

REGIONAL THREAT WATCH: AFRICA

EXTREMIST GROUPS PROLIFERATE

Valerie Kong explores the threat posed by national and international extremist groups across Africa

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

The resurgence of the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) franchise and affiliated groups in the Sahel region will continue to be a threat, given opportunities emerging from deteriorating states in the Sahel. Among longstanding and newly formed jihadist groups, AQIM remains a major terrorist group with the capability and breadth of operations to carry out attacks. AQIM's affiliates, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar al-Dine, appear to have re-grouped and re-supplied, launching IED attacks on civilians and UN troops in Mali in January. Ansar al-Dine continues to launch attacks between northern Mali and Algeria, as cross-over operations from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya and Niger benefit from vast, porous borders. Locally-driven militants and aims also pose internal threats from conflicts between the groups and AQIM. The threat of kidnapping is likely to increase since it comprises AQIM's main source of finances. The concern from a series of terrorist abductions may see more daring attempts and aggressive tactics employed by AQIM to obtain ransom demands. Criminal activity will likely remain the primary operations, including narcotics and weapons smuggling, roadside bombings, and oil



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sabotage. While AQIM remains an old guard among new jihadists, the threat has proven effective in the past. As kidnappings have shown, physical security will need to include resilient measures to reduce the risks of personnel being caught up in the threat. High security awareness and trained personnel will be significant part of the response in Algeria, Tunisia and in West Sahel.

Al-Shabaab



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Since the death of leader Ahmed Abdi Godane in September 2014 and at least two surrenders under the government amnesty agreement, al-Shabaab's internal changes have been followed by an increase in high-profile attacks to draw attention and regain its relevance. Its activities in Kenya, outside Mogadishu and against the UN and African Union in Somalia (AMISOM) mission have demonstrated its continued threat against foreign and regional interests. Frequent bombings targeting AU vehicles and government officials have carried over into 2015. A double suicide attack in Mogadishu at a mosque and the Central Hotel against government officials succeeded in undermining trust in the government's ability to restore security. The threat to foreign influences, especially Turkey, was evident in the 22 January car bombing on a Turkish delegation's hotel ahead of President Erdogan's visit. Cross-border activity into north-east Kenya and clashes with Somali security forces in Galguduud and Lower

Shabelle are likely to continue this year, and a significant decrease in al-Shabaab's operations are unlikely in the near-term forecast. The 18 February arrest of an al-Shabaab recruiter and financier by Kenyan police points to underlying difficulties in countering the threat will likely remain unaddressed by the Somali government.

With the third cabinet formation keeping a precarious political state intact, the deadline for a new draft constitution for a March 2016 vote will likely see power struggles re-ignite between the prime minister and president. Opportunistic activity from al-Shabaab can be expected while the group is still in flux, although the second half of 2015 may see more external operations, as a recent video threatening attacks on foreign malls has demonstrated. The threat to international aid workers, NGOs and foreign targets is expected to stay high, while American UAV strikes on al-Shabaab leadership have so far been limited in restricting the group's base operations.



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Ansar al-Sharia

The al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al Sharia Libya and Tunisia groups will likely play significant roles in the ongoing regional conflict, as both local and cross-border threats. The spreading chaos in Libya last year has put increasing pressure on neighbouring Tunisia and Algeria, buoyed by the proliferation of local jihadists returning with overseas experience and training from Iraq and Syria.

After a series of successful raids on Tobruk government-aligned forces and advances on Benghazi airport in Libya, renewed activity and a hardened approach may be expected from Ansar al Sharia Libya (ASL) in the light of leader Mohammed al Zahawi's death. As head of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), ASL will likely continue to wrest for control of the city from General Haftar's forces.

The Tunisian state's intolerance for jihadists and crackdown on Ansar al Sharia Tunisia (AST) have escalated attacks on security forces and economic targets in the south and central regions. Tunisia's national elections saw the main opposition Islamist party included in the coalition government formed early this year, which unsettled secular supporters of the ruling Nidaa Tounes. The fragility of the new government and major socio-economic challenges ahead could create openings with a weakened state and instability. Opportunistic activity from the group is expected to increase around Jebel el-Chaambi, Kasserine, and along the Algerian border, although attempts further north and inland cannot be excluded. The drop in tourism in Tunisia's western mountains and heavy military zone may see AST pushed further underground, likely making border security increasingly difficult to control.

