

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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EGYPT: AN INTENSIFYING PROBLEM WITH ISLAMIST MILITANCY

Alexander Sehmer

A suicide bomber blew himself up at a Cairo church close to the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in December, killing at least 25 people, wounding scores more and putting Egypt's Coptic community on edge heading into their Christmas celebrations on January 7 ([Ahrām](#), January 6). The real target of Egypt's militants, however, is the state itself.

Following the December 11 attack, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has been publicly supportive of Egypt's Copts, announced three days of mourning and ordered the church to be renovated (which it was) in time for the holiday ([al-Bawaba](#), December 12, 2016). Islamic State (IS), meanwhile, claimed responsibility for the attack and vowed to continue its "war against apostates" ([Egypt Independent](#), December 14, 2016).

Egypt's Christians are an obvious target for Islamist militants — the church attack was the deadliest on Egypt's Christian community since a blast in Alexandria in 2011 that killed 23 worshipers — but the government's prima

ry concern remains the political aspirations of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the days following the blast, Egyptian security forces rounded up four of the attack's alleged plotters ([Ahrām](#), December 13, 2016). Egypt's interior ministry also named the mastermind of the attack as Mohab Mostafa el-Sayed Kassem, and in so doing raked over a long-running political dispute with Qatar, which has been at odds with Sisi over its backing for the Muslim Brotherhood administration of former-president Mohamed Morsi.

The interior ministry announced that Kassem, a militant known as "The Doctor" with links to IS' Egyptian affiliate Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), had travelled to Qatar in 2015. It claimed that while there he met Brotherhood officials who encouraged him to join ABM and carry out attacks. Qatar reacted angrily, calling the accusations an attempt to "sully" its name and a "cover up" for the failures of the Egyptian security services ([al-Bawaba](#), December 15, 2016). Egypt also received a reprimand from Qatar's Gulf allies ([Khaleej Times](#), December 16, 2016).

There is truth on both sides, but Egypt's problems go beyond these established Brotherhood links. Militant

attacks have intensified since the 2013 coup. ABM had been a relatively fringe group up until Sisi came to power. Little over a year later, ABM declared allegiance to IS as Wilayat Sinai and stepped up its campaign against the security force. Although based in Sinai, its operations can reach Cairo, as the church bombing and other attacks make clear.

More recently the Hasam movement, a relatively new group, mounted an assassination campaign against state and security officials. The group claimed the failed attempted assassination last year on Egypt's former grand mufti, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, an establishment figure ([New Arab](#), August 5, 2016).

As 2017 gets under way, it will be the Egyptian establishment that comes under continued attack from violent Islamists.

CAMEROON: VOLUNTEER FORCES WORK TO COMBAT BOKO HARAM

Alexander Sehmer

Northern Cameroon has seen a stepped-up campaign of attempted suicide attacks attributed to Boko Haram in recent weeks. While local vigilance committees have helped to combat the threat, with the militant group apparently under pressure across the border in Nigeria, they will likely have their work cut out for them in the coming months.

At least two people were killed and several others injured on December 25 by a suicide bomber who blew himself up close to the entrance to a Christmas market in the northern town of Mora ([Cameroon Info](#), December 25, 2016; [K'mer SAGA](#), December 25, 2016). According to local media, the bomber was heading toward the market on a bicycle when members of the local vigilance committee stopped and tried to search him, at which point he detonated his explosives ([Cameroon Info](#), December 28, 2016).

In November, two young female suicide bombers also targeted the market in Mora, but only one was able to detonate her device, causing injuries to bystanders, while the other was killed before she could blow herself up ([Africa News](#), November 25, 2016). Members of the local vigilance committee were again responsible for disrupting the bombing attempt; committee members in northern towns thwarted two other attempted suicide attacks earlier this month ([Camer](#), January 11).

