

## **Africa and Afghanistan the Current Hotspots, but Jihadist Also Eye China and Russia**

James M. Dorsey

## **Al-Shabaab versus the Islamic State in Somalia Province: Why Only Al-Qaeda's Affiliate Remains Unrivalled**

Jacob Zenn

## **Boko Haram-ISWAP and the Growing Footprint of Islamic State (IS) in Africa**

Atta Barkindo

## **Counter Terrorism Meets Great Power Conflict in Africa**

Raffaello Pantucci



# Evolving and Diverse Terrorism Threat in Africa

In recent years, Africa has emerged as the new hotspot of jihadist violence. As Al-Qaeda has weakened in Afghanistan, despite the Taliban's takeover, and the Islamic State (IS) has lost its territorial holdings in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, Africa has gained salience. Though Al-Qaeda and IS survive and persist on the fringes in the Middle East, largely the region has become less hospitable to extremist ideologies. The decisions of influential Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to break away from Wahabism and open up their societies through reforms have made the crisis of Al-Qaeda and IS more acute. Consequently, IS has turned its focus towards Africa which is awash with illegal weapons, ungoverned spaces, porous borders, weak state authorities, a plethora of competing terrorist groups and vulnerable youth.

IS has seen phenomenal growth in Africa, expanding its tentacles to Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Tunisia. The continent is now home to more than half of IS' official provinces. Against this backdrop, the March issue comprising four articles explores various issues concerning terrorism and counter terrorism in Africa, such as has the centre of gravity of global jihadism moved from the Middle East to Africa or not? Likewise, it looks into the rivalry of IS and Al-Qaeda affiliates in the region as well as efforts to curb the threat of transnational terrorism.

The first article by **James M. Dorsey** examines the operational advantages to jihadist groups, such as weak governance, porous borders and vulnerable young populations around Sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan. He notes that the two regions provide hideouts to IS and Al-Qaeda to operate on the fringes of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, enabling higher levels of political violence for a prolonged period. The three regions on the eastern and southern borders of Europe and Central Asia, where China and Russia also have a presence, are also largely governed by ineffective autocracies and have large young populations with limited opportunities. Consequently, the prospect looms that jihadist groups could morph into important players in the growing power competition between the Western nations, China, and Russia.

Next, **Jacob Zenn** discusses the threat posed by the Islamic State in Somalia Province (ISSP) and its pro-Al-Qaeda rival group Al-Shabaab amidst the ongoing civil war and the resultant widespread instability in Somalia. While the Somali government and army control some key cities, Al-Shabaab remains a significant threat in rural areas. Conversely, despite ISSP being associated with the notorious IS brand, the author notes that the persistent threat to Somalia will be Al-Shabaab. As Al-Qaeda's presence in eastern Africa depends largely on Al-Shabaab and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), the conflict in Somalia and the threat posed by Al-Shabaab may persist for the foreseeable future.

The third article by **Atta Barkindo** situates Boko Haram-ISWAP in the expanding terror network and the potential for IS to consolidate its presence in Africa. Since 2015, when the IS released its propaganda magazine, Dabiq, outlining its strategy to mobilise and support jihadist groups in Africa, various regional militant groups have pledged oath allegiance to IS and become part of its so-called *wilayat* (governorate or province) in Africa. The author argues that Africa has become the centre of gravity for IS, with half of its claimed global operations taking place on the continent since early 2022. He notes that to neuter the threat from extremist groups like ISWAP, African governments must address structural issues by providing social security, alternative livelihood opportunities and mitigating economic deprivation through access to quality education and healthcare, as well as reducing the impact of climate change.

Finally, **Raffaello Pantucci** argues that terrorist threats and great power conflict are increasingly intersecting in some regions, particularly in Africa, where a rising Russian presence is gradually supplanting Western forces. As counter-terrorism efforts increasingly become a battleground for great power rivalries, the concern is it will overshadow the actual threat of terrorism, potentially allowing terrorist groups to proliferate and expand. The article also notes an evolving counter terrorism picture, with limitations in Western approaches pushing local authorities in Africa to alternatives such as Russia. Although most African terrorist groups are currently focused on regional objectives, the risk exists that they could develop into more dangerous and outward-facing organisations.

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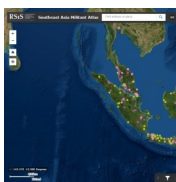
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## SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS

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Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via <https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd>

# Africa and Afghanistan the Current Hotspots, But Jihadists Also Eye China and Russia

James M. Dorsey

*Sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan are jihadism's current focal points. They are likely to remain hotspots of political violence for the foreseeable future. The two regions beckon jihadists with more than the operational benefits of ungoverned spaces, weak governments, porous borders, vulnerable bulges of youth who have no hope for a better future, and/or militants in search of an effective organisational framework. They also place groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda on the fringes of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. The three regions on Europe's eastern and southern flanks – and in Central Asia's case, China and Russia's near abroad – are populated by often non-performing autocracies and young populations with little to lose. As a result, the geopolitics of sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan have turned jihadists into players in the struggle between China, Russia and Western nations to shape a new world order.*

## Introduction

For many African recruits, jihadism promises a fulfilment of their temporal rather than spiritual aspirations.<sup>1</sup> More often than not, the recruits are young men in search of a way out of poverty. They want a job – a livelihood that would allow them to get married and build a family. More often than not, they are not seeking to fulfil a religious command.

Jihadist recruiters, including from the Islamic State (IS), cater to these aspirations, even if they have no intention of living up to their promises. The recruits' lack of religious education works in the militants' favour. Recruits are in no position to challenge their militant interpretation of Islam. A recent 128-page United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) survey of 500 former African militants showed that 57 per cent knew little or nothing about Islamic religious texts. Challenging notions that Muslim religious education creates a breeding ground for militancy, the study showed that it reduced the likelihood of radicalisation by 32 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

While making significant inroads in parts of Africa, IS recruitment in Afghanistan has proven to be a different beast. Over the past decade, it benefitted from outflanking Al-Qaeda (AQ) as the primary transnational jihadist group in the region, independent of and opposed to Afghanistan's Taliban rulers. In contrast to Africa, the IS had a more ready-made pipeline of battle-hardened militants and auxiliaries with its co-optation of groups like Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

The co-optation brought in militants with superior knowledge of the local and regional landscape. Some were scions of influential political and warlord families, who provided logistical support by helping the IS gain access to official documentation and plan attacks.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Afghanistan's Salafi communities' relations with the Taliban are strained,<sup>4</sup> and former Afghan security force personnel at risk of persecution by the Taliban after their takeover in the wake of the US withdrawal in August 2021,<sup>5</sup> turned out to provide an equally rich recruitment pool.

