

**Conflict and Instability in the Sahara and the Sahel:  
Local Dilemmas, Global Implications**

**Prepared Statement of**

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**Introduction**

North Africa and the intertwined Sahel, from Egypt to Mauritania, is a region that has undergone profound and destabilizing political and social change in the last several years, especially since the “Arab Spring” of 2011. Nascent political systems, newly empowered non-state actors, and underlying structural problems in the region

contribute to an increasingly volatile mix, the implications of which—especially terrorism—are global in scope.

This statement explores the areas and sources of security and instability in the Sahara and Sahel, emphasizing several geographic focal points and specific threats. Terrorist networks associated with al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) will receive a great deal of attention in this discussion, as will the patterns of radicalization and the illicit economies that support them. Left unaddressed, these patterns and nefarious actors will increasingly threaten the interests of the United States and her allies, both within and without Continental Africa.

I will conclude with several recommendations to the Congress, the primary one being to take the necessary legislative steps to empower and direct the Administration to work with the international community to synchronize critical USAID assistance to at-risk populations in places like Northern Mali with the efforts of Special Operations Forces (SOF) to deny safe haven to terrorist actors, diminish their standing within at-risk populations and prevent them from using the area to continue to threaten US and allied interests.

### **Mali**

Since I last came before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights to discuss the situation in Mali in June 2012, things have escalated dramatically in the West African country, causing further instability in the Sahara and the Sahel. Many skeptics underestimated the Islamist threat and claimed that the Saharan branch of AQIM was only focused on kidnappings for ransom and illicit trade, rather than jihadist activities. A year later, Mali is faced with a new threat, suicide bombers—a phenomenon never seen before in the Sahel. In fact, since 9 February 2013, Mali has experienced twelve suicide attacks in the cities of Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, and now Gossi. These are primarily areas that were once under Islamist control after the predominantly Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL) was elbowed out of Northern Mali last June by AQIM and its allies. This trend, which speaks to the inculcation of the insidious ideology, ethos and means of al-Qa’ida’s global jihad, is not going to disappear anytime soon. I am concerned that, in time, AQIM’s influence and tactics will grow more sophisticated and violent in Mali, following a similar evolution seen in the Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram from 2011 until present.<sup>1</sup>

The root causes of the terrorist escalation in Mali and across the region are complex and multi-faceted. Understanding the “why” of this present violence and the logic of its perpetrators requires us to look more closely at some of the principal regional issues that contributed to the current crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Peter Pham, *Boko Haram’s Evolving Threat*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies African Security Brief No. 20 (April 2012).

First, the situation in Northern Mali has recently escalated because jihadists across the region have become more proactive and lethal generally—a trend mirrored in Mali. Militants linked to al-Qa’ida, hardened by years of survival under oppressive regimes, have been revived in this region since the start of the “Arab Spring.” Seasoned fighters from Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, and Syria further bolster their skills and intent, helping them to expand their networks, strengthening their fighting capacity and resolve to recruit new militants.<sup>2</sup> Terrorist training camps exist in several parts of the region, especially the Egyptian Sinai and Upper Egypt, southern and eastern Libya, northern Mali and northern Nigeria. Every state in this region is vulnerable to AQIM, which has been massively bolstered by weapons flow, porous borders and security vacuums in the Sahel, in combination with fragile regional governments. The recruitment narrative of AQIM has also been given new life via Western intervention in Mali and a renewed, increasingly severe focus on Western (rather than Muslim government and civilian) targets. Beyond the recent In Amenas hostage disaster, the September 11, 2012, attack against the US Consulate in Benghazi exemplifies this pattern. Militants like Mokhtar Belmokhtar will also look increasingly to establish their *bona fides* and recruitment potential by striking accessible Western targets, including corporations with spectacular theatrical impact. Heavy-handed government responses to AQIM, as witnessed in Algeria, only raise the bar of lethality.<sup>3</sup>

Another catalyst for violent extremism in Mali and the broader region is the confluence of marginalized peoples, pushed into harsh border areas, and violent extremist organizations. Militant Islamist elements like AQIM, Boko Haram, The Movement for Tawheed and Jihad in African (MUJAO), Ansar Dine, and others prove attractive to some within marginalized ethnic groups, coerced into veritable no-man’s lands, seeking social justice and political recognition. Across the Sahel and Sahara, there are numerous examples of such marginalized peoples living in (predominantly post-independence) areas marked by weak governance, poverty, ethnic tensions and other insecurities that develop symbiotic relationships with extremists. This is the situation in Northern Mali and Niger with elements of the Tuareg ethnic group; the Toubous in southern Libya, northeastern Niger, and northern Chad; and the Sahraoui from Western Sahara. Nigeria, the most populated country on the African continent, is also mired in corruption, abusive security challenges and strife between the largely Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South. In each country, marginalized groups seek haven from oppressive regimes in neglected regions, while foreign militants are drawn to the same spaces to capitalize on the discontent. This creates a destabilizing conundrum that is playing out across the region.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the social and operational impact of foreign jihadist fighters, see Frank J. Cilluffo, Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp, *Western Foreign Fighters: Trends and Implications* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, October 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Magnus Ranstorp, Rudolph Atallah, and Jeffrey B. Cozzens, “Hva vi bør lære av In Amenas” (“After In Amenas: Five Lessons for Corporate Security in Africa”), *VG Nett*, January 29, 2013, <http://pluss.vg.no/2013/01/29/1103/yXQCKe>.

