

Strengthen Salafi-Jihadi Movement

Featuring Emly Estelle

JULY 24, 2020

The Islamic State and Al Qaeda are locked in a struggle for ideological supremacy in Africa. While this fight may seem appealing to the US, it presents some dangerous pitfalls that threaten US national security and the well-being of millions of Africans. In this episode of Overwatch, Emly Estelle, the research manager of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, explains how a fight between two US adversaries could catalyze greater challenges in the future.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are locked in an ideological struggle in Africa. While this fight may seem appealing to the US, it presents some dangerous pitfalls that threaten US national security and the well-being of millions of Africans. Emly Estelle, the Research Manager of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, is with me today to discuss the implications of this brewing conflict. Thank you for being here today, Emly.

Emily Estelle:

Thanks Jacob. It's great to be here.

Jacob:

Give us a quick overview of Al-Qaeda in Africa, what are they doing there? What do they seek to achieve?

Emily:

So Al-Qaeda has a long history in Africa. And those familiar with Al-Qaeda's history will remember particularly the embassy bombings in the late 1990's. But when you look at Al-Qaeda's role in Africa, you shouldn't look just to their landmark attacks. The group's goal overall is to be the vanguard for essentially a revolution that would reshape governance into a model that's in line with their extreme interpretation of Islam. And so, as Al-Qaeda has established affiliate groups or built relationships with other extremist organizations in Africa, it's pursuing that overall goal. So when we look at Al-Qaeda affiliates in Africa today, we see groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia or Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Maghreb in North and West Africa that are terrorist organizations and armed groups, but are also seeking to provide governance and to take control of populations. And so we'll talk more about the Islamic State today. And one of the key ideas that I'll get into is, how these groups have slightly different ideas of how to pursue that overall goal of achieving governance with Africa being one theater or one place where they're pursuing that goal.

Jacob:

Right. So what about the Islamic State? What are their objectives in Africa? What do they seek to achieve?

Emily:

The Islamic State entered Africa in part to compete with Al-Qaeda. So, the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have different models for pursuing that governance. They have different standards for deciding, for example, who they can work with and who is considered a Muslim in their eyes, who can be ex-communicated. And so that shapes a lot of their relationship globally.

The Islamic State really came to Africa as it was reaching the height of its power and its global attention. So if you look at 2014, when the leader of the Islamic State declared the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, for example. That

same year later on in 2014, is when the Islamic State started accepting pledges of loyalty from different branches around the world. And several of those were in Africa and there have been a few more over the years since then. So, this spread into Africa allowed the Islamic State to present itself as global to really market its brand, particularly as it came to the height of its power and challenge Al-Qaeda at the same time.

Jacob:

Africa, I think is sometimes treated somewhat homogeneous in Western discussions, but it's a huge place with dozens of countries. And with that in mind, where on the continent are we specifically seeing the emergence of these Islamic State branches?

Emily:

That's a great point, Jacob. And it's really important to avoid treating Africa like a single country because it's massive and incredibly diverse. And you see some of that diversity actually in the Islamic State's branches on the continent. So, the kind of, landmark branch in Africa was Libya initially. So particularly in 2015 and 2016, the Islamic State controlled a city on the central Libyan coast. The city is called Sirte in the middle of Libya, and for a time, Sirte was described in Islamic State media as the third capital of the Caliphate, alongside Raqqa in Syria, and Mosul in Iraq. Now, the fate of Islamic State in Libya has changed over time. At its high point, it featured in propaganda and there were calls from Islamic State leaders for people to go and travel to live in the Islamic State in Libya. Well, in the intervening years, there were efforts by Libyan forces, by the US and others to oust the Islamic State from that city. And it's retreated to be more of a remote insurgency, returned to terrorist attacks, et cetera in that space, and so it's much weaker. The relative weakening of the Islamic State in Libya has been mitigated though by the group's successes elsewhere.