Boko Haram (Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah Lil Dawa Wal Jihad)

Following a series of large-scale attacks at the end of 2014, Boko Haram's strategy has evolved and the group is expected to demonstrate a more sophisticated approach within Nigeria while continuing its cross-border threat. The momentum gained from the government's inability to contain the insurgency will likely be compounded by the fallout of the contentious national elections in March. Increased activity from the group is expected amid the political changes, deepening financial and socio-economic challenges.

Inspiration from Islamic State's success in Iraq/Syria was evident in recent videos released by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, which showed the higher production qualities typically seen from the former. Boko Haram's initial tactics of suicide bombings and IED attacks are expected to continue in the north-eastern Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa and Yobe states to incite fear and assert its authority. Heavy weapons and multi-pronged approaches used in repeated assaults in Monguno and Konduga, Borno in February indicate a higher level of sophistication in combat operations that are likely to be used in future assaults.

Despite the multinational force of Niger, Benin, Chad, and Cameroon, the internal threat to Nigeria will likely continue for the one-year outlook, barring renewed political will and a co-ordinated strategy to diminish the threat. Boko Haram has yet to take Maiduguri, but the loss of the Borno capital would be a significant blow to the state's territorial integrity. Efforts to undermine the government through "spectacular" attacks in major cities cannot be excluded, but pressure from joint military forces and airstrikes along Niger and Chad may see concentration shift to the north. While the commercial and oil centres of Lagos and Port Harcourt have avoided much of the activity, Boko Haram's intent to form an Islamic caliphate may see attempts succeed in either Lagos or the government centre of Abuja. The high threat to commercial interests throughout the country is expected to continue while the group's freedom of movement and attack capabilities remain largely intact. Training and continuous awareness of the situation in the changing environment will be necessary to face the threat into 2015.

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THE REACH OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

Valerie Kong analyses the growing threat from Islamic State extremists across Africa

Algeria

The attraction of IS to other jihadist groups in Algeria will likely be a major threat if uncontained by the Algerian government and regional authorities. AQIM splinter groups al-Huda Battalion in Maghreb of Islam and Jund El Khalifa (Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Algeria) pledged allegiance to IS leader al-Baghdadi in 2014, after executing a French national kidnapped from the Kabyle mountains on 24 September. Algerian security sweeps on the Moroccan border have so far kept military activity relatively low from the declared IS Wilayat al-Jazair since late last year. The alignment of existing groups to IS would present a greater threat with increased capabilities, organisation and operational control across the Sahel.

The Islamic State's performance in Syria and Iraq will likely have a strong impact on the outcome of its affiliates' progress in 2015. Home-grown extremism has also bred IS sympathies and an active recruitment pool for foreign fighters (200 as of Dec 2014). In addition, locally-focused operations of Islamist militants in Algeria largely conflict with the global caliphate aims of the Islamic State, which presents a long-term potential for escalating inter-factional conflicts among



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leading groups.

With neighbouring IS affiliates in Libya and Egypt (Sinai province) expanding their presence, and most investors already gone, Algeria's higher number of foreign nationals and companies may draw attention to more attractive targets. The expansion of IS in Libya in the east and south would present internal threats to oil facilities, multinational companies and business operations near Algeria's Kabyle mountains

and isolated deserts. Based on IS' current tactics, kidnapping, and convoy/rig site ambushes are the most likely methods of attack, although Algeria maintains a high level of internally managed security and regular counterterror operations reduce the possibility of an IS foothold. Security is likely to remain a consideration rather than an obstacle for operating in Algeria, and proactive measures will be essential in mitigating future risks.

Tunisia

Despite the state's tightening grip on the local AQ-linked Ansar al Sharia Tunisia (AST), the need for several large-scale raids this year indicate the growth of IS sympathies and inspiration from Islamic State campaigns in Syria and Iraq for jihadists back home. A series of terrorist plots and militant cells broken up since the start of this year are likely a fraction of the Ministry of Interior's security operations, and represent a growing challenge for the new government. Existing border threats are expected to continue alongside an increasing internally-focused threat from IS-linked groups,

such as the terrorist cell uncovered in Feb in Hammam Ghazay city, about 100km northeast from Tunis.

