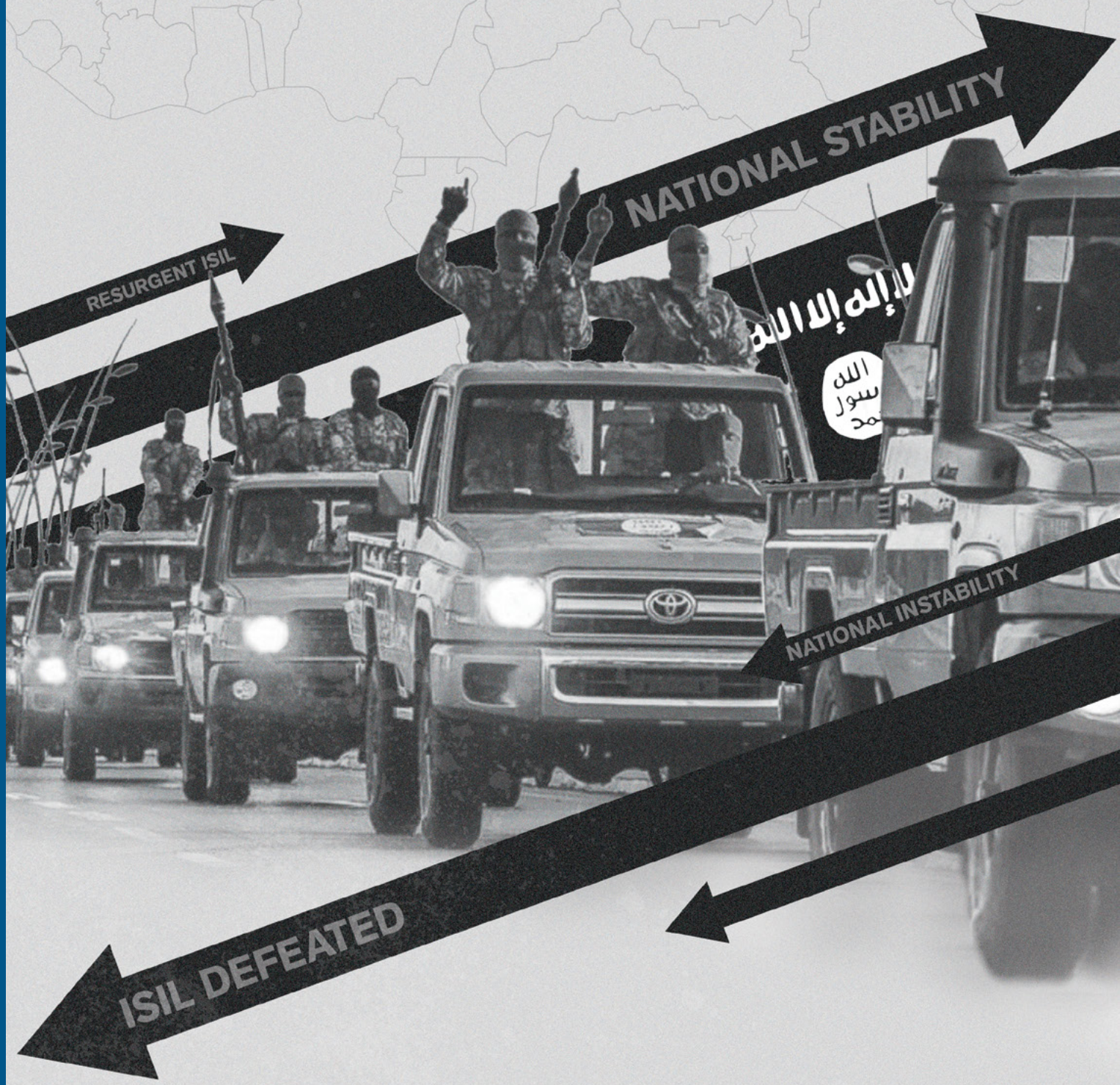




# Islamic State 2021

## Possible Futures in North and West Africa

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jacob Zenn & Nathaniel Barr  
February 2017





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**Daveed Gartenstein-Ross**

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## Introduction

The Islamic State (referred to in this report as ISIL) has seen its prospects in North and West Africa grow increasingly dim since early 2015. ISIL has experienced significant losses in North Africa in the past year, especially in Libya, which was once ISIL's most valuable territory outside of Syria and Iraq, and was home to the group's unofficial African capital. Meanwhile, the Nigerian militant group popularly known as Boko Haram, which is ISIL's West Africa Province (ISWAP), has experienced major internal schisms, as different factions vie for resources, compete for the attention of ISIL's senior leadership, and renew longstanding personal, ideological and strategic disputes.

But despite these setbacks, ISIL continues to pose a threat to North and West Africa, and is capable of mounting high-profile terrorist attacks in the region and beyond. Additionally, continued political instability and conflict in countries like Mali and Libya could undermine counter-ISIL efforts, and provide the group an opportunity to rebuild its networks and mount a resurgence. Indeed, two recent occurrences – the reemergence of ISIL in northern Mali and the group's temporary takeover of the town of Qandala in Puntland (a region in northeastern Somalia) – illustrate ISIL's ability to exploit ungoverned spaces and fragile states. It is possible that ISIL's global decline could also paradoxically help the group in North and West Africa, as state and non-state actors shift resources from combatting ISIL to other seemingly more urgent issues, giving ISIL the breathing room it needs to regenerate.

Several factors will have a fundamental impact on ISIL's future trajectory in North and West Africa:

1. *The future of ISIL's Sirte network:* In order to survive and rebuild in North and West Africa, ISIL will likely need to preserve at least some of the militant infrastructure it developed during its year-plus in control of the Libyan city of Sirte. The Sirte network has been a key bridge between ISIL's Syria-Iraq leadership and its African allies, and ISIL has relied heavily on the Sirte network to maintain its patronage of its provinces (as ISIL refers to its

affiliates) in the region. While ISIL has lost its foothold in Sirte, the group may be able to preserve some of the jihadist apparatus that had ruled and administered the city.

2. *ISWAP's organizational dynamics:* ISWAP's internal schisms threaten to cripple the group and weaken, if not sever, its ties to ISIL. The loss of its Nigerian province would be a major blow to ISIL's expansion efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa, and would further tarnish the group's brand. Conversely, if ISWAP remains in ISIL's orbit, ISWAP could provide ISIL with a vehicle through which to expand its presence into other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Senegal and Mali.
3. *The resilience of ISIL in northern Mali:* ISIL's recent resurgence in northern Mali gives the group a new foothold at a time when it is struggling elsewhere in the region, and across the globe. But ISIL's presence in Mali remains tenuous, as both regional and French security forces, as well as rival al-Qaeda militants, will likely target ISIL.
4. *Political stability in North Africa:* ISIL's prospects in North Africa hinge to a considerable extent on the future of the region's politics, especially in Libya. Ongoing tensions between rival political and armed factions in Libya continue to threaten to escalate into a high-intensity civil conflict, with destabilizing effects for the rest of the region. Spillover from Libya would test Tunisia's already fragile young democracy. Algeria's political future is similarly uncertain, given the lack of a clear successor to the ailing president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Political turmoil could provide ISIL with the opening it needs to rebuild its flagging networks.

This section now outlines ISIL's current capabilities and future prospects in each of the six countries/regions examined in this report.

### *Libya*

The collapse of ISIL's stronghold in the central Libyan city of Sirte will have a long-lasting impact on the militant

group's capabilities, strategy and prospects in North Africa. ISIL likely envisioned Sirte as a fallback in the event that it lost territory in Syria and Iraq, and consequently invested considerable resources in its Libyan province, even redirecting foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq to Libya. The city became a central command-and-control hub for ISIL's operations in Africa, with Libyan leaders providing strategic guidance to operatives in Egypt, Tunisia, and perhaps Nigeria and other African states.

Thus, ISIL's loss of control over Sirte – which it was finally completely pushed from in December 2016 – is a significant blow to the group's expansion efforts in Africa. Moving forward, the group may struggle to maintain its patronage to aligned factions in North and West Africa. This increases the likelihood that ISIL's regional provinces and allies will either break away from the group – potentially to join al-Qaeda, whether overtly or covertly – or pursue an agenda incongruent with ISIL's global strategy. ISIL's loss in Sirte also undercuts the group's "winner's message," and could hinder ISIL's future recruitment efforts in Africa.

ISIL will likely modify its strategy in the wake of its struggles in Libya, shifting from a quasi-state model, which focused on controlling and governing territory, to a guerilla warfare approach. ISIL fighters fleeing Sirte, including dozens to hundreds from Sub-Saharan Africa, will likely regroup in poorly governed areas. Whether they do so in the southern part of Libya or elsewhere (Mali, Tunisia, or Algeria, for example) will make a profound difference in the area to which they relocate. The ISIL foreign fighter diaspora from Sirte will restructure ISIL's forces in the region, and create new security challenges for countries that have sought to insulate themselves from Libya's chaos.

### Tunisia

Tunisia is particularly vulnerable to spillover from the conflict in Sirte. Several hundred Tunisian militants fought with ISIL in Libya, and though many Tunisian foreign fighters died in Sirte prior to its recapture from ISIL, others will return home. ISIL's Tunisian network suffered a major blow in early 2016 when the group was forced from its stronghold in the western Libyan

city of Sabratha, which had served as a staging ground for attacks in Tunisia. Shortly thereafter, Tunisian ISIL fighters, many fleeing Sebratha, mounted a failed offensive against the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdane, resulting in the death of over 30 militants. Despite these setbacks, ISIL's Tunisian network remains capable of carrying out high-profile attacks, and an influx of battle-tested foreign fighters from Libya could bolster its capabilities.

### Algeria

Unlike Tunisia, Algeria has proven relatively resilient to the threat of spillover from Libya. Ever since ISIL first announced itself in Algeria in September 2014, Algerian security forces have aggressively targeted ISIL networks in the country. In mid-2015, the Algerian military killed over 20 ISIL militants, including the leader of ISIL's Algerian network, in a series of raids in the northern part of the country. ISIL, which could boast only a low number of militants in Algeria to begin with, has struggled to regain its footing following these setbacks, while Algerian forces continue to crack down on nascent ISIL support networks. Though ISIL has mounted a limited number of small-scale attacks in Algeria since May 2015, the group lacks the resources to conduct a dedicated insurgent campaign. The return of foreign fighters from Libya may provide ISIL with a temporary boost in Algeria, but is unlikely to reverse the militant group's downward trajectory in the country, unless political chaos in Algeria ends up giving ISIL significantly more breathing room.

### ISWAP in the Lake Chad Region

ISIL's collapse in Sirte could be a blessing in disguise for ISWAP, which has struggled to overcome internal and external challenges. ISWAP has been riven by infighting, which has splintered the group and left three rival factions feuding over scarce resources. Further, the Nigerian military and other regional security forces have placed considerable pressure on ISWAP since early 2015, forcing the militants from most of their territorial strongholds in northeastern Nigeria. But as Sub-Saharan African ISIL foreign fighters flee Libya, they could reinforce ISWAP, and serve as a bridge

between ISWAP militants in Nigeria and Niger and networks outside of the Lake Chad region. On the other hand, ISWAP's internal tensions may ultimately cripple the group, and sever its relationship with ISIL. Al-Qaeda has an opportunity to reassert itself in the Nigerian theater, either overtly or more clandestinely.

### Mali

ISIL's flight from Sirte, and the relocation of its fighters southward, will likely bring ISIL's Sub-Saharan Africa foreign fighters into contact with both al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) fighters and an ISIL faction in Mali that is led by Adnane Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former al-Qaeda commander who defected. Sahrawi's faction mounted a series of increasingly brazen attacks in Niger and Burkina Faso in September and October 2016, following a prolonged period of inactivity. At a time when Sahrawi's faction is at least somewhat resurgent, the group has the potential to benefit considerably from the integration of ISIL foreign fighters into its ranks. Possible collaboration with ISWAP elements could also boost Sahrawi's capabilities. Conversely, if AQIM can successfully "rehabilitate" ISIL fighters and bring them into AQIM's ranks, it will strengthen the AQIM insurgency in Mali, and possibly sideline Sahrawi in the process.

### Senegal

ISIL has not managed to establish a foothold in Senegal, but the country is not entirely immune to the ISIL threat. Several Senegalese militants have appeared in propaganda produced by ISIL media operatives in Libya, and the possibility exists that some Senegalese fighters fleeing Sirte will try to set up an ISIL satellite in Senegal. Senegalese militants fighting with ISWAP in the Lake Chad region could also facilitate ISIL's expansion into Senegal: Several Senegalese militants who fought with ISWAP in the Lake Chad region have already returned home and attempted to establish a domestic network, though their cell was disrupted by Senegalese authorities.

Looking five years into the future, there are four major potential scenarios for ISIL in North and West Africa (ordered from the "strongest ISIL" outcome to "weakest ISIL" outcome):

1. *ISIL's resurgence: A confluence of factors enable ISIL to reemerge as a potent and ascendant actor in the region after a period of dormancy.* Continued political instability and conflict in Libya and Mali allows ISIL to rebuild its networks in both countries. ISIL establishes safe havens in poorly governed areas throughout the region, which also prove to be fertile recruiting ground for the group. As ISIL declines globally, state actors devote fewer resources to fighting the militant group in Africa, and politically fragile coalitions established to fight ISIL, such as the al-Bunyan al-Marsoos (Operation Solid Structure) alliance in Libya, collapse. Al-Qaeda's resurgence in the region draws the attention of state security forces away from ISIL's quiet comeback, in an ironic inversion of how al-Qaeda has benefited from the international community's focus on ISIL in recent years. Al-Qaeda, having reestablished itself as the dominant jihadist group in the region, and confident that ISIL is not in a position to lure away its affiliates, shows little interest in targeting the remaining ISIL factions. As a result, ISIL eventually returns to the region in force, pursuing a strategy of insurgency focused on seizing and holding territory.
2. *ISIL prioritizes terrorism: Facing pressure from state security forces and rival jihadist groups, ISIL finds itself incapable of sustaining an insurgent or quasi-state organizational model.* Instead, ISIL goes clandestine and prioritizes terrorism as its primary tool. In an attempt to sow instability, weaken state actors and outcompete rival jihadists, ISIL carries out a series of high-profile, mass casualty attacks targeting urban areas and symbolic locations. Though the group is unable to govern territory as it did in Sirte, it remains a threat to security in the region.



3. *ISIL rebrands and goes local: ISIL-aligned militants in North and West Africa eventually shed the ISIL moniker, but continue to operate as localized, independent insurgent groups.* Following the fall of ISIL's command-and-control hub in Sirte, ISIL's senior leadership is no longer able to provide support to the group's provinces and supporters in the region. ISIL members begin to distance themselves from the group for various reasons, including because ISIL's losses in Syria, Iraq, and Libya have made its "brand" undesirable. Though some militants formerly aligned with ISIL join al-Qaeda-linked organizations, most remain nominally independent, sometimes with clandestine connections to ISIL's central leadership, and sometimes with looser affiliations with other former ISIL groups. They continue to fight localized campaigns against state security forces.

4. *ISIL collapses: ISIL's militant infrastructure in North and West Africa collapses, and the group essentially disappears from the region.* The lack of concrete benefits flowing from ISIL's senior leadership to its North and Western African members leads some ISIL members to defect to al-Qaeda, which welcomes the "rehabilitated" ISIL renegades. Other ISIL members are hunted down by state security forces, while al-Qaeda also targets those who refuse to accept reconciliation. A small contingent of ISIL supporters remains, but the group becomes strategically irrelevant in the region.

The following report is organized regionally, focusing on ISIL actors in North Africa and then ISIL in West Africa. It first examines ISIL's capabilities in Libya, which had been the group's primary operational hub until the al-Bunyan al-Marsoos offensive began

in May 2016. It then assesses ISIL's operations and future prospects in Algeria and Tunisia, both of which will feel the direct impact of what happens to ISIL in Libya. The report subsequently turns to ISWAP, ISIL's most potent branch in West Africa. It then examines ISIL's resurgent network in Mali, which may be linked to both ISWAP and ISIL networks in North Africa, before concluding with a look at ISIL's nascent Senegalese network.

## Libya

ISIL's capabilities in Libya have deteriorated dramatically since May 2016, when armed factions aligned with the internationally backed Government of National Accord (GNA) launched a military campaign to drive ISIL from the city of Sirte. The campaign, which has been labeled al-Bunyan al-Marsoos (Operation Solid Structure), succeeded in pushing ISIL from the city. ISIL has also experienced major losses in recent months in the eastern city of Benghazi, and has been forced to withdraw entirely from nearby Derna, a former ISIL stronghold.

ISIL's losses in Sirte are a major blow to the group's prospects in Libya, and in Africa more broadly. Sirte was widely considered a fallback option for ISIL in the event that the group experienced major defeats in Syria and Iraq. In turn, ISIL invested significant resources in its Libyan province.<sup>1</sup> Starting in late 2014, ISIL began issuing propaganda statements encouraging militants from across Africa to migrate to Libya, and by early 2016, ISIL had redirected several hundred foreign fighters initially bound for Syria to Libya.<sup>2</sup> ISIL also deployed a number of high-profile commanders to Libya in 2015 to develop the group's capabilities in the country, including prominent religious figure Turki al-Binali; Abu Ali al-Anbari, a

1. For a discussion of ISIL's expansion efforts in Libya, see Nathaniel Barr and David Greenberg, "Libya's Political Turmoil Allows Islamic State to Thrive," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, April 1, 2016. ([http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45269&no\\_cache=1#V6rm8rh97IU](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45269&no_cache=1#V6rm8rh97IU))

2. Suliman Ali Zway, Kareem Fahim, and Eric Schmitt, "In Libya, U.S. Courts Unreliable Allies to Counter ISIS," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2016. ([http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/world/middleeast/in-libya-us-courts-unreliable-allies-to-counter-isis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/world/middleeast/in-libya-us-courts-unreliable-allies-to-counter-isis.html?_r=0)). It is not entirely clear how ISIL facilitated the relocation of foreign fighters, but one Tunisian member claimed that ISIL forcibly prevented recruits who had arrived in Libya from traveling on to Syria. See Facebook page of Akhbar al-An Television, June 8, 2016.

## Key Locations for ISIL in Libya



- A Tripoli:** ISIL reportedly maintains sleeper cells in the Libyan capital
- B Misrata:** The vast majority of Al-Bunyan al-Marsoos fighters come from this city, which is a major commercial hub
- C Sirte:** The former capital of ISIL's Libyan affiliate
- D Benghazi:** ISIL maintains a small presence in this city, though the group has experienced considerable losses in recent months
- E Derna:** ISIL's first stronghold in Libya, which is now home to several al-Qaeda-linked factions

now-deceased top lieutenant of ISIL caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; and Abu Umar al-Shishani, the skilled military commander of ethnic Chechen origin who was killed in a U.S. operation south of Mosul in July 2016.<sup>3</sup> But leaders of this stature were quickly recalled to Syria-Iraq in 2016 as ISIL's situation there deteriorated. The al-Bunyan al-Marsoos campaign has subsequently eliminated ISIL's territorial safe haven in Sirte, and significantly disrupted the group's expansion plans.

