

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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KENYA: ON HIGH ALERT AS AL-SHABAAB FRACTIONS CLASH

Alexander Sehmer

Kenyan security forces are on alert following reports of bloody clashes between al-Shabaab factions, which are said to have pushed fleeing militants across the border.

The fighting is thought to have been prompted by the group's execution of two high-ranking commanders who had sworn allegiance to Islamic State (IS). Kenyan security forces are also said to have intercepted an audio message from another al-Shabaab militant criticizing the executions, pledging allegiance to IS and calling on other fighters to do the same ([Daily Nation](#), April 23). Reports say the recording urged recruits to join a new group called "Dini ya Kiislamu Super Power" (DKSP).

Al-Shabaab's leadership takes a hard line on dissent. At the end of 2015, it ordered a ruthless crackdown on the pro-IS faction led by [Abdulkadir Mumin](#), sending fighters to the Bari region in northeastern Somalia to hunt down members of the jihadist's group ([Garowe Online](#), December 24, 2015).

Mumin's faction remains relatively feeble. It reported a fleeting and largely symbolic victory in the coastal town of Qandala in Puntland last year, but poses little threat to al-Shabaab overall ([Garowe Online](#), October 26, 2016). Since DKSP appears to also be led Mumin, the recent executions suggest only that his small band of followers has gained a little more traction, rather than indicating that a new divide is opening up within al-Shabaab.

Nonetheless, al-Shabaab is wary. In April 2016, a group calling itself Jabha East Africa — also thought to be linked to Mumin — criticized its "stubborn" and "confused" al-Shabaab "brothers" for being unwilling to accept the IS caliphate ([Tuko](#), April 8, 2016). Since then, however, Jabha East Africa has had no impact on the region's jihadist landscape, and DKSP will likely go the same way.

While al-Shabaab's intolerance of fighters who lean toward IS is not new, the killings do seem to indicate that there are rising tensions within the group. Recent reports say the group executed at least six Kenyan recruits last month, accusing them of being government spies ([Daily Nation](#), May 1; [Tuko](#), May 2). The Kenyans were

said to be from Lamu county on the northern coast, an area scarred by al-Shabaab violence.

While al-Shabaab turns on its own members, African Union forces in Somalia may hope to take advantage. Kenyan warplanes have scored some successes, with a number of air strikes on al-Shabaab bases in the southern Gedo region ([Garowe Online](#), April 25). Officials in Lamu, meanwhile, have played up the reports of the executions in the hope they will dissuade potential recruits ([Daily Star](#) [Kenya], May 3). But any reprieve from cross-border attacks as a result of the recent inter-factional fighting is likely to be short-lived.

MALI: AL-QAEDA ALLIANCE STEPS UP ATTACKS

Alexander Sehmer

Militants in northern and central Mali have stepped up attacks on Malian and international forces over the last month in what appears to be a concerted campaign by the new al-Qaeda alliance Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM).

An attack on a UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) base in Timbuktu on May 3 killed a Liberian peacekeeper and injured nine other UN soldiers ([RFI](#), May 4). Within hours, JNIM announced it was behind the attack ([Journal du Mali](#), May 4).

In the last few weeks, the group has claimed to have carried out an attack on a Malian military camp at Gourma Rhraous, about 120 kilometers (km) east of Timbuktu, in which four soldiers were killed; a bomb attack in Douentza in Mopti region on April 5, in which a French soldier was killed; and an attack against Malian police in Tene on April 13 ([Mali Actu](#), April 18; [Mali Actu](#), April 26).

The JNIM alliance, which is made up of a range of al-Qaeda-linked groups in northern Mali under the leadership of Ansar Dine chief [Iyad ag Ghali](#), consolidates and extends the influence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) at a time when Islamic State is losing ground (a state of affairs explored by Dario Cristiani in this issue of [Terrorism Monitor](#)).

