Al-Qaeda's Resurgence
in North Africa?

ANOUAR BOUKHARS

Hivos
people unlimited

FRIDE
A EUROPEAN
THINK TANK FOR GLOBAL ACTION

NORWEGIAN MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

*Anouar Boukhars is visiting fellow at FRIDE and non-resident scholar at the Middle East Programme of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is also an assistant professor of International Relations at McDaniel College in Maryland.

The views in this publication are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of FRIDE and Hivos.

About FRIDE

FRIDE is a European think tank for global action, which provides innovative thinking and rigorous analysis of key debates in international relations. Our mission is to inform policy and practice in order to ensure that the EU plays a more effective role in supporting multilateralism, democratic values, security and sustainable development. *www.fride.org*

About HIVOS

Hivos is an international development organisation based in the Hague, Netherlands. It works with local civil society partners in Latin America, Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and Asia to realise a world in which all citizens have equal access to opportunities and resources for development and can participate actively and equally in decision-making processes that determine their lives, their society, and their future. Within the framework of its Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia (www.hivos.net/Knowledge-Programme2/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia) it co-produces books, special bulletins, working papers and policy papers with think tanks and experts in MENA, Europe and US. These publications deal with dignity revolutions and transition challenges in MENA. *www.hivos.net*

Al-Qaeda's Resurgence
in North Africa?

Anouar Boukhars*

Hivos
people unlimited

FRIDE
A EUROPEAN
THINK TANK FOR GLOBAL ACTION

NORWEGIAN MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

›› **Contents**

›› The January 2013 French intervention in northern Mali has severely degraded the military capabilities of militant organisations, disrupted their organisational capacities and destroyed many of their sanctuaries. But as violent extremists are being subdued in one area, new hot spots of confrontation are emerging. When forced out of one of their safe havens, transnational terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)[1] just disappear into other peripheral zones of tension. The possibilities for expanding the threat boundaries are manifold, as are the opportunities to exploit security vacuums in much of North Africa. Already, optimism about France's military mission in northern Mali is giving way to concerns over AQIM's creeping into Libya where it has dense connections to trafficking networks. AQIM's ambition to diversify its redoubts and bases of operation extends to southern Tunisia, so far a corridor region for arms traffickers and criminal networks connected to the Sahel. Increasingly, however, weapons are being kept for use by local extremist groups, threatening to destabilise countries in the midst of difficult political transitions.[2]

This paper examines how chaotic environments in North Africa are giving new breathing space to a splintered terrorist organisation. Chastened by its many blunders in northern Mali, an off-balance AQIM is trying to shift gear, focusing less on becoming the face of local militancy in North Africa and more on stealthily parasiting local militant organisations without dominating them. Monopolising political and military power in northern Mali drove AQIM to the brink of defeat. The excesses of its operatives on the ground and zealous application of extremist forms of religious law alienated the local populations and gave rise to a tidal wave of popular revulsion against AQIM and its armed allies. Based on its past record, however, AQIM faces a steep learning curve. Undoubtedly, the organisation is capable of thriving in unstable areas and exploiting local extremist organisations. But its internal divisions and inconsistent narrative will continue to complicate its efforts to reinvent itself and gain popular support in North Africa.

›››

1. The group now known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was initially called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), before becoming an affiliate of al-Qaeda in 2006.
2. M. Nichols, 'Libya arms fueling conflicts in Syria, Mali and beyond: U.N. experts', *Reuters*, 9 April 2013, available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/09/us-libya-arms-un-idUSBRE93814Y20130409

An adaptive but troubled organisation

❯❯   After its strategic reversals in northern Mali, AQIM is trying to remain relevant by creeping into unstable areas in North Africa and melding with local militant groups. The organisation is not the only transnational militant group that is attempting to stage a deadly comeback. The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a splinter offshoot of AQIM whose membership is primarily West African, is also attempting to regroup and recruit in Niger, Mauritania and in the Polisario-controlled Sahrawi refugee camps in southwest Algeria. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently warned that the precarious situation of young, disgruntled Sahrawis make them vulnerable to radicalisation.[3] As happened in northern Mali, the prospect of regional terrorist and criminal organisations exploiting secular ethno-nationalist grievances cannot be ruled out.

Belonging to a militant group becomes enticing when membership in the organisation provides the potential to transcend ethnic specificity and entrenched social and tribal hierarchies. The many Malian Peuls and Songhay in Gao who joined MUJAO hailed from lower social status and captive lineages.[4] Some were lured by the prospect of transcending rigid social and clan structures; others, especially the Songhay, were driven by heightened feelings of ethnic nationalism; and almost all were tempted by the increasing monetary rewards of joining well-funded terrorist organisations. The same applies to those who actively sought out the Tuareg radical group Ansar Eddine (The Supporters of Religion). 'By rooting their ideology and aims to Islam and Jihad', writes Roland Marchal, 'the radical Islamist armed groups were credible enough to challenge that social hierarchy'.[5] Their zeal and overreach eventually doomed their project, but the fact that they managed to provide, albeit fleetingly, an alternative to a state of patronised corruption and pure anarchy is testament to the ability of transnational extremist groups to exploit social and political grievances.[6]

The prospect of AQIM and its affiliates manipulating ethnic and social tensions in the hinterlands of North Africa is of great concern to regional governments and Western officials. AQIM is at its strongest when it concentrates on Western targets while stealthily using local militant organisations to advance its international agenda. As it learnt the hard way in northern Mali, to territorialise itself within a given base and monopolise political power was a huge miscalculation. It made the organisation unpopular and its

