

Terrorism and Violent Extremism in North Africa

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Introduction

Recent violence suggests that extremism in Northern Africa continues to be a challenge for the region. There has been a rise in the number of attacks, with militants spreading into new areas, such as Mauritania. Additionally, regional groups have linked up with Al-Qaeda, forming Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). There are also reports that fighters from the region who went to Iraq and Afghanistan may be returning home, with new, deadlier skills. Compounding these challenges is the fact that this part of the world includes vast and remote desert areas where criminal and terrorist elements can easily move about, undetected by authorities.

With these challenges in mind, CNA convened leading experts on North Africa and the Sahel to explore what the recent violence signifies, what it means for US interests and engagement in this part of the world, and to share their views on whether recent developments mark the beginning of a new, deadlier era for the region. Below is a summary of speakers' presentations and the discussions that followed.

Sources of extremism in North Africa

There are two predominant schools of thought concerning what leads groups or individuals to pursue terrorism. The first is the political culture approach, which says that there is something unique—in this case, something about North African culture and history and the Islamic belief system—that explains why terrorism/extremism have emerged. Most North Africa analysts are uncomfortable with this approach because trying to analyze culture as a variable is very difficult. It is nearly impossible to find empirical data demonstrating that culture is a catalyst for the type of violent behavior terrorists partake in. A second school of thought is the political economy approach, which posits that measurable social-economic factors will, over time, offer a more compelling explanation for the roots of extremist tendencies.

As an alternative, one speaker offered that the most important factor in the emergence of extremism in North Africa is a function of the political regimes in regional states, and the disparities in power across the societies governed by these regimes. Since independence, all of the Maghrebi countries have had small groups of secularist elites who have used their dominance of the military/industrial/bureaucratic complex and a narrative of cultural/historical/religious legitimacy to keep themselves in power. In most cases, there is also a strong cult of personality surrounding the leader associated with these systems.

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On the other end of the political spectrum are the people in North African societies who have been marginalized and excluded from the spoils of the state. These people suffer, not because overall socio-economic conditions have gotten worse in their countries, but because improvements in socio-economic conditions engineered by prevailing regimes have been directed at key supporters. That is, state-engineered development has improved macro-level conditions (such as GDP and literacy), but because this development is focused on the elite, it has made it more likely for people to “fall through the cracks,” become frustrated, and be recruited by extremist groups.

Adding to this, over time, there has been increasingly less accountability for regimes and fewer opportunities for citizens to challenge government authority. The political process has become increasingly less inclusive, less responsive, and less reflective of popular sentiments. A lack of democratic process has added to existing frustrations. At the same time, external ideas have penetrated these societies and so people are extremely aware of both their own political system and other systems that they understand and, in fact, prefer.

The region has also been influenced by the Algerian experience with the rise of political Islam in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Governments began to believe that they should not allow political mobilization centered on Islam to emerge. This led regimes to seek to co-opt the Islamists. But in doing this, governments have created less room for other opposition voices to emerge. Once the moderate voices of opposition have been co-opted into the state, only the radical voices of opposition remain. North Africans are no more or less Islamic than any other people; they are perhaps just more unhappy. There are no moderate voices to express discontent—and since the state is using Islam, it encourages all political players to turn to the Islamic idiom.

AQIM’s Family tree: the evolution of violent extremism in Algeria

The violent extremism across the region today stems in large part from the conflict in Algeria, which began in the early 1990s after the cancellation of elections that would have brought to power Front Islamic du Salut (FIS). Before the last round of elections took place, the regime stepped in, declared a state of emergency, and banned the FIS and all other Islamist parties in the country. This ignited a lengthy civil war between the state security forces and a series of armed groups, some of whom targeted civilians.

One of the deadliest groups in the 1990s was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which was the predecessor of today’s AQIM. The GIA’s members were Salafi Jihadists proposing Islamic governance. Many of the fighters in the groups were Algerian *Afghans* who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and then returned home with foreign connections and influence. The organization is well known for its declaration that “anyone who fights us, even with a pen, we fight you with a sword.” The group resorted to extremely brutal tactics, including beheadings, and targeted the general population. Their actions alienated the Algerian people as well as other jihadists who might have otherwise supported their cause. The GIA became a case study on how *not* to run a jihad.

In 1998, the Salafist Groups for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) broke off from the GIA, saying that it would target only the state security forces, not civilians. The GSPC was not terribly successful. When the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq broke out in 2001 and 2003, respectively, the fight—and the center of gravity for Salafist combatants—moved to those places. In an ef-

fort to recapture momentum and expand their influence and impact, the GSPC reached out to Al-Qaeda. They established mobile training camps in Mauritania and Mali for AQ operatives. In September 2006, Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced that the GSPC had joined Al-Qaeda and subsequently announced the organization's name change to AQIM.

