NARCO

North Africa Risk Consulting Inc.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Geoff Porter. I am the president of North Africa Risk Consulting, the political and security risk analysis firm specializing exclusively in North Africa. North Africa Risk Consulting provides analysis of evolving political and security contexts in Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia to private sector corporations and different US government agencies and departments. In addition, from 2013-2016, I was an assistant professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point in the Department of Social Sciences and an instructor with the Combating Terrorism Center. In my capacity as president of North Africa Risk Consulting and previously as a faculty member at West Point, I made more than three dozen trips to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, as well as multiple trips to Libya before and after the 2011 revolution that resulted in the overthrow of Col. Muammar Qadhafi's regime. I have had the good fortune of having briefed U.S. ambassadors to Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya regarding political and security developments in those countries prior to their assuming their posts. It is a privilege and an honor to share my analysis of the threat posed by terrorism in North Africa with you.

Terrorism in North Africa

Terrorism in North Africa in recent years is entirely *jihadi salafi* in nature. Although there are differences among *jihadi salafi* terrorist organizations, they all stem from an interpretation of Islam that argues that there is a very narrow canon from which Islamic tenets and duties should be derived and that among those tenets and obligations is the duty to confront by any means necessary non-Muslims or Muslims that these organizations deem to be insufficiently religious. The goal of these *jihadi salafi* organizations is inherently political. They want to oust the political leadership in the nation states in which they operate because that leadership does not share their same interpretation of how political systems should operate. In addition, they want to erode the influence of the United States and its European allies in areas in which they operate.

The persistence of *jihadi salafi* terrorist organizations in North Africa poses a direct threat to U.S. national interests overseas and an indirect and longer-term threat to the homeland. For al-Qaeda affiliated groups and Islamic State allies alike, the U.S. remains the enemy.

Jihadi salafi terrorist groups in North Africa can be divided into two large rubrics. There are those allied with al-Qaeda, which continues to be led by Ayman al-Zawahiri. And there are those who have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Tactical disagreements and different loyalties keep these two groups apart, but there is slippage between them and individuals and affiliates move back and forth. [1]

Defining North Africa

The definition of North Africa can vary from one institution to another. For some U.S. agencies, North Africa includes not only the conventional Maghreb countries (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia), but also Saharan and Sahelian countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal). For the purposes of this examination of the threat posed by terrorism in North Africa, the definition of North Africa will be a hybrid of regional stakeholders' own definition of North Africa as "the Maghreb" and North African terrorist organizations' definition of their area of operations, which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger. [2] This definition accommodates the cross-border, transnational nature of terrorist organizations and of the diplomatic and military approaches adopted to combat it by the U.S., France, and regional governments.

Al-Qaeda and Affiliated Groups

In January 2017, al-Qaeda's regional affiliation, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM (Ar. القاعدة في بلاد المغرب الإسلامي), marked its 10th anniversary. AQIM emerged in moment of desperation out of a pre-existing *salafi* nationalist terrorist organization (the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or GSPC) that was increasingly without a viable mission. [3] The GSPC was dedicated to fighting the Algerian government allegedly in order to restore the aborted 1991 legislative elections. By 2004, the government and the Algerian population had moved on and were focused on restoring peace and stability. The GSPC's leader in 2005, Abdelmalek Droukdel, initiated the process whereby the GSPC first became formally affiliated with al-Qaeda, and then in 2007

---

[1] Thomas, Dominique, "État islamique vs. Al-Qaïda : autopsie d'une lutte fratricide," *Politique étrangère*, N. 1, printemps 2016

[2] http://www.maghrebarabe.org/ar/

[3] Porter, Geoff D., "AQIM Ten Years On," *The Cipher Brief,* 12 January 2017

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   2
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

announced that it had become AQIM.[4] Over the course of the last ten years, AQIM's strategy, tactics, and area of operations have evolved, responding to changes in the broader *jihadi* movement and to political and security developments in the region.