3. A. Hirsch, 'Mali conflict could spill over into Western Sahara, warns Ban Ki-moon', *The Guardian,* 9 April 2013, available at: http://www.guardian. co.uk/world/2013/apr/09/mali-conflict-spread-western-sahara

4. R. Marchal, 'Mali: visions of war', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 2(2), 1–8, p. 17, 2013.

5. Ibid.

6. See B. Lecocq, G. Mann, B. Whitehouse et. al., 'One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: a multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali', *Review of African Political Economy,* 2013, available at: http://www.centre-cired.fr/IMG/pdf/Lecocq_Mann_Et_ Al_-_One_Hippo_8_Blind_Analysts_Editors_Cut_1_.pdf

warriors vulnerable to French reconnaissance aircrafts and American drones. The Mali fiasco for AQIM and its allies is another reminder that unwieldy transnational terrorist movements are not in the business of ruling or holding territory. Territorial grounding requires deep social connection and political purpose, which AQIM still lacks.

In northern Mali, AQIM managed to build a network structure of family ties, establish economic and military alliances with local groups, and beef up its membership with local recruits. But the organisation's own rigid hierarchical structures and the concentration of Algerians in top level positions made AQIM an Algerian organisation *par excellence*. This Algerian dominance, compounded by the organisation's inability to rein in its operatives, undermined AQIM's credibility as a well-run 'democratic' North African militant organisation and blunted its impact on the local populations.

Following its strategic reversals in Mali, AQIM's return to its de-territorialised nature is thus a logical course of action. By going back to its original form, AQIM hopes to get a new lifeline. Such mutation is not random, but rather characteristic of the organisation's trajectory. Since its forced dislocation from its major hubs in Algeria in the early 2000s, AQIM (then the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat - GSPC) has sought strategic grounding and relevance in the Sahel. Its internal discords, moral schizophrenia and lack of strategic constraint ended up costing it its territorial entrenchment in the vast northern spaces of Mali, prompting yet another process of transformation that takes it back to where it came from – North Africa.[7]

After the French intervention: AQIM at a crossroads

›› This is not the first time that AQIM finds itself uprooted, marginalised and drifting ideologically. After its strategic defeat in Algeria in the early 2000s, the then GSPC was in desperate need of finding a new sanctuary and rebranding itself. Its image was badly battered and its narrative was fragmented, incoherent and widely discredited. The 11 September 2001 attacks and the onset of America's global war on terror suddenly gave a declining Algerian terrorist organisation new purpose and focus.[8] Embracing Bin-Laden's war against the 'crusader alliance' was an opportunistic means to salvage its reputation. At the time, Bin Laden's cachet conferred respectability on militant groups.

›››

7. M. Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, 'AQIM: Maghreb to Mali, and back', *Open Democracy,* 19 April 2013, available at: http://www.opendemocracy. net/mohammad-mahmoud-ould-mohamedou/aqim-maghreb-to-mali-and-back
8. See H. Roberts, 'Call to arms will bring no peace to Sahel', *The Financial Times,* 24 January 2013, available at: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/ s/0/6422e874-661d-11e2-b967-00144feab49a.html#axzz2J8N1wmfg

Acquiring his imprimatur in 2006 boosted the group's acceptability in radical circles. In the midst of this search for a new incarnation, AQIM sought sanctuaries in the Sahelian hinterlands. Morocco, Tunisia and Libya were difficult to penetrate, but the immense territories of the Sahara provided ideal locations to resettle. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, however, Mali's fall into AQIM's hands was not due to the 'syndrome of ungoverned spaces'. If that were true, Mauritania, Niger and other weak states would have suffered the same fate.[9] AQIM did not spread its tentacles in a political, economic and social vacuum in northern Mali. AQIM thrived because of the active collusion of state actors, the toxic relations between centre and periphery, and inter and intra-ethnic competition in the north over drug trafficking proceeds, resources, and rights.

The eruption of civil war in Libya in 2011 was another opportunity for the organisation to seize the moment. Just as the global war on terror gave the organisation new life, the West's military assistance in ending Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship in Libya opened new opportunities for AQIM to arm itself and further exacerbate insecurities in the region. Western governments also contributed to the growth of AQIM and its affiliates through payments of large sums of ransom money.[10]

But AQIM's fortunes ended in January 2013, in part due to its overreach in hijacking the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali. The organisation's amorphous structure, factional competition within its Algerian leadership and the fluidity of its affiliates made it almost impossible for AQIM to rein in the excesses of its 'hothead' emirs in Mali. As predicted by Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Algerian-based emir of AQIM, the zealous application of a radical form of *Shariah* law alienated the local population and mobilised international support for ending AQIM-led rule in northern Mali.[11] In a context of government-sponsored corruption and rigid social hierarchy, people yearned for justice and equal treatment, and *Shariah* held the promise of equality for all under the law.[12] But the hypocrisy of Droukdel's fighters in upholding the rule of law to all but themselves and their extremist excesses and flouting of the standards of proof prescribed by *Shariah* alienated their constituency.[13]

As Droukdel warned in a letter recovered by the *Associated Press* after the French intervention, the abrupt imposition of *Shariah* law in inhospitable environments undermines religious belief, causes a backlash against the mujahedeen, and inevitably leads to the defeat of their experiment.[14] Droukdel wanted his commanders to compromise on ideology and to avoid antagonising regional neighbours. Only by building bridges can AQIM's supporters get out of the fringes of society and withstand resistance to its project. In a note of stark realism, he stated that 'administration of

