



Islamic State's Incursion into North Africa and Sahel: A Threat to al-Qaeda?

Manni Crone

Danish Institute for International Studies, <http://www.diis.dk>

Abstract: The article examines Islamic State's expansion into North Africa and Sahel and the subsequent rivalry between Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – the regional Al Qaeda group. Although IS managed to establish a province in Libya from 2014 through 2016, its presence in North Africa and Sahel (Libya, Sinai, Nigeria) is fragile. AQIM in contrast has a longstanding presence in the region, which appears to be much more consolidated. The rivalry between IS and AQ in this region has incited AQ splinter-groups to unite around AQIM, and in 2016 these groups stepped up their attacks on Western targets.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Islamic State, Sinai Province, Boko Haram, terrorism, Libya, North Africa, Sahel.

Introduction

At the present time, the attention of the world's media is focused sharply on Islamic State's (IS) activities in Iraq and Syria, where IS has come under increasing pressure. A broad coalition of countries is at present attempting to combat IS in Iraq and Syria, and more specifically in the towns of Mosul and Raqqa. However, IS has not only established a presence in these countries. In contrast to al-Qaeda (AQ), which up until now has pursued a strategy of establishing small local "emirates," the IS Caliphate is a political entity aiming at encompassing the entire Muslim world. Since the inception of the Caliphate was proclaimed in the summer of 2014, IS has sought to expand its activities by establishing so-called "provinces" (*wilayat*) in other regions, and "expansion" has itself become a kind of ideological code word. Thus, local IS groups have sprung up in various places in Asia, the Caucasus and certain parts of Africa. However, the interesting aspect of this is not only IS' geographical expansion, it is also in

particular the manner in which this expansion has played out with respect to the various local AQ groups which were already present in the various regions. Has IS' move into these areas led to rivalries, cooperation or a kind of *modus vivendi* between IS and AQ? And is there indeed any significant difference between IS' and AQ's methods and projects, or are they simply two sides of the same coin? In order to shed light on these questions this article places sharp focus on a particular geographical area—North Africa and Sahel (Figure 1)—and sketches a picture of the effect IS' move into this region has had on regional security dynamics, and what implications this development has for the threat to Western targets.

Territorial expansion of IS in North Africa and Sahel

In the summer of 2014, the leader of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, announced the re-establishment of the classical Islamic Caliphate. The Caliphate is a political entity to which all Muslims are in principle subject, and which thus aims to encompass the entirety of the historical Islamic territory stretching from Morocco to Indonesia. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that, shortly after its establishment in Iraq and Syria, the new Caliphate began to expand beyond these regions, and from the very beginning North Africa was at the top of IS' ambitions. As early as in the first editions of the IS magazine *Dabiq*, leading IS spokesmen emphasized not only the mantra "expansion," but also the outstanding qualities of nearby Libya.¹ Not so surprisingly, then, the first official IS province outside of Iraq and Syria was the Libyan city of Derna, which in October 2014 was annexed to the Caliphate under the name "the Derna province." A month after this de facto annexation of Derna, Baghdadi published an official list of all new IS provinces. Besides enclaves in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, three North African provinces appeared on this list: Derna, Sinai and a province of Algeria. In 2015 and 2016 IS propaganda urged prospective foreign fighters to choose Libya over Syria and Iraq if they had ambitions of becoming affiliated to IS. Consistent with the increasing problems it has had with maintaining its territories in Syria and Iraq, IS has long regarded Libya as a potential new front where it could exploit the fragile political situation and establish itself close to the borders of Europe.