Droukdel remains the organization's leader, but it has expanded its operations beyond just Algeria to include a broad swath of North Africa. In fact, its operations in Algeria itself are curtailed and the group has struggled recently to remain relevant in the Algerian context. That being said, as evinced by the 18 March 2016 attack against the In Salah Gas asset at Krechba, AQIM retains some domestic support in Algeria and still has the capacity to carry out episodic strikes against high-value targets, especially far from urban centers where security measures are less rigorous.[5]

AQIM's evolution has not been seamless and the organization has experienced schisms and leadership fracture. In particular, in 2012 Droukdel quarreled with one of his commanders in northern Mali, and that commander, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, quit AQIM to form his own organization, al-Mourabitoun (Ar. المرابطون), made up of AQIM fighters as well as fighters from the Movement for Unity in Jihad in West Africa or MUJAO (Fr. Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest; Ar. حركة التوحيد والجهاد في غرب أفريقيا).[6] Four months after its formation, a heavily armed platoon of al-Mourabitoun fighters attacked the Tigantourine Gas Plant at In Amenas in Algeria. The attackers originated in northern Mali, transited eastward across the country, passed through northeastern Niger, and entered southwestern Libya where they staged their operation. The attackers subsequently crossed Algeria's border and attacked the gas facility. More than three dozen expatriates were killed at the site, including three U.S. citizens.[7]

Following the In Amenas attack, al-Mourabitoun went to ground, possibly as a result of having lost so many men in the attack, but also because it was being doggedly hunted. From January 2013 to July 2014, France had deployed roughly 4,000 troops as part of Opération Serval whose objective was to stabilize northern Mali in the wake of a *jihadi salafi* offensive. The French presence on the ground and its assets in the air hindered Belmokhtar and al-Mourabitoun's movements.

In the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan revolution, AQIM also tried to make inroads among *jihadi salafi* groups in Libya, including with Ansar al-Sharia (Ar. أنصار الشريعة), the *jihadi salafi* group involved in the attack against the US compound in Benghazi.[8] Belmokhtar was allegedly charged with initiating relations between AQIM and Ansar al-Sharia.[9] While Belmokhtar's overtures were likely well-received, they did not result in any operational coordination between AQIM and Ansar al-Sharia. Ansar al-Sharia itself has

---

[4] Tawil, Camille, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of al-Qa`ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London : Saqi, 2011), trans. Robin Bray

[5] Hadjer Guenanfa, "Attaque contre le site gazier de Krechba : la piste d'un terroriste de la region," *Tout sur l'Algérie*, 22 March 2016

[6] Ould Salem, Lamine, *Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (éd. de La Martinière, 2014)

[7] Statoil, *In Amenas Investigation Report* (2013)

[8] Rogers, Mike, and Ruppersberger, Dutch, *Investigative Report on the Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Facilities in Benghazi, Libya, September 11-12, 2012*, U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 21 November 2014

[9] Rémi Carayol, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar, le parrain du Sahelistan," *Jeune Afrique*, 4 February 2015

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

3

since been absorbed into other *jihadi salafi* organizations in Libya, including the Mujahids' Shura Council Darna (Ar. مجلس شورى مجاهدي درنة) and the Mujahids' Shura Council Benghazi (Ar. مجلس شورى مجاهدي بنغازي).[10] Libya's descent into civil war by late 2014 and the emergence of the Islamic State in Sirte in 2015 both undermined Ansar al-Sharia's ongoing viability. As a result, AQIM does not have a sustained presence in northern Libya. It is likely, though, that al-Mourabitoun continue to have a limited presence in southwestern Libya.[11]

While AQIM failed to maintain a presence in Libya, it has had greater success with its Tunisian affiliate, the Uqba Ibn Nafi Brigade (Ar. كتيبة عقبة ابن نافع), which was established by an emissary who had been sent to Tunisia by Droukdel in 2011. The Uqba Ibn Nafi Brigade is contained in western Tunisia along the border with Algeria and it closely adheres to AQIM's tactics, techniques and procedures, avoiding attacks on civilians and targeting Tunisian security services.

In November of 2015, al-Mourabitoun rejoined AQIM, although a faction of al-Mourabitoun led by Abu Walid al-Sahraoui had earlier pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and created the Islamic State of the Grand Sahara.[12] The return of al-Mourabitoun was a triumph for Droukdel and it reestablished AQIM's prominence as the leading *jihadi salafi* organization in North Africa, the Sahara, and the Sahel.