The alliance was needed on both sides: Al-Qaeda central was looking to establish regional affiliates for prestige. The move also reinforced the leadership of Bin Laden and Zawahiri in the global jihad. The Algerian GSPC benefited because the alliance revitalized the movement and provided the support and prestige of the well-known Al-Qaeda. As with the GSPC, AQIM's main target in the Maghreb remains the individual secular regimes of these regional states. While its AQ affiliation may not yet have given the GSPC much political support in its battle against the Algerian government, the organization arguably has benefited from AQ's sophisticated "media machine."

Is Libya vulnerable?

Theoretically, Libya should also be vulnerable to violent extremism. Like its North African neighbors, the Libyan government is secular, nationalist, and anti-Salafist. Also like its neighbors, the regime under Muammar Qaddafi has kept itself in power by building a large state security apparatus. The Libyan leader has built an extensive intelligence machine in which multiple organs overlap and watch each other. This engenders a mutual deep suspicion among the people.

According to one speaker, despite the authoritarian aspects of the regime, indications are that the average Libyan may not disdain Qaddafi. His efforts to define a culturally relevant and nationalist narrative have been largely successful. He is viewed as a simple Libyan and the people identify with him. It is the state, not him, that they fear. Once he is no longer in power, it is not clear what will happen. Analysts agree that a change in leadership may be followed by a rapid rise in instability and extremism in Libya.

In terms of socio-economic pressures, Libya is experiencing a population explosion and unemployment is high. The population is growing at 3 to 4 percent a year and the average age is 22 years old. Officially, unemployment in Libya is 30 percent, but the country also suffers from widespread *underemployment*, which is not accounted for in the unemployment numbers. This underemployment mainly results from the practice of several people sharing one position for very low wages. As a result of these conditions, observers find groups of young men just standing around in the major cities.

Libya is the classic *rentier* state, based entirely on government control of oil income. There are no other significant natural resources and less than 1 percent of the land is arable. Water is and will continue to be a big issue. The authorities reportedly have more or less ignored the looming economic challenges that face the growing population. Over the long term, the Libyan regime will be faced with the question of what to do when the oil stops flowing, but so far, relatively high oil revenues have allowed them to postpone dealing with this question.

The education system in the country is troubled. The central authority controls all of the resources that go into education. At times, there are problems—often ideological—within the central educational system in Libya that take months to resolve. As a result, schools lose funding and shut down until the issue is resolved within the central government. Private education

is very expensive (one of the best private schools in the country is the “School for Martyrs against American Aggression”). Universities are also not very good; enrollment is low; and people are not educated in English, making it difficult for Libyans to conduct business abroad.

In terms of internal political tensions, several areas require ongoing state intervention. For example, there is a regional rivalry between the people of Tripoli and Benghazi. There have been riots and pockets of opposition in Benghazi, which have been intensified by the Benghazi population’s grievances over not benefiting from the oil wealth. Soccer events have provided a major outlet for these frustrations. This is a potential source of vulnerability for the regime should these types of grievances continue to fester and/or increase.

In general, the average Libyan is a quiet conservative in regard to Islam. People in Libya appear unwilling to welcome social or economic changes that may come at the expense of their faith. In some ways, one commentator noted, they are the Saudis of the Maghreb. So far, this conservative form of Islam has not generated a significant Salafist movement within Libya. The Libyan regime’s major concern with regard to extremists in the country stems from the potential return of fighters who left to fight in Iraq. It appears that the regime is less concerned with the political groups operating domestically.

The threat of extremism in Libya may become a real concern once the heavy hand of Qaddafi is no longer in place. Since coming to power, he has pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy to deal with potential opponents within Libya, essentially pitting “everyone against everyone”: tribes against tribes, families against families, the military against civilians, etc. One result of Qaddafi’s efforts to undermine all potential rivals is that there is no clear successor in place. No one knows who will be next. Some speculate that it will be one of Qaddafi’s sons: Saif al-Islam is a contender, given his leadership role in Libya’s recent opening with the West and his overall experience with international affairs. Another son, Mutassim, however, has more influence within the country, through his ties to the military and relationships with the tribes. Qaddafi’s daughter Aisha is considered the “wild card” and also should not be overlooked.

Into the Sahel

Participants in the conference identified three sources of potential instability in the countries of the Sahel: (1) the “background” issues, which include the historical local and regional crises that exist and continue (these mainly concern the Tuaregs, but also include other nomadic groups); (2) the trafficking of weapons, oil, cigarettes, etc., that fund and fuel the terrorist groups; and (3) the terrorist groups themselves, which are embedded in the region (AQIM, in particular). As described below, these sources manifest themselves in somewhat different ways in different countries of the region.

