

# Jihadism in Northern Africa and the Sahel

**Samir Amghar**

Research Fellow

Centre d'études sur les langues, les arts et la tradition,  
University of Quebec at Chicoutimi

Even in Northern Africa, though thousands of kilometres from Iraq and Syria, the aftershock can be felt of the actions and discourse of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), whose military victories and the capacity to create an Islamic state from scratch has given the Maghrebi and Sahel jihadists a second wind after their decline following French intervention in Mali and the pressure of security forces in Algiers, Tunis, Cairo and Rabat. In Northern Africa as in the Sahel, jihadists are split between the two movements – al-Qaeda and the Islamic State – which, though they share the perspective of considering violent action the only tool for social change, have different or even opposing agendas and operational logic. The challenge for these two organisations struggling for leadership in the sphere of jihad is to maintain or rally structural allegiances in order to multiply the jihadi firepower in Northern Africa and the Sahel. If emissaries are sent to ensure support from a specific regional organisation for the parent organisation, allegiances are above all determined by the strategic choices made by the local jihadi leaders. Whereas some continue to proclaim their loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri, others prefer to join the Islamic State (IS), which has the wind in its sails despite its recent military setbacks in Syria and Iraq. In Tunisia, Abu Ayadh, the underground leader of Ansar al-Sharia (not the same group as its Libyan namesake), has made appeals to join the jihad in Syria and rally to the ranks of al-Baghdadi in Iraq. For its part, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has rejected the caliphate and renewed its alle-

giance to al-Qaeda and its leader, al-Zawahiri. Since then, it seems that rifts are appearing within AQIM (its leaders being primarily in Algeria), with some wishing to join ISIL. These rivalries can certainly divide and thus weaken the jihadists (who are still very weak), but they can also encourage some of them to carry out actions demonstrating their firepower over that of their rivals and attracting new members.

## The Persistence of Jihadism in the Sahel

Although the intervention of France, Chad and other African countries participating in the African-led International Support Mission in Mali Mission (AFISMA, later MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) has allowed the capacity for action of armed jihadi groups in the North Mali region to be broken, the March 2015 attack, which killed five people in Bamako, demonstrates that jihadism has not entirely disappeared from Mali. Groups such as al-Mourabitoun or the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) remain active in a region that is part of the al-Qaeda network. Combining various jihadi groups, it distinguished itself through a significant feat of arms: the In Amenas hostage crisis in Algeria in January 2013. The different operations carried out by the authorities can provide an idea of the persistence of the jihadi threat in Mali. On 10 September 2015, a truck bomb was intercepted in southern Gao and four days later, soldiers were attacked by four men south of Almoustarat, for instance. Despite French intervention, jihadists are returning to an area they know perfectly well and where they still have numerous hideouts: in the Menaka region; north of Timbuktu in the Wagadou woodlands, on the border between Mali and Mauritania; or in the

Adrar des Ifoghas massif. It is more or less from these areas that attacks have been organised against MINUSMA members for over a year. The jihadists enjoy broad support among the local population. Moreover, the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), a participant in the inter-Malian dialogue process, has never cut off relations with Iyad Ag Ghaly. By the same token, the boundaries between the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) are porous.

The resilience of Malian jihadists has alarmed the authorities of Niger since the attacks on a barracks and the Areva plant in Arlit on 23 May 2013. The main element of concern for the Niger government is the presence on its territory of Niger nationals having formed part of AQIM and MOJWA and militarily trained by these organisations. Niamey's concern is all the greater, considering that the country is practically 'surrounded': to the north, by the jihadists of southern Libya; to the south, by Boko Haram; and to the west, by members of AQIM and MOJWA. In any case, Niger is not the only country to grow alarmed at the jihadism in its region. Chad is likewise affected by the security imbalance in southern Libya. In the first place, the country has become a potential target since it sent a contingent of 2,000 soldiers to Mali. In the second place, N'Djamena must contend with the destabilisation risks on its eastern and southern borders due to the Darfur conflict and the security and political instability in Central Africa. In any case, the jihadi threat must not be overestimated and Mali is far from the situation prevailing in the months preceding the conflict there.