The distinct profiles of militants in Africa and Afghanistan suggest different trajectories with divergent geopolitical impacts, at least for now. As a result, in Africa, counter terrorism efforts emphasising political, social and economic reform on par with security and law enforcement in a bid to reduce militants' recruitment pool and deprive them of a conducive environment, is in the short- and middle-term a more feasible approach than in Afghanistan, where they rely on ideology and religious fervour to a greater degree.<sup>6</sup>

### **Varied Opportunities and Challenges for External Powers**

Even so, cross-border jihadist operations in Afghanistan and Africa pose different challenges and create diverging opportunities for external powers like China, Russia, the United States (US) and Europe. For Russia, Africa generates a significant opportunity to expand its global reach and influence. Russia capitalised on the tightrope that the US and Europe walk as they balance the need for reform with inevitable support for autocratic partners in the fight against militancy.

The management of that balance by France, long the major external power in the fight against political violence in the African continent alongside the US, has ultimately disadvantaged it and opened doors for Russia. Countries like Mali and Burkina Faso are cases in point. Mali highlighted the importance of strengthening good governance. In 2020, a weak government produced a military coup that ruptured relations with France and paved the way for the replacement of French troops by the Wagner Group, Russia's shadowy mercenary force.<sup>7</sup>

France's departure from Mali, completed in August 2022, signalled an end to its decade-long fight against Islamic insurgents in the Sahel. Instead, French President Emmanuel Macron has increasingly focused on reversing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, halving the number of French forces in Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania to 2,200 and limiting their mission.<sup>8</sup> Mali had six months earlier withdrawn from the G5 Sahel multinational military force, composed of troops from Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania, in a further blow to Western counter terrorism efforts.<sup>9</sup>

The drawdown of French troops spotlighted the inability of the US-sponsored Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), founded in 2005, to effectively assist West and North Africa in the fight against militancy. The partnership was designed to adopt a holistic approach to address the region's political, development, socioeconomic and governance challenges. In practice, it was a mismanaged policy tool focused almost exclusively on security assistance and strengthening local military and security institutions. As a result, it spent US\$1 billion over a decade and a half with little to show for itself.<sup>10</sup>

Pertinently, despite more than a decade of US- and French-led counter terrorism efforts, militancy is spreading, most recently to the West African coastal states of Benin and Togo.<sup>11</sup> As a result, many governments in West Africa, desperate to end the violence, welcome Russia and the Wagner Group, hoping they may succeed where France and the US and corrupt regional governments have failed.

### **Russia's Inroads**

In Mali and elsewhere in the region, Russian psychological warfare helped pave the way for the Wagner Group. So did Russia's willingness, in contrast to France and the US, despite the high cost to civilian life of their actions, to conduct and allow local governments to wage counterinsurgency and counter terrorism operations unconstrained by human rights concerns.

Yet the combination of brutality with no political, social or economic component of any significance and the lack of differentiation between transnational militant groups in Africa, such as AQ affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) and

various regional self-autonomy movements, promise to produce short-term results at best, rather than structural solutions.

The failure to distinguish between different types of militants precludes the design of tailor-made approaches that address specific grievances and reduce the risk of driving non-jihadist tribal and ethnic movements into the arms of religious militants. Moreover, by essentially paying Russia and the Wagner Group for their services in concessions for natural resources, commercial contracts and/or access to critical infrastructure such as airbases and ports, African governments have enabled Russia to embed itself in their economies and social fabric.<sup>12</sup>

In Burkina Faso, a landlocked nation of 20 million, protesters waving Russian flags attacked the French embassy and a cultural institute in the capital Ouagadougou, after a military takeover in September 2022, the second in a year. The head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was among the first to congratulate the new junta, praising it for doing what “was necessary”.<sup>13</sup>

Russia was a factor in the coup, even if Moscow may not have instigated it, and despite assurances by Burkina Faso's new president, Captain Ibrahim Traore, that his country would not follow in Mali's footsteps.<sup>14</sup> West African sources close to President Traore said he had toppled the leader of Burkina Faso's first coup, Lt Col Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba, because the latter was dragging his feet on turning to Russia after France refused to sell him military equipment, including helicopters.<sup>15</sup>

### **The North Africa Conundrum**

The US, France and Russia's focus on counter terrorism in West Africa should also not ignore the north of the continent. Officials, strategists and analysts believe that North Africa's experience dating to Algeria's bloody war in the 1990s against Islamist militants and militancy in Libya and Tunisia in the wake of the 2011 popular Arab revolts, as well as Egypt's brutal crackdown on Islamists in 2013, has, at least for now, firewalled the region against militancy.

The opposite could be true. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown regional economies into chaos. Many perform worse today than on the eve of the 2011 uprisings. Socioeconomic disparities, corruption and unemployment have increased. Significant segments of the population are angry, frustrated and hopeless.

A report in 2021 by the US Institute for Peace and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warned that “frustration with the inability of regional governments to address these problems boiled over in 2011, leading to popular revolutions that toppled three of the five regimes in power in North Africa”. Reforms have been slow, however, despite these highly visible and destabilising popular uprisings. Consequently, the social and economic factors that have made the region so fertile for terrorist recruitment and incitement remain unaddressed, the report concluded.<sup>16</sup>

### **China in Jihadist Crosshairs**

If Europe may be the external power most affected by increasing instability and political violence on its periphery, China could become the major power most targeted in Afghanistan and Central Asia. China has moved more firmly into the IS' crosshairs in the past year. At the same time, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), long a transnational jihadist group aligned with AQ, has increasingly shifted from pursuing global jihad to wanting to liberate the north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

The party's deputy emir, Abdusalam al-Turkistani, signalled the shift in a seven-page statement on social media platform Telegram. Speaking in Dari, one of Afghanistan's official languages, rather than Uyghur or Arabic, Al-Turkistani asserted that “we are not from China, our homeland is East Turkistan...

We are your Muslim brothers from East Turkistan of Central Asia". He added: "We are not terrorists; we are fighters for the freedom of the oppressed Uyghurs in East Turkistan."<sup>17</sup>

Al-Turkistani's assertion that his group, formerly known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), was not a terrorist organisation, was undergirded by a decision in 2020 by the US State Department to take the movement off its terrorism list.<sup>18</sup> China got a taste of what the IS and TIP shifts could entail when three men stormed a Chinese-owned hotel in the centre of Kabul, the Afghan capital, in December 2022. The attackers were killed, and five of the approximately 30 Chinese nationals in the hotel were wounded.<sup>19</sup>

It was the first attack on a Chinese target since the Taliban came to power in August 2021.<sup>20</sup> The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) claimed responsibility. A day earlier, Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan Wang Yu had expressed "dissatisfaction" about security and had urged the Taliban to improve its protection of the People's Republic's diplomatic mission.<sup>21</sup>

The attack followed a series of anti-Chinese statements and publications by the IS, in which the group denounced Chinese "imperialism".<sup>22</sup> The renewed focus broke the IS' five-year silence about China. It also raised the spectre of the group attacking Chinese targets in Pakistan, as it did in 2017 when it kidnapped and executed two Chinese nationals in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, a key node in China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the TIP vowed revenge for China's repression of Turkic Muslims in a statement released a week before the attack on the hotel.<sup>24</sup> Western governments, Uyghurs and human rights activists have accused China of imprisoning more than one million Turkic Muslims to reshape their religious and ethnic identity in the mould of the country's rulers.<sup>25</sup>

The brutal repression of Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang and the effort to "Sinicise" Islam in China is one major reason why the People's Republic is in jihadist crosshairs. Another is China's largely unnoticed but growing commercial interests in Afghanistan. China is one of only a handful of countries to maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul and trade with Afghanistan, even if it, like the rest of the world, refuses to recognise the Taliban regime.