So the largest African ISIS affiliate is the West African group based in Lake Chad, primarily in Nigeria, which joined the group in 2015. And so that's a significant insurgency at this point. There is an Islamic State branch also in the Sahel region of West Africa, so in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso. Some smaller groups elsewhere in North Africa, in Tunisia and Algeria, though the Tunisia group is not an official part of the Islamic State. There's an insurgency under the Islamic State banner in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. And then if you circle around to Eastern Africa, there is an Islamic State branch that's a splinter off of Al-Shabaab in Northern Somalia. And then more recently there are two separate groups, one in the DRC and one in Northern Mozambique that fall under the label of the Islamic State Central Africa Province.

Jacob:

You mentioned that the Islamic State viewed Sirte in Libya as its third capital, as though its expansion into Africa was part of the expansion of its territory that had started in the Middle East. But my understanding now is that the Islamic State no longer has even a first or second capital, in the sense that it's lost most of its territory in Iraq and Syria.

Has that change altered the way the group views its operations in Africa. And has it changed its approach to those branches as a result?

Emily:

Yeah. I've actually seen some changes in how the Islamic State is treating its African provinces since its fortunes have changed, particularly in core terrain and in Iraq and Syria as you alluded to. So, it hasn't been a kind of major change, but I've definitely seen a shift in emphasis. One piece is media production. So the Islamic State media is really promoting its African branches as a counterweight to reduced activity elsewhere. Some of this is just kind of an elevation of existing activity that was already going on. The Islamic State groups in West Africa are very active

and have been for quite a while. And so they provide a lot of fodder for the media operation, for example. There's still existing coordination, even as some of the leadership structures connecting the Islamic State branches to the core group in Iraq and Syria have weakened.

So for example, Islamic State branches all over the world will claim a tax under a particular campaign. And the group will typically do that, for example, during the Muslim Holy month of Ramadan. And so we saw coordinated attacks claimed under that title this year, things like pledges of allegiance, renewed pledges or the pledge of allegiance to the new leader of the Islamic State after Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was killed. You'll see those from the different African groups, as well as other Islamic State branches around the world.

There's been a bit more emphasis on Africa though. So going back to last summer, 2019, the Islamic State announced the addition of its central Africa province, which includes fighters in the DRC and in Northern Mozambique. So in that case, the Islamic State accepted the pledge of pre-existing organizations, armed groups in those places and has started to promote them. The Islamic State's slogan or one of them is, "Remaining and expanding." And Africa is certainly helping them maintain the perception of remaining and expanding, having suffered many defeats elsewhere. So remaining is fairly simple. You can see that there's continued activity in all of these different places. Expanding is a little bit harder, but if you look at some of the groups, particularly Mozambique where the Islamic State linked insurgency has gotten notably worse in say the last six months. Africa may also provide some cases of expanding for the Islamic State, which is important for its narrative.

The other change that I've started to see is a renewed emphasis on conflict between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa, which has not always been a focus either in action or in the Islamic State's media, but it's become a real flashpoint, particularly in West Africa within the last couple of months.

Jacob:

Which I think brings us to the fight between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Africa. Can you tell us a bit more about that? Are we talking about physical fight or is it purely ideological? Just, you mentioned contrasting with Al-Qaeda's ideology and methodology. Is it limited to that, a war of words? Or are we seeing actual physical violence between the two groups?

Emily:

In this case it's actual physical violence. So let me give a little context for why that's noteworthy. Depending on where you look in the history of Islamic State and Al-Qaeda relations, direct fighting between the groups is not unusual. If you look at Syria, for example, that's fairly common. When the Islamic State came into Libya, there was fighting between Al-Qaeda linked groups and the Islamic State over control of terrain, particularly when both sides were trying to control and implement their version of their program. They tended to clash similarly in Somalia, Al-Shabaab, which is the Al-Qaeda affiliate, has cracked down very aggressively on the Islamic State linked splinter group, because it's made up of defectors from Al-Shabaab. The exception to that pattern was West Africa, specifically the Sahel region. So Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso in this case for quite a while. And that was in part because the Islamic State linked group grew very much out of the ecosystem of different Al-Qaeda linked groups in this space. A lot of them, many different acronyms I'll try and skip the weeds here, but there was evidence of collaboration on attacks between the different Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State linked group, operating in the same space with an on and off tension, on and off reconciliation, but generally they weren't focused on each other. So that's changed within the last year. And in the Sahel in particular, there is now open, direct fighting, sustained fighting between the Al-Qaeda affiliate and the Islamic State affiliate in Mali. And that's actually become a focus in Islamic State media, which was interesting. The Islamic State spokesman's most recent statement focused on promising revenge against Al-Qaeda in the Sahel.