Outside of its principal territories in Iraq and Syria, Libya has long been one of IS's most secure strongholds. There are no precise figures indicating the extent of IS' presence in Libya, but in 2015 a UN report estimated that, at one point in time, there were 3-5,000 IS fighters in Libya. In 2016, US intelligence sources estimated this figure to be 6,500, while the French national newspaper *Le Monde* placed the figure at a more conservative 5,000. The bottom line here is that there are no reliable figures to be had. The Caliphate's principal presence in Libya has long been in the so-called "Sirte province" around the coastal town of Sirte, but IS, which in December 2016 was forced to flee the area, has

¹ "From Hijrah to Khilafah," *Dabiq*, no. 1 (July 2014), p. 36.

also established smaller enclaves, for example in Tripoli and Sabratha. A significant IS province has likewise been established on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. However, Sinai aside, IS' presence in the region is generally more sporadic. In 2015 the militant Nigerian group, Boko Haram, affiliated itself with IS and in connection with this accepted the change of name from Nigeria to "the West African province." In addition to this, a large number of small factions from the entire region have sworn allegiance (*baya*) to IS, but such declarations of support often prove to be unstable and are soon retracted if circumstances change.

In some cases, the spread of IS into North Africa/Sahel was panned as a *top-down* strategy whereby the Caliphate has sent individuals to the region in order to establish territorial enclaves. In the majority of cases, however, the strategy has been that local groups have declared their loyalty to Baghdadi and in so doing have spontaneously chosen to affiliate themselves with IS. Concurrent to IS experiencing success on the battlefield, proclaiming the inception of the Caliphate and beginning to disseminate its violent propaganda videos, many militant IS groups in North Africa and Sahel have chosen to affiliate themselves with IS at their own initiative. However, this is mostly a case of complex, dynamic processes, whereby militant groups initially announce their support for IS and thereafter in some cases establish a more formal relationship with high-ranking IS emirs – if not outright official recognition from Baghdadi himself. Consistent with the fact that many foreign fighters from North Africa/Sahel have



Figure 1: Map of North Africa and Sahel.

gone to Syria to fight in support of IS, it has also become customary for some of these fighters to then return to their native countries, having established fresh contacts with leading IS emirs.

What is IS doing in Libya?

From the very start, North Africa has been part of the territory that the IS Caliphate has envisioned as being under its dominion, and Libya in particular has been one of its top priorities. IS has exploited the chaotic political situation in Libya to gain a foothold and subsequently consolidate its territorial presence there. The first step in this process was, as previously mentioned, to seize the northern coastal town of Derna, which IS was nonetheless forced to abandon in the summer of 2015. Despite the fact that the Derna province is now a thing of the past, it is nevertheless of interest to dwell on IS' occupation of the city, insofar as it provides us with an insight into how IS goes about expanding and occupying new areas. As early as 2013, Baghdadi sent representatives to the former jihadist stronghold of Derna in order to explore the possibilities for expansion into the region.²

Shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate in the summer of 2014, a youth militia group in Derna swore allegiance to Baghdadi, and in October the IS leadership sent the Iraqi Abu Nabil al-Anbari to Libya to formalize the annexation of the city to the Caliphate.³ Abu Nabil was an experienced fighter, who under the banner of AQ had been fighting in Iraq since 2004. The establishment of the Derna province was thus a decision taken at the very highest level of IS. However, despite the fact that Libya was given high priority, the local IS group—which was seconded by the Iraqi branch of IS—did not succeed in winning the support of the local population of Derna. In June 2015, a clash with a local group with links to AQ led to IS being driven out of the city.

IS has also experienced various difficulties in the towns of Benghazi and Sabratha. In eastern Benghazi IS encountered military resistance from one of the two Libyan governments—the Tobruk government—in the form of an assault by General Hefar's troops, who were in the process of combatting various Islamist militias in eastern Libya. At the start of 2016, US warplanes bombed an IS refuge in the coastal town of Sabratha in western Libya which amongst others housed a large number of Tunisian foreign fighters. The target of this attack was a Tunisian citizen who had allegedly orchestrated several terrorist attacks in neighboring Tunisia.

Until December 2016 IS' primary presence in Libya is thus in the "Sirte province" – a coastal area surrounding the city of Sirte, which was formerly one of Muammar Gaddafi's strongholds. In Sirte, paradoxically enough, the local AQ-

² Geoff D. Porter, "How realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "fallback?," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 3 (March 2016): 1-5.