The fall of Sirte hampers ISIL's efforts to build its African network. As ISIL developed its governorate in Sirte, the city became a major command-and-control hub for operations across North and West Africa. Evidence indicates that ISIL commanders in Sirte provided instructions and guidance to both Wilayat Sinai, ISIL's Sinai Peninsula-based province, and ISWAP.<sup>4</sup> ISIL officials in Sirte also oversaw operations in the western Libyan city of Sebratha, which, until March 2016, served as the central hub of ISIL's Tunisian network.<sup>5</sup>

3. For information on Turki al-Binali's arrival in Libya, see «إمارة سرت».. الطريق إلى «داعش» («ISIS" – The Road to "Emirate of Sirte")," *Al-Wasat* (Libya), March 28, 2015. (<http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/89059/>). For information on Abu Umar al-Shishani's arrival, see "The IS most wanted Chechen leader arrives in Sirte," *Libya Prospect*, February 12, 2016. (<http://libyaprospect.com/index.php/2016/02/12/the-is-most-wanted-chechen-leader-arrives-in-sirte/>)

4. Muhammad Muqallid and Marwah Abdallah, «داعش ليبيا» لتتظيم بيت المقدس الإرهابة فى سيناء, "Security Source: Voice Recordings Reveal "ISIS Libya" to the Terrorist Organization of Baytul Maqdis in Sinai)," *El Watan* (Libya), February 9, 2016. (<http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/962680>) (describing the Libya hub's guidance to Wilayat Sinai); Fulan Nasrullah, "August 5th 2015 SITREP," *Fulan's SITREP*, August 5, 2015. (<https://fulansitrep.com/2015/08/05/august-5th-2015-sitrep/>) (describing the Libya hub's guidance to ISWAP).

5. A February 2016 video produced by a Tripoli-based militia fighting against ISIL noted that Ahmed Salih al-Himali, the *wali* (governor) of Wilayat Tarabulus, the *wilayat* encompassing Tripoli and Sirte, appointed Muhammad Sa'd al-Tajuri as ISIL's emir in Sebratha. See video posted on Quwwat al-Rad al-Khasah Facebook page, February 26, 2016.

The collapse of the Sirte hub will make it more difficult for ISIL's Syria-Iraq-based leadership to maintain its patronage of ISIL factions and supporters in North and West Africa. ISIL's defeat in Sirte and other coastal cities, such as Derna and Sebratha, may also eliminate one potential staging ground for operations in Europe.

Although ISIL no longer controls significant territory along the Libyan coast, the group will continue to pose a challenge to Libya's security. While GNA forces established a security cordon around Sirte in an effort to prevent ISIL militants from escaping in the midst of the GNA offensive, ISIL will likely maintain a residual force in the country. Though this force may end up being much diminished, it is also possible that poor coordination on the part of anti-ISIL forces may provide ISIL the opportunity to regroup in the country at a relatively high level of strength. Indeed, Libyan and Western officials have expressed concern that dozens to hundreds of militants who were based in Sirte fled south before the military offensive on the city commenced, possibly using trans-Saharan smuggling routes.<sup>6</sup> GNA forces found sinks full of hair in a school seized from ISIL fighters, suggesting that some militants shaved their beards in an effort to blend back into local communities.<sup>7</sup>

ISIL fighters who remain in Libya and manage to evade detection may embrace an insurgency strategy. ISIL has already carried out at least three attacks behind the frontlines on al-Bunyan al-Marsoos forces.<sup>8</sup> ISIL is also believed to possess sleeper cells in Tripoli and southern

Libya, which the group may mobilize to perpetrate terrorist attacks.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, just as the al-Bunyan al-Marsoos offensive was getting underway in Sirte, a militia in Tripoli disrupted an ISIL cell in the capital planning to plant explosives at checkpoints throughout the city.<sup>10</sup>

Another way that ISIL could remain relevant is by exploiting Libya's ongoing political and civil conflict in its propaganda. In the past, ISIL has used public messaging to divide the ranks of Libyan Islamist groups, and to appeal to disillusioned Islamist hardliners.<sup>11</sup> Recent revelations about U.S. and European involvement in counterterrorism operations in Libya, coupled with ongoing frustration over the UN's support for the GNA, could present ISIL with an opportunity to capitalize on local discontent relating to international intervention in Libya. ISIL may also seek to foment fissures within the GNA, and may try to exploit turmoil surrounding the October 2016 coup attempt in Tripoli, appealing to groups disillusioned with Misratan factions' perceived dominance within the GNA.

A second threat emanating from ISIL's presence in Libya relates to the possibility that foreign fighters now based in Libya will return to their home countries to perpetrate attacks. Over the past two years, fighters from across North and Sub-Saharan Africa have flocked to Sirte and other ISIL strongholds in Libya. While Tunisians were the largest foreign fighter contingent in Sirte, militants also came from countries as far afield as Kenya, Nigeria, Mali and Senegal.

6. Patrick Markey, "Sirte battle risks widening Libya political splits," *Reuters*, July 11, 2016. (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-libya-idUKKCN0ZR0GX>); Maria Abi-Habib, "Islamic State Fighters in Libya Flee South as Stronghold Crumbles," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2016. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-fighters-in-libya-flee-south-as-stronghold-falls-1471198644>)

7. Anthony Loyd, "Desperate jihadists shave off beards as Libyan rout looms," *The Sunday Times* (London), June 10, 2016. (<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/desperate-jihadists-shave-off-beards-as-libyan-rout-looms-03t0550x6>)

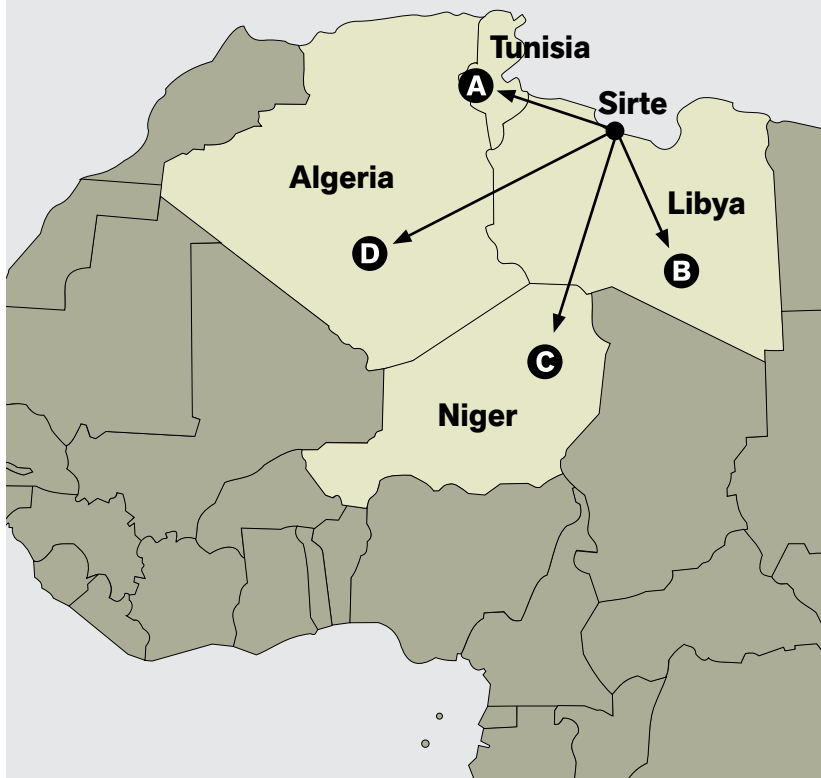
8. See tweets posted by Sami M. Berriwen, @SamiBerriwen, *Twitter*, September 29, 2016. (<https://twitter.com/SamiBerriwen/status/781533813927206913>)

9. Christoph Reuter, "The Next Disaster: Islamic State Expands as Libya Descends into Chaos," *Der Spiegel* (Germany), March 16, 2016. (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/libya-descends-into-chaos-as-islamic-state-expands-a-1081874.html>)

10. "ضبط خلية تابعة لتنظيم «داعش» في طرابلس" (Arrest of Cell Belonging to "ISIS" in Tripoli)," *Al-Wasat* (Libya), May 13, 2016. (<http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/105640/>)

11. For a comprehensive discussion of ISIL's propaganda strategy in Libya, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Nathaniel Barr, and Bridget Moreng, "The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy," *The Hague's International Center for Counter-Terrorism*, March 2016. (<http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Gartenstein-Ross-IS-Global-Propaganda-Strategy-March2016.pdf>)

## The Foreign Fighter Diaspora from Sirte



- A Sirte to Tunisia:** Several hundred Tunisian foreign fighters joined ISIL factions fighting in Libya. Tunisian militants have moved freely between Tunisia and Libya, and ISIL's Tunisian network used Libya as a staging ground for attacks in Tunisia
- B Sirte to Southern Libya:** Libyan ISIL militants may attempt to regroup and establish safe havens in poorly governed areas in southern Libya
- C Sirte to Sahel:** ISIL militants from Sub-Saharan Africa may attempt to link up with ISIL factions in Mali and Nigeria
- D Sirte to Algeria:** ISIL networks fleeing Sirte could attempt to move heavy weaponry, which is easily accessible in Libya, into Algeria



A screen shot from a Wilayat Tarabulus (Tripoli) video, featuring a Malian fighter known as Omar al-Mali. **Source:** <http://jihadology.net/?s=from+humiliation+to+glory>

A growing body of evidence indicates that foreign fighters previously based in Sirte have begun fleeing to neighboring countries, with some already plotting new attacks. In May 2016, Moroccan officials detained a Chadian ISIL member who was allegedly planning to carry out attacks on hotels and security forces in the country. Several Moroccans who had returned from Libya in May were also arrested on suspicions that they were coordinating with the Chadian.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Algerian security forces reported in May that ISIL members, carrying forged passports and dressed in civilian clothing, were fleeing toward the Algerian and Tunisian borders.<sup>13</sup>

12. Mounir Abou al-Maali, "أبو البتول الذباح" دخل المغرب تزامنا مع عودة ثلاثة مغاربة من ليبيا، ("Abul Batoul al-Zhabbah" Entered Morocco At the Same Time Three Moroccans Returned from Libya)," *Al-Yaoum* (Morocco), May 15, 2016. (<http://www.alyaoum24.com/596557.html>)

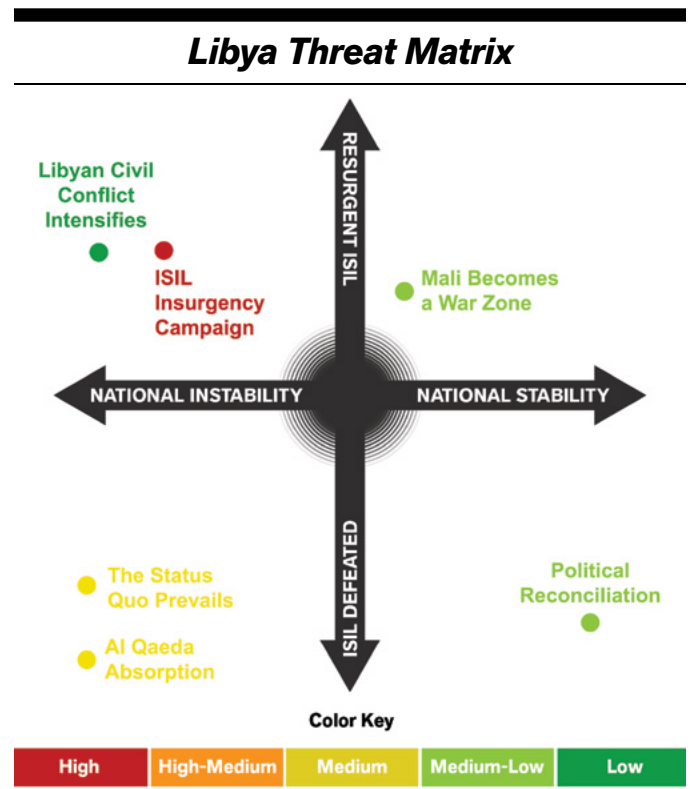
13. Kamal Mousaoui, "خاص/ وفق الأمن الجزائري.. فرار 200 "داعشي" من درنة، بنغازي وسرت نحو حدود الجزائر وتونس" (Exclusive: 200 Members of ISIS Flee from Darna and Sirte Toward the Borders of Algeria and Tunisia)," *Assabah News* (Tunisia), May 10, 2016. (<http://www.assabahnews.tn/article/124345/خاص-وفق-الأمن-الجزائري-فرار-200-داعشي-من-درنة-بنغازي-وسرت-نحو-حدود-الجزائر-وتونس>)

In August 2016, Egyptian forces disrupted a cell based in al-Gharbiyah governorate that was led by an Egyptian who had fought alongside, and remained in contact with, ISIL members in Libya.<sup>14</sup> These incidents raise the possibility that ISIL's Sirte leadership made a strategic decision to deploy forces back to their home countries to foment regional chaos.

### Scenarios for ISIL in Libya

ISIL's defeat in Sirte will test the group's resilience, and place pressure on ISIL to adapt its strategy. One possible adaptation is that ISIL will pivot from a model focused on holding and governing territory to an insurgency approach. This strategic shift would enable ISIL to exploit political uncertainty in Libya, while avoiding costly conventional military confrontations with better-armed adversaries. But the fall of Sirte could leave ISIL's Libyan network disorganized. Al-Qaeda may capitalize on ISIL's internal chaos by recruiting disillusioned fighters and making a play to absorb much of ISIL's Libyan network.

ISIL's future in Libya also hinges, in part, on the outcome of the Libyan civil war. Continued political gridlock, or violent conflict, at the national level will impede efforts to crack down on ISIL's remaining presence in the country, giving the group an opportunity to rebuild its networks. ISIL can exploit instability and establish a foothold in weakly governed territories, just as it did in Libya in late 2014 and early 2015. Conversely, ISIL's prospects in Libya will dim considerably if political actors reach an accord and begin a reconciliation process. If this were to occur, armed groups aligned with the state could focus on dismantling ISIL's residual network.



### Scenario 1: ISIL Insurgency Campaign

ISIL's remaining forces in Libya regroup in poorly-governed rural and urban areas and launch an insurgent campaign against both GNA-aligned factions and units allied with Khalifa Hifter, a military strongman supported by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR). ISIL also carries out a series of terrorist attacks against strategic economic sites and soft targets in major cities, including Misrata, Tripoli, and Benghazi. ISIL's military operations disrupt Libya's economic development and fuel instability.

**Likelihood: High.** Growing evidence indicates that a sizable contingent of ISIL fighters survived the Sirte offensive, though their whereabouts are unknown. Weak governance and political instability will provide this residual ISIL contingent with the space and time

14. Ahmad Rahim, "تفاصيل القبض علي خلايا نائمة لـ'داعش' في 3 محافظات بالدلتا" (Details of Arrest of ISIS Sleeper Cell in 3 Governorates in the Delta)," *60 Minutes*, August 9, 2016. (<http://60minutese-eg.com/2016/08/09/99163/>). Similarly, in September 2016, security forces aligned with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives arrested a prominent ISIL preacher in Ajdabiya who was planning to flee to Egypt. See, "Prominent ISIL Leader 'Planning To Flee' to Egypt Arrested in Ajdabiya," *WAL News Agency*, September 15, 2016 (Accessed via Open Source Center).

to rebuild its networks, eventually culminating in the initiation of a new insurgency campaign. This model is similar to the approach that ISIL adopted following its near-defeat in Iraq in the late 2000s.

### **Scenario 2: Al-Qaeda Absorption**

After struggling to maintain communications with ISIL's central leadership, the majority of ISIL fighters in Libya eventually join al-Qaeda-linked groups, both in Libya and the surrounding region. Al-Qaeda factions accelerate this process by launching a concerted campaign aimed at recruiting Libyan ISIL members. Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and AQIM battalions based in southern Libya are the primary beneficiaries.

Likelihood: Medium. Al-Qaeda already appears to be reaching out to ISIL members in North Africa, especially in Algeria and Tunisia. Thus, it is likely that al-Qaeda, which maintains a robust, albeit somewhat covert, presence in Libya, will attempt to capitalize on ISIL's disarray in the country. ISIL fighters in Libya may also voluntarily defect to al-Qaeda as ISIL's foothold in Syria and Iraq shrinks, and the group's brand loses value.

### **Scenario 3: The Status Quo Prevails**

Hifter and the HoR refuse to recognize the GNA or reconcile with rival factions in Misrata and Tripoli. Hifter consolidates control over eastern Libya, including the jihadist hotbed of Derna, but declines to cooperate with his military adversaries on counterterrorism issues. GNA-backed militias do not aggressively pursue ISIL networks that escaped from Sirte, fearing that doing so would allow Hifter to expand into central and western Libya.

Likelihood: Medium. There are few indications that Libya's rival factions will resolve their differences in the near term. In fact, recent developments, including the October 2016 coup and subsequent escalation of tensions in Tripoli, suggests that conditions are deteriorating. The continuation of the status quo remains a likely political scenario for the foreseeable future.

### **Scenario 4: Political Reconciliation**

Rival political factions gradually reconcile, and powerful armed militias disarm or fold themselves into a national Libyan army. This results in improved counterterrorism cooperation between military factions in eastern and western Libya, and reduces ISIL's freedom of movement in the country. It may not similarly impede al-Qaeda's ability to operate in Libya, however, due to al-Qaeda's ability to ingratiate itself with local actors.

Likelihood: Low to Medium. The GNA's political position appears increasingly fragile, reducing the probability that the internationally-backed government will be able to bring together rival factions. That being said, the international community, fearing renewed conflict in Libya, may double down on efforts to facilitate an accord. Alternatively, the HoR, which is disillusioned with the GNA-led negotiations, could initiate its own political talks with rival factions, though this is unlikely to change the status quo immediately.

### **Scenario 5: Mali Becomes a New War Zone**

The jihadist insurgency in northern Mali intensifies as ISIL continues to lose ground in Libya. ISIL fighters who evaded the offensive in Sirte flee to Mali and neighboring countries, where they link up with Sahel and West African-based ISIL networks, and insert themselves into the conflict against UN and French forces. Some of these ISIL fighters may be recruited by al-Qaeda after moving into Mali.

Likelihood: Low to Medium. The situation in northern Mali continues to deteriorate, with jihadist factions, Tuareg separatists, and pro-government militias fueling violence. Thus, the region presents a potential alternative for ISIL fighters fleeing Sirte. But it remains unclear whether large amounts of ISIL fighters in Libya will be able to migrate to Mali without being interdicted. Further, some North African ISIL members may prefer to remain in the region, rather than traveling to a culturally unfamiliar place like Mali.

***Scenario 6: Libyan civil conflict intensifies***

Clashes erupt in Sirte and other parts of central Libya between the Libyan National Army, the military faction aligned with Khalifa Hifter, and Misratan forces. Violence spreads to other parts of Libya, triggering a large-scale civil conflict. The conflict between rival factions creates a security vacuum in Libya and enables ISIL to rebuild its network.