Now, there are some reasons for that, that range from the local, which is the different jihadist groups in the Mali space kind of have come into the same area and are competing for territory. And there is an issue of commander relationships and defections back and forth. So the local dynamics are part of it. But I think that there's also a larger challenge, a challenge for the Islamic State, where their model ... So, that the caliphate model has suffered a lot of setbacks in the last couple of years. And at the same time Al-Qaeda's model, which advises basically a slower process towards the goal of establishing ultimately an Islamic State, that model appears to be succeeding more.

So if you look at Afghanistan, for example, the deal between the US and the Taliban benefits Al-Qaeda, and Al-Qaeda has heralded it as a victory. Now in Mali, there's kind of a similar play on where the Al-Qaeda affiliate is seeking a deal with the Malian government. And so that's a problem for the Islamic State because its model appears to be losing out to the Al-Qaeda model. And I think that's one reason for this increased focus on fighting between the different affiliates in Mali. At the same time, in different parts of West Africa, I've also seen a shift towards kind of more brutality from the Islamic State affiliates, more in line with what we expect when we think of the Islamic State, which was not always characteristic of the groups in West Africa. Really brutal media production executions, et cetera, that also may reflect a different focus from leadership on how they're trying to prosecute their campaign in West Africa.

Jacob:

Do you determine that the brutality you mentioned is intentional on the part of the Islamic State? Obviously the things they're doing are by choice, but is that an intentional strategy? Or is it more of a natural result of its growing involvement in the region and just the escalation of its fight with Al-Qaeda?

Emily:

So my hunch is that there is some top-down direction in the case of this increased brutality in West Africa. So I'm referring to the Islamic State group in Mali and its environs and the one in the Lake Chad basin. They're both called the Islamic State West Africa officially, but they're two separate groups. I'll try to dodge that complexity as best I can for now. The reason I think that there's some top-down influences is mainly because in the Lake Chad group, which is related to or it has a complicated history as part of Boko Haram. So, I'll say that name just because people know it. There's been some leadership, there've been some leadership changes in that group, in Lake Chad, that were directed from the top, from Islamic State leadership. And the shift in tactics, in brutality, including targeting Muslim populations, which is something ... targeting Muslim civilian populations, that's something that the prior Islamic State leadership in that area of West Africa had avoided. And so the shift followed a change in leadership that was top-down, which makes me think that it was intentionally directed.

The alternate hypothesis that I think also has some merit, is that particularly the group in the Sahel is bidding for more support and recognition from the Islamic State, which is often how these affiliate relationships work. And so proving that it is kind of upholding the ISIS brand and distinguishing itself from other groups in the area is also another reason that you would see a shift in how the groups are presenting themselves in their media and in their attacks.

Jacob:

Now the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are just fully defined adversaries of the United States at this point. So, them fighting each other would seem to be a good thing for US national security. After all, if they are fighting one another, then they can't ... There's expending resources that presumably they can't use on other operations, whether that's attacks abroad or elsewhere, that would hurt the US and frankly, a host of other countries. Is their fight then purely a good thing for US and by extension international, national security? Or are there pitfalls that we should be worried about?

Emily:

So it really is tempting to say, “Okay, let’s let the bad guys fight it out against each other.” And I think it’s worth examining all the different possibilities here to be sure both of these organizations are evil, absolutely. Unfortunately from a strategic perspective, when they fight each other, they’re not particularly likely to actually weaken the Salafi-Jihadi movement as a whole, which is the movement that they are both a part of. And in fact what you see ... These different kinds of groups like this have fought with each other for a long time, and we certainly haven’t seen them go away. Individual groups, yes, but the broader movement, no. And what I’m concerned about is first, an element of survival of the fittest. Where the most effective leaders, the most effective groups, are the ones that remain and attract remaining recruits. So it can actually drive consolidation over time, rather than weakening. There’s also a risk for outbidding, or groups competing to be the most effective, get the most attention, which can create an incentive structure for a bigger and more spectacular, bolder attacks in order to prove their credentials.