³ Ourdan, Rémy, "Derna, premier territoire de l'EI hors des frontières du "califat" en Libye", *Le Monde* (13 November 2014).

affiliated militia, Ansar al Sharia paved the way for IS' occupation of the city. In the course of 2014, Ansar al Sharia established itself in Sirte in typical AQ style by making a *dawa* (proclamation) and doing charitable work. However, in contrast to the situation in Derna, where IS came into conflict with local militias, certain elements in Ansar al Sharia in Sirte elected to affiliate themselves with IS and declare their loyalty to Baghdadi. In the period from February to May 2015, IS succeeded in seizing control of all of the important institutions in the city: radio, television, the immigration center, university, etc. It is by no means insignificant that Sirte was the city of Gaddafi's birth. In Sirte, IS was able to exploit dissatisfaction among the local militias loyal to Gaddafi with political developments in Libya that had undermined their influence and prestige. IS' territorial presence in Sirte has presented IS with a number of advantages. The province provides IS with a strategic depth with respect to Syria and Iraq and the possibility of potentially moving into Libya, if IS were forced into combat in these countries. In addition IS derives an advantage from being present in an area which is not only close to Libyan oil fields but also to the borders of Europe.

Beyond its territorial presence in the Sirte province, IS had a more discrete presence in practically all of the cities along the Libyan coast, primarily in Tripoli and Sabratha. A group calling itself "the Tripoli province" has at regular intervals claimed responsibility for various attacks against one of the Libyan governments. This is not, however, a case of IS having achieved decisive control over a given area. Rather, IS has achieved a more sporadic presence in particular quarters or smaller areas which it utilizes as refuges or training camps. These Libyan IS enclaves have attracted a large number of foreign fighters, primarily from Libya's neighbor Tunisia, but also from other countries in North Africa and Sahel. In 2015, a UN report estimated that around 5,500 Tunisians have affiliated themselves to IS, and that around 1,000-1,500 of them are located in Libya.⁴ It is relatively easy for Tunisians to cross the border into Libya, where they can side with IS groups and receive training. Subsequently, these foreign fighters either proceed to Syria to fight in support of IS' cause there, or they remain in Libya and contribute to consolidating the Sirte province or other IS enclaves in Libya.

In Libya, IS has attracted foreign fighters from across the entirety of North Africa and Sahel, but the Tunisian IS fighters represent a particular threat to the fragile Tunisian democracy. On several occasions, they have returned to Tunisia to carry out terrorist attacks and have more than once succeeded in damaging Tunisia's tourist industry, which is one of the country's most important sources of income. For example, these foreign fighters have carried out attacks against

⁴ Savannah de Tessières, Naji Abou-Khalil, Jan Barend Coetzee, Simon Dilloway, Juan Alberto Pintos Servia, and Steven Spittaels, *Letter dated 4 March 2016 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UNSC S/2016/209, March 9, 2016, accessed June 24, 2016, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/209.

a museum in the Tunisian capital and later against a beach hotel. However, the most significant of these attacks took place in early 2016 when Tunisian IS fighters operating from a base in Libya not only attempted to carry out a terrorist attack, but also tried to capture outright the Tunisian border town of Ben Gardane.⁵ In March, as many as 100 IS fighters from the Libyan town of Sabratha, which a short time previously had been the target of US fighter jets, entered Tunisia and attacked the Tunisian military and police in Ben Gardane. They attempted to capture the town by instigating an insurrection, which ended in the death of around 50 IS fighters and 20 Tunisian soldiers.