Ag Ghali made clear the group's intentions in an interview published in April, saying JNIM plans to expand al-Qaeda's operations into a "wider area," and listing 11 "enemy" countries: the United States, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Chad, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Niger ([Alakhbar](#), April 3; [Mali Actu](#), 15 April). The recent attacks suggest that campaign is now under way.

The violence is also further endangering the faltering peace process in Mali's north. According to government reports, five members of the Congress for Justice in Azawad, an armed Tuareg-led group involved in the process, were killed by suspected AQIM fighters in Gargando in central Mali on April 8 ([RFI](#), April 8).

The jihadists stand to benefit from the government's failure to implement a peace agreement with such groups, a state of affairs that JNIM will likely exploit.

In the current climate, the Malian government has once again extended its state of emergency powers for another six months ([Africa News](#), April 30). The move is no surprise, and there are likely more attacks on Malian and international troops to come. Mali has already proved to be one of the most deadly arenas for UN personnel in recent years. The JNIM campaign appears set to try to keep it that way.

Leaving Islamism Aside: The Gambia Under Adama Barrow

Jessica Moody

The inauguration of Adama Barrow as president in the Gambia in January 2017 heralded a new era for the country, ruled previously for 22 years by strongman Yahya Jammeh. Among Barrow's first actions in office was to reverse Jammeh's declaration that the Gambia was an Islamic Republic, a return to the separation of state and religion that the Gambia had maintained at independence from Britain in 1965 ([Africa News](#), January 28). The move restored the five-day working week and made Friday a working day.

Given that Barrow and his party won an absolute majority in parliamentary elections in April, it appears there is little substantial opposition to the decision ([Punch Ng](#), April 7). It may, however, have security implications, riling Salafists inside the country and attracting unwanted attention from Islamist militants abroad at a time when Barrow is attempting to rebuild the security services that were for years closely linked to the country's former leader.

Islam for Political Ends

Throughout his presidency, Jammeh sought to use Islamism to his political advantage, constructing a mosque on the grounds of State House, cultivating ties with a new generation of Gambian Muslims who had studied in Saudi Arabia and politicizing the Gambia's Supreme Islamic Council, which had previously been a moral but strictly non-political authority.

When Jammeh eventually decreed the Gambia — where 95 percent of the population is Muslim — an Islamic Republic in 2015, it was to win favor with donors in the Middle East at a time when the Gambia was struggling to maintain good relations with the West. He had signed legislation in 2014 that saw homosexuals sentenced to life imprisonment and later withdrew from the Commonwealth of Nations (formerly the British Commonwealth), declaring the organization to be a colonial institution ([African Arguments](#), January 28, 2016). In an effort to attract new funding, he turned to the Middle East, where wealthy Gulf States were less concerned by his government's human rights record and anti-Western

rhetoric. Proclaiming his country an Islamic Republic was part of a charm offensive that included offering to host the Organization of Islamic Conference in 2018, which is still scheduled to be held in the Gambia under Barrow.

While the Gambia became an Islamic Republic seemingly overnight, Jammeh also decreed that people would continue to be able to practice their respective religions without any obstruction ([al-Jazeera](#), December 12, 2015). He announced there would be no alterations to dress codes for women as a result of the new status of the country — although he later changed his mind on this aspect, before revoking the dress code once again a week later ([African Arguments](#), January 28, 2016). Meanwhile, the country continued to be a holiday destination for Western tourists who drank alcohol and sunbathed on the beach with little interference.

In practice, Jammeh's declaration had little real bearing on Gambians' lives, although for the country's minority Christians and others there was a real sense of unease. There was a threat that — combined with the absence of employment opportunities and extreme poverty — the move could create an attractive base for Islamist militants. They pointed to Jammeh's apparently ambivalent comments on Islamic State (IS) and made exaggerated claims that the Gambia could find itself hosting training bases for Islamist terrorists ([Freedom Newspaper](#), March 31, 2016).

