highest in the north-east (75.4 percent) and lowest in the south-west (47.9 percent).<sup>2</sup>

Growing sections of the northern population interpret the quarrel with the south as a conflict between Christians and Muslims. This has in turn generated a growing following for Islamist and Salafist ideas among Nigerian Muslims, and led to pressure on the local, strongly mystical popular Islam. Between 2002 and 2003 twelve northern states introduced Islamic law, or sharia. These developments have seen the two parts of the country growing increasingly apart. Academic literature and press reports supply numerous indications of local political actors in the north supporting Boko Haram in order to intensify this process and place the central government under pressure.<sup>3</sup>

## The Origins

In 2002 a young Salafist preacher named Mohammed Yusuf (1970–2009) founded a group in Maiduguri that later named itself Sunni Group for the Call to Faith and Holy War (Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad). Some also referred to the initially nameless group as the "Yusufiya" after its founder and leader. Yusuf originated from the north-eastern state of Yobe, but lived in Maiduguri, the capital of the neighbouring state of Borno, which was later to become Boko Haram's stronghold. He appears to have received no formal religious education, but impressed followers above all through his charisma and his rhetorical abilities. As a young man he joined the Salafists, who in Nigeria are organised in the Izala movement.<sup>4</sup> This non-violent and rather state-supporting movement is strongly orientated on the pro-regime Wahhabi scholars in Saudi Arabia. His more radical views led Yusuf to fall out with Izala and establish his own group.

Yusuf, who did not in fact come out unambiguously in favour of violence before 2009, initially sought to win supporters for his ideas through preaching. The principal arena for his missionising efforts was a religious

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, *Nigeria Economic Report*, Nr. 2 (Washington, D.C., 2014), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2014/07/19883231/nigeria-economic-report-no-2> (accessed 24 November 2014). The figure for the poverty line (\$1.25/day) is for 2010, as no more recent data has been published by reliable international sources. More recent calculations suggest considerably lower poverty rates. But even if the calculation methods were corrected and the estimates more realistic, a striking discrepancy between north and south would still remain.

<sup>3</sup> Roman Loimeier, "Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria", *Africa Spectrum* 47, no. 2–3 (2012): 137–55.

<sup>4</sup> The full name is "Removal of Innovation and Establishment of the Sunna" (Izalat al-Bida' wa-Iqamat al-Sunna). The group was founded in 1978 by the scholar Abubakar Mahmud Gumi (1922–1992).

centre with a mosque and school in Maiduguri, which was named after an important model for all Salafists, the Damascene scholar Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taimiya (1263–1328). Yusuf called for the establishment of an Islamic state based on his interpretation of Islamic law, the sharia. Although sharia had already been introduced in the twelve northern states by this point, Yusuf held it to be incomplete as long as the secular federal laws and constitution continued to apply there, believing that they strongly restricted the effectiveness of the sharia rules.<sup>5</sup> Nigerian Muslims were well aware that local Muslim politicians had demanded the introduction of sharia principally to strengthen their hand in negotiations with the new rulers in Abuja; accordingly sharia was implemented only halfheartedly.<sup>6</sup>

Yusuf's core demand and uppermost objective was to introduce the Salafist interpretation of sharia across the whole country. He tied that call to a biting criticism of Western influences and education, and treated any collaboration with the Nigerian state as an act of overt disbelief.<sup>7</sup> Although Yusuf condemned leaders across the whole of Nigeria, his criticism was directed above all towards the northern religious and cultural elites, who responded with harsh counter-attacks, often denigrating Yusuf and his followers as "Kharijites". Although the term strictly speaking designates the third Islamic confession alongside Sunni and Shia, governments and pro-government scholars in the Islamic world like to use it to stigmatise militant groups as sects.<sup>8</sup>

In 2003 a group of militant Salafists from Maiduguri, who stood in at least close contact with Yusuf, withdrew to the small rural settlement of Kanama in the state of Yobe to live out their interpretation of Islam away from the corrupted society of northern Nigeria. They were also preparing for an armed uprising, setting up a training camp and from the end of 2003 attacking police stations nearby and in the neighbouring state of Borno. The group was broken up by the army in autumn 2004. In order to escape apprehension by the security forces, Yusuf fled to Saudi Arabia while the uprising was still in progress. He resumed his activities after returning in 2005,<sup>9</sup> travelling to various cities in the north to promote his ideas with some success and becoming a preacher known across the whole of northern Nigeria. His supporters, including the remnants of the militant Kanama group, now operated increasingly frequently as vigilantes, patrolling Muslim cities and calling on residents to behave in conformity with Islam. This increasingly drew them into conflict with the police.

<sup>5</sup> Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram", in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, West African Politics and Society Series, vol. 2 (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 9–32 (22).

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Harnischfeger, "Boko Haram and Its Muslim Critics: Observations from Yobe State", in *Boko Haram*, ed. Pérouse de Montclos (see note 5), 33–62 (37).

<sup>7</sup> Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram" (see note 5): 16ff.

<sup>8</sup> The Kharijites emerged out of the civil war between supporters of Ali and of the Umayyad Muawiyah, where they refused to back either side. Today members are found only in Oman and Algeria.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram" (see note 5): 12f.