IS in Egypt, Nigeria and Sahel

Besides its territorial presence in Libya—and the failed attempt to expand across the Tunisian border—the Caliphate has succeeded in establishing a myriad of small enclaves and provinces in North Africa and Sahel. Despite the ubiquitous use of the term “province,” which suggests a territorial dimension, IS’ activities in these areas seldom amount to territorial gains as was the case in Sirte, but rather more or less established groups attempting to bask in reflected glory by declaring allegiance to Baghdadi, thereby sharing in the popularity enjoyed by IS until quite recently. In November 2014, on the Sinai Peninsula, the Egyptian insurgency group *Ansar Beit al-Maqdis*, which came into being in the wake of the Arab Spring, transformed itself into a “Sinai-province.”⁶ Moreover, in October 2015, this same “Sinai-province” was behind the attack on a Russian passenger aircraft after Russia had begun to bomb IS in Syria. Nonetheless, the group’s primary goal is, as previously stated, to destabilize the Egyptian regime by attacking the Egyptian military and police in Sinai. The group has furthermore on several occasions managed to strike targets deep inside Cairo. The attack on the Russian airplane demonstrates, however, that the group no longer solely has a narrow national agenda, but has also begun to carry out attacks bearing the hallmark of IS, albeit to a limited extent.

However, IS has not only established a presence in North Africa. In March 2015, the Nigerian group Boko Haram also aligned itself with IS and in so doing transformed itself into Islamic State’s “province in West Africa.” This metamorphosis from violent insurgency group to IS province occurred at a point in time when Boko Haram was under significant pressure from the fact that Nigerian government forces in collaboration with troops from neighboring Chad, Cameroon, Niger and France had launched a military offensive against Boko Haram. Shortly afterwards IS’ official spokesman, Adnani, bid Boko Haram welcome into the IS family and announced that Boko Haram’s affiliation clearly showed that the Caliphate had now spread to encompass West Africa. There has long been doubt as to the extent to which there was a concrete link between Boko

⁵ Frédéric Bobin, “La Tunisie au péril de l’État islamique,” *Le Monde* March 3, 2016.

⁶ SITE Intelligence, “Ansar Beit al-Maqdis Pledges Allegiance to the Islamic State,” November 9, 2014.

Haram and central elements of IS. However, in August 2016, IS appointed a new leader of its West African province, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and thereby demonstrated its increasing ambitions to exert an influence over this province. This in turn led the former leader of the province, Shekau, over the months that followed to broadcast a series of videos in which he once again made use of the group's earlier name Boko Haram.

Besides these IS provinces and enclaves, the Caliphate's expansion into North Africa and Sahel has been extremely fragmented. In the Sahel area, militant groups are traditionally dynamic and fluctuant, and there is a long tradition of alliances sporadically being formed and broken off as groups see fit. A number of IS groups have thus come into being as breakaway groups from existing AQ groups. However, such breakaway groups only exist for as long as they have a clear interest in enjoying the prestige that accompanies the IS brand. Thus, there have been instances of individuals in a given AQ group breaking away and declaring allegiance to Baghdadi, only to return once again to their former AQ group shortly thereafter. Likewise, there are examples of individuals from an AQ group declaring loyalty to Baghdadi, while nonetheless remaining members of this same AQ group. Members of the AQ group al-Mourabitoun, led by the infamous Mokhtar Belmokhtar, have sworn allegiance to Baghdadi while remaining part of Mourabitoun for example.

AQ in North Africa and Sahel: a historical overview

IS' move into North Africa and Sahel has undoubtedly led to a degree of rivalry between IS and local AQ groups, albeit not necessarily—as was the case in Derna—to violent confrontation. However, disagreements between IS and AQ do not simply arise sporadically on the ground, but are codified at the highest level by leading ideologues within IS and AQ, including AQ's supreme leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The theological disagreement between IS and AQ is also playing out in North Africa and Sahel where, prior to IS' move into the area, there was a relatively strong and well-consolidated AQ group, AQIM (AQ in Islamic Maghreb). AQIM has been among AQ leader al-Zawahiri's most loyal supporters, tirelessly reiterating its support for AQ's leadership and in common with Zawahiri it has countless times renewed its oath of loyalty to a succession of leaders of the Taliban.

