

RIDERS ON THE STORM: NORTH AFRICA'S PATHWAYS TO RESILIENCE

edited by **Haizam Amirah-Fernández, Intissar Fakir, Lorenzo Fruganti**



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3. Jihadism in North Africa: A 'Resilient' Threat in Times of Global Crises

by **Lorenzo Fruganti**

The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have acted as catalysts for pre-existing geopolitical dynamics, shifting the focus away from the *War on Terrorism* paradigm that shaped much of the international community's political and economic engagement with the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) in the aftermath of 9/11 towards an era of multipolarity and great power competition.¹ Over the last few years, consecutive counterterrorism operations, the enforcement of strict national anti-terrorism legislations, and the implementation of successful deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes have largely abated the threat posed by jihadist groups in MENA countries, particularly in North Africa. Among other things, the findings of the Global Terrorism Index 2023 seem to confirm this trend. While the Sahel has progressively emerged as the new epicentre

of jihadi terrorism over the last decade, with deaths in this area accounting for 43% of the global total in 2022 (a 7% increase compared to 2021),² fatalities from terrorism in the MENA have fallen by 42% in the last three years and by 32% in 2022.³ Although the impact of terrorism varies considerably within the MENA, North Africa – in particular – records a steady decline in extremist violence. The number of violent attacks associated with militant Islamist activity in this region is now down to pre-Islamic State (IS) levels. The 276 casualties linked to jihadist terrorism in North Africa in 2022 represent a 14-fold decrease from the 4,000 deaths that occurred in the area in 2015, when IS was at its height.⁴ Against this backdrop, Morocco stands as the safest country in North Africa (83rd position in the Global Terrorism Index rank), having not recorded a terrorist attack in the last five years. Conversely, Egypt is among the 20 states worldwide most affected by terrorism (16th position), which is no surprise given that nearly all the reported militant Islamist activity in North Africa over 2022 took place in the country (about 90%). In between Egypt and Morocco rank Libya, Algeria and Tunisia (32nd, 37th and 40th positions, respectively) with a medium-to-low impact of terrorism.⁵

The main trajectories of jihadist violence in North Africa

In Egypt, a major security crackdown coupled with the government's public investments and infrastructure policies in the Sinai Peninsula has, over the last few years, diminished the presence of the local branch of the Islamic State, also known as *Wilayat Sinai* or *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*

(ABM).⁶ However, according to the United Nations, the group – which is composed of around a thousand fighters – has remained active and resilient throughout 2022, its main targets being native communities and Egyptian security forces.⁷ The latest violent clashes between the Egyptian army and ABM in 2022 occurred in areas near the Suez Canal, testifying to the effort that the organisation is making to expand its activities in Egypt beyond north-east Sinai towards new strategic regions.⁸ Since 2013, more than 3,000 people have been killed and more than 12,000 wounded in terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula.⁹

In Libya, jihadist groups have continued to face several challenges following successive strikes against their positions, especially in the southernmost region of Fezzan, where the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda (reportedly present there with a hundred and three hundred members, respectively) are still active, albeit dramatically downsized compared to the past decade. Playing on the political and economic predicament in southern Libya, IS has kept cooperating with tribal elements involved in smuggling and illicit trade; this cooperation is a vital component of the group's financing and creates the conditions for new recruitment processes.¹⁰ On the other hand, the local branch of Al-Qaeda (which has its main terrorist structures in the cities of Awbari and Sabha),¹¹ depends mostly on a strategy of intermarriage and merging with local tribes to maintain legitimacy in southern Libya. According to a recent report by Europol, the organisation has become a logistic hub for Al-Qaeda affiliates in Mali.¹² The deployment of Syrian mercenaries¹³



– often with radicalised profiles – by Russia (through the Wagner Group) and Turkey in Libya might pose additional security risks to the country.

