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# JIHADIST GROUPS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL: BETWEEN DISINTEGRATION, RECONFIGURATION AND RESILIENCE

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# JIHADIST GROUPS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL: BETWEEN DISINTEGRATION, RECONFIGURATION AND RESILIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, based on extensive interviews and fieldwork conducted in North Africa and the Sahel, considers the recent evolution of jihadi organizations in this region, and offers analysis of patterns of competition and violence among different jihadi groups. We argue that while there is a clear division between Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and those linked with the Islamic State (IS), this has never turned into a civil war among them, in contrast to the jihadi groups in the Middle East, who have competed violently, especially Al-Nusra Front and IS. More dangerous, and in the context of the collapse of the Islamic State in the Middle East, we have observed patterns of rapprochement of its North African-Sahelian affiliates with Al-Qaeda-linked groups. This paper also examines the fragmentation of the North African-Sahelian regional states system into two categories: a core of strong states controlling their borders and territories and thus able to contain jihadi groups (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco), versus the weak and collapsed ones (Libya and the Sahel) which are unable to check the expansion of those groups. To this extent, the paper shows that the resilience of these organizations is influenced both by their own strength and by the weakness of their opponents.

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2014, the Islamic State (IS) announced through its spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani the creation of a Caliphate, proclaiming Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the organization, as caliph and therefore leader of the Muslim community – the *Umma*. A few days later, Al-Baghdadi requested all the radical jihadi organizations from around the world to dissolve their past allegiances, including Al-Qaeda, and to join IS and come under his command. This directly affected the jihadi organizations active in North Africa, as most of them were until then linked directly to Al-Qaeda. Organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Algeria, Sahel) and Al-Mourabitoun (Sahel) had pledged allegiance to the leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, while others, such as Ansar al-Din in the Sahel, were close to Al-Qaeda-linked organizations and shared the same ideology (i.e. Salafism and Jihadism) without being formally linked to Al-Qaeda themselves. The proclamation of the Caliphate resulted in deep divisions between those who chose to remain loyal to Al-Qaeda and those who decided to join the IS, provoking major rifts and splits within the organizations. This pattern of fragmentation was in many ways similar to that observed in Syria between Al-Nusra Front (affiliated to Al-Qaeda) which today has become known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) and ISIS (Lister 2015), however with different outcomes.

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In this way, North Africa and the Sahel present a jihadi landscape similar to that observed in the Middle East, with jihadi organizations that have long ties to Al-Qaeda but which have also been divided by the emergence of ISIS against the backdrop of weak and failed states (Libya, Sahelian states). Moreover, with over 7,000 foreign fighters who went to Syria and Iraq – mostly from Tunisia – North Africa represents the region with the largest contingent of foreign fighters in the Middle East, most of whom have joined ISIS and the rest going to Al-Nusra Front.<sup>2</sup> While half of these are estimated to have been killed or returned and are presently in gaol in their home countries, little is known about the rest of them. In the context of the collapse of IS and the unstable situation in the Idlib region in Syria, the stronghold of HTS (ex Al-Nusra Front), the return of these hard, battle-trained and ideologically radical fighters is looming in the region, with all the security concerns this brings up. Indeed, many raise the prospect of these “returnees” deciding to go either to Libya or to the Sahel to continue their jihad. To that extent, the study of the North African-Sahelian jihadi scene, and given its similarities to the Middle East security landscape (IS, Al-Qaeda, weak/failed states, major and regional power concerns) in addition to the issue of returnees, offers us a good framework in terms of envisioning possible scenarios for the future. Having said that, one must point out some aspects that distinguish the Middle East from Africa.

Firstly, IS spread into North Africa and the Sahel from July 2014 onward – that is, very shortly after proclamation of the Caliphate, when a small organization called Jund al-Khilafah split from AQIM and gave its allegiance to IS. They were followed by other organizations in Tunisia but especially Libya in October 2014 and then in the Sahel in May 2015. While in the Middle East, ISIS grew to be extremely powerful and directly challenged Al-Qaeda in the North Africa and Sahel region; the results were mixed. Whereas it failed to materialize itself in any way in Morocco, it was quickly suppressed in Algeria and with more difficulty in Tunisia. On the other hand, it was able to expand in Libya and was defeated there only with great difficulty, while it has proved to be resilient in the Sahel. In a similar way, we observe that the trajectory of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups is somewhat close to that of IS; that is to say, they have been either unable to deploy themselves or have almost been suppressed in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, while they have proved extremely resilient in Libya and in the Sahel. Thus, they have proved more threatening in what one may call the Libyan-Sahel security continuum, while, conversely, they have been contained in Tunisia-Algeria-Morocco (Lefèvre 2014). In all cases, they have never attained the level of power and threat reached by their Middle Eastern counterparts.

Secondly, this ability of IS to deploy themselves in Libya and Sahel as opposed to their failure in Algeria, Morocco and, to a large extent, in Tunisia reflects the presence of strong and powerful security apparatus capable of controlling their territory and thus preventing, suppressing or containing the spread of such a jihadi organization. This reflects a fragmentation within the North African-Sahelian regional state system, between a core of strong states able to withstand those organizations, and a second group composed of weak or collapsed states which includes the Libyan-Sahelian continuum where, on the contrary, those organizations have proved to be both resilient and a major threat.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most extensive studies on this topic was conducted by the Soufan Group in 2015, which estimated that 8,000 young North Africans were among the foreign fighters. See Soufan Group (2015).