Nevertheless, China advised its citizens in Afghanistan, Kabul's largest expat community, to leave the country "as soon as possible" in the wake of the hotel attack.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, China's first infrastructural project in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is a 142-acre, US\$216-million industrial park that sprawls across the north-eastern edge of Kabul.<sup>27</sup> China picked the project up after the US abandoned it with the US forces' withdrawal and President Ashraf Ghani's fall in August 2021.<sup>28</sup> China has since removed tariffs on 98 per cent of Afghan goods<sup>29</sup> and revived an air transport service to import US\$800 million a year's worth of pine nuts.<sup>30</sup>

## **The Great Game**

Africa and Afghanistan may be jihadists' current centres of gravity, but militants' ambitions go far beyond. IS attacks on Afghan mosques near the border with Central Asia and a purported cross-border missile attack on Uzbekistan have dashed Central Asian hopes that the Taliban would be able to control the frontier region and shield former Soviet republics from the jihadists.

Like China, Russia's involvement in the African fight against extremism will, sooner rather than later, make Russia a jihadist target. An IS suicide bombing in September 2022 near the Russian embassy in Kabul, in which two Russian embassy staff were among six people killed, may have been a shot across Moscow's bow.<sup>31</sup>

Offering alternatives across Africa to potential recruits is likely to prove easier in Africa as well as regions such as Central Asia, provided the US, Europe and local governments have the political will to implement necessary reforms.

That will be far more difficult in Afghanistan, where the Taliban is internationally isolated, desperate to hold on to power, and unwilling to meet the minimal conditions of the international community that wants to see more inclusive policies.

The 2022 attacks on the hotel and the Russian embassy in Kabul suggest that Russia and China are increasingly in jihadist crosshairs in ways that could see militants expand their theatre of operations and, in the case of Afghanistan, target others, like the United Arab Emirates, which do business with the Taliban.

## About the Author

**James M. Dorsey** is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He can be reached at [isjmdorsey@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isjmdorsey@ntu.edu.sg) and [jmd@jmdonline.org](mailto:jmd@jmdonline.org).

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# Al-Shabaab Versus the Islamic State in Somalia Province: Why Only Al-Qaeda's Affiliate Remains Unrivalled

Jacob Zenn

*The US Seal Team raid that killed Bilal al-Sudani in January 2023 highlighted the threats of Islamic State in Somalia Province (ISSP) not only in Somalia and East Africa, but also as far as Afghanistan. Despite this, ISSP is embattled in its home territory amid pressure from the US, international and Somali forces as well as from its rival – Al-Shabaab. As Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, Al-Shabaab is still significantly more powerful than ISSP and appears likely to maintain that status well into the future.*

## Introduction

On January 17, a US Seal Team killed Bilal al-Sudani and nine other Islamic State in Somalia Province (ISSP) fighters in Puntland, northern Somalia. Subsequently, the US military revealed al-Sudani not only operated in Somalia, but also financed and masterminded operations for the other so-called Islamic State (IS) provinces in Congo and Mozambique and even as far as Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Al-Sudani was, for example, allegedly the mastermind of the monumental August 2021 suicide bombing that killed 13 US troops at Kabul's international airport as US forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan. The raid on al-Sudani's hideout, in addition to another series of US airstrikes that killed five Al-Shabaab fighters almost exactly one month later, reflects how Somalia remains a key battleground in the global jihad and for international cooperation in counter terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

In the years prior to the raid on al-Sudani's hideout, ISSP had portrayed through propaganda videos and photos its evolution from its initial pledge to IS "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2015, to its first victorious clashes with Al-Shabaab in 2018, to its tactical training sessions in 2023. Such videos were ostensibly intended to recruit aspirant jihadists in Somalia or elsewhere in the world by showing ISSP was not only part of IS, but also a bona fide competitor of Al-Shabaab itself.<sup>3</sup> Yet, ISSP's high-profile militants like al-Sudani, propaganda videos and occasional large-scale attacks, including some against Al-Shabaab, have not overcome the fact that Al-Shabaab is still the preeminent jihadist group in Somalia, if not Africa as a whole.

Whether one considers territorial control, sophistication of local and international terrorist attacks or overall numbers of fighters, Al-Shabaab is not necessarily the most reported jihadist group in Africa. However, 15 years since its founding in 2007, the group is a model affiliate for Al-Qaeda (AQ) and has a persistence that IS provinces in Africa – with the possible exception of Boko Haram, but certainly including ISSP – have yet to rival. This article reviews the AQ and IS networks in sub-Saharan Africa, compares Al-Shabaab and IS, and argues that Al-Shabaab will continue to outmanoeuvre ISSP while also enduring for the long term in Somalia, albeit with not necessarily as much international attention drawn to it compared to IS provinces in Nigeria, the Sahel, Congo, Mozambique or even Somalia.

## Background on AQ and IS in Sub-Saharan Africa

As of 2023, IS and AQ both have networks of fighters throughout sub-Saharan Africa, with groups under the IS banner labelled as regional "provinces", or *wilayat*, by IS, such as in West Africa, Sahel, Central Africa (Congo) and Mozambique, and groups under AQ's banner labelled as "affiliates" by analysts. However, the AQ affiliates select their own distinct group names and show their affiliation to

AQ not necessarily by being called “Al-Qaeda” in name but through pledges or statements of loyalty to the organisation and its leaders, such as the late Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The AQ affiliates in sub-Saharan Africa are Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen (Al-Shabaab), or “Movement of Young Jihadists”; Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), or “Group of Supporters of Islam and Muslims”; and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). However, AQIM has become operationally irrelevant and has reduced its propaganda production, so AQ's affiliates in Africa are, in practice, only JNIM and Al-Shabaab.<sup>4</sup> JNIM operates primarily in Mali, Burkina Faso and northern Niger with recent movements into Benin, Togo and other littoral West African states, while Al-Shabaab operates in Somalia with occasional cross-border attacks into Kenya and rarer attacks historically in Uganda and Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

The IS provinces are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP); Islamic State in Sahel Province, which is better known to analysts as Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS); Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP); and Islamic State in Mozambique Province (ISMP). The latter two both used to be called ISCAP when it was founded in 2019, but ISMP subsequently separated to become its own independent province. ISWAP operates in north-eastern Nigeria and the borderlands of Niger, Chad and Cameroon along Lake Chad with rare attacks in southern and central Nigeria; ISGS operates in roughly the same areas as JNIM in the Sahel; ISCAP operates primarily in eastern Congo but has also attacked Rwanda; and ISMP operates in northern Mozambique but has conducted several cross-border attacks into Tanzania.