Open conflict came in July 2009, after tensions had grown over the preceding months and years. Yusuf's followers had come increasingly into conflict with the mainstream Salafists of Izala. Initially Izala continued to maintain close contacts to Yusuf in the hope that he would distance himself from his radical positions. However, when the differences between the preacher and the state came to a head, it became clear to Izala's leaders that they would have to come down on one side or the other. Conflicts over control of mosques occurred with increasing frequency from 2008, with the police regularly intervening and detaining many of Yusuf's supporters.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of 2009 the state took the offensive against the militant Salafists, whereby in many cases it appeared as though the security forces deliberately provoked the group. The situation escalated in June 2009 at a funeral for members of the group who had died in a car accident. Security forces opened fire and injured seventeen Yusuf supporters.<sup>11</sup> At roughly the same time Yusuf published an open letter to the federal government, calling on the government to approach him within forty days, otherwise he would proclaim jihad against it.<sup>12</sup>

In response the security forces went on the offensive. In July they attacked and destroyed the Ibn Taimiya centre in Maiduguri. Up to eight hundred of Yusuf's supporters were killed, hundreds more detained – including Yusuf himself, who died while still in police custody. A video showing his death quickly circulated on the internet and was broadcast globally on the Qatari television station al-Jazeera.<sup>13</sup> Those of Yusuf's followers who were able to escape detention now went underground and built a powerful terrorist organisation. Their first spectacular operation was an attack on a prison in the state of Bauchi on 7 September 2010, in which they freed seven hundred inmates.<sup>14</sup> Under its new leader Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram launched a campaign of terror that continues to this day.

## Ideology and Objectives

Since 2010 the organisation has been calling itself “Sunni Group for the Call to Faith and Holy War” (Jama’at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad), making no secret of its new militancy. Although it has become known as “Boko Haram”, which means more or less “Western education is forbidden”, it rejects the designation itself. The group regards Western education and the dominance of the English language in Nigeria as a threat to the cultural identity of Nigeria's Muslims. The Christians in the south, it

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Dr Ahmad Murtadā, *Boko Harām in Nigeria: Its Beginnings, Principles and Activities in Nigeria* (N.p.: SalafiManhaj, 2013), 8, [http://download.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj\\_BokoHaram.pdf](http://download.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_BokoHaram.pdf) (accessed 24 November 2014).

<sup>13</sup> “Video Shows Nigeria ‘Executions’”, *al-Jazeera* (online), 9 February 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news%20africa/2010/02/2010298114949112.html> (accessed 22 December 2014).

<sup>14</sup> David Smith, “More than 700 Inmates Escape during Attack on Nigerian Prison”, *Guardian*, 8 September 2010, 18.

claims, seek to subjugate the Muslims in the north. The fact that Christian presidents had governed the country for all but a couple of years since 1999 was evidence enough of the truth of the theory, it asserts.<sup>15</sup>

The only way to rebuff the southern assault, it says, is to introduce sharia in all of Nigeria and abolish all rival legal systems. This does not just mean introducing the “hudud” punishments mentioned in the Koran, such as beheading for murder, stoning to death for adultery, and amputating a hand for theft, but extends to a complete transformation of public and political life in accordance with Salafist ideals. With this project Boko Haram joins a global phalanx of jihadist groups all demanding such a transformation. The Nigerian group is characterised by the exceptional brutality it displays not only towards declared enemies and other religions, but also towards Sunni Muslims. In this respect it is considerably closer to the particularly violent Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria than to al-Qaeda and its allies. So it came as no surprise when Shekau declared his support for IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July 2014.<sup>16</sup>

In August 2009, shortly after the suppression of the Yusuf group in Maiduguri, Boko Haram published its “declaration of war” against the Nigerian state, in which it repeated its demand for full implementation of sharia across Nigeria and the “fall of Western civilisation”. What the document does not contain is any clear ideas about political governance:

Having made the following statement we hereby reinstate our demands:

1. That we have started a Jihad in Nigeria which no force on earth can stop. The aim is to Islamise Nigeria and ensure the rule of the majority Muslims in the country. We will teach Nigeria a lesson, a very bitter one.
2. That from the Month of August, we shall carry out series of bombing in Southern and Northern Nigerian cities, beginning with Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu and Port Harcourt. The bombing will not stop until Sharia and Western Civilisation is wiped off from Nigeria. We will not stop until these evil cities are tuned [sic] into ashes.
3. That we shall make the country ungovernable, kill and eliminate irresponsible political leaders of all leanings, hunt and gun down those who oppose the rule of Sharia in Nigeria and ensure that the infidel does not go unpunished.
4. We promise the West and Southern Nigeria, a horrible pastime. We shall focus on these areas which is the devil empire and has been the one encouraging and sponsoring Western Civilisation into the shores of Nigeria.
5. We call on all Northerners in the Islamic States to quit the follower ship [sic] of the wicked political parties leading the country, the corrupt,

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Zenn, Atta Barkindo and Nicholas A. Heras, “The Ideological Evolution of Boko Haram in Nigeria: Merging Local Salafism and International Jihadism”, *RUSI Journal* 158, no. 4 (2013): 46–53 (50ff).