Weakened Security Environment

Barrow's reversal of Jammeh's declaration indicates that he expects to have better relations with the West and the countries in the Gambia's immediate vicinity, rather than relying on the Gulf States for assistance. The new president has already established significantly better ties with Senegal, which surrounds the Gambia, as well as European nations such as France, and announced his intention to rejoin the Commonwealth ([Africa News](#), February 15).

No immediate fallout has arisen from Barrow's decision to change the status of the Gambia from an Islamic Republic. There have been no reported arrests of Islamic militants, and the country has avoided the Islamist attacks that have struck neighboring countries. Next-door Senegal has reported numerous arrests of militants linked to Boko Haram, Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the

Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but the Gambia has thus far been left untouched ([Jeune Afrique](#), April 12).

Barrow's pledges to open-up his country and increase political liberty and freedom of speech have been met with support by NGOs and Western governments alike. However, while such reforms are laudable, they will take time to implement and there are potential dangers for the Gambia's weakened security environment.

The president plans to upgrade the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), a secret police force accused of serious human rights abuses during Jammeh's tenure, and his plans will see the force become a less repressive, more functional organization ([Africa News](#), January 28). He also plans to reform the military, which played a key role in Jammeh's government but which remains heavily fragmented and of whose loyalty he is not yet certain ([Africa Daily](#), January 19). Barrow's decision in February to replace the head of the security forces, whose fidelity was questionable, will not immediately result in a more effective military. It will take several years to build trust and loyalty in such institutions.

In the meantime, the Gambia lacks a stable, reliable security agency making it more vulnerable to both Islamist terrorism and retaliatory violence from Jammeh loyalists. Barrow appears to have recognized this, requesting a Senegalese military unit be stationed in the country for the foreseeable future to ensure security ([RFI](#), March 16).

Changing Outlook

Simultaneously, the Gambia's decision to leave its "Islamic Republic" moniker behind and turn back toward the West and long-time Western ally Senegal could make the country a potential target for regional Islamic militant groups.

In March 2017, the Gambia announced that it had signed a security agreement with Senegal, aimed at augmenting security in the region as well as preventing trafficking of illegal contraband between the two countries ([RFI](#), March 16). This kind of cooperation has been lacking for some time. The move is a positive sign for regional development, though it could also attract the attention of militants. Previous alliances in the region that have aimed to prevent Islamic militancy have prompted militant threats of retaliation. For example, AQIM claimed the 2016 attack on Cote d'Ivoire was re-

venge for the country's close ties to France, while Senegal has tightened security in response to the same posturing by insurgents ([Africa News](#), March 15, 2016). Meanwhile, the arrest in Dakar in April of three Islamist insurgents with links to Boko Haram and IS underscores the potential threat ([Jeune Afrique](#), April 12).

The Gambia presents an enticing target for Islamic radicals. The country has long attracted vast numbers of Western tourists, with annual tourist numbers regularly higher than 100,000. [1] While the Gambia's security apparatus is weakened, its popular beachfront bars and hotels make an obvious soft target for a militant attack, as was the case in the Grand Bassam attack in Cote d'Ivoire ([l'express](#), March 14, 2016).

Added to this, those angered by Jammeh's removal — including his former security entourage, now marginalized by Barrow — could attempt to assist jihadists for their own ends. A comparable situation could be events in nearby Burkina Faso, where it emerged in local media in March, that the former presidential guard, the Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP), were cooperating with Ansar ul-Islam in the country's north ([NordSud Journal](#), March 14, 2017).

In Burkina Faso, the RSP launched a failed coup against the transitional government in September 2015. The unit had been the crutch of former ruler Blaise Compaore, who, like Jammeh, was forced from power after more than 20 years in power. Jammeh currently resides in Equatorial Guinea, which is not a signatory to the International Criminal Court, and where he may continue to have the ability to orchestrate violence in the Gambia.

Barrow's attempts to start a new era of governance, wherein repression is replaced with political and economic freedom, is admirable but cannot be achieved overnight. In the meantime, the restructuring that must take place within the security services will leave the country potentially vulnerable to Islamist violence and retaliatory attacks from Jammeh loyalists. The country's move away from its "Islamic" title and efforts to foment closer ties with the West and neighboring countries will exacerbate this vulnerability. These moves have undoubtedly already attracted the attention of Islamist radicals, who are likely to see the Gambia as an increasingly relevant target in West Africa.