9. Y. Guichaoua, 'Mali: the fallacy of ungoverned spaces', *University of East Anglia blog,* 12 February 2013, available at: http://www.uea.ac.uk/international-development/dev-blog/home/-/asset_publisher/1l1JoAAhCZsR/blog/id/2506832

10. W. Lacher, 'Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region', The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf

11. R. Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto', *Associated Press,* 14 February 2013, available at: http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf

12. For an excellent explanation of Islamic law and why *Shariah* can be appealing to Muslims, see N. Feldman, 'Why Shariah?', *The New York Times,* 16 March 2008, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/magazine/16Shariah-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

13. Marchal, 'Mali: visions of war', op. cit.

14. Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto', op. cit.

the region and standing up to the international, foreign, and regional challenge is a large duty that exceeds our military and financial and structural capability for the time being. So it is wise then for us not to bear the burden alone in this phase'.[15]

Droukdel did not hide his exasperation over the fact that his instructions went unheeded by local commanders on the ground. In another letter found by the *Associated Press*, Droukdel and the 14 members of AQIM's Shura Council bemoaned the renegade actions of the commander of an AQIM battalion in the Sahel known as 'The Masked Brigade' and the 'Signed-in-Blood Battalion'.[16] Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an Algerian jihadi gangster, is notorious for his insubordination and contempt for management authority, 'a bleeding wound' in his relationship with his AQIM bosses in Algeria.[17] Belmoktar's drift from AQIM culminated in his formal defection from the group in December 2012, a decision that according to the Shura Council threatened 'to fragment the being of the organisation and tear it apart limb by limb'.[18]

It is important to note that insubordination and infighting within al-Qaeda and its affiliates is fairly common. The frustration of AQIM's leadership with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's disobedience recalls that of Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's new leader, with the then head of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Before his killing in an American bombing raid in June 2006, al-Zarqawi relished his rogue status, repeatedly shrugging off calls for restraint and defying pressure by the organisation's core to change his ruthless tactics of gruesome beheadings of hostages and massacring of Shi'a. 'Do not be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughterers', al-Zawahiri warned al-Zarqawi. 'We are in a battle', he added, 'and more than half of this battle is taking place in the media'.[19] Al-Zawahiri feared that al-Zarqawi's brutality was alienating Iraqis and draining any sympathy al-Qaeda enjoyed among the Sunni tribes for its war against US occupation.

Similar frustrations have emerged lately with al-Zarqawi's successor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is proving difficult to control. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi announced a merger of his group with Jabhat Nusra without the approval of Ayman al-Zawahiri or consultation with Abu Mohammad al-Golani, Jabhat Nusra's leader. The latter saw the announcement as a power grab; 'the most dangerous development in the history of global jihad', to use the words of one of his operatives on the ground.[20] Al-Zawahiri admonished al-Baghdadi for his unilateral move and urged him and al-Golani to submit to his mediation and 'stop any verbal or actual attacks against one another'.[21] Infighting between the Iraqi and Syrian branches of al-Qaeda has already

›››

- -

15. Associated Press, *Mali Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook,* available at: http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf
16. See 'Les dessous de la rupture entre AQMI et Mokhtar Belmokhtar', *Le Monde,* 29 May 2013, available at: http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/05/29/les-dessous-de-la-rupture-entre-aqmi-et-mokhtar-belmokhtar_3420473_3212.html
17. R. Callimachi, 'AP exclusive: rise of al-Qaida Sahara terrorist', *Associated Press,* 28 May 2013, available at: http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-exclusive-rise-al-qaida-saharan-terrorist
18. Ibid.
19. L. Mansfield, *His Own Words: a translation of the writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri* (Lulu Pub., 2006), p.271.
20. B. Atassi, 'Qaeda chief annuls Syrian-Iraqi jihad merger', *Al-Jazeera English,* 9 June 2013, available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013699425657882.html
21. B. Mroue, 'Syria And Iraq Al Qaeda Merger Annulment Announced By Ayman Al Zawahri', *Huffington Post,* 10 June 2013, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/10/syria-iraq-al-qaeda-merger-annulment_n_3415138.html

led to several defections and 'a breakdown in operations as members disagreed over who commanded the battlefield'.[22] Al-Zawahari fears that this discord threatens to distract from the challenges of war fighting and holding territorial control.

This is the situation of AQIM today. Its shadowy nature and unwieldiness have made its project in the Sahel unworkable. Some AQIM internal correspondence reveals a deeply frustrated and powerless leadership, unable to control its operatives and execute its designs on the Sahel. Just as in the late 1990s, the hollowed-out terrorist organisation is once again at a crossroads and trying to reverse its decline. Efforts to build relationships with a diverse network of militants in North Africa are underway. AQIM's Algerian leadership hopes that this time its soldiers will mask their true intent, adopt a low profile, and avoid dominating the political and military stage. 'Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a "domestic" movement that has its own causes and concerns', Droukdel told his ill-disciplined fighters in northern Mali. 'There is no call for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, Qaeda or any other sort of project'.[23] In other words, the goal is not to monopolise but to instrumentalise the local extremist groups that have sprung up in the aftermath of the Arab spring. Al-Qaeda members are already present in the leadership of these organisations, especially in Ansar al Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) in Libya and Tunisia.