<sup>16</sup> “Boko Haram Voices Support for Islamic State’s Baghdadi, Al-Qaeda”, *Vanguard*, 13 July 2014, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/07/boko-haram-voices-support-islamic-states-baghdadi-al-qaeda/> (accessed 24 November 2014).

irresponsible, criminal, murderous political leadership, and join the struggle for Islamic Society that will be corruption free, Sodom free, where security will be guaranteed and there will be peace under Islam.

6. That very soon, we shall stir Lagos, the evil city and Nigeria's South West and South East, in a way no one has ever done before. Al Hakubarah<sup>17</sup>

ITS EITHER YOU ARE FOR US OR AGAINST US<sup>18</sup>

## Structure, Leadership and Personnel

Abubakar Shekau has been the organisation's emir since 2010. He originates, like Yusuf, from the state of Yobe and was probably born around 1970. Shekau owes his position and reputation to his close ties to Mohammed Yusuf, as whose right hand he functioned. But he lacks the charisma and probably also the religious education of his predecessor, even though he was already preaching at his own mosque in Maiduguri before 2009.<sup>19</sup> Shekau tries to lead his organisation in authoritarian style, but possesses effective authority over only those members operating in or close to the state of Borno. In other parts of the country semi-autonomous leaders have established their own power bases, both within Boko Haram and as splits outside it. Opponents of Shekau criticise most of all the brutal violence against civilians, which represents a major departure from Mohammed Yusuf's ideas. Shekau is also frequently accused of favouring ethnic Kanuri from Borno over Hausa and Fulani. The Kanuri are the largest ethnic group in Borno and the adjoining regions of Niger, Chad and Cameroon (while the Hausa and Fulani predominate in the other states of northern Nigeria). Kanuri also make up the bulk of Boko Haram's leadership and membership.<sup>20</sup>

These fractures led to a power struggle between leading figures in Boko Haram. Mamman Nur, a Cameroonian who had been number three under Mohammed Yusuf, became Shekau's most dangerous internal adversary. When Shekau was injured and later arrested in 2009, Nur took over the reins. Upon his release, Shekau declared himself the new emir, while his rival Nur is believed to have spent some time with al-Shabaab in East

<sup>17</sup> There has been speculation on the internet whether this completely incomprehensible formulation is actually supposed to mean "Allahu Akbar". Some commentators see this as evidence that the document is a forgery.

<sup>18</sup> "Boko Haram Ressurects, Declares Total Jihad", *Vanguard*, 14 August 2009, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/08/boko-haram-ressurects-declares-total-jihad/> (accessed 24 November 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis*, Chatham House Research Paper (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 2014), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Zenn, Barkindo and Heras, "The Ideological Evolution of Boko Haram in Nigeria" (see note 15).

Africa.<sup>21</sup> Following his return, Nur operated above all in Kano and Nigeria's so-called Middle Belt, the religious and ethnically mixed strip from Adamawa through Abuja to Niger. He is said to have masterminded the spectacular attack on the UN compound in Abuja and been implicated in the wave of attacks on churches that began in December 2011. Nur may also have been behind the car bombing of the federal police headquarters in Abuja on 16 June 2011, which was the first suicide attack in Nigerian history.<sup>22</sup> His activities clearly exhibit efforts to spare Nigerian Muslim civilians at the expense of foreign targets and Christians.

Whereas Nur apparently remained loyal to Boko Haram, other leaders split in the course of 2011, and in January 2012 founded Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Supporters of the Muslims in Black Africa), or Ansaru. The group's leading figure is Khalid al-Barnawi ("from Borno"), who spent several years in Mali with Mokhtar Belmokhtar and was involved in kidnappings in the Sahara. After returning to Nigeria he shaped the strategy of Ansaru, which sharply criticised Boko Haram for killing Nigerians and Muslims and from May 2011 (even before the group's existence was announced) concentrated above all on kidnapping foreigners. Barnawi is also said to have been more open than Shekau towards talks with the government. The conflict between the two is reported to have escalated to a point where each was betraying the other's leadership to the security forces.<sup>23</sup> In 2013 and 2014, on the other hand, there were also repeated indications of closer cooperation between Barnawi and Shekau, Boko Haram and Ansaru.

If the relationship between Shekau, Barnawi and Nur is opaque, even less is known about Boko Haram's wider leadership. As in all jihadist organisations there is a leadership council (shura, for consultation), whose members' identities are kept secret for reasons of security. The rate of fluctuation in the council also appears to be high, on account of internal conflicts and counter-measures by the security forces. For example, Nur and Barnawi are always named as members even though Barnawi had turned his back on Boko Haram at least for a time to lead Ansaru. Finally, a number of leading figures were killed in spring 2013.<sup>24</sup>

Mamman Nur's activities suggest that at least commanders operating outside of Borno enjoy very broad autonomy. This also appears to apply to many lower-level regional leaders, who have profited from the great pressure under which Shekau has come since 2013, which has left him largely isolated. As long as they adhere roughly to the strategic guidelines laid out

<sup>21</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria", *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (24 February 2014): 23–29 (24). This was also when Shekau first used the organisation's new name: "Sunni Group for the Call to Faith and Holy War".