The committees are in effect state-sanctioned vigilante groups. They are comprised of volunteers operating with the blessing of the government, but some complain they are under-resourced and many are armed with only rudimentary, homemade weapons ([Africa News](#), April, 4, 2016). While Cameroonian troops battle Boko Haram alongside their Nigerian counterparts as part of a regional military force, and have made significant gains in the last few years, they have struggled to deal with suicide bombers. The local committees have enjoyed greater success in this regard.

Across the border, recent Nigerian military successes appear to have put Boko Haram under pressure. As 2016 drew to a close, the Nigerian military claimed to have vanquished Boko Haram in the Sambisa forest, tak-

ing a key base known as Camp Zero ([Vanguard](#), December 24, 2016). Nigeria has made similar claims about the defeat of Boko Haram before, which have later proved to be overblown. However, if militants in the forest are being displaced, then Cameroon's far north can expect to see further disruption in coming months.

Suicide bombers often infiltrate Cameroon's northern towns from across the border ([Cameroon Info](#), August 23, 2016). But poor economic conditions and cultural similarities with northern Nigeria make Cameroon's north a potential recruiting ground for Boko Haram in its own right. In the long term, this is where the problem lies. The government must focus on economic development and deradicalization initiatives as much as on military strategy. Without that there will be little let up for either the military or the local vigilance committees.

India Tackles Terror Financing

Sudha Ramachandran

On November 8, 2016, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the demonetization of the country's two highest denomination bills, the Rs 1,000 and the Rs 500 notes, equivalent to \$15 and \$7.5 respectively. The notes, which accounted for almost 86 percent of the total value of all banknotes in circulation in the country, were declared illegal tender with immediate effect. Demonetization of these notes, Modi said, would help the government fight "black money," corruption and terrorism. [1] It would help tackle terrorism by rendering useless counterfeit currency notes, which "enemies from across the border" (read Pakistan) use to run their anti-India terrorist operations. "This has been going on for years," Modi said, pointing to the many instances of terrorists caught with a large number of fake 500 and 1,000 rupee notes ([Economic Times](#), November 9, 2016).

In the two months since the demonetization of India's high denomination notes, Modi and his ministers have made grand claims on its impact on terror funding. Within days of the announcement, Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar said that it had undermined the "core of terror funding" in the country ([Indian Express](#), November 13, 2016). On December 27, Modi declared "the world of terrorism" had been "destroyed due to demonetization" ([The Hindu](#), December 27, 2016). An examination of the financing of terrorist groups active in India, however, reveals a more complex picture. Terrorist groups have been hit – some harder than others – but whether demonetization will weaken terrorist outfits' finances in the long term is doubtful.

How Terrorist Groups Are Funded

Currency notes, genuine and counterfeit, constitute an important part of the assets held by terrorist groups active in India. The bulk of fake Indian currency notes (FICN) are printed abroad, mainly in Pakistan. India alleges that printing of FICN enjoys Pakistani state support; the paper used is the same as that used for Pakistani currency, and the printing of notes is undertaken using Pakistani government presses ([India Today](#), November 6, 2013). These notes are then pumped into India through criminal networks and terrorist outfits like

the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) and Indian Mujahideen.

Besides the militants, traders and travelers between the two countries are conduits for fake notes. Counterfeit currency is also sent via couriers through India's porous borders with Nepal and Bangladesh, or over air and sea routes via West Asian and Southeast Asian countries (India Today, November 10, 2016). Among illegal channels for the transfer of funds, the *Hawala* route, a form of money transfer, is the most popular and plays a key role in sustaining terrorism and financing terror attacks (Outlook, November 24, 2011). [2]

Militants also use legal channels to route their funds. JeM, for instance, favors sending money via bank accounts of Kashmiris based in Arab countries to their relatives in Kashmir, who then hand over the amount to JeM operatives in Kashmir (India Today, January 18, 2016). The HM is said to have routed Rs 800 million (\$12 million) through a Pakistan-based front organization to India mainly using conventional banking channels (Economic Times, August 26, 2016). It is also reported to be using the cross-Line of Control barter trade to fund its operations in Indian Kashmir. Goods from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir are under-invoiced and the excess money generated is collected by its fighters in India (Economic Times, August 27, 2016). Several Saudi "charity" organizations also use bank transfers to send funds to madrassas in India that are radicalizing young Muslims (NDTV, September 25, 2016).