### **Comparing and Contrasting Al-Shabaab and ISSP**

What is notable about Al-Shabaab and ISSP is that the former is the most powerful of AQ affiliates in Africa – and even arguably globally. For example, according to the latest estimates from the UN, Al-Shabaab is estimated to field between 7,000 to 12,000 fighters and to have a US\$25 million annual war chest. In fact, rather than AQ Central supporting Al-Shabaab, now Al-Shabaab reportedly supports AQ with funding from its coffers in Somalia.<sup>6</sup> Al-Shabaab now controls roughly 20 per cent of Somali territory. This, however, is not the height of the group's territorial control, because in 2011 the group also controlled the capital, Mogadishu, and the southern part of Kismayo.<sup>7</sup> Today, the group sometimes conducts asymmetric individual attacks in those cities, but controls and operates territories throughout southern and central Somalia and outside of those cities.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Shabaab administration includes taxing civilians, issuing legal decrees under the group's interpretation of *shariah* and, often most importantly, mediating between clans.<sup>9</sup> This neutrality aids Al-Shabaab in maintaining trust in rural areas and ensuring the legitimacy of its self-styled rule. Besides these administrative roles, Al-Shabaab also engages in constant attacks, including suicide bombings, ambushes and raids of military bases, with its largest attacks being a 2017 bombing in Mogadishu that killed 500 people and another in 2022 that killed around 100 people.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, a renewed Somali army offensive against Al-Shabaab started in January 2023 and has led to the government regaining more territory from the group than it had recovered in all of the past five years combined. The military was aided by the fact that Al-Shabaab's “foreign”, strict Salafi Islamic interpretation has been rejected by local villagers, who seek to maintain their Sufi practices and resent Al-Shabaab's forced conscription of youths into the group's ranks.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Turkish- and US-trained elite forces working at the community level alongside the “regular” Somali National Army forces and local militia have pressured Al-Shabaab more than at any other time in recent years. At any rate, although the group has lost more territory in four months than it has in five years and is facing an unprecedented “clan revolt”, it would be premature to expect any major change to the status quo, given Al-Shabaab's ability to persist for over 15 years since 2007.<sup>12</sup>

ISSP, meanwhile, is fighting against not only Al-Shabaab, with all the power the latter has accumulated since 2007, but also US counter terrorism forces. Considering that ISSP started with relatively small brigades of defectors from Al-Shabaab in 2015, it is much more difficult for ISSP to withstand these adversaries than it is for Al-Shabaab. The US, for example, has targeted former pirates and intelligence and logistics officers of ISSP, while also conducting airstrikes and other special operations akin to that which killed Bilal al-Sudani.<sup>13</sup> A further headwind against ISSP is the fact that IS “core” in the Middle East and Africa is no longer able to fund or resource “external provinces” like ISSP as it did during its heyday of territorial control in Iraq and Syria.

In total, ISSP is estimated to have only 200-300 members, which is around as much as Al-Shabaab can field in one attack alone.<sup>14</sup> ISSP is at a major manpower disadvantage compared to Al-Shabaab. Further, according to AQ’s strategy globally, its affiliates since 2015 have sought to crack down on rival “provinces”, which has meant that Al-Shabaab is determined to eliminate ISSP. Thus, although ISSP controlled several towns in Puntland and revealed such control in several propaganda videos, ISSP has only a fraction of Al-Shabaab’s strength and, due to the struggles of IS “core”, is unlikely to recruit as successfully in the future as it has in the past.

### **Assessment: Practical vs Propaganda Effect**

Beyond the fact that Al-Shabaab is stronger than ISSP on a one-to-one level, Al-Shabaab also plays a much more significant role in the AQ network than ISSP does for IS. Al-Shabaab is one of only two major AQ affiliates in sub-Saharan Africa, while ISSP is one of five active IS provinces in Africa – and the weakest of those provinces. Therefore, Al-Shabaab is more important for AQ than ISSP is for IS.

Given that ISSP has little chance of overcoming Al-Shabaab or increasing its strength much more significantly than it has at present, the most important function for IS now is for ISSP to simply not become non-existent as has occurred with IS’ provinces in Libya and Algeria, the latter of which has seen its remaining operatives come under the command of ISWAP.<sup>15</sup> Strategically, therefore, what would be best for IS is for ISSP to remain present – and possibly still in control – of several nominal remote towns so that IS can propagandise that it has an effective province in Somalia when, in fact, ISSP is largely “token”. As ISSP has little chance of defeating Al-Shabaab or avoiding US airstrikes, especially if it seeks to expand its control and influence, the group may be best off consolidating in the small areas where it is now in control, rather than exacerbating threats it faces from the US and Al-Shabaab. ISSP’s upside is accordingly limited.

In contrast to ISSP, Al-Shabaab has the potential to realise its ultimate goal of ruling all, or at least much, of Somalia. Although at present the combined power of the Somali army, African Union Transition Mission in Somalia and US forces, has restricted Al-Shabaab mostly to rural hinterlands in central and southern Somalia, Al-Shabaab remains relatively consolidated in those areas. It accordingly retains the hope that eventually the international forces will fatigue and not only reduce their own presence in Somalia, but also cut back their support of the Somali army. In that case, Al-Shabaab could potentially retake Mogadishu and Kismayo and again become the de facto ruler of much of Somalia.

A key difference between Al-Shabaab and ISSP is, therefore, that Al-Shabaab’s goals are practical and, if developments work in its favour, also possible. ISSP, in contrast, is mostly a propaganda front for the broader IS network, whereas only the other IS provinces in sub-Saharan Africa in the Sahel, Nigeria, Congo and Mozambique actually have realistic aspirations to hold significant territory and govern in those areas. Further, as ISSP is but one of five IS sub-Saharan provinces in sub-Saharan Africa, while Al-Shabaab is just one of two AQ affiliates in the region, the latter is more important to AQ than the former is to IS. This is why AQ Central has historically been more likely to support and sustain Al-Shabaab – although now Al-Shabaab may even be supporting the embattled AQ Central – than the “core” of IS has supported ISSP with its limited resources and multiple struggling provinces.

## Conclusion

Somalia has suffered from widespread instability and conflict since the civil war began in 1991. More than 30 years later, the Somali government and army maintain the writ over key cities like Mogadishu and Kismayo, but in the hinterlands, Al-Shabaab remains a potent threat. While ISSP still attracts significant attention when it conducts an attack or releases a propaganda video because it is associated with the notorious “IS” brand – and often receives more attention than Al-Shabaab when the latter does the same – the persistent threat to Somalia will be Al-Shabaab. Further, Al-Shabaab will also persistently remain a key AQ affiliate, since AQ’s presence on the continent depends almost entirely on JNIM and Al-Shabaab. In sum, if the conflict in Somalia has lasted more than 30 years already, it is an unfortunate but also a seeming reality, that Al-Shabaab – but not necessarily ISSP – may very well still be active even 30 years from now.

## About the Author

**Jacob Zenn** is an Adjunct Associate Professor on African Armed at the Georgetown University Security Studies Program (SSP), and Editor and Fellow on African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation in Washington D.C. He wrote the book, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, which was published in April 2020 by Lynne Rienner in association with the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews.