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 24.

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Zenn, "A Brief Look at Ansaru's Khalid al-Barnawi – AQIM's Bridge into Northern Nigeria", *Militant Leadership Monitor* 4, no. 3 (27 March 2013), [http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=40648&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=686#.VJgfxs8BNVA](http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40648&tx_ttnews[backPid]=686#.VJgfxs8BNVA) (accessed 21 January 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria" (see note 21): 27.

by Shekau and the leadership, they are relatively free to plan and act as they wish. One likely explanation for this broad local autonomy is Boko Haram's very rapid growth within the space of just a few years, from four thousand fighters in 2009 to six to eight thousand in 2014,<sup>25</sup> which makes rigid central control almost impossible. At the same time Boko Haram now possesses enough fighters to capture and control territory. So the growth in numbers will have been a contributing factor in the group's switch since 2014 to taking control of larger areas.

The Boko Haram fighters are almost all young Nigerian men, most of whom come from Borno and Yobe and belong to the Kanuri ethnic group. But the organisation has also recruited in Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Most of the fighters are unemployed, illiterate, and have little or no schooling. Many attended Koran schools, and are known in Nigeria as "almajirai" (from the Arabic al-muhajirun = emigrants), because they attend school far from their homes and live either from alms or casual labour – a consequence of the crisis of the Nigerian education system.<sup>26</sup> In view of the widespread corruption, nepotism and neglect of the northern parts of the country, they have been turning increasingly to religion in recent years – and finding convincing answers neither in traditional popular Islam nor from the Salafists of Izala or the conservative Sunni scholars. Boko Haram offers them the possibility not only to protest against the formalistic religiosity of their parents' generation and the traditional religious elites, but also against a political system in northern Nigeria that is supported and dominated by the older generation.<sup>27</sup> Boko Haram exploits the political and socio-economic problems of the young men and offers them the opportunity to articulate their protest in the form of violence. The organisation's propaganda operates above all through videos revolving around massive acts of violence against all its adversaries. Since 2015 Shekau's video messages clearly allude to the visual language of the Iraqi Islamic State and evince his sympathies for that organization.<sup>28</sup> In March he even publicly swore loyalty to IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

## Strategy and Tactics

Boko Haram's strategies have changed over the course of the years. In the early phase revenge for the destruction of the Yusuf group was uppermost. Boko Haram frequently responded to army attacks by killing opponents and terrorising local Christians.<sup>29</sup> But these early operations also demon-

<sup>25</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency?* (see note 19), 15.

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, Africa Report 216 (Brussels, 3 April 2014), 4. Other researchers differ on the role of the Koran students. See for example Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Introduction and Overview", in idem (ed.), *Boko Haram* (see note 5), 1–6 (4).

<sup>27</sup> ICG, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)* (see note 26), 5ff.

<sup>28</sup> "Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?" *BBC Monitoring*, 4 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31522469> (accessed 13 March 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency?* (see note 19), 12f.

strated that the group was capable of directed action. In order to expand its fighting strength, Boko Haram attacked Bauchi prison in Bauchi state on 7 September 2009 and freed more than seven hundred inmates, including more than one hundred of its own members.<sup>30</sup> After this it launched a campaign of terror designed to undermine state structures in the north and destabilise the country as a whole. The attacks almost all took place in the north-east and targeted state institutions (especially police and army), the Muslim religious establishment and the Christian minority in the north.<sup>31</sup>

As the organisation grew, the frequency and intensity of operations increased. Attacks in Abuja in June 2011 on the federal police headquarters and in August on the UN regional headquarters marked an initial high point; these were also the first suicide attacks ever to occur in Nigeria.<sup>32</sup> While the June attack fitted Boko Haram's known spectrum of targets and the police remained an important target afterwards, the attack on the UN was an exception. Since August 2011 Boko Haram has conducted no more significant attacks on international targets. As well as being its first suicide attacks in the style of other jihadist groups, it was also striking that Boko Haram succeeded in reaching heavily protected sites in the capital, far from its original strongholds.

The objective of the Abuja attacks may have been to provoke the Nigerian state and security forces into over-reacting, as well as to intimidate the local population. From summer 2011 Boko Haram routinely conducted suicide attacks, above all in the north-east, where it not only accepted but actively sought out civilian victims. From December 2011 this strategy of provocation also included increasing attacks on churches to spark conflict between Christians and Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Since mid-2012 mosques and schools in the north have also been targeted. The strategy was certainly successful, with the military steadily increasing its forces in the north-east since 2011. In fact, the army's offensive at the beginning of 2012 and the declaration of a state of emergency in May 2013 appear to have been successful. Boko Haram has been driven back to its original source in the north-east and placed under pressure there too.<sup>34</sup> The organisation has subsequently stepped up its efforts to intimidate and terrify the population, increasingly shifting its attacks to unprotected soft targets in rural regions and con-

<sup>30</sup> Daniel E. Agbiboa, "Peace at Daggers Drawn? Boko Haram and the State of Emergency in Nigeria", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 1 (2014): 41–67.