Eyeing Libya and Tunisia

» AQIM recent attempts to regain influence start in the chaotic hinterlands of Libya. After being expelled from northern Mali, AQIM soldiers sought refuge in the Libyan areas that border Algeria, Chad, and Niger. Libya's south exhibits similar characteristics to the Saharan territories AQIM exploited in Mali. It is an immense desert space that stretches over 2,000 km and lies at the crossroads of major trafficking routes to Algeria, Niger, and Chad. Even under Gaddafi, Libya's south was an uncontrollable hub for smuggling and trafficking. Since the dictator's downfall, the region has been awash with weapons, criminality has shot up and clashes over the control of trafficking routes have become more frequent. Ethnic skirmishes between African and Arab tribes – once kept under control through repression or cooptation – add to the region's growing lawlessness, as evidenced by the increase in robberies, jailbreaks, and deadly bomb attacks.[24] Indeed, since December 2012, the south has been declared a closed military zone by the country's General National Congress and is guarded by 6,000

22. B. Atassi, 'Qaeda chief annuls Syrian-Iraqi jihad merger', op. cit.
23. Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto', op. cit.
24. J. Thorne, 'Libya's greatest security threat: its porous southern border', *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 August 2013, available at: http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0807/Libya-s-greatest-security-threat-its-porous-southern-border. See also R. Worth, 'Jihadists' surge in North Africa reveals grim side of Arab spring', *The New York Times*, 19 January 2013, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/20/world/africa/in-chaos-in-north-africa-a-grim-side-of-arab-spring.html?pagewanted=all

soldiers.[25] However, according to the south's former military governor, Ramadan Al Barasi, policing the desert would require tripling the number of soldiers, as well as significant investments in bolstering the capacity of the security services.[26]

Amidst this volatile environment, AQIM lurks in the shadows. Chastened by their blunders in Mali, the organisation's fighters are operating under the radar. AQIM hopes that this time its operatives will stick to orders. Before their expulsion from Mali, Droukdel admonished his fighters for not broadening their alliances 'to the various sectors and parts of Azawad society – Arab and Tuaregs and Zingiya (blacks)' and for failing to 'end the situation of political and social and intellectual separation between the mujahidin and these sectors, particularly the big tribes, and the main rebel movements with their various ideologies, and the elite of Azawad society, its clerics, its groupings, its individuals, and its noble forces'.[27] He urged them to allow local militants full operational and administrative control of their territories, and to concentrate instead on their 'external activity'.[28] The car bomb attack on the French embassy in Tripoli on 23 April 2013 fits this mode of thinking.[29]

AQIM's natural allies in Libya are local extremists who share the same ideology if not the same goals. They are mostly present in the eastern coastal region of Benghazi, Darnah, and in the heavily forested Jebel Akhdar (the green mountain). These areas served as Islamist bastions of resistance against Gaddafi as well as producers of dedicated jihadi cadres who fought against the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.[30] Dozens of militants from north-eastern Libya also fought with AQIM in northern Mali.[31] The most notorious of these local extremist groups is Ansar al Sharia, a constellation of Islamist militias with contacts with transnational jihadists transiting the area. Ansar al Sharia is suspected of having carried out the terrorist attack that killed US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi in September 2012, as well as the recurrent assaults on diplomatic and humanitarian missions. After the overthrow of Gaddafi, the group tried to position itself among the plethora of self-formed armed militias as a social and religious movement that can restore law and order.

But its zeal and excesses, compounded by the attack on the US consulate, triggered a popular backlash against the group, as evidenced by citizens storming its headquarters after the death of Ambassador Stevens. Libyan radical Islamist groups are now facing the same challenges their fellow extremists confronted in Mali. Despite the weakness of the state and its inability to impose order, violent extremism has few takers even in a deeply conservative society as that of Libya.

›››

25. A. Entours, D. Hinshaw, and D. Gauthier-Villars, 'Militants, chased from Mali, pose new threats', *The Wall Street Journal,* 24 May 2013, available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323336104578503464066163002.html

26. J. Thorne, 'Libya's greatest security threat: its porous southern border', op. cit.

27. Associated Press, *Mali al-Qaida's Sahara playbook,* op. cit., p. 3.

28. Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto', op. cit.

29. See H. Sallon, 'L'attentat de Tripoli, symptôme de l'absence d'Etat en Libye', *Le Monde,* 24 April 2013, available at : http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/libye/article/2013/04/24/l-attentat-de-tripoli-symptome-de-l-absence-d-etat-en-libye_3164978_1496980.html

30. Ibid.

31. W. Lacher, 'The Malian crisis and the challenge of regional security cooperation', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 2(2), 1–5, p. 18, 2013.