### **A Polymorphous Jihadi Threat in Northern Africa**

Though jihadism continues to exist in Mali and to threaten Niger and Chad, it is no longer limited to this area. By 'stirring up the hornet's nest,' French forces have in effect nurtured a logic of dispersion. Many combatants have fled from Mali to southern Libya. Thus, after the Sahel, Libya is becoming the new epicentre of jihadism in the region. Indeed, four years after the beginning of the uprising against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime, who ruled the country with an iron fist, the wealthy oil-producing country has

been given over to rival militias, namely the Libyan branch of the Islamic State, well-established in several cities, from Derna in the east to Sabratha in the west, as well as Sirte in the centre, and another jihadi group, Ansar al-Sharia, which is entrenched in Benghazi, the country's second most important city. Taking advantage of the absence of a central power, the jihadists are benefiting from the great number of Ansar al-Sharia members from Tunisia hounded by the authorities, and are beginning to develop ties to those based in northern Mali and with Boko Haram in Nigeria. Hence, southern Libya has become a genuine safe haven, with its vast expanses escaping the control of a Libyan state in the process of disintegration. The region has become a 'place of regeneration,' where the jihadists reorganise and get fresh supplies of weapons originating from the former Gaddafi regime, without being disturbed by the French forces deployed next to the area (in Mali, Niger and Chad). The risk is such that Western diplomats are concerned about an area controlled by jihadists so close to Europe, jihadists who could project their threat to the other side of the Mediterranean.

### **Southern Libya has become a genuine safe haven, with its vast expanses escaping the control of a Libyan state in the process of disintegration**

Tunisia is certainly the country most exposed to the 'Libyan chaos.' Recently emerging from a democratic transition still in the process of consolidating itself, Tunis is having difficulties stemming the development of violent Islam on its territory, despite a security policy that has been stepped up as attacks increase. In any case, the security forces lack experience and though they have managed to dismantle numerous jihadi cells, have been unable to prevent attacks such as the one taking place at the Bardo National Museum in March. The security forces have not managed to dislodge the jihadists present on the Algeria-Morocco border for nearly two years now (Mount Chaambi), where the forces of order are regularly assassinated. They can, however, rely on the Algerian security forces, who are better trained and more experienced in the struggle

against jihadism, since Algiers has had to contend with a civil war opposing it to armed Islamist groups throughout the 1990s.

In this country, the authorities pride themselves on their success in stemming the jihadi threat on their territory, to the point where it has become only residual. Nonetheless, Algiers has experienced certain 'blitz' operations jeopardising the image of a country gradually returning to stability. For many Western diplomats, Algeria remains a country with a high jihadi risk. The Algerian desert and Kabylia are areas where jihadi groups remain active. A case in point is the assassination of Hervé Gourdel, a French hiker, in September 2014 by the Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria, a group claiming allegiance to the Islamic State. The Algerian situation is a matter of concern for neighbouring Morocco, which nonetheless states it is free from attacks on its territory. In any case, the terrorist alert is at maximum and Moroccan authorities established a surveillance plan ('*hadara*') in October 2014, mobilising nearly 80,000 people, demonstrating that the Kingdom has realized it could be the victim of actions such as the attacks in Casablanca in 2003 and in Marrakesh in 2011. This decision followed declarations by AQIM, which, in its project to extend throughout the Maghreb, threatened King Mohammed VI on video. This concern has increased since the Moroccan embassy in Tripoli was subject to an attack whose authorship was claimed by the Islamic State.

