

AL-QAEDAISM IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

BY ISAAC KFIR



**CENTRE ON
RADICALISATION
& TERRORISM**

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CENTRE ON RADICALISATION & TERRORISM

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The Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism (CRT) at the Henry Jackson Society is unique in addressing violent and non-violent extremism. By coupling high-quality, in-depth research with targeted and impactful policy recommendations, we aim to combat the threat of radicalisation and terrorism in our society.

Author's Note

Salafi-jihadi activity is on the rise in parts of North Africa and the Sahel. The French withdrawal from Mali, the reduction of Western interest in what is occurring across the Sahel and West Africa, and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan have sent a powerful message to many Salafi-jihadis: perseverance and insurgency work.

This paper examines how al-Qaedaism, the ideology developed and promoted by al-Qaeda that infuses Salafi-jihadism with local issues, allows extremist groups to continue to advance a Salafi-jihadi agenda and gain supporters across the region, which is dominated by two main groups: al-Qaeda-affiliated and Islamic State-affiliated. Consequently, al-Qaedaism poses a major threat to North Africa, the Sahel, and Europe as it continues to operate within local communities, building long-lasting filial relationships and undermining local and international efforts to provide human security. The need to remain vigilant about al-Qaedaism in both North Africa and the Sahel, in particular, is because the West, occupied by great power geopolitics, Covid-19, supply chains, populism, and the war in Ukraine, is paying less attention to sub-Saharan Africa and the growing Salafi-jihadi threat in the region. The research concludes by calling for more development aid to the region, reconciliation, and a new counterterrorism regime.

Keywords: North Africa, Al-Qaedaism, Glocalism, Terrorism

Introduction

The 9/11 attacks in New York announced the presence of (al-Qaeda), an ideology (al-Qaedaism), and a network (Salafi-jihadis) that have shaped the world. Shocked by the calculating brutality of the group and its ideology, the international community rallied together, not only in swift condemnation of the attacks, but also in a commitment to destroy the group, respond to the ideology, and challenge the network.

At the heart of the network is al-Qaeda. It represents an eschatological form of “sacred terrorism”,¹ whose members, despite being deprived of training bases and seeing many of their leaders die, including the founder Osama bin Laden, continue to threaten international peace and security.

Al-Qaeda’s threat comes from the ideology, which remains vibrant, giving fuel to new entities seeking to use the al-Qaeda brand and ideas to advance a local agenda. As is shown below, al-Qaeda not only permits the use of its ideology in such a manner, but it also encourages it, seeing this approach as an effective way to undermine the *status quo*. Therefore, it is the ideology, and not the group, which is the real danger, particularly in North Africa and the Sahel, where it is able to exploit anger towards the political elites.

North Africa and the Sahel are diverse regions and many al-Qaeda and Islamic State groups operate within this region. It is in the Sahel that one sees the greatest and fastest growth of Salafi-jihadi activity. The *Global Terrorism Index* underlines the need to pay close attention to the security situation in sub-Saharan Africa, with Salafi-jihadi activity being on the rise, as seen by the fact that 48 per cent, or 3,461, of all terrorism-related deaths globally, occurred in sub-Saharan Africa.² There is a strong anticipation that this rate of violence will continue, if not increase, especially now that European countries are withdrawing from the region, and Russia seems to be moving in through such entities as the Wagner Group.³

The rise in Salafi-jihadi activity in North Africa and the Sahel has attracted tremendous interest, and has given rise to a strong disagreement about the links and influence that local groups gain from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. For instance, Higazi, Kendhammer and others see the terrorist activity as products of local grievances, whereas Jacob Zenn sees groups such as Boko Haram as being part of the global Salafi-jihadi network.⁴ Others look at the activities through the lens of Islamic religious disputation,⁵ historical mediated violence and wealth creation,⁶ or counterinsurgency.⁷ This study draws on these different views, emphasising that

¹ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 90–95; Mark Sedgwick, “Al-Qaeda and the Nature of Religious Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16, no. 4 (2004): 795–814.

² “Global Terrorism Index, 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, March 2022, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

³ Bruce Mutsvauro, Mirjam de Bruijn, and Kristin Skare Orgeret, “While the Focus is on Ukraine, Russia’s Presence in the Sahel is Steadily Growing”, *The Guardian*, 3 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/feb/03/while-the-focus-is-on-ukraine-russias-presence-in-the-sahel-is-steadily-growing>.

⁴ Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston, “A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa’ida”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12, no. 2 (2018): 203–13; Jacob Zenn, “Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram’s Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11, no. 6 (2017): 173–89.

⁵ Kyari Mohammed, “The Message and Methods of Boko Haram”, in M.A.P. de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Zaria: IFRA/Ahmadu Bello University, 2015), 9–32.

⁶ Scott MacEachern, “Boko Haram, Bandits and Slave-Raiders: Identities and Violence in a Central African Borderland”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 54, no. 2 (2020): 247–63.

⁷ Atta Barkindo, “Abubakr Shekau: Boko Haram’s Underestimated Corporatist-Strategic Leader”, in Jacob Zenn (ed.), *Boko Haram beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2018): 53–73, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

the groups rely on al-Qaeda ideology (al-Qaedaism), but are also pragmatic and have become more fluid. Therefore, to understand such groups and their goals, one must draw on the ideology-theological nexus, local politics, socioeconomics conditions, and military factors, and recognise that groups adapt and innovate.⁸

The threat we see in North Africa and the Sahel has arisen as al-Qaeda and the branches of the Islamic State in West and North Africa recognise that if Salafi-jihadism is to remain vibrant and attractive, it must address local needs as opposed to focusing on the Far Away enemy, which is what Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had initially called for when they formed al-Qaeda. Such an approach by Salafi-jihadism is more focused on the basic needs of potential recruits. Additionally, it seems that the level of theological commitment and understanding of Salafi-jihadism among many local populations and in recruitment is substantially lower than one sees, for example, in the Arabian Gulf or South Asia, where the tradition and presence of this brand of Islamism has existed for a longer period of time. Therefore, it is unsurprising that in response to attacks by government-armed communal militias, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) carried out a series of joint offensives in 2012 in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.⁹

Clear connections between Sahelian Salafi-jihadis and the Taliban or al-Qaeda or even the Islamic State are not always obvious, as communication and engagement seem limited. Nevertheless, one expects that as North Africa and the Sahel see increased terrorist activity, these groups will gain influence and ideas from other campaigns, particularly in Afghanistan, which seems to serve as a case study of how local jihadis can win against larger forces.¹⁰ Notably, in October 2021, JNIM reached out to the Malian government with a Taliban-like offer for a ceasefire and negotiations if the French were told to leave Mali.¹¹

Looking at the period after 2017, when JNIM was formed, Sahelian Salafi-jihadi activity seems to have changed and became more people-centric. It seems that groups are less focused on gaining territory to form a state.¹² The goal appears to be more about winning people over, with the assumption that, in time, this will deliver territorial success and lead to the emergence of what Professor Brynjar Lia termed “jihadi proto-states”, that are ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist *wilayats* (provinces).¹³ Such a people-centric strategy includes carrying out attacks against civilians, if, and only if, it is about terrorising people into submission and reminding people that the state cannot protect them, which is why they should submit.

There has been an increase in Salafi-jihadi activities across the region: in 2021, four of the ten countries with the largest rise in the number of deaths from terrorism were Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and Niger, all of which are fragile states.¹⁴ Not only have the European countries not sought to remain engaged in the region, but they also withdrew from the region, effectively leaving the matter to the African Union and the Sahelian

⁸ Isaac Kfir, “Innovating to Survive: A Look at How Extremists Adapt to Counterterrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1–19, doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2021.1926069; Raafat, Lina. “The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel: How Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are Battling for Legitimacy in the Sahelian Context”. Middle East Institute, 13 (2021).

⁹ Clionadh Raleigh, Héni Nsaibia, and Caitriona Dowd, “The Sahel Crisis since 2012”, *African Affairs*, 120, no. 478 (2021): 138.

¹⁰ “How Islamist Militants Elsewhere View the Taliban’s Victory in Afghanistan”, *International Crisis Group*, 27 October 2021, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/afghanistan-360-27x21.pdf>.

¹¹ “Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM”, *International Crisis Group, Africa Report*, No. 306, 10 December 2021, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/306-mali-jnim.pdf>.