Droukdel has recently further consolidated AQIM's position in Saharan and Sahelian countries. A communique on 2 March 2017 announced the regrouping of disparate but related *jihadi salafi* groups in North Africa. The announcement was made by Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine, a local front for AQIM in Mali. Ag Ghali was accompanied by AQIM commander Yahya Abu Hammam, al-Mourabitoun second-in-command Hassan al-Ansari, Amadou Koufa, the leader of the Macina Brigade (Ansar Dine's Peul battalion), and Abderrahmane Sanhaji, an AQIM legal scholar (Ar. قاضي).[13] Ag Ghali declared that the group was now "Islam and Muslims' Victory Group" (Ar. جماعة نصرة الإسلام والمسلمين) and that it remained loyal to al-Qaeda's leader Ayman Zawahiri and AQIM's emir Abdelmalik Droukdel.[14] With the regrouping, AQIM is able to reestablish its unified presence in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Tunisia.[15]

The Islamic State and Affiliated Groups

In 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, sent a mission to Libya to assess the possibility of establishing an Islamic State presence in the country.[16] By 2014, a coalition of different *jihadi salafi* groups in Derna

---

[10] Lacher, Wolfram, "Libya: A Jihadist Growth Market," in *Jihadism in Africa: local causes, regional expansion, international alliances*, Steinberg, Guido and Weber, Annette, eds. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für
Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, 2015

[11] "al-Barghathî; 'Daech' yu'amalu 'ala `i'âda tajmu'a sufûfahu wa tamarkazâtahu fî janûb lîbîyâ," *khabâr lîbîyâ*, 4 March 2017

[12] Mémier, Marc, "AQMI et al-Mourabitoun: Le djihad sahélien réunifié" *Études de l'Ifri*, January 2017

[13] Mohamed Fall Oumère, "De la naissance d'un nouveau « djihadistan » au Sahel," *Le Monde*, 10 March 2017

[14] Amin Muhammad 'Amad, "ikhtiyâr iyâd agh ghâlî `amîran li jamâ'a 'jamâ'a nusrah al-islâm wa al-muslimîn," *al-salâm al-yûm*, 4 March 2017

[15] "iyâd agh ghâlî 'mullah 'umar' mantiqah al-sâhil wa al-sahrâ`," *al-`akhbâr al-maurîtânîyah* 6 March 2017

[16] Porter, Geoff D. "How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State 'Fallback'" *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9 Issue 3, March 2016

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   **4**
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and by June 2015, the Islamic State controlled most of the central coastal city of Sirte.[17] Reports regarding the number of Islamic State fighters in Sirte varied considerably with some sources citing 3,000 fighters and others as many as 12,000.[18] While in control of Sirte, the Islamic State tried to impose its own perverse interpretation of Islamic law on the town's population, but the Islamic State in Libya was never self-sufficient and remained dependent upon the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria for financial support.[19]

The Islamic State had also attempted to make inroads elsewhere in North Africa. In September 2014, a new group, the Caliphate's Soldiers in the Land of Algeria (Ar. جند الخلافة في أرض الجزائر), captured a French tourist in the mountains to the southeast of the capital Algiers. The group announced its allegiance with the Islamic State and declared that it would kill its hostage if its demands were not met. Algeria does not negotiate with terrorists and the group murdered the Frenchman. While Algeria has reckoned with AQIM for more than ten years, it would not tolerate the emergence of an Islamic State ally within its borders. By December 2014, Algerian security services had largely eradicated the group, including eliminating its leader Khaled Abou Suleimane.[20] There have been intermittent attempts to carry out attacks in subsequent years by individuals and cells claiming to be Islamic State members, but these

have been largely unsuccessful. The most recent attack in the eastern Algerian city of Constantine was foiled.[21]

There was also an uneven attempt to establish an Islamic State group in Tunisia which labeled itself the Caliphate's Soldiers. In March 2015, three Islamic State gunmen attacked the Bardo Museum in Tunis.[22] The Islamic State also claimed responsibility for an attack carried out by a lone gunman in June 2015 near the resort town of Sousse and for an attack on the presidential guard in Tunis, Tunisia.[23] In March 2016, there was a three-day gun battle in the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdane that seems to have been precipitated by the U.S. bombing of an Islamic State training camp in Sabratha, Libya.[24] Tunisian members of the Islamic State in Libya had been planning to capture and hold Ben Guerdane but may have accelerated their attack in the aftermath of the Sabratha bombing.

The battle of Ben Guerdane, however, underscores an important aspect of the Islamic State threat in Tunisia: almost all Islamic State activities in Tunisia have had a Libyan component. Since the Ben Guerdane assault and the Islamic State's subsequent loss of Sirte, Libya, the Islamic State's activities in Tunisia have been more sporadic and the group's capacity in Tunisia is diminished. Recent Islamic State attacks in Tunisia have focused on the Tunisian security services and Tunisia has not

---

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Imene Brahimi, "RÉCIT. Abdelmalek El Gouri : trois mois de traque sans relâche," *Tout sur l'Algérie*, 23 December 2014

[21] Fayçal Métaoui, "Attentat à Constantine : Le terroriste abattu," *El Watan*, 26 February 2017

[22] "Tunisie : les terrorists auraient été formés par le groupe EI en Libye," *RFI Afrique*, 20 March 2015

[23] "l'Etat islamique revendique l'attentat contre la police en Tunisie," *Le Monde*, 25 November 2015

[24] Declan Walsh, Ben Hubbard, and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Bombing in Libya Reveals Limits of Strategy Against ISIS," *The New York Times*, 19 February 2016

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   **5**
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

suffered a large-scale Islamic State attack in more than a year.