While General al-Sissi represses Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood, he must also contend with the rising power of jihadi groups in Egypt. In January 2015, the Egyptian branch of ISIL, *Ansar al-Bayt al-Maqdiss*, committed an attack resulting in 30 casualties. Highly active in the Sinai, this group – which has claimed authorship for the vast majority of attacks perpetrated since the military coup ousted President Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in July 2013 – has stated that it wishes to retaliate against the regime's political repression of pro-Morsi factions. Hundreds of security force members have been killed in a period of over a year in these attacks, which have mainly targeted the northern part of the arid peninsula, but also the Nile Delta and the Egyptian capital. Until 2012, *Ansar al-Bayt al-Maqdiss* operations only targeted Israeli interests in the Sinai in attacks (gas pipeline explosions) without bloodshed.

## The Departure of Combatants to Syria, a New Challenge to the Region's Security Problem

According to figures provided by the Moroccan Centre for Strategic Studies (Centre marocain d'études stratégiques), 8,000 Maghrebi (3,000 Tunisians, 2,500 Libyans, 1,200 Moroccans, less than a thousand Algerians and a handful of Mauritians, whereas the number of Sahelians is insignificant) have joined the jihad in Syria. Never had another conflict, from Afghanistan in 2001 to Iraq in 2003, attracted as many North African jihadists. Recruitment cells are regularly dismantled in Morocco or in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In contrast to Morocco or Algeria, which seems to be the only country to escape this wave of jihadi vocation, Tunisia continues to supply numerous combatants to ISIL. Abu Ayadh, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia, has invited Tunisians to rally to the aid of al-Baghdadi's organisation, renewing its call to jihad in Syria. Many of them make a stop at the training camps in the Ghadames area and Cyrenaica region of Libya, where they learn to handle weapons and guerrilla warfare tactics under the guidance of Libyan Ansar al-Sharia jihadists who have been leaders of the regular army for two years now, are highly experienced and have access to the military arsenal of their country's former leader.

**In the face of the jihadi threat, the authorities are aware that a solely repressive response is not enough and that it is imperative to establish de-radicalisation programmes**

Although these departures allow a certain number of combatants to be diverted to Syria, the authorities are concerned about the consequences of their participation in this war once they return to Northern Africa. How many will return? How many will be tempted to take action in their countries of origin? Already some of those who have returned have launched insurrectional diatribes on internet. The countries in the region (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Niger, etc.) also fear bearing the brunt of the rise of jihadi power. Hence security cooperation has been undertaken among the different countries, in-

cluding between Morocco and Algeria, for once in agreement in the face of this emergency. Each country's government is cooperating to track down jihadists and dismantle their cells. Thus, on 8 September 2014, a vehicle filled with explosives was discovered in a forest west of Anefis, a town between Gao and Kidal, by French, Senegalese and Nigerien soldiers and Malian police officers. Nonetheless, the security policy of the different countries in the region has been unable to prevent all attacks. Indeed, the Bardo attack in Tunis, confrontations with the security forces on the Algeria-Tunisia border or the Bamako attack killing five people are paroxysmal illustrations of the jihadi damage and strike capacity in the region. In response to these threats, certain countries, including Morocco, have stepped up their legal arsenal by condemning jihadi apologists with prison sentences of five to 15 years and fines of 5,000 to 50,000 euros.

**The security policy of the different countries in the region has been unable to prevent all attacks**

The persistence of attacks in the region is above all proof of the limitations of the security strategy undertaken by the different countries concerned. In the face of the jihadi threat, the authorities are aware that a solely repressive response is not enough and that it is imperative to establish de-radicalisation programmes. In fact, no programme has yet been undertaken in the region, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, which is a notable exception in the sphere: a royal decree established a programme for aid and reintegration for nearly 300 jihadists having returned from Syria. In Northern Africa and the Sahel, for the time being, systematic incarceration prevails. In Morocco, the majority of jihadists returning from jihad are directly apprehended at the airport and sentenced to four years of prison on the basis of an anti-terrorist law. One thing is certain, however: there is an intention to slow down or prevent jihadism through the development of a counter-discourse, a soft religious power emanating from religious figures, particularly Salafist ones. Hence the Imam of Tangiers, Omar Haddouchi, has condemned the actions of the Islamic State and other Tunisian imams railed against the perpetrators of the Bardo attack in their Friday sermons.