¹² Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies: 2007).

¹³ Brynjar Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9, no. 4 (2015): 31–41.

¹⁴ “Global Terrorism Index, 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, March 2022, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

states. Moreover, the presence of Salafi-jihadi groups helped create the conditions that led to several military coups in the region (Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso).¹⁵ This in turn has led to even more instability and threats as evident in Burkina Faso which has seen a 40 per cent increase in terrorist attacks since 2021, resulting in more than 400 deaths.¹⁶

There should be real concern that Salafi-jihadi groups would look to control territories, giving rise to several scenarios. First, the areas controlled by the Salafi-jihadis could seduce young men and women to travel to these places and take up with the local groups, as was the case with the approximately 30,000 Europeans who travelled to join the Islamic State. These young men and women could already have long historical ties to the Sahel, making their travel to the region easier. Second, once these groups control an area, with enough financial support, they could transform it into a training ground from where they can launch attacks against the West. This transpired in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

In the context of this study, al-Qaedaism is found within the Islamic State and its affiliates because jihadism, as Cole Bunzel shows, is at the core of Islamic State ideology.¹⁷ In 2022, in the Sahel, Islamic State affiliates and al-Qaeda affiliates are not interested in creating an Islamic State, nor are they engaging in substantive theological discussions, as was evident in the 2010s between Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (in Syria). The groups appear pragmatic; they look for recruits and financial resources with the intention of causing disruptions as opposed to massive revolutions that would topple the existing order. However, it seems that the Islamic State groups and their affiliates are more willing to use violence against civilians as a way to cause the disruptions because that is more the model of Islamic State than it is of al-Qaeda. For example, in 2020, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) was responsible for on average of 15.2 deaths per attack in Niger, making it the most lethal group in the Sahel.¹⁸ They appear to continue in this way.

The study proceeds in the following manner. It begins in Part I with a look at al-Qaeda and the roots of al-Qaedaism, arguing that over the last two decades, the group has developed an ideology that continues to resonate with a cohort of individuals. The Part II reviews the appeal of “glocalism” (defined below) in North Africa and the Sahel. Part III examines the pull-and-push factors of al-Qaedaism in North Africa and the Sahel. It focuses on four factors: *Economics and sustainability, the politics of ethnicisation and alienation, the crime-terror nexus, and securitisation of migration policies by the EU: long-term consequences*. These provide some understanding as to why Salafi-jihadi activity is on the rise. Part IV takes a closer look at Libya whose importance to the study of Salafi-jihadism, and for the security of Europe, cannot be underestimated. Libya's significance is magnified by its position as a central point of debarkation for countless irregular migrants hoping to make it to Europe.¹⁹

¹⁵ Emmanuel Akinwotu, “Contagious Coups: What is Fuelling Military Takeovers across West Africa?”, *The Guardian*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/07/contagious-coups-what-is-fuelling-military-takeovers-across-west-africa>.

¹⁶ Jean-Michel Bos, “Insecurity in the Sahel: What You Need to Know”, *DW.com*, 30 May 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/insecurity-in-the-sahel-what-you-need-to-know/a-61974641>.

¹⁷ Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State”, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, *Analysis Paper*, No. 19, The Brookings Institution, March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>.

¹⁸ “Global Terrorism Index, 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, March 2022, <http://visionofhum+Inity.org/resources>; Lachlan Wilson and Jason Pack, “The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition”, *CTC Sentinel*, 12, no. 3 (2019): 22–32; Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, “Al-Qaida's Strategy in Libya: Keep it Local, Stupid”, *Perspective on Terrorism*, 11, no. 6 (2017): 191–200.

¹⁹ Lorenzo Tondo, Piero Messina, and Patrick Wintour, “Italy Fears Isis Fighters Slip into Europe Posing as Injured Libyans”, *The Guardian*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/islamic-state-fighters-infiltrate-europe-posing-injured-libyan-soldiers>; Lorenzo Tondo and Piero Messina, “Interpol Circulates List of Suspected Isis Fighters Believed to be in Italy”, *The Guardian*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/31/interpol-circulates-list-of-suspected-isis-fighters-believed-to-be-in-italy>.

Part I: The roots of al-Qaedaism

Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and their cohorts wanted to impose their interpretation of Islam on Muslims. Al-Qaeda, its members, and sympathisers represent a Salafi strand of Islam within the Muslim community. To achieve their imposition of their interpretation of Islam on Muslims, they are willing to use extreme violence.

The al-Qaeda network draws on the Arabic word *salaḥ*, which means “to precede”, a reference to the Companions of the Prophet Muhammed. The Companions were individuals who had learned about Islam directly from the Prophet Muhammed. This, the al-Qaedaists claim, means that the Salafis practice Islam as preached by the Prophet. They see this period, which also included the Prophet’s four immediate successors, as the “Golden Age”, when the “well-guided caliphs” governed properly because Islam was in its purest form.

Woven into the *Salafiya* concept is the belief that, over time, syncretic cultural, tribal, and popular rituals have come to pollute Islam.²⁰ These are seen as *bidāa* (religious) innovations that undermine *Hakimiyyah* (God’s rule on Earth) and have led to *Jahiliya* (the Age of Ignorance). Thus, al-Qaedaists see it as their mission to purify Islam and return the faithful to the “right” way to practice the faith, although they also recognise that they need to be pragmatic and cannot do it in the way that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or the Islamic State did it.

Sayyid Qutb, who helped shape the Salafiya movement, argued that such changes can only occur through violence. For Qutb, *Istishhad* (Martyrdom) typified the campaign to purify Islam and the Islamic world because it needed the believers to embrace violence since those in power are determined to let people continue to practice Islam “wrongly” as it lets the leaders stay in power.²¹

Al-Qaeda’s appeal across the Sahel and North Africa has proven challenging to counter, in part because it looks to those already angry at the failings of local government and the international political system, whom many hold responsible for the rise in the cost of living. It meshes economics (understood through the lens of deprivation), politics, and religion with emotions, particularly anger and humiliation. The narrative is effective because it adapts to real-world events. This has become more obvious following the death of bin Laden because, with al-Zawahiri at the helm, the al-Qaeda doctrine has evolved through internal debates and political realities, giving rise to the “Peshawar Paradigm” and “the Idelb Paradigm”.²²

Untangling al-Qaedaism

Professor Assaf Moghadam persuasively argues that ideologies have many functions, most notably because they raise awareness about one’s views and goals. In other words, an ideology underlies the ideas, beliefs, views, and goals of a specific group, facilitating the emergence of an in-group and out-group dichotomy.²³

²⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kaltner, “Killing in the Name of Islam: Al-Qaeda’s Justification for September 11”, *Middle East Policy*, 10, no. 2 (2003): 76–92.

²¹ Mohamed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2007); Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207–39; Djallil Lounnas, “The Shifts in the Jihadi-Salafi Paradigms: From the Peshawar and Jalalabad Paradigms to those of Idlib and Raqqa”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33, no. 3 (2021): 441–65.

²² Three pillars make up the Peshawar Paradigm: fighting the near enemy, which is being propped up by the far enemy, which also supports Israel and prevents the liberation of Palestine. Second, jihad is alleviated as the sixth pillar of Islam. Third, embracing and welcoming martyrdom. Djallil Lounnas, “The Shifts in the Jihadi-Salafi Paradigms: From the Peshawar and Jalalabad Paradigms to those of Idlib and Raqqa”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33, no. 3 (2021): 445.

²³ Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, “Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda’s Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5, no. 2 (2011): 39. Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Ideology and Armed Conflict”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 56, no. 5 (2019): 635–49; Ibid., “A Map of the Field of Ideological Analysis”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18, no. 3 (2013): 299–327.

Al-Qaeda, because it has faced enormous pressure from the United States and its allies, has innovated, transforming itself from an atypical terrorist organisation structured to coerce countries to accept its political goals, into an ideology. It draws on ideas from Abu Ala Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Abdallah Azzam, and theologians such as Ibn Taymiyyah, mixed with many established Islamic ideas about *dar al-islam* (domain of Islam), *dar al-harb* (the domain of war), as well as *jihad al-talab* (offensive jihad) and *jihad al-daf* (defensive jihad). These have come to form the core of al-Qaedaism.

The current ideological threat of al-Qaeda is complex and is found on three different plateaus.

