

Pandemic Enables the Spread of Salafi Jihadism in Africa

Featuring Nicholas Heras and Emily Estelle



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Years of poor governance and economic insecurity have allowed Salafi Jihadist groups to metastasize in several parts of Africa. In this episode of Overwatch, ISW Middle East Security Program Manager Nicholas Heras and CTP Research Manager Emily Estelle discuss the opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis presents for these groups to expand the reach of their terrorist activities.

Kim Kagan:

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Nicholas Heras:

Hello everyone. Thank you for joining us for today's segment of the Overwatch Podcast. My name is Nicholas Heras, and I'm the Middle East security program manager at the Institute for the Study of War. Joining me today is Emily Estelle who is the research manager at the Critical Threat Project at the American Enterprise Institute. Emily is also a noted expert on Salafi-Jihadi movements in Africa. She will be soon releasing a comprehensive assessments of the COVID-19 crisis's impact on Africa, and the opportunities that Salafi-Jihadi movement's can take to benefit from that crisis. Thank you for joining us today, Emily.

Emily, let's get right into it. Your forecast is an important contribution to our understanding of how Salafi-Jihadi movements can take advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to expand their influence, control, and operations reach on the African continent and globally. You've highlighted several social, economic, political, and humanitarian preexisting conditions in Africa that could have strong negative impacts on the security situation throughout the African continent. So Emily, take us on a tour of Africa. What are these preexisting conditions, and where on the African continent are they most likely to create opportunities for Salafi-Jihadi movements?

Emily Estelle:

Thanks, Nick. And I'm happy to be here and to talk about this important issue. The preexisting condition that I'm most concerned with is poor governance, defined as governance that's illegitimate or unresponsive to some segment of the population. Some examples of poor governance are say, the inability to deliver basic services. Real or perceived bias against ethnic or religious groups. Human rights abuses by security forces and police, and political instability. Another contributing factor can be natural or man-made crises that disrupt normal societal function. One example of that right now is climate change in Western Africa, which is disrupting normal local governance and resource access because it's reducing the amount of available resources.

The reason I'm emphasizing governance is because, well, it's a catalyst for many different dangers. One of the bad things in particular that benefits from poor governance is the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Salafi-Jihadi movement includes the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, other similar and related groups. These groups are known for suicide terrorism, but that's a tactic that they use toward a larger goal. And that larger goal is destroying and replacing governance, be it democracy, monarchy, dictatorship, whatever, with their extreme interpretation of Islamic law. Looking at Africa, there are several active Salafi-Jihadi insurgencies around the continent, where groups are trying to do just that. In the Horn of Africa and East Africa, the most prominent group is the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. Somalia has been a failed or failing state for decades now, and Al-Shabaab tries to make the case through force and persuasion and providing services, that it's the more legitimate government. The Somali government is weak and fractious, and it struggles to counter Al-Shabaab's efforts. And Al-Shabaab's

getting bolder about attacking military targets outside of Somalia, and maybe even trying to strike international aviation. So, this is a big area of concern.

Emily Estelle:

Moving to other insurgencies, another main area is the Sahel, which is the area along the southern edge of the Sahara. This insurgency is centered in Mali, which destabilized stabilized in 2012. And there has been a Salafi-Jihadi insurgency there since. It's now spread into Niger, increasingly into Burkina Faso, which has really destabilized rapidly in the past few years. The states in this area have very weak control at their periphery, so away from the capital, away from the center, which is where Salafi-Jihadi groups are thriving. These groups are inserting themselves into local ethnic conflicts, which they make worse and then try and present themselves as the solution.

There's also a problem with human rights abuses, sometimes by security forces targeting certain vulnerable groups or minorities. So in Mali, Salafi-Jihadi groups have gotten good at playing the game of playing on local tensions. They disrupted Mali's legislative elections recently. They actually kidnapped the lead opposition candidate and have not released him yet. Jihadists are now pushing the Malian state to kick international counter-terrorism forces out and have negotiations with the government. There's also an insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin, which is primarily Northeastern Nigeria and crossing into neighboring countries. This insurgency, you probably heard of Boko Haram, that group's now in a couple of different factions, including one that's part of ISIS. The ISIS-linked group has been trying a governance project there, and some people end up choosing to live there because it brings some stability compared to their other options. All of the countries in this area are juggling multiple threats. So it's hard for them to even prioritize fighting this insurgency, much less, really resolving it. So those are the main insurgencies in Africa right now. There's also an emerging hotspot in Mozambique, along the Southeastern African coast, where ISIS-linked militants have gotten a lot stronger this year. I'm also keeping an eye on the Maghreb region in North Africa. It's been an epicenter for the Salafi-Jihadi movement before, especially if you look at ISIS in Libya. And then Algeria and Tunisia both really had to beat back Salafi-Jihadi insurgencies in the 2010s. Libya's war is ongoing and getting worse. And so that means that these wins against terrorist groups probably won't stick, and we'll see that country become a more overt Salafi-Jihadi haven again, and we'll also again, become a spillover threat to its neighbors.