Despite having not recorded any Islamist-inspired attack since 2018, Morocco remains vigilant over the offline and online threat of violent extremism. In recent years, the state's security services have regularly thwarted IS terrorist plots relying on explosives, firearms or knives while also dismantling jihadist cells that operate in cyberspace.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the country has implemented rather successful de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes, such as "Moussalaha" ("Reconciliation"), which since 2017 has benefited hundreds of jihadists, both those arrested in Morocco and foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) returnees.¹⁵

Jihadist organisations linked to Al-Qaeda remain extremely constrained in Algeria owing to both tight security mechanisms¹⁶ and reconciliation policies that allow jihadists who surrender to security services and provide them with information to receive amnesty and economic assistance. It is noteworthy that only a limited number of former jihadists who participated in these programmes in Morocco and Algeria have relapsed into violence.¹⁷

Although it has seen an overall decline in jihadist attacks and arrests over the last five years,¹⁸ Tunisia continues to face a number of challenges related to violent extremism. Foiled plots in the country¹⁹ demonstrate the still effective organisational and operational capability of jihadist groups such as *Katibat Uqba Bin Nafi* (KUIN) and *Jund Al-Khilafa* (JAK),

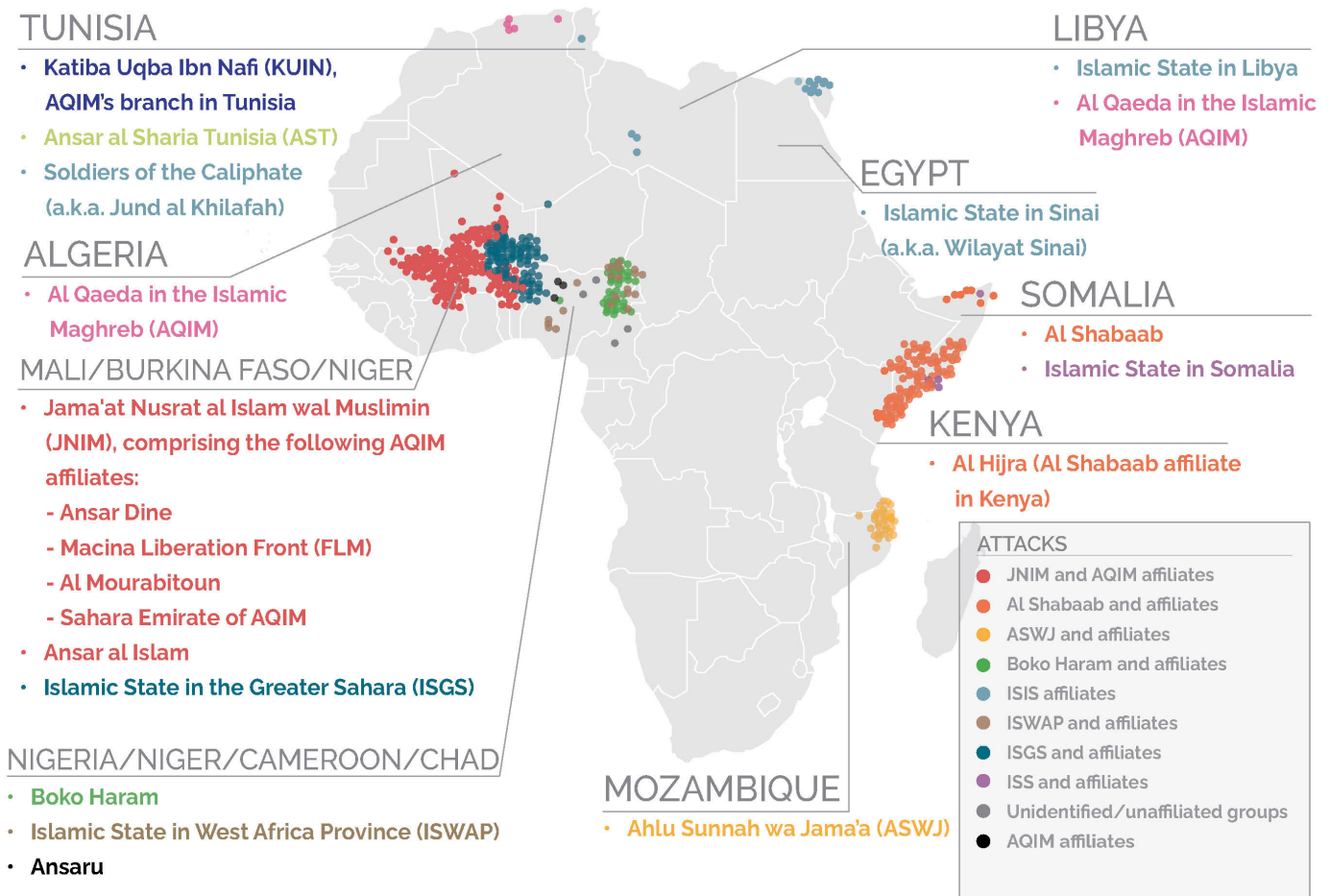
which – however weakened – are active in the mountainous zones along the Tunisian-Algerian border.²⁰ The risk of attacks perpetrated by so-called "lonewolves" scattered across the national territory is also marring the national security landscape.²¹ Furthermore, unlike Morocco and Algeria, in Tunisia there seems to be still room for implementing more effective disengagement and de-radicalisation programmes. As it stands, Tunisian FTFs returnees are jailed or remain under strong surveillance by security services, as some de-radicalisation policies, such as "Tawasul" ("Connection") have not received support (and hence the funding needed to operate) from the general public, which opposes the return of FTFs from Syria, Iraq and Libya.²² Overcrowded Tunisian prisons, ruled by strict repressive measures (including torture),²³ may entail additional risks for national security, continuing to serve as hotbeds of new radicalisations pathways or even worse, a new generation of jihadist fighters.

