

Testimony of
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"Terrorism in North Africa: An Examination of the Threat"

**Al-Qaida & ISIS in North Africa:
A Brief Examination of the Jihadi Terrorist
Landscape**

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Biography

Laith Alkhouri is a co-founder and the Director of Counterterrorism Research at Flashpoint, a business risk intelligence company. Mr. Alkhouri, a native Arabic speaker and regular on-air analyst for NBC News, has supported law enforcement and other government clients on dozens of national security investigations. He directs Flashpoint's Jihadist Threat Intelligence service and serves as the lead on all primary-source research into Deep and Dark Web networks used by terrorist groups and their supporters.

In that capacity, throughout the past decade, Mr. Alkhouri has researched and translated thousands of jihadist documents, communiques and videos, analyzing jihadi terrorist activities across the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia, and focusing on their use of technology. Mr. Alkhouri brings expertise on the topic of how terrorist networks operate on the Internet, monitoring emerging communication platforms and procedures used to radicalize people, incite attacks, and evade detection.

Mr. Alkhouri has presented his findings to audiences at the State Department, Department of Justice, Department of Defense, House Committee on Homeland Security, the Council on Foreign Relations, the NYPD, a number of academic institutions and security conferences. Mr. Alkhouri's analysis and commentary are frequently cited in national and international media reports.

Mr. Alkhouri holds an MS in International Affairs with a concentration on International Conflict and Security from The New School University and a BA in Political Science from Manhattanville College.

(1) Introduction

North Africa has conventionally been the backyard of major Al-Qaida terror activity, predominantly Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) - and to this day the group poses a significant threat to the region and to Western civilians and interests. The terror threats have created a sense of insecurity in major parts of the region, and AQIM has been the primary perpetrator. Indeed, it has a long record of bombing and kidnapping attacks against Westerners, extending its reach from Algeria to Tunisia, Mali and other countries.

The region has also witnessed the emergence of The Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL), further amplifying the preexisting sense of insecurity and instability, particularly in light of its seizure of a major territory in Libya. It has played the role of a de facto governing body in Libya's Sirte City, affording it a comfortable launching pad for attacks across other Libyan cities, and transnationally in Algeria and Tunisia — and potentially in the West.

ISIS and AQIM are highly adversarial toward the West in general and the U.S. in particular. They possess a long track record of issuing threats and carrying out attacks aimed at Western civilians and economic interests. Albeit both upholding the jihadist ideology, AQIM and ISIS are highly oppositional toward each other. Their potential competition for dominance drives each group to reassert its influence over the jihadi landscape in North Africa, which significantly raises the threat prospects against Westerners.

In addition, these groups thrive on being in the spotlight, and targeting Westerners brings them considerable PR value. Looking at today's jihadi landscape in North Africa and the record of these groups, I believe that they will continue to pose a significant threat to the West in the future, regionally and internationally.

(2) Picture of the Threat

On March 6, 2017, al-Zalaqa Media Foundation, a jihadi media unit affiliated with al-Qaida, released a video featuring the leaders of the Mali-based jihadi groups Ansar al-Dine, al-Murabitoune, Macina Liberation Front, and the Sahara Region. In the video, Iyad Ag Ghali, the top leader of Ansar al-Dine, announced the creation of "The Group for Support of Islam and Muslims," a new jihadi collective encompassing the aforementioned groups, declaring the new collective's allegiance to al-Qaida's top leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. Henceforth,

these groups will be operating under the umbrella of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the terror group's North Africa and Sahel faction.

On March 19, al-Qaida Central Command issued a statement accepting the pledge of allegiance, indicating that the new collective is:

an extension to what Qaida't al-Jihad [al-Qaida] has taken as approach since its inception, in uniting the Islamic Ummah, unifying its ranks, to seek the establishment of Allah's Sharia, upholding justice, and fighting injustice and tyranny; Allah has graced our brothers in the jihadi groups in Mali to unite under the banner of one group.¹

The latest announcement constitutes a new milestone in the growth of al-Qaida's presence and operations at a time when the group behind the 9/11 attacks appears to have been significantly diminished. Although al-Qaida has been mostly decimated in large parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, its North Africa and Sahel networks appear to have exponentially grown, increasing their tempo of terror attacks and establishing links in North and West Africa.

Throughout most of its existence, AQIM operated in central-east and northern Algeria, but in the past several years it has expanded its operations to Tunisia and Mali, making AQIM one of the most active al-Qaida branches. In Tunisia, the group's faction "Uqba bin Nafae' Brigade" — designated a terrorist group by the Tunisian government — has carried out a number of attacks against security forces, most notably in the Chaambi Mountains, which overlook Kasserine City in west-central Tunisia. In Mali, its faction al-Murabitoune — a group affiliated with the notorious Mukhtar Belmokhtar's "Signatories in Blood Brigade," responsible for the 2013 hostage crisis in In Amenas, Algeria — as well as other jihadi groups, have merged under its leadership. On multiple occasions, al-Murabitoune has kidnapped Westerners and targeted Western economic interests.