First, al-Qaeda became the midwife of a theological-political-military, uncompromising ideology, best understood as “al-Qaedaism”. The ideology is based on a distinct reading of Islam and Islamic history. It percolates and appeals to a cohort of mainly young men who feel aggrieved at what they perceive are social, political, economic, and international failures. The ideology looks to generate feelings of anger, grievance, humiliation, and victimhood.

Second, al-Qaedaism is about the long game. Whereas before 9/11, al-Qaeda may have hoped for a quick, decisive battle, the lessons drawn from the “War on Terror” and the rise of the Taliban show that a strategy of attrition and low-intensity conflict aimed at exhausting the West is more productive. The strategy no longer looks to target the West directly or use unaffiliated individuals to carry out attacks.²⁴ The 2022 *Global Terrorism Index* confirms this trend as the data shows that terrorism in the West has been falling consecutively for the last three years. In 2021, there were 59 attacks and 10 deaths, a decrease of 68 and 70 per cent, respectively, since the peak in 2018. In Europe, Islamic extremists carried out three attacks in 2021. Attacks in the US also dropped to the lowest level since 2015, with 7 attacks recorded in 2021, none of which was attributed to any known terrorist group.²⁵

Third, as the Ugandan foreign minister Jeje Odongo noted, Salafi-jihadis have relocated to sub-Saharan Africa, leading to a marked increase in activities in the region.²⁶ The strategies seem to shift and change, depending on the environment they occupy and who they face. For example, in Mali, Salafi-jihadis have had to adapt to robust French-led counterinsurgency, whereas in Libya, the intention was to build long-term relations with specific communities as they recognised that violence in Derna and Sirte was counterproductive.

The change in circumstances fed into what Abu Musab al-Suri argued for in his 1,600-page magnum opus, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*. Al-Suri called for an individual jihad and the abandonment of a structured format. Put differently, al-Suri, drawing on his experiences as a mujahedeen, claimed that to win the war, al-Qaeda had to turn from an organisation into a system through mass mobilisation, where it encourages individuals to carry out jihad on behalf of the cause and less in the name of the organisation.²⁷ Things seem to be playing out as al-Suri foresaw. There has been an increase in unaffiliated claims of responsibility for religiously motivated violent extremist attacks as seen, for example, in the murder of the British Conservative MP Sir David Amess in his surgery in October 2021.²⁸

Al-Suri, bin Laden, and al-Zawahiri recognised the role of the media. In a letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, whose reign of terror in Iraq was proving too much even for al-Qaeda, bin Laden

²⁴ “How Islamist Militants Elsewhere View the Taliban’s Victory in Afghanistan”, *International Crisis Group*, 27 October 2021, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/afghanistan-360-27x21.pdf>.

²⁵ “Global Terrorism Index, 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, March 2022, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

²⁶ Jeje Odongo, “Africa’s Islamist Terrorism Problem is a Global, Not Local, Threat”, *Newsweek*, 2 February 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/africas-islamist-terrorism-problem-global-not-local-threat-opinion-1678109>.

²⁷ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Musab al Suri* (London: Hurst, 2007).

²⁸ “Global Terrorism Index, 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, March 2022, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

pointed out “we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media”.²⁹ Bin Laden’s message was that al-Zarqawi’s actions were proving counterproductive not only because he was terrorising the local population, but because the media was covering it, and Muslims from around the world were seeing the carnage inflicted by Muslims on Muslims.

The veteran al-Qaedaists recognised there was an army of armchair jihadi sympathisers, such as Younis Tsouli (aka Irhabi007), and that these young, savvy men could mobilise into what al-Suri called “small resistance units” to spread al-Qaeda’s general message and thus undermine official, government narratives as well as inspire lone-actor activism.³⁰ This is effectively what has been going on since the mid-2010s in Europe, where there has been more lone-actor, Salafi-jihadi activity. It is also obvious that Salafi-jihadi groups recognise that they need to have a media presence, which they need to control.

Third, the adoption of a franchising strategy that focused less on the West, and more on new spheres of jihad has been key to al-Qaedaism’s survival.³¹ Initially, al-Qaeda was highly discerning about whom it allowed into its fold. It was particular in its messaging, which looked to the Muslim world. Al-Zawahiri’s essay of 2005, “The Freeing of Humanity and Homelands under the Banner of the Qur’an”, looked to expand the audience by pointing out the dangers of globalisation and the need for climate action.³² More notable was al-Qaeda’s reframing of its grievance narrative to take into consideration local and specific issues that resonated with movements engaged in terrorism in Yemen, Somalia, the Caucasus, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This franchising strategy exploited glocalism.

Integral to al-Qaeda’s transformation and arguably that of the Islamic State which went through this change once it lost the Caliphate in 2014-17,³³ is the adoption of a new strategy that rests on three pillars: continue the transition from an organisation into a network;³⁴ make the message less doctrinal and aimed at magnifying grievances; and shift the battlefield from the West to the online sphere and the non-Western world.³⁵ Similar things could be seen with the Islamic State, particularly because the group’s leadership has been decimated,³⁶ demanding it adapts its tactics and leading it to adopt a *sabr* (“patience”) strategy.³⁷ These adaptations

²⁹ “Letter from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi”, *GlobalSecurity.org*, 9 July 2005, http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm.

³⁰ Rita Katz and Michael Kern, “Terrorist 007, Exposed”, *The Washington Post*, 23 March 2006; Shiraz Maher, “The Road to Jihad”, *Index on Censorship*, 36, no. 4 (2007): 144-7; Raffaello Pantucci, “Operation Praline: The Realization of Al-Suri’s Nizam, la Tanzim?”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2, no. 12 (2008): 11-16.

³¹ Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³² Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, “Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda’s Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5, no. 2 (2011): 39.

³³ Hassan Hassan, “Insurgents Again: The Islamic State’s Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond”, *CTC Sentinel*, 10, no. 11 (2017): 1-8.

³⁴ In the case of the Islamic State, the change is to an “adocracy”, a reference to a decentralised organisation particularly when it comes to tactics and operations. The organisation has a core of specialists who may provide strategic direction, but those at the front carry out the day-to-day running. Haroro J. Ingam, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, “The Islamic State’s Global Insurgency and its Counterstrategy Implications”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), *Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism*, Vol. 2 (November 2020): 24, doi: 10.19165/2020.5.22.

³⁵ Defectors from Boko Haram have pointed out that continuous internet-based communications led the group to become a franchise of the Islamic State. Defectors underlined that initially the challenge for Boko Haram was the lack of “a stable internet connection” as opposed to theological differences. Once the technology barrier was overcome, Islamic State provided advice via Telegram. Vincent Foucher, “The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad”, *International Crisis Group*, 29 October 2020, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/iswap-29oct20.pdf>.

³⁶ In February 2022, a raid by US Special Forces led to the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi and it took about a month for the group to name a new leader, though doubts remain as to how much authority the new leader Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi actually wields.

³⁷ Asaf Day, “Patience: Islamic State’s New-Found Focus on Sabr”, *The Defense Post*, 6 February 2019, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/02/06/patience-islamic-state-new-focus-sabr/>; Haroro J. Ingam, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, “The Islamic State’s Global Insurgency and its Counterstrategy Implications”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), *Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism*, Vol. 2 (November 2020): 21-46, doi: 10.19165/2020.5.22.

resonate with many Sahelian Salafi-jihadis who do not seem as doctrinal as their Middle Eastern counterparts. This is more obvious in the post-2012 period as they recognise that the community is not interested in a strict Islamic interpretation, in part because the concerns of many people are with subsistence, being excluded from the socioeconomic system, and the impact of climate change, which is altering the region's ecology and the inhabitants' ability to forge a living.