At the same time, however, the Islamic State has expanded southward, at least in name. In May 2015, a former MUJAO leader in Mali, Adnane Abou Walid el-Sahraoui, who had joined al-Mourabitoun, split with Belmokhtar, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and formed the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (Ar. الدولة الإسلامية في الصحراء الكبرى).[25] In the following months, el-Sahraoui was quiet, some suspecting he had been wounded in a clash with al-Mourabitoun loyalists.[26] El-Sahraoui re-emerged in May 2016, threatening to undertake attacks against Morocco and UN personnel stationed in the disputed territory of Western Sahara.[27] No such attack ever transpired and over the last six months el-Sahraoui's group has carried out only a handful of small scale attacks against soft targets in Burkina Faso and Mali.

El-Sahraoui's inability to hit Morocco is all the more curious because there appears to be a deep well of sympathy for the Islamic State in Morocco. Moroccans constituted the third largest nationality to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (smaller only than Saudi Arabia and Tunisia).[28] At home, Moroccan security services have disrupted an Islamic State plot or arrested an alleged Islamic State cell almost once a month, every month for the last two years. Why there is so much support for the Islamic State in Morocco may be due to the monarchy's overt effort to enforce a state version of Islam. Islamic State supporters bristle

at a monarch who they view as corrupt claiming the mantle "Commander of the Faithful" (Ar. أمير المؤمنين) and imposing an interpretation of Islam on them.[29] The Islamic State's Moroccan appeal extends beyond Morocco's borders into Europe. The November 2015 Paris attacks and the March 2016 Brussels attacks, both claimed by the Islamic State, each had Moroccan elements.[30]

Assessing the Threat

Jihadi salafi terrorist groups in North Africa undoubtedly pose a threat to U.S. national interests overseas and, even though they pose no immediate risk to U.S. homeland, they could threaten the homeland over the longer term. Importantly, as is true of all terrorist organizations, neither al-Qaeda allied groups nor Islamic State affiliates distinguish between civilian and official targets. U.S. government personnel, U.S. citizens, and U.S. corporations are all seen as legitimate targets.

The Threat to National Interests Overseas
With its ongoing operations in Algeria and Tunisia and its "regroupment" in the Sahara and Sahel, AQIM is now the strongest terrorist organization in North Africa with the biggest footprint and poses the greatest threat to U.S. national interests in the region. Its "regroupment" theoretically allows it to eliminate redundancies among formerly disparate groups, conserve and share resources, and coordinate training and planning.

---

[25] "Sahel : un chef d'Al-Mourabitoun prête allégegance à l'organisation de l'État islamique," *France24*, 15 May 2015

[26] Aziz M., "Urgent : L'émir d'al-Mourabitoun gravement blesse dans des affrontements," *El Watan*, 17 June 2015

[27] Imad Stitou, "Qui est Abou Walid as-Sahraoui qui menace de terroriser le Maroc," *Le Desk,* 4 May 2016

[28] Dodwell, Brian, Milton, Daniel, & Rassler, Don, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail*, The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, April 2016

[29] Ilhem Rachidi, "Mohamed Tozy : «Le Maroc a parié sur une sorte de salafisme implicite»," *Le Desk*, 22 July 2016

[30] Paul Cruickshank, "The inside story of the Paris and Brussels attacks," *CNN*, 30 March 2016

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   **6**
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

In contrast, the Islamic State suffered a severe setback in North Africa due to the loss of its bastion in Sirte. There have reportedly been fewer "squirters" from the Sirte offensive than anticipated and smaller numbers of Islamic State fighters managed to escape the city than was expected. Those that did escape are dispersed throughout Libya and northern Niger. Their current capabilities are uncertain, but they lost or expended a large amount of materiel in their campaign to defend Sirte and in subsequent airstrikes against training camps and other locations.[31] In addition, it will take them time to establish networks in new local communities that will enable them to function more fluidly. That being said, there is no doubt that Islamic State fighters cling to *jihadi salafi* ideology and still harbor a desire to attack U.S. and U.S.-related targets. For the moment, though, Islamic State attacks in North Africa will be more opportunistic than calibrated.