AQIM has demonstrated its will and intent to target Western nationals and interests. It has kidnapped and killed European and American civilians, and targeted Western gas and oil extraction plants. A number of the group's hostage operations were kidnap-for-ransom, and reportedly brought the group significant sums of money.

¹ <https://justpaste.it/14mlp>

Over the past three years, North Africa has witnessed the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL), most notably in Libya's Sirte City, and to a lesser extent in the cities of Darna and Benghazi in northeastern Libya. ISIS has also established a small branch in Algeria and connected with jihadists in Tunisia. Unlike AQIM, whose attacks mostly consist of hit-and-runs, kidnappings, and bombing operations, ISIS has been able to capture territory and implement its form of governance in Sirte, recruiting from the population under its rule, and conducting beheadings in the largely arid Fezzan region in central Libya.

ISIS in North Africa continues to operate mostly in Libya. Security forces have only recently succeeded in pushing the group to the outskirts of Sirte and recapturing many of its vital sites. However, recent reports suggest that ISIS is regrouping, and possibly gaining enough manpower to recapture Sirte.²

Both AQIM and ISIS's Libya faction have launched significant operations in the past two years; such attacks garnered global attention and positioned both groups as leaders of global jihad. AQIM fighters have targeted multiple hotels and killed Western tourists and locals alike in Mali, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. Meanwhile, ISIS has focused on targeting government forces and Christian laborers; it has conducted gruesome beheadings of Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian workers, as well as multiple bombings in Tripoli. I believe that both groups pose a threat to the West: AQIM's threat is directed at Western nationals and interests in its primary operational territories, rarely, if ever, targeting Western countries, while ISIS's threat to Western homelands is significantly higher, via orchestrated and inspired attacks.

(3) Will and Intent to Target the West

Al-Qaida's top leader Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri has indicated that al-Qaida's main focus remains targeting the United States — most notably in his 2013 manifesto, "General Guidelines for Jihadi Work."³ Zawahiri's manifesto laid out the military agenda for all al-Qaida affiliates — indeed, all jihadists — around the world. In other words, his document dictated the priorities jihadi groups are meant to follow, placing the United States at the top of al-Qaida's military targets. The document stated:

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/africa/libya-isis.html>

³ https://ia800408.us.archive.org/27/items/tawjeh_ayman/tawjeh_ayman.pdf

The military work is to target firstly the head of global infidels America, and her ally Israel, and then her local allies who rule our countries. Targeting America aims at exhausting and hemorrhaging it, in order for it to end like the Soviet Union did, and isolate itself due to its military, human, and economic losses, and subsequently ease its grip on our countries, and its allies to begin falling one after another.

ISIS leaders regularly and vocally urge the group's followers to target the United States and Europe. Since 2014, the group has released a range of missives and videos urging jihadists in the West to kill Americans and Europeans. ISIS's late spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, made this a focal point of his speeches:

If you can kill a disbelieving American or European — especially the spiteful and filthy French — or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah and kill him in any manner or way.⁴

Moreover, ISIS features individuals in its propaganda who represent and parrot the group's threats to the West and suggest that their goal is to strike beyond North Africa, to "conquer Rumiyah," in reference to Europe and North America. In a February 2015 video released by ISIS media in Libya, an English-speaking masked man threatened:

The sea you have hidden Sheikh Osama bin Laden's body in, we swear to Allah, we will mix it with your blood.⁵

ISIS has inspired a number of attacks in the West — and capitalized on these attacks with its official propaganda releases designed to inspire even more attacks — including the Pulse Nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida. Furthermore, ISIS has orchestrated a number of deadly attacks in Europe, including the November 2015 attacks at the Bataclan theatre and the Stade de France in Paris, and the March 2016 attack at Brussels' Zaventem Airport, among others.

(4) ISIS and AQIM are Different

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-urges-more-attacks-on-western-disbelievers-9749512.html>

⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/19/africa/libya-isis-executions-ethiopian-christians/>

There are differences, however, between AQIM and ISIS, the most obvious of which is their proclaimed ideological differences — especially after Zawahiri disowned ISIS in February 2014. Organizationally, AQIM is more decentralized in its approach and sees North Africa and the Sahel as the primary geographic region for its operations. Quite rarely does the group invite foreign fighters or recruits from outside the Maghreb and Sahel regions into its ranks. Its political statements have largely focused on “tyrannical” regimes in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mali and its aims are very much North Africa-centric.

ISIS, on the other hand, including its branch in Libya, has specifically called on Muslims to migrate to territories under its control. Its ranks in Libya have swelled with the arrival of fighters from Sudan, Somalia, Ghana, and Mali, among other countries. It has operated in a more centralized fashion, consistently adhering to the language and methodology of ISIS central command in Iraq and Syria. Its messages mostly ignore the politics of North African countries, instead concentrating on illustrating jihad in North Africa as part of the overall structure of the proclaimed “Caliphate,” as provinces under ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s rule. These messages specifically urge jihadists to pledge allegiance to ISIS. When ISIS’s propaganda has focused on North and West Africa, it invites jihadists who are operating in al-Qaida’s backyard to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed “Caliph” of the Islamic State.