Likelihood: Low. Though relations between rival political factions in Libya remain tense, and have become even more strained following recent events in Tripoli, few players involved in Libya’s civil conflict would benefit from a sharp escalation in violence. A possible exception is Khalifa Hifter, who may see an opportunity to strike in the Sirte basin as Misratan forces regroup following their significant losses during the fight against ISIL. Still, the international community and regional actors will likely attempt to contain the conflict and prevent a full-blown civil war.

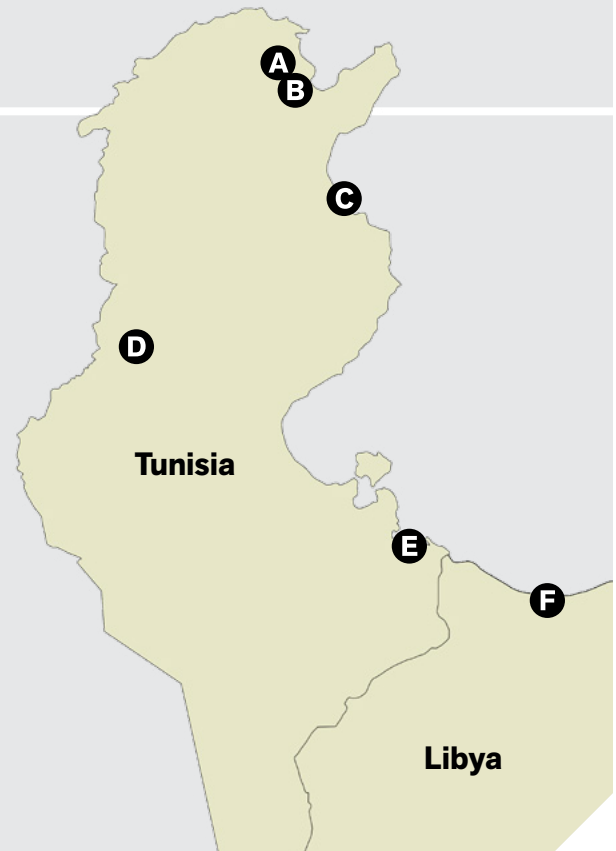
**Tunisia**

ISIL functions primarily as a clandestine terrorist network in Tunisia. The group maintains sleeper cells in the country, including in and around the capital of Tunis, which are connected to senior planners and facilitators. This senior cadre was, for a time, based in the western Libyan city of Sebratha, but following U.S. strikes against ISIL leaders in Sabratha in early 2016, several of these leaders migrated to either Tunisia or other parts of Libya.

ISIL’s Tunisian leadership has orchestrated several large-scale, mass-casualty attacks against both hard and soft targets in Tunisia, and the group continues to plot attacks in the country, though its operational capabilities have diminished since early 2016. ISIL also maintains a small force in Tunisia’s western mountains, which is intermittently fighting against the Tunisian military.

**Key Locations for ISIL in Tunisia**

- A Mnihla:** Tunisian security forces killed two militants during a raid on an ISIL cell here in May 2016
- B Tunis:** In November 2015, ISIL carried out a suicide bombing of a bus carrying presidential guard members in downtown Tunis
- C Port El Kantaoui:** An ISIL militant massacred over 35 people on a beach in June 2015
- D Jebel Chaambi:** Mountains in this area are home to numerous violent non-state actors, including a small contingent of ISIL militants
- E Ben Guerdane:** This border town was the target of a major ISIL offensive in March 2016
- F Sebratha:** The Tunisian ISIL network's former operational base



## Timeline of ISIL Attacks and Incidents in Tunisia

**Militants attack the Bardo Museum in Tunis,** killing more than twenty people. ISIL claims responsibility for the attack, but Tunisian authorities assert that Katibat Uqba Ibn Nadi, an al-Qaeda-linked group, carried out the operation.

**March 18, 2015**

**ISIL militants based in Jebel Semama,** a mountain range in Sidi Bouzid province, behead a 16-year-old shepherd whom the group accused of spying for the Tunisian military.

**November 13, 2015**

**June 26, 2015**  
An ISIL militant who had trained in Sebratha massacres over 35 people at a beach resort near Sousse.

**November 24, 2015**  
ISIL claims responsibility for a suicide bombing targeting presidential guards boarding a bus parked on a main thoroughfare in Tunis. Twelve presidential guards are killed and more than a dozen others are wounded.

ISIL's core Tunisian network is led by former Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) members, many of whom fled to Sebratha and other cities in Libya after the Tunisian government banned AST, an al-Qaeda front group, in August 2013. Several individuals who migrated to Sebratha, while nominally affiliated with AST, disagreed with the AST leadership's slower and more deliberate post-Arab Spring strategy, and instead believed that AST should immediately adopt a more confrontational stance toward the Tunisian state.<sup>15</sup> This contingent's strategic approach aligned with ISIL's aggressive and ostentatious growth model, and

the Sebratha network eventually broke with AST and joined the ISIL network.

Sebratha subsequently became the operations hub for ISIL's activities in Tunisia.<sup>16</sup> Tunisian jihadists traveled to Sebratha to receive military training. Weapons moved in the other direction, as ISIL-linked smugglers transported guns from Libya to cells in Tunisia. Recruits trained in Sebratha were also redeployed to Tunisia to perpetrate attacks at home. Indeed, all three major terrorist attacks that occurred in Tunisia in 2015 were linked to training camps in Sebratha. Seifeddine Rezgui, the militant who

15. Two individuals who played a critical role in shaping the Sebratha network were Ahmed Rouissi and Abu Bakr al-Hakim. Rouissi and Hakim represented the more assertive wing of AST, and both men were implicated in the 2013 assassinations of Tunisian politicians Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi. It is not entirely clear whether Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, AST's leader, ordered these 2013 assassinations; but the odds are quite high that Rouissi and Hakim acted of their accord in carrying out the killings. Rouissi and Hakim helped establish the Sebratha training camp in 2013, and both men later defected to ISIL, a move that reflected their strategic disagreements with al-Qaeda loyalists in AST. The fact that the Sebratha cell aligned with ISIL, rather than with al-Qaeda, was likely a result of Rouissi and Hakim's influence over the network. For more on Rouissi and Hakim's connections to Sebratha, see Pierre Longera, "Tunisian Officials Detain Eight and Hunt Three Men Allegedly Involved in Sousse Massacre," *Vice News*, July 2, 2015. (<https://news.vice.com/article/tunisian-officials-detain-eight-and-hunt-three-men-allegedly-involved-in-sousse-massacre>)

16. Though ISIL commanders in Sirte were technically responsible for directing the group's activities in Sebratha, ISIL members in Sebratha reported that cells in the city maintained a significant degree of autonomy and control over local affairs. These cells also focused on different theaters of combat. While the Tunisian network plotted attacks in Tunisia, a cell comprised of Libyan nationals engaged in kidnapping, among other activities, to raise revenue for ISIL operations. See, Aidan Lewis and Ahmed Elumami, "Tunisian prisoners tell of life with Islamic State in Libya," *Reuters*, July 1, 2016. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-tunisians-idUSKCN0ZH450>); "Confessions of Ali Bashir Ali al-Fallah," Arabic video posted on Quwwat al-Rad al-Khasah Facebook page, February 23, 2016.



**The U.S. carries out airstrikes on an ISIL cell in the** western Libyan town of Sebratha, killing approximately 40 militants. It is believed that the Sebratha cell was planning an attack in Tunisia at the time of the airstrikes. Following the airstrikes, Libyan militias clash with remaining ISIL militants in Sebratha and force the group out of the town.

**February 19, 2016**

**Tunisian security forces conduct a raid** in a Tunis suburb against an ISIL cell plotting a series of attacks in the country. Two militants are killed in the raid, while several others are arrested.

**May 11, 2016**

**March 7, 2016**

**ISIL militants launch a major attack on the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdane.** Many of the militants involved in the clash were natives of Ben Guerdane, and some appeared to have trained in Sebratha. ISIL's attempt to take over the border town fails, and over 40 militants are killed.

massacred 38 Western tourists on a beach in Sousse in June 2015, trained in Sebratha, as did the two attackers who killed over 20 people at the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015.<sup>17</sup> The November 2015 bombing of a bus carrying members of Tunisia's presidential guard in downtown Tunis has also been linked to Sebratha, with investigators concluding that the explosives used in the Tunis bombing matched explosives discovered in Libya.<sup>18</sup>

February 2016 marked an inflection point in ISIL's Tunisia operations, as the group lost its valued Sebratha safe haven. On February 19, the U.S. carried out airstrikes against ISIL targets in Sebratha, including Nouredine Chouchane, who was believed to be the

commander of ISIL's Tunisia network.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after the airstrikes, which killed 43, the remaining ISIL militants in Sebratha clashed with Libyan security forces, who forced the ISIL contingent out of Sebratha after several days of intense conflict.

The collapse of ISIL's Sebratha safe haven led to the restructuring of its Tunisian network. With jihadists no longer able to plan and stage operations in Sebratha, ISIL's operational hub shifted to Tunisia. In the months following, Tunisian authorities arrested several people who had received training in Libya.<sup>20</sup> The migration of operational networks from Libya to Tunisia has given Tunisian intelligence greater visibility into the activities

17. Carlotta Gall and Steven Erlanger, "Gunman at Tunisian Beach Hotel Trained with Museum Attackers," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2015. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/world/africa/gunman-at-tunisian-beach-hotel-trained-with-museum-attackers.html>).

Although the two Bardo attackers attended a training camp in Sebratha, it is not clear from open-source information whether the attack was directed by ISIL. The Tunisian government has claimed that Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, al-Qaeda's military wing in Tunisia, planned the Bardo attack. However, ISIL claimed responsibility.

18. "إلقاء القبض على إرهابي خطير مورط في الهجوم على حافلة الأمن الرئاسي هذه هويت" (Arrest of Dangerous Terrorist Involved in Attack on Presidential Convoy, This is His Identity)," *Al-Jomhouria* (Lebanon), June 20, 2016. ([http://www.jomhouria.com/art54699\\_القاء\\_](http://www.jomhouria.com/art54699_القاء_)); "Five Arrested in Ben Guerdane for Attack Plot, Ties to Sabratha," *Tunisia Live*, February 21, 2016. (<http://tunisia-tn.com/five-arrested-in-ben-guerdane-for-attack-plot-ties-to-sabratha/>)

19. Ahmed Elumami and Aidan Lewis, "U.S. air raid hits Islamic State in Libya, 43 dead," *Reuters*, February 19, 2016. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/libya-security-idUSKCN0VS1A5>)

20. Mona Bouazizi, "Tasked with Smuggling Arms through Sea, Hide it in Capital: Uncovering ISIL Members in Bardo, Hey Ezzouhour, Jebel El Ahmar," *Al-Chourouk* (Tunisia), April 20, 2016. (Accessed via Open Source Center)

of ISIL cells, but could also accelerate the rate at which domestic networks recruit locally and mobilize.

The February 2016 air and ground operations against ISIL in Sebratha also disrupted a budding plot to target the Tunisian border city of Ben Guerdane.<sup>21</sup> For several weeks, if not months, before the airstrikes, Tunisian ISIL members had been planning a major operation aimed at seizing the city and placing it under *sharia* law.<sup>22</sup> The Sebratha network, as well as ISIL militants based in Tunisia's western mountains, were involved in smuggling weapons into Ben Guerdane, where they were collected by cells.<sup>23</sup> Highlighting the magnitude of the planned assault, one Tunisian arrested in Libya in late February claimed that ISIL planned to deploy 200 militants to seize the town.<sup>24</sup> Another Tunisian based in Sebratha noted that, in preparation for the attack, ISIL members in Libya gathered an impressive weapons arsenal, including DShK Russian-made heavy machine guns, and instructed contacts still in Tunisia to travel to Libya to train for the Ben Guerdane operation.<sup>25</sup>

But the February 2016 military operations against ISIL in Sebratha significantly reduced ISIL's manpower, and forced the group to launch the Ben Guerdane attack hastily, with a diminished, albeit still lethal, force.

Though Tunisian security forces were expecting an attack on Ben Guerdane, militants who struck the town on March 7, 2016 still managed to establish temporary checkpoints, and to kill eight civilians and 12 military and police officials, including the head of Ben Guerdane's counterterrorism brigade.<sup>26</sup> Militants deliberately sought out prominent members of Ben Guerdane's security apparatus, reinforcing claims that operatives involved in the attack were locals with intimate knowledge of the town.<sup>27</sup> But Tunisian security forces prevented ISIL from seizing control of Ben Guerdane, dealing a blow to the group's ambitions in Tunisia.

Since the Ben Guerdane incident, Tunisian authorities have disrupted several high-profile plots, indicating that, despite the losses that ISIL suffered in Sebratha and Ben Guerdane, the group still possesses a robust network in Tunisia. In May 2016, Tunisian security forces conducted raids on cells in the southern city of Tataouine and in the northern town of Mnihla, located just seven miles from Tunis, killing four militants, arresting over a dozen others, and recovering a major weapons stockpile.<sup>28</sup> The Mnihla cell was reportedly planning attacks on Tunisian military installations and Western targets, including a high-ranking U.S.

21. Khamis Ben Brek, "هل يخترق تنظيم الدولة حدود تونس؟" (Will ISIS Penetrate Tunisia's Borders)," *Al-Jazeera* (Qatar), February 28, 2016.

(<http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2016/2/28/هل-يخترق-تنظيم-الدولة-حدود-تونس>)

22. "وثيقة سرية تكشف أن 'فجر ليبيا' وراء كشف مخطط داعش في بن قردان" (Secret Document Reveals that "Libya Dawn" is Behind Uncovering ISIS Plan in Ben Guardane)," *Achahed* (Tunisia), March 12, 2016.

(<https://www.achahed.com/وثيقة-سرية-تكشف-أن-فجر-ليبيا-وراء-كشف-م>)

23. Mouna Missaoui, "In a Secret Operation, Terrorist Ghandri Reconstructs the Burying of Weapons in Ben Guerdane," *Assarih* (Tunisia), May 26, 2016; Khadija Yahiaoui, "مخازن أسلحة... خلايا نائمة... مهربون... سيارات مفخخة: مخطط داعش لاستهداف تونس" (Weapons Depots... Sleeper Cells... Smugglers... Booby-Trapped Cars: ISIS' Plot to Target Tunisia)," *Al-Chourouk* (Tunisia), March 9, 2016.

(<http://www.alchourouk.com/164600/151/1/-مخازن-أسلحة-...-خلايا-ناائمة-...-مهربون-...-سيارات-مفخخة-مخطط-داعش-لاستهداف-تونس-.html>)

24. Khamis Ben Brek, "هل يخترق تنظيم الدولة حدود تونس؟" (Will ISIS Penetrate Tunisia's Borders?)," *Al-Jazeera* (Qatar), February 28, 2016.

(<http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2016/2/28/هل-يخترق-تنظيم-الدولة-حدود-تونس>)

25. Interview with Mohammed ben Mohsen Gharbi (Arabic), video posted to Akhbar al-An Facebook page, June 8, 2016.

26. Sudarsan Raghavan, "Islamic State, growing stronger in Libya, sets its sights on fragile neighbor Tunisia," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2016.

([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/islamic-state-threatens-fragile-tunisia-from-next-door-in-libya/2016/05/13/cd9bd634-f82e-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-threatens-fragile-tunisia-from-next-door-in-libya/2016/05/13/cd9bd634-f82e-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718_story.html))

27. Samy Ghorbal, "Tunisie: la bataille de Ben Guerdane (Tunisia: The Battle of Ben Guerdane)," *Jeune Afrique* (France), March 22, 2016.

(<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/309387/politique/tunisie-bataille-de-ben-guerdane/>)

28. "Tunisia kills two 'suspected jihadists' in anti-terror raid," *Agence France Presse*, May 11, 2016.

(<https://www.yahoo.com/news/tunisia-kills-two-jihadists-anti-terror-raid-near-111535691.html>)

military official, in the coastal town of Hammamet.<sup>29</sup> The Tataouine cell was tasked with providing arms to jihadists in Mnihla.<sup>30</sup> The commander of the Mnihla cell, known only as Ennemer, was allegedly in contact with ISIL leaders in Libya, and sent pictures of the would-be Hammamet attackers to ISIL in Libya – a move designed to provide ISIL propagandists with material to claim credit for and celebrate the upcoming operation.<sup>31</sup> This incident highlighted the ties between ISIL networks in Tunisia and Libya.

In addition to Ennemer's links to Libya, there are several other significant ties between the Ben Guerdane, Mnihla, and Sebratha cells that shed light on ISIL's intricately interconnected network in Tunisia. One individual who featured in both the Mnihla and Ben Guerdane plots is Adel Ghandri, a prominent ISIL smuggler arrested during the Mnihla operation. Ghandri had been involved in transporting arms and militants from Libya to Ben Guerdane.<sup>32</sup> Najmeddine Gharbi, one of the militants killed in the Mnihla raid, was initially but erroneously believed to have

been killed in an airstrike in Sebratha, and was also involved in planning the Ben Guerdane operation.<sup>33</sup> Another individual arrested in the Mnihla operation was allegedly involved in planning the November 2015 attack on the presidential guard bus in Tunis, further underscoring the density and scope of the Tunisian ISIL network.<sup>34</sup>

Though Tunisian security forces have experienced considerable success in identifying and disrupting domestic cells before they can perpetrate attacks, the core ISIL network in Tunisia continues to pose a significant threat. Tunisian authorities disrupted several plots intended to be part of ISIL's global Ramadan terrorist campaign.<sup>35</sup> For instance, in mid-July, Tunisian security forces foiled an ISIL plot to carry out eight suicide attacks in Tunis before the Eid al-Fitr holiday.<sup>36</sup> The Mnihla cell was also expected to carry out its attack during Ramadan.

Pro-ISIL online networks play a critical role in supporting ISIL's physical network in Tunisia. Militants

29. Mona Bouazizi, "الدواعش" خططوا لـ3 عمليات إرهابية بالحمامات في رمضان.. اغتيال جنرال أمريكي واستهداف نادي الضباط ومدرسة الحرس، "Al-Chourouk (Tunisia), June 3, 2016. (<http://www.alchourouk.com/181321/662/1/3-خططوا-ل-3-عمليات-إرهابية-بالحمامات-في-رمضان-اغتيال-جنرال-أمريكي-واستهداف-نادي-الضباط-ومدرسة-الحرس>)

30. Mouna Missaoui, "In a Secret Operation, Terrorist Ghandri Reconstructs the Burying of Weapons in Ben Guerdane," *Assarib* (Tunisia), May 12, 2016.