Finally, a third pattern of fragmentation can be observed between the Middle Eastern jihadi organizations and the North African and Sahelian ones. While the rivalry between IS- and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the Middle East is characterized by extreme violence and competition, in addition to excessive violence towards the local populations, we do not observe similar structures of behaviour in North Africa and the Sahel between jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and those linked to IS. Indeed, while they have been competing with each other, there are very few cases of inter-jihadi conflict reported. Worse, and as we shall see, several reports point to the growing risk of cooperation and rapprochement between Al-Qaeda and IS affiliates.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, although they have proved to be violent towards the local population at times, this was never comparable to what was observed in the Middle East, especially in the case of IS's North African and Sahelian affiliates. While the North African jihadi organizations are transnational through their proclaimed affiliations to the Middle East jihadi leadership, they remain in essence what one might refer to as trans-regional organizations.

Based on this framework, this paper addresses several questions that are of paramount importance for the security of the MENA region and for the future of the Mediterranean: (1) What is the current state of jihadi organizations in North Africa and the Sahel? (2) What are the relations of those jihadi organizations among themselves, especially between those affiliated with Al-Qaeda and those with IS? (3) What are the prospects for a collaboration – if any – between those jihadi organizations, given the violent and ideological political rift between Al-Qaeda and IS in the Middle East and the collapse of the Caliphate and the weakening of Al-Qaeda? (4) What are the perspectives on the issue of “returnees” (i.e. how do we assess the risk posed by the return of North African foreign fighters in North Africa)?

Based on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2018 in Algeria, Tunisia, Mali and Mauritania with experts and specialists, this paper attempts to address these questions by first looking at the security situation in Algeria and assessing the threat. The second section considers security in Tunisia both at the domestic level and in relation to the evolving situation in Libya. The third and the last section analyses the changes and mutations of jihadi organizations in the Sahel.

## 1. ALGERIA: THE SPLIT WITHIN AQIM AND THE COLLAPSE OF JIHADISM

Shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014, Abdelmalek Droukdel (aka Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), supreme emir of AQIM, formally condemned its creation and confirmed the decision of his organization to remain loyal to Al-Qaeda. In a communiqué he explained that the proclamation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was done without any consultation with the mujahidin's leaders. He added: “We want to establish a caliphate in the way of the prophecy; that is, based on the Shura (consultation), which aims at unifying all Muslims and at sparing their blood [...] he [al-Baghdadi] still has time to fix the flaws of his announcement”. He concluded by saying, “we would like to reassure the world, we remain loyal to our choice to support our spiritual guide, sheikh Al Zawahiri”.<sup>4</sup> Proving his support and solidarity for Al-Qaeda, Droukdel congratulated Abu

3 See “Sahel: Iyad Ag Ghaly tente-t-il un rapprochement avec Abou Walid al-Sahraoui?”, in *Jeune Afrique*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/529517>.

4 “AQMI rejette le califat proclamé en Irak et en Syrie”, in *Libération*, 15 July 2014, <https://www.liberation.fr/>

Muhammad al-Golani, leader of the then Al-Nusra Front, the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, for the conquest of Idlib province from the Syrian regime in 2015.

However, this was directly countered by IS. Through one of their Tunisian preachers, Abu Mussab al-Tunisi, a former member of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and then a member of AQIM before rallying IS in Syria, they argued that “only IS has an imam who has received the *bayaa* [allegiance]. The Dawla is the only one that is just. I was a member of Ansar al-Sharia, which followed AQIM. I know them, and I am telling you these two are not members of the *Taifa al-Mansura* [victorious community], both have major flaws, IS has none.”<sup>5</sup> Shortly afterwards, in a video released in July 2015 from Raqqa, the self-proclaimed capital of IS in Syria, two Algerians, Abu al-Hafs al-Jazairi and Abu al-Baraa al-Jazairi, directly threatened Algeria. Hence, Abu al-Hafs al-Jazairi declared: “Between you and us, there will be a long war [...] The only path is the jihad and only jihad.” Abu al-Baraa, addressing the Algerian military, said: “We shall launch a war upon you until the reconquest of Andalusia. Repent before the arrival of our swords” (Berkani 2015), showing that Algeria was clearly targeted by ISIS, and putting themselves in competition with AQIM in a context where Islamist insurgency had been rife for almost twenty-five years. However, all this failed to have any effect on Droukdel as he continued to be a staunch supporter of Al-Qaeda.

This show of solidarity by AQIM masked the fact that this organization had become very much weakened by 2014. Indeed, under the impulsion of Algerian president Bouteflika and his policy of national reconciliation, over 7,000 jihadists surrendered between 2000 and 2010 to the Algerian authorities. Furthermore, during the same period over 1,200 jihadists had been arrested (Irnatène 2010) while another 250 were killed by the Algerian security services (Boufatah 2009). In that regard, Mohamed Mokeddem (aka Anis Rahmani), an Algerian expert on terrorism and director of the national newspaper *Ennahar*, explained that there had been a major decrease in the number of terrorists in activity due to this double policy of “amnesty of those willing to surrender and repression of those willing to continue to fight” (Interview E). This strategy had drastically reduced the capabilities of the still active Algerian terrorist groups, whose capacity was estimated to be around just 600 men by 2012. These groups were also plagued by problems of recruitment, which considerably limited the ability to absorb their losses. Mokeddem also claimed that the leaders of the armed groups had isolated their men from the outside world by forbidding them from buying newspapers and listening to the radio, in order to prevent them from being tempted to surrender for the benefits offered by the reconciliation policy (Interview E). An additional consequence of this policy of national reconciliation was the diminishing appeal of armed groups to new and younger recruits and a drop in radicalization, which directly affected recruitment capabilities of the terrorist organizations. As a result, according to Farid Alilat, a journalist and expert on terrorism: “The jihadists who remained in the mountains are veterans. They convinced people that their fight was right. They think they have nothing to lose anymore, even if they are fighting for a lost cause” (Interview A).