Although North Africa and the Sahara are not strategic regions for the U.S., there are three main categories where U.S. national interest can be endangered by terrorist organizations: U.S. government personnel, U.S. private citizens, and U.S. businesses.

U.S. Government Personnel
In 2012, Ansar al-Sharia participated in an attack in Benghazi, Libya that resulted in the deaths of four U.S. government personnel.[32] Although the circumstances around the attack are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere in North Africa, it was a sharp reminder that North

African terrorist organizations will target the U.S. government when they can. In addition to the U.S. diplomatic corps, the U.S. has soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen in North Africa who are high-value targets for *jihadi salafi* groups. The risks to U.S. service members were underscored in an episode in December 2015 during which a team of U.S. Special Forces was interdicted by a Libyan militia.[33] The militia was not a terrorist organization and the team exfiltrated the country without further incident, but the confrontation could have easily ended very differently. Further to the south in Niger, a U.S. soldier died while supporting Nigerien counterterrorism operations.[34]

U.S. Citizens
In addition to U.S. diplomats and members of the armed services, the ongoing presence of *jihadi salafi* groups in North Africa threatens U.S. citizens in the region. AQIM and the Islamic State's willingness to kill civilians is well documented. In April 2011, a *jihadi salafi* bomber in Marrakech, Morocco killed 17 civilians, including 15 Europeans.[35] In January 2013, 37 expatriates were killed, including three U.S. citizens, when al-Mourabitoun attacked the Tigantourine Gas Facility at In Amenas, Algeria.[36] In January 2015, a U.S. citizen (and U.S. Marine veteran) was killed in an Islamic State attack in Tripoli, Libya.[37] In March 2015, Islamic State gunmen killed 22 civilians, including 21 from Europe, Japan, and Latin America, at the Bardo Museum in Tunis,

[31] North Africa Risk Consulting, *NARCO Analysis: Why the US bombed ISIS in Libya*, 19 January 2017
[32] Op Cit., Ft. 7
[33] Chris Stephen, "Secret US mission in Libya revealed after air force posted pictures," *The Guardian*, 17 December 2015,
[34] Alex Horton, "Special Forces soldier dies in accident in Niger," *Stars and Stripes*, 11 February 2017
[35] "Attentat de Marrakech : au moins six Français tués" *Le Monde*, 29 April 2011
[36] Porter, Geoff D., "The Eradicateurs" *Foreign Policy*, 18 January 2013
[37] "RIP to a friend – MARSOC Marine" *SOCNET, The Special Operations Community Network*

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   **7**
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

Tunisia.[38] In June 2015, an Islamic State gunman killed 38 civilians and wounded 37 at Port El Kantaoui, Tunisia. The victims were predominantly from the U.K.[39] On 20 November 2015, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun attacked a hotel in Bamako, Mali, killing 20 civilians, including a U.S. citizen.[40] In January 2016, AQIM attacked a hotel and café in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, killing 30 civilians, including one U.S. citizen.[41] In March 2016, AQIM attacked a beachfront hotel in Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast, killing 19 civilians.[42] It is due to a combination of vacationing patterns, limited U.S. foreign direct investment in the region, and luck that more U.S. citizens have not been killed by *jihadi salafi* organizations in North Africa over the last decade.

U.S. Corporations

The operations of U.S. companies in North Africa are also vulnerable to *jihadi salafi* terrorism.[43] Numerous U.S. companies have investments and activities in North Africa, particularly in the oil and gas sector. ExxonMobil has oil and gas assets in Libya and Chad. A consortium of three other prominent U.S. oil companies also operates in Libya.[44] Still other U.S. energy companies have assets in Algeria.[45] In addition, a U.S. energy company recently made a promising gas discovery in Mauritania.[46] U.S. companies are also involved in other sectors throughout North Africa, including petrochemicals, telecoms, defense, pharmaceuticals, and renewables.

Although the value of U.S. corporate activity in North Africa is dwarfed by that in Central America or South East Asia, North Africa is nonetheless an important market that creates value for American enterprises. A terrorist attack, regardless of whether it directly targets U.S. companies or the private sector in general, disrupts commercial activity and erodes value for U.S. corporations. There is the possibility of the loss of life and the destruction of hard assets. There are costs associated with lost productivity due to country evacuations in the wake of terrorist attack. Finally, the existence of a terrorist threat compels corporations to shoulder additional security and insurance costs. If the threat is deemed serious enough, costs become unsustainable and U.S. companies will abandon opportunities in North Africa.