Increasing pressures from the Sahelo-Saharan region

The Sahelo-Saharan space has traditionally been shaped by deep political, socioeconomic and security connections binding Maghreb states to Sahelian actors. Largely permeated by terrorist groups that have proved quick to capitalise on local issues (including ethnic tensions, climate-related challenges, and lack of public services) to attract recruits, the Sahelo-Saharan strip has not only become a hotbed of jihadist activities in recent years, but it is also poised to turn into an export hub of the terrorist threat towards peripheral areas. While the

Militant islamist groups in Africa

Jihadist organisations active in 2022



Group listings are intended for informational purposes only and should not be considered official designations. Due to the fluid nature of many groups, the listed affiliations may change.

Sources: Elaborated by ISPI



Sahel instability has already produced spill-over effects on West Africa and the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea,²⁴ where the existence and expansion of violent extremist organisations affiliated especially with the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (*Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen*, JNIM) are widely demonstrated,²⁵ a similar scenario could also affect North Africa, reversing the significant achievements in terms of prevention, counterterrorism and de-radicalisation made by some regional states over the last few years. The range of military and intelligence cooperation initiatives (not involving Western actors) that were undertaken between Sahelian and North African countries to deal with the mounting jihadist threat in the former signal the intertwined security concerns both regions face. However, leadership rivalries and differences in strategic interests have hampered such efforts, and collaborative partnerships to address this transnational challenge remain fragmented.²⁶

The strategic shifts (and uncertain implications for the Sahel-Maghreb area) in the Sahel's Western counterterrorism architecture following the relocation of US and European forces,²⁷ and the increased activity of Russian Wagner mercenaries in Sub-Saharan Africa, notably in Mali since late 2021,²⁸ raise additional fears of a jihadist contagion spreading across North Africa. Besides, geopolitical rivalries between France and Russia could undermine efforts to tackle the terrorism crisis in the Sahel, with counterterrorism cooperation between neighbouring states now being hostage to divisions between those states seemingly supported by Russia (Mali and Burkina Faso above all) or France (Niger).²⁹