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planete/2014/07/15/aqmi-rejette-le-califat-proclame-en-irak-et-syrie\_1064258. See also Joscelyn (2014).

5 View his declarations at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvHnfeaBQ9E> (this video is not yet available on Youtube).

In July 2014 Abu Abdullah Osman al-Assimi, who held the position of Islamic judge within AQIM, released a statement in which he considered that “the IS approach “applied Shari’a on the ground”, “remapped” their Islamic Caliphate, “supported the oppressed and removed the tyrants. Only the ignorant, envious or spiteful blame [Islamic State militants]. Whoever insulted them must repent” (Lefèvre 2014: 854). In turn and shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate, following Assimi’s path the leader of AQIM’s Al-Arkam brigade, Abdelmalek Gouri – one of the most powerful AQIM leaders – announced his separation from this organization and the creation of his own, Jund al-Khilafah (“the soldiers of the caliph”), pledging allegiance to IS. As a matter of fact, Gouri expressed his regrets to Al-Baghdadi: “Our command of AQIM did not position itself in your favour. However, as far as we are concerned, we have decided to support you. You have, in the Islamic Maghreb, men that will obey your orders” (Chikhi 2014, Thomson 2014). For an Algerian observer close to the issues this “reflected the fact that several leaders within AQIM wanted to part from the organization in order to regain their legitimacy and remobilize the support for their fight after the repeated failures of Al-Qaeda” (Interviewee 1). This organization illustrated its intentions by ambushing a military convoy of the Algerian army, in July 2014, during which eleven soldiers were killed, and above all through the kidnaping and murdering of French alpinist Hervé Gourdel in September 2014.

These events led to a swift and massive manhunt against Jund al-Khilafah, conducted by the Algerian security services, which led to the elimination of Gouri in December 2014 and the quasi-destruction of the group by May 2015, during a major operation that resulted in the death of twenty-one members of this organization, including Osman al-Assimi the successor to Gouri. By this time, Jund al-Khilafah was considered to be almost extinguished in Algeria. Nevertheless, a few weeks later in July 2015, another AQIM brigade, called Katibat al-Ghuraba and led by Nouredine Laouira, aka Abu al-Hammam, active in the region of Constantine, split from AQIM and announced its allegiance to IS.<sup>6</sup> Very weak and with limited means, it carried out some attacks of limited impact while also being the subject of a huge manhunt by the Algerian security services. By March 2017 its leader had been killed and the organization dismantled. Finally, in May 2017 a small group from AQIM called Katibat El-Feth (Hamdi 2017) announced its allegiance to IS. However, as of July 2018 no attack by this organization has been recorded. As such, most observers consider that the attempts of IS to establish itself in Algeria have so far failed.

However, one of the consequences of the attempted emergence of IS in Algeria was the decision by the Algerian security services to eliminate any jihadi organizations in Algeria once and for all. Indeed, large-scale military operations have been conducted all over the country between 2014 and 2018 against the last remnants of terrorist organizations, leading to the killing or capturing of several hundred AQIM fighters and resulting in the collapse of AQIM, which was chased from its stronghold in the Kabyle regions. In that regard, Akram Kharief, a security analyst, considers that

AQIM in Algeria is to all intents finished. In the past few years the Algerian army has inflicted heavy losses on AQIM, which was forced out from Kabyle region. There remain some groups scattered across the country, especially in Jijel, Skikda and Tbesa, but with very limited if any capability. (Interview D)

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<sup>6</sup> “Questionnements sur la configuration du terrorisme en Algérie”, in *El Watan*, 28 July 2015, <https://www.elwatan.com/?p=83731>.

No terrorist attack was reported in Algeria during the first six months of 2018, an indication of the considerable weakness of the remaining jihadi organizations and their near collapse. While attacks remain a possibility, these are unlikely to endanger the stability of the country as they once did in the 1990s – leading Algerian security analysts to consider that the most threatening situation comes not from Algeria itself but rather from Libya and the Sahel, where jihadi organizations remain powerful and therefore Algeria is at risk of being attacked by them.

## 2. TUNISIA: JIHADI THREATS CONTAINED BUT RESILIENT

Jihadist organizations in Tunisia have historically been weak, in spite of many failed attempts in the 1990s and 2000s to deploy themselves in this country. More specifically, the roots of jihadism in Tunisia are to be found in the Tunisian Islamic Combatant Group (TICG), created in the early 2000s, most likely in Jalalabad (Afghanistan) by several so-called Tunisian Afghans led by Tarek Maaroufi (aka Abu Ismail El Jendoubi) and Seifallah Ben Hassine (aka Abu Iyad al-Tunisi). As Habib Sayah explains, this was largely an offshore organization that wanted to “connect, support, and structure the Tunisian jihadi community in exile” (Sayah 2017: 100). As one of the key leaders of the TICG remarks:

For us, and at the time, Tunisia was ruled by an ignorant dictatorship which refused the political Islam of Ghannouchi [...] his engagement in this trajectory is due first and foremost to the dictatorship in Tunisia [of the Ben Ali regime] and the exclusion of political Islam [...] To support the Muslim cause against hypocrisy and injustice [...] the western regimes were also perceived as oppressors, occupiers taking advantage of our wealth. (Interviewee 2)

However, overall, as Sayah further reflects, those jihadists did not benefit from any support from local Tunisian Islamist structures, including from the Ennahda party. Indeed, although remaining clandestine and also the target of massive repression by the Ben Ali regime, Ennahda and its leader Rachid Ghannouchi refused to resort to violence, thus limiting and reducing the appeal of the TICG. Sayah states: “When someone was a Salafi jihadist, his options were rather clear and limited: he leaves for the jihad abroad in Afghanistan, Chechnya or Bosnia; he stays here and ends up in jail; or he must always keep a low profile” (Interview G). Indeed, the Ben Ali regime implemented a very effective strategy for combating radicals. It was based on repression by (1) establishing a very dense system of surveillance; (2) the institutionalization of denunciation; (3) violent repression and the widespread use of torture; (4) a rigorous control of information and the Internet; (5) the co-optation of scientific Salafists (also known as Scripturalist Salafists) who consider political activism impious and pointless and who prefer to focus on education and preaching (Interview G; on Scripturalist Salafists see Watanabe and Merz 2017: 137).

By 2011, according to Michaël Ayari, there were close to 2,500 people in prison due to their links to jihadi activities. Yet, “out of these 2,500, [only] 1,000 were really linked to jihadi organizations at various levels, starting from the leaders such as Maaroufi and Abu Iyad to simple logistic support units, while many of the 1,500 others were not really linked to jihadism” (Interview B). However, many of those in gaol who were unjustly accused of terrorism eventually connected with the

jihadists, creating a critical mass of 2,500 men. This would play a pivotal role in the rise of jihadism after the fall of the Ben Ali regime.

Accordingly, when the Arab uprisings arrived and the Ben Ali regime collapsed, it created – as often happens during the early months of such a situation – a security vacuum. Ayari notes that this vacuum was exploited by those former jihadists, as many of them had then escaped from prison while many others who were in exile returned to Tunisia. Those who had escaped were pardoned anyway as a measure of general amnesty for all the people imprisoned during the Ben Ali regime. The Tunisian authorities estimated in 2012 that around 500 of these Islamists, who were either released from prison or were returning from exile, had received military training abroad, whether in Afghanistan or Iraq (Malka and Balboni 2016).

Immediately afterwards, in April 2011, those former jihadists created a political organization called Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) led by Seifallah Ben Hassine (aka Abu Iyad al-Tunisi). Officially a political organization, the main purpose of AST was to prepare for an Islamist takeover in Tunisia by following a strategy of recruitment and gaining the sympathy of the masses. Indeed, AST tried to answer the criticisms of the youth in post-revolutionary Tunisia and to compete with the state by targeting poorly governed institutions, such as education, and providing such things as Quranic schools and medical caravans in areas where there was little, if any, medical infrastructure (Interview G). AST members would show up in those areas in convoys full of medical supplies, food, water and so on, especially in the region of Kairouan (Interview G). As Sayah also says: “They responded to the demands that the state was not answering and thus they created a sort of alternative governance” – which in turn gave them massive popularity, especially among the youth (Interview G). However, AST was involved in several violent actions including attacks on bars, occupation of the streets and above all the attack against the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012. Tunisia witnessed a wave of assassinations of intellectuals opposed to the Islamists, culminating in the murder of Chokri Belaid in February 2013. Moreover, as early as 2011, that is to say shortly after the fall of Ben Ali and taking advantage of the weakening of the Tunisian security apparatus, AQIM sent one of its brigades, Okba Ibn Nafaa, led by the Algerian emir Lokman Abou Sakhr to the Chaambi Mountain region in Tunisia. From 2012 onwards, this AQIM brigade launched attacks against the Tunisian security forces in the area. Finally, according to Sayah and most Tunisian experts on jihadi organizations, shortly after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime and the start of the uprisings in Syria and in Libya, more than 5,000 Tunisians went abroad – to Libya but particularly to Syria – and there joined jihadi organizations, especially IS.<sup>7</sup> Given the deterioration of the security situation, the Tunisian authorities decided to crack down on Islamists by arresting thousands and banning AST in mid-2013. Those who escaped repression either went abroad to Libya and Syria or joined local jihadi organizations, such as Okba Ibn Nafaa brigade.

In 2014 and all above 2015 constituted the climax of jihadi violence in Tunisia. The Okba Ibn Nafaa brigade stepped up its operations, reinforced by the arrival of new recruits escaping police repression and by AQIM brigades from the Sahel evading the French-led military Operation Serval. Among the most noteworthy was the March 2015 attack in the Bardo Museum, during which twenty-one western tourists were killed. More generally, this brigade multiplied its attacks

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7 In 2015, the Soufan Group released a report in which it was estimated that around 6,000 Tunisians had joined the Jihad in the Middle East. See Soufan Group (2015).

using rocket-propelled launchers, ambushes and bombings, with the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – all of this bearing the hallmarks of AQIM and its influence on combat methods. However, one of the major problems for this group was that most of the young Tunisians aspiring to jihad were attracted by the jihad in Syria and Iraq and even Libya rather than in Tunisia itself, which in turn considerably limited the ability of the Okba Ibn Nafaa to expand. In that regard, in March 2013 Droukdel sent a message to Tunisian fighters concerning the jihad, exhorting them to stay in Tunisia (Zelin et al. 2013: 23) in order to prevent what he called “the possible return of secularism and of Ben Ali”. However, this proved useless. As one Tunisian official explained,