AQIM’s rhetoric has largely focused on France as its primary nemesis, referring to the French invasion of Mali and France’s historical interest in North Africa. Meanwhile, ISIS’s enemies are lumped into one — what is referred to as “Fustat al-Kufr,” or “the party of infidels.”

(5) Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

AQIM was formally established in February 2007. Its predecessor, “The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat” (GSPC), formally pledged allegiance to al-Qaida on September 11, 2006⁶: it has sought the establishment of Islamic Sharia governance and the targeting of Western nationals and interests.

GSPC’s declaration of allegiance to al-Qaida not only appears to have transpired for the sake of relevancy; affiliating with al-Qaida effectively placed the group in the spotlight as

⁶ http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=pjcis/aqap_6%20terrorist%20orgs/report/appendix%20e.pdf

the leader of jihadi efforts across North Africa and the Sahel region. More importantly, GSPC declared that its allegiance to Usama bin Laden was “part of the international jihad”⁷ – in reference to al-Qaida’s 1998 declaration of war on the United States. In other words, GSPC adhered to the ideology of al-Qaida, positioned itself as part of the global jihadi movement, and as no longer exclusive to Algeria.

Though it operates mostly in Algeria, AQIM portrayed itself as the top jihadi group for North African jihadists — a point that it addressed in numerous audio and video recordings. Led by Algerian national Abdulmalik Droukdel (also known as Abu Musaab Abdulwadoud), many of AQIM’s operations have specifically targeted Western nationals and interests, to include the kidnapping and killing of numerous Western victims.

AQIM views North African governments as “an extension” of Western powers and interests. The group believes that there is a new type of imperialistic, “Crusader” campaign that aims at fighting and uprooting Islam. Thus, for AQIM, targeting the governments of Algeria and neighboring countries is in line with targeting U.S. and European interests. The West, according to AQIM, must be confronted — and if not directly, then through the targeting of its citizens and interests.

In a 2009 audio release titled “A Message to Our Ummah in the Islamic Maghreb,” Abdulwadoud discussed these points, stating:

I return briefly to show the danger of the new imperialistic attack, which is an extension to the old campaign, which aims to target our Ummah in its dearest of spiritual components and even its existential principles, and the principles of its continuity, and also to show the dirty role of these apostate and traitor regimes in our Maghreb countries for the interests of the countries that have imperialistic goals and expansionist interests like America, the European Union, and Israel, so perhaps that our Ummah would get ready and prepare to fight its inevitable existential battle, that, if it does not fight today, will inevitably fight it tomorrow.⁸

AQIM claims to fight the Algerian government because it views it as “part of the declared Crusader campaign,” in reference to the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a 2010

⁷ http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=pjcis/aqap_6%20terrorist%20orgs/report/appendix%20e.pdf

⁸ <https://archive.org/details/Archieve-to-almagreb-mojahdeen>

video, AQIM indicated that the “evil government” of Algeria is a direct participant in the “Crusader war,” because it:

confessed to occupying Iraq via diplomatic representation; [by] imprisoning and torturing the Muslim youths who join their brothers in Iraq, [and] participating in the war on Somalia by sending military supply aircraft in support of its Crusader masters...to appease the American master.⁹

Zawahiri later underscored these points in his “General Guidelines for Jihadi Work” manifesto, stating:

In Algeria, where the American presence is small and unnoticeable, the struggle against the regime is for the sake of weakening it and to spread the jihadi influence across the Islamic Maghreb, the West African Sahel and South Saharan countries, and in these regions the signs of [mujahideen] confrontation with the Americans and their allies have started....[sic] All the mujahideen brothers should consider targeting the Western Crusader Zionist coalition’s interests in any location in the world the most important of their duties, and to seek it to the best of their ability.¹⁰

Zawahiri sees Algeria, and North Africa in general, as a new front to weaken the United States, but not necessarily a launching pad for operations in the West. This is important because it underscores AQIM’s methodology: it is easier to target the West in AQIM’s operational reach than to train and dispatch operatives overseas.

(6) Targeting Western Civilians and Interests

Although AQIM has not yet claimed responsibility for terrorist operations in the West, it has underscored that one of its goals is to target Western citizens and interests. Its narrative includes grievances such as the “French invasion of Mali,” which the group sees as part of the new “Crusader imperialism.” Indeed, of all the Western nations, France is AQIM’s primary adversary, a theme deeply rooted in North Africa’s history — and AQIM has expressed its grievances against France’s stance in North Africa since the group’s inception. AQIM’s rhetoric, nonetheless, is confrontational towards the West at large, as it views Western and “Zionist” influence as having negatively impacted Muslims, portraying them as

⁹ <https://archive.org/details/badrmagrib>

¹⁰ https://ia800408.us.archive.org/27/items/tawjeh_ayman/tawjeh_ayman.pdf

persecuted, threatened, and targeted. Therefore, its selection of targets is not limited to nationalistic borders, and its threat is not limited to French citizens and interests.