In addition, terrorist groups raise their own funds. Front organizations for LeT and JeM collect donations from the Pakistani public for use in their anti-India jihad (Indian Express, July 5, 2016). Terrorist groups also raise funds by collecting protection money from local businesses and contractors, as well as "taxing" profits from illicit businesses such as narcotics smuggling and illegal mining (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses [IDSA], December 27, 2013).

Limited Financial Impact

Although terror groups do hold some of their assets in the form of investment in real estate, gold or stock shares, most is held as currency notes. Demonetization would, then, have converted any stashed counterfeit notes into scraps of valueless paper. However, militants would likely have already deposited as much of their

illegally amassed wealth – the "black money" – as possible into bank accounts. In the Maoist strongholds in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Bihar and Jharkhand, fighters appear to be forcing local villagers to deposit the rebels' black money into their own bank accounts, with officials reporting an unusual rise in the balances of the accounts of poor villagers (NDTV, November 30, 2016).

Despite such efforts to preserve some of the value of black money, demonetization has had an immediate impact on terrorists' funding. Hawala traders, who after demonetization were left holding large volumes of cash rendered suddenly valueless, have been hit. Several hawala businesses have been forced to close, crippling an important channel for terrorist funding (Mail Today, December 25, 2016).

However, the impact of demonetization on terrorists' finances is at best temporary. Indian officials claim the security features of the new Rs 2,000 and the Rs 500 notes that have replaced the demonetized notes are almost impossible to replicate, but it seems only a matter of time before counterfeiters copy the new notes (Times of India, November 10, 2016). By some accounts, fake notes printed in India are already in circulation. Furthermore, as Pakistan government presses are used to print FICN, replicating the new notes will not be all that difficult (Deccan Herald, December 27, 2016; The Wire, November 11, 2016). That could mean the coffers of terrorist groups will be replenished with new fake high-denomination bills within a matter of months.

As for those sending money via the hawala channels, agents are already finding new ways to launder black money (New Indian Express, November 19, 2016). Transfer of funds to terrorist groups can therefore be expected to normalize in a few months as cash in circulation increases, making demonetization only a temporary impediment to terrorist finances (Hindustan Times, November 10, 2016).

Recovering From the Blow

Just how demonetization will hit different terrorist outfits will depend on their cash reserves, the liquidity of the businesses in which they have invested and the ease with which they are able to reconvert assets into cash. The Maoists and insurgent groups in India's Northeast – which keep the bulk of their assets in cash – have been hardest hit, and it will take them longest to recover.

Their existing stashes of cash have been rendered redundant. Likewise, their ability to raise money through extortion from locals has been weakened, as those from whom they raise such funds are unable to pay immediately. So too they will be unable to sell real estate and gold ([IDSA](#), November 18, 2016 and [Sunday Guardian](#), December 4, 2016).

In contrast, terrorist groups active in Jammu and Kashmir, and Islamist outfits operating elsewhere in India, will be able to recover much faster, as they have access to sources of financing, including funds from the Pakistani state and rich donors in West Asia who have not been impacted by demonetization ([IDSA](#), November 18, 2016). Additionally, as well as the Hawala system, these groups draw their finances from remittances sent by the Indian diaspora in West Asia, payments that are routed via legal banking channels and so will not be affected.

Demonetization will not provide a long-term solution to India's problems with foreign-funded terrorists nor, contrary to the government's claims, will it break the back of terrorist finances. Any setback it inflicts will be temporary at best, with Pakistan-backed groups likely to quickly recover.