<sup>31</sup> David Cook, "Boko Haram: Reversals and Retrenchment", *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 4 (April 2013): 10–12.

<sup>32</sup> Agbiboa, "Peace at Daggers Drawn?" (see note 30).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Scott Stewart, *Is Boko Haram More Dangerous Than Ever?* Security Weekly (Austin: Stratfor Global Intelligence, 12 December 2012), [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/boko-haram-more-dangerous-ever?utm\\_source=feedlist-f&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=20121213&utm\\_term=sweekly&utm\\_content=readmore&elq=3bfd456e3f8c4ab09a8ab3106f16827d#axzz3KvCgiZSl](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/boko-haram-more-dangerous-ever?utm_source=feedlist-f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20121213&utm_term=sweekly&utm_content=readmore&elq=3bfd456e3f8c4ab09a8ab3106f16827d#axzz3KvCgiZSl) (accessed 4 December 2014).

ducting more kidnappings.<sup>35</sup> The victims of the first larger-scale kidnapping, which took place on 19 February 2013 in Cameroon, were a seven-member French family. The three adults and four children were released in Nigeria on 18 April 2013 after a ransom had been paid and nineteen imprisoned Boko Haram fighters released.<sup>36</sup> But this kidnapping of foreigners was an exception. Many observers suspect that it may actually have been an operation by Ansaru.<sup>37</sup> Boko Haram was now kidnapping Nigerians with increasing frequency, some of whom the government says it forcibly recruited, while the women and girls were reportedly sold into forced marriages.<sup>38</sup> At the same time the group continued to attack police and army bases.

At the beginning of 2014 Boko Haram began to change its approach yet again. Alongside attacks on the police, the army, infrastructure, churches, mosques and schools, the group increasingly sought headline-grabbing operations to attract attention throughout and beyond the country. On 14 April 2014 members of the group kidnapped almost three hundred schoolgirls from a boarding school in Chibok in the state of Borno. Months later more than two hundred of them were still in the hands of Boko Haram and there is currently little reason to hope for their release. No reliable information is available about their whereabouts or well-being.<sup>39</sup> Alongside that case, other examples confirm an escalation of attacks since early 2014. Thus for example on 14 March 2014 Boko Haram fighters attacked the infamous Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, which serves as the main prison for Boko Haram members, and freed those imprisoned there. According to Amnesty International more than six hundred people died in the incident, largely fleeing prisoners killed by state security forces.<sup>40</sup>

The frequency and destructiveness of suicide attacks has also increased since the beginning of 2014, now choosing targets having greater prestige. A bomb attack on a bus stop in Abuja in April killed more than seventy. Shortly afterwards, in May, a second attack very close to the scene of the first killed about nineteen. The next attack in Abuja followed in June,

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Bey and Sim Tack, *The Rise of a New Nigerian Militant Group*, Security Weekly (Austin: Stratfor Global Intelligence, 21 February 2013), [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/rise-new-nigerian-militant-group?utm\\_source=freelist-f&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=20130221&utm\\_term=sweekly&utm\\_content=readmore&elq=efad4a67cb3940f98f8a036effcd01c6](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/rise-new-nigerian-militant-group?utm_source=freelist-f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20130221&utm_term=sweekly&utm_content=readmore&elq=efad4a67cb3940f98f8a036effcd01c6) (accessed 4 December 2014).

<sup>36</sup> The ransom is reported to have been more than \$3 million. Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria" (see note 21), 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Aminu Abubakar, "Chadian Troops Rescue 85 Nigerian Hostages from Boko Haram", CNN (online), 17 August 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/16/world/africa/boko-haram-hostages-rescued/> (accessed 22 December 2014).

<sup>39</sup> "Boko Haram Unrest: Nigerian Militants 'Kidnap 200 Villagers'", BBC News Africa (online), 18 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30529178> (accessed 18 December 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Amnesty International, "Nigeria: More than 1,500 Killed in Armed Conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria in Early 2014", (London, 31 March 2014), <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/4000/afr440042014en.pdf> (accessed 24 February 2015).

killing twenty-one.<sup>41</sup> Nor are the attacks restricted to Abuja: in the meantime almost all cities in northern and central Nigeria are affected. Kano, the fourth-largest city and economic powerhouse of the north, was the scene of numerous attacks in 2014. The bitter culmination of this series was marked in November by an attack on the city's central mosque, directly beside the palace of the Emir of Kano. This attack alone is said to have cost more than one hundred lives.<sup>42</sup> As well as Kano, attacks targeted Jos (in Plateau state), Maiduguri, Borno and many other places in Nigeria.

The situation in the rural areas in the north-east is no better. The kidnapping of entire villages, as occurred most recently in December 2014 in Gumsuri (Borno state), terrifies the population, leading many to flee to the cities. But they do not necessarily find protection there either. Reports from Maiduguri suggest that at the end of 2014 Boko Haram was in control of the city by night. Its attack on Maiduguri on 24 and 25 January 2015, shortly after President Goodluck Jonathan had held election rallies there, and another attack hardly a week later, are further indications of the group's strength. Since 2015 most suicide attackers have been adolescent girls, with speculation as to whether these may be Boko Haram kidnapping victims. Officially the million-strong capital of Borno state is "controlled" by the Nigerian military, but it has not succeeded in establishing its authority throughout the city.