In 2006, AQ established a foothold in North Africa when the militant Algerian insurgency group, GSPC, initiated formalized cooperation with AQ, which simultaneously occasioned a change of name to AQIM. In 2006, GSPC found itself weakened by the Algerian military and, for this reason, it was an opportune moment to join the ranks of AQ and in so doing profit from the prestige the group then enjoyed. Prior to the establishment of this new branch of AQ in Algeria there had been exploratory talks and approaches between GSPC and AQ's branch in Iraq (AQI), which is one of the immediate predecessors of Islamic State. GSPC's leaders harbored a deep admiration for AQI's iconic leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who at that point in time led an extremely violent guerrilla

war against the US-led coalition in Iraq. GSPC sent a great number of Algerian foreign fighters to Iraq to fight alongside AQI, and in the summer of 2005 Zarqawi repaid this support by killing two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad. Following Zarqawi's death in June 2006, AQIM's leader Abdelmalek Droukdel adopted the epithet Abu Musab in honor of Zarqawi.

AQIM has nonetheless long had links to AQ, going back to the late 1980s, when many Algerians travelled to Afghanistan to take part in the guerrilla war against the Soviet Union. At the start of the 1990s, some of these Algerian "Afghans" returned to Algeria, where they contributed to founding the Islamist insurgency movement GIA, which attempted to topple the Algerian government. It was GIA which throughout the 1990s waged a bloody civil war against the Algerian regime, and in general against Muslims who did not stick to the theological "straight and narrow." These Algerian veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War not only had experience in guerrilla warfare, but also brought a very strict concept of Islam back from Afghanistan. Their extremely violent strategy backfired, however, causing the Algerian public to turn its back on GIA. At the same time, within GIA there was dissatisfaction with the group's violent approach, and in 1998 a section of the leading emirs within GIA broke away to establish the militant GSPC, which henceforth was to focus on the conflict with the Algerian state.

In the early 2000s, the Algerian military put great pressure on GSPC, and this prompted the group to expand southwards towards the Sahara – primarily into northern Mali, but also into Niger and Mauritania. Here, the group ran a lucrative smuggling business, and being experienced guerrilla fighters, they were able to integrate rapidly into the local economy and local society. The newly arrived GSPC fighters married local women and were generous with the income from their profitable smuggling enterprise. Around 2003, GSPC expanded its sphere of activity when it began to take foreign hostages, who were released in return for astronomical ransoms. GSPC's expansion into the Sahara and the Sahel region lent the group a strategic depth relative to its principal activity, namely the guerrilla war against the Algerian state. In 2006, these same Algerian guerrilla fighters joined the ranks of AQ and, in alliance with a range of local groups, in the summer of 2012 conquered the whole of northern Mali, where they then established an Islamic emirate. At the start of 2013, the French military intervened in the situation in Mali, forcing AQIM and related groups to flee. Some high-ranking emirs were killed, but with their experience as guerrilla fighters, many of the militants succeeded in carrying out a tactical withdrawal to southern Libya. It was from southern Libya that, a few days after the commencement of the French intervention in Mali, the experienced guerrilla fighter, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, instigated an extensive hostage-taking operation which succeeded in taking several hundred hostages at a gas plant at In Amenas in southern Algeria. This attack transformed Belmokhtar from an unknown AQIM leader to the most wanted criminal in Sahel.

From fragmentation to alliance

The question is, however, what IS' move into North Africa and Sahel has meant for the battle-hardened AQ group AQIM and the other AQ-affiliated groups in the region. As already stated, Libya is where IS has been most strongly placed outside of its primary Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. However, North Africa/Sahel is also a region where AQ is relatively well established. After AQ was weakened in Pakistan and Yemen by US drone strikes, AQIM is one of the few remaining AQ groups which is both able to hold on its own against IS and at the same time has the capacity to carry out venomous attacks against Western citizens and interests in the region. One might also ask whether AQ's center of operations has moved from the east into the west, such that, in an operational sense, AQIM has seized the initiative from AQ. Zawahiri is still AQ's undisputed leader, and it is Zawahiri who, in collaboration with other AQ ideologues, has plotted the group's ideological path. Yet in an operational sense, AQIM presumably has a greater capacity than the original iteration of AQ in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At all events in the course of 2015/2016, AQIM has escalated its level of activity and has carried out a greater number of attacks against Western targets in the Sahel region than has previously been the case.