For COVID-19 in the states with existing insurgencies, I expect Salafi-Jihadi groups to use it as a cudgel against these governments rhetorically, which they're already doing with a lot of issues. And they may try to supplant the governments with some of their own aid, if they can. We've seen Al-Shabaab co-op humanitarian aid in crisis response before. Now there is potential that this could backfire on Salafi-Jihadi groups, if their governance ends up being much worse, but particularly where COVID responses hit against existing societal fissures. Like we're seeing reports of police brutality, for example, or biased enforcement of lockdowns. The groups then have a pretty winning argument in the places where they're already trying to take down the government.

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you very much, Emily, for that expansive explanation and excellent synthetic assessment of the situation as it stands in Africa now for the Salafi-Jihadi movement and how it could develop. There is a stark warning in your forecast that should not be lost on policy makers. That is, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis could collapse multiple African states, which would supercharge the Salafi-Jihadi movements and allow Salafi-Jihadi organizations to establish unprecedented safe havens in Africa to enable a wave of terrorist attacks across the world. You have further identified the potential collapse of medium to large African states, the key driver of this opportunity for Salafi-Jihadi organizations in Africa. So my question is, how can this nightmare scenario for global security that could develop an Africa, be mitigated or prevented?

Emily Estelle:

Right. So this is a most dangerous course of action that I see. It actually existed before the COVID crisis, but the pandemic and the economic fallout make it a more likely possibility, and one that we need to be prepared for. I think there's a role the US can play in, to help coordinate the immediate humanitarian response, which doesn't mean shouldering it, but coordinating with others who are there to improve the effectiveness of the overall response. There's also a need to help states prevent economic catastrophe. There's actually an intersection with the US interest in China here. So, there needs to be public pressure on China to issue forbearances or maybe cancel debt for countries whose budget is going to debt payments instead of to pandemic response. But going further, one thing I'm worried about is that the breaking of the social contract in states where people have traded repression for stability and basic economic function. That deal is going to break down if states truly cannot function under the pressure that they're in. Now, these states need to transition to representative governance to be stable in the long term, but ideally that would happen without a catastrophic collapse, and it would probably take some time. But if the pressure goes really high, so economic collapse paired with states really cracking down to hold onto power, you can see a powder keg or a situation exploding. So I think the US and its democratic allies should also be watching for power grabs and infringement on civil liberties during this time. And we shouldn't think that tacitly supporting repressive leaders is actually a route to stability.

Since the pandemic started, we've already seen pressure on journalists and civil society and in a lot of countries, Egypt, Algeria, Uganda, are some examples. Tanzania. And leaders are trying to use this as an opportunity to increase their power based on what issues they were having before the pandemic started, not based in genuinely responding to the crisis. I'm also concerned about the potential for counterrevolution in countries that have had recent positive progress in a governmental transition. So, Algeria and Sudan. They've both made some positive progress against tough odds in the last year and have gotten rid of long-term rulers and have avoided falling into the worst-case, unrest. But the backsliding, particularly during a time of crisis, is a dangerous possibility.

Nicholas Heras:

Emily, thank you very much for that insightful analysis. It's certainly a dangerous situation on the African continent that could become much worse. I'd like to say that perhaps the most provocative argument you are making in your assessment is that the effect of the COVID-19 crisis over the medium and long term is the destabilization of states that we take for granted in Africa. In particular, you have singled out Algeria as one such at-risk state that has been a bulwark of stability in a volatile region, and that serves as a cork of sorts that stops the flow of Salafi-Jihadi fighters from the Transaharan region to other Maghreb states in Europe. So what would be the consequences of the collapse of Algeria for regional and global security, and how would the Salafi-Jihadi movement take advantage that scenario?

Emily Estelle:

Okay. So I'll start with a bit of context. Libya has barely 7 million people. Mali has 20. Syria was about the same size at the start of its civil war. And the collapse of these states, which are relatively small ones in population size, have had a huge effect regionally and globally as hubs for terrorist groups. As competition areas for other external players. As humanitarian disasters. Contributors to mass, irregular migration. So we've got several examples of a phenomenon where a local conflict starts small and just widen and widen and have bigger regional effects and start to merge with each other.

So looking at Algeria, it has 40 million people, and it's the 10th or 11th largest country in the world by surface area. It's a major natural gas supplier to Europe, and one of the bigger and stronger security forces in this region, already bordering existing disaster zones in Mali and in Libya. But Algeria now is under incredible strain.

Emily Estelle:

There's been a remarkable protest movement over the last year, which ousted the long-time president, but is still grappling with a regime that's unwilling to open up. The economy has been struggling to diversify and privatize. It's very heavily based on oil and gas. Low oil prices have been hitting hard for a while now. Algeria has avoided worst cases so far recently. The state and protesters have avoided violence. They're looking at examples of how other countries' transitions have gone, and they're very wary of that. But authorities are still cracking down, including on journalists, since COVID-19 started. And the protest movement, while it's off the streets, is persisting online and has proven to be quite strong.