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NOTES

[1] Figures from [Access Gambia](#)

What to Expect in Iraq After the Liberation of Mosul

C. Alexander Ohlers

Within a period of four years, Islamic State (IS) has risen from near defeat in 2010 to become one of the most successful modern insurgencies. At its height in 2014, it controlled 40 percent of Iraq. Three years later, soon to be eradicated from its last Iraqi territory in Mosul, the threat is far from over. Local insurgent groups, which fell into decline under IS, could resurface in the post-IS vacuum, al-Qaeda could rebuild itself in Iraq and IS itself will likely return to its roots as a non-territorial guerrilla insurgency.

Iraq's Insurgent Groups

The Iraqi militant landscape is composed of a complex network of movements that may reemerge after IS' eradication from Mosul. The origins of these groups sometimes pre-date the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), for example, was founded in the 1980s by the Muslim Brotherhood's Sheik Uthman Abdul Aziz, while Ansar al-Islam (AI) — formed in 2001 by IMK splinter groups — incorporated Sunni Arabs and establish ties to al-Qaeda.

Following the U.S.-led invasion, a number of Sunni militant groups emerged largely for the purpose of opposing the occupation: Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshbandia; the 1920s Revolution Brigades (1920s RB), named after the historic Iraqi revolt against occupying British forces; the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI); the Mujahideen Army (MA); Ansar al-Sunna Sharia (AS Shariah); and Hamas Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Jamaat al-Tawhid waal-Jihad, which would later formally affiliate with al-Qaeda and eventually become IS, also took root. With the departure of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011, these militant Sunni groups did not diminish but instead reoriented their focus to challenge the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and oppose Iranian influence in Iraq.

Many Sunni insurgent groups denounced IS' targeting and exploitation of Iraqis and even fought against the group. Both the Jihad and Reform Front (RJF) — which was formed with MA, IAI, AI and AS Sharia — and the Political Council for the Iraqi Resistance (IRPC) — which was formed with Hamas in Iraq and parts of the Islamic

Army in Iraq, the Mujahideen Army, AS Shariah, the Fatiheen Army and the Islamic Front for the Iraqi Resistance (JAAMI) — were established in opposition to IS ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 3, 2008). Others, such as the 1920s RB and JRTN, denounced IS' targeting of Iraqi civilians but nevertheless cooperated with the group.

IS' unprecedented expansion and territorial gains from 2011 to 2014 generated extensive resources and attracted fighters. As a result, it overshadowed Iraq's other Sunni militant groups, absorbing or defeating competing organizations and forcing others into hiding. As IS' star now wanes, these groups may reconstitute themselves. Some could also offer a less extreme alternative to IS in Sunni areas, taking up the mantle of challenging Iranian influence, Shia militia groups and the perceived political marginalization of Sunnis.

JRTN, for example, was the second largest insurgent group in Iraq at its peak. It provided organization, funds and intelligence to other militant groups, including al-Qaeda in Iraq, the 1920s RB and AI, to carry out attacks. It also formed the General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR) with the 1920s RB and other groups ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 26, 2014). Although JRTN condemned IS' targeting of Iraqis, it still provided critical support to IS in its capture of Fallujah and Mosul in 2014. After Mosul, IS and JRTN fell out, and IS eventually forced JRTN into hiding. In late 2016, however, JRTN issued a call to resist IS in Mosul, suggesting it may now be plotting a return to a more prominent position ([Niqash](#), November 1, 2016).