Dr. Sudha Ramachandran is an independent researcher and journalist based in Bangalore, India. She has written extensively on South Asian peace and conflict, political and security issues for The Diplomat, Asia Times and Jamestown's China Brief.

NOTES

[1] Black money refers to the illicit proceeds of tax evasion, criminal activity and corruption, which are often held in the form of high denomination bills, as well as in real estate and gold.

[2] Hawala is a money transfer system popular in Arab countries and South Asia, in which money is paid to an agent who instructs an associate in the relevant country to pay the sum to the final recipient.

Entering the Era of 'Unmanned Terrorism'

Scott N. Romaniuk & Tobias J. Burgers

Over the past four decades, suicide attacks has become the weapon of choice for terrorist organizations from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the Islamist fundamentalists of Islamic State (IS). However, with the advent of consumer drone use by terrorists groups in the Middle East – which has risen significantly in the past year, particularly on the part of IS militants – that may now be on the brink of changing.

Data collected by the Chicago Project on Security & Terrorism (CPOST) on suicide attacks over the past 40 years shows how more than 100 militant groups have experimented with and adapted this form of assault. The data shows how, at different times, different methods have found favor among terrorist groups. Crucially, it also demonstrates a willingness by militant groups to experiment. [1]

Adaptation and Experimentation

Suicide attacks have been undertaken by individuals using various types of devices and methods of delivery. Some examples include wearable devices such as belt bombs, car bombs and other vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) and explosive devices taken on board airplanes.

The use of car bombs spiked in 2004 (see chart) after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and was followed to a lesser degree by an increase in the use of other VBIEDs and "unspecified" forms of suicide attack, as militants explored other newer and possibly more efficient forms of attack.

Now that experimentation is taking a different form. On October 2, 2016, IS militants flew a small, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) affixed with an IED on an attack mission, killing two Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and wounding two French paratroopers ([Haaretz](#), October 13, 2016).

The incident may have been the first successful terrorist UAV-IED attack, but militant groups have been exploring the potential of drones for years. As early as 2001, al-

Qaeda deliberated over using a remotely operated aerial explosive device against G8 Summit leaders in Genoa, Italy. The group also planned to attack the British House of Commons with an anthrax-filled drone, with an additional plot to attack commercial aircraft using remote-controlled planes with explosives attached to them ([Center for Arms Control](#), 2005).

During the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the latter sought to bomb Israeli territory by deploying explosive-laden UAVs. Hezbollah's plans played-out unsuccessfully, but the group saw some success in 2016 when it bombed opposing forces in the Syrian war using UAVs loaded with hand grenades.

Jund al-Aqsa's use of a drone during the summer of 2016 to deliver a small bomb on the Syrian battlefield in Hama province is also indicative of the prospects and likelihood of future terrorist drone attacks ([New Arab](#), October 12, 2016). And in late 2016, the Taliban used a drone to film a suicide car-bomb attack on a police station in Nawa-i-Barakzayi, in Afghanistan's Helmand province.

A New Security Paradigm

The unchecked proliferation of unmanned systems and their use by state and non-state actors makes it likely there will be increased use of unmanned systems by militant groups to launch attacks over the next decade. IS has already successfully demonstrated, albeit to a limited extent, that the merger of increasingly accessible drone technology with IEDs can be used to carry out attacks.

Taking things a step further, miniature unmanned systems could present even greater security challenges. These systems are already hard to detect and, if analysts' predictions are accurate, they will be as small as a fly or ladybug in under a decade. While tiny in size, miniature unmanned systems will be able to carry a payload sufficient for an attack on a human target ([Defense One](#), May 28, 2015).

They may be sufficient to carry out an assassination, or to kill groups of people in an attack on, for example, a football stadium. Pilot Mark Jacobsen offered a chilling illustration of this when, with about \$250, he built a UAV-IED capable of delivering a two-pound load, somewhere between 6-12 miles – not nearly as lethal as

an F-16 strike, but enough for a deadly attack against a civilian target ([WOTR](#), October 19, 2016). Moderately larger devices could be used to attack commercial planes, ships and other targets.