31. Mona Bouazizi, "الدواعش" خططوا لـ3 عمليات إرهابية بالحمامات في رمضان.. اغتيال جنرال أمريكي واستهداف نادي الضباط ومدرسة الحرس (Exclusive: 'ISIS' planned 3 terrorist operations in Hammamet in Ramadan...an assassination of an American general and the targeting of an officer's club and National Guard school)," *Al-Chourouk* (Tunisia), June 3, 2016. (<http://www.alchourouk.com/181321/662/1/html>)

32. Mona Missaoui, "El Mnihla Attack! They Planned Seven Simultaneous Attacks During Ramadan. Dangerous Terrorist Ghandri Trapped... A Woman Gave Them Away," *Assarib* (Tunisia), May 12, 2016. (Accessed via Open Source Center)

33. "Terrorisme: Adel Ghandri capturé vivant à Mnihla (Terrorism: Adel Ghandri captured living in Mnihla)," *Kapitalis* (Tunisia), May 11, 2016. (<http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2016/05/11/terrorisme-adel-ghandri-capture-vivant-a-mnihla/>) (reporting the initial belief that Gharbi was killed in an airstrike on Sebratha); "Le père de Adel Ghandri accusé de complicité avec les terroristes (Adel Ghandri's father accused of complicity with terrorists)," *Kapitalis* (Tunisia), May 24, 2016. (<http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2016/05/24/le-pere-de-adel-ghandri-accuse-de-complicite-avec-les-terroristes/>) (detailing Gharbi's involvement in planning the Ben Guerdane operation)

34. "Dangerous Confessions by the Father of the Terrorist Adel al-Ghandari and 3 Individuals Who Received Pardons Planned Terror Operations)," *Turess* (Tunisia), May 24, 2016. (<http://www.turess.com/hakaek/92373>)

35. For more on ISIL's Ramadan campaign, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "Bloody Ramadan: How the Islamic State Coordinated a Global Terrorist Campaign," *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2016. (<http://warontherocks.com/2016/07/bloody-ramadan-how-the-islamic-state-coordinated-a-global-terrorist-campaign/>)

36. "صحيفة: قبل العيد، 8 إرهابيين انتحاريين كانوا سيفجرون أنفسهم في قلب العاصمة" (*Newsaper: Before Eid, 8 suicide terrorists were going to blow themselves up in the heart of the capital*)," *Akher Khabar* (Tunisia), July 11, 2016. (<http://www.akherkhabaronline.com/ar//54571>)

in Tunisia sometimes coordinate operations online before meeting in person to train. For example, a jihadist arrested in the eastern governorate of Mahdia in April 2016 established contact with three other militants via Facebook, and later met the men in person to search for places where they could engage in weapons training.<sup>37</sup> Investigations have also revealed that Tunisian jihadists maintain contact with militants in Syria and Libya through social media, suggesting that ISIL's Tunisian network may be receiving directions from abroad.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to its clandestine, urban-based network, ISIL maintains a support base among a contingent of militants residing in Tunisia's western and central mountains. The western mountains, including those in Chaambi national park, have historically been a stronghold for Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN), AQIM's Tunisian military wing, and al-Qaeda-linked factions dominate the region. However, a fraction of KUIN's fighting force has defected to ISIL, including a unit based in Jebel Mghila, located in Sidi Bouzid governorate.<sup>39</sup> The Jebel Mghila unit is believed to have been led for a time by Mourad Chaib, the brother of former KUIN emir and al-Qaeda loyalist Khaled Chaib (a.k.a. Luqman Abu Sakhr).<sup>40</sup> The ISIL contingent based in the western and central mountains has claimed responsibility for several small-scale attacks, but the Tunisian military has carried out multiple debilitating

strikes on the group's leadership. For instance, in May 2016, the Tunisian military killed Seifeddine Jamali, ISIL's leader in Jebel Mghila.<sup>41</sup>

It is likely that some of the estimated 1,000 Tunisians fighting with ISIL in Libya will flee home and link up with Tunisia-based ISIL cells.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, an Algerian news outlet reported that in September 2016, several ISIL members, posing as shepherds, slipped across the Libyan border into Tunisia.<sup>43</sup> An influx of ISIL foreign fighters into Tunisia would boost ISIL's capabilities in the country, and present additional challenges to Tunisian security forces that are already scrambling to identify and disrupt ISIL cells before they strike.

## Scenarios for ISIL in Tunisia

Though Tunisian security forces have made considerable gains against ISIL networks in recent months, there are still numerous opportunities for jihadists to sow chaos in the country. One significant risk to Tunisia is the possibility of spillover from Libya, as ISIL foreign fighters flee from Sirte. Tunisia-based ISIL networks that have suffered losses in recent months could also try to mount a resurgence, either by carrying out a territory grab similar to the Ben Guerdane attack, or by shifting tack and pursuing a

37. Mona Bouazizi, "Between the Capital, Mahdia and Sidi Bouzid: A Camp to Train Terrorists and Dormant Cells Using Deserted Houses," *Al-Chourouk* (Tunisia), April 12, 2016.

38. Sabir Mokshir, "جهاز الاستعلامات يحذر من استهدافها مخطط «داعشي» لـ«ضرب» الكنائس والمعابد اليهودية بتونس" (Exclusive: Investigative apparatus warns of ISIS plot to 'strike' churches and synagogues)," *Assabah News* (Tunisia), August 3, 2016. (<http://www.assabahnews.tn/article/129272/خاص-جهاز-الاستعلامات-يحذر-من-استهدافها-مخطط-«داعشي»-لـ«ضرب»-الكنائس-والمعابد-اليهودية>)

39. In November 2015, the ISIL unit based in Jebel Mghila beheaded a Tunisian shepherd accused of providing intelligence to the Tunisian army on ISIL's movements in the region. See "Tunisia group claims beheading of teen shepherd for ISIS," *Agence France Presse*, November 23, 2015. (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/11/23/Tunisia-group-claims-beheading-of-teen-shepherd-for-ISIS-.html>)

40. "Mourad Chaib reportedly defected to ISIL while he was in Tunisia, and later joined ISIL fighters in Libya, where he was killed in May 2016. خاص بالصور // مفاجأة مدوية: هذه علاقات الصورة نشرها الاعلام الليبي بلقمان ابو صخر" (Exclusive with Pictures// Huge Surprise: This is the Relationship of the Picture Published by Libyan Media to Luqman Abu Sakhr)," *Akher Kabar* (Tunisia), April 22, 2016. (<http://www.akherkhabaronline.com/ar/1744/print/خاص-بالصور-مفاجأة-مدوية-هذه-علاقات-الصورة-النشرها-الاعلام-الليبي-بلقمان-ابو-صخر>)

41. "Tunisian forces say kill local Islamic State commander in clashes," *Reuters*, May 19, 2016. (<http://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL5N18G2SA>)

42. "1,000 Tunisians 'fighting for Islamic State in Libya,'" *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* (UK), September 7, 2016. (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/9/7/1-000-tunisians-fighting-for-islamic-state-in-libya>)

43. "Army Foils 'Terrorists' Infiltration Attempts From Libya, Tunisia," *Echourouk El-Youmi* (Algeria), September 20, 2016. (Accessed via Open Source Center)

more deliberate growth strategy. Al-Qaeda, which has maintained a relatively low profile in Tunisia, could also attempt to regain clear control of the jihadist landscape in the country by recruiting disillusioned ISIL foreign fighters.

Political and economic developments in Tunisia will influence the trajectory of jihadism in the country. Though Tunisia has made considerable progress in its transition to democracy following the 2011 Arab uprisings, political stalemate and intra-party schisms have impeded the implementation of necessary political, social, and economic reforms. This has, in turn, prevented the Tunisian state from addressing key drivers of radicalization and violent extremism. Tunisia’s economy is fragile, and an uptick in jihadist violence could cripple the tourism industry, leaving millions of Tunisian youths unemployed and vulnerable to the narrative of empowerment that ISIL and al-Qaeda promulgate.

***Scenario 1: Spillover from Libya***

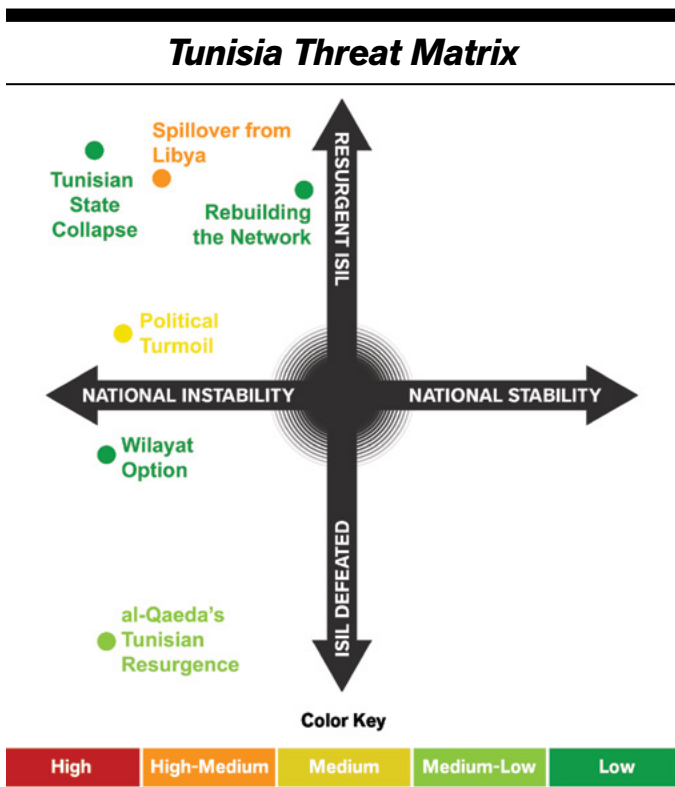
ISIL fighters fleeing Sirte and other Libyan cities join ISIL cells in Tunisia, and bolster the group’s network in the country. ISIL mounts a campaign of terrorist attacks inside Tunisia, focusing on soft targets and symbolic locations in an effort to cripple Tunisia’s tourism industry. ISIL units in the mountains of western Tunisia also experience a boost in capabilities following the arrival of fighters from Libya, and begin to carry out more brazen and aggressive attacks against security forces.

Likelihood: Medium to High. Initial reporting suggests that ISIL fighters from Sirte have already attempted to make their way into Tunisia. Moreover, Tunisian ISIL militants have traveled regularly between Tunisia and Libya in the last year, indicating that the group maintains access to cross-border smuggling routes. It is likely that at least some foreign fighters fleeing Libya will succeed in linking up with jihadist cells in Tunisia, but Tunisian security forces are hyper-vigilant to the threat of returning foreign fighters, and may be able to contain the spillover.

***Scenario 2: Political Turmoil***

Conflict between and within national political parties inhibits the Tunisian state from making necessary economic, security, and social reforms, and impedes counterterrorism efforts. The lack of meaningful political and economic change fuels frustration among the Tunisian youth population, and gives ISIL continuing recruitment opportunities. Communities residing in Ben Guerdane and other cities near the Libyan border, frustrated with government efforts to clamp down on cross-border smuggling, become increasingly confrontational toward Tunisian authorities, constraining the state’s ability to control its borders.

Likelihood: Medium. The Tunisian government, riven by internal divisions, has struggled to push austerity measures that would strengthen the country’s long-term economic outlook. At the same time, the government



has made only incremental steps aimed at addressing issues that fuel radicalization and extremism among socioeconomically disenfranchised Tunisian youths. Youssef Chahed, who was recently appointed Tunisia's prime minister, has promised to implement sweeping reforms, but the pace of change is likely to be torpid in the short term.

### **Scenario 3: Al-Qaeda's Tunisian Resurgence**

Al-Qaeda capitalizes on ISIL's global setbacks, and recruits ISIL fighters returning from Syria, Iraq and Libya. Al-Qaeda also expands its presence in urban areas in Tunisia, absorbing cells that were previously loyal to ISIL. The Tunisian ISIL network is diminished, though not eliminated, while al-Qaeda's model of revolutionary warfare in Tunisia is bolstered.<sup>44</sup>

Likelihood: Low to Medium. Media outlets and Tunisian authorities have both reported that some ISIL fighters in Tunisia are already considering defecting to al-Qaeda. As ISIL loses ground in Syria and Iraq, more Tunisian ISIL members will likely consider shifting their allegiance to al-Qaeda. But Tunisian al-Qaeda factions, especially those in the western mountainous region near Algeria, have also suffered significant losses in recent years.

### **Scenario 4: The Wilayat Option**

With ISIL losing ground in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, the group's senior leadership directs its Tunisian network to mount another Ben Guerdane-style attack on a town or city in Tunisia to demonstrate

ISIL's continuing global relevance. Alternatively, ISIL conducts a series of high-profile terrorist attacks in Tunisia. ISIL's campaign in Tunisia places increasing pressure on Tunisian security forces, but leaves ISIL's network more vulnerable to disruption.

Likelihood: Low. Though ISIL may feel pressure to make a show of force, the group's network in Tunisia has been significantly depleted, raising questions about whether ISIL possesses the capacity to mount another Ben Guerdane-style offensive. There is, however, a greater probability that the group will try to carry out a series of high-profile, mass-casualty attacks similar to the Sousse beach massacre.

### **Scenario 5: Rebuilding the Network**

Rather than focusing on carrying out attacks in Tunisia, ISIL changes tack and begins to covertly rebuild its networks. The group employs some of the recruitment and *dawa* tactics initially implemented by Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (though it is forced to be much more covert than AST's initial post-revolution efforts),<sup>45</sup> while capitalizing on public discontent with the government. ISIL's operational tempo in Tunisia declines temporarily, though ISIL intends to increase the tempo again once the group is strong enough to sustain a campaign against the state.

Likelihood: Low. Though adopting a low-profile growth model would likely be a shrewd decision for ISIL, such an approach conflicts with ISIL's overarching strategy, which has emphasized ostentatious growth and highly visible military

44. In the post-Arab Spring environment, al-Qaeda has adhered to a strategy that closely resembles Mao's approach to revolutionary warfare. Rather than immediately mobilizing its forces against state actors, al-Qaeda has focused on building and consolidating bases of support. The group has pursued a deliberate and patient approach to expansion, avoiding costly conflicts with adversaries, and prioritizing sustainable growth over symbolic, tactical victories. This model of warfare stands in stark contrast with ISIL's propaganda-driven strategy, which, until recently, depended on maintaining the perception of constant growth. (Such a model is no longer sustainable for ISIL, now that the group's caliphate in Syria and Iraq is moving ever closer to becoming non-viable.) For more on the strategic differences between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jason Fritz, Bridget Moreng, and Nathaniel Barr, "Islamic State vs. Al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict," *New America Foundation*, December 2015. ([https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12103-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda/ISISvAQ\\_Final.e68fdd22a90e49c4af1d4cd0dc9e3651.pdf](https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12103-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda/ISISvAQ_Final.e68fdd22a90e49c4af1d4cd0dc9e3651.pdf))

45. For discussion of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's *dawa* and recruitment efforts prior to the state crackdown against it, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba, and Jihad," *The Hague's International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, May 2013. (<https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Gartenstein-Ross-Ansar-al-Sharia-Tunisia's-Long-Game-May-2013.pdf>)

operations. Indeed, some of the militants who joined ISIL's network in Tunisia split from Ansar al-Sharia and al-Qaeda primarily because they disagreed with al-Qaeda's more deliberate model. Thus, internal dynamics within ISIL present the greatest obstacle to the realization of this scenario.

### ***Scenario 6: Tunisian State Collapse***

A series of high-profile jihadist attacks against tourist targets causes tourism to plunge to near zero. This has a devastating impact on the country because of tourism's centrality to Tunisia's economy. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates the direct contribution of travel and tourism to Tunisia's GDP as 7.4 percent, and calculates tourism and travel's total contribution (including indirect effects) as 15.2 percent of GDP. Similarly, the council estimates that travel and tourism directly supports 6.8 percent of Tunisia's total employment, and that its total contribution is 13.9 percent of the country's employment.<sup>46</sup> Al-Qaeda and ISIL are able to exploit the economic misery they have caused, recruiting heavily in economically depressed areas. In a desperate triage, Tunisia concentrates security resources in its north, protecting Tunis and cities along the beach, while ceding areas in western and southern Tunisia to militants. Tunisia is increasingly characterized by the chaos and lawlessness that now grips Libya, and both ISIL and al-Qaeda are beneficiaries of the once-stable country's decline.

**Likelihood: Low.** Though continued terrorist attacks could cripple the Tunisian tourism industry, there exists a range of factors that could prevent this nightmare scenario from coming to fruition. For one, Tunisia's economy already withstood a significant decline in tourism-related revenue following the Bardo and Sousse attacks, and may be robust enough to survive future shocks. Second, Tunisia has received

considerable economic and counter-terrorism assistance from the international community, and it is likely to receive increased support if security conditions deteriorate further.

## Algeria

ISIL has struggled to gain and maintain a foothold in Algeria, and its prospects in the country are dim. Algerian security forces have aggressively targeted pro-ISIL militant groups, and have repeatedly killed the group's leaders. AQIM has largely repelled ISIL's efforts to peel away disaffected jihadists, and appears to be positioning itself to absorb ISIL's remaining infrastructure in Algeria. Meanwhile, Algerian authorities have dismantled ISIL recruitment networks before the group could embed itself in local communities. Although ISIL's expansion efforts have been largely unsuccessful, spillover from the conflict in Libya, including the possibility that the remains of ISIL's Sirte network will seek refuge elsewhere, could boost ISIL's capabilities in Algeria.

The collapse of Jund al-Khilafah, an AQIM splinter group that defected to ISIL and represented ISIL's most promising attempt at expansion in Algeria, underscores the challenges that ISIL has faced. In September 2014, AQIM's Center Zone, led by veteran commander Abdelmalek Gouri, announced that it was defecting to ISIL, and rebranded itself as Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate). Two weeks after announcing its defection, Jund al-Khilafah filmed the beheading of a French mountain climber whom it had kidnapped.<sup>47</sup> The beheading video, which was consistent with ISIL's brutal propaganda approach, was a misstep on Jund al-Khilafah's part, as it prompted Algerian security forces to launch a vicious manhunt for ISIL members.

46. "Travel and Tourism: Economic Impact 2015: Tunisia," *World Travel and Tourism Council*, 2015. (<http://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic%20impact%20research/countries%202015/tunisia2015.pdf>)

47. "ISIL-linked group beheads French captive," *Al-Jazeera* (Qatar), September 25, 2014. (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/algeria-fighters-behead-abducted-frenchman-2014924153845171677.html>)

In the two years since, Algerian forces have systematically eliminated the group's leadership and rank and file, rendering the group strategically obsolete. In December 2014, Gouri, Jund al-Khilafah's emir, was killed in a raid in northern Algeria.<sup>48</sup> In May 2015, Algerian security forces conducted a major operation against Jund al-Khilafah, killing 25 militants, including the group's new emir and four other senior commanders, in raids targeting a Jund al-Khilafah meeting site.<sup>49</sup> The assault decimated Jund al-Khilafah, which numbered no more than 50 militants at its peak, though it did not destroy the group entirely.