A further reason for escalating destabilization in Mali is central government corruption. In Bamako (and elsewhere), the central government embezzled aid money destined for the North, leaving its inhabitants, the Tuareg, Songhai, Arabs, and others out to fend for themselves. Fifty-three years after independence, and these resourceful peoples continue to be deprived of development, leaving the door open for extremist elements to exploit their grievances to generate recruits. Tuareg (and others) are at home in the desert and know how to make a living there, but the lack of resources prevents them from developing a modern economy. While the Tuareg excel at trading (especially livestock) and tourism, Bamako refuses to acknowledge that these pastoralists produce a significant amount of their milk and meat. If they had good roads and trucks, they could capitalize on these primary industries much more efficiently. We should support their business efforts instead of stigmatizing them. Bamako needs to acknowledge the legitimate input of Tuareg into the national economy and support them through more extensive development. Bamako has not been doing this.

A severe cultural and ethnic divide between northern and southern Mali are the result of this central government corruption. From the perspective of many Tuareg (especially the older generation), before independence, their social and economic ties were historically with people of the North; decades post-independence, the Tuareg and Arabs still find it difficult to integrate with the South. Bamako elites jockeying for lucre and other civilians scrambling for scarce resources and sparse development money want to stigmatize “light-skinned” peoples as a means of excluding them economically and politically. These elites exclude whole populations based on arbitrary factors like skin color. This creates antagonism between pastoralists and agriculturalists, no matter where the Tuareg live.

The principal antagonists are some of the ethnic Bambara, who are largely in control of the government and benefit from the best salaried jobs, nepotism, cronyism, military positions, and major corruption. In order to make their government seem like a democracy and procure Western aid, they also support a few “clients” in a patron-client system.

A further reason for the violence has to do with the entrenchment of jihadists in Mali. When the (primarily Algerian) Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, the precursor to AQIM) first set foot in Northern Mali in 2003, it was careful to integrate itself into the local population. Extremists like Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid (recently killed by French forces) married into local tribes, forging ties with and securing support from these communities, making it extremely difficult to extricate AQIM entirely. Clearly AQIM is not a creation of the “Arab Spring” or even a new threat. It is a terrorist group that traces its origins back to the Algerian civil war in the early 1990s. While the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi from power did indeed allow AQIM in Mali access to more sophisticated weapons, its threat and presence in Mali pre-dated Gaddafi’s fall by almost a decade.

AQIM has also been relatively successful in establishing itself in Mali beyond intermarriage because of its ability to seize opportunities—a theme promoted by al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri himself in a July 2007 message to the group. This opportunity came last year, when a confluence of factors—namely, the Malian rebellion, the fall of Gaddafi to the northeast and the presence of generally like-minded factions like MUJAO and Ansar Dine —coalesced to spark a jihadist insurgency that carved out a de facto “jihadist condominium” in Northern Mali.<sup>4</sup> This “condominium” will, in theory, allow AQIM to “command the good and forbid the evil” on the ground (i.e. apply its understanding of shari’a law) to “reform” local tribes; manage the work of local jihadist partners, MUJAO and Ansar Dine; and develop a base to strike both near and far enemies—essentially, the pattern proposed by jihadi theorist Abu Bakr Naji in *Management of Savagery*.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the French intervention in early 2013 designed to route AQIM, the former has most certainly not concluded its project in Mali. For the better part of a decade, proselytization, intermarriage, a variety of inducements, and alliances with tribes have left AQIM with many friends in northern Mali and the region. Evidence shows that even corrupt Malian officials have benefited financially from the jihadists’ presence, making it all the more difficult to root out the violent extremists.

Moreover, AQIM fighters have opted for tactical withdrawal, versus the supposed strategic defeat that some claim. Some militants clearly remain in the country, evidenced by the increase of suicide bombings, while others have merely taken refuge nearby in Libya’s south, Algeria, Sudan, Mauritania, and elsewhere. Once a strategic opening is perceived by AQIM’s leadership—and a new racial savagery wrought by Malian forces on the Tuareg, Arabs and Peul pushes them even closer to the ‘enemy of their enemies,’ the jihadists—re-infiltration and new ‘condominiums’ will be established.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, while French, Chadian, and Malian efforts have in the main pushed AQIM and their allies out of Mali, the network remains resilient and has emerged less effective but more clandestine and dispersed. The Malian military itself has little support among Northern populations, which are needed to deny safe haven to AQ. This makes it exceedingly difficult to find and attack the jihadists without significant population support—a situation reminiscent of dislodging the Taliban from Afghanistan. Further,

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<sup>4</sup> See Fernando Reinares, “AQIM’s Existing and Disrupted Plans in and from the Sahel—Analysis,” *Eurasia Review: News and Analysis*, May 12, 2013, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/12052013-aqims-existing-and-disrupted-plans-in-and-from-the-sahel-analysis/>.