AQIM sees its fight against the West as part of a larger battle; this point is highlighted in a number of its communiq  s. In March 2016, AQIM claimed responsibility for the armed assault on the Grand Bassam Hotel in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, which killed a number of Westerners, including German and French nationals. In its claim of responsibility, released after the attack,¹¹ the group said:

The goal from these [operations] include a reminder to the Crusaders that their continuous crimes against the Muslims and their Mujahideen brothers will beg a response of targeting the leaders of their crimes and their interests. Our message to the Western populaces is that our actions are a response to the crimes of your armies and governments against our Ummah in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Mali, and Central Africa...you either leave us safe in our homelands, or we will spill your security and the security of your citizens.¹²

(7) A Threat to Economic Interests

Furthermore, AQIM poses a significant threat to Western economic interests, most notably gas and oil plants and facilities. In January 2013, Mukhtar Belmokhtar's Signatories in Blood Brigade (also known as al-Mulathamin) attacked the Tigantourine gas extraction facility in In Amenas town, eastern Algeria, which is jointly operated by an Algerian national company and BP/Statoil. The ensuing hostage crisis lasted for over a day, and concluded with the death of over thirty hostages, including American, British, Norwegian, and French nationals, among others. Reports indicated that a number of the hostage-takers were Libyan and Malian fighters, suggesting a higher level of transnational coordination between AQIM's affiliates.

A few months later, Belmokhtar's group attacked the French Uranium mine Areva and nearby military barracks in Arlit town, in Niger's northwestern city of Agadez. A spokesman

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35798502>

¹² https://telegram.me/AI_Andalus

for the group explained, “[we] attacked France, [as well as] Niger because of its cooperation with France,” further underscoring AQIM’s focus on targeting French interests.¹³

AQIM’s threat to Western gas and oil companies was further underscored in the March 2016 rocket attack on BP/Statoil facilities in Algeria’s In Saleh region. The group’s statement referenced the In Amenas attack three years earlier, and stated its will and intent to target Western interests in the future, saying:

*We chose the British Petroleum base in In Saleh area, and it is the same company that we targeted at Tigantourine compound, to send, through this operation, a number of messages...We announce to all the Western companies that are investing in rock gas that we will target you directly, and we will use every ability to repel you from these projects that harm our environment, rejected in our society.*¹⁴

AQIM’s fixation on France came further into focus on March 17, 2017, when Abdulwadoud released an audio message in which he accepted the allegiance from “The Group for Support of Islam and Muslims” and addressed France, suggesting that the mujahideen will seek to strike in France:

*[France’s] injustice and aggression against the populaces and tribes of the Sahel and Sahara will only increase these tribes’ brotherhood, coalescence and unity...[they will] be determined to wage jihad and resist against the aggressors, and this will only add to the determination of Muslims to transfer the war from our land to her land and from our cities to her cities so it can live in fear that our people in the occupied lands are living.*¹⁵

¹³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22637084>

¹⁴ https://justpaste.it/Algeria_AQMI_2016

¹⁵ <https://soundcloud.com/user-903507653/8cg8ayogbe4v>

(8) Kidnapping Operations^{16,17,18,19,20}

AQIM's primary source of funding and influence is the kidnapping of Westerners, going as far back as 2007. Kidnapping operations not only provide major propaganda value, but also reportedly earn the group significant sums of money, which it uses to finance various other operations.

The incomplete list of AQIM kidnapping operations provided below clearly demonstrates that the group is constantly pursuing Western nationals. Since its inception, AQIM has kidnapped Westerners in Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. The group has reportedly, at times, negotiated with foreign governments to release hostages in exchange for ransom sums. Some estimates indicate that by 2012, AQIM was making about \$3 million USD per hostage released.²¹ In other instances, the group has demanded the release of militants from prison — a tactic that has likely helped swell its ranks.

- On December 24, 2007, four French nationals were killed in Mauritania. The Mauritanian government charged and sentenced three AQIM members to death.
- On February 22, 2008, Austrian citizens Wolfgang Ebner and Andrea Kloiber were kidnapped in Tunisia and transferred to an unknown location in Mali. They were reportedly released after a ransom was paid.
- On December 14, 2008, Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay were kidnapped in Niger, and later released on April 22, 2010.
- On January 22, 2009, Edwin Dyer, Marianne Petzold, Gabriella Greitner, and Werner Greiner were kidnapped in Mali near the Niger border. AQIM killed Dyer on May 31 while reportedly releasing the others after alleged AQIM members were released from prison.