Authorities delivered another major blow to Jund al-Khilafah in the summer of 2016, when security forces mounted a major operation against ISIL units in and around the western province of Bouira. In mid-June 2016, following a multi-week combing operation, Algerian security forces announced that they had "completely dismantled" Jund al-Khilafah.<sup>50</sup>

In 2015, ISIL persuaded several militant units aligned with AQIM to join its ranks, but the defections primarily served a propaganda purpose for ISIL, and did little to boost the group's overall military capabilities.<sup>51</sup> Two of the groups that pledged allegiance to ISIL in 2015 had been inactive for several years, and it is likely that neither group had more than 20 fighters in its ranks.<sup>52</sup> Other groups that defected to ISIL have found themselves in the Algerian military's crosshairs. In March 2016,

Algerian forces killed the emir of the Protectors of the Salafist Call (Humat al-Dawa al-Salafiyya), a small group that announced its defection to ISIL in September 2015.<sup>53</sup> In October 2016, Algerian security forces killed an ISIL commander in Skikda Province.<sup>54</sup>

ISIL's decline in Algeria presents AQIM with a strategic opportunity to expand its network. In recent months, AQIM initiated a program, known as Munasahah (rehabilitation), which aims to bring ISIL fighters back into the al-Qaeda tent.<sup>55</sup> In discussions with ISIL fighters, which sometimes take place through text message, AQIM clerics argue that the jihadist movement needs to unify in the face of the Algerian military's operations. According to Algerian media outlet *El Khabar*, around ten ISIL militants have already rejoined AQIM following communications with AQIM ideologues under this program, a sizable number considering ISIL's limited manpower in Algeria. The success of the Munasahah program suggests that, among Algerian militants, the balance of power has shifted decisively in AQIM's favor, presenting yet another obstacle to ISIL's growth prospects.

ISIL appears to have fared little better in its efforts to establish foreign fighter recruitment networks in Algeria. According to government and non-government estimates, between 170 and 200 Algerians have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, a small fraction of the number

48. "Algeria army kills militant behind Frenchman murder," *Agence France Presse*, December 23, 2014. (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/23/Algeria-troops-kill-chief-militant-behind-Frenchman-s-murder-.html>)

49. "UPDATE 1-Algerian troops kill three Islamist gunmen in second day of assault," *Reuters*, May 20, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/algeria-security-idUSL5N0YB4KH20150520>)

50. "الجيش الوطني يفكك اخر خلية في تنظيم داعش الارهابي في الجزائر" (National Army Dismantles Last ISIS Cell in Algeria), *Ennahar* (Algeria), June 19, 2016. ([http://www.ennaharonline.com/ar/urgent\\_urgent/277778-الجيش-الوطني-يفكك-آخر-خلية-في-تنظيم-داعش-الارهابي-بالجزائر.html](http://www.ennaharonline.com/ar/urgent_urgent/277778-الجيش-الوطني-يفكك-آخر-خلية-في-تنظيم-داعش-الارهابي-بالجزائر.html))

51. For discussion of AQIM units that defected to ISIL, see Nathaniel Barr, "If At First You Don't Succeed, Try Deception: The Islamic State's Expansion Efforts in Algeria," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, November 13, 2015. (<https://jamestown.org/program/if-at-first-you-dont-succeed-try-deception-the-islamic-states-expansion-efforts-in-algeria/#>)

52. "مجموعات داعش في الجزائر-ظاهرة صوتية" (ISIS Groups in Algeria...A Voice Presence), *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* (UK), July 26, 2015. (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/7/26/مجموعات-داعش-في-الجزائر-ظاهرة-صوتية>)

53. "القضاء على أمير داعش بساحل تيبازة فيما تم استرجاع سلاح من نوع كلاشينكوف" (ISIS Emir in Tibaza Coast Eliminated...Kalashnikov Rifle Recovered), *El-Khabar* (Algeria), March 14, 2016. (<http://www.elkhabar.com/press/article/102348-القضاء-على-أمير-داعش-بساحل-تيبازة-فيما-تم-استرجاع-سلاح-من-نوع-كلاشينكوف>)

54. "Algerian forces kill commander of Islamic State affiliate behind French murder - source," *Reuters*, October 13, 2016. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-security-idUSKCN12D2V1>)

55. *El Khabar*, an Algerian media outlet, reported on the existence of the Munasahah program on August 13, 2016.



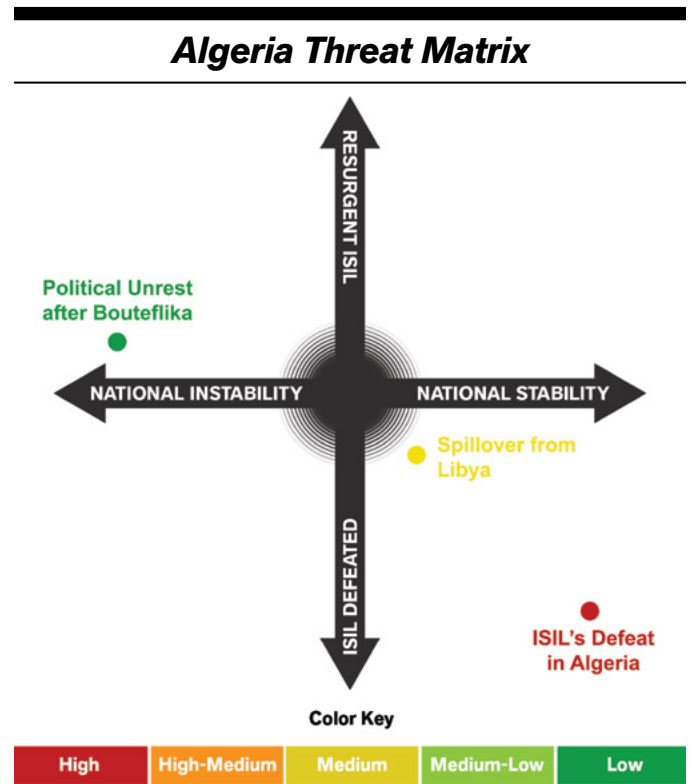
of foreign fighters that came from Algeria's neighbors, Tunisia and Morocco.<sup>56</sup> Algeria's resilience in blocking ISIL's growth may partly reflect the security services' far-reaching capacity to monitor and disrupt domestic threats. Algerian intelligence has penetrated both online and offline recruitment hubs, using a combination of signals intelligence and human intelligence tools, and has acted decisively to disrupt budding networks.<sup>57</sup> For instance, in June 2016, Algerian authorities arrested 332 people suspected of recruiting for or supporting ISIL.<sup>58</sup> Another raid in April 2016 disrupted a six-person cell of Algerians and Tunisians involved in recruiting foreign fighters to join ISIL in Syria and Iraq.<sup>59</sup> These sweeping operations enable authorities to dismantle networks quickly.

While ISIL has struggled to gain a foothold in Algeria, turmoil in neighboring Libya could reorder ISIL's force structure in North Africa, and potentially provide ISIL with a new opportunity to infiltrate Algeria. Algeria is a less hospitable place for fleeing jihadists than southern Libya or Tunisia, but some militants may seek to exploit the long and difficult-to-police Libya-Algeria border.

### Scenarios for ISIL in Algeria

As a result of the country's bloody civil war in the 1990s, Algerian security forces have become deadly efficient at cracking down on jihadist elements within the country. ISIL's loud emergence on the Algerian scene prompted the government to use its characteristically brutal efficiency against this jihadist upstart, and as detailed above, the nascent ISIL branch was thoroughly dismantled in short order. ISIL's defeat at the hands of Algerian security

forces will make it difficult for the group to reassert itself, with its clearest paths back to relevance being the possibility of political unrest after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's death, and Libya-based ISIL fighters relocating to Algeria.



### Scenario 1: ISIL's Defeat in Algeria

Algerian security forces continue to hunt down ISIL cells in the country, and vigilantly monitor and target militants returning from foreign battlefields. ISIL's collapse in Sirte prevents the group from supporting

56. By comparison, approximately 7,000 Tunisians and 1,500 Moroccans have gone to fight with jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," *The Soufan Group*, December 2015. ([http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf))

57. Farid Alilat, "Algérie : la traque des jihadistes touche-t-elle vraiment à sa fin? (Algeria: Is the Hunt for Jihadists Really Coming to an End?)," *Jeune Afrique* (France), July 18, 2016. (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/340322/politique/algerie-traque-jihadistes-touche-t-vraiment-a-fin/>)

58. Nouara Bachouche, "توقيف 332 عنصر من شبكات تجنيد الجزائريين لصالح "داعش" (Arrest of 332 Algerian Members of Recruitment Networks for "ISIS")," *Echourouk El-Youmi* (Algeria), June 25, 2016. (<http://www.echouroukonline.com/ara/articles/489745.html>)

59. Nabil Chahti, "اتصلت عبر "فايسبوك" بزملاء سابقين في الدراسة تفكيك أخطر شبكة لتجنيد الجزائريين في "داعش" (Dismantlement of the Most Dangerous ISIS Network to Recruit Algerians Which Used Facebook to Contact Former Schoolmates)," *El Khabar* (Algeria), April 19, 2016. (<http://www.elkhabar.com/press/article/104365/داعش-شبكة-لتجنيد-الجزائريين-في-داعش/#sthash.VTjZsCdJ.0ApJLn3R.dpbs>)

nascent networks in Algeria, and these networks are left to fend for themselves against the Algerian state. ISIL cells in Algeria are either dismantled by security forces or join better-resourced AQIM units.

**Likelihood: High.** ISIL's nascent branch has already essentially met with strategic defeat in Algeria, and this scenario represents a continuation of the status quo. The other two scenarios detail the two likeliest developments that could possibly overwhelm Algerian forces' ability to keep ISIL contained.

### **Scenario 2: Spillover from Libya**

As is the case with Tunisia, Algeria experiences adverse effects stemming from the military offensive against ISIL in Sirte. ISIL fighters from Libya flee to Algeria, where they try to rebuild their network. Algerian security forces respond by strengthening border controls with Libya to curb the flow of foreign fighters.

**Likelihood: Medium.** Algeria is one of about five potential locations where significant numbers of ISIL foreign fighters may choose to regroup after Sirte's fall. There are two big disincentives, however, for fleeing ISIL fighters to choose Algeria as their destination. First, the aforementioned brutal efficiency of Algerian security forces could make Algeria a deadly destination. Second, the lack of a strong preexisting ISIL network in Algeria, following Jund al-Khilafah's evisceration, means there is no real organizational structure in place into which these fleeing fighters can easily integrate.

### **Scenario 3: Political Unrest after Bouteflika**

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's death ushers in a period of instability in Algeria as rival political factions vie for dominance. The military becomes embroiled in political feuds and struggles to sustain its counterterrorism operations. ISIL and al-Qaeda-linked groups exploit this volatile environment.

**Likelihood: Low.** Post-Bouteflika chaos is certainly possible, but the Algerian state has also had a long time to prepare for a power transition.

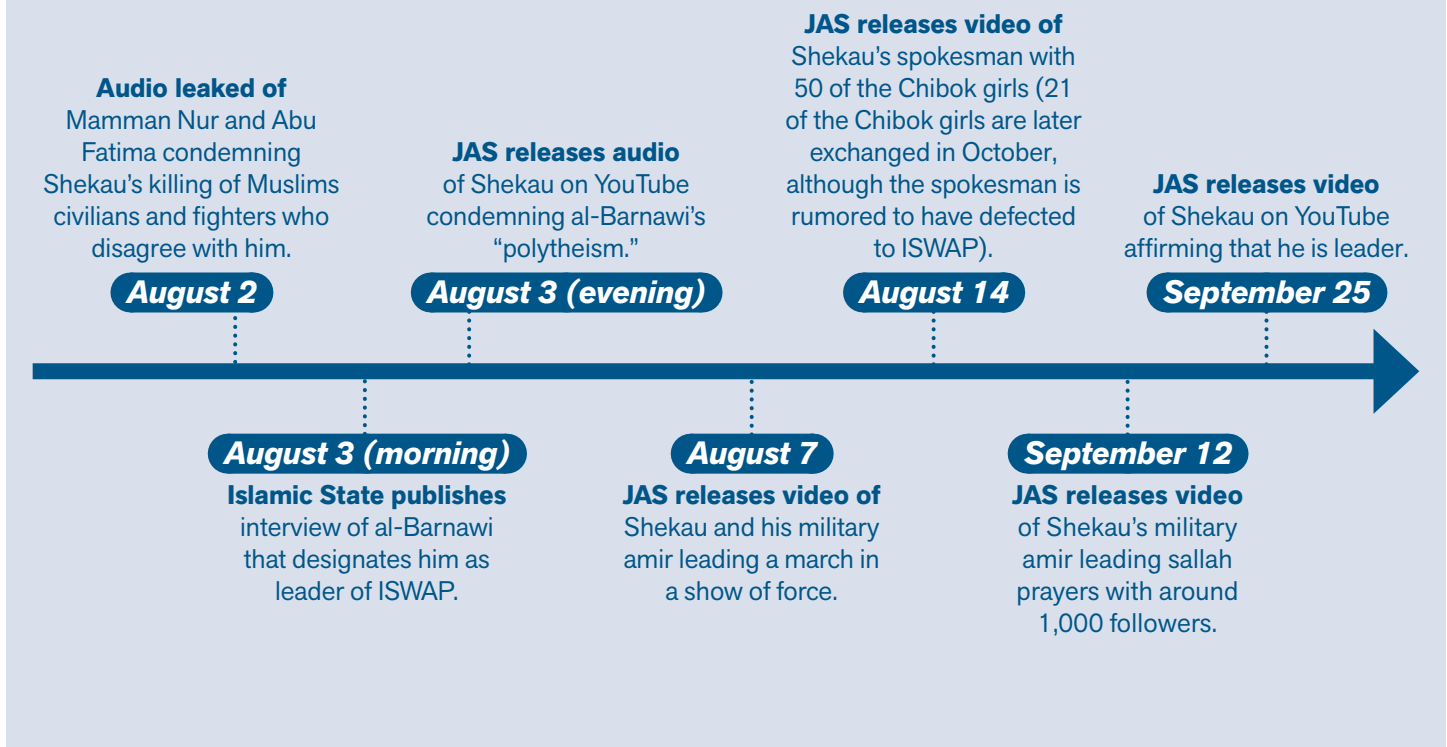
## ISIL in the Lake Chad Region

Boko Haram has been internally divided since 2009, when Abubakar Shekau announced a jihad after Nigerian security forces killed the group's founder, Muhammed Yusuf.<sup>60</sup> In subsequent years, a number of Boko Haram factions have operated in Nigeria and, increasingly, in the neighboring Lake Chad region countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Today, ISWAP and Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da'wah wa-l-Jihād (Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad, or JAS) are the two main insurgent factions operating in the Lake Chad region. Both are commonly labeled Boko Haram.

While the leadership of both ISWAP and JAS are loyal to ISIL caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIL only recognizes the authority of ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The current leader of JAS, Shekau, had earlier become the leader of ISWAP when he pledged loyalty to Baghdadi in March 2015, and ISIL accepted

60. "Boko Haram" was founded in 2002 by Muhammed Yusuf. The movement did not have a formal name: At the time, followers simply referred to themselves as the *Yusufiya*, or followers of Yusuf. The media, Nigerian government, and locals called them *Boko Haram* because of Yusuf's prohibition on Muslims receiving Western education. As Yusuf's then deputy, Abubakar Shekau, said, "Western education is part of a broader civilizational project to detach Muslims from Islam and its Arabic-language traditions, and instead immerse Muslims in Christianity and English language." *Boko* can refer to *book* or, more broadly, Western education, in northern Nigeria's lingua franca of Hausa, and *Haram* is an Arabic term meaning *blasphemous* or *forbidden*.

## Timeline of the ISWAP-JAS Schism in August-September 2016



the pledge one week later.<sup>61</sup> At the time, Shekau terminated the “original JAS” of 2009, rebranding it as ISWAP. But ISIL announced in 2016 that Barnawi was the new ISWAP leader in an interview with Barnawi published in ISIL’s online newsletter, *Al-Naba*.<sup>62</sup> Shekau subsequently seceded from the group because ISIL had replaced him without issuing him any prior warning. In doing so, Shekau decided to resurrect JAS.

A third faction should also be mentioned in the Lake Chad militant landscape. Mamman Nur leads a faction that is loyal to ISIL and is allied with ISWAP. Unlike Barnawi and Shekau, Nur’s faction has no explicit name. Nur, like Shekau, is one of the original deputies of Boko Haram founder Muhammed Yusuf. Soon after Yusuf’s death in 2009, Nur leveraged his connections to al-Qaeda affiliates AQIM and al-Shabaab to gain assistance in orchestrating major bombings in Nigeria, including at the United Nations Headquarters in

61. “al-‘Ūrwah al-Wūthqā Foundation presents a new audio message from Jama’at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da’wah wa-l-Jihād’s (Boko Harām) Abū Bakr Shekau: ‘Bay’ah Jamā’at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da’wah wa-l-Jihād to the Caliph of the Muslims Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī,” *Jihadology*, March 7, 2015. (<http://jihadology.net/2015/03/07/al-urwah-al-wuthqa-foundation-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-dawah-wa-l-jihads-boko-%E1%B8%A5aram-abu-bakr-shekau-bayah-jama/>); “Shari’ah Alone Will Rule Africa,” *Dabiq* (Islamic State publication), July 2015, “The Bay’ah from West Africa,” pages 14-16. (<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-8e280b3.pdf>); “al-Furqān Media presents a new audio message from the Islamic State’s Shaykh Abū Muhammad al ‘Adnānī al-Shāmī: ‘So They Kill and Are Killed,’” *Jihadology*, March 12, 2015. (<http://jihadology.net/2015/03/12/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-so-they-kill-and-are-killed/>)

62. “قطع طريق إمداد الرافضة إلى معسكر القيارة” (Cutting Off Supply Route From Al-Rafidha to Al-Qiyara Barracks), *Al-Naba* (Islamic State newsletter), August 2, 2016. ([https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-4122.pdf](https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84_-newsletter-4122.pdf))

August 2011. That attack killed at least 21 people and injured 73.<sup>63</sup> Nur has also carried out a number of large-scale attacks on international targets and churches in Nigeria. Interestingly, Nur generally avoids promoting his attacks through propaganda, preferring to let the attacks speak for themselves. As a result, many attacks engineered by Nur were claimed by JAS, which was led by a more publicity-seeking Shekau.