The potential spillover into Libya and Tunisia

Against this backdrop, the enduring security vacuum in Libya is undoubtedly one of the main sources of instability associated with the potential spillover effects of jihadism from the Sahel region. The state's weakness, particularly in the Fezzan region, could enable both IS and Al-Qaeda to gain strength by taking advantage of transfers of fighters not only from the Levant and Eastern Africa (Eritrea above all) but also from the Sahel through the country's porous southwestern border.³⁰ The current conflict in Sudan risks fuelling further instability in Libya and across the entire Sahel. According to observers, especially worrying is the impact of the war in Sudan on the proliferation of weapons, which could potentially strengthen the various armed groups and militias already operating in a region plagued by continuous instability and *coups d'état*, with severe repercussions on jihadist violence in Libya as well.³¹

The insecurity and jihadist violence plaguing the Sahel might also reverberate in Tunisia, due to the presence and activity of Tunisian terrorist fighters in the Sahelo-Saharan space and southern Libya. According to some experts, around 100 Tunisians are fighting in the Sahel today,³² in addition to almost 600 fighters who are still part of jihadist militias in Libya, especially in the Fezzan.³³ Tunisians' presence in the Sahel is also likely to strengthen Tunisian-Malian jihadist bonds, which have existed for over a decade.³⁴ As long as Tunisia's nationals fill the ranks of jihadist groups in Libya and south of the Saharan desert, these connections (manifesting themselves in new supply routes and funding

sources) could be reactivated and lay the groundwork for new attacks in their country of origin and in other North African states. Although nothing seems to indicate that this is the case for the time being, the issue deserves close attention, given the persistent crises in Libya and the Sahel. Besides, Tunisia's participation in multilateral training and capacity-building initiatives (such as NATO's Operation Sea Guardian)³⁵ and joint military exercises (such as African Lion 22 and Africa Lion 23)³⁶ with a focus on counterterrorism underscores the country's rising concerns for the future stability of the Sahel region and the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

Algeria's quest for a pivotal role in the Sahel-Maghreb

After the fall of the Qaddafi regime and the deterioration of the political and security situation in Libya, Algeria has emerged as one of the key guarantors of peace in the Sahel-Maghreb area, striving to bring stability to neighbouring Libya, Tunisia and Mali, and to securitise the Sahel region notably by means of joint military and security coordination.³⁷ Overall, Algeria's action has delivered mixed results. Many questions persist today about whether the country can play a pivotal role in the Maghreb-Sahel area. The volatile security situation and the ever-changing geopolitical context characterising the Sahel region may compromise Algeria's endeavours. In addition to this, another important aspect should be considered. Challenging Algeria's historical influence in the Sahel, Morocco has, over the last decade, consolidated its presence there by adopting a *soft power* alternative strategy

to the predominantly "hard" counterterrorism approach promoted by Algeria. The competition between these two countries contributes to averting the restructuring of a regional security framework to grapple with terrorism-related threats in the Sahel-Maghreb region.

Throughout the past fifteen years, regional instability and the presence of terrorist groups on Algeria's borders have threatened the country's security. For Algeria, which shares a 1,300 Km border and a common heritage of social and ethnic relations with Mali, the securitisation and stabilisation of the Sahel-Maghreb area have long been a matter of national interest.³⁸ The state authorities have opted for a mix of diplomatic and military strategies to tackle terrorism and criminal networks.³⁹ This process started with the signature of the 2009 "Tamanrasset plan" agreed to by the so-called *pays du champ* (Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania), which led to the creation, in 2010, of a joint military operations centre known as *Comité opérationnel conjoint des chefs d'état-major* (CEMOC) based in Tamanrasset, and a joint intelligence unit – *Unité de Fusion et de Liaison* (UFL) located in Algiers.⁴⁰ Such an initiative marked the first attempt to build a regional security architecture with an operational dimension in the Sahel. The *pays du champ* doctrine, as conceived by the Algerian authorities, consists of developing the capacities of the countries concerned to manage the security challenges in the region without relying on external actors; as a result, any cooperation initiative provided by the US or the EU should be limited to specific activities, basically training, logistical support and intelligence.⁴¹ If, on one side, cooperation between CEMOC member



countries in analysing security threats and sharing border management responsibilities set a praiseworthy model, the initiative has not yielded tangible results thus far, the main obstacles being the lack of mutual trust among participants and the inability to pool military forces.⁴²