<sup>5</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass*, trans. William McCants, (Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, May 23, 2006), <http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/olin/images/Management%20of%20Savagery%20-%2005-23-2006.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See Reinares, “AQIM’s Existing And Disrupted Plans In And From The Sahel—Analysis.”

the withdrawal of a large portion of French combat forces will almost certainly exacerbate friction between secular rebels (MNLA) and the state, with the chance of any negotiated solution unlikely and escalation towards active future rebellion probable. This distracts both Mali and the MNLA from the fight against AQ, essentially creating the instability, time and space needed for the jihadists to reestablish a safe haven in Mali’s north.

#### *The Tuareg*

In the cases of Mali and Niger, Tuareg (and to a lesser extent, certain Arab tribes) remain marginalized and oppressed by the central governments. In January, after France drove jihadists from key cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, an undisciplined and unprofessional Malian military took advantage of the victory to beat, torture and kill non-combatants (Tuareg and Arabs) who allegedly supported the MNLA. Human Rights Watch has documented numerous atrocities against civilian populations, which are fueling deep resentment by a suffering population. If left unchecked, terrorist groups like AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine will exploit local grievances and young populations with no economic opportunities.

While on trip to Kidal in late 2002, a Tuareg friend named Ibrahim showed me a mosque where Tuareg youth were being recruited by missionaries from the Tabligh Jamaat sect for indoctrination into a more radical brand of Islam. In our conversation, Ibrahim explained that his people and culture would never be radicalized because the youth were the backbone of their society. Today, the majority of Tuareg want nothing to do with jihadists’ version of shari’a law, which also curtails rights for women that are upheld by the Tuareg. They prefer to embrace a secular lifestyle, allowing each person to follow his/her beliefs. As if to back this statement, on 19 September 2006 and 23 Oct 2006, three years after GSPC members settled in Northern Mali, Tuareg clashed with the Salafist group to push them out of their territory, with no support from the central Malian government, which at the time was receiving counter-terrorism military aid and training, the Tuareg sustained heavy losses.

Unfortunately, because of the poor treatment of the Tuareg by Bamako over the years, they are caught between a rock and a hard place, and the radicalization of a few is a sad testimony to the pressures they face in an isolated and ethnically charged region. Indeed, some Tuareg prefer to side with Islamists, not for ideological reasons but to keep Bamako and anti-Tuareg violence out of the North. Moreover, a small minority of Tuareg are radicalized because of the influence of a charismatic Tuareg leader named Iyad Ag Ghaly, who gained notoriety for leading the second Tuareg rebellion in the early 1990’s. Today, Ag Ghaly is the emir of Ansar Dine and his involvement with AQIM landed him on the US’s list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

#### **Libya**

A weak central government, strong militia groups, and resilient jihadist networks are three main factors contributing to an unstable environment in Libya. Local interest groups also dominate the political landscape and exercise authority over the distribution of power, federalism, and ethnic minority rights.

Over the last year and a half, Benghazi in particular has been the epicenter of targeted attacks on security forces, Western diplomats and international organizations. Recent militancy in and around Benghazi illustrates the broader instability that increasingly mars Libya. Following the revolution’s end, many attacks in Benghazi (especially against police stations) have historically occurred at night, resulting in few casualties. However, on May 13, 2013, Benghazi saw a shift in the nature of attacks. A car bomb exploded near the Jala Hospital resulting for the first time in civilian deaths (no one claimed responsibility). The Ministry of Interior, struggling to bring militias under some form of centralized control, can do little about such violence—even as it faces increasing pressure to reign in the revolutionary brigades.

The brigades that in large part control security in Libya are divided into two competing factions: one focused on local interests and another driven by Islamist ideology. Whether Islamist or not, the brigades demand sweeping political exclusion of anyone once associated with the old regime, primarily the alliance of many independents from Libya’s south and central regions. Wolfram Lacher explains in his paper “Fault Lines of the Revolution” that organized extremist groups are emerging in the country, but they typically operate outside the framework of the new official institutions and garner their support when needed.<sup>7</sup> This is in keeping with the historic anti-state lineage of anti-state jihadist groups in the region.