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# Boko Haram-ISWAP and the Growing Footprint of Islamic State (IS) in Africa

Atta Barkindo

*In November 2015, the Islamic State (IS) dedicated the eighth issue of its English-language monthly propaganda magazine, Dabiq, to the propagation of strict Islamic governance in Africa, with the title “Sharia Alone will Rule Africa”. It was done to counter the growing tentacles of Al-Qaeda (AQ) in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The issue also outlined IS’ strategy on how to mobilise, create and support various regional groups, known as provinces or wilayat, around the continent, whose members carry out violence in its name.*

*In early 2014, different jihadist groups around Africa, such as Boko Haram, began pledging allegiance to then IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leading the region to become the new IS wilayat in Africa. While each province undertook IS-approved activities in terms of violence and governance, one unifying element was total submission to the vision of a self-styled global Sunni caliphate. Today, some African militant groups have regional partners with networks spanning the North African region and straddling the Sahara into East and West Africa. At the same time, it has become an IS recruitment hub, with the terror group co-opting indigenous partners and interfacing with local imams (prayer leaders) to control, influence or intimidate other Islamic sects with similar ideologies to join their cause. Since early 2022, IS has conducted half of its claimed global operations in Africa. This means Africa has emerged as the new centre of gravity for IS.<sup>2</sup> With existing structural issues of poverty and dispossession across different African regions, there is the potential for IS to consolidate its presence and serve as a threat to the global order.*

*Against this backdrop, this article examines the place of Boko Haram-Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in this expanding terror network of IS across Africa. It highlights the future scenarios that could emerge if this trend is not checkmated.*

## IS’ Expansionist Agenda in Africa

The formation and expansion of IS in Africa are well documented.<sup>3</sup> After the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi welded together various insurgent groups that consisted largely of Iraqis from the former Baathist regime, nationalists, tribal elements and Islamist fighters; like al-Zarqawi, some had fought in Afghanistan under Osama bin Laden. Al-Zarqawi named these groups *Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (JTJ).<sup>4</sup> After forging an alliance with AQ, JTJ became AQ in Iraq (AQI), until al-Zarqawi’s tactics led to the group’s break-up. Consequently, AQI evolved to become IS under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi<sup>5</sup> and, in 2015, Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram’s then leader, pledged an oath of loyalty to IS and Boko Haram changed its name to ISWAP.

The role of IS has changed the dynamics of the conflict, with new actors and new forms of digital propaganda. IS has been a primary factor in the explosion of jihadist violence on the continent in recent years. As of September 2021, IS has established six official African provinces located in Libya (2014), Algeria (2014), Sinai (2014), West Africa (2015), Somalia (2018) and Central Africa (2019). However, the West Africa Province has two regions, one in the Lake Chad Basin (ISWAP-Lake Chad) and the other in the Sahel (ISWAP-Greater Sahara). Similarly, the Central Africa Province has two regions, one in Mozambique and the other in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>6</sup> It is therefore logical to conclude that IS has at least eight provinces in Africa.

In addition to these administrative units, IS continues to provide the African provinces with some level of strategic support to exacerbate, service and sustain violence, targeting governments, institutions and individuals.<sup>7</sup> For example, IS has facilitated financial transfers to ISWAP-Lake

Chad,<sup>8</sup> Somalia<sup>9</sup> and Central Africa (DRC).<sup>10</sup> In Libya, IS is alleged to have sent emissaries from Iraq to train locals, while returning foreign fighters provide support<sup>11</sup> by offering blueprints for governance, funds, and advice on strategy and tactics. IS has allegedly also provided financial and technical support to Sinai,<sup>12</sup> including media and digital support to the different African provinces.<sup>13</sup>

IS' technical and strategic support is evident among the provinces, particularly the activities of Boko Haram-ISWAP around the Lake Chad Basin. In 2020, the Lake Chad borderland region witnessed increased levels of violence linked primarily to Boko Haram (also known as *Jama'atul Ahl Sunnah Liddawati wal Jihad*, or JAS).<sup>14</sup> From March to June 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, Boko Haram-ISWAP carried out more than 19 attacks around the Lake Chad basin, killing 452 people, including the March 2020 attack on Chadian soldiers, one of the deadliest ever recorded in West Africa.<sup>15</sup> Between July and August 2020, Boko Haram-ISWAP carried out 22 more attacks, killing 230 people. On June 1, 2022, the government of Chad predicted in its Humanitarian Response Plan that more than 5.3 million people, 50 per cent of whom are women and children, are threatened by insecurity.<sup>16</sup>

### **Boko Haram-ISWAP Riding the IS Tide**

Although the history of Boko Haram remains contested, Muhammad Yusuf is considered its founder.<sup>17</sup> When he was killed in 2009, Abubakar Shekau assumed leadership of the group and maintained the essential ingredients of the ultra-Salafi extremism espoused by Yusuf.<sup>18</sup> However, he also introduced a "global vision", openly identifying with other global jihadist organisations.<sup>19</sup> In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged loyalty to IS, taking the name Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).<sup>20</sup> Shortly after this development, internal wranglings emerged and, in August 2016, Shekau was deposed and replaced with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of the late Yusuf. At this point, IS offered guidance on strategy and tried to reconcile the rival factions.<sup>21</sup>

IS also increased its support for ISWAP as more Boko Haram fighters defected to the latter, allowing ISWAP to overrun at least 14 army bases around the Chad Basin.<sup>22</sup> ISWAP created an extensive shadow government close to the Lake, with firm control of the local economy, including the southern Diffa Region, territories of Niger Region, and areas around northern Borno and Yobe states in Nigeria and towards northern Cameroon.<sup>23</sup>

ISWAP also exploited the digital space for mobilisation and propaganda. Previously, Boko Haram used fake SIM cards to make calls to demand funds, claim responsibility, threaten or intimidate perceived enemies.<sup>24</sup> Between 2016 and 2020, ISWAP is alleged to have released more than 100 videos on YouTube, including beheadings, executions and the stoning to death of those deemed in violation of *shariah*.<sup>25</sup> They also posted images of their fighters carrying out attacks and/or in training, often acquiring suicide skills.<sup>26</sup> ISWAP has used Telegram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook for its online propaganda. Since November 2019, ISWAP has released a selection of its old videos on Amazon, Google Play, Vimeo, Dropbox, Flickr and other platforms.<sup>27</sup> For instance, between December 2019 and August 2020, ISWAP is alleged to have posted a hostage video showing the beheading of 11 Christians,<sup>28</sup> aid workers and soldiers around the Lake Chad borderland.<sup>29</sup>

A 34-page manual on securing communications, developed by IS and quoted in the European Foundation for South Asian Studies report,<sup>30</sup> highlights ISWAP's deployment of applications such as Twitter, Justpaste.it, Telegram, iMessage and FaceTime, as well as communication applications considered to have better end-to-end encryption, such as Signal, German Cryptophone and BlackPhone.<sup>31</sup>