Part II: Al-Qaedaism, glocalism, and the Sahel

“Our general goals are the same goals of Al Qaeda the mother, and you know them. As far as our goals concerning the Islamic Maghreb, they are plenty. But most importantly is to rescue our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion, and their people.”³⁸

Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud),
leader of the Algerian al-Qaeda, 2008

The 2012 crisis in northern Mali was in all likelihood caused by thousands of Tuaregs, Berbers from central and western Sahara, who had served in Gaddafi’s Islamic legion. With Gaddafi’s fall and a NATO intervention in 2011, these men, bringing with them their small weapons, headed back to Mali, Niger, and Algeria, causing havoc across the region.³⁹ Libya’s fragility means that both criminal organisations and Salafi-jihadis continue to exploit the chaos for their own gains, which could include the establishment of a jihadi proto-state at some point in the future.⁴⁰ Speaking in 2018, Neil Basu, the Deputy Assistant Commissioner and the Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom, declared:

“You would be completely foolish not to worry about Libya ... Libya is very close to home for Europe and our allies, but for a long time, it was not the focus for our attention. For us in the U.K., what happened in Manchester was a big wake-up call to the fact that there were people who had travelled back and forth to Libya doing much the same thing we were preventing people from doing in Iraq and Syria and who had a similar hatred for this country.”⁴¹

Glocalisation emerged in the early 1990s. It could be understood as “think globally, but act locally”.⁴² Adib Bencherif has applied glocalisation to study Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel, arguing that whereas scholar such as Roland Robertson saw glocalisation as the material and local component of globalisation, in the context of violent extremism, glocalisation highlights a dialectical process that is evolutionary.⁴³ In other words, a glocal jihad underlies a layered approach in which different sociological, political, economic, ethnic, and religious elements play a role in shaping the groups, their message, and their actions. It also means that groups adhering to a glocalist agenda may not be theologically orthodox since their agenda is driven by local issues, which they interweave with transnational Islamism in the hope to raise their own profile or because they look for financial and logistical support.

Drawing on certain theological themes and infusing them with material needs, local political pressures, and ethnic elements, Sahelian Salafi-jihadi groups have constructed a narrative and an agenda aimed at destabilising the *status quo*. This strategy has short-term and long-term goals. As to the former, the goal is survival and destabilisation. Groups look to survive

³⁸ “An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel”, *The New York Times*, 1 July 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdel.html?_r=0.

³⁹ Scott Shaw “Fallout in the Sahel: The Geographic Spread of Conflict from Libya to Mali”, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 19, no. 2 (2013): 199–210; Yehudit Ronen, “Libya, the Tuareg and Mali on the Eve of the ‘Arab Spring’ and in its Aftermath: An Anatomy of Changed Relations”, *Journal of North African Studies*, 18, no. 4 (2013): 544–59.

⁴⁰ Sergei Boeke, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27, no. 5 (2016): 914–36.

⁴¹ Raffaello Pantucci, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Neil Basu, Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom”, *CTC Sentinel*, 11, no. 2 (2018): 10.

⁴² Roland Robertson, “Globalisation or Glocalisation?”, *Journal of International Communication*, 1, no. 1 (1994): 33–52; Victor Roudometof, “Theorizing Glocalization: Three Interpretations”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 19, no. 3 (2016): 391–408.

⁴³ Adib Bencherif, “Unpacking ‘Glocal’ Jihad: From the Birth to the ‘Sahelisation’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14, no. 3 (2021): 335–53.

the various counterinsurgency operations that exist across the region, which has seen JNIM and ISWAP working together since after all, both are products of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the 2012 Mali crisis. The second part of the strategy is to cause as much destabilisation as possible to the existing political order, because it underlines the message that the contemporary, Western-created polity cannot provide basic services to the local people. Both JNIM and ISWAP want to cause as much disruption as possible, though they may go about it in different ways, with ISWAP being more violent. Additionally, local Salafi-jihadis emphasise that the ruling elites are having to turn to Western powers for support while also instituting an ethnic policy that sees preferential treatment given to some communities over others as a way for this elite to survive. However, in the long run, this adds to the fragmentation and instability.⁴⁴

The long-term policy of Sahelian Salafi-jihadis is to ingrate themselves with the local communities and offer the services that the state has not been able to provide. In return, the groups hope to institute stricter Islamic rules and, eventually, create an Islamic State. In the words of one scholar looking at JNIM, “JNIM has been increasingly able to implement a comprehensive strategy to shape power brokers and social networks, which allowed JNIM to strengthen their horizontal ties across ethnic, social, and economic fault lines. The strategy includes political, violent, and information lines of effort to create a governance structure in parts of Mali, and later Burkina Faso.”⁴⁵ However, when looking at JNIM, and specifically at its leaders, they seem more pragmatic, which may mean that they could be open to compromise, including giving up their military campaign in return for limited engagement in the political system. Having a dialogue with these groups could shed light on whether they are open to adapt their Islamist agenda.⁴⁶

It is unsurprising that glocalism would find an audience among Sahelian jihadis because there has always been a strong focus on local issues. One reason for the rise of AQIM was a recognition by Algerian jihadis, such as Abdelmalek Droukdel, that the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) and its successor, the Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), were tainted by the butchery of Algerians. AQIM sent recruits to Iraq to join al-Zarqawi, and it is possible that while al-Zarqawi chose to ignore the advice of the high-ranking member of the Libyan al-Qaeda, Abu Yahya al-Libi, that he should not follow in the GIA path, Droukdel did so, ensuring that AQIM targeted mainly foreigners.⁴⁷ Such pragmatism explains the allure of a glocalist agenda for Sahelian Salafi-jihadis, some of whom move across groups in pursuit of power and plunder, sometimes making the exact relationship between major jihadis unclear. Oumar Ould Hamaha illustrates this, as he switched from AQIM to Ansar Dine, before moving to Mouvement pour l’unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO).

For their part, many contemporary Sahelian Salafi-jihadi groups looked to the al-Qaeda strategy of creating the conditions as a more effective strategy. The reason for the change is that it has become vital for Salafi-jihadis to ensure the right conditions before one declares a Caliphate. The influence of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State on local Salafi-jihadis has been repeatedly demonstrated, with Droukdel often travelling to northern Mali to visit JNIM. In the case of the Islamic State, the group had reportedly sent Boko Haram financial assistance ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Rida Lyammouri, “Tribal Dynamics in the Sahel”, Policy Center for the New South, *Policy Brief*, PB19/31, October 2019, https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Tribal_dynamics_in_the_Sahel.pdf.

⁴⁵ Troels Burchall Henningsen, “The Crafting of Alliance Cohesion among Insurgents: The Case of al-Qaeda Affiliated Groups in the Sahel Region”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 42, no. 3 (2021): 373.

⁴⁶ For more on this, see Sumita Pahwa, “Secularizing Islamism and Islamizing Democracy: The Political and Ideational Evolution of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers 1984–2012”, *Mediterranean Politics*, 18, no. 2 (2013): 189–206.

⁴⁷ Sergei Boeke, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27, no. 5 (2016): 919–20.

⁴⁸ “Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM”, *International Crisis Group, Africa Report*, No. 306, 10 December 2021, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/306-mali-jnim.pdf>; Vincent Foucher, “The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad”, *International Crisis Group*, 29 October 2020, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/iswap-29oct20.pdf>.

One explanation for the pragmatism that appears among Sahelian Salafi-jihadis is that several of the leaders were part of the failed experiment of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad, effectively a recreation of the Islamic State in northern Mali. The project lasted but a few months, not only because of the way in which the international community responded, but also because locals rejected the brutality that came with its creation.⁴⁹

It seems that many senior Sahelian Salafi-jihadis have taken heed of Ayman al-Zawahiri's letter to al-Zarqawi in which bin Laden's deputy called for a gradual strategy. Al-Zawahiri emphasised that, first, the Americans needed to be expelled from Iraq (in the context of the Sahel, that would be the French), which would lead to "the installation of a power centre".⁵⁰ The next step was to expand the jihad to neighbouring states, before launching a campaign against Israel. Most notably, and probably because al-Zawahiri recognised that al-Zarqawi's bloodlettings were counterproductive, he stressed winning the hearts and minds of the local population.⁵¹ This is what al-Qaedaism now seeks to do. It may explain why there are fewer references to Israel or the United States in many of the statements by Salafi-jihadis and why there are more statements being made about local actions and emerging or potential spheres of jihad.⁵² Moreover, leaders such as Iyad Ag Ghaly, the Mali Tuareg with al-Qaeda allegiance, have called for a moratorium on the enforcement of strict Islamic (al-Qaedaist) principles because they claim that the locals are not religiously mature.⁵³