Guerrilla Tactics

Having lost its territorial hold in Iraq, it is likely that IS will return to its roots as a non-territorial guerrilla insurgency. This tactical shift has been seen in numerous recent attacks in Iraq, including a series of nighttime attacks in Tikrit in which 34 people were killed ([al-Jazeera](#), April 5). These offensives are designed in part to divert resources from the battle in Mosul, but also signal a shift toward guerrilla tactics. A top Kurdish counterterrorism and intelligence official also warned that IS will probably move out of cities into deserts and mountains, likely using the Hamrim Mountains as a base of operations ([Iraqi News](#), February 16, 2016). Hundreds of IS fighters have also reportedly relocated from Mosul to the Makhoul Mountains near Baiji ([Niqash](#), March 15). According to

Iraqi MP Zaher Taher, intelligence reports show that over 1,100 IS fighters arrived in Diyala province, a likely location for an IS guerrilla front ([Iraqi News](#), April 11).

Territorial losses incurred by IS have created space for al-Qaeda which, in line with other militant groups in Iraq, may be planning a comeback. Like many Iraqi groups, al-Qaeda disagreed with IS' targeting of Iraqis (favoring "external" enemies, such as the United States, over Iraqis) even when the two groups were affiliated. As such, it may seek alliances with local insurgencies, such as JRTN or other groups that may either emerge or reassert themselves. Although al-Qaeda and IS have been adversaries since their formal split in 2014, it is possible that they may again cooperate in the wake of IS' territorial losses. Iraqi Vice President Ayad Allawi has indicated that these kinds of discussions are already underway between al-Qaeda and IS ([ARA News](#), April 18).

Drivers of Extremism Remain

The rise of IS was due predominantly to drivers that cultivated the political terrain for a Sunni resistance. The dismantling of IS' supposed caliphate in Iraq has done little to remove these roots of insurrection; instead, they may have become more pronounced. Former Prime Minister Maliki, whose divisive government stoked Sunni upheaval, was nominated in April as a candidate to for the presidency of the Iraqi National Alliance, Iraq's largest political party, and could re-ascend to the premiership ([Iraqi News](#), April 14).

Iranian influence in Iraqi politics remains strong, and Shia-dominated Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) militias (*Hashd al-Shaabi*) now exceed over 100,000 fighters, some of which are directed by Iran and responsible for human rights violations against Sunnis. In addition, large parts of Sunni, as well as Kurdish, areas of Iraq have been destroyed and over three million Iraqis have been displaced, creating turmoil that may further kindle extremism.

As IS' territorial dominance in Iraq comes to an end, the future of Sunni militant groups largely depends on the extent to which Iraq's political and security systems integrate Sunnis and other groups, or decentralize control to provinces and regions. If this is not accomplished, the next wave of guerrilla warfare will be determined by the ability of militant Sunni groups to reconstitute and ex-

pand their networks and the capacity of Iraq's security forces to engage in counterinsurgency operations.

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Ten Years of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Evolution and Prospects

Dario Cristiani

In the past few months, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) hit the headlines again as it carried out a massive attack in Gao, northern Mali, killing 77 people and injuring dozens more. Al-Mourabitoun, the group of [Mokhtar Belmokhtar](#) — so far, the “most-killed” terrorist in the world, having been proclaimed dead several times since the ‘90s — claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was punishment for Malians working with France ([Jeune Afrique](#), January 18; see [MLM](#), August 2015).

From a strictly operational perspective, the attack is significant as it signals a return to large-scale terrorist operations in an area where AQIM has historically been well established. Although there has been no return to large-scale attacks in Algeria, the initial core target of AQIM operations, at the same time it signals AQIM’s greater capacity for operations in an area in where it has been progressively dislocated by the French military operations “Serval” and “Barkhane.”

In addition, a few weeks later, AQIM announced a merger of a number of local jihadist groups into a new alliance, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). This partnership includes: the Islamist Tuareg organization Ansar Al-Dine; al-Mourabitoun, the group led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar; AQIM’s Sahara division; and the Katiba Macina Liberation Front of Ansar al-Dine. This new alliance will be led by [Iyad ag Ghali](#), the historical leader of Ansar al-dine. These developments are significant since, as Islamic State (IS) loses ground in Iraq and Syria and its regional offshoots weaken, al-Qaeda’s groups are trying to capitalize on the situation. For AQIM itself, these developments have occurred as the organization marks 10 years since its official creation ([Jeune Afrique](#), March 10; [L’Economiste Maghrébin](#), March 6).