The influence of IS has also seen a spike in the recruitment drive of ISWAP in Nigeria. ISWAP's recruitment drive targets young people, especially teenage boys and girls, who are affected by poverty and relative deprivation. Estimates indicate that, since February 2019, ISWAP had between 3,500 to 5,000 fighters and JAS had between 1,500 and 2,000.<sup>32</sup> The Global Initiative for Civil Stabilisation (GICS), a Nigerian research organisation, recently produced a much higher figure for ISWAP's numbers – between 18,000 to 20,000 fighters – apparently based on an

unpublished examination of ISWAP's combat groups, built from contacts in the Nigerian military and ISWAP sources.<sup>33</sup>

ISWAP has taken the initiative to raise its own funds rather than continuously depend on IS. While IS' financial support was crucial to the survival of ISWAP in 2016 and 2017, by 2018 that support had dropped sharply to just 3.41 per cent of its previous rate, and ISWAP had to look elsewhere for funding.<sup>34</sup> According to the 2019 report by GICS, ISWAP has, from 2018 onwards, earned as much as US\$35.2 million, collected in a combination of Naira, US Dollars and West African CFA Francs from taxes, fees charged to local traders, smugglers and transport drivers of illegal goods across borders. ISWAP's success is linked to its increasing involvement in and control of the trade and production of dried fish, dried pepper and rice.<sup>35</sup>

However, in March 2019, ISWAP suffered a major setback due to internal disputes and changes in leadership. IS replaced Abu Musab al-Barnawi with Abu Abdullah ibn Umar al-Barnawi.<sup>36</sup> The removal of Abu Musab triggered an untidy flight of ISWAP's top fighters, led by Adam Bitri, a skilful military commander. He unsuccessfully sought collaboration with ANSARU, an earlier militant group that worked closely with AQ.<sup>37</sup> However, he decided to set up a base in Abadam, Borno state, Nigeria, close to the ISWAP seat of power. Adam Bitri had been a loyal commander to Abu Musab. Afraid of being demoted under a new ISWAP structure, he set up his own base. More significantly, his strategy was to assemble other senior figures and disgruntled elements who lost positions because of the removal of Abu Musab and to confront ISWAP within its own territory.

In May 2021, ISWAP fighters tracked down Shekau, the erstwhile leader of Boko Haram. To ISWAP, as long as Shekau was alive, he remained a threat to the emerging structure of ISWAP. Consequently, obtaining his loyalty or neutralising him became its two options. When he was tracked down, ISWAP demanded that he surrender and pledge allegiance to them in return for his safety and protection. Shekau, who allegedly had a suicide vest on him, opted to blow himself up rather than surrender.<sup>38</sup> Despite the setback suffered by ISWAP and the internal disputes that led to the death of Shekau, a close analysis of the group's recent activity in the past two years reveals the continued and potent threat it poses.

### **ISWAP the New IS Super Ally**

The death of Shekau has created a closer collaboration between ISWAP and IS around the Lake Chad Basin. In June 2021, according to the Institute for Security Studies,<sup>39</sup> IS made a proposal to ISWAP to set up four caliphates in Borno, northeast Nigeria, to oversee its activities in the Lake Chad Basin area and beyond. The proposed caliphates were Lake Chad, Sambisa, Timbuktu and Tumbuma, each administered by a governor (*wali*).<sup>40</sup> These four caliphates would be centralised around the Lake Chad caliphate and administered by a *Shura* Council (Consultative Assembly) and *Amirul Jaish* (Military Leader). ISWAP's leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who was earlier replaced and had been in Sambisa since Shekau's death, was elevated to head the *Shura* Council, with all the other governors reporting to him. However, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, an appointee of IS who was to oversee the overall administration of the four caliphates headed by a military commander and two representatives at the IS Council,<sup>41</sup> was killed in a US raid in February 2022.<sup>42</sup> At the moment, it is not very clear if his successor, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi,<sup>43</sup> has also taken on the role to oversee the four caliphates.

Additionally, IS-ISWAP continues to lobby for the return of former fighters to rejoin ISWAP, particularly those who left during the death of Shekau. So far, evidence suggests that more than 80 of such fighters have returned to Nigeria from Libya since June 2022. IS, in partnership with ISWAP leadership, has also undertaken some reforms to secure the loyalty of returnee fighters. Such reforms include fair treatment, the need to expend the spoils of war at will, an increase in economic incentive, and protection and support of livelihoods for civilians in areas of control.<sup>44</sup> These decisions have given some legitimacy to the returnee fighters, a better bargain than what they would have gotten from the Nigerian government. The result of these changes is evident. During the first four months of 2022, IS claimed responsibility for more operations in Nigeria than in Iraq. This means Nigeria has emerged as the epicentre for IS activities.<sup>45</sup> On December 29,

2022, a car bomb explosion that killed at least three people in Okene, Kogi state, close to Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital, was claimed by ISWAP. This came barely days after another IS-claimed attack in Ebira, also in Kogi state. Since April 2022, ISWAP has also conducted a series of attacks on civilians and security forces in Kogi, Niger, Edo and Ondo states, locations far away from its stronghold in Nigeria's northeast.<sup>46</sup>

## Outlook

Evidence suggests that the future of IS-ISWAP in Africa is tied to three key principles – the motivation, the opportunity and the capability to change. So far, IS seems to have the capacity to inspire its members, including the strategic creativity of its leaders to initiate changes for effective transformation and to acquire the necessary skills and resources for sustainability. Consequently, IS will likely seek a greater unification of likeminded groups in Africa. Reports indicate that IS has already branded a group operating in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as ISWAP.<sup>47</sup> The formal unification of ISWAP in Lake Chad, with IS factions in the Sahel under a single banner, therefore has the potential to unify terrorist groups beyond Lake Chad to the whole of Africa. Africa may become a centre for strategic coordination due to the opportunities available. Consequently, the potential threat to the entire continent remains uncertain and incalculable.

Another possibility is the fact that, increasingly, the successes of the African IS provinces have been more a product of their own initiatives and not just the administrative requirements of IS.<sup>48</sup> This means, as the provinces are likely to acquire strong central leadership with vision, innovation and initiative and probably become more independent, governments of the region will find it more challenging to tackle the menace.

Additionally, the absence of governance at the border regions and the inability of the government to provide social services to the people means IS-ISWAP will likely provide a sense of protection and will serve as an alternative government, winning the hearts and minds of locals. This will make it more difficult for governments to win the war on terror.

For over a decade, the Nigerian government has waged an anti-terror war against Boko Haram and now ISWAP. Boko Haram, whose members were initially considered a ragtag group of deranged criminals led by a madman, Shekau, whose ambitions would simply fizzle away, has not only remained but evolved into different shades, consolidating its relationship with local communities as well as the international jihadist organisation IS. With the current state of things, the group has the potential to overrun substantial parts of Africa. Thus, African governments must work collaboratively to keep their social contract with citizens. They must address structural issues to prevent more young people from joining extremist groups, particularly ISWAP. This requires increasing government presence in border areas, providing social security and alternative means of livelihood, including access to quality education and healthcare, and mitigating the impact of climate change in order to address the economic deprivation that drives people to join militant groups.