The situation is of particular concern when one considers how easily al-Qaeda has been able to disseminate advice on tactics via online media. Its online magazine *Inspire*, popularizes target types, modes of attack and attempts to empower people of all walks of life to take-up-arms against the United States. Another magazine, *al-Shamika*, has similarly helped to expand the margins of attacks ([Al-Arabiya](#), August 23, 2016).

The use of UAVs is a natural development of the kind of DIY approach to terrorism that groups like al-Qaeda and IS have been practicing for years, to say nothing of the efforts of IS and others to recruit on college campuses and enlist individuals in the fields of engineering, organic chemistry and nanotechnology ([Carnegie](#), June 29, 2015). It may become necessary to look beyond measures that involve merely shooting down a terrorist drone or UAV-IED, especially where its payload may not be solely explosive-based but might contain enriched material or other toxic substance.

Tackling the Drone Threat

The U.S. government faces the problem of groups like IS and al-Qaeda using UAVs on two broad fronts. First, there is the threat posed to U.S. military personnel, as well as the military personnel of coalition forces deployed. Second, and more disconcertingly, there is the threat posed to civilian populations. Defending civilian populations against flying IEDs will not be as easy as defending U.S. soldiers on deployment.

In 2015, Congress requested \$20 million to provide U.S. military personnel with the necessary equipment to contend with flying IEDS. Part of that equipment includes the Batelle DroneDefender, or directed-energy unmanned aircraft system countermeasure ([Defense One](#), January 3, 2017). The battery-operated device, known as an "anti-drone rifle" and designed much like a regular assault rifle, is an innovative system capable of instantly disrupting small aerial vehicles like those being used by IS.

Companies such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin are also testing an array of new laser systems that have had

some success in shooting down smaller UAVs. These are relatively inexpensive to produce and could be a major inroad into counter-drone measures.

At present, response options remain extremely limited, but such systems are precisely where research and developed are needed.

Scott N Romaniuk is a Doctoral Researcher in the School of International Studies, University of Trento. He is the Editor of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Modern War (2015) and The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy (2017). His research interests include international relations, security studies, terrorism, and political violence.

Tobias J Burgers is a Doctoral Researcher at the Otto Suhr Institute, Free University Berlin, from which he holds a Master's in Political Science. His research interests include the impact of cyber and robotic technology on security dynamics, East-Asian security relations, maritime security and the future of conflict.

NOTES

[1] Chicago Project on Security & Terrorism. "Suicide Attack Database." http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu/search_new.php

How Al-Qaeda Will Benefit From Islamic State's 'Greater Sahara Province'

Jacob Zenn & Abdou Cisse

Under increasing pressure in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Libya, Islamic State (IS) is activating and reorganizing its networks elsewhere, observably in Europe and Turkey, and, less conspicuously, in West Africa.

On October 30, 2016, IS confirmed via its Amaq news agency that it had recognized a militant faction led by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and al-Murabitun commander, releasing a video of al-Sahrawi and 40 of his fighters giving the pledge of allegiance, or *baya*, to IS leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi. Although this did not receive the same level of fanfare in IS circles as the pledge Boko Haram made in March 2015, IS ensured its followers were made aware of al-Sahrawi's pledge. The mentions were brief, but the 53rd edition of Islamic State's *al-Naba* newsletter and the 3rd issue of IS' multilingual magazine, *Rumiyah*, both hailed the integration of al-Sahrawi's faction of al-Murabitun into the "Islamic Caliphate."

However, al-Sahrawi's faction of al-Murabitun – or as he terms it the "Greater Sahara Division" – first made its pledge to al-Baghdadi in May 2015. Why then did it take more than a year for IS to grant the group recognition? Further, how will al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) respond to the existence of a newly recognized IS faction in the Sahel where until now (despite Boko Haram further south in the Lake Chad region) it has had a virtual monopoly on jihadism?