Focusing on the relationship between IS and AQ in North Africa/Sahel, it could be said that IS has primarily established a foothold in areas where AQIM has not had any long-term, deeply-rooted presence. AQIM has thus managed to stand its ground in the face of IS and to a certain extent has succeeded in curbing the Caliphate's move into North Africa. At present, IS is weakened in northern Libya but is still present, to a lesser extent, in Sinai and Nigeria. The notable fact about these areas is that they do not overlap with AQIM's primary areas of operations in Algeria and Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and southern Libya).

IS has attempted to establish itself in those North African countries which in 2011 experienced political upheaval – yet the same may be said of AQ. Thus, in the wake of the Arab Spring, a number of new AQ-affiliated groups sprang up in these countries: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya, Ansar beit al-Maqdis in Egypt, and Uqba bin Nafi in the western part of Tunisia on the border with Algeria. With the exception of Uqba bin Nafi, which was established by AQIM and should therefore be considered as a branch of AQIM, many of these new AQ groups subsequently joined forces with IS. This has not always taken place on entirely peaceful terms, however. The principal rivalry has played out in Libya, where both groups have an interest in exploiting the chaotic political situation. IS has combated the AQ groups in Libya by systematically executing some of their leaders. This method has borne fruit in some areas. As already mentioned, in Sirte the local Ansar al-Sharia group decided to affiliate itself with IS after IS had executed the group's local leader. Nonetheless, an Ansar al-Sharia group still exists in Benghazi, which regularly carries out attacks against one of the Libyan governments, which has its headquarters in Tobruk.

However, the primary consequence of IS' move into the African continent is that AQIM and the myriad of loosely related AQ-groups have formed an alliance in order to present a united front against the upstart IS. Prior to IS' advance into the region, the AQ groups in North Africa/Sahel were characterized by endless discord and rivalries, which led to constant schisms and fragmentation. Personal antagonisms and disagreement concerning power and resources regularly led to small factions opting to leave AQIM to establish their own militant group (*katiba*). Some of the groups, which in 2012 established an emirate in northern Mali, were among these breakaway groups from AQIM, which nevertheless did not prevent them from cooperating with one another in relative peace and tolerance. By the end of 2012 the experienced AQIM emir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, had broken away from AQIM—though not from the core of AQ—and established his own group.

In the face of this behavior on the part of IS, the AQ splinter groups have joined forces. These are AQ groups within the region and AQIM's relationship with AQ groups outside of North Africa/Sahel. Following the establishment of the Caliphate, AQIM and AQAP (AQ on the Arabian Peninsula) decided in the autumn of 2014 to broadcast a joint statement in which they taunted Islamic State for killing other Muslims, and encourage Muslims in Syria and Iraq to present a united front against IS.⁷ AQIM and AQAP have on several occasions since then broadcast joint statements in which they have rebuked IS. In September 2015, Zawahiri did not mince his words when he castigated Baghdadi and his pseudo-caliphate, which he said could in no way live up to prevailing Sharia law.⁸ Shortly after the publication of Zawahiri's broadside against IS, AQAP and AQIM broadcast a joint statement in which they reiterated Zawahiri's critique to the letter: the Caliphate did not live up to prevailing Sharia law, and IS was committing an offence against true Islam by bringing about discord between Muslims.⁹ Since then, this has been AQIM's chief grudge against IS: that they are sowing dissension between Muslims and have no qualms about killing fellow Muslims. On two occasions, the duo of AQIM and AQAP was expanded to a trio, when the two groups broadcast statements together with the Nusra Front. This took place following the public announcement of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar's death in 2015, and after the murder of his successor, Mullah Akhtar. Thus, on these two occasions a conglomerate of three large AQ-groups united to put out a joint statement.