A close look at the groups and their actions over the last few years underlies that they recognise the danger of carrying out purely terror and Islamist campaigns, as undertaken by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s or by Boko Haram in Nigeria (mainly), Chad, Niger, and Cameroon in the 2010s. These groups, or at least their leaders, seem to have taken note of what occurred in northern Mali when an attempt was made to create a "pure" Islamic State (the Islamic Emirate of Azawad in 2012–13), in part because they accept that the local population is not Salafi in orientation. They seem to appreciate that terror can be counterproductive, alienating local populations and encouraging foreign interventions. JNIM has decided to respect local hierarchies, which may explain why anecdotal evidence suggests that its membership is rising. JNIM's pragmatism is also seen in its willingness to accept voting in some of the areas that it controls, as long as those elected jihadi groups are close to JNIM, as seen in several districts in Nampala, Segou, and in Dogo, Mopti.⁵⁴ The Sahelian Salafi-jihadis recognised that there is a lot of anger around, and this was evident in the way Hamadoun Koufa, the founder of the Katiba Macina, looked to exploit the Fulani pastoralists' sense of victimisation, specifically as to how the Malian government managed the shrinking pastoral land in his recruitment drive. Koufa referred to Sékou Amadou and the Diina movement that he had led in the nineteenth century, as many in the region see that period as the Fulani's "Golden Age". The narrative centred on restoring lost Fulani and Islamic pride.⁵⁵

By being pragmatic and taking the long view, Salafi-jihadis look to form alliances, develop relations with local communities, work with local powerbrokers, and most importantly to

⁴⁹ Vidar B. Skretting, "Pragmatism and Purism in Jihadist Governance: The Islamic Emirate of Azawad Revisited", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2022), doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2021.2007562.

⁵⁰ Cited in Djallil Lounnas, "The Shifts in the Jihadi-Salafi Paradigms: From the Peshawar and Jalalabad Paradigms to those of Idlib and Raqqa", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33, no. 3 (2021): 441–65.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Leader Argues Taliban's 'Blessed Emirate' a Core Part of New Caliphate", *The Long War Journal*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/al-qaeda-leader-argues-talibans-blessed-emirate-a-core-part-of-new-caliphate.php>.

⁵³ "Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM", *International Crisis Group, Africa Report*, No. 306, 10 December 2021, p. 8, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/306-mali-jnim.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys': Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists", *International Crisis Group, Africa Report*, No. 276, 28 May 2019, pp. 3–4, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/276-speaking-with-the-bad-guys_0.pdf.

continue to destabilise the state by ensuring that basic human security is denied to many people. With this format, violence is strategic and not theological. Violence is used for specific reasons, operating not simply as a means to terrorise communities into submission, but rather to remind them where power lies. The violence is also more focused on specific entities and institutions, mainly ones related to the state or that support the state. Consequently, the extremists tend to target local leaders as such actions create disruptions. For example, following the killing of Boubacar Lawey, a 95-year-old chief of the village of Tchombangou in southwest Niger, major chaos ensued as for over 50 years, had been resolving local disputes, collecting taxes, registering births and deaths, and more. His murder led to around sixty village chiefs fleeing the area, leaving a power vacuum that the government tried to fill. Instead, local tensions rose as the government outlawed motorbikes because many insurgents use them. The increased insecurity discouraged villagers from visiting the markets, grounding the local economy to a halt.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Edward Mcallister and Lena Masri, "Extremists Target African Village Leaders in Wave of Assassinations", *Reuters*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/africa-islamists-sahel-leaders/>.

Part III: Recruitment in the region

The pull-and-push factors behind the allure of al-Qaeda in sub-Saharan Africa

Economics and sustainability

The Sahel is one of the world's poorest regions. The situation is made worse by changing ecological conditions that increasingly impact agriculture and tribal life, which in turn affect migration patterns and food production as local populations must come to terms with rising temperatures and a reduction in fresh water. Extremists have looked to exploit these conditions, with reports of jihadi preachers focusing their sermons mainly on the Gourmantché and Fulani who have been deprived of access to water, mineral deposits, pastures, and hunting and fishing grounds.⁵⁷

A quick look at the Mopti Province in Central Mali highlights the economic and sustainability challenges. Irregular rainfall, poor soil, and low-level flooding of the Niger River have affected cultivable land and agricultural production. Pastoralist communities have had to contend with a decrease in fresh water, which led to a substantial reduction in herd sizes. In turn, water insecurity has led to increased tensions between pastoralists and farmers, leading some to join militant groups as they look to survive, with some Fulani joining such Salafi-jihadi groups as Katiba Macina and Ansarul Islam to protect themselves.⁵⁸

The pervasive need to subsist and survive, as opposed to living, means that locals must rely on other sources for their survival and security. This reality has given fuel to the claim that violent extremism in the Sahel is facilitated by economic deprivation and the politicisation of religion. The former highlights two key elements: a sense of discontentment that arises from a belief that they have less than they should, especially when one compares one's situation to that of another group, which then encourages a sense of victimhood that over time can only be addressed through the use of violence.⁵⁹ Significantly, the argument is not that poverty necessarily leads to terrorism, but rather, that deprivation could contribute to violent extremism, particularly if individuals feel that they cannot change the *status quo* through political discourse.⁶⁰ Alex Thurston identifies this continuum in relation to Boko Haram's recruitment methods, arguing that the group has a dual message which looks to exploit the pervasive poverty that many in northern Nigeria live in, while emphasising that a return to true "Islam" would end the inequality, deprivation, and abuses.⁶¹

The politics of ethnicisation and alienation

Ethnicity is a feature of African politics, and is becoming increasingly the case in the Sahel. Political leaders tend to rely more on "their" ethnic brethren for their positions.⁶² This ethnicisation of politics has led to government policies giving preference to one group over another, with dangerous consequences. For instance, in Mali, such policies have led to intercommunal violence in the Mopti and Ségou regions between Dogon and Fulani, with the Malian government favouring

⁵⁷ "Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence", *International Crisis Group, Africa Report*, No. 287, 24 February 2020, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/287-burkina-faso-spiral-of-violence.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri, "Sahel: Moving beyond Military Containment Policy Report", *Atlantic Council Africa Center*, February 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving_beyond_military_containment.pdf.

⁵⁹ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

⁶⁰ Ted Robert Gurr, "Economic Factors", in Louis Richardson (ed.), *The Roots of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2006): 85-101.

⁶¹ Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, "Living in Fear: Religious Identity, Relative Deprivation and the Boko Haram Terrorism", *African Security*, 6, no. 2 (2013): 153-70.

⁶² Kristen A. Harkness, "The Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset: When Leaders Use Ascriptive Identity to Build Military Loyalty", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2021): doi: 10.1177/07388942211044999.

the Dogon who are sedentary farmers, whereas the Fulani are semi-nomadic cattle herders. In Burkina Faso, these policies led to tensions between Fulani and Djermas, encouraging some Fulani to turn to groups such as Ganda Izo (Sons of the Soil) or to the Islamic State in Greater Sahara or Ansarul Islam, as they look for protection from government forces.⁶³

Beyond the ethnicisation policies, other factors also help explain the rise in violence between farmers and herders, with competition over resources being one. Climate change appears to have a huge impact on sub-Saharan Africa, as farmers and herders are competing for grazing lands and access to water. The region, particularly the Sahel, has seen a large population rise of about 40 per cent in the last 20 years. At the same time, pastoralists, many of whom do not have links with the ruling elites, have been losing their grazing lands while cropland has nearly doubled in size.⁶⁴

The crime-terror nexus

The demise in legitimate work has encouraged young men to turn to crime, particularly banditry. In places such as northern Benin, young Fulani men join criminal groups to earn a living because of their poor education and a lack of social standing.⁶⁵ A similar situation occurred in Tillabery, Niger, where members of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara focused on targeting security services, and looked to recruit among the Fulani by capitalising on their grievances against the state and neighbouring ethnic groups.⁶⁶ The ethnic, tribal, and filial relations help explain why group sizes vary as members move from one group to the next due to personal attacks or because of family relations.⁶⁷ Other reasons why some leave groups and join others include the death of a leader or falling out within the group.

The ability and willingness of criminal and terrorist enterprises to exploit social, economic, political, cultural, and topographical conditions in the Central Sahel and Libya to facilitate irregular migration mainly to Europe and to other criminal operations explains why there is a great focus on the crime-terror nexus in the region.⁶⁸ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), looking solely at the human-smuggling operations that take place across the region found that these activities generated as much as US\$1.5 billion in 2016.⁶⁹ Conversely, the decision by groups such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which was to become Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), to engage in kidnapping not only raised the group's profile, but also netted it around US\$5 million per hostage.⁷⁰

⁶³ Pierre Englebort and Rida Lyammouri, "Sahel: Moving beyond Military Containment Policy Report", *Atlantic Council's Africa Center*, February 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving_beyond_military_containment.pdf; Mahamoudou Savadogo, "The Changing Face of Burkina Faso's Terrorist Threat", *The Conversation*, 27 January 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-changing-face-of-burkina-fasos-terrorist-threat-130267>.

