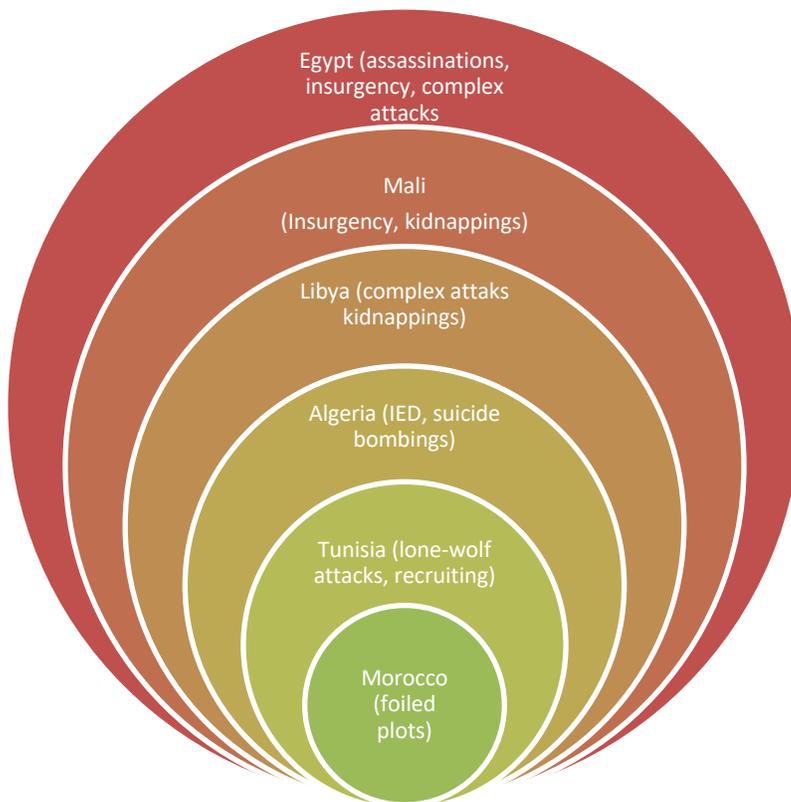


### **Update on the terrorist threat environment in North Africa**

The overrepresentation of North Africans in IS ranks and terrorist attacks in Europe and the continuing migrant crisis have put North Africa at the center of Europe’s strategic concerns. The measures taken by Maghreb countries since 2014-15 mitigated the regional impact of increased terrorist activity in Libya (and Mali) while stemming the flow of returning foreign fighters. Libya has also seen gradual improvement on the terrorism situation since the retaking of Sirte from IS control. Egypt is still struggling with insurgency in Sinai but has managed to contain most terrorism to that region. However, the cyclical history of terrorism in North Africa, ongoing conflict in Muslim countries, enabling socio-economic factors and the capacity of terrorist groups to adapt suggest that large scale terrorism will resume in the medium term in parts of North Africa. A better understanding of some outstanding features of terrorism-linked insecurity may help stakeholders in with business investments or aid commitments in the coming years particularly as concerns Libya and Southern Algeria. It can also help policy makers design more comprehensive strategies for their interests in that region.



**Figure 1 Security situation in greater North Africa/Sahel**

**Weakened and isolated entities:** Since 2014, Algeria has decimated IS and AQIM leadership and contained its fighters to isolated areas of North Algeria. Morocco has preempted all operations on its soil since 2011 and even Tunisia has been able to limit IS/AQIM activity to small scale operations since

mid-2015. Current Jihadi control of territory in North Africa is limited to areas of the Sinai.<sup>1</sup> There are of course pockets of armed terrorist groups in remote uninhabited areas of Libya, Algeria and Tunisia but this does not constitute territorial control.<sup>2</sup> Following the ouster of IS from its sanctuary in Sirte (December 2016), It is estimated that some 800-1000 armed terrorists remained in Libya -down from about 5000 in 2016. Egyptian numbers range between 500-1000 fighters. Algerian government pressure and terrorist strategy saw the migration of hundreds of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) fighters to Mali and Tunisia in 2012-2014 leaving some 300 in Northern Algeria. There are some 100-150 armed terrorists in Tunisia while most extremist in Morocco are untrained amateurs rather than armed fighters.

**Decline in sophisticated and large scale attacks:** The Maghreb has not been this quiet since the late 1980s. In 2017, most large scale or complex attacks in North Africa were carried out in Egypt (Sinai) with Libya ranking a distant second. As an example, on 20 October 2017, Egyptian security forces were ambushed by militants in the Western Desert. Dozens of security forces were killed in the attack.<sup>3</sup>

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*The Maghreb has not been this quiet  
since the late 1980s*

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Terrorists have been unable to undertake any such strikes in Algeria since 2013 when a group managed to enter southern Algeria via Libya and attacked a strategic gas plant in In Amenas. Algiers has not been seen a terror attack since 2008 and most attacks in Algeria consist of IEDs and to a lesser extent ineffective suicide attacks against security forces.