¹⁶ <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/Africa-Monitor/2011/0119/AQIM-kidnapping-and-murder-a-brief-history>

¹⁷ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/aqim-takes-australian-couple-hostage-in-northern-burkina-faso.php>

¹⁸ <http://www.gctat.org/analysis/29-ranoc/236-the-forgotten-three-the-fate-of-aqim-timbuktu-hostages-and-their-captor-belkacem-zouadi.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/11693716/New-British-front-man-for-jihadist-videos-revealed.html>

²⁰ <http://af.reuters.com/article/maliNews/idAFL8N1500DA>

²¹ <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/mali-al-qaeda-islamic-maghrebs-ransom-revenue>

- In June 2009, U.S. national Christopher Leggett was murdered in Nouakchott, Mauritania.
- On November 14, 2009, AQIM attempted to kidnap U.S. embassy personnel in Tahoua, Niger.
- On November 25, 2009, French citizen Pierre Camatte was kidnapped in Mali near the Niger border. Mali released four AQIM militants while AQIM released Camatte in return.
- On November 29, 2009, Spanish citizens Albert Vilalta, Roque Pascual, and Alicia Gamez were kidnapped near Nouadhibou, Mauritania. AQIM later released Gamez after the Spanish government allegedly paid a ransom. AQIM released Vilalta and Pascual on August 22, 2010.
- On December 18, 2009, Italian citizens Nicola Sergio Cicala and Philomen Kabouree were kidnapped in Mauritania. AQIM later released Cicala and Kabouree; it remains unclear whether a ransom was paid.
- On April 19, 2010, French citizen Michel Germaneau was kidnapped in northern Niger and then moved to Mali. AQIM demanded the release of its members from prison. French and Mauritanian security forces raided AQIM members in Mali, killing six of them. AQIM announced it had killed Germaneau on July 25.
- In September 2010, five French nationals were kidnapped in northern Niger. AQIM still holds them hostage to this day.
- In January 2011, French aid worker Antoine De Leocour and French citizen Vincent Delory were kidnapped in Niger. De Leocour and Delory were killed during a rescue attempt.
- In 2011, AQIM kidnapped Swedish national Johan Gustaffson and South African national Stephen McGowan. In 2012, they were featured in an AQIM video with another hostage, Dutch national Sjaak Rijke, who has since been rescued. In June 2015, the two other hostages appeared in an AQIM video in which a British-accented militant informed them that their governments were not negotiating for their release.
- In December 2015, Swiss nun Beatrice Stockley was kidnapped from her residence in Timbuktu, Mali. Stockley was previously kidnapped and released in 2012, but upon her return to Mali, AQIM militants from the Sahara faction took her hostage and accused her of conducting missionary campaigns.

- In January 2016, an Australian couple — a doctor and his wife — was kidnapped by AQIM militants following the terror group's attack on a hotel in Burkina Faso. They were reportedly kidnapped in the country's north and brought into Mali across the border.

(9) Uqba bin Nafea' Brigade in Tunisia

AQIM's affiliate in Tunisia appears to have begun operating in the country in the summer of 2014. The group's operations have primarily targeted security forces, namely in Kasserine City. In September 2014, two months after Uqba bin Nafea' militants targeted security forces in Hanshir at-Talla in the Chaambi Mountains in west central Tunisia, a spokesman for the group threatened the Tunisian government in a video, stating:

Without introductions...O tyrants of Tunisia, await glad tidings of what harm you, as the silence of the mujahideen of Uqba bin Nafea' Brigade before your crimes will not last long.²²

The group has since carried out a range of attacks against police and army units.

Additionally, there is evidence to suggest a higher level of coordination between Tunisian and Algerian AQIM fighters. AQIM recently released the bio of one of its since-killed Algerian commanders who purportedly traveled between Tunisia and Algeria to coordinate with the group's affiliates.

Although the Chaambi Mountains appear to be the group's main hideout, a jihadi media unit known as Efriqia Media released a statement in April 2015 indicating that Uqba bin Nafea' Brigade has:

cells and its soldiers are present on all the Tunisian soil and in its various provinces, and has history in jihadi work and in training a big number of Muslim youths and supplying weapons.²³

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lDwXDnoeJLc&feature=youtu.be>

²³ <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=235486>

Uqba bin Nafae' Brigade poses a serious threat to Tunisia's stability, and should be considered a threat to Western nationals traveling through inadequately governed areas of western Tunisia near the Algerian border.

(10) The Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) in Libya²⁴

Previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the evolution of what was once known as al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). After expanding into Syria and rebelling against al-Qaida, ISIS shocked the world with scenes of brutality, including the videotaped beheadings of at least three Americans. The global terror group seized Raqqa, Syria and shortly thereafter took control of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. Over the course of several months, the group seized control of cities, towns, and villages in several Syrian and Iraqi provinces, and quickly expanded into the schismatic political atmosphere of Libya.

In the spring of 2015, ISIS captured the city of Sirte, effectively establishing a North African stronghold where it is able to host fighters from other countries.^{25,26} The group established strong fighting fronts in Darna and Benghazi and launched attacks targeting Libyan Forces and rival rebel factions, as well as government buildings in Tripoli and Misrata. Moreover, ISIS attempted and temporarily succeeded in laying control over gas and oil plants.