Most likely al-Sahrawi had to first prove himself in order to win IS recognition, but his faction provides a useful case study to explain new trends in IS' expansionist strategy. As for AQIM, the group will be able to manage – and possibly even benefit from – the rise of al-Sahrawi's faction in several important ways.

The Importance of Timing

The timing of the *Amaq*, *al-Naba* and *Rumiyah* publications show that IS coordinated the confirmation of al-

Sahrawi's pledge across its media outlets, but what is notable is the delay in recognizing al-Sahrawi's faction. Al-Sahrawi had released an audio as early as May 2015 calling on al-Murabitun to join IS "for the good of the Muslim community," but IS ignored the announcement ([France24](#), May 14, 2015). In contrast, immediately after the release of the audio recording, the historical leader of al-Murabitun, [Mokhtar Belmokhtar](#), declared that al-Sahrawi's al-Murabitun faction had gone against the "Shurah Council," and reasserted that he and (his faction of) al-Murabitun were still loyal to al-Qaeda ([rfi.fr](#), May 16, 2015).

One theory behind IS' delay in recognizing al-Sahrawi's pledge is that al-Sahrawi had to first prove himself. On May 4, 2016, about one year after the release of al-Sahrawi's first audio recording, another recording attributed to al-Sahrawi threatened Morocco and the UN mission in Western Sahara (al-Sahrawi's native land) in the name of "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," but nothing resulted from the threat ([al-Jazeera Arabic](#), May 4, 2016). Shortly after the recording was released, however, Morocco broke up an IS cell planning attacks in Tangiers. The cell was led by a Chadian national, which would be consistent with al-Sahrawi's sub-Saharan support base. The foiled attack may have been planned by al-Sahrawi in an attempt to impress IS, although information on the cell is scarce and Morocco has not released any further details of the arrests.

On September 1, 2016, al-Sahrawi carried out his first attack, striking a Burkinabe customs post in Markoye, not far from the border with Mali and Niger, killing a customs officer and a civilian. He claimed that attack three days later ([al-Akhbar](#), September 3, 2016). Al-Sahrawi then carried out his second attack and claimed it in the name of IS in Greater Sahara on October 12, in Intangom, northern Burkina Faso ([al-Akhbar](#), October 14, 2016). In this attack, four Burkinabe soldiers and two civilians were killed. A third attack, also claimed it in the name of IS in the Greater Sahara, came on October 17 at the Koutoukalé prison in Niamey, where many jihadists are imprisoned. This attack, however, was repelled by the Nigerien security forces ([rfi.fr](#), October 19, 2016).

Less than two weeks after this attack, IS confirmed al-Sahrawi's pledge from 2015, promoting the video of al-Sahrawi and his fighters pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi. This suggests the attacks gave IS the confidence

that al-Sahrawi's brigade could become a "legitimate" operational branch of IS, unlike several Algerian groups that broke from AQIM in 2014 and 2015 to join IS, but which were largely inactive and quickly destroyed by Algerian security forces.

Supporting this is the experience of [Abu Musab al-Barnawi](#), the leader of IS in West Africa Province (formerly known as Boko Haram), whose faction operates further southeast from al-Sahrawi's area of operations in the Lake Chad region. Before IS announced in its *al-Naba* newsletter that al-Barnawi had replaced [Abubakar Shekau](#) as leader of its West Africa Province in August 2016, the militants, then still formally under Shekau's leadership, carried out a string of raids on towns and military barracks in Bosso and Diffa, southeastern Niger. These were actively promoted by IS media.

Given al-Barnawi's historic focus on the Nigeria-Niger (Nigeria-Chad and Nigeria-Cameroon) border areas, and the style of the videos showing the raids, it is likely al-Barnawi's faction (not Shekau's) commanded those raids. Al-Barnawi likely carried out the raids to establish his credibility and capabilities to IS before the group would name him as Shekau's replacement (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), August 19, 2016).