Looking at the Islamic State, and Al-Qaeda in particular. The Islamic State’s brutality and ideological rigidity can benefit the overall Salafi-Jihadi movement and especially Al-Qaeda, even if it ends up backfiring for the Islamic State itself. So this is a dynamic that’s played out in part in Syria. And that I think I’m starting to see in the Sahel as well, where Al-Qaeda and friends can present themselves as the moderate alternative, which I don’t mean actually moderate. Al-Qaeda is still obviously very extreme, but in comparison to the Islamic State, it does look relatively moderate.

And when it’s competing for access to populations and for the ability to control them, if it can say, “I”, speaking for Al-Qaeda in this case, “We are more just than the state, which is corrupt. But we’re more humane than the Islamic State,” which is crazy. It makes them more palatable, particularly to the populations that they’re able to access anyway, which are people in desperate circumstances that lack the ability to protect themselves. So the competition can normalize aspects of the Salafi-Jihadi movement that are previously not normal and that shouldn’t become normal, but by dint of the brutality that’s present, that can happen.

Jacob:

So moving on from that, what do you see as coming next for the Islamic State in Africa?

Emily:

My theory right now, and I’m still kind of working this one out, but I’ll share it. Is that the trajectory for the Salafi-Jihadi movement in Africa is good, obviously for the Salafi-Jihadi movement, so bad for everybody else. But that the trajectory for the Islamic State might not be as strong as the movement overall. So, Africa is a feeder for this contest to be the head of the global Salafi-Jihadi movement right now between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. The areas on the continent where Salafi-Jihadi groups are trending most successfully towards their overall objective, which is establishing governance in their model and driving out external presence and all of these other things, the most success is happening with Al-Qaeda linked groups, like the Al-Qaeda and Islamic Maghreb affiliate in the Sahel and Al Shabaab in Somalia. And these are kind of the big Al-Qaeda affiliates that the Islamic State tried to win over early on and wasn’t able to, and they’ve remained staunchly in Al-Qaeda’s camp. The fact that these groups are successful or appear to be on track for long-term survival and success on their terms is a vulnerability for the Islamic State, because they’re obviously pursuing Al-Qaeda’s methodology.

That said, I think there are also some opportunities for the Islamic State, especially in the near term. It’s an interesting question. For example, in Nigeria where the Islamic State West Africa branch is kind of the dominant Salafi Jihadi group in that area. And it has had some success already establishing a zone of governance and making itself kind of a pseudo state already. My open question for now is whether as that group changes tactics and actually

starts attacking more of the populations that its tried to control, is that going to backfire? Or is it going to kind of cement its gains there? And I think there are both possibilities depending on how things play out.

Jacob:

Are there other places where the Islamic State may see successes? Or has already seen success? Are there places where the group seems to be seizing opportunities?

Emily:

Unfortunately, yeah, there are. There are definitely some opportunities. Some playing out now, some that I could see happening in the future. I mentioned Mozambique previously again, not a country that we're used to necessarily talking about in the counter-terrorism world, but the Islamic State group there has had some pretty brazen successes in the last couple of months, as far as storming into cities and preaching its message and interacting with populations and targeting security forces and officials. And I think there's a distinct possibility that the Mozambique group could mirror to a degree what the Islamic State did in Mosul to a sense. So, kind of a campaign of exhausting security forces and doing the series of temporary raids until ultimately they're able to turn one of them into a catastrophic success where they can seize the city, declare it part of the califate. I do think there's a limit to how resonant a Mozambique example would be as compared to the symbolic weight of Mosel in that sense. And it's certainly much more remote, but that would be a victory for the Islamic State in presenting itself as remaining and expanding and could be a rallying point for other Salafi-Jihadi militants, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The other thing I'm concerned about, related to Mozambique, is also the drawing in of regional States. So a recent Islamic State publication threatened South Africa, which is concerned with the destabilization of Mozambique. So you could see increased targeting of South Africa with terrorist attacks. The other, to swing to a different part of the continent, another thing that I'm concerned about is how some of the North African States are trending. So, Libya being the place I'm most concerned about. The civil war in Libya is becoming this regional conflagration that is drawing in all of these other players in an increasingly intense way. And that kind of environment is preserving the security vacuum that we've already seen the Islamic State exploit, and is also going to draw attention away from combating groups like the Islamic State. And also as a war plays out between kind of other larger players, the ability of those actors who are pursuing counter-terrorism missions to keep the Islamic State weak. It might become a lot harder to do that as air defenses come in and as the attention on them shifts elsewhere. So looking a few years ahead, I won't be surprised to see a renewed Islamic State presence in Libya based on how that war is trending. And of course, an Islamic State Haven on the Mediterranean coast, as we've seen previously, is dangerous for a host of regions to neighboring states and also across the Mediterranean into Europe.

Jacob:

You said a few minutes ago, the Islamic State's kind of narrative for itself that it's trying to reinforce of remaining and expanding the kind of, "We're still here and we're growing." And they're trying to do that literally, but also they're presenting it as a narrative. Do you expect that the group's presence in Africa will make that narrative reality? Will it provide the resources, clout, whatever that it needs to survive setbacks elsewhere?

Emily:

I don't think that Africa alone is enough to sustain the Islamic State, at least in the way we conceive of the Islamic State as an organization. I think, looking ahead more creatively at what next iterations of the Salafi-Jihadi movement look like, then Africa may play a more important role. But at least as the Islamic State has existed, it is still quite rooted at least at its core in Iraq and in Syria. So I don't think that, that particular group of leadership will

retain its level of clout if it doesn't have the presence in its core terrain that it has historically had, and is relying solely on its external provinces. That said, the Islamic State in Africa has helped, if not kick off, then supercharge in a way, the expansion of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. And that trend, I think, can spiral onward with Africa becoming kind of a more important base for a lot of these organizations.

There's also an element of kind of cyclical reinforcing across these different parts of the world. So the flow of foreign fighters from North Africa into Iraq and Syria being one example where even if let's say Africa remains a secondary feeder for the Islamic State, which is most likely, having a presence in Africa and the ability to recruit and get people to go to wherever the main effort is, is valuable. If you look at the large numbers of North African foreign fighters, we talked about Tunisia and Morocco as some cases with large numbers of recruits, that's really important for the Islamic State to actually recover from its losses in core terrains. So we'll continue to see a strengthened Salafi-Jihadi movement in Africa, I think that is feeding the Islamic State, but it's not enough on its own to kind of be the Islamic State 3.0 that only exists in Africa.

Jacob:

Presumably Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are not being permitted to carry out these actions in a complete vacuum. We'll optimistically assume that the international community is responding in some manner. What does that response look like? And is it working? Presumably Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are not being permitted to carry out these actions in a complete vacuum. We'll optimistically assume that the international community is responding in some manner. What does that response look like? And is it working?

Emily:

I think I'll speak to the Sahel specifically, just so that I don't kind of go off into too many corners, because of course there are many different aspects of international response across these large regions of the continent. So the Sahel in West Africa, there are several different security initiatives going on. There's an international counter-terrorism mission that's led by France and that the US supports logistics, and intelligence, and other capabilities. There are also regional forces. So you'll hear about the G5 Sahel Force, which is the French working with five states in the Sahel as a joint force. There's also a UN mission, MINUSMA, as well as individual countries that are involved.

The problem with the response is unfortunately similar to what we've now seen across the middle East and now multiple attempts to fight these wars against the Salafi-Jihadi movement, where the strategy has tended to focus pretty narrowly on killing terrorists, terrorist leadership, and being kind of relatively militarized or overly militarized in our approach. That's not to diminish the large amount of, for example, aid and development work that is also going on. But what's missing is a strategy that actually manages to integrate those different pieces, as well as the political diplomatic requirement to try and close some of the big gaps in governance that are actually what insurgent groups like Salafi-Jihadi groups exploit.