ISIS's branch in Libya — comprising "Tripoli, Barqa and Fezzan" provinces²⁷ — is arguably one of its strongest and most reliable factions. The post-Qaddafi political turmoil in Libya has afforded ISIS a more flexible environment in which to operate, especially prior to the creation of the Government of National Accord (GAN) in December 2015. Libyan Forces recently scored victories against ISIS in Sirte, but the group is quickly regrouping and maintains a wide network of operatives and large caches of weapons.

²⁴ It is worth mentioning that this report does not discuss ISIS in Egypt. ISIS's branch in Egypt's North Sinai is a highly active group, and it has operated in that region for over five years (previously allegiant to Al-Qaida). Most of its attacks have targeted Israeli territories and Egyptian security forces. While the group does not appear to have hosted foreign fighters or dispatched operatives to the West, its targeting and downing of the Russian Metrojet Airliner in October 2015 spotlighted the group as a serious threat to tourists and the aviation industry. It is unlikely that ISIS in Egypt will be the next destination for fighters from the West; however, Western tourists and interests — especially in the North Sinai — are at risk from potential attacks in the future.

²⁵ https://ia600405.us.archive.org/35/items/jamalalqudsy_yahoo_20160530_1211/الاعزة%20على%20الذل%20من.ogv

²⁶ https://ia801504.us.archive.org/28/items/rs_ta/r11.mp4

²⁷ Areas of ISIS operations in Libya: Fezzan (Phazania) region in south west Libya is mostly a desert region. Barqa (Cyrenaica) Province includes the cities of Darna and Benghazi. Tripoli denotes the capital Tripoli, Sirte, and Misrata.

(11) The West as Adversary

ISIS in Libya has not just been adversarial toward the Libyan Forces; it has sent a direct message to the “Crusaders” with its release of footage showing the grisly beheadings of twenty-one Egyptian laborers in southwestern Libya. Released in February 2015, the video featured an English-speaking masked militant whose message echoes ISIS’s will and intent to strike beyond North Africa:

*You have seen us on the hills of al-Sham and on Dabiq's plains, chopping off the heads of those carrying the cross who have been living a long time, filled of spite against Islam and Muslims. And today, we're in the south of Rome, on the land of Islam, Libya, sending another message. O Crusaders, safety for you will be only wishes, especially when you're fighting us altogether. Therefore, we will fight you altogether.*²⁸

In April 2015, the same English-speaking fighter appears in a video featuring the executions of two groups of Ethiopian Christian workers, directing a message to the “nations of the Cross,” in reference to the West. His message was similar to the earlier one:

*To the nations of the Cross, we're back again on the sands where the companions of the Prophet have stepped on before, telling you Muslim blood that was shed under the hands of your religion is not cheap. In fact, their blood is the purest blood because there is a nation behind them inherits revenge. And we swear to Allah...you will not have safety even in your dreams until you embrace Islam.*²⁹

Such threats to the West are in lieu of ISIS’s main external operations goals: to strike in the United States and Europe — goals that its leaders verbalized the intent to accomplish on multiple occasions. ISIS in Libya as an entity, however, does not appear to have succeeded in orchestrating attacks in Western countries — at least not yet. However, its operatives have targeted Western tourists, namely in Tunisia.

Unlike AQIM, however, which operates in a more decentralized fashion, ISIS is highly centralized and the goals of its Libyan faction are not confined to North Africa. On a number of

²⁸ <http://justpaste.it/jfg4>

²⁹ <https://dump.to/albayyinah>

occasions, ISIS fighters have appeared in videos to threaten (or even celebrate) an attack and name other cities they wish to target. After the November 2015 attacks in Paris, ISIS in Libya released a video, titled “From Barqa to Paris,” featuring fighters who vowed more attacks against “Crusaders” in the future. One foreign fighter, whose country of origin was not specified, threatened:

*France was the beginning, and tomorrow it will be in Washington, New York, and Moscow...you will have no haven from our guns, bullets and explosives; we will come to you.*³⁰

ISIS’s targeting of Christians — whom ISIS deems a part of the global “Crusade” — is directly addressing the West and challenging Western countries to intervene. If ISIS’s operatives are unable to strike overseas, the group appears to be urging Western armies to bring to it a ground war — an action that would afford ISIS significant attention and amplify its recruitment efforts. ISIS has used this rhetoric since the U.S.-led coalition began its aerial campaign against the group in Iraq and Syria.

(12) ISIS in Libya Recruits Foreign Nationals

ISIS has reportedly recruited from more than eighty countries around the world.³¹ Its branch in Libya brought in fighters from north, west, and east Africa, and from across the Sahel region. ISIS in Libya has featured fighters urging others to join its ranks, including those from Mali, Somalia, Ghana, Mali, Tunisia, Nigeria, Egypt, and Sudan. The group has also featured English-speakers, although their countries of origin remain unknown.