## About the Author

**Fr. Atta Barkindo** is a Security & Terrorism Expert on Africa with specialty in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. He is also a Researcher, Writer and Consultant with over 15 years of technical expertise on issues of political violence, electoral conflict, terrorism, violent extremism, migration, and environmental and human security. He has consulted for and held several research positions at various institutions across the world. He sits on the board of the Africa Research Institute, London. He can be reached at [atta.kindo6@gmail.com](mailto:atta.kindo6@gmail.com).

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# Counter Terrorism Meets Great Power Conflict in Africa

**Raffaello Pantucci**

*In parts of the world, there is a growing confluence between terrorist threats and great power conflict. Nowhere has this been clearer than in Africa, where a growing Russian presence under the auspices of counter terrorism is steadily pushing out western forces in an ever-expanding space. The danger for the longer term is that as counter terrorism becomes a proxy for conflict between great powers, attention on such security threats slips under the radar, leaving space for them to grow and multiply further.*

## **Introduction**

In December 2021, the political directors of the “Small Group of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS” – an offshoot of the larger Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS which was formed in September 2014 to defeat the terrorist group – met in Belgium to discuss the state of the conflict against the Islamic State (IS).<sup>1</sup> Amongst other announcements to emerge from the session, an “Africa Focus Group” was formed to permit the coalition to “undertake civilian capacity-building programs to help address the ISIS threat across Africa”.<sup>2</sup> The Coalition’s decision to focus on Africa followed a growing pattern of threat assessments which pointed to the continent as the new heart of the IS threat. According to the Global Terrorism Index, in 2021, almost 50 per cent (around 3,461) of the deaths attributed to IS worldwide took place in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there has since been a steady retreat by Western counter terrorism forces across Africa as alliances are tested, and a growing Russian presence in Africa pushes the terrorist threat into becoming a strand of the wider geopolitical clashes buffeting the world.

2021 proved to be a particularly challenging year for Western efforts to counter terrorism in Africa. In May, Mali suffered its second coup in a year, leading to a breakdown in relations between Paris – a key player across the Sahelian, mostly Francophone, region – and Bamako. Both France and the United States temporarily suspended aid, only to restart it later in the year. By February 2022, however, Paris concluded the relationship was entirely broken and decided to close down the longstanding Operation Barkhane, which had started in 2013 as part of an effort to counter the growing violent Islamist threat that had almost enveloped the country.

Key behind this French decision was a growing frustration in Paris at the government in Bamako’s unwillingness to fulfil its commitments to the international community,<sup>4</sup> as well as their growing reliance on the Russian private military company (PMC) Wagner. In announcing his forces’ withdrawal, President Emmanuel Macron of France stated that Wagner was “arriving in Mali with predatory intentions”. He went on to condemn the Russian presence in Libya and Central African Republic and their alleged “awful abuses against the civilian population”.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Russian Dimension**

Wagner’s presence in Africa is part of a much wider Russian push into the continent which stretches back two decades. In the mid-2000s, Moscow sought to reinvigorate its relationships around Africa as part of an attempt to return the country to the global status that it held during the Soviet era. A major early focus was South Africa, where many of the African National Congress (ANC) party leadership had strong links to Russia through training they had undergone in the country during the period of anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>6</sup> However, it was after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine and seizure of Crimea in 2014 that relations with Africa accelerated, particularly in the security domain. During 2015-2019, Russia signed some 19 government-to-government military agreements in Africa, mostly focused on arms sales.<sup>7</sup>

Wagner, or Russian PMCs more generally, are the latest expression of this Russian push, though it is one that has (until recently) been denied by the Kremlin and its associates. According to research by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C., Russian PMCs are identifiable in an African context going back to 2016. The growing relationship was brought into a clearer public focus in October 2019, when Moscow held a Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi where 43 heads of states were hosted by President Vladimir Putin at an event that was heavily focused on Russian defence cooperation and military sales with the continent.<sup>8</sup> Throughout this period, Wagner forces were identified as present across the region, playing roles in conflicts in Libya, Sudan, Mozambique, Madagascar, Central African Republic and Mali. In most conflicts, the role was supportive of local authorities and focused on a counter terrorism mission.

It has not always worked, with Mozambique proving an example of where the local IS affiliate was seemingly able to push Wagner out of the country.<sup>9</sup> More worrying, however, has been evidence of Wagner's involvement in reported human rights abuses and massacres, issues that are likely to only inflame the tensions which underpin the narratives that foster extremism in the first place.<sup>10</sup>

### **Western Cooperation and Challenges**

For local leaders, Russia's willingness to provide uncritical support is attractive. This, alongside active disinformation campaigns which seek to play on local tensions with former European colonisers<sup>11</sup> as well as cultivate local figures to help lay the groundwork for Russia's arrival,<sup>12</sup> have created a context where Russia is seen as a positive alternative to Western partners. Part of the problem for Western countries, however, is that there is often a poor track record of their own efforts in countering terrorism across the region. This can be seen through two metrics: first, the unintended consequence of working through and building up local security forces; and second, through the bitter reality that terrorist groups in the region have been able to expand considerably in the past decade. For example, rather than shrinking, IS has only grown across the continent, while two of Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s most effective remaining affiliates – Al-Shabaab in East Africa and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in North Africa – have continued to thrive.

One of the major pillars of Western counter terrorism efforts in Africa has been to develop local forces who are then able to help lead the local efforts at countering terrorist group expansion. This has, unfortunately, generated some unintended consequences. For example, Africa has seen 12 coup d'états since 2020.<sup>13</sup> Many (if not all) have been led by officers who had been through training programmes guided by the US (or allied) military under the aegis of counter terrorism cooperation.<sup>14</sup> In a particularly awkward moment, in September 2021, soldiers being trained under such a programme in Guinea left their US Green Beret trainers to participate in the overthrow of the authorities in the capital Conakry.<sup>15</sup> In Somalia, the special force developed by the US to counter Al-Shabaab and IS became so entangled in local politics that it had to suspend its counter terrorism activities.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, the core counter terrorism goals for which the forces were initially assembled were clearly impacted, even if only temporarily.

Another problem is that local forces do not always follow the rules of engagement or practise behaviour that their Western supporters would like or train them for. A recent grim *Reuters* investigation uncovered massive human rights abuses by Nigerian military forces in their conflict against militants in the northeast of the country.<sup>17</sup> Earlier reports in Kenya linked the elite Western-supported anti-terrorism force to numerous extrajudicial killings.<sup>18</sup> One such murder that was never resolved was the shooting of extremist cleric Mohammed Rogo, a senior figure in East African jihadist circles with close links to Al-Shabaab and AQ networks around the region. Shot in his car in September 2012, his murder led to widespread violence and radicalisation but was never formally solved.<sup>19</sup> His image continues to feature prominently in extremist material emanating from both IS- and AQ-linked groups across East Africa.