Mauritania

Analysts agree that particular attention should be paid to Mauritania. Recent years have seen successive coups and, as a result, increasing instability within the country. Mauritania is seen as a primary target for AQIM. Recent violence is new, deadly, and on the rise. In August 2009, a suicide-bomber from the Basra area of Nouakchott attempted to blow up himself up, but the bomb detonated prematurely, only slightly injuring a few people. The young man who carried out the attack had failed his “bac”—an exam required to obtain one’s high school degree—three times, after which he entered a training camp in Northern Mali in 2007. Salafist leaders

are focusing on Mauritanian youth for recruiting. The attack was claimed by AQIM “against the French who are hurting Muslims around the world...and against Abd-al Aziz [the President of Mauritania].” Sleeper agents are probably in the country, but there are no known AQIM cells. Overall, the situation in Mauritania is worrying. While the new president seems serious about counter-terrorism, there is a fundamental lack of means, given the size of the territory. There may be a good opportunity for US cooperation and engagement.

Mali

The key problem for Mali is Algeria, since AQIM members operating in Mali generally come from Algeria. The borders are not secure, and accordingly, Mali has become an overflow tank for pressures in Algeria. Specifically, Mali is becoming maneuver space for AQIM members seeking to escape direct pressure from Algerian security forces. There is cause for concern that this could continue to expand into other countries, perhaps even going as far as Nigeria. The Malian military has made efforts to fight AQIM on its own, but it has failed. In general, AQIM lacks the support of the population in Mali; however, the organization still poses a threat among the broader population due to the poor socio-economic conditions in the country. Engaging Mali on the topic of Islamic extremism is difficult and sensitive. It is only in recent years that the Malian government has considered AQIM to be an internal problem. Mali has very scarce resources and a huge territory to control. There is, however, a growing willingness within the Government of Mali to cooperate with regional and international partners to deal with the AQIM problem.

Niger

Niger is fairly isolated within the region, but it should be considered an important engagement partner in order to prevent AQIM from spilling over into its borders. The government can be difficult to deal with, as it is becoming more and more of a dictatorship. The country has not seen much violence, but given its connections to Mali and Mauritania, it is in the traffic lane of violence and is likely the next place where we will see an increase in AQIM activity.

Where people and goods move undetected: Trans-Saharan trade routes

Traditional routes

The Sahara is a diverse region made up not only of desert but also of rocky plateaus, escarpments, and volcanoes. Major trading markets linked by caravan routes have existed across the Sahara in such places as Timbuktu, Kano, and Gao, for thousands of years. Trade routes have changed over time, depending on the climate and the winds, but they tend to transit known points of passage through rough terrain and areas where there are wells to provide water for humans and animals.

Throughout history, caravan routes across the region have allowed for the transmission of goods, culture, and religion, both east-west and north-south. For example, Islam itself spread across the region by way of the caravan routes: starting in the 7th century, it crossed the Sahara from the east, spread into West Africa, and made its way up into Spain, to a region known as Al-Andalous. The Tuareg, a nomadic Berber people, have been primary operators of the trans-Saharan trade routes for millennia. As a result, Tuareg populations can be found in many North African and West African countries today.

New Saharan circulation

While the 1800s saw the last great “boom” in trans-Saharan trade (driven largely by African demand for such items as cloth, paper and books, tea, sugar, and firearms), today trans-Saharan trade routes are still in use. Modern “caravans” not only move legitimate goods across the region, but many also transport illicit goods and unauthorized people. Those involved in illicit activities avoid the old routes, which have well-known passages and sources of water, so as to stay out of reach of military, police, and customs outposts across the region. They rely heavily on GPS to find alternative routes, where they can go undetected. They use 4x4s with oil drums and locate drum deposits for refueling. They also frequently use cell phones, to alert each other about traffic (both officials and bandits) and coordinate crossings.

The types of contraband most frequently being moved today are arms (mostly coming from Eastern markets, such as China and Ukraine); humans (clandestine workers going to Europe, local slave traders, and domestic workers); stolen vehicles; refined oil; strategic minerals (uranium?); cigarettes; camels; and narcotics. These routes have also been used in the AQIM kidnappings. Given the abundance of hiding places in the mountains, it is no coincidence that the area in the Sahara considered the “terrorist corridor” is where the three major mountainous regions overlap: the Tebesti (Chad/Libya), the Ahaggar (Algeria), and the Air (Niger).

Itinerant fighters: Will they come home?

One commentator noted that in the 1980s and 1990s, Al-Qaeda concluded that they had failed to overthrow the “near” enemy—essentially, their own governments—as they had planned. Over time, they made the strategic move to shift their focus to targeting the “far” threat, which included the United States, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and a number of other “imperial, apostate” governments. Over the past three decades, one participant explained, this has created a string of “*jihads du jour*.” The mother of these jihads was the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets. This was the original training ground for foreign fighters, and it provided an excellent training environment and the ultimate networking opportunity for extremists. This conflict resulted in tremendous inspiration, as they were able to defeat one of the major superpowers of the day. Jihadists met there, and stayed in touch over time. Other *jihads du jour* have been the wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iraq.