While Tunisia is known as the largest supplier of foreign fighters for IS (3,000 as of Apr 2014), the hard-line approach of the recent government may result in escalating aggression from the local contingent of jihadist returnees and IS sympathisers. The attraction of IS was evident in Okba Ibn Nafaa Battalion's pledge of support for IS during autumn 2014, and a message to the "People of Tunisia" in December from an IS

media wing. Current government campaigns against AST, Salafi extremism and underlying civil unrest may see IS-linked groups seize openings left by the heavily-strained government. Ongoing attacks on national guard and police forces may shift to civilian targets, with improvements in organisation and military capabilities from IS support. Heavy security measures and unaddressed socio-economic issues are likely to be used by IS supporters to stoke violence in the capital and expand activity for the near-term future.

Egypt



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Despite a heavy military response to terrorist threats following President al-Sisi's election, jihadist groups comprising IS' Sinai Province in Egypt are expected to expand their attempts at establishing IS beyond the northern Peninsula. In the wake of the government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood last year, Salafist groups circulating between Libya and the northeast have stepped up attacks across Egypt. A string of executions in El Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and the Gaza border town of Rafah have been suspected or claimed by Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (Champions of Jerusalem), now rebranded IS' Wilayat Sinai provincial arm.

Evidence of a unified jihadist organisation from Wilayat Sinai would likely lead to greater co-ordination and equipment for large-scale attacks against high-value targets and the capital. The "Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem" umbrella group pledged support for IS, while the Jund al-Khilafah in the Land of Kinana (Egypt) announced its allegiance in late 2014, threatening attacks against US interests and Christians. The co-ordination

of Wilayat Sinai's operation on 29 January against ten military bases and headquarters, including the army's largest Battalion 101 base, indicated further sophistication in planning and implementation; around 100 militants, multiple VB/IEDs and mortars were deployed in the co-ordinated attacks. Various incidents against gas pipelines in particular are likely this year, linked to IS sympathisers within the local pool of extremism.

Ongoing animosity toward local security forces and the antagonism of civilians during military operations is unlikely to subside, and may support Wilayat Sinai's growth with a passive population to influence. As the government looks for foreign investment to boost the decline in financial aid, the group may shift from local to North African targets within Egypt. Repeated attacks on the Egypt-Jordan gas pipeline demonstrates the threat toward infrastructure and personnel with perceived anti-IS ties. As a result, ongoing vigilance and crisis management will be required from companies operating in Egypt to adequately respond to the threat for the foreseeable future.

Libya

The ongoing decline of security and UN-sponsored talks will likely see increased activities from IS' Barqah, Tarabulus and Fezzan provinces into 2015. A series of high-profile attacks – from Wilayat al-Tarabulus' claim of the siege on Tripoli's Corinthia Hotel to the execution of 21 Egyptian Coptics captured by the group in Sirte – has followed recent successes against competing jihadist groups and foreign embassy bombings. Since 2014's rise of Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (Islamic Youth Shura Council) in Derna, the rebranded Wilayat al-Barqah arm has shown greater control and implementation of IS governance in the town.

Without the incursion of regional or UN interests, the development of IS' south-western Wilayat al-Fezzan could increase following gains over rival groups. Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi and its affiliate, Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade (ASM), will likely fiercely contest further IS expansion, and ongoing clashes with the Tobruk and General National Congress governments could provide an additional military front. Airstrikes and retaliation against the groups will likely result in a greater attraction to IS' aims in Libya, and an influx of IS core members may enhance the provinces' material and operational capabilities.

The eastern coast of Derna and nearby Bayda will likely be flashpoints for future activity, while Benghazi, Tripoli and Tobruk may provide high-value targets for large-scale attacks or kidnappings. The longstanding presence of al-Qaeda-associated jihadist groups and local rival factions, such as ASM's Shura Council of Darnah Mujahidin, may spur cross-border conflict with bloodshed escalating beyond the near-term outlook.



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