⁷ SITE Intelligence, "AQAP and AQIM Release Joint Statement Condemning U.S.-led Alliance in Iraq and Syria, Urge Warring Factions to Unite," September 16, 2014.

⁸ SITE Intelligence, "Zawahiri Attacks Baghdadi, IS for Exporting Infighting from Iraq and Syria," September 9, 2015.

⁹ SITE Intelligence, "AQAP and AQIM Give Scathing Rebuke of IS in Joint Statement," November 1, 2015.

AQ in North Africa and Sahel: the old jihadists strike back

This demonstrative fraternization between AQ groups to a large extent also pertains within the region, whereby various AQ groups which had earlier elected to go their separate ways proclaimed in the course of 2015 that they had now rejoined forces, and what is more were working in partnership on carrying out substantial terrorist attacks. The question is, however, whether it is IS' move into the region which has influenced AQ's strategy of fraternization and its escalating level of activity in terms of attacks targeted at foreign interests. Is it competition from IS which has caused these AQ groups to change strategy and carry out more and increasingly varied forms of terrorist attack than previously?

There is no doubt that IS has for a long time led the pack when it comes to recruiting new followers. For a long period, the foreign fighters who travelled to Syria preferred to align themselves with IS, which up until 2016 had seen success on the battlefield and at the same time—with the attacks in Paris and Brussels—demonstrated that they are capable of striking targets in the very heart of European capitals. The IS Caliphate thus showed itself able not only to offer its followers the opportunity to take part in fighting, but also to participate in a brand-new Islamist society as well as extremely violent propaganda videos. Compared with this, AQ took on the appearance of a group of pensioners who once, many years ago, had been trendsetters, back when now deceased icons such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Anwar al-Awlaki were still alive.

When AQ's current emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, broadcasts crackling sound files, months or even years often go by before they reach the ears of the general public. These sound files are often accompanied by still images of Zawahiri – an old man with a long white beard and glasses. In contrast to IS' sensuous orgies of violence involving young well-trained fighters, AQ's videos present elderly gentlemen delivering long theological monologues in which they take IS to task by referring to both the Quran, Sharia law and Islamist learning. For a long period, the pages of Western media outlets bulged with stories about IS, while news items about AQ were few and far between.

AQ is thus able to provide theology, but struggles to provide action in the form of successful acts of terrorism. This is presumably one of the reasons why both AQIM and practically all AQ groups were falling over one another to praise the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, which was carried out on behalf of the AQ branch AQAP. AQ had at long last succeeded in carrying out that which they had long dreamed of but had not been capable of achieving – a spectacular terrorist attack on European soil.

However, in the case of North Africa/Sahel, the local AQ groups have demonstrated that they are still capable of carrying out attacks against Western targets. AQIM's supreme leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and the former AQIM emir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, are arguably middle-aged men—which is to say they are well into their 40s—but this also means that they are experienced

fighters who have been *mujahideen* for 25 years and have achieved the near impossible – survival. This extensive experience means that they understand the ins and outs of insurgency. If AQ are to survive in North Africa/Sahel, it is not enough to simply go to ground and wait for the IS phenomenon to blow over. AQ has had to demonstrate that it still possesses the capacity to plan and carry out terrorist attacks and that in this particular geographical area it has a greater capacity than IS. It is in any case clear that the AQ groups' ability to carry out terrorist attacks has escalated since IS entered the scene as a jihadi force in the region. At the same time, AQIM has made a virtue of carrying out terrorist attacks which differ demonstratively from IS terrorist attacks.

The principal distinction between the two groups lies in who they consider to be legitimate targets. AQ-affiliated groups accuse IS of “shedding the blood of Muslims”—for instance when IS launches attacks on the Nusra Front in Syria—in contrast to their own policy of demonstratively directing their aggression against non-Muslims who are unlawfully present on Muslim soil. In North Africa/Sahel it is primarily Westerners who are attacked and kidnapped, but attacks are also targeted against soldiers stationed in the region. These are either French or Algerian soldiers engaged in anti-terrorism activities in Sahel, or soldiers from the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali, MINUSMA.