AQIM in Tunisia, and by the same token the Okba Ibn Nafaa brigade, has remained weak overall. This terrorism has never territorialized itself and has remained essentially a terrorism of networks. By this we mean that we do have an insurrectional presence in the Chaambi Mountains for AQIM but not a solid implantation in Tunisia as a whole [...] they are essentially networks and cells. (Interviewee 3)

In addition to AQIM, IS was able to gain some very limited support in Tunisia itself. Shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014, the Shabab al-Tawhid of Tunisia (an organization created in March the same year and composed of former supporters of AST) proclaimed its support and allegiance to IS (Zelin 2014). Based in Kairouan, and claiming to be the “Kairouan Emirate: Islamic Tunisia” (Al-Tamimi 2017), it did not, however, conduct any actions and seems to have remained an “Internet organization”. In addition to this, an organization called Jund al-Khilafah, similar to the one in Algeria, was created in Tunisia in the region of Kasserine. Led by Tunisians rather than Algerians, Jund al-Khilafah emerged from a split within the Okba Ibn Nafaa brigade between those who wished to remain loyal to Al-Qaeda and those who preferred to switch allegiance. However, the leaders of Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia clearly announced that, while they were pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, they in no way considered AQIM their enemy – meaning that no competition nor rivalry and even less any kind of violent confrontation was to be expected between the two, in contrast to the case of their Middle Eastern counterpart. However, here again Jund al-Khilafah remained very weak according to security officials, as they never exceeded a few dozen fighters.

The most dangerous security threat to Tunisia, though, comes from foreign fighters – in other words, the Tunisians who joined jihadi organizations in Syria and Libya. As many experts and reports argue, and according to Sayah, there are no definitive figures on how many people left Tunisia to join the jihad in Syria, Iraq and Libya. He argues that estimates vary between 3,000 and 4,000 going to the Levant and at least 1,500 to Libya (Interview G), while according to specialists the real figures are most probably much higher (Interviewee 4). This threat is further increased by the fact that most of them joined IS. These foreign fighters were among those responsible for extremely violent attacks in Tunisia, including the Sousse attack of June 2015, which led to the death of thirty-eight tourists; the suicide bombing attack against the presidential guard in November 2015, which killed twelve Tunisian soldiers; and finally, the climax of these attacks, in March 2016, with the failed attempt by IS to take control of the Tunisian border city with Libya of Ben Guerdane. These attacks were all conducted by ISIS foreign fighters trained in Libya. The attack on Ben Guerdane was supposed to be a first step by ISIS in taking control of the rest of the country. In sum, these extremely violent confrontations underline the threat posed by these fighters.

The Tunisian government reorganized its security services to deal with the jihadi organizations. A new anti-terrorist law was passed in 2015 expanding the definition of terrorism, which from then onwards included the joining of a terrorist organization abroad as a criminal offense. It also increased pre-trial periods of detention (Watanabe and Merz 2017: 140). The government further decided to close the borders with Libya and above all to build a protective wall between Libya and Tunisia to prevent terrorist infiltrations. As Huda Mzioudet states: “This wall, built with western support, played a major role in gradually restoring security and considerably reduced the infiltration of jihadists coming from Libya, which have become now a rarity” (Interview F). Mzioudet goes on to explain that the Tunisian authorities established contact with the militias of the area of Zuwara, close to the border, and worked with them to secure it. Furthermore, the Tunisian government received significant help from the international community. France played a major role by providing weapons, training and equipment, especially surveillance technology, to the Tunisian security services. The United States elevated Tunisia to the status of a major non-NATO ally in 2015, paving the way for the reinforcement of cooperation between the two countries and facilitating the delivery of US weapons to Tunisia. Finally, cooperation was strengthened with Algeria in the fight against terrorism. Mzioudet adds that Algeria had greatly helped in securing the country, given Algiers’ experience from infighting jihadists, inherited from the 1990s civil war. As such, Algiers provided training to the Tunisian Special Forces as well as intelligence sharing, especially since at some point the Algerian–Tunisian border was considered to be more porous than the one with Libya. Algeria also effected an impressive military deployment on its borders with Tunisia to reinforce security there.

Through these efforts Tunisia was able to curb the jihadist threat within the country, as many members of the Okba Ibn Nafaa and Jund al-Khilafah brigade had been killed or captured, including their leaders. Analysing the situation of jihadi groups, one Tunisian official explained: “Since late 2017 and early 2018, these groups can be considered a nuisance, conducting very low-intensity guerrilla warfare; in fact, one might call this ‘intermittent terrorism’ as they lack everything in terms of supplies, whether food or medicine” (Interviewee 3). The most enduring threat, however, remains the Tunisian foreign fighters who left for the Middle East or who are still in Libya. Indeed, given the collapse of IS in Syria and Iraq, many Tunisian officials argue that the returnees may decide to go to Libya, which remains very weak, and there join existing jihadi organizations and reinforce them. Sayah notes that currently some 800 have returned to Tunisia and are either in prison or under heavy surveillance. To this number, one must add all those who are detained by the Syrian authorities and hundreds of others who have died during the fighting there (Interview G). Figures for those likely to return to Tunisia are difficult to ascertain but nonetheless such individuals do represent a major threat if they come back without the knowledge and surveillance of the security services.