In summer 2014 Boko Haram began taking control of rural territories in the north-east and in August proclaimed a "caliphate". In the meantime the group has established a firm hold over large parts of the north-east. The Nigerian army presence is limited to the cities, while the rural areas are controlled by Boko Haram. Although the group failed to capture its erstwhile stronghold of Maiduguri, it has taken numerous smaller towns in the vicinity. By the beginning of December Boko Haram controlled or threatened most places in the Maiduguri area, although since then the army and militias have succeeded in recapturing a number of important cities, such as Chibok (Borno state) and Mubi (Adamawa state). At the end of December 2014 Boko Haram expanded its radius of operations beyond Nigeria's borders to attack five towns and the Achigachia military base in Cameroon. After the group briefly succeeded in taking control of the military base, air strikes were required to dislodge them.<sup>43</sup> Shortly after this, Boko Haram fighters captured the Nigerian military base at Baga, which served as the headquarters of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in

<sup>41</sup> "Nigeria: Abuja Bomb Blast in Wuse District Kills 21", *BBC News Africa* (online), 25 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28019433> (accessed 18 December 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Will Ross, "Boko Haram Kano Attack: Loss of Life on Staggering Scale", *BBC News Africa* (online), 30 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30266868> (accessed 18 December 2014).

<sup>43</sup> "Boko Haram Unrest: Cameroon Air Strikes on Nigerian Militants", *BBC News Africa* (online), 29 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30623199> (accessed 5 January 2014).



north-eastern Nigeria.<sup>44</sup> MNJTF was established in 1994 for counter-terrorism purposes, and has contingents from Nigeria, Niger and Chad. The arms depot in Baga fell into the hands of Boko Haram almost without a fight, after the Nigerian forces based there fled their attackers. These incidents suggest that the direct conflict between the group and the military within Nigeria is escalating, and that forces from neighbouring countries are becoming drawn into the conflict. The events also demonstrate that it is not a lack of weaponry but inadequate political will to take effective action against the group that promotes instability in the north-east.

## International Connections

The extent to which Boko Haram also poses a danger outside Nigeria's borders is a matter of some debate. Boko Haram leader Shekau is reported to have spent time in 2012 with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali and the attack on the UN compound in Abuja 2011 initially appeared to suggest an internationalisation of the spectrum of operations. But since then there have been no new attacks on international targets. The kidnapping of a French family in Cameroon in spring 2013 remained an isolated incident, but demonstrated the potential threat to eastern Nigeria's immediate neighbours. The international dimension tends to be represented by the splinter group Ansaru led by Khalid al-Barnawi.

Ansaru first came to public notice at the end of January 2012, when it distributed leaflets in Kano, the capital of the eponymous state. Like later video statements, its message opposed attacks against innocent Muslims except for self-defence, even treating members of the Nigerian security forces as innocent. Ansaru's ideology (like that of MUJAO in Mali) reaches across the whole of West Africa, with its acts of violence directed above all against non-Africans. Although outwardly the group strictly differentiates itself from Boko Haram, the two organisations maintain close operational and personal ties.<sup>45</sup>

Although the relationship between Mamman Nur and Ansaru is not entirely clear, it is known that the Ansaru leader Abu Usama al-Ansari is Khalid al-Barnawi. As already mentioned, Barnawi spent several years in Mali where he trained with AQIM before returning to Nigeria. As a member of the group led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar he is reported to have participated in kidnappings in the Sahara.<sup>46</sup> But Ansaru's founder and first leader was Abubakar Adam Kambar. Like Barnawi he came from Borno and was a follower of Mohammed Yusuf. After Yusuf's death he followed Barnawi to Mali, where he also trained at an AQIM camp, but returned to

<sup>44</sup> "Boko Haram Seizes Nigerian Army Base", *al-Jazeera* (online), 4 January 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2015/01/boko-haram-seizes-nigerian-army-base-20151421315330265.html> (accessed 5 January 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria" (see note 21).

<sup>46</sup> Zenn, Barkindo and Heras, "The Ideological Evolution of Boko Haram in Nigeria" (see note 15): 51.

Nigeria before Barnawi.<sup>47</sup> In summer 2012 his hideout in Kano was betrayed and Kamar died in the Nigerian security operation to capture him. Barnawi succeeded him as the new emir of Ansaru. In their modus operandi, Kamar and Barnawi orientated strongly on Belmokhtar and attracted attention especially through kidnappings of Western citizens. The victims of the first major kidnapping attributed to Ansaru, which took place in May 2011 in the western state of Kebbi, were a British and an Italian engineer. Both died in March 2012 during a failed British operation to liberate them.<sup>48</sup> The second kidnapping in January 2012 also ended with the death of the hostage, a German engineer, although this time AQIM said it was responsible. In November 2012 Ansaru claimed responsibility for an attack for the first time, after a number of its members attacked a prison in Abuja and freed several Boko Haram commanders. Further kidnappings followed, most of which ended with the deaths of the hostages.<sup>49</sup> In late 2012 and early 2013 the group concentrated on targets connected with the French deployment in Mali, which was directed against the uprising by militant Islamists there. For example, Ansaru attacked a Nigerian army convoy heading for Mali.<sup>50</sup> In this case the motive was clearly to support beleaguered comrades from AQIM and MUJAO.

