IISA

INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

IDENTIFYING AND ANALYSING STRATEGIC ISSUES OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

SAHEL & LIBYA

ROUND-TABLE REPORT

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IISA WEST & HORN OF AFRICA PROGRAMME

IISA's West and Horn of Africa Programme held a specialist round-table event on the 25th February 2016 to analyse the security situation in Libya and the Sahel. Due to the nature of the event and attendees, Chatham House rules were applied to the meeting. As such, this report will provide a summary of the discussion and will not disclose the identities of individual speakers.

The Situation in Libya

The meeting opened with a discussion on Libya, before expanding into a more holistic analysis of possible impacts on regional security in the Maghreb.

Libya has experienced a power vacuum since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011; bifurcating between competing militia blocs, inducing centrifugal pressures on external actors and providing space for Jihadist infiltration. The civil war continues to imprint a transnational legacy, increasing the access and circulation of armaments and thereby accelerating the lateral expansion of pre-existing Islamist insurgencies. This initially manifested in the secession of a self-declared Independent State of Azaward from Northern Mali, after its capture by an amalgam of Jihadi and nationalist Tuareg forces. While a French military intervention in 2013 quickly restored Malian sovereignty, the underlying dynamics fuelling regional instability have persisted and in many respects metastasised.

Events in Syria and Iraq undoubtedly shifted international attention after the fall of Gaddafi but, with contemporary discourses now largely revolving around new Islamic State colonies in Sirte, the focus is once again moving south. Aerial strikes across Libya's peripheries are increasing and strategic dialogue is now being framed by the possibility of a more concerted military intervention by Western powers. Special forces have already been operating in Libya, under relatively ambiguous auspices. Since 2014, US and Algerian units are coordinating with local authorities. France, Egypt, and Russia supply General Haftar's militias with training, and both Egypt and the UAE have engaged IS positions directly.

Whereas intervention in Syria remained a contentious domestic issue for many European powers, the saliency of the Maghreb as a political theatre is widely agreed upon. To this end reports indicate a strategic re-orientation of international priorities, with key NATO members including France, Canada and Italy, re-deploying military assets, from the Levant to the Mediterranean, in anticipation of further escalation. It therefore appears there is little appetite for continuing to invest in local solutions before an international mobilisation. The panel unanimously described the Unity Government as an irrelevant façade imposed by external actors: a superficial construct that simply fails to correlate with the strategic landscape as it stands today.

This has been accentuated by resurgent refugee flows pressuring Europe's southern frontier, a trend steadily commercialised and systematised by predatory human traffickers. The situation in the Maghreb has therefore been amplified on two key levels: European constituencies are demanding stringent border controls and greater pre-emptive action along the Mediterranean to alleviate further migration, and Western security concerns have changed, re-centering on North Africa to protect vulnerable allies in the region.

To this end the discussion highlighted a need to transcend the ubiquitous IS-centric prism currently defining global security. Disaggregating Jihadism's diverse typography identifies the residual strength of Ansar al-Sharia (AS) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as more immediate threats to Western and regional interests. Reports describing fighting between IS and the Libyan Army under General Khilfa Haftar are in many cases actually skirmishes between the military and local Islamists, with IS's presence remaining embryonic and territorially constrained by a matrix of tribal militias and local strongmen. While Sirte and its satellite towns are undoubtedly conduits for the transnational flow of Jihadi fighters, and continue to attract increasing recruitment from West Africa in particular, panellists outlined the folly of direct military intervention by Western powers.

Primarily, without reconciliation or at the very least cooperation between Tobruk and Tripoli, there are no local partners with the capacity to sustain legitimate peace building processes. In a context of dilapidated economic infrastructure and

