



## **The Spread of Radical Islam in Africa: 2021 Summary**

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## **Summary**

In their July 2021 article, *Global Jihad in Africa: Risks and Challenges*, the authors detailed the spread of Islamic terrorist organizations in Africa—specifically ISIS and al-Qaeda—and highlighted the challenges in contending with them. Their main conclusion was that a joint umbrella/master strategy would be required to fight the spread of Islamic terrorism in Africa. This overarching strategy should include some regional sub-strategies adapted to the reality in the respective region of implementation (e.g., the Horn of Africa or the Sahel). The authors discussed that the African governments, while militarily active against the terrorist organizations, should also be more receptive and meet the resident’s needs in all areas of life (improve personal security, healthcare, education, critical infrastructures such as water and electricity, transportation and most of all, employment for the younger generation). The authors further recommended that the governments should—in parallel to their military and social welfare actions—form oversight mechanisms to prevent the spread of the radical ideologies by the imams in their jurisdictions.

This report is an analysis of events that have transpired in the six months since the original report was published and includes updated trends on the various jihadist organizations in Africa.

**Keywords:** Jihadist; Boko Haram; al-Shabab; AQIM; ISWAP; Sahel

Africa is plagued by radical Islamic terrorism. The many groups active on the continent are primarily anti-establishment and anti-west and aim to establish states and societies based on the tenets of Islam. To reach their goal, they direct their violent activities at civilians and are intensively active in the periphery and rural areas where the governmental representation is weak or absent and the military presence scarce. To achieve their political goals, they leverage alienation, frustration, poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment to recruit activists and establish networks for recruitment and finance.

As a rule, the Sahel states have experienced an exceptionally harsh year due to either ISIS or al-Qaeda banner flying terrorist organizations as well as self-proclaimed ones. State economies collapsed, waves of refugees flooded them, all of which occurred during a prolonged drought and COVID lurking in the background. The above destabilized some of the states caused political instability, multiple regime changes, and weakened governability. The Islamic organizations' strategy is clear – they join forces with local rebel organizations, reinforce them with finance and weapons, and indoctrinate them to spread radical Islam in Africa.

Africa is home to a myriad of radical Islamic groups. The most notorious of which are al-Shabab, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam Wal Mulslimin (JNIM), ISIS in Somalia (ISS), which also has a presence in Mozambique and the Central African Republic, ISIS of Western Africa (ISWAP) who split from Boko Haram and have a significant influence in the Lake Chad region.

The most disturbing matter in 2021 was that the violence that caused the collapse of Sahel states spilled over to the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea (some 6,000 square Km region spreading from Angola in the south to Senegal in the north) and presented their governments with a severe threat to the stability of their regimes as well as to the western powers who have significant economic interests in the region.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the map of Islamic terrorism in Africa is comprised of three areas where radical Islamic terrorism flourished: (i) Somalia – a central coastal state in northeastern Africa that has been suffering political instability for decades due to internal wars among tribes, local warlords, gangs, and militias. In Somalia, al-Shabab have been trying multiple times to cease power through indiscriminate

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<sup>1</sup> Approx. 10% of the world's oil reserves are in Africa. 4% are in the Gulf of Guinea and the rest around the continent.

violence. The events in Somalia have directly affected Kenya, DRC, and Mozambique; (ii) Sahel – which includes states like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso that are rife with terrorism and gun-running drug and human trafficking. The above affect states such as Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin; (iii) Boko Haram and ISWAP that are active in northeastern Nigeria, Cameroon, Mandara Mountains, and Lake Chad regions where they fight the Nigerian Army and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) as well themselves for hegemony in the area.<sup>2</sup> These murderous organizations sow complete destruction, turn millions into refugees, and their activities have shut down the education system for years. In light of the above, neighboring countries such as Chad, Cameroon and Niger have been sucked into the circle of violence as well.

At the end of 2021, one can safely argue that with its penetration to the Gulf of Guinea, radical Islam finally has complete coverage of Africa, either directly or indirectly – from the boiling Sahel as its focal point through the Gulf of Guinea, establishing itself in South Africa through Mozambique and covering the Horn of Africa with its focal point being Somalia – like cancer radical Islam has metastasized into all of Africa.

A timeline review shows that in 2021 states like Burkina Faso and Togo saw an increase in radical Islamic terror events that presented local forces with challenges they were not trained or prepared for. The consensus was that the fighting was limited to the Sahel and the Horn of Africa; however, more stable states with larger Christian demographics such as: Ivory Coast, Togo, Senegal (which is predominantly Muslim), and Benin also faced severe terror events and fighting with ISIS identified organizations in the Great Sahara region. In June 2021, jihadists killed 160 people along the border of Burkina Faso, and Niger and Mali continue to be terrorist attacks' targets.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the crisis in the Sahel, circa 2014, the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea saw themselves as out of the region where jihadism may spread – it is apparent now that the leaders of these states lived in denial aimed at preserving the continued foreign investments and tourism. Since these

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<sup>2</sup> Within such internal fight, on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021, ISWAP managed to kill Abu Baker Shekau (Boko Haram's leader) along with tens of his senior officers while they hid in the Sambisa forest. Per ISWAP's then leader Abi Musab al-Barnawi (killed by the Nigerian army on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021) Shekau chose to take his life rather than to fall prisoner to ISWAP.

<sup>3</sup> "Terror in the Sahel: On growing Islamist violence in Africa," *The Hindu* (11.6.2021).  
<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/terror-in-the-sahel/article34784522.ece>

states are not a cohesive unit, meaning their population is heterogenic and has a significant Muslim segment, the jihadist organizations found open hearts to their cause within their religious brethren.

International terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda that operate as non-state actors in the international arena demonstrated resilience in the face of their decline in western Asia (al-Qaeda) and the middle east (ISIS). They adapted and changed their modus operandi in Africa and managed to penetrate the entire continent.

Their fundamentalist and anti-west position coupled with an intricate web of inter-organizational contacts with counterpart organizations in western Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have turned radical Islamic terrorism into a force to be reckoned with that poses a complex challenge to the continent's states and the west.

If there ever was a need for a wake-up call to the African governments, who heavily rely on western support in the fight against Islamic terrorism, it came when the US withdrew from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021, and the fall of the country in the hands of the Taliban. There is little doubt that the fall of Afghanistan provides a strong tailwind to any terrorist organization. In our opinion, the immediate conclusion that can be drawn from that withdrawal and an omen for the future in as much as the African states and their leaders are concerned is that they have to immediately increase their governability and the legitimacy of their regimes because African governments, mired in corruption, dependent on loyal military and security officers and absent from their periphery as well as dependent on external support will have a challenging time blocking the Islamic flood, just as has happened in Afghanistan. If and when the foreign support is removed (regardless of the reason), the states that cannot defend themselves will become low-hanging fruit for radical Islamic organizations, just like in Afghanistan.

In our opinion, in 2022, radical Islam is expected to strengthen its hold in Africa unless the west will significantly support the African states fighting it and break the chokehold applied by the terrorist organizations. Handing over the reins to the local military forces due to unwillingness to sacrifice western soldiers' lives on African soil (either because of political or social discourse or otherwise) and staying at a "supporting from behind" position (i.e., training, logistics, guided armament bombings, targeted killings) guarantees that the radical Islamists will establish themselves even further in the continent.