Libyan citizens have demonstrated remarkable courage and determination in protesting against the rule of armed factions, including government-aligned Islamist militias like the Supreme Security Committees and Libya Shield. These were deputised by Libya's new rulers to restore order in the cities, pacify tribal tensions in the provinces and manage the country's porous borders in the west and south.[32] 'Increasingly though', writes Carnegie scholar Frederic Wehrey, 'they have become a law unto themselves, pursuing agendas that are regional, tribal, Islamist and sometimes criminal'.[33]

The vigilance of civil society is unfortunately not enough to address the enormous security and political challenges facing Libya. Until the army and police are strengthened, and the parallel security forces are integrated into a national force or transformed into a national guard, insecurity will remain pervasive. Building functioning and inclusive security institutions will remain elusive as long as political reconciliation is stymied and the political drivers of insecurity are unaddressed.[34] Libyans are increasingly frustrated with rising militia violence, high unemployment, paralysing political power disputes over the regions and a stringent political isolation law that bars officials who served under Gaddafi from public service.[35]

AQIM is exploiting this chaotic environment to regroup, recruit and build bridges with like-minded ideological extremists in the east and southwest of the country. Like in Mali, it will also seek opportunistic cooperation with tribal groups and criminal networks. 'If we can achieve this positive thing in even a limited amount, then even if the project fails later, it will be just enough that we will have planted the first, good seed in this fertile soil', Droukdel wrote in his manifesto.[36]

After failing in Mali, Droukdel hopes that AQIM can plant the seeds of another generation of AQIM sympathisers in North Africa. Naturally, Libya is not the only place where the organisation is attempting to recover from its losses. Several of its fighters are believed to have retreated to southern Algeria where they initially came from. Despite being uprooted from the main population centres in Algeria, AQIM retains a marginal presence in the east and south of the country. Indeed, its main leadership never left its redoubts in eastern Algeria. It is not surprising, therefore, that AQIM still has many contacts with cells in the country. In the region of Eastern Kabylie, abductions and attacks on military barracks persist.[37] The Bouira region in central Algeria remains restive, with regular skirmishes between armed militants and Algerian security forces.[38] The strength and experience of Algerian security and military forces, however, precludes a scenario where AQIM regains its sanctuaries in the country.

----

32. J. Dettmer, 'Extremists setting up shop in Libya', *Voice of America,* 7 June 2013, available at: http://www.voanews.com/content/libya-niger-mali/1677341.html

33. F. Wehrey, 'Libya doesn't need more militias', *The New York Times,* 10 June 2013, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/11/opinion/libya-doesnt-need-more-militias.html?_r=0

34. F. Wehrey and P. Cole , 'Building Libya's security sector', *Policy Outlook*, 6 August 2013, available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/06/building-libya-s-security-sector/ghle

35. D. DePetris, 'Libyan degaddafication law's scope raises concern', *Atlantic Sentinel*, 13 May 2013, available at: http://atlanticsentinel.com/2013/05/scope-of-libyan-degaddafication-law-raises-concern/

36. Associated Press, *Mali al-Qaida's Sahara playbook*, op. cit.

37. M. Benyakoub, 'Le terrorisme en Kabylie, jusqu'à quand?', *El Watan*, 11 August 2013.

38. According to the Algerian newspaper *El Watan*, the Bouira region has become in the last few years the new headquarters of AQIM. Since the war in Mali, the number of armed militants active in the region has also increased. See A. Fedjkhi, 'Bouira, nouveau QG d'AQMI?', *El Watan*, 22 July 2013.

Tunisia is also a tantalising target for AQIM. Immediately after the overthrow of the country's long-time dictator, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, in January 2011, AQIM sensed an opportunity to position itself in the new volatile political transition. The sudden weakening of the repressive state apparatus opened up the public space for radical Salafi preaching and recruitment. 'Take advantage of this historical opportunity to spread the manhaj (methodology) of tawhid (monotheism) and jihad', read an AQIM communiqué released in the early weeks of the Tunisian revolution.[39] In other statements, AQIM advised local militant groups to foster cohesiveness among all Islamist groups and avoid unnecessary confrontations with the state. In the recent crackdown by the Tunisian Islamist-led government on radical Salafi groups, AQIM cautioned Islamist militants to show 'patience and wisdom' and avoid falling into the trap of 'provocations'.[40]

To widen their recruitment base, AQIM urges Islamist groups to adopt a light touch in spreading the faith and avoid associating with Takfiri groups, who consider non-practising Muslims as infidels.[41] 'Let them be kind in their dawa (proselytising)', a statement reads, 'since kindness in any matter makes it beautiful and violence in any matter makes it disgraceful'.[42] At the same time, radical militant groups remain alert at the fact that their enemies are waiting for the opportune moment to strike. The military overthrow on 3 July 2013 of the democratically-elected government in Egypt is a strong reminder of the power of the deep state, an assortment of the remnants of the old regime and bureaucratic forces, allied with secular opposition groups who deeply distrust all Islamists.[43] In Tunisia, prominent secular figures have warned that when in power, they will strike hard on the Salafi movement.

Tunisia is different from Egypt. The military is not a major political force and is very unlikely to act as an arbiter of power. But the fear of (secular) allies of the old regime rising again in Tunisia is probably one of the reasons why AQIM has argued against sending young Tunisians to battlefields as far as Syria. While the relation between militant groups and Islamists in government has been tense, the return of hardline secular groups to power would most probably result in violent crackdowns on Salafi groups. This might stymie Salafi outreach and their dawa services even as it opens up new recruiting possibilities.

The assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, the leader of a secular opposition party, on 25 July 2013 led to greater uncertainty in Tunisia's security environment. AQIM and militant groups are trying to prepare for all eventualities. In Tunisia, Ansar al Sharia – whose fugitive leader, a veteran of the Afghan war against the Soviets, is suspected of orchestrating the September 2012 attack on the US embassy in Tunis – is the group

›››

39. 'To our people in Tunisia: the tyrant has fled but the infidel and tyrannical system remains', *al-Andalus Media*, 28 January 2011.
40. A. Yahya al-Shinqiti, 'O people of Tunisia of al-Qayrawan be supporters of Shari'a al-Rahman', *al-Andalus Media*, 18 May 2013.
41. For a brief explanation of Takfirism, see S. Shahzad, 'Takfirism: a messianic ideology', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2007, available at: http://mondediplo.com/2007/07/03takfirism
42. 'To the wise men of the Islamist movement in Tunisia', *al-Andalus Media*, 22 October 2012.
43. M. Strasser, 'The Egyptian opposition's deal with the devil', *Foreign Affairs*, 2 July 2013, available at: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/letters-from/the-egyptian-oppositions-deal-with-the-devil?cid=rss-letters_from_the_egyptian_oppositions_deal-000000; C. Levinson and M. Bradley, 'In Egypt, the "deep state" rises again', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2013, available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324425204578601700051224658.html; K. Abou El Fadl, 'The collapse of legitimacy: how Egypt's secular intelligentsia betrayed the revolution', *ABC*, 11 July 2013, available at: http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/07/11/3800817.htm

closest in ideology to AQIM.[44] Unlike the case of AQIM fighters in Mali, AQIM is content to see Ansar al Sharia assume operational control of dawa activities in Tunisia, while it concentrates on militant activity in and outside of the country. AQIM has so far benefited from the disorganisation and demoralisation of Tunisian security and intelligence services. The military is still struggling to dislodge AQIM-linked operatives holed up since last December in the southwest rugged mountainous border with Algeria.[45] On 29 July, at least eight soldiers were killed in an ambush.[46]

So far, Tunisia's frontier regions in the west and south have been used as transit points for armed militant groups, smugglers and drug traffickers connected to the Sahel, and increasingly to Egypt and the Levant. If these non-state violent actors establish a presence in Tunisia's borders, the danger to the country and its neighbours would be consequential. They can provide safe havens for AQIM and its affiliates to plot attacks on eastern Algeria, as well as offer violent extremists an environment suited for generating profits from smuggling and illicit trafficking. They can also be ideal locations to recruit and train the growing number of disenfranchised and alienated Tunisian youth. The number of Tunisians involved with regional terrorist organisations is already a great concern. The danger of Tunisian violent extremists was highlighted in the terrorist attack perpetrated against the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria, in which one third of the 32 hostage-takers were Tunisians.

Tunisians also constitute one of the largest cohorts of foreign fighters in Syria. Tunisian security forces have been mobilised to prevent a further influx of young Tunisians to Syria. Several networks specialised in facilitating the journey through the Libyan border have recently been dismantled. Tunisian authorities fear that the country could become more than just a transit route as Tunisians fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, a local Syrian extremist group, return home. Terrorism is 'the biggest threat facing Tunisian security in the post-revolution era', said Prime Minister Ali Larayedh.[47]

In this context of security vacuum and fragmented politics, there are many windows of opportunity for AQIM to creep into Tunisia and Libya. The proliferation of militant organisations and the ever-larger availability of weapons complicate the landscape of militancy in the Maghreb and beyond. As a recently released UN report warned, the flows of weapons from Libya 'are fuelling existing conflicts in Africa and the Levant and enriching the arsenals of a range of non-state actors, including terrorist groups'.[48]

---

44. Ansar al Sharia claims to have thousands of followers and has invested heavily in charity activities in poor neighbourhoods. For example, it has volunteer doctors run its makeshift clinics. The group also denies any involvement in the US embassy attack or in the political assassinations that have rocked Tunisia in the last seven months. See, I. Mandraud, 'En Tunisie, la menace djihadiste d'Ansar Al-Charia', *Le Monde*, 9 August 2013, available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=1240743&xtmc=mandraud&xtcr=1.

45. B. Roger, 'Tunisie: sur la trace des djihadistes de mont Chaambi', *Jeune Afrique*, 7 May 2013, available at: http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20130507161818/

46. C. Gall, 'Tunisia faces more anger after an ambush kills soldiers', *The New York Times*, 29 July 2013, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/africa/tunisia-faces-more-anger-after-soldiers-die-in-attack.html

47. J. Oumar, 'Al-Qaeda split could spell turmoil', *Magharebia*, 20 June 2013, available at: http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/06/20/feature-01

48. Nichols, 'Libya arms fueling conflicts in Syria, Mali and beyond: U.N. experts', op.cit.

Marginalising AQIM

›› The prospect of cross-pollinisation between AQIM and local militant groups is a source of great concern to both North African and Western governments.[49] The latter also fear cross-fertilisation between AQIM and terrorist organisations in Africa such as Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.[50] This was expressed in January 2013 by UK Prime Minister David Cameron when he warned after the hostage crisis in Algeria that the West should brace for another decades-long struggle against Islamist militancy in North Africa. 'This is a global threat and it will require a global response'.[51] The Western response will be key to whether AQIM remains a containable threat or develops into a major danger to regional stability and Western interests. AQIM's internal divisions, hollow ideology, and lack of control over its affiliates and field operatives seem to condemn it to a parasitic role. International overreaction to threats, however, could give AQIM a new boost.

The global war on terrorism helped AQIM to come out of irrelevance. Similarly, militarisation of policy risks accelerated the development of a 'common consciousness' among local and regional militant organisations.[52] The temptation to make counter-terrorism policies a fixture of policy towards North Africa does not take into account local dynamics and does little to address the real political, economic and regional causes that drive militancy. A balance must be found between remote controlled killing of suspected terrorists and helping governments in difficult transitions revive their economies and reform their security and judicial sectors.