⁶⁴ Leif Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa", *Africa Center for Strategic Security, Africa Security Brief*, No. 39, July 2021, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ASB39EN-The-Growing-Complexity-of-Farmer-Herder-Conflict-in-West-and-Central-Africa-update-7-27-21.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Leif Brottem, "The Growing Threat of Violent Extremism in Coastal West Africa", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Spotlight*, 15 March 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-growing-threat-of-violent-extremism-in-coastal-west-africa/#author>.

⁶⁶ "Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger's Emerging Communal Crisis", *International Crisis Group, Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, No. 172, 28 May 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1400826/download>.

⁶⁷ "Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence", *International Crisis Group, Africa Report*, No. 287, 24 February 2020, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/287-burkina-faso-spiral-of-violence.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Richard Philippe Chelin, "From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel: The Transformation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32, no. 6 (2020): 1186-205; Annette Hübschle, "From Theory to Practice: Exploring the Organised Crime-Terror Nexus in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5, no. 3/4 (2011): 81-95; Morten Bøås, "Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery", *African Security*, 8, no. 4 (2015): 299-319.

⁶⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018*, UNDOC Report (Vienna: UNDOC, 2018).

⁷⁰ Joelle Rizk, "Exploring the Nexus between Armed Groups and the Trafficking and Smuggling of Human Beings in the Central Sahel and Libya", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021), doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2021.2002687.

Ontologically, one fundamental difference when distinguishing between criminal groups and terrorists is that the former is largely driven by financial gains, whereas the latter focuses on ideology.⁷¹ Woven into the dichotomy is an assumption that, in order to keep their campaign pure, those motivated by ideology would avoid engaging in products or actions that would sully the cause. However, the crime-terror nexus highlights a continuum when it comes to operations and behaviour whereby the terrorist group would adopt criminality to further its cause.

When looking at the Sahel, criminal networks and Salafi-jihadi groups operate along three main lines: cooperation, coexistence, and convergence.⁷² One of AQIM's regional leaders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (Khalid Abu al-Abbas), who later became the leader of al-Murabitoun, represents the crime-terror nexus. Belmokhtar had been involved in cigarette trafficking, leading him to acquire the nickname of "Mr. Malboro". His connection to local Arab tribes and the Tuareg enabled him to control some of the better routes. The proceeds of the smuggling facilitated the establishment of AQIM.⁷³

Securitisation of migration policies by the EU: Long-term consequences

European countries, particularly France, have a long history in the Sahel. Interest in the region stems from its resources and concern with irregular migration.⁷⁴ European countries recognise that individuals travel from the region, but also use the region as a transit point to reach Europe through, what is termed, the "Central Mediterranean Route". Reportedly, around 180,000 people used this route in 2016, possibly because the Economic Community of West African States Treaty permits citizens of the member states to have the right of passage, meaning that individuals can travel unencumbered all the way to the borders of Algeria and Libya.⁷⁵

The EU, through various initiatives such as the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (2011), the Regional Sahel Regional Action Plan (2015), and the European Trust Fund for Africa (2015), has looked to tie development and security aid to stop the flow of irregular migrants.⁷⁶ This approach has given rise to "a governance architecture for migration management that effectively blurs the lines between development assistance and migration control as well as whose interests this serves".⁷⁷

By focusing predominately on stopping irregular migration, European efforts have caused two key things. First, they have helped destabilise local power dynamics without providing those employed by criminal enterprises or those benefitting from the movement of people with an alternative source of income.⁷⁸ That is, European intervention has sought to criminalise border movement, including informal trade, which has encouraged greater hostility towards

⁷¹ Tamara Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism", *Global Crime*, 6, no. 1 (2004): 129-45; Steven Hutchinson and Pat O'malley, "A Crime-Terror Nexus? Thinking on Some of the Links between Terrorism and Criminality", *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, 30, no. 12 (2007): 1095-107.

⁷² Joelle Rizk, "Exploring the Nexus between Armed Groups and the Trafficking and Smuggling of Human Beings in the Central Sahel and Libya", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021), doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2021.2002687.

⁷³ Sergei Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27, no. 5 (2016): 914-36.

⁷⁴ The term "irregular migrant" in the content of this research refers to the movement of people who lack the appropriate documentation to travel and travel mainly on foot or by vehicle and possibly with the help of smugglers. It does not reflect the status of the individuals, some of whom are fleeing persecution, whereas others are in search of a better life.

⁷⁵ Morten Bøås, "EU Migration Management in the Sahel: Unintended Consequences on the Ground in Niger?", *Third World Quarterly*, 42, no. 1 (2021): 57, doi: 10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002.

⁷⁶ Andrew Lebovich, "Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel", European Council on Foreign Relations, *Policy Brief*, Paris, September 2018, https://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/files/publications_pdf-template_halting_ambition_eu_migration_and_security_policy_in_the_sahel.pdf.

⁷⁷ Morten Bøås, "EU Migration Management in the Sahel: Unintended Consequences on the Ground in Niger?", *Third World Quarterly*, 42, no. 1 (2021): 54, doi: 10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002.

⁷⁸ Abebe, Tsion Tadesse, "Securitisation of Migration in Africa: The Case of Agadez in Niger", Institute for Security Studies (ISS), *Africa Report*, 20 (Dakar: ISS, 2019), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/ar20.pdf>.

those looking to impose these measures and has increased anger at the lack of alternatives.⁷⁹ Second, the policies are less about helping the countries and more about stopping migration to Europe, leaving them vulnerable to local Salafi-jihadi forces. These entities use foreign aid to label the government a puppet of the West. Alternatively, Salafi-jihadis claim that the aid only ends up in the pockets of corrupt government officials or corrupt local officials, whose goal is to ensure that foreign aid keeps flowing to them, as opposed to the community. Ultimately, the European anti-migration policies in the Sahel only end up causing more problems as they do not address the root cause, which is a lack of opportunities, increasing securitisation of migration, and the lack of alternative means for young men to earn a living and have stature within communities.

The situation in the Sahel and North Africa remains serious when it comes to the prospect of an Islamic State reawakening. It is unlikely that an Islamic State, as the one that existed in Iraq and Syria or in Azawad, would re-emerge because there is little appetite for such brutality and the pragmatism of the local actors made them astute to the failings of the former. Therefore, what is likely to happen is that local actors look to the Taliban for inspiration. They will look to emulate what is occurring in Afghanistan, where slowly and, more importantly, less violently, the Taliban is reversing many of the hard-fought gains of the last two decades, with the recent demand that women wear burkas if and when they leave their homes.

⁷⁹ Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, "(B)ordering Hybrid Security? EU Stabilisation Practices in the Sahara-Sahel Region", *Ethnopolitics*, 18, no. 5 (2019): 544-59, doi: 10.1080/17449057.2019.1640509.

Part IV: Libya

Since 2014, Libya has been the most important recruitment, logistical, financial, and training centre for ISIS and a key redoubt for al-Qaedaism interaction with the rest of the African continent.⁸⁰

The case of Salman Abedi highlights Libya's importance from a security perspective for a UK audience. The 22-year-old Manchester Arena suicide bomber came from the well-established Libyan diaspora in Northern England. It is likely that he was radicalised in Libya by Abdul Baset Ghwela, a militant preacher affiliated with the Islamic State.⁸¹ The bombing occurred on 22 May 2017, killing 22 people and injuring over 230. What made the attack particularly heinous was that the bomber seemed to deliberately target teenagers and youngsters as these were the individuals who were expected to attend the concert.⁸² This viciousness is very much part of the way the Islamic State operates, as they look for such mass-casualty attacks.