Local Strikes, Global Resonance

These developments alone are significant, but they are even more relevant as the group marks 10 years since it

officially joined al-Qaeda and rebranded itself. Previously it was the Salafist Group for Preachment and Combatant, mostly known as GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat), itself an offshoot of the GIA, the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armé), the most influential terrorist organization that fought in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s.

This shift was not only a change of brand — although the symbolic dimension and the impact of publicly using the name al-Qaeda played a major role in this decision — it was a broadening of the priorities of the former GSPC, which had suffered a number of setbacks and was on a declining path, operationally and in terms of its local popularity.

This trend had already started by the end of the 1990s, and the GSPC itself was an attempt to address it. The GSPC’s founders wanted to distance themselves from the GIA, whose indiscriminate killings had alienated many Algerians who had been sympathetic at the beginning of the Algerian civil war. However, the GSPC did not manage to reverse this trend, and the emergence of Abdelmalek Droukdel as its leader — instead of Hassan Hattab, the leader who had orchestrated the split — engendered a return to the targeting of civilians.

The GSPC’s localized agenda was one of the most significant issues in negotiations between the group and al-Qaeda. It took more than two years of negotiations between Droukdel and al-Qaeda leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri to bring GSPC into AQIM, with al-Qaeda leaders concerned the merger would be incompatible their wider strategic goals. For al-Qaeda, its primary targets were the “far enemies” of the United States, Europe and Israel, rather than the governments of the territories in which its offshoots were operating, the so-called “near enemies.”

Algerian extremists likewise feared external influences, concerned that foreign groups would impose their own agenda over local priorities. Indeed, even after it joined al-Qaeda, the group continued to operate primarily in Algeria, but imported tactics deployed in other theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan. While it employed a rising rhetorical focus on the far enemies, its operational center remained Algeria. Thus the core interest of the organization was somehow safeguarded, despite its internationalization and affiliation with the al-Qaeda franchise. This helps explain the skepticism with which Droukdel,

Belmokhtar and the entire AQIM command-chain have approached the emergence of Islamic State (IS). Although global in its ambition, the IS agenda is very much characterized by the dominance of the organization's interests in the Syrian-Iraqi theatre and a more vertical and less flexible approach — compared to that of al-Qaeda — to local offshoots.

The merger between al-Qaeda central and the Algerian terrorists in 2006 and 2007 and the progressive convergence of interests was very much the result of al-Qaeda's increasing weakness. It was considered a way for the al-Qaeda to gain leverage in an area of strategic importance, at the doors of Europe, while for the GSPC the merger was aimed at strengthening its jihadist appeal, bolstering its legitimacy and reversing the declining that had characterized the organization since the end of the 1990s.

Losing Algeria: The Rise of the Southern Katibas

Despite its ambition to maintain its primary operational focus on Algeria, changing strategic circumstances forced AQIM to shift its geographical core progressively southward. Over the past ten years, this gradual geographic shift of AQIM has represented one of the most significant developments in the organization's evolution. Algerian jihadism has always had a presence in the Sahel/Sahara region, both before and after the Algerian civil war. However, the area was never a center of its activities but more a geographical appendix.

Back in 2003, when AQIM was still the GSPC, the spectacular kidnapping of 32 European tourists represented the first visible sign of the increasing importance of this area for the group. Since then, the focus on the Saharan/Sahelian area has increased exponentially, and after the end of the first period of Qaedist adaptation in 2007/2008, it started to represent the main center of AQIM's operations.