AQIM and Ansaroul Islam

IS' recognition of al-Sahrawi's faction will likely lead to competition with AQIM and its network of branches (Sahara Branch); allies (Belmokhtar, Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi); sub-affiliates (Ansar Dine); and front groups (Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia and Macina Liberation Front (MLF)) in the broader Sahel region.

Indeed, AQIM already appears set to encroach on al-Sahrawi's main area of operations in Burkina Faso, which had limited experience of jihadist attacks until AQIM's large-scale hotel and café attacks in Ouagadougou in January 2016. These had been preceded by similar attacks by AQIM on hotels in Bamako and near Abdijan in late 2015.

AQIM's most recent front group, Ansaroul Islam, is based in Burkina Faso, and reportedly is a sub-group of the Malian MLF which, like MLF, exploits historical Fulani jihadist narratives to recruit among Fulanis on the Burkina side of the Mali border ([menastream.com](#), January 3). If Ansaroul Islam takes after the MLF, it will have the

grassroots networks and intelligence to be able to eliminate local clan, tribal and government officials who oppose AQIM and jihadist preaching more generally.

Al-Sahrawi, whose main support base has historically been around Gao in Mali, is unlikely to have such a grassroots base in northern Burkina Faso, given the diverse backgrounds of his fighters. This holds true even if al-Sahrawi receives some of the sub-Saharan African IS foreign fighters who have recently fled Libya.

AQIM may seek to prioritize Ansaroul Islam in response to al-Sahrawi. AQIM has paid close attention to the former al-Murabitun leader. Not only did Belmokhtar respond immediately to al-Sahrawi's audio pledge in 2015, but also after that same audio pledge from al-Sahrawi, AQIM released a video of a Romanian hostage, who was abducted on April 4, 2015 from a mine in northern Burkina Faso ([voaafrique](#), May 19, 2015). Until then, the man had not featured in any hostage video. AQIM made clear that its branch of al-Murabitun, rather than al-Sahrawi's, had the Romanian hostage. It is unlikely this was a coincidence. Instead it was likely a rebuttal to al-Sahrawi and intended to show AQIM was the stronger faction. Now with Ansaroul Islam AQIM has part of its network in the same geographic area of al-Sahrawi and can more effectively operate and recruit in his terrain.

Possible AQIM Responses

Although there have been reports of clashes between al-Sahrawi's fighters and Belmokhtar's fighters, such as in Gao in mid-2015, AQIM can likely use "non-violent" measures to deal with the emergence of al-Sahrawi's Greater Sahara Province ([maliactu.net](#), June 17, 2015). The leader of AQIM's Sahara Branch, Yahya Abu el Hammam Okacha, for example, said in an interview with al-Akhbar in January 2016 that there was still communication with al-Sahrawi, suggesting cooperation was an option ([al-Akhbar](#), January 10).

More generally, despite infrequent crackdowns on defectors, AQIM has adapted its messaging to cater to IS interest among its foot-soldiers, including using IS *nasheeds* and "talking points" – such as promising to conquer Rome – aimed at keeping IS-inspired youths in AQIM's orbit. At the same time, however, AQIM's overall leadership has employed more sophisticated theological arguments to counter IS and cater to more "intellectual" (likely experienced) jihadists. It has, for example, con-

demned IS for its killing of Muslims in Libya and elsewhere ([Libyaschannel](#), July 9, 2015).

There are other non-violent measures AQIM can take to manage interest in al-Sahrawi's faction and IS in the Sahel more generally:

- AQIM, like other al-Qaeda affiliates, may develop "rehabilitation" programs for IS fighters who are disaffected by the group's mass killings and the loss of the Caliphate, and who seek to rejoin al-Qaeda and accept its more methodological approach to Caliphate-building.