In a video from its media office in Tripoli, ISIS featured fighters who addressed Muslims across Africa, urging them to pledge allegiance and join ISIS:

*Brothers, it is time to pledge allegiance to the State of the Caliphate; I say to the youths, jihad is obligatory in our current time, and I urge those from my brothers who have no excuse to depart for jihad.*³²

³⁰ <https://archive.org/details/WilayatBarqahFromBarqahToParis>

³¹ [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html? _r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html?_r=0)

³² https://ia601301.us.archive.org/5/items/CopyOf001_20150910/Copy%20of%20001%20-%20رسالة%20إلى%20إخواننا%20الموحدين.ogv

Another fighter delivered a message to “my brothers and sister everywhere: we are now in the Islamic State, and I call upon you to migrate to it.” He called upon the Tuareg tribe in North Mali — the tribe one of AQIM’s most senior leaders, Iyad Ag Ghali, belongs to — to “migrate to the Islamic State.”

Nonetheless, for ISIS, it has remained of critical importance to strike in the West while simultaneously recruiting fighters to its ranks. ISIS leadership believes that inspiring so-called “lone wolves” to strike in the United States and Europe will generate higher propaganda value. For ISIS, attacks in the West are preferable; they turn the attention away from its losses in Iraq and Syria while maintaining the spotlight on the group. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani addressed this point in a May 2016 speech, in which he called on jihadists in the West to launch operations in their home cities rather than migrate to ISIS territory:

Open in their faces the door of jihad and return their deeds against them in regret, and the smallest action you carry out in their homelands is better and more favored by us from the biggest of actions in our midst; it is more successful for us and more brutalizing to them. And if one of you wishes and seeks to reach the Islamic State [i.e. here in the Middle East], one of us wishes to be in your location [i.e. in the West] to brutalize the Crusaders.³³

To justify the targeting of civilians, Adnani added:

We’ve heard that some of you cannot work [i.e. to attack] for being unable to reach military targets, and is hesitant from targeting the so-called civilians, avoiding them because he doubts the permissibility and legitimacy. Know that in the heart of the warring Crusaders’ lands there is no immunity of blood and no presence to the so called innocents...at least from the notion of treating others in the same way; their aircraft do not distinguish between our armed or unarmed, man and woman. Know that targeting so-called civilians is more beloved to us...more brutalizing and painful to them and more repulsing.

³³ <https://archive.org/download/KalemtSHabaan/kalemt%20SHa%60baan.mp3>

(13) ISIS's Resurgence in Algeria

ISIS established a faction under the initial name of “Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria” in September 2014, now called “Algeria Province.” A week after declaring allegiance to Baghda-di, the faction kidnapped and beheaded a French national. The group is believed to be comprised of a few dozen members, and for the past two years it has remained mostly inactive. That changed on March 2, 2017, when the group launched its first suicide attack, targeting a police station in Bab el-Kantara area of Constantine City in northeastern Algeria.

Although the faction remains in a fragile state and lacks organizational support and a programmatic agenda, ISIS fighters in Algeria — operating mostly in the vicinity of Tizi Ouzou — will likely attempt to strike again, as they appear to be re-organizing their ranks. The likely targets will continue to be security forces; however, Western nationals traveling in certain parts of northern and eastern Algeria could be easy targets for kidnapping operations.

(14) ISIS Operations in Tunisia a Main Concern

ISIS has failed to seize territory and establish a strong fighting front in Tunisia, though it has attracted many Tunisians to its ranks in Iraq and Syria. This is partly due to the Tunisian government’s crackdown on jihadists, even those who have no allegiance to any specific group, such as Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, which has been designated a terrorist group by the government.

Two significant ISIS attacks in Tunisia that targeted Westerners took place in 2015; in March, two ISIS operatives attacked tourists outside the Bardo Museum in Tunis City, killing a total of twenty-two people, including Italian, French, Spanish, British, and Belgian nationals, among others. The attacker, according to the Tunisian government, trained with ISIS’s branch in Libya, underscoring the threat ISIS in Libya poses to Western nationals. Three months later, an ISIS operative using an automatic rifle killed over thirty-five tourists, most of them British, at a resort beach hotel in Port al-Kantaoui, north of Sousse City.³⁴

³⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33304897>

While fairly infrequent, these operations generate significant media attention for the terror group; as ISIS continues to face challenges in its Middle Eastern strongholds, ISIS-orchestrated attacks against Westerners in Tunisia may be more likely in the future.

(15) Tackling the Jihadist Threat in North Africa

According to various media reports, the emphasis of U.S. and European counterterrorism operations in North Africa and the Sahel has been limited. U.S. special forces have reportedly conducted a number of airstrikes and other operations against jihadists in Libya.

Part of the issue appears to be that the U.S. is preoccupied with fighting ISIS in its main strongholds in Iraq and Syria, likely viewing ISIS's Libya branch as a lesser threat vis-à-vis Western nations and interests. Another reason may be that U.S. and European security forces see the greatest threat from ISIS to the West as directly emerging from its Iraqi and Syrian strongholds — where the group's top leadership is in hideout.