The rising focus of the organization on the Sahara/Sahel was not the product of a particular strategic choice — for instance of targeting local governments for their international alliance or internal ethno-confessional balances — nor was it the result of its al-Qaeda membership. It was the tactical outcome of the changing geostrategic circumstances that characterized the local operational environment, which reduced AQIM's freedom of action in Algeria while presenting a number of

significant jihadist "business opportunities" in these territories. As such, it was more of an utilitarian and pragmatic move dictated by circumstance.

The strengthening of Algeria's counter-terrorism capacity and its speedy adaptation to the AQIM's imported tactics in 2007/2008, as well as rising oil prices that gave additional financial resources to the Algerian state and the loss of public support for jihadists, made Algeria an increasingly challenging environment in which to operate.

In addition, the internal balance within the organization was changing. Belmokhtar's Katiba al-Moulathimin was growing increasingly independent, reflecting the substantial freedom of action that he was enjoying and Belmokhtar's characteristic resentment of tight hierarchical control.

As local militants became better financed, they grew operationally more independent and the chain of command around Droukdel progressively weakened. The emergence of a local Katiba headed by a close ally of Droukdel, [Abou Zeid](#) — a type of "smuggler turned Jihadist" whose original task was to keep Belmokhtar in check — also contributed to shifting the geographic focus of the organization (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 2011).

From the Sahel to West Africa

As the group moved southward, its ranks also swelled as local Sahelian militants joined the organization. However, despite this ethnic diversification, the chain of command remained firmly in the hands of Algerian militants and did not reflect the increasing diversity of the group.

This created a number of tensions, and in addition, the new militants were more focused on spreading jihad in other parts of West Africa. This led to the creation of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) in 2011, a splinter group of AQIM that nevertheless remained in the orbit of the organization.

Later, having been dismissed as head of his katiba following an internal re-organization of AQIM, Belmokhtar also left the group, and with the support of Abderrahmane Ould el-Amar (aka Ahmed al-Tilemsi), one of the key leaders of MOJWA, he created al-Mourabitoun.

The name of this new group was a sort of political manifesto, recalling the dynasty of the Almoravides who ruled in the 11th and 12th century over a unified Sahelian-Maghrebi empire stretching all the way to Andalusia (modern day southern Spain). As such, the ambition was to unify the groups and the peoples of the region, as the Almoravides had done (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), October 17, 2013). Despite the split, Belmokhtar also remained in the orbit of AQIM, and enjoyed a rather fluid relationship with the organization, before re-joining formally in December 2015.

That was also the period in which AQIM became an increasingly hybrid organization, as the diversification of its activities became more significant. Its focus on *minor jihad* — armed attacks against those perceived as infidels — was balanced by the presence of more mundane illicit activities, such as kidnappings, smuggling and so forth.

The local environment was conducive to these opportunities. The Sahara has been historically home to traffickers of all kinds, and the leaders of the southern katibas had a comparative advantage given their in-depth knowledge of the territory. As a consequence, kidnappings flourished as European tourists visiting the Sahara were considered easy targets, while the increasing centrality of Africa in the global narco-trafficking routes provided new opportunities to make money. AQIM's presence in northern Mali favored this dynamic (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), January 28, 2010).

This hybridization, however, should not be seen in rigid terms. These illicit activities were still consistent with AQIM's jihadist ambitions — kidnapping Westerners and eventually killing them or receiving a ransom, or inundating the European markets with drugs, were just other ways to harm the heathen Western countries. In addition, these activities provided greater revenues and strengthened ties with the local population. This was seen as part of a long-term strategy to co-opt local groups. Indeed, these activities all still enabled AQIM to further its core aim of waging jihad.

Exploiting the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring had a number of unintended consequences, and AQIM's increased local presence put the group in a good position to exploit the chaos that struck the region in its wake.

The collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya created the conditions for the spread of Tuareg fighters and weapons in the region (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 14, 2011). Many of these fighters moved to Northern Mali where they encountered the local grievances of Tuaregs there who felt discriminated and marginalized by the government in Bamako. The constellation of local radical jihadist organizations — formed by AQIM, Belmokhtar's katiba, MOJWA and the Malian Ansar al-Dine soon allied with the secular Tuareg of the National Liberation of the Azawad and took control of territory in Northern Mali, with the ambition to create an Islamic state and use it as a platform to move southwards.