AQIM, which finds refuge primarily in southern Libya (another marginalized region), is believed to have growing interest in cementing its presence there since the French-led intervention forced them to regroup outside Mali. According to several Libyan security personnel interviewed by a trusted contact, during the early part of May 2013, AQIM representatives met with local Libyan jihadist groups to refocus attacks on French interests in the region. The meeting, which lasted several days, was held at an undisclosed location in the mountains of Djabal al Akhdar.

These developments should come as no surprise. We know that from the spring of 2011, AQIM cadres fought in Libya during the Revolution. Moreover, Belmokhtar was kept closely informed of the progress of the attack against the US Consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012.

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Fault Lines of the Revolution: Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya*, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2013), 16, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-papers/swp-research-paper-detail/article/libya\\_fault\\_lines\\_of\\_the\\_revolution.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-papers/swp-research-paper-detail/article/libya_fault_lines_of_the_revolution.html).

### **Rising Tunisian Extremists**

Overt militancy and attacks are, of course, the most tangible way to chart the evolution and reach of AQIM. Beyond Mali, Tunisia is another region of struggle and recruitment for AQIM, largely because of its weak Islamist government and the hard-core salafists’ proficient social media apparatus, preaching and charitable organizations.<sup>8</sup> The Tunisian government (or what remains of it) recently conceded that it had struggled against two small jihadist groups near the Algerian border led by AQIM-linked veterans of the jihad in Mali.<sup>9</sup> According to Tunisian Foreign Minister Othmane Jarandi, some 800 Tunisians are fighting in the Islamist rebel ranks in Syria.<sup>10</sup> If past is precedent, the likelihood of them returning to Tunisia or somewhere else in the region to fight for AQIM’s cause is high, much as Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) veterans did upon their return from Afghanistan. Further, 11 of the 32 terrorists who attacked the Algerian gas plant were Tunisians, and a Tunisian citizen, Ahmed Abassi, has recently been charged with involvement in the plot to derail a passenger train between Toronto and New York City.<sup>11</sup>

Former TCG activists, some of whom are linked to the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia (AST) and inspired by jihadist preachers like Kamel Zarouq, fuel the Tunisian reservoir of potential AQIM operatives. Zarouq and other extremist preachers are actively engaged in *da’wa* (in this case, proselytizing and social services) in and around the Tunis area.<sup>12</sup> Zarouq’s own words are instructive and speak to the supranational goals of AQIM and its Tunisian supporters: “Our goal is to support the Islamic nation, to support our religion, to elevate the shari’a, and to spread the law of Muhammad. Our goal is to pull the nations out of darkness and into light. Our goal is to instate the shari’a, and regain Andalusia and Jerusalem.”<sup>13</sup>

On May 12, 2013, Abu Yadh, the extremist leader of Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia, said much the same in a diatribe that threatened Tunisian authorities bent on cracking down on salafi activism. Accusing the authorities of waging “war against Islam”—a common jihadi accusation against regional governments—and recalling Tunisian jihadists’ participation in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq, Somalia and Syria, Abu Yadh added that “these

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<sup>8</sup> See Ghassan Ben Khalifa, “The Secret of Salafists’ Appeal in Tunisia,” *Al Monitor*, May 1, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/05/disadvantaged-tunisian-youth-embrace-salafism.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See Abou Djaffar, “Papa, Get the Rifle From its Place Above the French Doors! / They’re Comin’ from the Woods!” *Le Monde*, May 2, 2013, <http://aboudjaffar.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/05/02/papa-get-the-rifle-from-its-place-above-the-french-doorstheyre-comin-from-the-woods-the-rifle-alela-diane/>.

<sup>10</sup> See “Tunisia FM: 800 Tunisian Islamists Fighting in Syria,” *Naharnet*, May 11, 2013, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/82683>.

<sup>11</sup> See Jessica Murphy, “Via Suspects Discussed Alternative Plans to Poison Air/Water to Kill up to 100,000 People: Court Docs,” *Toronto Sun*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.torontosun.com/2013/05/09/third-man-arrested-in-plot-to-derail-via-train>.

<sup>12</sup> See Khalifa, “The Secret of Salafists’ Appeal in Tunisia.”

<sup>13</sup> “Tunisian Muslim cleric: ‘Our goal is to Instate the Shari’a, and Regain Andalusia and Jerusalem,’ and Conquer Rome,” *Jihad Watch*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2013/05/tunisian-muslim-cleric-our-goal-is-to-instate-the-sharia-and-regain-andalusia-and-jerusalem-and-conq.html>.

young people” are ready to give their lives to defend the salafist project in Tunisia, saying: “Our lives will not be expensive if paid for our religion is attacked and if our preaching is embarrassed.”<sup>14</sup> He also warned against government interference with a planned May 19 Ansar al-Sharia conference in the city of Kairouan.

### **Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**

Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb is the most notorious violent extremist network in the region and a principal source of terrorist violence. Trends related to AQIM that we are witnessing across North Africa and the Sahel should be a cause for concern. The next section explores these developments.