After several devastating attacks in 2015, Tunisia is managing the threat and dismantling operational cells leaving lone wolves as the main threat. A similar threat picture presents itself in Morocco with lone actor attacks being the most probable. The last complex attack in Libya occurred in Misrata in October 2017 but successful large attacks have become few and far between compared with previous years.

**Competition between Jihadi groups:** As in other countries of MENA, IS and AQ (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)), compete for status and recruits. While IS maintains its image as an uncompromising terrorist organization, AQ has pursued an “inclusionist” narrative and attempted to portray itself as a “moderate” terrorist organization. IS has repeatedly accused AQ of being less than dedicated to jihad while AQ has accused it of extremism. Although IS has decisively won the battle in terms of reputation among aspiring jihadis, AQIM has strengthened its position in Libya through efforts at leaving a light footprint and building local contacts. This competition has weakened both groups although collaboration in the MEDIUM term is not outside the realm of possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Wilayat Sinai has released pictures where they are seen operating a checkpoint openly, in broad daylight for a prolonged time, stopping vehicles, searching them and checking credentials without interference

<sup>2</sup> Mostly in remote southern regions and mountainous and porous north-east; these areas are harder to police and have traditionally offered terrorist groups greater freedom of movement.

<sup>3</sup> Also, on December 20, an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) targeted a helicopter on the ramp of al-Arish Airport, located in Egypt's North Sinai Governorate. The helicopter carried, among others, the Egyptian interior and defense ministers who disembarked from the aircraft shortly before the attack.



**Low risk of returnees despite huge numbers abroad:** For many governments in the West, there continues to be a risk that extremists will return home as hardened fighters with the expertise needed to carry out attacks. SAM is aware of Tunisian arriving in Libya by the dozens which has implications for Tunisian stability as well. However it must be said that for the time being, the thousands of North Africans who made their way to Iraq and Syria have either opted to travel elsewhere or cannot easily reenter their home countries. This could change in the MEDIUM term if prolonged and intense civil unrest is seen in countries like Tunisia, which could destabilize the current security and border system.

### Implications

The gradual weakening of terrorist groups in recent year is due in large part to adjustments by North African governments in the security and legislative sector. With few exceptions however, social issues have yet to be tackled. In the SHORT term (3-6 months), North African countries will be able to manage the threat of terrorism. This requires a security sector working at full capacity and a heightened perception of the threat posed by terrorism. For example, up to 60,000 Algerian security forces were deployed for New Year's Eve at transport hubs, cultural sites and hotels. This is massive taking into account that Algeria receives only a fraction of foreigners compared to Morocco and Tunisia. Tunisia has been in a state of emergency since November 2015, granting security forces wide authorities of search and arrest. For its part, Libya will continue to struggle with terrorist groups until the country is united under a single government.

Problems can arise in the MEDIUM term (6-12 months) as Governments become more complacent and/or other security threats such as civil unrest divert their attention. Countries in the region have often declared victory on terrorism in the past only to see a successful attack come to fruition. Moreover, a latent terrorist threat remains. Despite its current weakened state, jihadism in North Africa can and will likely reemerge with either a successful large scale attack on the In Amenas model or through a high-level kidnapping. One of the reasons for this is the existence of sanctuaries in Mali,

Southern Libya and other ungoverned areas in the greater region. Potential returnees from Syria could also potentiate this threat in the medium term (such as is happening in Afghanistan). Such trained fighters can recruit across North Africa from a huge pool of marginalized young men (and women)

This has implications for foreigners, whether aid workers, tourists and private sector employees, who are all equally targeted by jihadists in the region. The risk of kidnapping in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria is virtually nil and will remain so in the short to medium term, but a different reality exists in Libya and Southern Algeria/and many parts of Egypt. IS and AQ are also known to target high economic zones to promote their cause, **the risk is especially acute in Southern Algeria and to a lesser extent in Libya's oil crescent.** Most international companies have left Libya but there are several in Southern Algeria involved in gas extraction and the region's energy potential looks slated for further growth. In developing a comprehensive security strategy, SAM advises clients in Libya that they will continue to face risks, even when operating in "secured" areas (Tripoli, Benghazi, and Misrata). Southern Algeria will continue to be intermittently targeted by various jihadi groups but authorities will manage the risk in the MEDIUM term. In Tunisia, Morocco and Northern Algeria, the biggest threat will consist of lone wolf attacks and collateral damage from operations against the Government and security forces.