A screenshot from a January 2015 video featuring Abu Musab al-Barnawi (brown veil), who was serving as JAS' spokesman at the time. The video was released by a Twitter account that later advertised Shekau's pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. **Source:** <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/27/al-urwah-al-wuthqa-foundation-presents-a-new-video-message-from-from-boko-arams-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-dawah-wa-l-jihad-interview-with-the-official-spokesma/>

Barnawi has emphasized asymmetric attacks, primarily against military targets, with a focus on operations in the Lake Chad region. In particular, he targets Niger, both because it hosts a joint U.S.-French base and also because looting barracks can help to resupply ISWAP forces.<sup>64</sup> Barnawi prefers not to have a core geographic base, instead roaming between regions. Barnawi is not a flamboyant producer of propaganda like Shekau, but nor is he assiduous about avoiding the spotlight like Nur. Barnawi has managed ISWAP's social media accounts, so he recognizes the utility of propaganda.<sup>65</sup> Barnawi's fighters include many members of the formerly AQIM-allied faction Ansaru, and others who have trained in Mali or elsewhere in the Sahel.<sup>66</sup>

The leaders of all three factions are united in sharing ISIL's vision of a caliphate. Nur, however, seemingly has ideas that clash with ISIL's broader strategic vision. In one audio to his followers, Nur confirmed his loyalty to Baghdadi while criticizing Shekau for declaring *takfir* (an accusation of apostasy) on too many Muslims.<sup>67</sup> In this respect, both Nur *and* Barnawi are more similar to al-Qaeda's methodology, while Shekau is more similar to ISIL's.<sup>68</sup>

63. Jide Ajani, "UN House Blast: Mastermind, Nur, declared wanted," *Vanguard* (Nigeria), September 1, 2011. (<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/09/un-house-blast-mastermind-nur-declared-wanted/>)

64. Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram: Abu Musab al-Barnawi's Leadership Coup and Offensive in Niger," *Terrorism Monitor*, August 19, 2016. (<https://jamestown.org/program/boko-haram-abu-musab-al-barnawis-leadership-coup-and-offensive-in-niger/#>)

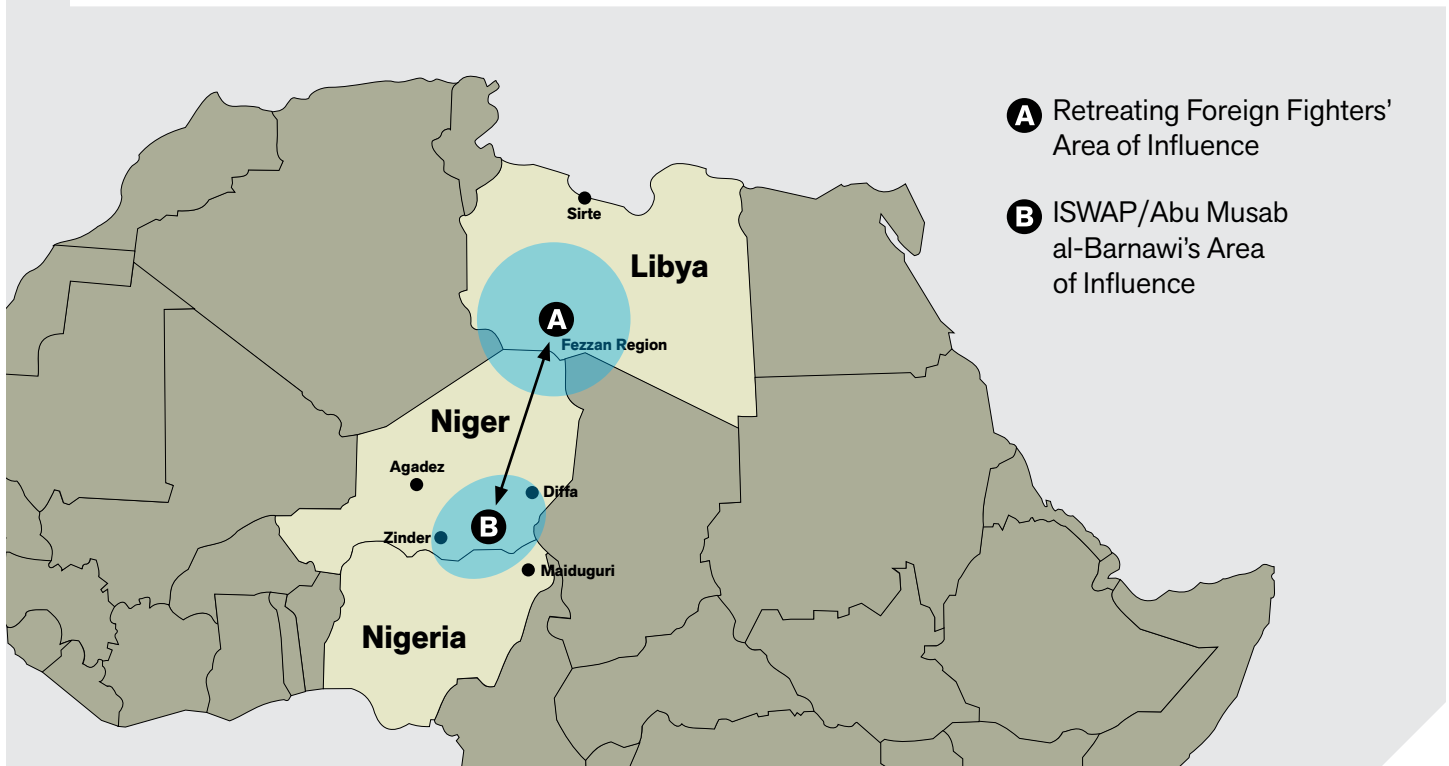
65. Two months prior to Shekau's pledge of allegiance to Baghdadi in March 2015, JAS – then under a General Command comprised of Shekau's faction and Barnawi's faction, with Shekau as overall leader – set up a Twitter account, co-run by Barnawi and ISIL social media coordinators. It was on this Twitter account that various JAS tweets, videos and statements leading up to and including Shekau's pledge were featured. After Shekau's pledge, the account became inactive, but Barnawi set up several other Twitter accounts, none of which lasted beyond a few tweets. This may have been because members of Barnawi's social media team were killed in battle shortly after Shekau's pledge.

66. Ansaru was a project initiated by AQIM aimed at establishing a militant group separate of Shekau's control in Nigeria. It targeted Christians and churches, the Nigerian government and army, and foreigners and foreign interests, but tried to avoid targeting Muslims or carrying out attacks that would result in Muslim civilian casualties. Among its leaders were Mamman Nur and Abu Fatima, as well as other Nigerian AQIM members who were trained in Mali and Algeria. Ansaru was significantly weakened – and some analysts believe that it became defunct – due to such factors as the French-led intervention in northern Mali in 2012-13 (which separated Ansaru from its AQIM patrons), arrests of key Ansaru members by Nigerian special forces, and Shekau's assassinations of Ansaru commanders. For more on Ansaru, see Jacob Zenn, "Ansaru: Who Are They And Where Are They From," *Africa in Transition*, July 1, 2013. (<http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2013/07/01/ansaru-who-are-they/>)

67. "New Boko Haram Leader, al-Barnawi, Accuses Abubakar Shekau of Killing Fellow Muslims, Living in Luxury," *Sahara Reporters*, August 5, 2016. (<http://saharareporters.com/2016/08/05/new-boko-haram-leader-al-barnawi-accuses-abubakar-shekau-killing-fellow-muslims-living>)

68. ISIL has been far more willing than al-Qaeda to declare *takfir* on and target Muslims who have not joined ISIL, though it has shown some restraint in certain theaters. For instance, in ISIL's attack on a café in Dhaka that killed 22 people, the attackers separated Muslims from non-Muslims, and let the non-Muslims survive. The attacker at Sousse beach in Tunisia had a similar approach, targeting Western tourists rather than fellow Tunisians.

## ISIL Networks from Nigeria to Libya



Overall, Barnawi's attachment to ISIL is suspect. Barnawi's faction comes from a pedigree of Ansaru members who were part of AQIM's project to extend al-Qaeda's reach into Nigeria, and to serve as a counterpoint to Shekau in the Nigerian arena. One indication of Barnawi's likely sympathy for al-Qaeda is that ISWAP, unlike other ISIL provinces, engaged in no anti-al-Qaeda polemics when Barnawi controlled ISWAP's communications.

It is possible that Barnawi will rejoin with al-Qaeda in the future if, as appears likely, ISIL's caliphate in Syria-Iraq collapses – particularly if ISIL cannot preserve a large portion of its Sirte network. If al-Qaeda's Malian affiliates (AQIM and its allies and front groups) are successful, that could make al-Qaeda particularly alluring for Barnawi because of Mali's proximity to Nigeria. Nur, like Barnawi, could also eventually join al-Qaeda and abandon his loyalty to Baghdadi. Nur is historically close to AQIM and al-Shabaab.

Shekau has remained loyal to Baghdadi. He has seemingly burnt his bridge to al-Qaeda, and is also more methodologically similar to ISIL.

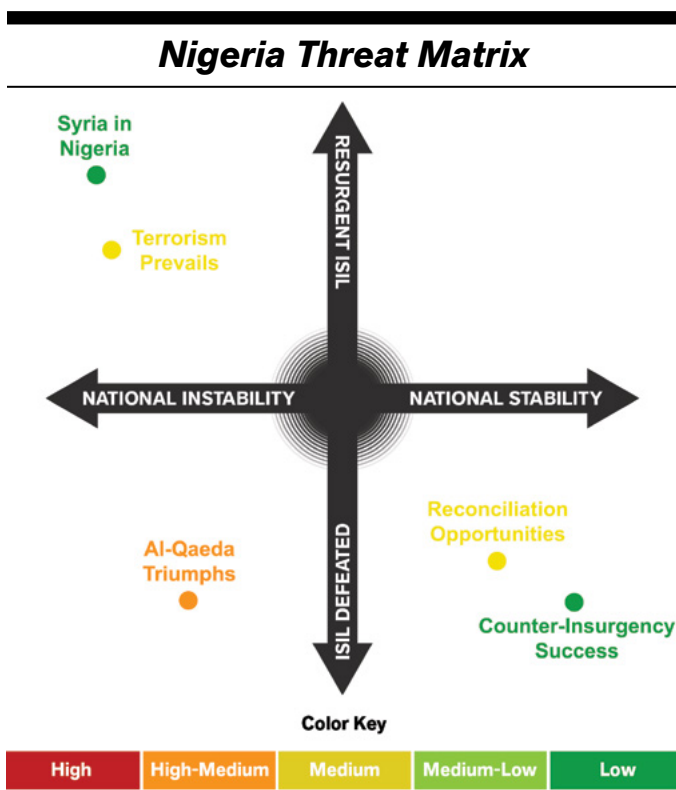


In an August 7 video directed at Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abubakar Shekau shoots a gun in the air in a manner reminiscent of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. **Source:** <http://jihadology.net/2016/08/07/new-video-message-from-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-dawah-wa-l-jihads-abu-bakr-shekau-message-from-the-soldiers/>

## Scenarios for ISIL in Lake Chad Region

The pro-ISIL jihadist groups in the Lake Chad region find themselves embroiled in a heated rivalry. At the same time, ISIL leadership is on the run in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and is not prioritizing ISWAP in its time of need. Given the long-term sustainability of AQIM’s insurgency in Mali, it seems likely that AQIM will eventually reach out to members of ISWAP.

It is important to examine scenarios in which al-Qaeda will once again become active in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.



### Scenario 1: Al-Qaeda Triumphs

After several years of a reduction in ISWAP and JAS violence from 2015 to 2019, the Nigerian military breaks down again. ISWAP, having seen ISIL fall in Libya and Syria, and reduced to only a “virtual caliphate,” begins receiving support from AQIM and allied militant groups in an increasingly unstable Mali. Though ISWAP has not (yet) adopted the

al-Qaeda moniker, it is in essence functioning as an al-Qaeda affiliate in the Lake Chad region. As insurgent formations raid barracks after barracks in Borno State, the Nigerian military presence weakens, creating a power vacuum. Unlike the last power vacuum that occurred in 2014, however, the population no longer trusts the military, while ISWAP decides not to hold territory but to utilize hit-and-run tactics in an insurgent strategy. ISWAP escalates its attacks on churches and other Christian targets in the months leading up to the 2019 elections, as the militants attempt to further the Muslim-Christian divide in Nigeria.

**Likelihood: Medium-High.** Al-Qaeda historically has been interested in Nigeria, and currently it is trying to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of ISIL’s downfall. Thus far, al-Qaeda has not made a play at recovering ISWAP or JAS, but if al-Qaeda does this, it will be consistent with its overall modus operandi.

### Scenario 2: Reconciliation Opportunities

After several years of clashes between ISWAP and JAS, the Nigerian military, which has applied pressure to both factions, kills JAS leader Abubakar Shekau and destroys his main camps in Borno. ISWAP, isolated in Borno State, comes under the leadership influence of cooler heads in Barnawi’s inner circle, who disavow ISIL and agree to negotiations with the government in return for a promise of government non-interference in their Salafist religious practice, the reconstruction of mosques that belonged to the movement before 2009, and the release from prison of several hundred members, who would be admitted into reintegration programs. (These were some of the principal demands articulated by Muhammed Yusuf’s followers after his death in 2009). While there are still holdouts in ISWAP who carry out occasional attacks, the majority of the movement drops its weapons and agrees to a long-term process of reconciliation.

**Likelihood: Medium.** Militants close to Mamman Nur have previously been open to negotiations, although as the conflict has become more brutal, many militants have abandoned the possibility.

But if ISWAP becomes detached from ISIL's overall leadership and remains outside al-Qaeda's influence, it is possible that these militants will have the independence to re-engage in negotiations. Shekau's faction is unlikely to ever negotiate, but it might become increasingly irrelevant due to military pressure.

***Scenario 3: Terrorism Prevails***

Although ISWAP does not return to controlling large swathes in northeastern Nigeria, it takes advantage of instability and safe havens in Niger to loot new weapons and resupply ISWAP forces. Barnawi strengthens his relationship with Mamman Nur, who trains militants in Niger to carry out suicide bombings on high-profile targets in Nigeria, including in Abuja and Lagos, funding these operations by "taxing" migrants traveling to Libya. ISWAP targets Yorubas for recruitment in southern Nigeria, and its cells there carry out attacks on cafes, hotels, and foreigners. ISWAP, having established cells in Senegal, also claims attacks on hotels in Dakar.

Likelihood: Medium. The Nigerian military has shown that it is capable of engaging in counter-insurgency operations to root out ISWAP and JAS from positions they once occupied. If ISWAP and JAS focus their resources on terrorist attacks on soft targets, it is still quite difficult for Nigeria to stop such attacks.

***Scenario 4: Counter-Insurgency Success***

The Nigerian and regional militaries reassert control and expel ISWAP and JAS from the territories they hold. The Nigerian government, in coordination with international relief teams and post-conflict peacebuilding NGOs, gradually resettles internally displaced persons (IDPs). ISWAP and JAS holdouts continue to carry out sporadic attacks, including lootings and small-scale kidnappings for ransom, in remote parts of Borno, though these attacks are primarily aimed at ensuring the groups' survival. Neither group is capable of carrying out regular high-profile attacks or challenging Nigeria's sovereignty. Nigeria, in essence, "returns to normalcy."

Likelihood: Low. The Nigerian military has the resources in manpower and weapons to wage a counter-insurgency against ISWAP and JAS for years to come. Nonetheless, there are too many factors working in ISWAP's and JAS's favor, including porous borders, abundant weapons smuggling routes, and ideologically committed youths in the Lake Chad region, let alone the potential for a surge in outside support.

***Scenario 5: Syria in Nigeria***

ISWAP and JAS engage in an all-out confrontation with one another, and ISWAP also splinters. All three jihadist factions attack Christians and churches in northern Nigeria, as well as other Salafist and Shiite organizations. The Muslim elites provide additional funding to the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF, a pro-government militia) to combat all jihadist factions, and the Civilian JTF evolves into an increasingly independent paramilitary group. The Civilian JTF collaborates with the Nigerian military, which in Borno State is undersupplied, and suffers from low morale and high attrition rates. In an increasingly regionalized conflict, Chad appears to be sponsoring an ISWAP faction that taxes traffic through northern Cameroon (Chad's lifeline) but maintains a constant flow of goods. Borno State becomes not only home to one of the world's most violent conflicts, but also a safe haven and training ground for both ISIL and al-Qaeda fighters from around West Africa.

Likelihood: Low. ISWAP and JAS are far from defeat, and the fault lines in Nigeria between Muslim and Christian are currently being exacerbated. ISWAP and JAS could both take advantage of this situation. Meanwhile, Nigeria's government is losing resources from oil theft or sabotage in the southeast, and the drop in global oil prices. Nonetheless, this remains a worst-case scenario for the conflict.

## Mali

Mali is a potential growth area for ISIL in Africa. ISIL initially struggled to gain a foothold in northern Mali, which is dominated by al-Qaeda-linked organizations. Indeed, ISIL's first attempt at expansion into the country was disastrous, as al-Qaeda factions, led by the notorious Algerian jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar, aggressively targeted ISIL supporters. But after a prolonged lull, the pro-ISIL faction in Mali appears to have mounted something of a comeback in the latter half of 2016, with the group claiming responsibility for a series of attacks in the Niger-Burkina Faso-Mali border region. After these attacks, ISIL's central media apparatus publicly acknowledged the ISIL faction in Mali for the first time.

ISIL first made inroads into Mali in May 2015, when Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a leader of MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) who joined forces in August 2013 with Belmokhtar to form al-Murabitun, single-handedly pledged loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on behalf of al-Murabitun.<sup>69</sup> Belmokhtar, an al-Qaeda loyalist, quickly renounced Sahrawi's statement and reaffirmed al-Murabitun's allegiance to al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>70</sup> A month later, fighters aligned with Belmokhtar reportedly killed over a dozen of Sahrawi's supporters, and badly wounded Sahrawi himself in clashes near Gao.<sup>71</sup> Belmokhtar's targeting of Sahrawi's faction signaled that pledging allegiance to ISIL was costly for militants in Mali and other neighboring countries where AQIM and its allies were militarily dominant.<sup>72</sup>



Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former MUJAO and al-Murabitun commander, is the current leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, an ISIL-aligned group that operates in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region. **Source:** Al Jazeera

Sahrawi's faction was inactive for almost a year following its altercation with Belmokhtar's forces, suggesting that Belmokhtar had badly weakened, and also intimidated, ISIL's contingent in the region. In May 2016, however, *Al-Jazeera* reported that Sahrawi issued an audio statement threatening to attack United Nations offices in Western Sahara, as well as foreign tourists in Morocco.<sup>73</sup> It is noteworthy that Sahrawi released the audio statement via *Al-Jazeera*, instead of through official ISIL media channels. To that point, ISIL had not made any official statements acknowledging either Sahrawi or Hamadou Kheiry, another MUJAO leader who also pledged allegiance to ISIL. Thus, Sahrawi's adoption of the moniker *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS) in his May 2016 statement may have been an independent decision, rather than a move sanctioned by the ISIL leadership.