cannibalised state institutions, direct military engagement would both fail to deliver a stable, self-sufficient polity and exacerbate human insecurities and grass-root radicalisation. Moreover, non-intervention could provide space for escalating intra-Jihadi conflict. Terror attacks in West Africa, including the recent assault on Grand Bassam in the Ivory Coast, have all derived from Al Qaeda subsidiaries targeting 'soft tourist' hotspots. This is associated with AQIM's desire to reinforce its relevance following the precipitous rise of IS in North Africa and the proliferation of its regional franchises in Nigeria, Algeria and the Sinai. Beyond ideological tensions, these attacks also allude to a zero-sum economic competition between AQIM's affiliates and IS over access to a myriad of smuggling networks, rent-seeking opportunities and local criminal enterprises. Based on emerging trajectories it is likely these groups are liable to becoming enticed in internecine conflict, an organic process that may be interrupted should external actors intervene as they did in Syria. Similarly, there is a fear any Western military escalation could precipitate a Domino effect across the region. These are inherently itinerant insurgencies capable of rapidly crossing Libya's porous borders should their current positions become untenable. Niger, Chad and Tunisia have already recognised these dangers and expressed concern over the prospect of further international intervention.

Other regional stakeholders have also been vocal against expanding the conflict. Despite the increasing flow of weapons into the Sinai insurgency, Egypt is reticent about increasing their own unilateral involvement in Libya, citing the potential for spillover and domestic radicalisation. Without any substantive progress in strengthening the Unity Government, the Sisi regime has little confidence in even its nominal allies and continues to be wary in supplying military hardware to any Libyan actors, including General Haftar, and consistently use IS's capture of heavy weapons/equipment in Iraq as an example of the possible consequences. This has been compounded by internal problems; the national economy needs a $52 billion stimulus injection to remain solvent, government popularity is plummeting and its Saudi patrons have re-shifted their attention towards Yemen. The Muslim Brotherhood's state-sponsored sanctuary in the Gulf has similarly strained relations with Riyadh and accelerated Cairo's reapproachment with Russia, a diplomatic gesture undermining King Salman's aspirations for a pro-active pan-Sunni coalition to

constrain Iranian interests. In such a context there is little appetite to escalate Egypt's involvement in Libya

How Instability in the Maghreb Impacts the Sahel

Beyond the 2013 invasion of Northern Mali, there have been a series of recent terror attacks across the Sahel, including the Radisson Blu massacre in Bamako and the 2016 Ouagadougou siege. Islamist militants also used Mali as a platform for penetrating the rural periphery of Burkina Faso, deliberately targeting local authority figures, community services and kidnapping foreign aid workers. While the army was able to quickly restore order and deny any sustained territorial acquisition, grass-root radicalisation remains a persistent problem, specifically amongst the youth. The discussion outlined the saliency of long-term demographic trends, structural deficiencies in regional economies and endemic unemployment as key variables inciting extremism. These are, to a degree, symptomatic of fragile post-colonial polities and broader globalisation processes, but they have been exacerbated by this new security context and remain vulnerable to exploitation by political entrepreneurs. Offering high wages, identity and power to disenfranchised minorities has accelerated mobilisation across the Sahel and, increasingly, sub Saharan Africa, with AQIM affiliates replicating the successful recruitment strategies conducted by al Shabaab and Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP).

The drugs trade was also referenced as a key issue fuelling both extremism and regional instability. In a number of countries, including Mauritania, Mali and Burkina Faso, state control is largely confined to urban areas. Beyond these nuclei, authority remains transient and are regularly co-opted by a constellation of nomadic militias and local nodes that manage flourishing circuitries of narcotics, drugs and lootable resources. Jihadism operates relatively synonymously within this broader context, with radical groups either cannibalising autonomous smuggling networks operating under their de facto jurisdiction, or establishing direct monopolies over key transit routes. As such, the Sahel has provided space for a cohesive crime-terror nexus to emerge,

integrating marginalised local communities to sustain its longevity and supplying consistent revenue streams for Islamist insurgencies further north. The problem has only metastisised with the conflict in Libya, allowing more groups to violently consolidate control over particular criminal activities and spillover into surrounding areas. To this end, the panel argued punitive international legal regimes need to be revised; regional security forces don't have the capabilities to sufficiently regulate their borders and stop the drug flow, indeed many of these agencies have been corrupted themselves. Instead, the participants proscribed the adoption of new de-criminalisation or legalisation measures to inject greater transparency, regulation and accountability into this 'shadow' industry. It also asserted a new holistic approach to development is necessary, establishing durable oversight for the drugs trade while simultaneously engaging with economically deprived communities to generate new commercial opportunities.