In 2011, Libya went through a revolution like that experienced by many of the Arab countries where it had spread during the "Arab Spring", starting in Tunisia in 2010, which had lost its purpose and direction. Since then, Libya has been trapped in a cycle of violence and political deadlock. Salafi-jihadis have been partly responsible for the chaos but they have also looked to exploit the political vacuum to solidify their base. A Salafi-jihadi tradition has existed in the eastern parts of Libya prior to the revolution. In the 1980s, Libyans, mainly from the east, travelled to join the jihad in Afghanistan.⁸³ Upon their return, and influenced by the many jihadis who were in Peshawar, Pakistan, they established the al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah al-Muqatilah (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, LIFG) which attempted to topple the Gadhafi regime.⁸⁴ Currently, groups such as AQIM have capitalised on the instability in Libya to cement their presence, particularly in the southwest, allowing it to link up with JNIM and with the Tunisian-based Uqba ibn Nafa Brigade.⁸⁵

The LIFG, whose leaders claim never to have joined al-Qaeda as their primary goal was overthrowing Gadhafi, showed itself to pursue a glocalist agenda when Abdulbaset Buhliqa, a Shura Council member, named a brigade after Omar Mukhtar. Mukhtar is known by many Libyans as the "Lion of the Desert" for his role in 1911-31 in fighting the Italian occupation. However, Mukhtar was a member of the Sanussi Sufi order.⁸⁶

There was hope in 2020 that Libya was on track to ending the stalemate after Khalifa Haftar's Tripoli-based rivals defeated his latest military campaign. The campaign however, opened the

⁸⁰ Lukáš Tichý. "The Islamic State Oil and Gas Strategy in North Africa", *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 24 (2019): 254-60; Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa", *CTC Sentinel*, 13, no. 11 (2020): 18-33; Kevin Truitte, "The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council: A Revolutionary Islamist Coalition in Libya", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12, no. 5 (2018): 4-17.

⁸¹ "The Manchester Terrorist Bombing", *Strategic Comments*, 23, no. 5 (2017), iii-v, doi: 10.1080/13567888.2017.1344018.

⁸² Chris Osuh, "The Making of a Monster: How Manchester Boy Salman Abedi became a Mass Murderer", *Manchester Evening News*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/salman-abedi-manchester-arena-bomber-13601393>.

⁸³ Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith, and Karim Mezran. "The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya", *Atlantic Council*, 20 June 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The_Origins_and_Evolution_of_ISIS_in_Libya_web_0705.pdf.

⁸⁴ Mary Fitzgerald and Emadeddin Badi, "The Limits of Reconciliation: Assessing the Revisions of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)", Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT), Barcelona, September 2020, <https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ASSESSING-THE-REVISIONS-OF-THE-LIBYAN-ISLAMIC-FIGHTING-GROUP-LIFG.pdf>; Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith, and Karim Mezran. "The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya", *Atlantic Council*, 20 June 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The_Origins_and_Evolution_of_ISIS_in_Libya_web_0705.pdf.

⁸⁵ Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Qaeda & ISIS 20 Years After 9/11", *Wilson Center*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/al-qaeda-isis-20-years-after-911>.

⁸⁶ Mary Fitzgerald and Emadeddin Badi, "The Limits of Reconciliation: Assessing the Revisions of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)", Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT), Barcelona, September 2020, p. 37, <https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ASSESSING-THE-REVISIONS-OF-THE-LIBYAN-ISLAMIC-FIGHTING-GROUP-LIFG.pdf>.

door to a UN-mediated, Western-supported, negotiated settlement, although the refusal of the key powers of Turkey, Russia, and the UAE to disengage sustains the divisions.⁸⁷

Several reasons explain the stalemate, ranging from persistent disputes about the control over Libya's resources by the ruling elites, the proliferation of armed groups, and the failure to conduct any reasonable security sector reform; to the interference in Libya's internal affairs, including the continuous deployment of thousands of foreign forces and mercenaries within the country's borders; and, ultimately, to a failure by the Libyans themselves to compromise on a new path forward.⁸⁸

With Europe looking to move away from its reliance on Russian energy, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia are natural places to turn to in search of energy. The issue, however, is that soon after the toppling of Gadhafi and the ensuing political chaos, Sahelian and non-Sahelian Salafi-jihadis looked to Libya, recognising its energy potential, close proximity to Europe, and that there is a vast amount of weapons that are circulating around the country.⁸⁹ It was, therefore, unsurprising that Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL), an al-Qaeda-affiliated group, and the Islamic State sought to capitalise on the chaos by establishing a presence, although their ability to hold territory changed has over time.⁹⁰

Second, Libya has a Salafi-jihadi community committed to the al-Qaedaist ideology, and specifically to the creation of an Islamic State. With the removal of Gadhafi, there was an attempt by former LIFG members to seize the initiative and set up something akin to a jihadi proto-state, although, initially, the focus of Islamists was to work through the political system as they recognised the limitation that comes with violence.⁹¹ The members operating under the banner of the Islamic Movement for Reform failed to get much traction, leading the LIFG to fragment, with Shura Council members looking to carve out their own paths, and some choosing to participate in the violence that eventually pushed Libya to a civil conflict.⁹² With the civil war, extremists looked to establish a presence in Libya by exploiting the vacuum that emerged, particularly in the south of the country where al-Qaeda's affiliates established training facilities.⁹³ Moreover, the vacuum enabled the Madkhalists, whom some have tied to Saudi Arabia, to also carve out a space in Libya, further highlighting the increased jihadism in the region.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Jason Pack and Wolfgang Pusztai, "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli", Middle East Institute, 10 November 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-11/Turning%20the%20Tide%20-%20How%20Turkey%20Won%20the%20War%20for%20Tripoli.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux, "The Deep Roots of Libya's Security Fragmentation", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 55, no. 2 (2019): 200-24; Alessia Melcangi and Karim Mezran, "Truly a Proxy War? Militias, Institutions and External Actors in Libya between Limited Statehood and Rentier State", *The International Spectator* (2022), doi: 10.1080/03932729.2022.2061225; George Joffé, "Libya: The New Geopolitical Arena", *Journal of North African Studies*, 25, no. 5 (2020): 681-88.

⁸⁹ Charlie Winter writes: "It has been long suspected that the IS bureaucracy has looked upon Libya as a source of great potential due to its asset wealth, strategic location and the immense amount of weaponry still present there following the overthrow of al-Qadhafi", in, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State", The Quilliam Foundation, February (2015), <http://content.maltatoday.com.mt/ui/files/QUILLIAM%20libya-the-strategic-gateway-for-the-is.pdf>.

⁹⁰ Andrea Beccaro, "ISIS in Libya and beyond, 2014-2016", *Journal of North African Studies*, 27, no. 1 (2022): 160-179, doi: 10.1080/13629387.2020.1747445; Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, "Al-Qaida's Strategy in Libya: Keep it Local, Stupid", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11, no. 6 (2017): 190-9.

⁹¹ Abdel Hakim Belhaj, "The Revolution Belongs to All Libyans, Secular or Not", *The Guardian*, 27 September 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/27/revolution-belongs-to-all-libyans>.

⁹² Omar Ashour, "Libya's Defeated Islamists", *Al-Jazeera*, 18 July 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/7/18/libyas-defeated-islamists>; Mary Fitzgerald and Emadeddin Badi, "The Limits of Reconciliation: Assessing the Revisions of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)", Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT), Barcelona, September 2020, <https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ASSESSING-THE-REVISIONS-OF-THE-LIBYAN-ISLAMIC-FIGHTING-GROUP-LIFG.pdf>.

⁹³ Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars, *Salafism in the Maghreb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019), 107.

⁹⁴ Anouar Boukhars, "The Potential Jihadi Windfall from the Militarization of Tunisia's Border Region with Libya", *CTC Sentinel*, 11, no. 1 (2018): 32-6; Tarek Megeris, "Libya's Global Civil War", European Council on Foreign Relations, *Policy Brief*, June 2019, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/libyas_global_civil_war1.pdf.

Part V: By way of conclusion and policy recommendations

In 2012, Mali was rocked by an ethnic-nationalist Salafi-jihadi insurgency that led to the emergence of the short-lived Islamic Emirate of Azawad. Foreign intervention has helped crush the insurgency, but it also spread the insurgents across the region as they sought refuge and new converts. Over the last decade, various efforts to defeat the insurgents have failed as they adapted and spread, making the Sahel the epicentre of Salafi-jihadi activity. There is evidence that the violence is spreading to such places as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Cameroon, and Benin. The latter has not only seen more Salafi-jihadi activity since December 2021, but has also experienced more sophisticated attacks, for example with insurgents using improvised explosive devices in the Pendjari National Park, which resulted in the deaths of eight people.⁹⁵

Left to their own devices, and dealing with fragile governments, some of whom, such as in Mali, are increasingly relying on Russia and the Wagner Group, means that the prospect for the groups to weaken is unlikely. These entities remain a clear and present danger, although, in the short term, only to the people and governments of the region, as they generally do not show an interest beyond the region. However, if such ungoverned and under-governed areas are allowed to fester, the threat of these groups to Europe will become increasingly prominent.