It is still quite possible that reforms will continue in a gradual way and that we won't see this worst case happen, but it's increasingly likely that the pressure is building too much, and we will see more instability in the country. Especially with an economic crisis on this scale, it's really difficult to see how the country remains stable. There are a lot of implications to that for Europe. The energy disruption is problematic and also probably opens up more leverage for Russia as an energy supplier to the Europeans. And the migration, especially to France in a difficult political environment, would raise tensions, especially in a post-COVID economic crisis environment. There's a regional piece too. So if you look across Northern Africa, Eastern Africa, across the Middle East, there's a regional competition playing out between some of the Gulf states and Turkey, that is impacting the politics across the area. So this is most obvious in the Libya war where it's actually a proxy war, but all of these states have political interests and try and use their leverage in different ways across the Muslim world. And I would expect to see that intensify in the case of a destabilized Algeria. Algeria is very resistant to external involvement as a policy, but major instability there could allow it to happen. And another actor to watch would be Russia, which is the main arms supplier to Algeria and has expressed interest in a military base there before and has been rebuffed. But certainly a civil war dynamic or a mass instability dynamic would create new opportunities.

On the Salafi-Jihadi side, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, which is the main Al Qaeda branch in North and West Africa, has its roots in Algeria. It's been focused on the sahel for the last several years because that's been the more permissive environment to work in, but I don't think that AQIM would pass up the opportunity to exploit instability in Algeria. Neither would ISIS, which also still has an active branch there. Both of those groups still have some organization in the country, even under heavy security pressure, and they have presence on the periphery and in neighboring countries. So I'd expect a terrorism campaign on top of any other major instability in Algeria if it came to pass, plus potentially Salafi-Jihadi groups trying to use the country as a base to attack elsewhere, including across the Mediterranean and Europe.

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you very much, Emily. And you present a very stock picture of how Algeria is a pivotal state in Africa and how security challenges in Algeria could metastasize across the continent and throughout the Mediterranean region. I want to pick up on a theme that you touched on in our discussion of Algeria, which is in regards to the foreign actors' involvements in conflicts in Africa, as well as the impact of global competition between great powers on the African continent. Africa is a resource-rich continent that global organizations project will develop the most populous and largest global market over the course of the 21st century. You assert in your forecast that the United States was already in the process of withdrawing from Africa before the COVID-19 crisis hit. And that the temptation for US policy makers will be to seek to do even less on the African continent in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. However, you make the important point that China's not only actively involved in African affairs, it will likely ramp up its efforts on the African continent in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. So, how can the US remain engaged in Africa and leverage that engagement to contest China's growing dominance in this resource-rich and strategic region?

Emily Estelle:

There's a discussion about shifting military resources from Africa to China that's been ongoing in the DOD for a while now. And one issue I'd raise with that would be the marginal benefit. So, can the much smaller percentage that we spend in Africa do more there in Africa, or in the Asia Pacific, where we're already spending a lot more? I would argue for Africa. One reason for that, is that Africa is already a competition space for China and Russia. The resources are important as you pointed out, especially when you think about supply chains and resources like rare earth minerals. And these are lines that the Chinese government has already been thinking along. But I think Americans should really see our engagement with Africa as an opportunity to make the case for why we are the better partner, and why we can offer something mutually beneficial that's not predatory like some of the current Chinese outreach.

So there's a real opportunity for this right now actually, because the pandemic and the economic crisis is making some African countries realize that they're in a very precarious position with China as a creditor. And they aren't looking favorably at Beijing, particularly as there are discussions about China potentially seizing strategic assets from these states as collateral for some of the debt. I therefore think that the US should look at humanitarian coordination as a building block and a way of establishing productive relationships with African states. We've got some good baselines there with helping with the Ebola response and other humanitarian crises, as well as security assistance that we've been running for awhile. The relationship-building that we do sets us up for being to coordinate with African partners against other kinds of challenges. If you look to a different theater in the Asia-Pacific, the quad, which is US, India, Japan, Australia, that's now a key part of US strategy in the Asia-Pacific, particularly as a group of democracies, but it was based initially on tsunami response before it was related to military coordination at all. So working with African states to prevent the worst outcomes that I outlined has some obvious benefits in the near term, preventing those absolute worst cases and helping with the humanitarian aspect. But doing that is not divorced from the long-term strategic competition with China either and could actually really benefit us in the long term.

Nicholas Heras:

Well, thank you, Emily. You present a way forward for the United States on the African continent and for the US to manage its policy on all these different, important and emerging issues that will impact African security, as well as global security. Thank you for a robust discussion, and we hope to see you next time, dear listeners.

Emily Estelle:

Thanks Nick. I really enjoyed the discussion.

Kim Kagan:

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