While 2014–2016 seemed to be the most dangerous period, the Tunisian authorities have been able to reverse the situation and contain and prevent the collapse of Tunisia. While the threat has not been totally eliminated, as the attack of July 2018 (in which six members of Tunisia’s National Guard were killed) shows, it is likely to remain low intensity and contained.

### 3. THE SAHEL: THE ENDURING JIHADI THREAT

The jihadi scene in the Sahel presents a major contrast with the situation in North Africa. Indeed, in Morocco jihadi organizations have not been able to deploy themselves at all, with scores of jihadi cells dismantled, while the numbers of the Moroccan foreign fighters were high between 2011 and 2014 with an estimation of there being close to 2,000 (see Masbah 2015). The situation has shifted since then. Indeed, there has been almost no departure to the Middle East since 2015, while over 500 have returned to Morocco and been gaoled (Masbah 2015). In Algeria, jihadi organizations have been almost suppressed. While they may continue to conduct attacks, these have become very rare and do not represent a major threat to the security of the country. Furthermore, the numbers of Algerian foreign fighters have been very low and are estimated to be no more than 150, and so they are not considered to be much of a threat. The jihadi organizations in Tunisia have also been contained and isolated, and, although some are still able to mount attacks against the Tunisian security forces, many consider that the worst is over. Libya represents a contrast. The jihadi organizations in the northern parts of the country were defeated in 2017; however, they have retreated to the south, especially in the region of Fezzan, where they have established new strongholds.<sup>8</sup> In the Sahel they have proved to be extremely resilient. In spite of international and regional cooperation to fight jihadi organizations, and despite the French-led military Operation Serval and then Operation Barkhane, these groups have not only been able to absorb heavy losses both material and in terms of fighters but, worse, to strengthen themselves. Indeed, while jihadi violence was more or less limited to Northern Mali and the immediate border region of Niger in 2013 – when the French launched Serval – the jihadists have now been striking in all the Sahel countries and in those never touched by jihadi violence before, such as Burkina Faso or Ivory Coast.

Indeed, the jihadi organizations in the Sahel were considerably weakened in the immediate aftermath of operations Serval and then Barkhane in 2013–2014 in Northern Mali, which led to the death of several hundred jihadists, including several important leaders. Therefore, in order to evade destruction AQIM and Ansar al-Din retreated from the major urban centres and spread across the whole Sahel or regrouped in Libya. In that regard, Serge Daniel posits that “the French operations did not solve the problems that led to the 2011–2012 crisis and the collapse of the Malian State, these operations simply stopped the jihadi advances, Northern Mali was reconquered, however most of the jihadi fighters simply retreated to Southern Libya” (Interview C). However, by 2014, sensing that disaffection had returned to the populations in Northern Mali, a region where the state remains endemically weak, and which is plagued by extreme poverty and unsolved social and economic issues, with enduring tensions between the different political factions and ethnic groups, the jihadi organizations started gradually to return. They began increasing attacks in Northern Mali, then expanded to the centre of the country (Macina) and by 2016 had managed to infiltrate the neighbouring countries, which until then had never been touched by jihadi terrorism. This in turn allowed Yahya Abu Hammam, supreme leader of AQIM in the Sahel to declare that “the French operations in Mali have totally failed and today, we are present everywhere, from the Mauritanian border in the west all the way to Burkina Faso in the east”.<sup>9</sup>

8 On Libya, see Lounnas and Collombier (2018).

9 Interview of Yahya Abu Hamam, supreme leader of AQIM by the Mauritanian press agency Al Akhbar: “Abu Hamam in His First Interview after the French Intervention in Mali” (in Arabic), in *Alakhbar*, 10 January 2016, <http://archive.wikiwix.com/cache/?url=http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html>.

Nevertheless, one of the characteristics of the Sahelian jihadi movement until March 2017 was its fragmentation, with several different movements in existence. By 2015, jihadi groups in the Sahel were dominated by four powerful organizations. The first, led by Yahya Abu Hammam, was AQIM in the Sahel. Present there since the early 2000s, AQIM had participated in the takeover of Northern Mali in 2012. Following operations Serval and Barkhane, AQIM suffered heavy losses and saw the death of several key figures in its Sahelian brigades, including Abdelhamid Abu Zeid and Abdelkrim al-Targui. Next to AQIM and closely allied with it, was Ansar al-Din, led by Iyad Ag Ghali. A local hero and a major figure of the Tuareg uprisings in the 1990s and early 2000s, Ghali had since abandoned his separatist goals and from the mid-2000s became a radical Salafi Islamist. Ghali very clearly stated to other Tuareg leaders in late 2011, shortly after the creation of his organization Ansar al-Din: “As from now, I want to tell everyone that our goal is the implementation of the Sharia in all Mali. We don’t want to hear anymore of autonomy or independence” (Daniel 2014: 271). It is worthy of note that since the mid-2000s Ghali had developed close relations with AQIM leaders, including Abu Zeid and Abu Hammam. Moreover, Abdelkrim al-Targui, one of the most important AQIM brigade leaders, was his nephew. Thus, sharing strong personal relations with AQIM in addition to ideologically converging with them, the alliance between Ansar al-Din and AQIM was a natural conclusion of this comradeship which had started in the 2000s. Talking about the nature of the relationship between AQIM and Ansar al-Din, Abu Hammam explained that “Ansar al-Din is an Islamist organization for the way of the jihad in the name of God, and in spite of some difference, we see eye to eye on several issues”.<sup>10</sup> The third faction closely allied with Ansar al-Din and AQIM is the Macina brigade, sometimes referred to as the Macina Liberation Front, led by the charismatic Salafi preacher Amadou Koufa. Close to Ghali in 2010–2012 and very popular in central Mali, the Macina region, he has important support from the Fulas, being from this community himself.