### **Growth of Extremist Groups**

The most obvious expression of failure, however, has been the growth of extremist groups in Africa. During the pandemic, for example, Africa was one of the few places where terrorist threats and

violence actually increased.<sup>20</sup> The Islamic State of Western Africa Province (ISWAP) has, in particular, shown itself to be a highly successful organisation which has displaced the AQ-aligned Boko Haram as the preeminent extremist group in the Lake Chad basin.<sup>21</sup> Groups operating in the Sahel linked to both IS- and AQ-backed groups in the region have increasingly expanded their presence south, reaching into countries previously untouched by such problems, like Benin and Togo.

On the opposite end of the continent, Al-Shabaab continues to be highly resilient, substantial and ambitious in the face of repeated campaigns against it.<sup>22</sup> Threat groups in Central African Republic (CAR), Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have all adopted IS messaging and links highlighting the group's ideological expansion across the continent. Some of these links appear to be supported by money flowing between them,<sup>23</sup> while in other cases there is clear frustration by the African affiliates that they are not able to get the attention of the core IS leadership.<sup>24</sup>

### **Evolving CT Support**

All of this has taken place against a context in which Western forces have continued to seek deployments and play roles in countering terrorist groups in the continent. It is consequently not entirely surprising (notwithstanding clear disinformation campaigns and likely corrupt practices by Russian actors) to find that local authorities find Western support efforts ineffective and are willing to explore other alternatives like those offered by Russia. The answer to this so far by Western governments has been to try to call out Russian efforts, but also to withdraw and seek to support more local initiatives to undertake counter terrorism efforts in the region.

For example, following the collective withdrawal from operations in Mali by Western forces, the decision was made to support the Accra agreement, which called for regional powers using structures like the G5 grouping and ECOWAS (with African Union support) to take a leadership role in working with the Malian authorities to deal with the threats they face.<sup>25</sup> This partner-led effort is at the core of the current US thinking, which seeks to encourage local forces to take on the militant groups, with the US and other allies playing a supportive role in the background.

This has not, however, stopped Western forces continuing to take a proactive kinetic role where required. The recent death of IS in Somalia leader Bilal al-Sudani in a US special forces raid highlighted this, and his death is merely the latest in a long list of kinetic actions that the US in particular has taken across the continent to deal with specific menaces.<sup>26</sup> France has continued to undertake such missions too – for example, the killing of Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) leader Adnan Abou Walid al Sahraoui, even as French forces withdrew from Mali.<sup>27</sup> Such strikes demonstrate a capability by Western forces to reach in and strike individuals of concern, even as the wider operating environment becomes complicated. Whether this overwatch capability can be maintained as forces withdraw further will have to be seen.

However, it is clear that this targeted kinetic capability and local security development is unlikely to eradicate terrorism on the continent. The deep-seated issues that foster an environment in which extremist groups can grow goes far deeper. In part to answer this, there has been an increasing push to increase aid and support to Africa. Over time, billions of dollars have been spent on the continent, and this has been further boosted. The US has promised a new fund of some US\$2 billion this year,<sup>28</sup> while the EU has offered hundreds of millions through different funds (for example, a €100 million fund to support teachers,<sup>29</sup> a €175 million for humanitarian aid in Central and West Africa,<sup>30</sup> and an additional €25.5 million in humanitarian aid in January 2023<sup>31</sup>), as well as a promise of a whopping €150 billion in investment over seven years at the EU-Africa Summit in February 2022.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, there has been an effort to push a narrative of trying to help Africa stand up and develop by itself and not simply be an aid recipient – something reflected in US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's January 2023 10-day visit to Africa, which sought to highlight the ambition with which the United States wanted to engage with the continent.<sup>33</sup>

## Jostle For Geopolitical Influence

The driver of this engagement, however, is not counter terrorism (even though the aid may help to deal with some of the underlying development issues which underpin radicalisation), but rather a range of issues from migration (in a European-specific context), to wider geopolitical plays against China and Russia. Both powers are perceived to be increasingly competing for influence in Africa, using a mix of hard security, investment, aid, development and wider support. This plays against the wider context of geopolitical competition between the West and China-Russia. China, in particular, has offered billions to a variety of African countries in terms of infrastructure investments and opportunities. Russia has contributed less in these terms, but has sought to offer some non-military support in the form of food or hydrocarbons.

Whilst there is little evidence of the two directly cooperating in Africa, it is clear that both China and Russia have identified counter terrorism as an issue through which they can engage with Africa to Western detriment and ultimately their own benefit. Whilst Moscow's activities have already been highlighted, China has sought to displace the US from key counter terrorism bases in Kenya<sup>34</sup> as well as spoken at a United Nations (UN) level against sanctions placed on African countries dealing with terrorist threats.<sup>35</sup> This has translated into support for China and Russia in other UN votes, for example, on issues surrounding Xinjiang or Ukraine. Highlighting how much geopolitics has started to become entangled with local issues, the South African Development Community (SADC), made up of 16 nations, actively condemned US legislation that sought to counter Russian malign influence in Africa.<sup>36</sup> Counter terrorism, it appears, has become a tool of great power conflict in Africa.

## Outlook

The specific impact on Western counter terrorism efforts continues. The current focus of attention is Burkina Faso, which, following a coup last year, has appeared to follow the path already taken by neighbouring Mali and turned on France as a counter terrorism partner. This led to a decision by Paris to close down its counter terrorism operation there as well.<sup>37</sup> Again, similar to developments in Mali,<sup>38</sup> this was preceded by an active Russian disinformation campaign as well as consistent rumours of Wagner deployment.<sup>39</sup> It is not clear that this is going to happen, but there has been a noticeable volume of statements from the government in Ouagadougou that the relationship with Moscow has been strengthening. Should Wagner, the private military firm, be deployed, it will be widely interpreted as further evidence of Western loss and Russian gain, with little focus actually paid to the terrorist threat which underpins the security attention in the first place.

This is likely to be the most damaging effect of the growing focus on African terrorism through the lens of great power politics. The attention on the actual threat will likely fall to the wayside as powers compete for influence or seek to keep each other out. This could create a space in which groups can develop further or, as has been seen in the context of some Russian deployments, problems actually get worse. And while thus far, most Africa groups appear quite regionally focused, the danger is that over time, a capability and space could develop into which more dangerous outward-facing groups could establish themselves.

## About the Author

**Raffaello Pantucci** is a Senior Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He can be reached at [israffaello@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:israffaello@ntu.edu.sg)

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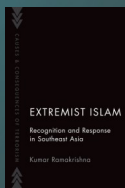
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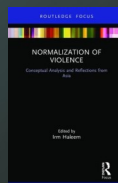


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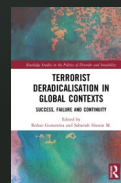
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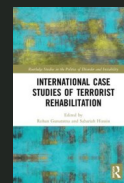
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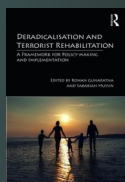
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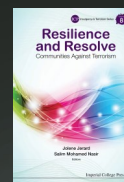
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