Drivers and Contexts of Militancy and Migration in North Africa and the Sahel

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Crisis and upheaval in Europe’s southern periphery have shaken the strategic landscape of regional security in the Western Mediterranean. The Arab uprisings radically transformed the political and security environment within some countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, especially Tunisia and Libya. The resultant political tumult and the proliferation of transnational violent extremist groups and organized criminal networks, including human smugglers and drug traffickers, have stirred major security concerns in Europe. The initial response of European policy-makers to the tectonic shifts transpiring in the Maghreb and the Sahel, however, seemed quite promising. As early as March 2011, EU leaders branded the tantalizing lure of a strategic partnership with countries of the Southern Mediterranean that was to be underpinned by money, market access and mobility. This “three Ms” approach seemed bold and transformative, a much-needed break from the same policies of the past.

Unfortunately, the much heralded EU support to its southern neighbors never really transpired. The EU became preoccupied with stemming the flow of migration and violent extremism into Europe. But instead of tackling the main drivers behind such rise, the EU and concerned European countries fell back to the same old securitization approach of trying to seal off the Mediterranean. This brief argues that the European response is too short-sighted to shore up the continent’s security and stability. Such a process needs to first take stock of the realities that drive trans-national jihadism and cross-border migration. This brief purports to do just that.

The Advantage of Militants in the Sahel

Salafi-jihadi movements have become a major staple of modern day insurgencies waged in countries where Muslims constitute either a majority or minority population. Some scholars attribute this prominence to the ideological characteristics of these groups and their transnational revolutionary networks. Others point more convincingly to the strategic incentives for embracing extremist ideologies.

The core assumption is that the adoption of a radical revolutionary identity provides a critical competitive advantage in attracting the most dedicated first-movers’ fighters necessary to build a well-funded, robust network that can out-compete rival rebel groups and shape the dynamic and outcomes of conflict. In contexts of political uncertainty, rampant corruption, ethnic and sectarian competition, or shifts in economic distribution, the presence of a credible fighting force that promises physical protection and a transformative socio-political project can capture the loyalty, sympathy or at least acquiescence of aggrieved local populations. In other words, the adoption of Salafi jihadism by both insurgent leaders and their rank-file supporters is a strategic choice aimed at gaining perceived competitive advantages.

The downside of adopting such extreme revolutionary identity, however, is that when taken to extremes it can provoke popular resentment and eventually counter-mobilization as al-Qaeda experienced first hand in Iraq when its excesses led the Sunni tribes that had once perceived it as a protector to help defeat it in 2008. A decade earlier, the same fate befell the jihadi insurgency in Algeria when the brutality of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) alienated its sympathizers and supporters.


3 Mohammed M. Hafez, “Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremity and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars,”
Jihadi insurgent actors also tend to invite U.S. drone strikes and regional and foreign military interventions, the most notable is the international coalition that drove the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) out of Iraq and Syria and the French-led military campaign in Mali, which ousted jihadi extremists in 2013 from the territories they controlled. Ironically, the factors that contributed to the prominence of jihadi rebels as warriors, protectors and purveyors of harsh justice eventually led to their defeat.

This is the major paradox of modern jihadi insurgencies. Jihadi insurgents continue to thrive even when they have failed to translate the advantages they have into lasting positive outcomes for their followers. Though it is tempting to attribute this prominence to Islam's presumed core teachings and the natural inclination of the most pious for a violent reading of religious texts, in several conflict-affected areas, the adoption of jihadiism as a tool of war continues to be viewed as a rationalist choice to violently contest the status quo. Yes, these groups are composed partly of a highly dedicated core and invest a great deal of time and energy on indoctrinating their recruits. But it is also not rare to see the occasional softening of ideological constraints or tweaks in ideological messages to fit the dictates of particular circumstances. In some contexts, religious ideology intermixes with ethnicity, opportunism and shady criminal activities. It is therefore more analytically sound to analyze jihadi groups such as ISIS as revolutionary actors that happen to be religious.

Whatever the case, Salafi-jihadism remains the only available form of radical revolt on the market. To use Olivier Roy's famous expression, this "Islamization of radicalism" forces us to rethink why the discontented, marginalized and repressed have found in jihadi ideology the right paradigm to guide their rebellion against the system. 4 But unlike Roy's assertion that contemporary jihadists are motivated only by the nihilistic destruction of the status quo, this article argues that rebels adopt Salafi jihadism because it offers the promise of imagining alternatives to a political and social system that is deeply corrupt and unjust. As the case of the Sahel and Maghreb demonstrates, in environments pervaded by bad governance and intense inter and intra-group tensions, individuals and communities tend to embrace any group that can offer assurances of survival and when possible profit as well. In other words, people join groups and alliances based on relative power calculations.