The Threat to the Homeland

Threat posed by North African terrorist organizations to Europe is greater than the threat they pose to the U.S. There are multiple reasons for this having to do with geographic proximity, colonial legacies, linguistic facility, and the commonality of dual-nationality among European and North African countries.[47]

---

[38] Frida Dahmani, "Attentat du Bardo : le musée de l'horreur," *Jeune Afrique*, 24 March 2015

[39] *The Tunisia Inquests* (2017)

[40] "L'attentat de Bamako réveille le spectre de "l'insaisissable" Mokhtar Belmokhtar," France24 23 November 2015

[41] "Ce que l'on sait de l'attaque terroriste à Ouagadougou," *Le Monde* 15 January 2016

[42] "Côte d'Ivoire: Aqmi dévoile les objectifs de son attentat à Grand-Bassam," *RFI*, 15 March 2016,

[43] Porter, Geoff D., "Terrorist Targeting of the Libyan Oil and Gas Sector," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, February 2015

[44] U.S. Energy Information Administration, Libya, https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.cfm?iso=LBY

[45] U.S. Energy Information Administration, Algeria, https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.cfm?iso=DZA

[46] Michael Stothard, "Gas find on Mauritania-Senegal border comes with challenges," *Financial Times*, 15 April 2016

[47] Reinares, Fernando, "Avatares del terrorismo yihadista en España," Real Instituto Elcano, 3 February 2017

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   **8**
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

No terrorist organization in North Africa currently has the capacity to undertake attacks in the United States. *Jihadi salafi* terrorist organizations in many senses are no different than any other organization, terrorist or otherwise. *Jihadi salafi* groups calculate the most effective ways to allocate finite resources with the greatest likelihood of success. In the case of North African terrorist organizations, this means that if they do intend to carry out attacks against targets outside their area of operations, then they are most likely to attempt attacks in Europe. In fact, given the target rich environment in which they operate in North Africa and given the proximity of Europe, *jihadi salafi* terrorist organizations in North Africa are more likely to carry out attacks in North Africa and Europe than they are in the U.S.

Because of the historical legacy of colonial occupation by France, North African *jihadi salafis* from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia are likely to have greater familiarity with French than English and are more likely to be able to establish networks among North African diaspora communities in Europe than they are in the United States. In fact, in a communique commending the formation of "The Islam and Muslims' Victory Group" earlier in March 2017, Abdelmalek Droukdel, the commander of AQIM, declared that "Muslims want to export war from their lands to France."[48]

Similarly, because of Italy's colonial presence in Libya and the subsequent U.K. presence after World War II, Libyan *jihadi salafis* are more likely to have familiarity with and potential networks in Italy and the U.K. rather than in the U.S. Lastly, because of its geographic proximity and because of the size of the Moroccan diaspora population, Moroccan *jihadi salafis* are also more likely to privilege Spanish over American targets.[49]

Nevertheless, like any other group around the globe, *jihadi salafis* are mobile. Individuals from one group in one region join another group in another region. The 2009 plot to explode an airplane over Detroit, Michigan was undertaken by a Nigerian from Kaduna who had joined al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen and was being directed by the American Anwar al-Awlaki.[50] In 2012, Libyans who had traveled to Syria formed the Battar Brigade, which later pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. They subsequently traveled back to Libya where they were joined by an Islamic State delegation from Yemen and Saudi Arabia.[51] Later in 2015 and 2016, Iraqis and Saudis traveled to Libya to oversee the Islamic State's activities there.[52] A recent video from Abu Bakr Shekau, the embattled leader of Boko Haram in Nigeria, featured a French speaker in predominantly Anglophone Nigeria, suggesting that Boko Haram is recruiting in Francophone Sahelian countries.[53] What this means is that even though *jihadi salafi* groups in North Africa may not pose a direct threat to the U.S. because

---

[48] "AQMI menace 'd'exporter la guerre en France," *alakhbar.info*, 17 March 2017

[49] "Tres detenidos en Barcelona y Valencia en un Nuevo golpe contra el yihadismo," *El País*, 22 March 2017

[50] Peter Finn, "Al-Awlaki directed Christmas 'underwear bomber' plot, Justice Department memo says," *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2012

[51] Wehrey, Frederic, Alrababa`h, Ala`, "Rising Out of Chaos: The Islamic State in Libya," *Carnegie Middle East Center,* 5 March 2015

[52] Op. Cit. Ft.16

[53] Allain Jules, "Boko Haram : réapparition de Abubakar Shekau qui accuse le Cameroun de «mensonge »," *mamaafrika.tv*, 17 March 2017

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

9

they do not have the operational capacity to hit the U.S. or because it is not a strategic priority for them, individual North African and Saharan *jihadi salafis* could contribute to the capabilities of other *jihadi salafi* groups outside North Africa that do have the capacity and the intention to target the U.S.