AQIM remains poorly understood and generally underestimated. This could be due to the fact that the organization’s Shura council and leadership is in Kabylia, in northern Algeria, and intelligence sharing from the host country is marginal at best. However, AQIM has been forming networks in the Maghreb and the Sahel for many years, and developing cells or cooperating in other ways with extremist factions like Boko Haram, the Boko Haram splinter group Ansaru, and various Tunisian and Libyan jihadists. The recent attack against the Embassy of France in Tripoli and the failed attack against the British embassy illustrate that the Algerian jihadists and their local allies are able and ready.

It is noteworthy that the head of AQIM’s notables’ council, Abu Ubayda Youssef al Annabi, recently called for support in attacking France.<sup>15</sup> This call echoed a common refrain of many other global jihadists—join the fight globally against Islam’s oppressors—but was very specific for AQIM and representative of its growing vision and, likely, reach. Indeed, AQIM’s ability to leverage support and increasingly develop its narrative is where its strength lies. Speculation over whether the group operates as a unified organization, how it is divided into smaller franchises or the count of its “members” is basically irrelevant. The important matter is the influence it wields to mobilize support from Islamists across the region, harness discontent and legitimize violent jihad against regional states and their Western supporters. This ability lends it an increasing global character, which has been especially apparent over the last two years.

AQIM has been expanding and forging relationships across the Sahara and Sahel for years with significant implications for the region. These relationships go beyond North and West Africa, as the involvement of Canadians in the In Amenas, Algeria, gas plant attack demonstrated. After the gas plant attack in Algeria, Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s popularity grew among certain youth in North Africa. An example from social media

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<sup>14</sup> “Abou Iyadh déclare officiellement la guerre aux forces de l’ordre Tunisiennes,” *Business News*, May 5, 2013, [http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details\\_article.php?t=520&a=38045&temp=3&lang](http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?t=520&a=38045&temp=3&lang).

<sup>15</sup> Sheikh Majayd, “يُعلم على رحلًا” (“The War in Mali”), May 2013, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/shaykh-abc5ab-ubaydah-yc5absuf-al-anc481bc4ab-22the-war-in-mali22-ar.pdf>.

provides one useful metric. A Facebook page called the “Derna Media Center” (DMC) gained 4000 new “likes” in two weeks after the attack when Belmokhtar’s photo was posted on the site and he was touted a hero (Facebook removed the page). While these “likes” could, of course, indicate many different things and do not suggest 4,000 new AQIM recruits, they serve as one quantifiable illustration of the attention (and potential attraction) AQIM is capable of generating within some regional segments.

In sum, AQIM is linked to a greater or lesser extent to almost all increasingly active jihadist networks across the region, even if by inspiration alone. Indeed, in just the first two weeks of May we have witnessed continued suicide attacks in Mali and the dismantling of two terror cells in Morocco (the “Al Mouahidoun” and “Attawhid” cells, according to news agencies, which had already carried out robberies to fund their activities and were believed to be in contact with jihadists in northern Mali).<sup>16</sup> Further, Egypt claims that it has disrupted a terror plot against one or possibly two foreign embassies; Boko Haram has not stopped its relentless attacks in Northern Nigeria; and an alleged Tunisian militant was arrested for apparently plotting against US and Canadian interests.<sup>17</sup> While some view these events as wholly disconnected, my experience on the ground and contacts across North Africa strongly suggest that the common denominator tying them together is AQIM and/or its inspiration.

### **Boko Haram**

Boko Haram is a terrorist group allied with AQIM that wants to create an Islamic State across Nigeria. While some question its links to AQIM, the proof of this relationship—and therefore the threat from Boko Haram to allied interests and US—is growing.

In August 2011, the group attacked the UN Headquarters with a suicide bomber—an innovation that speaks to the group’s commitment to tactical progress and jihadist modus operandi. It is not a coincidence that the same year a spokesman for the group, Abu Al-Qaqa, claimed that Boko Haram had ties with al-Qa’ida. While there is no concrete proof to this assertion, the group undoubtedly drinks from the same well, as evidenced by its behavior and pronouncements. A well-publicized video on YouTube titled “Join the Caravan” shows Nigerians participating in training with AQIM. Further, in September 2011, AQIM’s media wing released for the first time a 2011 message purportedly written by Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram. These events highlight the ideological and potentially operational support that permits Boko Haram to grow in sophistication (and threat).

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<sup>16</sup> “Morocco Dismantles Two Cells That Planned Attacks on its Soil,” *Middle East Online*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=58666>.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Perry and Yasmine Saleh, “Egypt Says Thwarts Suicide Attack on Foreign Embassy,” *Reuters*, May 11, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/11/us-egypt-alqaeda-plot-idUSBRE94A07K20130511>.