The discontent with both the CEMOC and the UFL and the hesitation of Algeria (rooted in its traditional doctrine of non-intervention) to respond to Mali's request for direct military involvement in 2012⁴³ led five of its Sahelian neighbours (Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso) to establish in 2014 an alternative regional platform to combat terrorism in border areas of the region. The so-called G5 Sahel, which included CEMOC member states (Mauritania, Niger, Mali) while never comprising Algeria,⁴⁴ was strongly supported by France, which has been happy to fill the leadership void that the North African country created in the Sahel-Saharan strip by refusing to support Bamako militarily.⁴⁵ Today, however, the G5 Sahel seems to be reeling, especially after Mali's military junta pulled out in May 2022.⁴⁶ Aside from its military weaknesses, the G5 Sahel has been based on significant geostrategic shortcomings; by conceiving the Maghreb, the Sahel and West Africa as separate (static) sub-regional blocs and ignoring their deep geographic, political and security interconnections, the horizontal (east-west) logic of the organisation overlooks the north-south and interregional dynamics, even though the spread of crises and instability follows a "vertical pathway".⁴⁷

While the G5 Sahel has shown its limits, Algeria has recently attempted to carve out a new space in the regional security dynamics. The visits to Mali of former Algerian Foreign Minister Lamamra (in September 2022)⁴⁸ and new Foreign Minister Attaf (in April 2023)⁴⁹ seem to show the country's willingness to engage more prominently at the regional level by dealing with the increased terrorist threats and the spread of organised crime in the common neighbourhood area.⁵⁰ Algerian President Tebboune had already sought to speed up this progress of re-engagement through a 2020 constitutional amendment authorising Algeria's army to deploy outside the country's borders, provided certain conditions were met.⁵¹ If Algeria's military involvement in case of an existential attack against a Sahelian neighbour remains a remote possibility, that now cannot be discarded. Moreover, as part of its efforts to diversify partnerships in the Sahel-Maghreb region, Algeria has invested significantly in the Trans-Saharan Highway Project.⁵² In doing so, the country aims to exert further leverage on and strengthen the mutual dependency with Sahelian governments, thus seeking to enhance its role as a key player in the area also in the fight against terrorism.

Despite the efforts to assume a leadership role in the Sahel-Maghreb, it remains to be seen whether Algeria will be able to play a stabilising role in this crucial area amid the collapsing Algiers Peace Agreement, the withdrawal of international troops and the rise of Russia's influence in the Sahel. Undoubtedly, Algeria's expertise and knowledge of militant groups across the Sahel may be an asset to

the success of any future multilateral security mechanism taking shape in the region. However, the presence of the Wagner Group in Algeria's border areas – as part of Russia's African projection – could pose extra challenges. The Maghreb country, which is Africa's second-largest importer of Russian arms,⁵³ has further strengthened its economic and military relations with Moscow over the past few years and has reportedly allowed Russian military planes affiliated with the Wagner Group in Mali to use its airspace to carry out counterterrorism operations in the Sahelian country.⁵⁴ Of course, this is not to say that Algeria has established official ties with the Russian Wagner group in Mali; on the contrary, in December 2022, Algerian President Tebboune regretted the deployment of Russian mercenaries to his country's neighbour, calling on Mali's military government to drop the costly services of the Russian private contractors and allocate its financial resources to the state's economic development instead.⁵⁵ This stance by President Tebboune has probably long been awaited by the French government, which pointed to the controversial deal between the Malian junta and the Russian Wagner Group as a crucial factor in pushing Paris to withdraw its troops from Mali throughout 2022.