Several months after releasing his audio statement, Sahrawi recommenced military operations. Since

69. Sahraoui was never appointed the leader of Murabitun, but instead assumed that position without consulting the group's *shura* council. "المرابطون" تعلن أميراً جديداً وتبايع البغدادي (Al-Murabitoun Declare They Have a New Emir and Pledge Allegiance to al-Baghdadi)," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), May 13, 2015. (<http://alakhbar.info/news/9799-2015-05-13-20-45-48.html>)

70. For a copy of Belmokhtar's statement, see Caleb Weiss, "Alleged statement from Mokhtar Belmokhtar denies his group swore allegiance to the Islamic State," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 15, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/alleged-statement-from-mokhtar-belmokhtar-denies-his-group-swore-allegiance-to-the-islamic-state.php>)

71. Aziz M., "Mali: L'émir d'al-Mourabitoune gravement blessé dans des affrontements (Mali: Al-Murabitoun's Emir is Seriously Wounded in Armed Clash)," *El Watan* (Libya), June 17, 2015. (<http://news.abamako.com/h/92504.html>)

72. *Ibid.*

73. Zainab Calcuttawala, "ISIS Threat: Polisario Front Member Threatens Morocco, MINURSO," *Moroccan World News*, May 5, 2016. (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/05/185833/isis-threat-polisario-front-member-threatens-morocco-minurso/>)



September 2016, Sahrawi's faction has claimed responsibility for three attacks, according to the Mauritanian news outlet *Al-Akhbar*, which is considered a reliable source for news on jihadist groups in the Sahel. In September 2016, ISGS attacked a Burkinabe border post, killing two.<sup>74</sup> Subsequently, in October 2016, ISGS killed at least three Burkina Faso soldiers in an attack on a military post near the Mali and Niger borders.<sup>75</sup> Several days later, *Al-Akhbar* reported that ISGS claimed responsibility for an attack on a prison north of the Nigerien capital of Niamey that held several prominent jihadists.<sup>76</sup> The prison break was unsuccessful, as Nigerien forces repelled the attackers, and killed one fighter before he could detonate his suicide vest.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to these incidents, the Nigerien interior minister claimed that militants aligned with MUJAO – likely a reference to Sahrawi's faction – were responsible for the October 2016 kidnapping of Jeffrey Woodke, an American aid worker, in the town of Abalak in central Niger.<sup>78</sup> This claim has not been confirmed, though, and one news source has suggested that the

kidnapping may have been linked to disputes between drug trafficking networks in the region rather than to jihadist militancy.<sup>79</sup>

It appears that the Sahrawi faction's primary area of operations is in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area, as all of the group's recent attacks have occurred in or near this area. Sahrawi has likely been operating in this area for over a year. In April 2015, shortly before Sahrawi pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, his faction kidnapped a Romanian mining employee in northern Burkina Faso, near the Mali border.<sup>80</sup> Further, following the kidnapping of Woodke, Niger's interior minister asserted that the Malian town of Menaka, located just north of the Nigerien border, was under the control of MUJAO.<sup>81</sup>

Following the attacks in Niger and Burkina Faso, ISIL's media apparatus finally recognized Sahrawi, more than a year after he initially pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. On October 30, 2016, *Amaq*, an ISIL-run news agency, released a statement on the social media platform Telegram announcing that the Murabitun Brigade, led by Sahrawi, had pledged

74. "أول عملية لـ "تنظيم الدولة" بغرب أفريقيا" ("ISIS" First Operation in West Africa)," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), September 3, 2016. (<http://www.alakhbar.info/news/17727-2016-09-03-20-33-21.html>)

75. "L'Etat islamique revendique l'attaque contre l'armée burkinabé (Islamic State Claims Attack Against the Burkinabe Army)," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), October 14, 2016. (<http://fr.alakhbar.info/11825-0--L'Etat-islamique-revendique-l'attaque-contre-l'armee-burkinabe.html>)

76. "Niger: l'Etat Islamique revendique l'attaque contre la prison de Koutoukalé (Actualisé) (Niger: Islamic State Claims Attack Against Koutoukale Prison (Updated)," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), October 18, 2016. (<http://fr.alakhbar.info/11849-0-Niger->)

77. "Niger: une attaque repoussée à la prison de Koutoukalé (Niger: Attack on Koutoukale Prison Repulsed)," *RFI* (France), October 17, 2016. ([http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20161017-niger-attaque-prison-koutoukale-repousse?ns\\_mchannel=social&ns\\_source=rfi\\_appli-marque\\_ios&ns\\_campaign=email&ns\\_linkname=editorial&caef\\_campaign\\_ref=send-to-friend&caef\\_campaign\\_date=16-10-17](http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20161017-niger-attaque-prison-koutoukale-repousse?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=rfi_appli-marque_ios&ns_campaign=email&ns_linkname=editorial&caef_campaign_ref=send-to-friend&caef_campaign_date=16-10-17))

78. Patrick Fort, "Niger says US aid worker likely held by Mali jihadists," *Agence France Presse*, October 16, 2016. (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/niger-says-us-aid-worker-kidnapped-mujao-jihadists-154909481.html>)

79. François de Labarre, "Niger: Jeffery Woodke, un otage pas comme les autres (Niger: Jeffrey Woodke, a Hostage Like No Other)," *Paris Match*, October 17, 2016. (<http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/Niger-Jeffery-Woodke-un-otage-pas-comme-les-autres-1097375>)

80. "N.Africa jihadist group says holding kidnapped Romanian," *Agence France Presse*, May 19, 2015. (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/n-africa-jihadist-group-says-holding-kidnapped-romanian-105448077.html?ref=gs>). It appears that the Romanian hostage changed hands from Sahrawi's faction to Belmokhtar's at some point in 2015. In August 2015, several months after Sahrawi's defection, Al Ribat Media, a jihadist news agency associated with Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun, released a video featuring the Romanian hostage. One possible explanation for this apparent shift in custody is that Sahrawi handed the Romanian hostage over to Belmokhtar before he defected to ISIL. The al-Murabitun video featuring the Romanian hostage can be found at <http://jihadology.net/2015/08/29/al-riba%E1%B9%AD-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-murabi%E1%B9%ADun-romanian-hostage-calls-on-his-government-and-burkina-faso-for-his-release/>.

81. Patrick Fort, "Niger says US aid worker likely held by Mali jihadists," *Agence France Presse*, October 16, 2016. (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/niger-says-us-aid-worker-kidnapped-mujao-jihadists-154909481.html>)

allegiance to Baghdadi and joined ISIL.<sup>82</sup> Shortly after the statement was released, Sahrawi's faction released a video chronicling its pledge to Baghdadi.<sup>83</sup>

The fact that *Amaq* did not declare a new province when announcing Sahrawi's pledge suggests that either ISIL has stopped creating new provinces altogether – a possibility alluded to by other analysts studying ISIL's strategy in the Philippines<sup>84</sup> – or that ISIL has become more discriminating in establishing provinces. If it is the latter, ISIL likely is not convinced that Sahrawi's faction is strong enough at this point to earn provincial status.

Though much uncertainty surrounds ISGS' recent operations, it is evident that Sahrawi and his supporters survived Belmokhtar's onslaught in mid-2015, and may now be resurgent.<sup>85</sup> There are several possible explanations for Sahrawi's resurgence. First, ISWAP and/or JAS members may have migrated to Mali and Niger to reinforce Sahrawi's operations. This would not be the first time that militants from Nigeria and the Lake Chad region have fought in Mali: MUJAO's links with ISWAP/JAS go back to 2012, when JAS

fighters reportedly trained with and fought alongside MUJAO during the latter group's offensive in northern Mali.<sup>86</sup> During that time, JAS members aided MUJAO and AQIM in the takeover of Menaka.<sup>87</sup> A second possibility is that Sahrawi and ISGS received support from Sub-Saharan African foreign fighters fleeing Sirte and other ISIL-controlled areas in Libya. ISGS may also be drawing upon support from other militant groups operating in and around Mali, including certain al-Qaeda-linked factions. Sahrawi's decision to join ISIL triggered a harsh backlash from Belmokhtar, but it appears that some other al-Qaeda actors did not cut off all communications with Sahrawi. In January 2016, Yahya Abu Hammam (a.k.a. Djamel Okacha), the commander of AQIM's Sahara Emirate, gave an interview with *Al-Akhbar* in which he stated that he had "normal" relations with Sahrawi, and was in "constant contact" with the ISIL commander.<sup>88</sup> Though Hammam expressed hope that Sahrawi would be guided to the "correct path" – a likely reference to Sahrawi's defection from al-Qaeda – there were no indications that tensions existed between the two commanders.<sup>89</sup>

82. "Amaq Announces Pledge from Murabiteen Division in Northern Mali to IS," *SITE Intelligence Group*, October 30, 2016. (<https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/amaq-announces-pledge-from-murabiteen-division-in-northern-mali-to-is.html>)

83. "New video message from Abū al-Walīd Sahrāwī: 'Pledge of Allegiance in Northern Mali to Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī and Joining The Islamic State,'" *Jihadology*, October 30, 2016. (<http://jihadology.net/2016/10/30/new-video-message-from-abu-al-walid-%E1%B9%A3a%E1%B8%A5rawi-pledge-of-allegiance-in-northern-mali-to-shaykh-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-joining-the-islamic-state/>)

84. Charlie Winter, "Has the Islamic State Abandoned its Provincial Model in the Philippines?" *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2016. (<http://warontherocks.com/2016/07/has-the-islamic-state-abandoned-its-provincial-model-in-the-philippines/>)

85. For one example of this uncertainty, some analysts have expressed skepticism about *Al-Akhbar's* claims linking recent attacks to Sahrawi's group. See @rmaghrebi, "Niger: After attacks claimed in Burkina Faso, @FrAlakhbar reported Abu Walid al-Sahraoui men are behind Koutoukalé prison attack! #Caution," *Twitter*, October 18, 2016. (<https://twitter.com/rmaghrebi/status/788451539820183553>)

86. For a full discussion of JAS's activities in Mali, see Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's International Connections," *CTC Sentinel*, January 14, 2013. (<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-international-connections>)

87. Jemal Oumar, "Touareg Rebels Vow Terror Crackdown," *Magharebia* (Morocco), November 22, 2012. (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201211231457.html>)

88. "أبو الهمام في أول مقابلة له بعد التدخل الفرنسي بمالي (نص المقابلة)," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), January 10, 2016. (<http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html>)

89. Recently, unconfirmed social media reports have alleged that Sahrawi and his faction may have broken with ISIL. On January 1, 2017, "al-Andalusi," the pseudonym of a prominent online al-Qaeda propagandist who regularly comments on jihadist activities in the Maghreb and Sahel, posted a tweet on his account stating that "unconfirmed news indicat[ed] that the Abu-al-Walid al-Sahrawi group and Da'ish [ISIL] had split." See tweet from @Nourdine\_1991, January 1, 2017. Aside from Andalusi's tweet, there is no evidence indicating that Sahrawi has defected from ISIL—thus leaving open the possibility that Andalusi was either commenting on unconfirmed rumors or deliberately disseminating false information to try to sow discontent in ISIL's ranks in the Sahel. But it is also possible that ISIL's recent losses in Syria and Iraq, and especially Libya, prompted Sahrawi to reconsider his pledge of allegiance, and to return to the al-Qaeda fold.

Another explanation for Sahrawi’s resurgence is that Belmokhtar’s attack on ISGS did less damage to Sahrawi’s faction than was believed at the time. Initial reporting was limited, leaving questions about how significant Sahrawi’s losses were. Further, there are few credible estimates of ISGS’ manpower, making it difficult to assess to what extent the casualties that Sahrawi’s faction incurred impacted the group’s capabilities. There was a significant lull in activities and operations carried out by Sahrawi’s group from May 2015 to September 2016, but it is possible that the group was focused primarily on evading Belmokhtar and establishing a new safe haven during that time. Now, more than a year after the skirmish with Belmokhtar, Sahrawi and his group may feel secure enough to reinitiate their military activities.

Regardless of what is driving Sahrawi’s resurgence, ISGS’ increased operational tempo will have a destabilizing effect in Mali and the surrounding region. ISGS’ ability to carry out cross-border attacks creates new security challenges for Niger and Burkina Faso, both of which had, until recently, been largely immune to instability in Mali. ISGS’ resurgence could also provide ISIL with a new vehicle through which to expand its presence in Africa.

### Scenarios for ISIL in Mali

Northern Mali continues to be dominated by an al-Qaeda-led insurgency almost four years after the French-led intervention ousted AQIM from the major towns it occupied. ISIL’s presence in Mali is still minimal, especially compared to al-Qaeda, but there are signs that ISIL is on the upswing. For one, ISIL recently acknowledged, for the first time, a division in Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso under the leadership of Sahrawi. In addition, ISWAP may be making inroads into Mali via its operations in Niger – and may make further inroads as its foreign fighters leave Sirte.

#### Scenario 1: Sahrawi Fails to Gain Traction

After Sahrawi claims several attacks in southern Mali and Burkina Faso in ISIL’s name, Western counterterrorism officials, working with regional security forces, track his location and conduct kinetic operations against his

group. These operations relieve pressure on the Malian government and prevent ISIL from establishing a solid foothold in West Africa, but also enable al-Qaeda to maintain its “monopoly” over the insurgency in Mali.



Likelihood: Medium-High. From a counter-insurgency perspective, Sahrawi’s now “official” relationship to ISIL makes him a more prized target for France, Mali, and other forces. Paradoxically, however, eliminating Sahrawi could end up furthering al-Qaeda’s predominance in Mali.

#### Scenario 2: ISIL in Libya Sends Foreign Fighters to Sahrawi

After leaving Libya, ISIL foreign fighters from Sub-Saharan Africa join Sahrawi’s forces in Mali, which cooperate with certain regional al-Qaeda factions. Sahrawi deploys militants to Bamako, where they attack high-profile targets, and to the Mali border region with Burkina Faso and Senegal, where they launch ambushes on border patrols. Though Sahrawi does not carry out as many attacks as AQIM in Mali, ISIL incorporates

his fighters into mainstream ISIL propaganda, and Mali becomes a prominent destination for ISIL-aligned foreign fighters from across North and West Africa. Sahrawi's attacks weaken the tourism industry in Mali and other neighboring countries, and deter outside investments.

**Likelihood: Low-Medium.** It is clear that ISIL foreign fighters are now deserting Libya, and that Sahrawi is one option where they can find refuge. Nonetheless, there are other potentially more attractive locations for foreign fighters to go: to ISWAP, to Europe, to Tunisia, or even joining up with al-Qaeda fighters in Mali. Joining Sahrawi in remote parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is not nearly as attractive as Sirte in its heyday.

### **Scenario 3: Sahrawi Rejoins AQIM**

Sahrawi's fighters launch a series of attacks in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border region, but ISIL leadership is too disorganized to establish a consistent relationship with Sahrawi, and too often fails to recognize his attacks. Rather than continuing to pursue recognition from ISIL, Sahrawi turns to al-Qaeda, and integrates his fighters with Ansar Dine and other AQIM front groups, though Sahrawi's public profile diminishes in the process. Sahrawi's fighters eventually strengthen AQIM's reach in southern Mali and into Burkina Faso.

**Likelihood: Low.** Sahrawi has been very public about his loyalty to ISIL, and it would be a surprising about-face for him to defect back to al-Qaeda. It would not be without precedent – such defections do happen – but if some version of this scenario were to unfold, it is more likely that Sahrawi's foot soldiers bail on him and join an ascendant al-Qaeda on the upswing.

## Senegal

Senegal has not suffered any attacks from either ISIL or al-Qaeda. But the threat from ISIL comes in two interrelated forms: the prospect that Senegalese militants fighting with ISIL in Libya will return to their home country, which seems increasingly likely given ISIL's recent losses in Sirte; and the possibility that Senegalese members of ISWAP will set up cells and training camps in Senegal (and possibly also in Mauritania and Mali), or collaborate with imams who are recruiting on behalf of ISWAP in Senegal. These two categories of threats are discussed below.

### **Senegalese Foreign Fighters with ISIL in Libya**

Senegalese foreign fighters in Libya were mostly based in Sirte, and took on some leadership roles within ISIL's network there. Abu Hamza al-Senegali, for example, was an "emir" in ISIL's Diwan al-Hisba (the department responsible for the enforcement of Islamic morality). In this capacity, Abu Hamza ordered the internet to be disconnected in public places, with "imprisonment and interrogation" as punishment for those who failed to obey. Abu Hamza, who was also reported to be on ISIL's "general security committee," threatened "harsh measures" for civilians caught leaving Sirte.<sup>90</sup>

Other Senegalese foreign fighters in Sirte have become influential on social media back home in Senegal. Abu Hatem al-Senegali was reportedly the leader of a group of Senegalese fighters in Libya. Other fighters frequently referred to him deferentially in their Facebook postings.<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, Abdourahman Mendy, a house painter from a suburb of Dakar who arrived in Sirte in early 2015,

90. Raffaello Binelli, "A Sirte l'Isis vieta internet caffè e dispositivi satellitari (In Sirte, ISIS bans Internet cafes and satellite dishes)," *Il Giornale* (Italy), April, 15, 2016. (<http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/sirte-lisis-vieta-internet-caff-e-dispositivi-satellitari-1246991.html>); "أبو حمزة السنغالي يعزل مدينة سرت الليبية عن العالم" (Abu Hamza al-Senegali Isolates the Libyan City of Sirte from the World)," *Sahara Media* (Islamic State radio broadcast in Sirte, Libya), April 14, 2016. (<http://www.saharamedias.net/أبوحمزة-السنغالي-يعزل-مدينة-سرت-الليبية-عن-العالم-a29984.html>)

91. "Who are the Senegalese men joining the Islamic State group?" *France 24*, February 1, 2016. (<http://observers.france24.com/en/20160201-senegal-jihadist-islamic-state>)

was active in Senegalese jihadist circles on Facebook.<sup>92</sup> Using broken French and Arabic, he called out “untrue” Muslims in Senegal, and posted photos of himself and other Senegalese fighters in Libya with Kalashnikovs and camouflaged uniforms, holding up their index fingers (a symbol of *tawhid*, or monotheism, that ISIL frequently displays in its propaganda).

Another fighter, Abu Sha’ib al-Senegali, appeared in an ISIL propaganda video in Libya that also included Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Malian foreign fighters. Abu Sha’ib spoke in a local Senegalese language, Wolof, and called on his “brothers” to abandon Senegal because it “is not ruled by sharia.” He advised them to migrate to “the territories [IS] controls in Nigeria, Libya, Syria, and other countries.”<sup>93</sup>

Based on available data, most Senegalese foreign fighters appear to be educated. One 25-year-old fighter from the southern Casamance region, Sadio Gassama, who is known as the “doctor,” graduated from Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, where he became radicalized through his involvement in a Salafi group called Ibadou Rahmane before joining ISIL in Sirte in September 2015.<sup>94</sup> In an interview, he declared that Senegal would be a target of ISIL attacks because President Macky Sall is “one of the pawns fighting against Islam.”<sup>95</sup> Like other Senegalese ISIL militants,

his Facebook account shows both his pre-ISIL life as a student and soccer fan.