Moreover, if groups are left unmolested, even if they do not presently pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland, they will evolve and their capacity to plan and train will grow, potentially to the point where attacking the U.S. homeland is no longer practically infeasible. This was the case with al-Qaeda and Usama ibn Laden in Khartoum, Sudan in the 1990s and it is potentially the case today for al-Qaeda and Islamic State groups in North Africa, the Sahara, and the Sahel.[54]

Current Counterterrorism Approaches

In counterterrorism, there is no "Mission Accomplished." There is only "continuing to accomplish the mission." There is no winning. There is only managing the risk to tolerable levels. Doing that is complicated, involving a continuum of military and non-military solutions.

Military Counterterrorism Approaches in North Africa

Since 2013, the U.S. has employed a new model for counterterrorism operations in North Africa and the Sahara and Sahel.[55] The model relies on logistical and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support to U.S. allies, building partner capacity (BPC) programs, and the limited use of U.S. Special Forces to advise, assist, and accompany local forces and pursue high-value targets (HVTs).[56] This approach has advantages and disadvantages.

Among its advantages, it is less costly than large scale military deployments; it limits U.S. personnel exposure to risks on the ground; it allows for the wider projection of U.S. power; and it is potentially less diplomatically disruptive to the pursuit of other U.S. national non-security related interests. By training local partners, it builds a more enduring counterterrorism presence in the region. Perhaps most importantly, this approach does not aim to eliminate terrorism or defeat terrorist groups in North Africa: its objective is to degrade them. The constant pressure that results from this approach slows the evolution of terrorist groups and prevents them from gaining the capabilities that could ultimately allow them to target the homeland.

Nevertheless, there is no counterterrorism silver bullet and the new model is not without its shortcomings. Although over the long run leadership decapitation of terrorist groups and eliminating HVTs quantifiably shortens a group's lifespan, they also can have unintended consequences.[57] For example, removing the leader of one group can result in the merger of two groups that had previously been hostile to one another, thereby creating a new group that has greater capabilities than either of the two

---

[54] Wright, Lawrence, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York : Knopf, 2006)

[55] Porter, Geoff D. and Sheehan, Michael, "The Future Role of US Counterterrorism Operations in Africa" *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, February 2014

[56] Eric Schmitt, "Using Special Forces Against Terrorism, Trump Seeks to Avoid Big Ground Wars," *The New York Times*, 19 March 2017

[57] Price, Bryan C., "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Spring 2012), pp. 9-46

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

10

pre-existing groups.[58] Alternately, eliminating HVTs and leadership decapitation can result in schisms within terrorists organizations that can result in competition for prominence among factions, a phenomenon known as "outbidding."[59] One of the ways in which outbidding can manifest itself is through an increased pace of terrorist attacks or more "spectacular" terrorist attacks. In short, eliminating HVTs or leadership decapitation can inadvertently increase the lethality of a terrorist organization in the near term.

A second problem with the new approach to counterterrorism in North Africa is that BPC efforts need to be consistent and sustained in order for them to work. Ad hoc or intermittent training engagements with partner nations mean local forces retain some of the skills acquired through BPC programs for a period of time, but there is no long-term capacity improvement and the U.S. runs the risk of repeating efforts ad infinitum.[60]

Lastly, the U.S. needs to be mindful that political circumstances in partner countries may not be conducive to BPC. U.S. training of local militaries that have poor reputations in host countries or are politically problematic can contribute to broader animosity toward the U.S. and fuel the *jihadi salafi* anti-American narrative. For example, while U.S. efforts in Chad have increased Chadian forces counterterrorism capabilities, it has come at the cost of the U.S. being perceived as supporting President Idriss Déby's authoritarian regime.[61] In Niger's Diffa region, the local population blames the deterioration of the security environment as much on Boko Haram as on the abusive Nigerien forces combating the terrorist group.[62] The problem is more difficult in Libya where, in the absence of a functioning government, it is hard to even identify the proper military units to be trained.[63]

Non-military Approaches to Countering Terrorism in North Africa

Despite the new counterterrorism approach's advantages, military solutions are never enough to limit the threat that terrorism poses to U.S. national interest abroad and to the homeland. It is equally important to address the underlying conditions that lead to the emergence and continuation of terrorist organizations in North Africa. Because terrorism is by definition political and because *jihadi salafi* terrorism is about destroying and reshaping political structures in predominantly Muslim parts of the globe, it is critical to engage regional political institutions to ensure that they are upholding the obligations inherent in the state-society relationship. Misunderstanding the political dimension or ignoring it entirely does a disservice to counterterrorism efforts.