AQIM can only be marginalised, as Olivier Roy aptly put it, if the 'local forces it takes advantage of could be persuaded that they have no reason to protect it'.[53] The same applies to other transnational terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operating in Yemen, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, based in Iraq and active in Syria, or local extremist groups like Boko Haram in northern Nigeria or Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. In the case of Syria, local and transnational extremist groups cannot be contained as long as Western countries are unwilling to provide moderate rebel forces with arms and training.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and Jabhat al Nusra have lost a lot of popular support due to their religious radicalism. For example, in Raqqa in Syria militant

›››

49. See G. Miller and J. Warrick, 'Although splintered, al-Qaeda finds new life in unstable areas', *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2013, available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-02/world/36698995_1_al-qaeda-qaeda-cia-drone-strikes

50. J. Blitz and R. Khalaf, 'Al-Qaeda: the jihadi hydra', *The Financial Times*, 3 February 2013, available at: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ce19f802-6c5e-11e2-b774-00144feab49a.html#axzz2WCFMLecb

51. J. Blitz, 'Cameron leads warnings on jihadi threat', *The Financial Times*, 20 January 2013, available at: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/546e45d6-6316-11e2-8497-00144feab49a.html

52. A. Brahimi, 'Al-Qaeda in a changing region', Paris: IFRI, September 2012, available at: http://www.ifri.org/downloads/notebrahimifinal.pdf

53. O. Roy, 'Vaine stratégie française au Mali', *Le Monde*, 4 February 2013, available at : http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/02/04/vaine-strategie-francaise-au-mali_1826781_3232.html

brigades who control the city thanks to superior armed forces and alliances with influential local tribes were recently compelled by popular protests to tone down their zealous preaching and limit their interference in people's daily lives.[54] The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has also recently stepped up its community outreach to 'soften its image' and counter mounting backlash against its radical tactics and attempts to impose harsh Islamic law. During Ramadan, the group, for example, sponsored and featured online several community gatherings, food distribution events, 'ice-cream-eating competitions' and other cash prize contests. This is 'a far cry from the organization's usual fare of video offerings, which includes public executions', wrote Loveday Morris in *The Washington Post*.[55] Whether this change of tactic pays off or not, the reality remains that some of the groups or tribes supporting the rebellion in Syria will continue to cooperate with Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as long as they do not see credible alternatives.[56]

To marginalise extremists groups in Tunisia and Libya urgent efforts must be deployed to help both countries address their uneven regional development and high unemployment rates, as well as reform and democratise their security institutions. The most urgent task in Tunisia is for political actors quickly to smooth over the last remaining differences over the constitution draft and move towards elections. The country desperately needs its rulers to focus on the economy and on strengthening the rule of law and order. Failure to do so would threaten the democratic transition in Tunisia. Popular patience for political squabbling, economic incompetence and insecurity is wearing thin. The key therefore is to fulfil people's economic needs and reassure sceptical secularists that their interests and values will be protected in the new Tunisia. Equally important, stigmatising all Islamists and Salafists and resurrecting the security state as some hardline secularists are calling for is a recipe for more violence and unrest.[57]

The worst case scenario would be to see Tunisians' anger and frustration transformed into support or acquiescence to the necessity of overthrowing the democratic order to save the Tunisian state. The interruption of the democratic process would be a huge boon for violent extremist groups. After the military coup in Egypt, the 62-year old, Egyptian-born leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, rejoiced in militant websites that 'democracy failed'.[58] Al-Zawahiri has warned for decades that the 'crusaders' and their secular allies in the Middle East will never allow Islamists to attain political power. The Algerian experience when the military aborted the electoral process in 1992 taught him not to trust democratic elections.[59] For al-Zawahiri, the only path to power is through violent confrontation with secular dictatorships and their Western enablers.

54. T. Pierret, 'L'influence des salafistes risque de diminuer en Syrie', *Le Monde*, 11 July 2013.

55. L. Morris, 'Al-Qaeda tries to soften image with ice cream', *The Washington Post*, 25 July 2013, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-tries-to-soften-image-with-ice-cream/2013/07/25/250dec6e-f54d-11e2-81fa-8e83b3864c36_story.html

56. See T. al-Abed, 'Raqqa: search for civil rule', *Assafir*, 2 July 2013.

57. International Crisis Group, 'Tunisia: violence and the Salafi challenge', *Middle East/North Africa Report* 137, 13 February 2013, pp. ii-iii.

58. See, P. Bergen, 'Al Qaeda leader's "I told you so" on Egypt', *CNN*, 15 August 2013, available at: http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/15/opinion/bergen-zawahiri-egypt

59. Ibid

In Libya, the problem of militias cannot be resolved without addressing the trust deficit in state institutions and resolving the persistent mistrust and hostility between Libyan revolutionaries and those who were coopted or obliged to work within the parameters set by Gaddafi. The EU and the US should engage more in these processes. Libyan authorities desperately need assistance in building their army and integrating parallel security forces. The recent initiative by the European Union on 22 May to launch an EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya is a good starting point. [60] The mission, which has an annual budget of €30 million, falls under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and is tasked with helping Libya improve its border monitoring capacity. The EU should also coordinate with the US its assistance efforts in the post-conflict reconstruction of the country.[61] Given the regional dimension of the Libyan crisis, coordination is also necessary between EUBAM Libya and the CDSP Sahel missions, mainly EUCAP SAHEL Niger and EUTM Mali. If left unaddressed, Libya's insecurities threaten to further fuel conflicts beyond its borders.