Only when these groups were heading toward Bamako did external countries intervene. The French military operation "Serval" disbanded the proto-Salafi state created in Northern Mali and disrupted the networks that the organizations had set up ([MaliActu.Net](#), August 7, 2015).

However, the Libyan chaos also allowed AQIM to deepen its presence in the country, and many fighters started using Libya as a new logistic platform. This also enabled AQIM to finally carry out a new powerful attack in Algeria — the attack in InAmenas, allegedly organized by Belmokhtar. This attack, which targeted international oil companies and their employees, was a return to AQIM's focus on striking locally with a global impact.

The IS Challenge

The InAmenas attack was nevertheless an exception, as the new operational trends of the organization were increasingly focused on West Africa. Indeed, between the end of 2015 and early 2016, the group carried out massive terrorist attacks targeting hotels and holiday resorts in Bamako (Mali), Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast ([Abidjan.net](#), March 14, 2016; [Sidwaya](#) [Ouagadougou], January 16; [Jeune Afrique](#), November 20, 2015). This further Africanization of the operational profile of AQIM and its affiliate is the result of its emerging rivalry with IS.

The emergence of IS in the wider jihadist world was another unintended consequence of the Arab Spring. The group evolved from an off-shoot of the al-Qaeda presence in Syria. Members of this group severed their ties with al-Qaeda Central and created a group characterized by a further radicalization and an even more violent approach to jihad.

IS immediately showed its ambition to build up a Salafi state, intended as a catalyst for the creation of a new caliphate. While for AQIM the ultimate goal (in keeping with al-Qaeda's philosophy) was to eventually revive the caliphate, the group's methodology was different. The al-Qaeda view is that (re-)building a Caliphate is a long-term process.

IS also represented a threat to AQIM in operational terms, including the recruitment of the youth from the region — Tunisians and Moroccans accounted for a very significant part of the foreign fighters ranks of IS — and its presence in a number of strategic regional theatres, such as Libya and Tunisia. It also became a magnet for local, minor leaders who saw a pledge of loyalty to IS as a way to boost their status, something that created a number of problems for Belmokhtar's organization. Finally, IS' aggressive use of the media and a powerful brand fueled a sort of competition, forcing AQIM to adapt some of its media strategies to those of its jihadist rival.

Prospects for the Years to Come

Ten years on, AQIM is a very different organization from what it was in early 2007. Although its leadership remains Algerian, Algeria no longer represents AQIM's main focus.

While this does not mean that the organization will not mount attacks in Algeria, it is no longer the systemic threat that the GIA represented in the 1990s and AQIM itself posed in the first months after its rebranding.

The group is now more of a regional franchise. It is the center of gravity for a number of local groups, and itself part of the wider al-Qaeda global project. Moreover, it represents a regional counterbalance to IS, and the rivalry between the two organizations has been a significant feature of the regional geostrategic environment.

However, as IS declines, it is possible that many IS fighters will move closer to al-Qaeda-linked groups once again. In addition, as IS weakens, AQIM is likely to return to many regional theatres, among them Libya.

In Mali, the establishment of JNIM shows that AQIM intends to capitalize on IS' increasing weakness and bring together in a systemic way those organization that

have gravitated to it over the last few years. While many previously collaborated on a tactical level with AQIM, they did not always follow its directives and priorities. AQIM's operational return to Northern Mali now shows the group intends to reassert itself in those territories where it had an established presence prior to the French-led military operation in 2013.

That said, while AQIM does not appear to have the capacity to establish a salafi-jihadist state in the region, it will continue to represent a significant asymmetrical and hybrid threat, mixing minor jihadist operations with criminal activities to bolster its finances and further its ultimate goals of fighting near enemies such as regional governments and actors such as Libya's [General Haftar](#), and its traditional far enemies in the West.

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