One of the fundamental drivers of *jihadi salafi* terrorism is the perception of injustice and the belief that the implementation of a *salafi*

---

[58] Porter, Geoff D., "The Drone War Goes Awry in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, 20 January 2016

[59] Porter, Geoff D., "Terrorist Outbidding: The In Amenas Attack," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, Issue 5 (May 2015)

[60] Powelson, Simon J., *Enduring Engagement Yes, Episodic Engagement No: Lessons for SOF from Mali*, Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013

[61] Nickels, Benjamin P., and Shorey, Margot, "Chad: A Precarious Counterterrorism Partner," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, Issue 4 (April 2015)

[62] *Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency*, International Crisis Group, Report Number 245, 27 February 2017

[63] Carla Babb, "Friend or Foe? Doubts Plague US Military in Libya Training," *Voice of America*, 18 May 2016

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com

11

interpretation of Islam via *jihad* would ensure Muslims social justice.[64]

There is quantitative evidence that indicates that North African, Saharan, and Sahelian countries have a justice deficit. Excepting Tunisia, all the countries in the region fall in the bottom half of Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016*.[65] Libya is ranked 170th of out 176 countries. Chad is 159th and Mali is 116. The World Justice Project's *Rule of Law Index 2016* ranked Tunisia 58th out of 113 countries. Morocco was 60th, Burkina Faso 79th, and Nigeria 96th.[66] The *2016 Ibrahim Index of African Governance* which ranks Africa's 54 countries also indicates inadequate governance and rule of law in North Africa.[67] For its "Overall Governance" ranking, Libya was ranked 51 out of 54 countries. Chad was 48, Niger 27, Mali 25, and Algeria 20. There is a justifiable and overwhelming perception that the playing field in North Africa, the Sahara, and Sahel is uneven. If injustice fuels the *jihadi salafi* narrative, then the narrative burns bright in North Africa and the Sahara.

There is also quantifiable evidence that North African and Saharan and Sahelian countries may not just be unwilling to ensure justice for their populations, but they may be unable to. Every country in the region is listed as being at risk according to the Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index: Fragility in the World 2016*.[68] Even the most stable countries in the region – Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia – receive "Elevated Warnings." Chad's status is categorized as "Very High Alert," and Cameroon, Libya, Mali, and Niger are listed as "Alerts." When states are fragile or they fail, they no longer have the capacity to provide services ranging from education to security for their populations. The collapse of governance, let alone implementing of good governance, creates space for *jihadi salafi* terrorist groups to act.

Considering its historical commitment to justice and good governance, the U.S. should work to reduce North African deficits in those areas. Military approaches to counterterrorism can diminish existing threats but they cannot address the conditions that allow terrorist groups to emerge, sustain themselves, or revitalize themselves. Through aid and development programs, the U.S. can shore up fragile North African and Saharan states. Doing so is as vital a counterterrorism tool as are BPC programs and eliminating HVTs.

Mitigating the threat posed by North African *jihadi salafi* terrorists to U.S. interests abroad and to the homeland requires a nuanced combination of military and non-military approaches. North African terrorist organizations do not presently pose a threat to the homeland. However, removing terrorists from the battlefield downrange only slows their groups' evolution. To truly secure the homeland, the U.S. must address the underlying causes of North African terrorism, chief among them injustice and rule of law.

---

[64] Turner, John A., *Religious Ideology and the Roots of Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order* (New York: Springer, 2014)

[65] *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016*, Transparency International, 25 January 2017

[66] *World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2016*, The World Justice Project (2016). Algeria, Libya, Chad, Niger, and Mali were not included in the index because the World Justice Project was unable to conduct household polling.

[67] *A Decade of African Governance 2006-2015: 2016 Ibrahim Index of African Governance*, Mo Ibrahim Foundation (October 2016)

[68] Messner, J.J., and Haken, Nate, et al. *Fragile States Index 2016: The Book* (June 2016)

North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc.   **12**
info@northafricarisk.com
www.northafricarisk.com