Field case studies, including the author's own research in the Maghreb's border areas, 5 have documented how in contexts of socio-political instability, the temptation for aggrieved individuals and communities to join armed groups that can defend them is high. 6 Surveys of young Fulani people in the conflict-affected areas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso reveal how toxic the state and its defense and security services (DSF) have become. 7 Majorities associate DSF with a threat to the security of their communities and assert the necessity to arm themselves as protection from state abuse and stigmatization. For an appreciable number of young men, jihadi groups appear as logical allies in environments teeming with myriad armed groups, some of whom are believed to be supported by the same abusive security services. 8

In line with the main argument advanced in this paper, the decision to join ideological groups is primarily driven by relative power considerations. 9 In the case of young Fulanis, jihadi groups offer the promise that their armed struggle might yield an alternative socio-political model inspired by the ideals and principles of Islamic law. 10 In the more immediate term, jihadi groups are appealing because they tend to possess enough fighting power to help Fulanis defend themselves as well as compete in the struggle over access to natural resources with rival factions such as the Bamba-ra and Dogon farmers in central Mali and the Daoussakh herders in northwest Niger. It is this revolutionary character—but buttressed by a moralizing and revolutionary discourse—that build the credibility and reputation of jihadists as enforcers of order and purveyors of security. If several scholars, NGO's and journalists highlight the brutality and harshness of such enforcement, even if such cruel application is inconsistent, interviews with those who lived under jihadists' rule reveal a more nuanced assessment of their tenure. This helps explain why a non-negligible number of people still turn to the Jihadists for swift justice and protection. Some, even long for the days when AQIM controlled Timbuktu and cracked down on criminality (theft of cattle, motorbikes) and moral failures (prostitution, Alcohol) and enforced an equitable justice.


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.

Several recent studies and recent reports warn that the return of Malian security services to liberated territories was accompanied by ethnic-based abuse and stigmatization. Such unchecked state abuse best exemplified by the toxic culture of impunity that pervades the security services is directly driving young men into the orbit of violent extremist organizations. In Tunisia, part of the lure of militant ideologies and violent extremist groups lie in their anti-systemic rhetoric and their ability to tap into anti-establishment anger. In the Sahel, states Marco Simonetti of International Alert, “the appeal of global jihad carries much less weight than the unlawful detention of a loved one, the struggle for access to grazing areas or the desire for recognition within the village.”12 Jihadi armed groups are successful precisely because they pose as the only credible alternative to an unsalvageable status quo.

This does not mean that shared identity does not factor in individuals’ considerations. The fact that it does is one reason why jihadi ideology intersects with the ethnic, sectarian and social status configuration of society.13 For example, both Ansar Dine and the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) emphasize radical Islam as the main founding block of their groups, but when it suits their purposes they don’t hesitate to appeal to race and ethnicity to recruit. In the case of MUJAO, the group initially tried to distinguish itself from other armed groups whose sociological make-up is Arab by styling itself as defender of black African identity. When the group ended up being itself a constellation of mostly Arab tribes, it quickly repositioned itself as a capable protector against “untrustworthy ‘ethnic others’ such the Tuareg.”14

The key is the emphasis on protection and capability as MUJAO and other extremist groups know full well that alliances are not primarily driven by a shared repertoire of religious beliefs and community identifications. An appreciable number of the rank and file cadres of jihadi groups base their choice of alliances first and foremost on tactical necessities driven by security considerations (fear) and opportunism (greed).

As in the past, state abuse, discrimination and stigmatization remain the main influential factors that drive young men into the orbit of violent extremist organizations. They also part of the factors that drive migration flows. Demographic pressures, changing climatic conditions and civil wars are other major drivers of migration.

Don’t Blame the Smugglers

Europe is spending vast sums of money trying to seal off its borders. "Ironically," writes Hein de Haas, Co-Director of the International Migration Institute (IMI), the militarization of Europe’s borders has “mainly (1) diverted migration to other crossing points, (2) made migrants more dependent on smuggling, and (3) increased the costs and risks of crossing borders.”15 In such cases, adds Haas, blaming smugglers for Europe’s woes is nonsensical, as they “basically run a business, a need for which has been created by the militarization of border controls, and migrants use their services in order to cross borders without getting caught.”16 In other words, the uncomfortable reality for Europe is that the erection of walls is not a panacea to the continent’s migration ‘threat’ nor is the EU’s attempts to outsource its border controls to its ‘partners’ in transit countries. Indeed, as long as some countries in the Maghreb and Sahel continue to face creeping insurgencies and civil wars, and others continue to wallow in mass poverty and socio-economic underdevelopment, young people will continue their attempts to cross into Europe.