From spring 2013 less was heard from Ansaru, and there was speculation that it had rejoined Boko Haram, to which ties had never been broken. Shekau's choice of Babagana Assalafi, a loyal follower of Barnawi, to become his deputy might be one indication for this. However, Assalafi was killed in March 2013.<sup>51</sup> The changing situation in Mali, which hinders direct connections to AQIM and no longer offers a safe refuge, may have played a role in the reconciliation. But an even more important factor was heightened pressure from the Nigerian security forces, which smashed many Ansaru cells in the states of Kaduna, Sokoto and Kano. It is certainly possible that Ansaru has become a part of Boko Haram and could develop into a unit concentrating on international attacks.

The greatest danger is without doubt still presented by Boko Haram. It is, like al-Shabaab until 2012, both a jihadist organisation and a political factor. Its reign of terror has won it control over large parts of northern Nigeria. To date the Nigerian state has proven incapable of mastering the steadily growing threat. Should Boko Haram grow even stronger, there would be a threat of civil war that could spill over into neighbouring Niger, Chad and Cameroon. In this event one would have to expect a further internationalisation of the group's activities.

<sup>47</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency?* (see note 19).

<sup>48</sup> Zenn, "A Brief Look at Ansaru's Khalid al-Barnawi" (see note 23).

<sup>49</sup> A German hostage kidnapped from Nigeria by Boko Haram was rescued by Cameroonian special forces in January 2015. "Deutsche Geisel aus den Händen von Boko Haram befreit", *Die Zeit*, 21 January 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru after the Mali Intervention", *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (März 2013): 1–8.

<sup>51</sup> ICG, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)* (see note 26), 28.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber

Even if the Middle East and South Asia generally attract greater political and media attention, the large and growing problem of jihadism in Africa can no longer be ignored. This is perhaps illustrated most vividly by the data of the 2013 Global Terrorism Index.<sup>1</sup> For number of deaths attributable to terrorist violence, Nigeria came fourth after Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In a newer survey at the end of 2014 it even comes second for number of deaths, behind Iraq but ahead of Afghanistan. In November 2014 alone 786 people were killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> If one considers that the number of victims in Nigeria increased significantly in 2014, and also includes deaths in Somalia, Kenya, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria, it becomes clear that Africa is in fact one of the most important arenas of jihadism.

Although some jihadist groups in Africa possess well-developed regional networks and lend one another manpower and technical support, there is no overarching command structure within or outside the continent. Nor do the much-discussed connections to al-Qaeda or ISIS, which certainly exist, create any central controlling instance. The virtually autonomous freedoms of the individual groups and leaders are evidence enough that an absence of central control is no obstacle to effective operations.

The comparison of the very different African terrorist organisations laid out in this study clearly demonstrates that there is no independent pan-African jihadist ideology. The groups' propaganda rests on a rather narrow shared base, according to which the governments in the region, regardless whether Muslim or Christian, are all lackeys of Western (or Christian) imperialism (or unbelief) and must therefore be violently removed. In Libya the efforts of Ansar al-Sharia and other groups are directed above all against the attempts by non-Islamist political forces to form a secular central government. Their actions have played a decisive role in bringing the country to the brink of a devastating civil war. In Tunisia the jihadists have also grown stronger since 2011. Their objective is to prevent a stabilisation of the new political system through sporadic attacks. This has not succeeded, but the jihadists hold out in the mountainous regions along the

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index* (online), <http://economicsandpeace.org/research/iep-indices-data/global-terrorism-index> (accessed 4 February 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *The New Jihadism: A Global Snapshot* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2014), <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ICSR-REPORT-The-New-Jihadism-A-Global-Snapshot.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2015); Kathy Gilsinan, "The Geography of Terrorism", *Atlantic* (online), 18 November 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/the-geography-of-terrorism/382915/> (accessed 4 March 2015).

Algerian border, while the open border to Libya remains a source of danger for Tunisia's internal security. In northern Algeria al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is greatly weakened and no longer in a position to threaten the stability of the state. Much more threatening are the activities of groups operating in the name of AQIM or as splits from it in Mali and the Sahara. Although they have lost their refuge since the French intervention of early 2013, they continue to profit from the permeability of the region's borders.

Nigerian jihadism is currently stronger than its North African counterpart and characterised by spectacular acts of violence. The pure numbers of victims, as well as targets including the major city of Maiduguri in the north-eastern state of Borno, military bases in Cameroon and villages in Chad, demonstrate that the formerly local group of Boko Haram has mutated into a powerful violent organisation with a wide radius of operations. It no longer mobilises to introduce sharia, but to destroy the entire state and its disbelieving citizens. In Africa's most populous nation, the occupation of even just one region by violent actors has far-reaching and catastrophic repercussions on security, as well as on the economy of the entire country. In Somalia al-Shabaab stands under pressure after important senior figures were killed in US drone attacks or defected to the government. Yet the organisation continues to grow, as does its support in Kenya's coastal regions where the Muslim population feels excluded and disadvantaged by the Kenyan state.

Especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria and Somalia) the jihadists demonstrate a pronounced interest in establishing their own state. And the major territorial gains of Boko Haram in Nigeria leave no doubt as to the importance of finding new approaches to dealing with terrorist groups in Africa. These will have to focus above all on the local causes of their popularity.

Although both al-Shabaab and Boko Haram operate successfully in their own terms, each binding several thousand supporters and placing weight on formal acceptance by al-Qaeda (al-Shabaab) or solidarity with the Islamic State (Boko Haram), the fighters of both organisations operate largely in their own countries and rarely travel to join jihadist operations in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. The reason for this may well be the widespread racism towards Africans in the Arab world. The consequence is that jihadists from sub-Saharan Africa are more likely than their counterparts from Tunisia or Algeria to be found operating in their home region. This expands the possibilities to find responses to the jihadist challenge at the local or regional level. The flip side is that it is considerably more difficult to reintegrate fighters who have attacked "their own people".

Germany and Europe should fundamentally reassess their own perspectives on the issue, taking into consideration the following recommendations:

- In order to understand why jihadist organisations arise and how they grow (and in order to be able to weaken or destroy them) it is imperative to expand knowledge about their composition and the local circum-

stances under which they operate. Germany lacks expertise on Africa across the board: in politics, the military, intelligence, academia and the media.

- ▶ As this study repeatedly demonstrates, there appears to be a causal connection between political, economic and social marginalisation and jihadist radicalisation. In Nigeria and Mali it is the northern parts of the country that object to the neglect by their central governments. In North Africa young men without hope or employment take up arms against society. This would suggest that conventional approaches, such as strengthening the central government's security forces, may actually worsen the problem. Especially in sub-Saharan Africa the need is to rectify regional imbalances and find decentralised solutions for the areas where the jihadists are especially strong.
- ▶ Fragile states consistently provide lawless spaces that in recent years have increasingly been filled by jihadist organisations. It is therefore necessary to consolidate and renew state structures. Where these have practically disappeared, as in Libya or Somalia, governments and administrations must be rebuilt and stabilised – frequently in a more decentralised form than was hitherto the case. Where these structures are still robust enough, the principal task is to establish democratic governance and social infrastructure. Improving the security situation through police work is imperative to enable states to challenge jihadist law-and-order structures – but intervention must not be restricted to this measure.
- ▶ As well as the motivations of the terrorist organisations, their respective strengths and the statehood of the country or region in which they operate must also be analysed. Initiatives such as participation in government or transformation of a jihadist movement into a political party are only auspicious and meaningful where the state possesses the strength and authority required to implement political decisions. Reintegrating fighters into society is an enormous challenge requiring long-term support. In this connection concepts for education and reconciliation processes are needed. Altogether the legal systems and rule of law programmes of the affected states should be supported.
- ▶ There is another point where Germany and the European Union have an opportunity to contribute to containing jihadist organisations. This is by promoting national and regional socio-economic projects that offer ordinary people an economic perspective and thus an alternative to radicalisation. Here too, however, the strength of the state is decisive for the success or failure of such projects. For example with respect to Mali it cannot be assumed that participation in national government would be attractive to jihadist organisations in the north, because the alternatives offered by jihadist and criminal networks are much more lucrative. In Nigeria and Somalia the overlap between jihadist groups, national government and local political networks also represents an obstacle to reintegration programmes. Instead there is a danger of jihadists helping themselves from all funding sources.

- ▶ A one-sided concentration on military counter-terrorism has tended to boost recruitment to jihadist movements in Somalia, and even more so in Kenya and Nigeria. This insight should guide choices in cooperation with the affected states. As experience shows, an exclusively repressive counter-terrorism policy does nothing to promote security and social peace in societies affected by jihadist violence.

# Appendix

## Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France-Presse
AIAI	al-Ittihad al-Islami (Islamic Union)
AIS	Armée islamique du salut
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AP	Associated Press
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AST	Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia
AU	African Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network
CSS	Center for Security Studies (ETH Zürich)
CTC	Combating Terrorism Center (West Point)
FIS	Front islamique du salut (Algeria)
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GATIA	Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés
GIA	Groupement islamique armé (Armed Islamic Group, Algeria)
GSPC	Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat; Algeria)
HCUA	Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (High Council for the Unity of Azawad)
ICG	International Crisis Group
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISS	Institute for Security Studies (Pretoria)
ISVG	Institute for the Study of Violent Groups (Boston, University of New Haven)
ITES	Institut Tunisien des Études Stratégiques (Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, Tunis)
LIFG	Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (al-Jama'a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libiya)
MAA	Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (Arab Movement of Azawad)
MEMRI	Middle East Media Research Institute
MIA	Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad (Islamic Movement of Azawad)
MINUSMA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali)
MNJTf	Multinational Joint Task Force
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa; Jama'at at-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya)
MYC	Muslim Youth Center
RFI	Radio France Internationale
UNITAF	Unified Task Force
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WACD	West Africa Commission on Drugs

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