In other words, the conventional wisdom seems to be that ISIS directs external operations from Iraq and Syria. While that might be true today, there is a high likelihood that the group will decentralize its command-and-control in the future, and its branch in Libya is poised to become the main destination where many of its fighters will end up. There is a higher likelihood that ISIS in Libya will fund and direct external operations as its Syrian and Iraqi branches are under immense pressure to defend what remains of the territory under their control.

For AQIM, its affiliates in North Mali have recently coalesced into one group; one of the new collective's key goals is to continue fighting French forces in Gao and other places.

AQIM's Algeria faction — where its top leader Abdulwadoud is believed to be hiding — has faced a number of setbacks over the past two years, and its operations have been highly subdued. This is part of the reason for the increased activity from its factions in Mali and Tunisia. It is thus imperative that Western governments provide further military and intelligence support to Tunisian, Algerian, and Malian forces as they tackle the jihadist activity in their respective countries.

(16) Conclusions

Given AQIM and ISIS's respective records of targeting Westerners, it is clear that both groups pose a significant threat. AQIM's focus continues to be on targeting Western citizens and economic interests mainly in North Africa and the Sahel regions. There is a significant focus on France and its influence in North and West Africa, which may be a driving force for North African jihadists in France to launch attacks in the country on behalf of AQIM.

Gas and oil facilities have been AQIM's primary economic targets, especially given that many Westerners work at these plants. AQIM's preferred methods of attack against such sites will involve suicide bombers, hostage taking, and rocket attacks. Though France appears to be AQIM's primary adversary, the terror group has targeted various Western nationals, and, while the viability of AQIM attacks in the United States is low, its interest in targeting the U.S. homeland is high — especially given that al-Qaida's leadership has designated the U.S. as al-Qaida's primary target.

Notorious AQIM commander Mukhtar Belmokhtar — who was reported to have been killed several times over the past four years — was confirmed killed by senior al-Qaida Central leader Hussam Abdulra'oof in an October 2015 recording.³⁵ Various reports indicate that he may have been killed as early as June 2015 in Libya.³⁶ His reported presence in Libya is further indicative of transnational cooperation between AQIM affiliates across North Africa.

AQIM never confirmed Belmokhtar's death, but it is safe to say that the commander left behind a powerful faction in the Sahel capable of conducting attacks against Westerners for years to come.

It is worth noting that al-Qaida and ISIS oppose each other — not only ideologically, but also in their geographic areas of interest. This does not mean, however, that jihadists allegiance to both groups do not have room for cooperation. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that jihadists who are specifically inspired by both groups might find a cooperative environment provided they have the same enemy. The January 2015 attacks in Paris, France at the offices of the magazine Charlie Hebdo by pro al-Qaida operatives, and at a Kosher

³⁵ <https://twitter.com/menastream/status/651179105832955905>

³⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/11674616/The-Uncatchable-one-eyed-jihadi-Mokhtar-Belmokhtar.html>

deli by a pro-ISIS jihadist, pointed to some level of cooperation between the perpetrators, particularly in obtaining weapons.

In light of the wave of ISIS-inspired and orchestrated attacks in the United States and Europe in 2015 and 2016, and given the ongoing U.S.-led military mission in Iraq and Syria, the likelihood is that ISIS will continue to incite, inspire, and plot similar attacks against civilians and soft targets. Stabbing, ramming, armed assault, and bombing attacks will likely continue to be the methods of choice for future attackers.

ISIS's strongholds in Iraq and Syria are under siege. The group has lost significant territory and in the coming months, it is poised to lose Mosul and most of its control in Aleppo. Foreign fighters, including those from the West who may not wish to go home, may end up connecting with ISIS's faction in Libya, invigorating the group's North Africa ranks. Fighters from at least ten nationalities so far have been fighting with ISIS in Libya.

Given Libya's close proximity to Europe, ISIS fighters in Libya who wish to target the West may travel to European countries instead of the United States.

Furthermore, ISIS has expressed on multiple occasions its will and intent to orchestrate attacks in the West, and its operations in Paris and Brussels denote the group's ability to dispatch skilled fighters with the know-how to plot and strike. The group has also exerted influence among jihadists in the United States and Europe who are encouraged to attack in their countries on behalf of the group, rather than join ISIS's ranks.

Westerners traveling or residing in insecure areas of Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria will likely continue to face threats from ISIS-inspired and directed attacks.

ISIS appears to have a more powerful recruitment and indoctrination strategy in the West than AQIM. ISIS's external operations facilitators appear to have developed a more inclusive and aggressive call to target the West by all means necessary — unlike AQIM, which has not focused on calls for external attacks overseas.

Returnees to the United States and Europe — those who have gained experience in militant tactics in ISIS camps — as well as self-radicalized individuals, likely pose the most significant jihadist threat to the West.