So far, the EU has adopted a ‘results-oriented Partnership Framework’ – the Valletta Action Plan— to pressure recipient nations such Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Niger to stem the migrant smuggling trade and most importantly to accept the return of migrants in return for aid. Critics of weaponizing aid warn that “the price will be paid in human rights and development.”17 It risks also destabilizing fragile countries. “We are creating chaos in our own backyard and there will be a high price to pay if we don’t fix it,” one senior European aid official told the Guardian newspaper.18 Tahar Cherif, Tunisia’s ambassador to the E.U., told the Guardian newspaper that his country has “neither the capacity nor the means to organize these detention centers.”19 Tunisia is rightly lauded for the democratic progress it has made since the popular uprising that toppled longtime strongman Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. But economic instability and mounting social and security risks, particularly along the country’s fragile borders where smuggling and contraband with Algeria in the west and Libya in the east is often the only means of employment, pose significant challenges to the country’s nascent democracy.

16 Ibid.
Libya is in much worse shape. The country is still divided into different national-level factions and competing governments that are underpinned by loose coalitions of local armed groups and regional and international actors. Only one government is recognized by the UN, but it cannot even impose its authority over Tripoli, the capital, let alone the rest of the country. The result is that in much of Libya, local groups and criminal networks are fighting over access to resources, including dominance of border trade, military installations and oil fields. Under such circumstances, Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister, called for the creation of a 'giant refugee city' be built in Libya to shield Europe from the migrant invasion. The EU, backed by Italy, has indirectly struck deals with notorious militias to disrupt the Niger-Libya migration route and forcibly stop migrant boats from crossing the Mediterranean.20 The EU has also put pressure on Niger to crack down on migration flows, criminalize human smuggling and reinforce its transit centers.

The problem with such deals—besides the already documented abuses of migrants in detention in Libya—is that the disruption of cross-border mobility has severely affected the livelihoods of semi-nomadic peoples who depend on the free movement of people and goods. This risks creating more instabilities in fragile countries such as Niger. And in any case, even if Libyan militias and Nigerian authorities temporarily succeed in controlling migration routes, other more dangerous crossings will open up.

The bottom line, as Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Luis Martinez put it, is that the EU ‘must not just focus on stopping people from moving, but also on giving people reasons to stay at home’.

Conclusion

Much of Europe’s southern flank is exposed to insecurities emanating from the Maghreb and the adjacent areas of West Africa and the Sahel. It is therefore critical for the EU and all concerned member states to strive to mitigate the conditions that fuel the spread of instabilities. So far, however, the main driver of EU attention has been counter-terrorism and migration control. Both are viewed as vital to the continent’s security, but their effectiveness necessitates addressing the causes that enable the rise of instabilities in North Africa and the Sahel, namely the failure of governments to genuinely respond to peoples’ demands for economic opportunity and ethical governance. The King of Morocco acknowledged as much in a speech during the opening session of Parliament on October 13, 2017: ‘We have to admit that our national development model no longer responds to citizens’ growing demands and pressing needs; it has not been able to reduce disparities between segments of the population, correct inter-regional imbalances or achieve social justice.”

In this context, viewing Islamic fundamentalism as smugglers as the main drivers of modern insurgencies and migration flows misdiagnose the problem. For violent extremism, a growing body of research is showing that the endurance and proliferation of Salafi jihadi groups in the Sahel is not due to increasing levels of religiosity or even to global dynamics. Rather, the most determining factors are local in nature, foremost amongst them are abusive dysfunctional governments. Unless the international community and local governments acknowledge the conditions that make Salafi jihadi groups resilient, the challenges to state authority will continue to be characterized and dominated by extremist ideologies. As for migration, the strengthening of states’ border controls is, however, only one piece of the puzzle in tackling the causes that drive young people to attempt the desperate and perilous journey to Europe.

Unfortunately, the much heralded EU support to its southern neighbors never really transpired. The new approach mainly repackaged and recycled the same old piecemeal policies and instruments that failed to address the economic needs of countries buffeted by multiple internal and external shocks. EU policy towards North Africa is still reflective of the disjointed self-interests of member states who favor their own short-term political and security interests. For example, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which was launched in 2004 and governs the EU’s relations with its southern neighbors, remains too technocratic, lacking the political support and financial muscle necessary to translate its lofty goals of shared economic prosperity into reality. The same problems handicap the Western Mediterranean Forum, referred to as the 5+5 Dialogue. Since it was launched in Rome in 1990, the forum has taken an ad hoc approach, focusing mainly on short-term crisis and security management strategies.


The EU, and its international Western partners, have also found it very difficult to design and implement a coordinated security and development strategy that transcends international institutional rivalries and regional inter-state rivalries. The efforts of different actors (local, regional and international) show little coherence and almost no consensus on regional approaches to address security and development challenges in North Africa and the Sahel. Each international, regional or local strategy fits its sponsor’s political priorities and strategic purposes.

The challenge for the EU and its international and regional partners is to develop a coordinated international approach that skilfully uses the comparative advantage of each institution. Already, a number of EU and UN strategies are implemented in concert with the AU and ECOWAS. Another example of synergies that deserve support is the proposal by the AfDB to establish and manage ‘action funds for the Sahel’ that would pool donor contributions together.

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