All in all, Algeria is seemingly trying to perform a delicate balancing act between Russia, Mali and France, with the aim to preserve the strong relations with Moscow, favour a political solution in the Malian conflict by supporting the junta in Bamako, and keep the fluctuating relations with Paris on track (some observers believe that the French withdrawal from Mali might boost Franco-Algerian cooperation, especially

on the Sahel crisis' file).⁵⁶ While it is premature to predict how this uneasy balance will evolve, some Western officials and experts have talked about the "destabilising role the Wagner Group plays in the Sahel"⁵⁷ and argued that the presence and activity of Russian mercenaries might directly affect the jihadist threat stemming from the region.⁵⁸ In this respect, it has been stressed that the deployment of the Wagner Group to Mali since late 2021 has energised local jihadi organisations, providing them with new recruitment opportunities and a more propitious operating environment in the country. This seems further evidenced by the fact that there was an increase in JNIM attacks across Mali in the 2022 rainy season compared to the previous year's rainy season, and terrorist acts by IS within Mali also surged across these timespans.⁵⁹ Although the relocation of anti-jihadist French and European military forces from Mali might also have contributed to this trend, there should be a concern that Wagner's deployment to Mali or any other Sahelian countries (such as Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger) could make the security context in that area and the neighbouring states even worse, with a likely increase in the terrorist risk level for North Africa as well.⁶⁰

The Algerian-Moroccan rivalry in the Sahel region: another obstacle in the fight against jihadism

In 2014 Algeria was wary that the France-supported G5 Sahel was created with the primary objective of reining in Algerian regional influence. Back then, the country was indeed suspicious of its neighbours, especially the so-called pro-French axis led by Morocco.⁶¹



Unsurprisingly, even before the G5 came into existence, the CEMOC and the UFL were built to contain not only Western interference in Algeria's close backyard but also regional competitors, first and foremost Morocco.⁶²

Despite its peripheral position *vis-à-vis* the epicentre of insecurity in the Sahel, Morocco has for years enhanced its diplomatic engagement in Africa, as testified by the country's reintegration into the African Union in January 2017 after 33 years,⁶³ as well as by Rabat's application to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in February 2017.⁶⁴ In order to confront jihadism and halt its northward advance, Morocco has reinforced its security partnerships with Sahelian countries.⁶⁵ Building on the common Islamic heritage with the latter, the state has developed a *soft power* strategy based on the export of a cultural and religious model. Rabat has offered religious formation to the ulema of Mali and Niger as part of this strategy, instructing them in the "moderate" Islam practised in the kingdom. According to Moroccan officials, the government has thereby addressed the need to tackle jihadist radicalisation in the Sahel while at the same time proposing an alternative to the "hard" counterterrorism policies promoted by Algeria.⁶⁶

On the one hand, Morocco is widely considered to be one of the leading African countries in the fight against terrorism; its involvement and efforts within multilateral bodies devoted to counterterrorism and countering violent extremism are particularly valued.⁶⁷ among others, today the country serves as co-chair of the Africa Focus Group in the US-led Global

Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS;⁶⁸ it has been hosting the Africa Lion military training for 19 years (the 19th edition, which took place in seven regions across Morocco, confirms the deep military cooperation between Morocco and the US),⁶⁹ and has just handed over the presidency of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF).⁷⁰ Additionally, since June 2021 the kingdom's capital has hosted the headquarters of the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism and Training in Africa (UNOCT) – the first of its kind on the African continent.⁷¹

On the other hand, Morocco's desire for expansion in the Sahel has projected the kingdom's historical rivalry with Algeria into the region, which is mainly linked to the conflict over Western Sahara. Consolidating a network of regional alliances is functional for Rabat to gain political and diplomatic support on the Sahrawi question. The latent conflict between Algeria and Morocco in Western Sahara and their divergent interests in the Sahel have, until now, further complicated the development of joint security cooperation processes in the counterterrorism field.⁷²

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