Rival to those three organizations was the powerful Al-Mourabitoun, led by the charismatic Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Present in the Sahel since 1994, regional emir for the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) until 2005, when he was demoted by Droukdel to a simple brigade leader role, although formally a member of AQIM until 2012, since then Belmokhtar had acted with total independence from the regional AQIM leadership as well as from Droukdel. Indeed, Belmokhtar wanted to become supreme emir of the GSPC in 2004, after the death of its previous leader Nabil Sahraoui. However, he was caught off guard by Droukdel, who managed to become emir instead. Since then the two men had had very difficult relations. This was aggravated by the demoting of Belmokhtar in 2005 and his rivalry with Abu Zeid over a wide range of issues, including links between Belmokhtar and local mafias condemned by Abu Zeid and the refusal of Belmokhtar to share the money he was receiving from western hostage takings. The tensions between Belmokhtar and the AQIM leadership continued to rise over the years, furthering the rift between him and the other brigade leaders. This was illustrated when Belmokhtar discreetly encouraged the formation of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), a splinter from AQIM. Finally, in late 2012 Belmokhtar was removed from the command of his brigade by Droukdel. This led him and his brigade to directly split from AQIM and in mid-2013 he merged with MUJWA and gave birth to Al-Mourabitoun, one of the strongest jihadi organizations in the region. Al-Mourabitoun immediately pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus becoming the direct

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

competitor of AQIM in the Sahel. Having said that, one must note here that while Al-Mourabitoun was the rival of AQIM, this was due essentially to bad personal relations between Belmokhtar on the one hand and Droukdel and Abu Zeid on the other. Otherwise, Belmokhtar maintained very good relations with most of the other AQIM leaders in the Sahel, in addition to the leader of Ansar al-Din. Ideologically, there was a total convergence between him and AQIM. Finally, at no point was there any confrontation between AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun. On the contrary, the men in the field continued to entertain very cordial and good relations. Lastly, Al-Mourabitoun was also the target of operations Serval and Barkhane, suffering heavy losses in 2014 and 2015, including the death of several of its leaders – especially Omar Ould Hamaha, number two in the organization.

Worse for Belmokhtar, tensions rose between his organization and IS in Libya, a country in which he had established a strong presence after the fall of Gaddafi. In late 2014 he is said to have refused to merge with IS in Libya and apparently his group fought against IS during the battle of Derna. This led IS to condemn him to death in August 2015 and launch a warrant against him. Belmokhtar was by then being hunted by France and the United States as well. These nations conducted several airstrikes against him and his associates in 2015 and 2016. In November 2016, a French air strike in Libya is suspected to have either killed or at least badly injured him. While no information has circulated since on his whereabouts, as Belmokhtar has neither appeared in public nor released any statement, it has led many to question whether he is still alive or at least to suspect that he has been incapacitated.

In May 2015, amid tensions and divisions among Al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliates, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the number two man in Al-Mourabitoun announced that this organization was "pledging its allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, thus banishing all divisions within the community of the Muslims". Done without authorization and against the wishes of Belmokhtar, his declaration was immediately rejected by the Al-Mourabitoun leadership. Belmokhtar released an announcement shortly afterwards in which he explained that the Sahrawi declaration had been done without respecting Shura (consultation) procedures and therefore the statement did not represent Al-Mourabitoun, which according to Belmokhtar remained loyal to Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, close to 100 men followed Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, who created his own organization, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and entered in competition with all the other Sahelian organizations.

As a result, from late 2015 a process of rapprochement between the various jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda started, including conducting attacks in common. This process culminated in March 2017 when AQIM, Ansar al-Din, the Macina brigade and Al-Mourabitoun merged into a single organization: Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), also known as Group in Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), whose leader is Iyad Ag Ghali. This merger ended all competition and rivalries between Al-Qaeda affiliates in the region and the GSIM has since emerged as the most powerful jihadi organization in the Sahel, with an estimated 1,200 men fighting under its banner. One should note that the GSIM pledged allegiance to Droukdel and Zawahiri, and thus presented itself as an AQIM affiliate in the Sahel and confirmed its affiliation with Al-Qaeda. However, and this was a first, GSIM also pledged allegiance to the Taliban Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada – recognizing him as commander of the faithful. This was a clear message to ISIS and the other jihadists that as long as Al-Qaeda existed, there was already a commander of the faithful and therefore ISIS caliph

was not legitimate. Since then, GSIM has ramped-up attacks all over the region, emerging as the most powerful organization in the Sahel.

