



Nervous In North Africa

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Officials in Morocco are apprehensive. "Africa is approaching a dangerous moment," one of the Kingdom's most senior political figures told me recently in Rabat. His bleak assessment, which I heard in virtually every meeting during my recent visit to the country, stems from what are essentially two factors.

The first is the dawning realization, now proliferating among regional governments, that the security challenges confronting Africa following the Islamic State's collapse in Iraq and Syria might be more daunting than ever before. The second is a persistent worry that policymakers in Washington do not have an adequate appreciation of this increasingly perilous security environment - and of the need to resolutely address it.

The problems start with the Islamic State. Over the past year, America and its international partners have made undeniable headway against the group in the Middle East. As a result of coalition action, ISIS is now estimated to have lost more than ninety percent of its total territory (once the size of the United Kingdom), and some 6.5 million people have been liberated from its control. The organization's various sources of sustenance - among them oil trade, smuggling and taxation - also have mostly dried up, declining by an estimated 80 percent from their height of nearly \$2 billion annually.

But as it has come under pressure in Iraq and Syria, the group has made a concerted move to establish itself in other territories, Africa prominent among them. Over the past two years, ISIS militants have gained a significant foothold in post-Moammar Gadhafi Libya, which the group has come to view as an important "second front" in its war against the West.

Local sources now say that the group's contingent in the country is far larger than commonly understood in the West, and stands at some "five to seven thousand people of different nationalities." And, at least for the moment, these forces represent a real threat to regional security and prospects for national reconciliation in the war-torn country.

Yet ISIS is not the only Islamist threat to the continent, or even the most potent one. Over the past three years, as the international community has focused on the anti-ISIS fight in Iraq and Syria, other radical actors have experienced a resurgence in Africa.

Their ranks include al Qaeda's regional franchise, AQIM, which has used the opening afforded by global inattention to launch an expansion of its activities in the Sahara and Sahel regions, and to restart large-scale attacks in places like Mali. It has also begun to organize; in mid-2017, AQIM helped midwife the creation of a new alliance, known as Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, unifying a number of affiliated Islamist factions (including Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and its own Sahara division) under a larger *jihadi* umbrella.

Meanwhile, in Nigeria, the radical Boko Haram movement remains resilient and dangerous, despite the best efforts of the Nigerian government. As proof of this fact, in late November the organization launched a major assault in the northeastern Nigerian state of Borno, capping the most intense wave of violence linked to the group in the past two years. The damage caused by the group to date has been immense; the United Nations now estimates that more than \$1 billion is needed to assist the millions of Nigerians that have been displaced in the northeast of the country by Boko Haram's long-running *jihadi*.

Further east, the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab movement likewise remains a real threat to the stability of the Somali state, despite the ongoing military operations being carried out against it by the U.S.-supported African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In fact, there are signs that Shabaab is thriving amid this adversity, including a recent expansion of the group's activities in neighboring Kenya.

From a strategic perspective, regional scholars say, there is now a "triangle" of conflict that crisscrosses the continent, stretching from Libya through the Sahel into Nigeria, and east to Sudan and Somalia. In this strategic space, a wide array of Islamist actors is now active.

Their ranks are now poised to become bigger still. Since 2011, civil war has transformed Syria into a training ground for future *jihadi*. The U.S. intelligence community estimates that some 40,000 foreign fighters have traveled to the Middle East to join the ranks of the Islamic State to date. Africa is heavily represented in this contingent. According to the African Union, some 6,000 fighters, or 15 percent of ISIS' total foreign cadres, hail from the continent. And now that the ISIS "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria has been degraded, these radicals are expected to begin to migrate home - and to gravitate toward the region's most fragile states.

Such spaces abound. Lax borders, poor governance and widespread corruption characterize the region, and have made the continent as a whole a permissive environment for an array of criminal and extremist groups. As Lt.-General Vincent Stewart, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, noted in his most recent assessment to the Senate, the African theater is typified by "an array of internal and external threats, including armed conflicts, insurgencies, civil disorder, humanitarian crises, and transnational criminal and terrorist networks."

Much of this instability is driven by continuing economic hardship. While recent years have seen a notable quickening in economic growth among sub-Saharan states, extreme poverty, income inequality and uneven growth remain endemic. These conditions have served to increase the appeal of the comparatively well-resourced extremist and criminal groups that proliferate throughout the region.

Demographics undoubtedly play a role as well. With an average age of just 19.5, Africa's population is already the youngest in the world. But the continent is becoming even younger. According to the United Nations, some 224 million youth lived in Africa as of 2015. This cohort, however, is "growing rapidly," and will increase by nearly 50 percent by the end of the next decade - and more than double in size by 2055.

Yet it remains largely idle. Youth unemployment stands at some 60 percent across the continent, according to World Bank statistics. This, coupled with widespread economic privation, could make Africa's youngest citizens a "potential demographic bomb" unless they are properly managed and engaged, in the words of one African scholar.

All of which helps explain why Moroccan officials, like many of their regional counterparts, are now so nervous about regional stability - and why they are looking to Washington for assistance.

As seen from the region, the Trump administration remains something of an enigma. While still a candidate for the presidency, Mr. Trump campaigned heavily on the need to eradicate the Islamic State - something that has now largely been accomplished, at least in the Middle East. However, his White House has still not answered vital questions regarding the future of America's counterterrorism fight, among them whether Washington is prepared to truly fight the Islamic State and other radical actors in global theaters other than the Middle East.

Moroccan officials clearly hope that it is. Just as clearly, they are hopeful that the United States will at long last appreciate the challenges they now face, and turn its attention to Africa in earnest.

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