As such, despite limited information and inherent methodological difficulties collecting data, it would appear this trajectory is set to continue, with jihadist ideologies disseminating through the Sahel and across Central Africa. The discussion referred to increasing extremist recruitment drives in Togo, Senegal, Ghana and even Rwanda, highlighting the need for comprehensive transnational action.

Competition between Al Qaeda and Islamic State

The meeting moved on to analysing the relationship between AQIM and IS's African surrogates, possible intra-Jihadi conflict and its implications for the region.

Al Mourabitoun (The Sentinels) is a Jihadist group founded by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, amalgamated from a 2013 merger between two regional militant groups: al-Mulathamun (The Masked Men Battalion AMB) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). These organisations were both splinters of AQIM, adhering to a consistent trend of internecine leadership struggles defining Jihad's recent manifestations in Africa. MUJAO's Mauritanian leadership pursued a purely West

African Jihad, transcending AQIM's Algerian-centrism and integrating a spliced nationalist-Islamist ideology. Similarly, Belmokhtar's AMB circumvented AQIM's convoluted bureaucracy to engage with Al Qaeda General Command directly, splitting from the regional franchise rather than the parent body. However, despite claiming responsibility for both the attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali, it now appears AM has reconciled with AQIM and they are operating as a singular entity, raising the possibility of sustained cooperation across a constellation of disparate militant groups.

The panel also concluded that while violent competition between IS and Al Qaeda is likely to increase, the recent terror attacks in Bamako and Ouagadougou were independent initiatives to preserve AQIM's regional hegemony across the Sahel in strategic and discursive terms. In reality, IS only has an embryonic presence beyond Libya, with cells surfacing in Tunisia and autonomous nodes operating in Algeria. While its associates have launched sporadic attacks on Algerian military positions and targeted foreign tourists, including the execution of Herve Gourdel in 2014, it may be superficial to delineate these groups as genuinely distinct actors. The Soldiers of the Caliphate, al Ansar Battalion, al Huda Battalion in Maghreb of Islam etc., are all splinters of AQIM, appropriating the IS franchise as a legitimising rubric for pursuing their own interests. The discussion referenced egotism, as a central driver informing local inter-group conflict and these nominal IS subsidiaries have maintained the same tactical modus operandi as Al Qaeda. Brand fluidity has not impacted the security situation in any meaningful way: the hit and run orthopraxy associated with Algerian Jihadism has persisted in its current form.

One major discrepancy between IS and Al Qaeda is in their grass-root relations. AQIM, al Mourabitoun and MUJAO all have historical linkages in the region, with fighters embedding in the Sahel's societal fabric by marrying into nomadic Tuareg and Berabiche communities and providing security and economic opportunities. In contrast, while IS has experience assimilating into Sunni tribes in Iraq and Syria, and has recruited a number of local clients in the Maghreb, the group nevertheless remains an exogenous force that relies on a transnational amalgamation of foreign fighters. It will therefore have a greater difficulty expanding through Libya's southern periphery compared to AQIM's itinerant nodes. There is no indication of a cohesive IS presence

in Mali as of yet. This also raises questions over the level of communication and coordination between West Africa Province (Boko Haram), IS affiliates in North Africa and the parent group in Raqqa, suggesting further analysis of is necessary.

Conclusions and Pathways for Conflict Resolution

The discussion moved to summarising the implications for conflict resolution. Primarily, it highlighted the need for developmental NGOs deployed in volatile areas to prepare for increasing instability, and underlined the need for a more cohesive integration of security and political risk analysis in their local strategies. Transnational inter-connections between Jihadist groups, from Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria to IS in Libya, are reshaping the militant landscape across West Africa, creating transient circuitries of men and material capable of permeating fragile states and exploiting vulnerable communities. In this context, the prospects of either Islamist competition or growing cooperation will both invariably generate greater humanitarian calamities and accentuating pre-existing refugee pressures.