Since the French intervention in Mali in January of this year, evidence suggests that some members of Boko Haram have turned their sights outside of the Nigerian border—another indicator of affinity for the global jihad. In January, two Nigerian troops were killed and five seriously injured after a splinter of Boko Haram, Jama’atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (or, “Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa”) claimed responsibility. The Nigerian soldiers were deploying to Mali to join West African forces. After the attack, in a written statement, Ansaru said: “We are gladly informing the general public, especially those in the black Africa, that...with the aid and guidance of Allah we have successfully executed our first attempt in griping [sic] the Nigerian army troops that aimed to demolish the Islamic empire of Mali.”<sup>18</sup> This attack clearly shows solidarity between the Nigerian terrorists and those in Mali and logically implies (another) strong link between Boko Haram and AQIM.

Further, in a video that aired before the release of a kidnapped French family in April, a Boko Haram spokesman openly threatened France: “Let the French President know that he has launched war against Islam and we are fighting him everywhere. Let him know that we are spread everywhere to save our brothers.” Filmed in Arabic, this video highlights a new approach for the group designed to maximize appeal, which historically addressed all videos in a local language called Hausa.

Also, for the first time, the group took hostages to leverage its own agenda—a page from AQIM’s playbook. In the video, Boko Haram uses the family as a bargaining chip to end Western military action in Somalia and Mali, calls for the release of prisoners from Cameroonian and Nigerian jails and asks for a ransom payment. When the hostages were released, news sources reported that Boko Haram received a \$3 million ransom payment and secured the release of some members detained in Cameroon. These demands and their global character clearly reflect the growing influence of AQIM in the region.

### **Organized crime & narco-trafficking**

Organized crime—especially various forms of smuggling and narco-trafficking—is the lifeblood of the vast under-governed expanse of the Sahara. It is within this largely decentralized and politically corrupt milieu that terrorists and criminals work together to access weapons and money to sustain their symbiotic operations.

#### *Cigarette smuggling*

In 2003, I traveled to Dirkou in the Eastern Niger near the Chadian border. During my visit, I witnessed a large convoy of trucks heading north towards the Libyan border. When I inquired about the cargo, my guide explained that it was black market tobacco destined for the markets in Libya and Europe. He went to say that the cargo received

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<sup>18</sup> “Islamists Kill Nigerian Soldiers Heading to Mali,” *IRIN News*, January 21, 2013, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/97301/Islamists-kill-Nigerian-soldiers-heading-to-Mali>.

protection from the Nigerien military, which collected a small percentage of the revenue because the government was poor and this was a way to compensate.

The cigarette smuggling business is nothing new in this region. It began two decades ago and evolved over time into a lucrative business that has profited government officials, military personnel, smugglers and terrorists alike. Extremists like Belmokhtar (a man of many nicknames, including “Mr. Marlboro”) greatly benefitted from this business. In 2009, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) wrote an in-depth report about the black market tobacco and narco-trafficking trade in North and West Africa.<sup>19</sup> In the report, investigators demonstrated how widespread and lucrative these trades were.

A separate September 2012 report by Wolfram Lacher, “Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel Region,” referenced the UNODC report but provided further evidence and important insights concerning the complexities of cigarette smuggling networks in North Africa:

The key actors in this trade are legal cigarette importers and distributors, who import their merchandise from free trade zones such as Dubai. The trade is therefore best interpreted as a deliberate strategy by tobacco companies to circumvent tax regimes or break North African state monopolies on cigarette distribution.

**This system has led to the erosion of the customs services because of corruption and collusion between smugglers and state officials.** For part of its journey, the merchandise is transported in large trucks on the main roads, with the connivance of Malian and Nigerian security officials. In Libya, cigarette smuggling is controlled by networks in the security apparatus dominated by members of the Qadhafu tribe. In the triangle between Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, Sahrawi networks—often with the direct involvement of officials in the Polisario movement, which seeks independence for Western Sahara—trade subsidized Algerian goods and humanitarian aid southward and cigarettes northward to Algeria and Morocco. Cigarette smuggling has also contributed to the emergence of smaller gangs of smugglers charged with transporting the merchandise from Mauritania, Mali, and Niger into Algeria. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who later acquired notoriety as one of the leading figures in AQIM’s Sahelian operations, is widely reputed to have long run a cigarette smuggling racket across the Sahara.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, July 2009, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/West\\_Africa\\_Report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/West_Africa_Report_2009.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel\\_sahara.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf).

*Narco-trafficking*

Since 2003, the region has seen an exponential increase in smuggling of Moroccan cannabis resin, cocaine from Latin America and more recently, methamphetamine (i.e. over the last four years), which is cheap to produce and distribute locally and internationally. Licit and illicit contraband, which developed decades ago, laid the foundation for the lucrative narcotics trade. Routes through the Sahara shift regularly based on regional threats, tribal fight conflicts or wars. Wealth gained by these groups affords them the ability to buy political influence and military power. Mali is a prime example.