Currently, both the governments across the region and the various Salafi-jihadi groups are vying for supremacy, in what has become low-intensity conflicts. Many in the West are either ignorant of this, or are unable to address the issue as Western governments look to deal with the cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine, both of which impact the region directly, causing a serious increase in the cost of energy and food. Moreover, the groups, and particularly entities such as JNIM, are looking for incremental progress, as they recognise that drastic changes will bring more attention to them and the region. They note the role of France's counterterrorism mission and the use of drones had on the region, but also on Salafi-jihadis around the world, and they therefore aim not to attract too much attention. This explains why they avoid kidnapping Westerners or attacking energy sources, two things that AQIM was doing in the 2000s and early 2010s.

It is not just development support, but regional structural reform

The Sahel has seen a rise in coups, and providing the security services with better equipment could be counterproductive for the promotion of democracy. This is why before undertaking meaningful, long-term development support, there has to be an understanding of the countries, including whether a Western-style democracy is appropriate and possible. For decades, we assumed that democracy was the solution, but we must recognise how long it has taken Western countries to develop their own political systems, and some would say that recent events have raised questions about how effective Western liberal democracies are.

To emphasise that there is a need for development aid with respect to North Africa and the Sahel is obvious, as many of these countries are de facto failed states. Local communities and governments across the region must become more resilient.⁹⁶ The ability of Sahelian governments to provide basic services beyond a few urban centres is limited and is a situation which terrorist groups look to exploit. The issue, however, is the type of development support

⁹⁵ Newswire, "Death Toll in Benin National Park Attacks Rises as France Opens Terror Probe", *France24*, 11 February 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220211-death-toll-in-benin-national-park-attacks-rises-as-france-opens-terror-probe>.

⁹⁶ Carolyn Logan, "The Roots of Resilience: Exploring Popular Support for African Traditional Authorities", *African Affairs*, 112, no. 448 (2013): 353-76; Fransje Molenaar, Méryl Demuyneck, and Kars de Bruijne, "Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances", Netherlands Institute of International Relations and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT), December 2021, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/customary_legitimacy_synthesis.pdf.

currently being offered because training the military without addressing the structural issues is redundant, if not dangerous.

There is also a dire need to discuss borders in North Africa and the Sahel regions. Such a discussion must involve the African Union, which has itself become the biggest barrier to border reforms. The need for such discourse is derived from borders not reflecting the conditions on the ground, serving to empower nefarious actors who use borders and the existence of trafficking to enhance their criminal activities. Current borders also limit trade, which limits growth.

Together with a discussion on borders, there is a need to assess regional associations, and to make travel, transport, and commerce easier and more effective. Africa is massively underperforming, accounting for around 2 per cent of global trade (intra-trade is around 17 per cent, whereas in Asia it is 59 per cent and in Europe 68 per cent).⁹⁷ The establishment of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) within the African Union in 2001 has been a good development, however there are indications that some are in fact complicating trade as opposed to making it easier, which partly explains why intra-African trade remains underdeveloped. There is hope that the 2018 Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) framework could help harmonise trade, thereby eliminating overlapping trade agreements, boosting regional income by 7 per cent, or US\$450 billion, and raising the GDP of most African countries by 1–3 per cent.⁹⁸

Reconciliation

Across the Sahel, anger, divisionism, and disenchantment is rife. These feelings stem in part from persistent failures by political elites to create the conditions for people to prosper. Instead, what Sahelian governments do is feed more resentment and anger, as they look for short-term gains and survival and do not address the root causes of why Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso sit at the bottom of the 2022 Human Development Index (Niger is 189, Chad is 187, Mali is 194, and Burkina Faso is 182, out of 189 countries).

The deteriorating socio-political-economic situation has made it vital that something akin to the 2017 Charter of National Understanding is created across the region, allowing governments to have a dialogue with Salafi-jihadis, as it has become obvious that it is not possible to destroy such entities that have become so embedded in the current system. The 2012 rebellion by Tuaregs highlighted that decades of neglect would lead to resentment and conflict. Instead of developing a comprehensive solution, the government working with the members of the Platform alliance and the Rebel Coordination of Azawad Movements looked to address cultural issues and not to adopt a political solution for the Azawad, which is also why there is evidence of increased ethnicisation across Mali.⁹⁹

Rethinking counterterrorism

A decade of French-led counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in the Sahel, which was influenced by the theory of modernisation¹⁰⁰ – defeating terrorists without also expanding and

⁹⁷ John Luiz, “Africa’s Free Trade Area Offers Great Promise. But Only if Risks are Managed with Resolve”, *The Conversation*, 26 May 2021, <https://theconversation.com/africas-free-trade-area-offers-great-promise-but-only-if-risks-are-managed-with-resolve-161535>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2022 Country Report – Mali. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_MLI.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ M. L. R. Smith and David Martin Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency: Strategic Problems, Puzzles, and Paradoxes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); Steven Metz, “Abandoning Counterinsurgency: Toward a More Efficient Antiterrorism Strategy”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 10, no. 4 (2017): 64–77.

ensuring that the state has the capacity to govern – has proven ineffective. “Fixing” the Malian, Nigerian, and Burkinabé political systems is simply inconceivable, at least in the immediate future. This, therefore, means that counterterrorism and counterinsurgency assistance needs to be separate from political, social, and economic help. The goal should be to adopt an anti-terrorism model, which means accepting some narrative that could be construed as extremist, but not allowing it to become violent. If the behaviour of the group remains violent, the use of surgical drone strikes and even of Special Operation activities could help remove key targets.¹⁰¹ Individuals such as Iyad Ag Ghaly should be co-opted to join the political process with sufficient inducement to dissuade insurgents from engaging in violence.¹⁰² A key feature of this revised counterterrorism policy is to move away from a whole-of-society approach where efforts are placed on trying to address everything under the sun, to a more targeted system which relies on the local population, particularly village chiefs and religious leaders, who have largely been ignored.

In sum, since it was first expounded, its ideas in the 1996 *Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites*,¹⁰³ the 1998 *Jihad against Jews and Crusaders*,¹⁰⁴ and in countless statements, al-Qaeda has looked to facilitate violence. Initially, it has looked to ferment violence in Arab countries, only to refocus on the West. After two decades, al-Qaeda is not the organisation that bin Laden and al-Zawahiri had created in the mountains of Peshawar, but rather the harbinger of a pragmatic ideology that seems to resonate with a few who use it to defend their violence. With all eyes on Ukraine and rising great power tensions, there is a real danger that the international community would cease looking at the Sahel, allowing JNIM, ISWAP, and others to expand their influence. There is already evidence of the Malian government reaching out to JNIM that could lead to the establishment of the Taliban-like system in Mali that would have dangerous implications for the entire region, which is why attention must be redirected to the region to prevent this from occurring.

¹⁰¹ It was recently revealed that US Special Operation units have been active in 13 different African countries, with the US having 29 bases on the continent. Nick Turse, Sam Mednick, and Amanda Sperber, “Exclusive: Inside the Secret World of US Commandos in Africa”, *Mail & Guardian*, 11 August 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/exclusive-inside-secret-world-us-commandos-africa>.

¹⁰² On cooptation see, Markus Holdo, “Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest”, *Social Movement Studies*, 18, no. 4 (2019): 444–62; Meili Criezis and Sammie Wicks, “Al Qaeda’s Algerian Strategy: Attempts to Co-opt the Hirak and Rehabilitate the Salafi-Jihadi Image”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), *ICCT Research Paper*, March 2022, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2022/03/Al-Qaeda-Algerian-Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites. (Expel the infidels from the Arab Peninsula)”, 1996, https://www.911memorial.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/1996%20Osama%20bin%20Laden%27s%201996%20Fatwa%20against%20United%20States_O.pdf.

¹⁰⁴ Osama bin Laden, “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders”, 23 February 1998, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>.

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