So far, most local militant groups in Libya and Tunisia have had tenuous relations with AQIM and their goals have been shaped and driven by local concerns. Their calculations are, however, likely to shift depending on how successful they are in pursuing their objectives. Western countries therefore need a 'more tailored and locally driven approach' to deal with these evolving threats and changing political conditions, writes *Financial Times* columnist Roula Khalaf.[62]

In addition, the international community should try to mitigate external pressures on beleaguered governments in transition by promoting regional cooperation in intelligence sharing and monitoring of financial flows from drug trafficking. The transnational nature of the threat makes it impossible for any country to tackle it by itself. The recent terrorist blasts in Tripoli and northern Niger, as well as the attack on the gas field in Algeria, which was executed by a multinational group of militants, attest to the threat of trans-border militancy. Unfortunately, international efforts to encourage regional cooperation have been hindered by a lack of coordination between border states, the opacity of the Algerian regime and the persistent suspicion and mistrust between Morocco and Algeria over the Western Sahara dispute.

The January 2012 agreement between the prime ministers of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia to form joined teams better to coordinate security along their porous borders and stem the flow of drugs, arms, and fuel has not yet lived up to its potential. However, in the last few weeks, Algeria has started coordinating with Tunisian forces to confront the mounting threats in Jebel Chaambi near their shared border, and sharing security information collected from aerial reconnaissance. Both countries have also agreed to establish a military-security liaison and a joint committee to exchange intelligence information. The EU and the US must encourage and support these endeavours.

›››

60. 'EUBAM Libya: story of a long-awaited CSDP mission', *International Security Information Service*, May 2013, available at: http://isis-europe.eu/sites/default/files/publications-downloads/esr66_EUBAMLibya_May2013MHLA_1.pdf

61. See 'EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya', Fact Sheet, available at: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/csdp/missions_operations/eubam-libya/eubam_factsheet_en.pdf

62. R. Khalaf, 'Algeria shows we need a new approach to terrorism', *The Financial Times*, 18 January 2013, available at: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/496c9e92-6165-11e2-957e-00144feab49a.html#axzz2a6bSRu6l

Conclusion

>> Chaotic spaces in Libya and the difficult political transition in Tunisia give AQIM new breathing life to arrest its strategic decline and stage a comeback. The documents found at a compound in Timbuktu show a frustrated organisation that is fully aware of its past mistakes and limitations. They also show, however, a group that is determined to change its tactics, compromise on ideology and broaden its alliances with local militant groups. 'The current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and has not yet stood on its two legs', wrote Droukdel in the context of Mali. 'If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it and support it until its stands'.

Despite its strategic overreach and reversal in Mali, AQIM is planning for the long haul. But reviving its fortunes is still a tall order for an organisation that is not only internally-divided but is also incapable of bringing meaning to its project for the region. AQIM stands at a crossroads and so does the policy approach to countering it. Future choices, whether by local or international actors, will play a critical role in further narrowing or expanding the attractiveness and room for manoeuvre of AQIM in North Africa. In particular, if the democratic transition in Tunisia is aborted and counter-terrorism policies become militarised across the region, AQIM's project and narrative might gain renewed traction. Conversely, if the consolidation of democratic institutions and the improvement of living standards continue, not least thanks to the targeted support of external partners, AQIM will likely remain a manageable threat to fledgling governments in transition, striking at Western targets when it can and trying to exploit local conflicts to its advantage.

Recent FRIDE Working Papers

Recent HIVOS/University of Amsterdam Working Papers

21 Syrian Civil Society Scene Prior to Syrian Revolution, Wael Sawah, October 2012

20 So Many Similarities: Linking Domestic Dissent to Foreign Threat in Iran, Maaike Warnaar, March 2011

19 The First Lady Phenomenon in Jordan, Felia Boerwinkel, March 2011

18 The Political Implications of a Common Approach to Human Rights, **Salam Kawakibi,** December 2010

17 Authoritarianism and the Judiciary in Syria, Reinoud Leenders, December 2010

16 Civil Society in Iran: Transition to which Direction?, Sohrab Razzaghi, November 2010

15 Re-rethinking Prospects for Democratization: A New Toolbox, Stephan de Vries, November 2010

14 Dissecting Global Civil Society: Values, Actors, Organisational Forms, Marlies Glasius, November 2010

13 Non-Democratic Rule and Regime Stability: Taking a Holistic Approach, Stephan de Vries, November 2010

12 The Uncertain Future of Democracy Promotion, Steven Heydemann, November 2010

11 The Private Media in Syria, Salam Kawabiki, July 2010

10 Internet or Enter-Not: The Syrian Experience, Salam Kawakibi, July 2010

9 East European and South American Conceptions of Civil Society, Marlies Glasius, June 2010

8 Package Politics, Aurora Sottimano, June 2010

7 Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan, Curtis R. Ryan, June 2010

6 State-Business Relations in Morocco, **Farid Boussaid,** June 2010

5 Democratization through the Media, Francesco Cavatorta, April 2010

4 The Downfall of Simplicity, Stephan de Vries, November 2009

3 Civil Society and Democratization in Contemporary Yemen, Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirier, November 2009

2 Civil Society Activism in Morocco: 'Much Ado About Nothing'?, Francesco Cavatorta, November 2009

1 Moth or Flame: The Sunni Sphere and Regime Durability in Syria, Teije Hidde Donker, November 2009