So let me talk actually a little bit about what Salafi-Jihadi groups are exploiting in Mali and in surrounding area to make that clearer. These groups are not popular. Their ideology is not popular, but they're able to come into places where people don't trust the security forces, because they're often targeted by the security forces. In Mali, this falls out along ethnic lines, as well as farmer/herder divides a lot of the time. So people don't feel safe kind of in going to the security forces at all. There's also failures of government at the local level, at the national level. Officials are seen as corrupt and unable to actually provide services, much less provide them equitably. This happens in a context of competition between different communities and local violence that can break out. So in that environment, the Salafi-Jihadi groups are competing to clear a very low bar, but they're able to sometimes clear it by promising security, by administering courts that at least seem more fair in certain cases. And so, I think the

problem that the international community has had, and that local governments have had, is figuring out how to close that gap in governance and build up legitimacy in places that are already very insecure, which is kind of the core difficulty of Western aid and development, being unable to access the areas that actually need it the most.

I'll highlight just one piece of this, because it's been in the news lately, that security forces, when they abuse populations and commit humanitarian violations, human rights violations, are feeding directly into the grievances that benefit Salafi-Jihadi groups. So, this has been a problem in the Sahel. And so it's ... There's discussion now of what the US security assistance should be, because of course we don't want to support forces that are committing offenses against their own population. And I'd say that figuring out how to help partner forces get, become more professional to avoid committing those grievances, and also holding them accountable is important, not just from a human rights standpoint and a moral standpoint, but it's also the thing that's going to be strategically effective at trying to quell recruitment and trying to cut the momentum that these Salafi-Jihadi groups have.

Jacob:

Good. Is there anything else that the US and its allies could be doing better to respond to this emerging threat?

Emily:

Yes. There are a few things that I think the US and its allies could be doing better, and regional states as well. I think these are our overarching themes. One, is making sure that states have the infrastructure to actually improve on some of the problems with security forces, and for the US problems with partner forces that we've seen. So the question of security assistance and professionalization of forces is important, but it needs to be paired with a hard look at justice systems in order to make sure that when bad things do happen, that there is a just system and people can get resolution. That, I think, would go a long way towards increasing legitimacy. And that's for Burkina Faso specifically, to look at the Sahel. That's one dynamic, is that there just isn't the capacity and the number of people trained properly to administer the justice system.

I also think that the US has leverage and a voice for certain values issues and promoting things that we both believe in, and that are also strategically valuable. So another Burkina Faso example has been, there's a media law in place that restricts journalists speech on terrorism issues, but also on what security forces do, which contributes to this kind of culture of impunity. And I think the US should put pressure on that. And we've seen some statements to that effect. To jump to a different part of the continent now, I think one problem is that there's a tendency for the US and others, that's a very understandable tendency, to focus narrowly on what we see as our core interests. And that obviously makes sense, because we can't do everything, we shouldn't do everything, et cetera. But when you have, say counter-terrorism as our primary interest in Libya, and we look just at that it becomes moot when you look at the dynamics of the larger war, and what will happen to the conditions in the country, and what opportunities it will create for terrorist groups like the Islamic State if the war continues to spin on, as it does. Not to mention the other implications for the humanitarian issues for NATO, all of these other dynamics that are tied up in the Libya war.

And so that question is fundamentally a diplomatic one, and it would be as a case where the US has sought to avoid taking on a larger diplomatic role. But in that vacuum, this war has continued to protract and expand and draw in us allies and partners on different sides in a way that's now created a much worse environment for other American interests. So recognizing that we can't just do counter-terrorism in an environment like that. There's a real diplomatic role that's going to be important to any sort of lasting solution, and that would also benefit other US interests beyond the counter-terrorism portfolio.

Jacob:

Emily Estelle, thank you so much for sharing your insights with us today.

Emily:

Thanks so much for having me, Jacob.

Kim Kagan:

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