This has been accentuated by the West's adoption of a securitised framework prioiritising 'counter-terrorist' contingencies over humanitarian norms, economic development and social reconciliation. As illustrated by the tragedies inflicted on MSF in both Syria and Afghanistan, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are being consistently degraded and are forced to operate in a much more hostile reality. Target consistencies increasingly perceive them as neo-imperialist: they cast these agencies as exogenous vehicles proselytizing neoliberal values and spreading Western hegemony. Similarly, a militarised international community is actively undermining their position from the top down by either inadvertently striking hospitals and aid centres, cutting available funding or by scrutinising NGOs that partner with local groups on the ground. Such a trend has undoubtedly derived from the Global War on Terror paradigm, and consistently impedes organisations from assimilating into at-risk societies and delivering effective relief. These mutually reinforcing pressures are drastically diminishing the ability of developmental bodies to positively

impact the areas in critical need, and it appears this is a trajectory that is set to continue.

Panellists also cited the intrinsic weaknesses of contemporary global governance, referencing their historic failures in providing sustainable conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Across a number of theatres, including Mali and Somalia, multilateral missions remain structurally isolated and relied on inefficient hermetic enclaves to coordinate and interact with indigenous communities. While these are certainly based on very real security concerns, it fatally undermines any sense of local ownership, legitimacy and domestic internalisation and leaves a perpetual rift that only consolidates over time. This is complicated further by the 'baggage' associated with international agencies; they are repeatedly framed as a parasitic 'other', surrogates of a predatory US draining national capital and colonising the national population. It is therefore incredibly difficult to actualise durable developmental projects from such a position, even without the myriad of internal communication and management problems associated with the likes of MINUSMA. Without holistic structural reform across all global institutions and a decisive revision of Western approaches to terrorism, there is little prospect of the situation improving.

Therefore, the Sahel, Maghreb and West Africa more broadly, will likely be unstable for decades, experiencing radicalisation, an increasing rate of terror attacks, political degradation and inter-communal violence. NGOs, policy makers and the international community must be prepared to operate in this new strategic reality.

ABOUT THE RESOURCES, MILITANCY AND ORGANISED CRIME IN WEST AND HORN OF AFRICA PROGRAMME

Africa's GDP is the most rapidly growing of any continent but corruption, crime, and militancy are rife. Much of this centres on the continent's wealth of natural resources, including petroleum etc. Foreign investment in Africa has grown exponentially over the last decade and will continue to rise. Consequently, foreign & African governments and criminal/militant groups' interests and sphere of influences will clash with increasing intensity over the coming years. This will have direct implications on energy, regional and global security agendas.

Furthermore, areas such as West and Horn of Africa regions are strategically located which enhances their role in the international trade system through shipping routes and trans-national linkages etc. The creation of AFRICOM reflects the rising global importance of the region, with the export of oil from the continent expected to increase drastically by 2025. Yet, with the region still lacking institutions of effective governance and reliable security structures, the levels of violent insurgency have jeopardised economic development in countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Mali and Nigeria.

Different militant groups finance their operations through employment of traditional criminal enterprises, such as smuggling and drug sales. Resources are also exploited for revenue by both criminal organisation and militant groups. Militant organisations such as Al-Shabab and other Jihadists and nationalist movement operating primarily in Somalia & Sahel have exploited the security vacuum that exists in the regions.

In addition, issues such as piracy continue to effect maritime security whilst increasing costs for counter-piracy measures. The implications of this are severe on three fronts: energy security; regional security; and global security. To address these problems and develop solutions, we must confront all three immediately and holistically, with due appreciation and regard to their interrelated attributes.

ABOUT IISA

The Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs (IISA) is a think-tank and an intellectual forum that addresses the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world in its totality, and its interaction with western civilisation. Based in London, IISA aims to create trans-Islamic and global reach with branches in major capitals across the Islamic and western world.

As a non-profit, independent and academic organization, IISA seeks to establish a platform where the Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issues, problems or crises are analysed according to local models and realities rather than with external standards or perceptions. It aspires to be the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. IISA is the only think-tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations.

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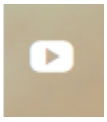

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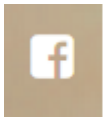

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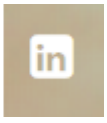

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