A similar pattern is seen with 20-year-old Abou Jafar Diop, who began fighting with ISIL in March 2015. In an interview, he said, “We love death in the same way unbelievers love life,” and asserted that Senegal’s Sufi brotherhoods were a target and had to be destroyed. He also called on the Sufis to renounce their “crazy beliefs.”<sup>96</sup>

The top leader of the Senegalese in Libya is Abu Hatem, who, in an ISIL Tarabulus [Tripoli] Province video, is seen giving a sermon to a group of followers. In both that and another video, he was sitting in a wheelchair, although it is not clear whether or not he sustained an injury in Libya that required him to use it.<sup>97</sup>



Abou Hatem, seated in the wheelchair and wearing a blue uniform, is the leader of Senegalese militants in Libya.

92. “Abdourahmane Mendy, Sadio Gassama, Abu Jafar Diop, Abu Khalid, Zaïd Bâ etc... : Ces sénégalais reconvertis en Djihadistes (Abdourahmane Mendy, Sadio Gassama, Abu Jafar Diop, Abu Khalid, Zaïd Bâ etc... These Senegalese Have Reverted to Being Jihadists),” *Dakaractu* (Senegal), November 17, 2015. ([http://www.dakaractu.com/Abdourahmane-Mendy-Sadio-Gassama-Abu-Jafar-Diop-Abu-Khalid-Zaid-Ba-etc-Ces-senegalais-reconvertis-en-Djihadistes\\_a101039.html](http://www.dakaractu.com/Abdourahmane-Mendy-Sadio-Gassama-Abu-Jafar-Diop-Abu-Khalid-Zaid-Ba-etc-Ces-senegalais-reconvertis-en-Djihadistes_a101039.html))

93. “IS Fighters from West Africa Call on Respective Countrymen to Join Group,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, May 30, 2016. (Accessed via SITE Intelligence Group)

94. “Who are the Senegalese men joining the Islamic State group?” *France24*, February 1, 2016. (<http://observers.france24.com/en/20160201-senegal-jihadist-islamic-state>)

95. “Sadio Gassama Djihadiste: « Le Sénégal est ciblé car Macky Sall est l’un des pions qui mènent la lutte contre l’islam » (Sadio Gassama Djihadiste: Senegal is Being Targeted Because Macky Sall is One of the Pawns Leading the Fight Against Islam),” *SeneJet* (Senegal), accessed December 15, 2016. ([http://senejet.net/article/28393/actualite/interview-exclusive-avec-le-djihadiste-sadio-gassama-le-senegal-est-cible-car-macky-sall-est-leun-des-pions-qui-menent-la-lutte-contre-leislam-17.html?href=inner\\_website](http://senejet.net/article/28393/actualite/interview-exclusive-avec-le-djihadiste-sadio-gassama-le-senegal-est-cible-car-macky-sall-est-leun-des-pions-qui-menent-la-lutte-contre-leislam-17.html?href=inner_website))

96. “Abu Jafar Diop, djihadiste sénégalais: « Nous reviendrons pour combattre les soufis jusqu’à ce qu’ils arrêtent Gamou et Magal! » (Abu Jafar Diop, a Senegalese Jihadist: We Will Continue to Fight the Sufis Until They Stop Gamou and Magal!),” *Buzz Senegal*, July 23, 2016. ([http://www.buzzsenegal.com/news/abu-jafar-diop-djihadiste-senegalais-laq\\_n\\_1849.html](http://www.buzzsenegal.com/news/abu-jafar-diop-djihadiste-senegalais-laq_n_1849.html))

97. “Who are the Senegalese men joining the Islamic State group?” *France 24*, February 1, 2016. (<http://observers.france24.com/en/20160201-senegal-jihadist-islamic-state>)

These profiles represent several of the more public figures out of the estimated several dozen Senegalese foreign fighters in Libya. Although most of the fighters seem to be educated, a significant contingent is also uneducated. The greatest commonality among Senegalese fighters is their shared ideological outlook. They all appear to have internalized the anti-Sufi and anti-Western attitudes of both ISIL in Libya and JAS in the Lake Chad region. The fact that many Senegalese cite JAS as an inspiration suggests that they have stronger links (whether cultural, ideological, or interpersonal) with JAS than with Arabs in ISIL, and would thus likely be among the first to link up with ISWAP factions further south.<sup>98</sup>

## Senegalese ISWAP Members

There are also militants now based in Senegal whom Senegalese authorities suspect fought with and received funding from ISWAP in Nigeria, with the intention of setting up an ISWAP project in southern Senegal. This project, which was the first of its kind, involved exchanges of money, cells for training, and cells for radicalizing Senegalese youth.

The main cell involved in transferring money was led by Makhtar Diokhané, who was arrested in Niger with large sums of money, including counterfeit bills, which he was sending to his wife in Senegal for storage.<sup>99</sup> Another cell included a group of eight Senegalese who were arrested in Mauritania in February 2016. Those eight claimed that at least 23 Senegalese had become ISWAP members

since 2015. The leader of the cell, known as Abu Youssouf, was extradited to Senegal in July 2016.

The most prominent imam who radicalized Senegalese youth was Alioune Ndao, who attracted attention for preaching a worldview similar to that of JAS. When security forces arrested him, they discovered that he had two satellite phones that showed constant communication with ISWAP. There was a broader connection between Alioune Ndao and Senegalese ISWAP networks, as Ndao had been Makhtar Diokhané's Qur'anic teacher.<sup>100</sup>

After the arrest of Ndao, another four imams were arrested in Ziguinchor. They were charged with criminal conspiracy, money laundering, and financing terrorism. Other Senegalese were also arrested for receiving funds from relatives who were ISWAP fighters.

Only a month before Ndao's arrest, a teacher, 38-year-old Ibrahim Seye, was also arrested after he condemned Senegalese troops being sent to Mali, Darfur, and Yemen, argued that the Senegalese national flag contradicted "Islamic values," and called President Macky Sall a "non-believer just like the French and U.S. President."<sup>101</sup> His proceedings, held in June 2016, were the first time a Senegalese was charged with "condoning terrorism." The court ruled he had "proven sympathies" for both AQIM and ISIL.<sup>102</sup>

98. In an interview, a Senegalese fighter with ISIL in Libya said, "I wanted to go to Nigeria but this was not possible, so I set my heart on Libya." Another Senegalese fighter said in an interview that his nickname was "Shekau al-Senegali," a reference to the then-ISWAP leader, and an indication of where the fighter's inspiration came from. Some of the fighters traveled to Libya only because it was easier to reach than Nigeria, although some fighters did make it to Niger or Nigeria to join ISWAP directly. In some cases, their "migration" was a response to ISIL spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani's call for African Muslims to travel to Libya or Nigeria to join ISIL in "lands of the Caliphate." Author's (Jacob Zenn) interview of Senegalese journalist Abdou Cisse, September 10, 2016, in Dakar.

99. "Senegal Fears Extremism Amid Imam Arrests, Regional Attacks," *Voice of America*, February 8, 2016. (<http://www.voanews.com/a/senegal-fears-extremism-amid-imam-arrests-regional-attacks/3181622.html>)

100. "Entendues au fond dans le dossier Imam Ndao: Les deux épouses de Makhtar Diokhané disent ignorer les activités de leur époux (Heard at the End of Imam Ndao's File: Makhtar Diokhané's Two Wives Said They Ignored Their Husband's Activities)," *Dakaractu* (Senegal), May 6, 2016. ([http://www.dakaractu.com/Entendues-au-fond-dans-le-dossier-Imam-Ndao-Les-deux-epouses-de-Makhtar-Diokhané-disent-ignorer-les-activites-de-leur\\_a110280.html](http://www.dakaractu.com/Entendues-au-fond-dans-le-dossier-Imam-Ndao-Les-deux-epouses-de-Makhtar-Diokhané-disent-ignorer-les-activites-de-leur_a110280.html))

101. "Le Sénégal lance un sévère avertissement aux imams radicaux (Senegal Issues Severe Warning to Radical Imams)," *Seneweb* (Senegal), June 2, 2016. ([http://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/le-senegal-lance-un-severe-avertissement\\_n\\_183977.html](http://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/le-senegal-lance-un-severe-avertissement_n_183977.html))

102. Ibid.

## ISIL Networks in West Africa



### Scenarios for ISIL in Senegal

Senegal’s future as an ISIL operational hub is largely dependent on whether foreign fighters return to the country. Senegal thus far has maintained political stability, and the government is aware of the risks posed by Senegalese ISIL networks, but the country has fairly little experience dealing with jihadist terrorism. As such, ISIL may be able to find openings in the country.

#### *Scenario 1: Anti-Sufism turns Violent*

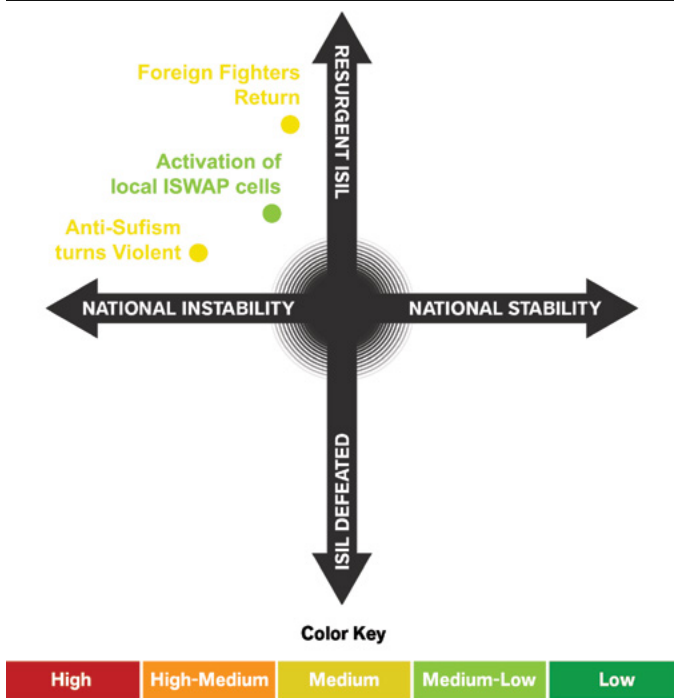
Senegal suffers from a series of unclaimed arsons and attacks on Sufi shrines and imams. A government investigation determines that a group of Salafi imams made contact with ISWAP, and instructed their followers to attack Sufi institutions on the advice of ISWAP members. When security forces arrest some of these imams, their followers engage in more attacks on security forces and Sufi institutions in retaliation. For the first time, these attacks on Senegalese soil are claimed by ISWAP.

Likelihood: Medium. Over the past few decades, Salafism has grown in Senegal and, more recently, anti-Sufi vigilantism has become more prevalent. Thus far, these anti-Sufi Salafist networks have remained relatively quiet, but there is a latent threat of charismatic or opportunistic leaders operationalizing these networks.

#### *Scenario 2: Foreign Fighters Return*

After Senegalese foreign fighters flee Sirte, they retreat along with Nigerians and other Sub-Saharan Africans to training camps in southern Libya, where they prepare to launch attacks in their home countries and professionalize their propaganda activities. Some fighters connect with pro-ISIL commander Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border area, from where the militants launch attacks on Senegalese, Burkina Faso, and Malian border officials. French-speaking ISWAP fighters from Niger also travel to Senegal and launch attacks on foreign

### Senegal Threat Matrix



targets. While they do not establish grassroots support in Senegal, their attacks have a destabilizing effect.

**Likelihood: Medium.** There are several dozen known Senegalese fighters in Libya, and a number of them played public media roles. It is unclear how many are unknown and may return to Senegal under the radar. ISIL has been successful infiltrating fighters into the security-conscious countries of Europe, and it would not be a significant challenge to do the same in Senegal. Sahrawi's proximity to Senegal makes him a possible conduit for these fighters.

### ***Scenario 3: Activation of local ISWAP cells***

After several years of developing networks throughout universities and mosques in the country, Salafi cells, loyal to ISWAP but acting independently, begin carrying out the first terrorist attacks in the country. Some of them appear to have studied bomb-making from online manuals of al-Qaeda and ISIL. They target the tourism sector and places where foreigners congregate. This, in turn, begins to weaken the Senegalese economy, and creates additional opportunities for jihadist recruitment. ISIL takes advantage of the violence in Senegal, and claims responsibility for attacks there.

**Likelihood: Low to Medium.** ISWAP is currently under pressure in Nigeria, and it could seek safe harbor or establish new networks in Senegal. Senegal is somewhat distant, but the interest of Senegalese jihadist aspirants in ISWAP makes the establishment of a new network a lingering possibility.

## Conclusion

Despite its various setbacks, ISIL will continue to threaten security in North and West Africa for the foreseeable future. Although the loss of Sirte and the fragmentation of ISWAP are significant blows to ISIL's expansion campaign in Africa, it is highly probable that the global militant group will remain relevant in the near term. Although ISIL will not be able to match the successes it experienced in seizing and holding territory in Nigeria and Libya in 2014 and 2015, respectively, the group may be well-positioned to conduct either an insurgent or

terrorist campaign in North and West Africa, especially in unstable countries such as Libya, Mali, and parts of Nigeria. ISIL may also exploit insecurity and poor governance in the region to rebuild its network, reboot its recruitment efforts, and expand operations to new countries, such as Senegal or Burkina Faso.

As ISIL evolves in North Africa and West Africa, countering the militant group will require innovative and adaptive thinking on the part of local governments and the international community. Regional states, working alongside international partners, will have to commit to a long-term counterinsurgency and "counter-network strategy" that focuses on clearing and holding territory and methodically dismantling ISIL's operational and support cells. To execute this strategy, state actors will have to improve regional counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL from exploiting porous borders and weak states.

But a military strategy alone is unlikely to produce a lasting victory over ISIL and other jihadist groups in the region. State actors will have to improve governance, rule of law, and economic opportunities, especially in the economic and geographic periphery of the region, in order to deny ISIL the ability to recruit and establish safe havens.

But ISIL is not the only jihadist threat in North and West Africa. As ISIL loses territory and resources in Libya, Nigeria, and elsewhere, al-Qaeda may have positioned itself to reclaim its former title of the undisputed jihadist hegemon in the region. In Algeria, al-Qaeda is already reintegrating defectors to ISIL, while in Nigeria, evidence suggests that rising militant leaders may eventually favor reconciliation with al-Qaeda, and perhaps even rejoining its network. The fall of ISIL's command-and-control hub in Sirte may also render ISIL's senior leadership incapable of providing patronage to ISIL factions in North and West Africa, thus creating new opportunities for al-Qaeda to chip away at ISIL's network.

In short, al-Qaeda's long-game strategy, which focuses on gradually building bases of support through deliberate growth, is paying off. ISIL's more aggressive and assertive expansion model may be coming undone, though poor governance and other structural opportunities gives ISIL ample opportunity to reverse its decline.



## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to begin by thanking the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) for its tireless support for quality scholarship and innovative, against-the-grain thinking related to violent non-state actors. The report's lead author, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, has been proud to call FDD home for almost a decade, and he has been able to witness FDD blossom as an institution during this time.

This report was funded by the Canadian Department of National Defence's Defence Engagement Program. The authors would like to express their appreciation to the Government of Canada for supporting this critical project. It should be noted that the views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of National Defence or the Government of Canada.

The authors respect FDD's policy of not accepting funding from foreign governments. The authors sought Canada's funding through an entirely separate entity, Valens Global, the private entity that Gartenstein-Ross runs, and FDD did not receive any of the funds that the Government of Canada allocated to this project.

The authors would also like to thank Madeleine Blackman, Meghan Conroy, and Morganne McManus, all of whom provided valuable research support for this report, and David Daoud, a talented linguist who provided assistance on relevant Arabic-language material.

## About the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) is a Washington, DC-based non-partisan policy institute focusing on foreign policy and national security.

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## About The Authors

**Daveed Gartenstein-Ross** is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. His professional focus is on understanding how violent non-state actors (VNSAs) are transforming the world. Gartenstein-Ross specializes in jihadist movements, including undertaking detailed research into the Islamic State (ISIL), al-Qaeda, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, Boko Haram, and other groups. He is also the chief executive officer of Valens Global, a private firm focused on the challenges posed by VNSAs, and an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

Gartenstein-Ross is the author or volume editor of twenty-one books and monographs. He has published widely in the popular and academic press. Additionally, as a practitioner, some of Gartenstein-Ross's recent projects have included delivering regular briefings and assessments to U.S. government agencies on such topics as ISIL's European attack network and the strategic implications of the Libyan civil war; organizing and facilitating a conference in Nigeria as an EU-appointed Strategic Communication Expert, and helping civil society activists understand militant groups' use of social media and forge a strategic action plan for countering it; mapping the online counter-ISIL narrative space for Google's think tank Jigsaw as it designed a pilot project to divert users who may be susceptible to the jihadist group's propaganda; and serving as a subject-matter consultant on militant groups during live hostage negotiations.

Gartenstein-Ross has testified on his areas of core competency before the U.S. House and Senate a dozen times, as well as before the Canadian House of Commons. He has also served as an expert witness or litigation consultant in nine different federal court cases. He is frequently a featured speaker at events and conferences throughout the globe, including delivering keynote speeches at the U.S. Army Special Operations Command Commander's Conference, the University of Southern California's National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE), and the Global Futures Forum.

Gartenstein-Ross holds a Ph.D. in world politics from the Catholic University of America and a J.D. from the New York University School of Law.





## About The Authors

**Jacob Zenn** was a component leader under European Union Technical Assistance to Nigeria's Evolving Security Challenges (EUTANS) from 2014 to May 2016, and supported a CT Sahel project in Niger as part of the EU's Instrument for Stability (IfS). He is also a fellow at The Jamestown Foundation, and a non-resident fellow at think tanks in Astana, Kazakhstan (Center for Security Programs) and Shanghai, China (Center of Shanghai Cooperation Organization Studies).

Zenn is the author of more than 200 articles and reports on Nigeria, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, and has spoken and published widely in the academic and popular press. Zenn consults for clients who need to understand micro-level details about the leadership, ideology, strategic communication, and operational trends of VNSAs, as well as macro-level trends about how VNSAs in the 21st century are evolving in geographical, socio-cultural, and historical context. He has provided briefings and lectures for a range of international actors, including the U.S. Army, United Nations Counter-terrorism Executive Directorate, Canadian Special Forces, and UK Ministry of Defense, and he co-teaches a graduate-level course on VNSAs with Gartenstein-Ross as an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

Zenn holds a J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center, where he was a Global Law Scholar, and a Graduate Certificate in Chinese and American Affairs from Johns Hopkins SAIS-Nanjing University School of Advanced International Studies, where courses were taught in Mandarin. Zenn conducts research in more than 10 languages.

**Nathaniel Barr** is the research manager at Valens Global. He specializes in the study of salafi jihadist groups in North Africa and the Middle East, with a specific focus on the dynamics of the global competition between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. He has also done extensive research on domestic jihadist networks in the West, combating jihadist propaganda, and other issues relating to countering violent extremism (CVE).

Nathaniel has co-authored six full-length monographs, and has also been published in several major publications, including *Foreign Affairs*, *The Daily Beast* and *Foreign Policy*. He is a graduate of Brandeis, holding a degree in political science and a minor in journalism.









P.O. Box 33249  
Washington, DC 20033-3249  
(202) 207-0190  
[www.defenddemocracy.org](http://www.defenddemocracy.org)