AQIM and groups affiliated to it do not necessarily have the capacity or the desire to do as IS has done and carry out terrorist attacks on European soil. Yet following the attack on Paris in November 2015, for which IS claimed responsibility, AQIM has made a point of demonstrating that it is capable of carrying out large-scale attacks against foreign nationals and Western interests in Sahel. Since November 2015, AQIM has steadily expanded its sphere of activity, making its attacks unpredictable. Thus, a coalition of groups related to and sympathetic with AQ has succeeded in carrying out three major attacks on hotels in the capitals of Mali, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast, far beyond its traditional area of operations. In carrying out these attacks, the AQ groups in question have made a point of demonstrating that their *modus operandi* differs from that of IS, inasmuch as they exclusively target foreign nationals. In the course of these attacks, they asked potential victims to state which religious faith they adhered to in order to ensure that they did not unintentionally end up killing Muslims.

IS on the retreat – AQ in rude health?

As already stated, North Africa—and primarily Libya—has been the Caliphate's top priority as regards territorial expansion. In May 2016, the late IS spokesman, Adnani, broadcast a tirade against the USA in which he spoke of Sirte as being on a par with Mosul and Raqqa: “Even if you took Mosul, Sirte and Raqqa, and all of our cities, you would still not have defeated us.” This statement indicates not only Sirte's prominent place in official IS propaganda, but also that IS' military fortunes have turned, and that the Caliphate has already

conceded that a territorial setback is a possibility. Simultaneously the word “expansion” vanished from official IS propaganda.

There can be no doubt that IS now finds itself under increasing pressure – in Mosul and Raqqa, and in December 2016 Misrata militias with support from the USA, France and the UK supposedly expelled the group from Sirte.¹⁰ Already in August, US warplanes bombed targets in Sirte, and both the USA and France currently have special forces’ troops on the ground in Libya. In the spring of 2016, the UN succeeded in cobbling together a fragile national coalition government in Tripoli under the leadership of Fayez al-Sarraj, and the new government announced that the fight against IS was among its top priorities. The question remains where the IS fighters, who were expelled from Sirte, will go. There are already unconfirmed reports that some of these fighters have begun to retreat down towards Sahel. There may be potential repercussions for the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali, or for Sahel countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where France is currently carrying out a major anti-terror effort – “operation Barkhane.” In neighboring Tunisia, there is also deep concern about what might happen when the large numbers of Tunisian foreign fighters aligned with IS return to Tunisia.

All indications thus point to IS’ territorial move into North Africa as being far more fragile than AQ’s more consolidated presence in North Africa and the wider Sahel region. AQIM has operated in this desert region for decades. They know the area back to front, are integrated into the local economy and have managed to survive French and Algerian counter-terrorism efforts since the 1990s. Even though AQIM has traditionally been engaged in insurgency against the Algerian government, its transformation to a branch of AQ has meant that “the distant foe,” i.e. the West, has now become a target on a par with the Algerian government. Uppermost on the list of enemies is the old colonial power, France. However, there is nothing to suggest that the North African AQ groups have any intention of carrying out terrorist attacks on European soil. It is not simply a question of capacity, but presumably also depends upon a consideration of what the consequences will be if they are directly linked to a terrorist attack in Europe. On the other hand, they have not refrained from attacking Western interests on their home patch, namely North Africa and Sahel. In this respect, they are no different from IS, which still has ambitions of carrying out attacks in the West.

¹⁰ Frédéric Bobin, “Libye : l’Etat islamique vaincu à Syrte, après six mois de combats,” *Le Monde*, December 5, 2016.

About the author

Manni Crone, PhD, is Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies. Her current research focuses on terrorism and counterterrorism in Europe, North Africa and Sahel. Recent publications include “Radicalization revisited,” *International Affairs* 92:3 (2016) and “French interventionism in the post-American MENA-region: filling a void?,” in *Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention: New Conflict Dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa* (DIIS, 2017).