After the conclusion of the fighting, many of the foreign fighters return to their home countries, where governments take an array of steps to deal with them. Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have reintegration programs to deal with returning jihadists, while others throw them into prison. However, it appears that many fighters do not go home but rather seek out the next fight, or find a relatively safe place to wait for the next fight to break out. We know from certain individuals who have been apprehended, in fact, that often these fighters avoid going home to keep from being targeted by state security apparati. In the case of Algeria, for example, jihadists admitted that they feared the Algerian government would detect them and, as a result, were too afraid to go back home.

Foreign fighters from North Africa who have recently fought in Iraq and Afghanistan may yet return to the region (some may already have returned) with dangerous skills. This current generation of fighters may be more unsettling to regional regimes than the fighters who returned from the jihad in the 1980s. Today’s fighters will be returning from a battlefield where they took on formidable US forces and developed effective tactics and skills for combatting—and inflicting losses on—their technologically superior adversaries. Moreover, these re-

cent battles may have exposed these fighters to broader global networks of information, resources, and fellow fighters. However, barring the outbreak of a *jihad du jour* in the region, the threat from foreign fighters to Northern Africa appears quite low. Absent the *jihad du jour*—like the ones in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Bosnia—foreign fighters appear unlikely to become involved in terrorism in significant numbers in this part of the world. While the outbreak of a significant conflict in the region seems unlikely at the present time, if it were to happen, there would be cause to worry about an influx of experienced jihadists to the region.

Conclusions

While the contributors to this conference came from diverse backgrounds, a number of themes recurred. The most prominent of those themes are highlighted below.

➤ **While violent extremists remain active, they do not appear to pose an immediate threat to regime stability in any countries in Northern Africa.**

Violent extremist organizations, including Al-Qaeda, do not pose an immediate threat to the regimes in North Africa—at least, not under current conditions. These governments have mastered the art of state security. Some, such as Tunisia, are considered “police states” par excellence. At the same time, it appears that extremist organizations will not disappear from the region in the near future. Some regional governments are concerned about the return of foreign fighters to the region. While there may be some who return home, many analysts believe the future will not see a significant wave of jihadists coming back from the wars abroad.

➤ **The lack of good governance contributed to causing violent extremism in the region.**

The lack of good governance remains one of the fundamental reasons for the persistence of extremism in the region. Until the gap between the state and the people narrows, a certain disenfranchised sector of the population will continue to turn to violence and/or extremist ideologies, having no other avenues to express their discontent. The lack of good governance is manifested in a myriad of ways across the region, ranging from the authoritarian practices of the regional governments, to the weaker states’ inability to extend government control over their own territories. In the case of Mali, for example, the government has not found a way to repair its longstanding problem with the Tuaregs. Today, the Tuaregs are distant, disenfranchised, and alienated from the government. The groups and the central government have few to no roads of communication that could be used to work out differences. Yet, working with the Tuaregs is essential to solving the AQIM problem because they interact with and reside in the areas where AQIM operates.

➤ **Regional governments must work together, through coordinated and cooperative approaches, to defeat AQIM and other extremist organizations.**

The threat from AQIM is a problem for every country in the region. AQIM moves freely across these massive territories, often totally undetected; no single country in the region has the resources to stop the group on its own. Sharing information and resources is essential for success. As, given our commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have limited resources to invest in this part of the world, a potential role for the US and our international partners in the region is to focus our efforts on bringing regional governments together to work in partnership, seeking and implementing cooperative, coordinated approaches to countering AQIM.

➤ **Extremist organizations and criminals rely on an elaborate network of ancient caravan routes through the Sahara to move illicit goods and people and generate income.**

Modern-day criminals and terrorists take advantage of ancient trading routes that have existed for centuries to conduct their activities. AQIM gets much of its income from criminal activities, such as kidnapping, extortion, and theft, and from its supporters in Europe. AQIM also relies on the ability to retreat into safe havens in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania—particularly in the mountainous regions in the Sahara. AQIM and criminal elements also interact with the nomadic groups in the Sahara, particularly the Tuaregs.

➤ **According to some analyses, Al-Qaeda may be in decline globally.**

There is some agreement that Al-Qaeda as an organization is losing power, influence, and capability. A potential sign of this is the weakening of relationships between local or regional organizations and Al-Qaeda central. For local or regional groups, adopting the Al-Qaeda name is about merchandizing. For AQ central, it is about franchising. This appears to be the case for AQIM in North Africa.