In an in-depth report by the International Crisis Group, the researcher notes that the governance—if it can be called that—of northern Mali by the administration of deposed President Amadou Toumani Touré’s (ATT) was based on several corrupt agendas: collusion with local rival and opportunist elites, questionable relations with AQIM terrorists and the non-transparent and imbalanced use of international aid (especially aid provided for counter-terrorism operations) to strengthen control over the region.<sup>21</sup> The profits he derived from a criminal economy, sustained by trans-border trafficking (especially of drugs) and ransoms from Western hostages lined the pockets of northern and Bamako elites and officials in the state administration and sustained the economic underdevelopment of the region.<sup>22</sup> The balance in the Sahara is delicate; the international community should help the region’s people find alternatives to narco- and weapons trafficking.

In contrast to Mali, Morocco stands out as a model for reform and progress in the fight for equality, counter-terrorism and a counter-narcotics strategy, which is outlined in the 2012 report by the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).<sup>23</sup> It has achieved significant reductions in the cannabis and cannabis resin industry over the years by outlining a comprehensive strategy combining law enforcement, crop eradication and demand reduction efforts with economic development to erode the “cannabis growing culture” in the north of the country.<sup>24</sup> It continues to fight terrorism through the strengthening of the security and justice systems, and emphasizes a preventive dimension against violent extremism and organized crime through reforms in the economic, political, social, religious and educational fields, many of which were introduced in the Amazigh (Berber) language. These reforms provided a boost in

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<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, July 18, 2012, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/west-africa/mali/189-mali-avoiding-escalation-english.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/west-africa/mali/189-mali-avoiding-escalation-english.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “INCB Expresses Appreciation to Morocco for Its Strategy to Fight Drugs, Report” *Morocco News*, March 6, 2013, <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2013/03/81265/incb-expresses-appreciation-to-morocco-for-its-strategy-to-fight-drugs-report/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Morocco 2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” WikiLeaks Cable, October 30, 2009, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09RABAT886>.

cultivating a culture of democracy, pluralism and equality in Morocco—qualities that fly in the face of black market economies. .

Nevertheless, like other countries in North and West Africa, Morocco is concerned with the risks of infiltration by terrorists fleeing Mali via illegal immigration channels. Indeed, drugs and human trafficking networks overlap — a cause for concern throughout the region (and Europe). For example in 2011, Moroccan authorities dismantled a large local drug-trafficking network linked to both Colombian cartels and AQIM. The movement of hash to Europe that apparently travels through Morocco also suggests that there remains room for improvement.

### **A Global Problem Set**

While some suggest the threats in the Sahara and Sahel are local or regional in scope, their impact is global. Even a cursory overview of the involvement of North Africans as itinerate jihadists linked to al-Qa’ida demonstrates this.

The Sinjar Records, captured in 2007 on the Syrian/Iraqi border and analyzed by West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, provided a unique quantitative perspective on North African involvement in global jihadism. Most observers of international terrorism will agree that the same patterns witnessed in these documents are again alive and well in different theatres. As observed in Iraq, in Syria, we know that North Africans make up a large percentage of the foreign fighters on the rebel side, many of which are aligned today with the al-Qa’ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>25</sup> Recently, the Tunisian government announced that 800 of its citizens were fighting alongside Islamist rebels in Syria. Further, in a testament to the scope of the problem, the Libyan Foreign Ministry publicly announced that it had no control over citizens who were leaving the country to join the Syrian uprising. Nevertheless, the flow of African jihadists to fight abroad is, of course, nothing new. Indeed, it was two Tunisians that killed Northern Alliance Leader Ahmad Shah Massoud as an apparent favor to al-Qa’ida and the Taliban in the run-up to the 9/11 attacks.

Yet it is not simply Africans leaving to combat perceived threats to Islam outside of the continent that speaks to the global nature of North African militancy: it is also the flow of jihadists *into* Africa. The recent arrest of a French citizen in Mali, Gilles Le Guen (also known as “Abdel Jelil”) confirms this point, as does the investigation into the January 2013 attack on the natural gas plant at In Amenas in Algeria. It is becoming increasingly evident that the terrorists who perpetrated the attack were able to recruit individuals from Canada to join the operation. In sum, for militants that share the worldview of AQIM, Africa has many front lines and “occupied territories” that also require the *fard*

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<sup>25</sup> Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, “Jabhat al-Nusra,” (London: Quilliam Foundation, January 2013) <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>.

*‘ayn* (individually obligatory) support of fighters to combat non-Muslim oppressors. This was a primary ideological contribution developed by one of global jihad’s original architects, Abdullah Azzam.

Viewed slightly differently, the development of extremist states (emirates) in Africa matters to jihadists, and when non-Muslim forces threaten them, a global reaction ensues. For instance, when France intervened in Mali, threats to France came from al-Qa’ida in Yemen (AQAP), Jabhat al Nusra in Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and more recently, AQIM.