- AQIM may use double agents to infiltrate al-Sahrawi's faction and sow discord within it to cause defections – something AQIM may already be doing to West Africa Province in coordination with al-Qaeda's "reviving" Ansaru as an alternative to both West Africa Province and Shekau's faction in Nigeria (al-Risalah Issue 4, January 11). Indeed, on January 1, 2017, a high profile and credible al-Qaeda media official announced on Twitter that members of al-Sahrawi's faction "split from Daesh [IS]" (and presumably joined with AQIM), although no evidence was provided to validate the claim (@Nouridine_1991, January 1).

- AQIM could expend more of its resources to consolidate its hold on the insurgency in Mali, including staging recent attacks on Timbuktu and Gao airports, especially via Ansar Dine and MLF, both of which have escalated attacks in central Mali in recent months. Mali is a geographic lynchpin of West Africa; as long as AQIM controls that space for insurgency, it will make it difficult for IS to send reinforcements from Libya to either Burkina Faso or further south to al-Barnawi in the Lake Chad region.

AQIM may be more likely to seek these "non-violent" alternative avenues to deal with al-Sahrawi, now that he is a competitor, rather than engaging him directly in battle because of AQIM's longstanding "organizational psychology." Having experienced the IS-like ultra-*takfiri* Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, veteran AQIM leaders will well remember the infighting, death and destruction that defined its confrontations with the GIA and the Algerian government during that era.

Al-Qaeda vs Islamic State

The relative slowness with which IS recognized al-Sahrawi's pledge shows the group is becoming more deliberate about acknowledging new factions. It has abandoned the earlier model of expeditiously declaring new "provinces" as the subsequent inability of those provinces to grow harms the reputation of IS. Although IS has been promoting its fighters in the Philippines in recent months, it has as yet avoided declaring a "province" in the region, for example.

Notably, neither al-Sahrawi — nor al-Barnawi in the case of West Africa Province — continued their momentum after IS recognized them. Al-Sahrawi is yet to claim another significant attack in the Burkina Faso-Niger-Mali axis since October 2016, and West Africa Province has slowed down the pace of attacks in Niger (and Nigeria) since mid-2016.

It could be that the al-Sahrawi and al-Barnawi carried out their string of attacks to impress IS enough to receive recognition simply in order to improve their own localized recruitment and legitimacy. On the other hand, it is possible that both al-Sahrawi and al-Barnawi exhausted their resources in these attacks before receiving recognition from IS and have since been replenishing or awaiting further funds or IS reinforcements before launching new campaigns.

If al-Sahrawi and al-Barnawi do not continue to carry out attacks for IS, they could end up further diminishing IS' Africa brand, especially following the underperformance of IS' Algeria Province and its Libyan Province's loss of Sirte, which was its African "capital."

Despite IS' recognition for al-Sahrawi, and its promotion of al-Barnawi to lead West Africa Province, AQIM remains a greater threat to West Africa than IS. AQIM has carried out the higher profile attacks and has the deepest-rooted insurgency in the region in Mali (Shekau's faction of Boko Haram is also deep-rooted in Nigeria but left IS in August 2016). AQIM also continues to maintain its cadre of core leaders in the Sahel and North Africa and is making significant efforts to respond to interest in IS from among its foot soldiers.

AQIM can also count on the support of the global al-Qaeda affiliates, which have stayed loyal to al-Qaeda

throughout the rise (and now decline) of the IS Caliphate project. But, perhaps most importantly, AQIM has a well-developed and multi-layered insurgency structure in West Africa that can withstand the limited expansion of IS in the region. AQIM may even benefit from the insecurity brought to the region by al-Sahrawi, as it further exhausts national security forces and creates a greater market for jihadism in West Africa from which AQIM can pull new recruits.

Jacob Zenn is a Fellow on African and Eurasian at The Jamestown Foundation.

Abdou Cisse is a Senegalese journalist focusing on jihadist movements in West Africa.