The ISGS, for its part, has so far proved to be a marginal organization, active in the region of Gao and the south-eastern parts of Mali and its immediate neighbour Niger. It has been involved in just a few attacks, the most important being the Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger during which four American soldiers were killed. Finally, while the ISGS was created in May 2015, it was only recognized by IS as an affiliate in October 2016, which shows that Al-Sahrawi was not taken seriously by IS leadership (see Joscelyn and Weiss 2016). Moreover, while ISGS has formally stated its allegiance to IS, we have not observed the use of extreme and excessive violence against civilian populations that IS has been exercising in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, when an organization pledges allegiance to another, this usually means that it automatically adopts the other's methods of warfare and ideological stance. However, so far ISGS has not released any document that could officially link it ideologically to IS.<sup>12</sup> Its patterns of behaviour seem to be a continuation of the methods used by the other jihadi organizations in the Sahel, albeit more violent. A possible rapprochement and cooperation between ISGS and GSIM cannot be excluded. In that regard, a certain Amar, the ISGS spokesman, gave an interview to the Agence France-Presse in January 2018 in which he explained that "we will do everything we can to prevent the G5 Sahel from deploying itself in the Sahel. [...] Our brother Iyad Ag Ghali and the other mujahideens like us defend Islam. [...] To defend Islam we give help to each other and will continue to do so" (AFP 2018).<sup>13</sup> Other rumours indicate that a meeting has already taken place between Sahrawi and Ghali.<sup>14</sup> However, so far those jihadi organizations have proved to be extremely resilient and are far from any collapse. The attacks of 2018 in the Sahel region have now spread to almost all the countries, and these states have proved unable to check them.

## CONCLUSION: FRAGMENTED REGIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

This comparative analysis between jihadi organizations in North Africa and the Sahel leads us to conclude that they have been able to rise and maintain themselves only in countries where state structures and apparatus were extremely weak, allowing these organizations to take control of what one may qualify as "ungoverned spaces". Thus, Morocco, Algeria and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Tunisia after it restored its state apparatus, have managed to considerably reduce the terrorist threat. On the other hand, Libya, Mali, Niger and the other Sahelian countries have been unable to do so, given the weakness of their state structures. The North African-Sahelian regional system is fragmented along these lines, which in turn considerably affects the ability of jihadi organizations to deploy themselves. Indeed, when we look at the figures for jihadists in the

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11 ISGS is suspected to be the origin of the May 2018 Tindinbawén and Taylalene massacres in Menaka, during which 17 civilians were killed, as well as of Injagalane massacre in July 2018, when ten civilians were killed.

12 The Islamic State has been considered a neo-takfiri organization rather than a Salafi jihadi organization, Salafism jihadism being here the ideology of al Qaeda.

13 The G5 Sahel is a regional organization created in 2014 under the auspices of France and composed of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. It aims at fostering regional cooperation in fighting terrorism in the Sahel.

14 "Sahel: Iyad Ag Ghali tente-t-il un rapprochement avec Abou Walid al-Sahraoui?", in *Jeune Afrique*, 15 February 2018, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/529517>.

Sahel, not exceeding 1,200 men, we may conclude that their power comes from the weakness of the states of the region, rather their own intrinsic strength. Consequently, the persisting weakness of Libya and the Sahelian states is perceived by the Tunisian-Algerian-Moroccan authorities as constituting the most dangerous threat to their stability.

Furthermore, we should note the major differences between the Middle Eastern jihadi and the North African–Sahelian organizations. In the Middle East, the jihadi organizations are absorbed in extremely violent and bloody civil wars that often take precedence over fighting the regimes in place and have claimed the lives of several thousand of their fighters, whether Al-Qaeda or IS. Moreover, they (especially IS) are known for their extremely violent behaviour towards the local civilian populations and minorities. In Algeria and Tunisia and the Sahel on the other hand, there are almost no records of infighting between the jihadi organizations over the past fifteen years, except one significant skirmish in Gao in 2015 between AQIM and IS fighters. The situation of Libya and the different trajectory of Libyan jihadi organizations there makes it a specific case, in the sense that these organizations did engage in violent confrontations with each other, especially IS versus Al-Qaeda loyalists – although here again, it does not seem to have equalled the internecine strife observed in in the Middle East. Finally, again no large-scale massacre or extreme violence has been observed against civilians in the North Africa and Sahel region. When such events occur, they are exceptional, showing that while those organizations claim affiliation with their Middle Eastern counterparts, they usually remain local organizations following their own objectives and strategies.

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## ANNEX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Interviewee 1: Algerian observer close to the Islamic jihad issues, Algiers, January 2015

Interviewee 2: former jihadist of the TICG, Tunis, March 2018

Interviewee 3: Tunisian official, Tunis, March 2018

Interviewee 4: Tunisian specialist of terrorism, Tunis, March 2018

Interview A: Farid Alilat, journalist at Jeune Afrique and specialist in jihadi organizations in Algeria, Algiers, October 2016

Interview B: Michaël Béchir Ayari, Tunisia Senior Analyst for the International Crisis Group (ICG), Tunisia, March 2018

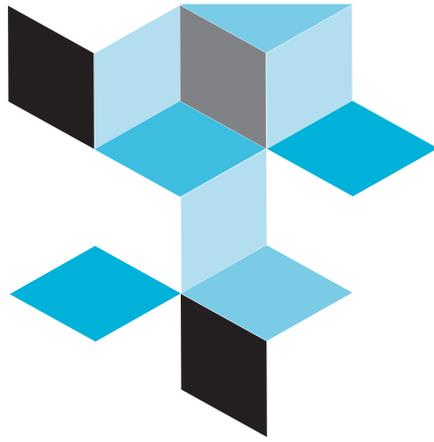
Interview C: Serge Daniel, journalist and specialist in jihadi organizations, Bamako, March 2017

Interview D: Akram Khariief, journalist and security expert, Algiers, January 2018

Interview E: Mohamed Mokeddem, Algerian expert on terrorism and director of the national newspaper Ennahar, Algiers, September 2012

Interview F: Huda Mzioudet, expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Tunis, March 2018

Interview G: Habib M. Sayah, consultant and security expert, Tunis, March 2018



**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

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