This legacy of transnational jihadism and its growing impact on “local” groups like Boko Haram is precisely why AQIM is more dangerous than ever before—and is further evidence that combating terrorism in Africa should matter very much to the US and her allies.

### **Conclusions**

The multifaceted threats from terrorism, political violence and criminality in North Africa are on the rise. The issue of Mali and the threat from AQIM and associated violent extremist networks present particularly vexing dilemmas for the US and its allies to address. While there are few proverbial ‘silver bullets’ to solve this complex problem-set, there are several approaches that could make a difference and are therefore worthy of consideration by Congress.

The first recommendation is to get USAID “back into the fight” to address key humanitarian and development dilemmas in Northern Mali and the surrounding areas, and couple this with support from US and allied SOF initiatives. From Tindouf, Algeria, to the Aouzou Strip in northern Chad (the “arc of instability,” according to the UN), the populations of this **under-governed** region receive little support and are left exploited by various political actors, including AQIM and its allies. From narco-trafficking and weapons smuggling to terrorism and kidnappings, these issues fester in this region. Further, since the four rebellions suffered by Mali since 1960, the people of the Sahara like the Tuareg were promised many things in each negotiated peace agreement. These agreements included paved roads, hospitals and schools. Sadly, these promises never materialized and the northern part of the country is littered with incomplete projects and a grieving population that is blamed for the woes of the country. In fact, a half-century of disputes between North and South have led to racism and deep resentment between various ethnic groups. It is these socio-culture tensions that open the door to terrorist exploitation and recruitment, despite the fact that the MNLA remains a secular militia. These issues will remain at the core of Mali’s problems until they are addressed and settled once and for all. This is where USAID can help, provided it can operate.

Historically, USAID access to areas like northern Mali has always been related to security. Therefore USAID and their enabling partners have in the past avoided projects

within this area that could actually address the underlying conditions faced by the Tuareg and others. This is because of Embassy- and Bamako-imposed access restrictions. The result has been almost zero in terms of net USAID impact. DOD Humanitarian Assistance and Capacity Development are also limited by security restrictions and achieve little effect with the targeted population groups because they cannot gain the needed access. Meanwhile, violent extremists have themselves provided humanitarian assistance or allowed select Islamic NGOs from Arab countries to operate in areas they controlled. This equation has, of course, boosted their access and influence among certain populations and further entrenched the extremists within their safe haven.

The international community should focus acutely on these “denied area” populations being influenced by violent extremists and develop creative ways to partner SOF capability with USAID. This will also serve as a means of reducing the chance of resumed active conflict between MNLA and the Malian state. Naturally, this will require some nesting of the economic element of national power to incentivize groups towards the desired effect of increasing stability and denying safe haven. Further, because of security concerns in these areas, this USAID activity should be closely partnered with full spectrum SOF operations—especially information operations. Failure to synchronize USAID capabilities with SOF in the safe haven denial fight will create more Embassy-limited projects in ‘safe’ areas that achieve no effects towards reducing the safe haven enjoyed by violent extremists or their recruitment pool.

It should be noted here that the secular MNLA, despite all criticism, remains an example of an organization that has no interest in militant Islamism or jihadist governance. By dealing with basic grievances in Mali’s North, the West, in time, can influence local people as allies in the fight against AQIM. Further, with proper training and support, the international community can convince Bamako and an empowered secular Tuareg community to work together against terrorism and narco-trafficking. However, as previously stated, it is important to provide some form of financial security to bring this situation to bear, and NGOs will play a big role in this respect. Moreover, in order for any of this to happen, genuine reconciliation and stability needs to be the first order of business, as NGOs and peacekeepers cannot operate effectively in a tense and dangerous environment.

The second recommendation pertains to addressing border insecurity in the region. Borders between countries of the Sahara remain porous and open to terrorists and smuggler activity, both of which weaken governance and promote corruption (not to mention global insecurity). It is time that the countries of the region receive assistance to secure and monitor movement along their borders. This applies not only to land traffic but to the air as well.

Finally to effectively counter the jihadi narrative wielded by AQIM, a comprehensive and expertly crafted information operation campaign is necessary for the region. Violent

extremists associated with AQIM experience far too much safe haven in social, print and televised media, and this must be rectified. Recently, news agencies flocked to write about AQIM’s new twitter account—an event AQIM used to appeal to popular North African concerns about repression and injustice, and to answer questions by journalists and the public. Following the media buzz, AQIM’s new twitter account gained over 5000 new followers two weeks after going live. It is noteworthy that Syrian terror group Jabhat al-Nusra, Somalia’s al-Shabaab, and Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia are all followed by the new AQIM Twitter account.<sup>26</sup> Countering AQIM’s media expansion and online “havens” is crucial to our long-term success against violent extremism in the region.

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<sup>26</sup> Jamal Oumar and Siham Ali, “AQIM Creates Twitter Account,” *Magharebia*, April 4, 2013, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/04/04/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/04/04/feature-01).