

MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Benjamin Nickels is an associate professor of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency at the National Defense University's Africa Center for Strategic Studies. His research focuses on terrorism, political violence, and human security in the Sahel, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa, as well as security cooperation in Africa and the role of international actors. Nickels previously conducted research at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

Rida Lyammouri is an independent security consultant focusing on North Africa and the Sahel. He is currently working on countering violent extremism projects in Morocco, Mali, and Niger and is a contributing analyst with IHS Jane's. He was an analyst for the Navanti group from 2011-2016, and has extensive experience consulting for U.S. government agencies. He holds a master's degree in public policy from George Mason University. ■

Between Jihadi-Salafism and Local Conflict: Evolving Security Threats in the Maghreb and Sahel

Jihadi-salafi groups continue exploiting local conflicts in the Maghreb and Sahel that shape a regional security environment influenced largely by political dynamics, according to Benjamin Nickels and Rida Lyammouri. Benjamin Nickels is an associate professor of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency at the National Defense University's Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Rida Lyammouri is an independent security analyst focusing on North Africa and the Sahel. The two experts discussed evolving security trends in the Maghreb and the Sahel, the intersection of local and jihadi-salafi-driven conflicts, and the prospects for greater regional security cooperation during a roundtable event entitled "Between Jihadi-Salafism and Local Conflict: Evolving Security Threats in the Maghreb and the Sahel," at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on June 14, 2017.

More than six years later, the Arab Uprisings continue to overwhelmingly shape the security environment in the Maghreb and the Sahel, Nickels argued. The reverberations of the uprisings—including political transition in Tunisia and reforms in Morocco, the expansion of insurgent groups in Mali, the fracturing of Libya, and the transformation of Syria into a magnet for thousands of young men joining jihadi-salafi groups—continue driving political and security dynamics in the Maghreb and indirectly in the Sahel. Renewing a sense of Arab solidarity among many North Africans, the uprisings also arguably increased the lure of conflicts in Syria and Iraq on recruits from North Africa.

Beyond the Arab Uprisings' geopolitical consequences, Nickels maintained that their legacy will continue to shape the Maghreb's evolving political and security landscape. Questions of "citizen security" will hinge on how states grapple with issues related to social contracts that featured so centrally in the 2011 protest movements, including how to address political Islam and the integration of populations from marginalized areas. Protest occupies an increasingly central place in the conduct of politics in places like Algeria, which Nickels noted creates some security vulnerabilities, including the risk of manipulation by violent actors.

In the security realm, jihadi-salafists have exploited regional upheaval in several zones at the intersection of the Maghreb and the Sahel, Lyammouri explained.

CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM WORK ON THE MAGHREB

The CSIS Middle East Program examines changing political, economic, and security trends in the Maghreb—defined here as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The Program produces original research and analysis and convenes events that connect members of the policymaking community with practitioners and officials in the Maghreb in order to highlight issues of importance in the region to policymaking and business audiences. The program's current areas of focus include political transitions, drivers of radicalization and social unrest, government policies to shape religious identity, and violent non-state actors and extremist groups that operate across national boundaries. ■

Ongoing counterterrorism operations have weakened jihadi-salafists including the Islamic State group (ISG) and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Libya, Mali, and the Lake Chad Basin, but have not eliminated the threat they pose. Rather than collapse, these groups will adapt, evolve, and build new alliances in response to local conditions, Lyammouri argued. In Libya, the ISG was largely driven out of its territorial enclave in Sirte, yet jihadi-salafi fighters have dispersed to other parts of the country and folded into other small groups, where they remain a threat. Members of the recently-disbanded Ansar al-Shari'a in Libya for example, will likely be absorbed by other jihadi-salafi organizations and continue to operate. Despite largely failing to gain traction with local populations, AQIM has used Libya's southwestern peripheries in the past as a springboard to plan attacks on targets in neighboring Algeria and Niger.

In the Lake Chad basin, Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) remain acute threats, despite overall attacks since 2015 having decreased as a result of operations by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Benin, and Niger. Counterterrorism outcomes have been more mixed in Mali, where France's military intervention helped liberate areas in the north previously controlled by AQIM and allies, but the group continues to operate by devising new strategies. Some of AQIM's brigades joined elements of local group Ansar al-Din in March 2017 to form a new group called Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). The main focus of this group is attacking Malian government targets, French forces, and the United Nations (MINUSMA) peacekeeping force. JNIM employs a coalition strategy of four main branches operating in different parts of Mali, allowing them to utilize their local experience and networks, but now under the JNIM brand that pledged allegiance to al Qaeda. Security continues to suffer in northern and central Mali, where Lyammouri counted over 80 attacks by extremist groups in the first five months of 2017 despite the French military presence. That the majority of these attacks were not officially claimed by JNIM highlights the complexity and inter-connection between different actors in the Sahel.

External actors have responded to this evolving security environment by prioritizing threats that traverse the Maghreb and the Sahel such as terrorism, migration, and trafficking, Nickels argued. These threats have become more pronounced since 2011, creating an opportunity for greater cooperation within and between the two regions. Yet, transnational threats affect states differently. Weaker states in the Sahel have been the most affected, as security dynamics have also exacerbated ethno-religious tensions such as those between Mali's Tuareg and the Malian state. Maghreb countries view

the same transnational Maghreb-Sahel threats as primarily external and often as secondary to cross-border challenges posed by other Maghreb states. States have at times evoked global threats to political ends, either to appeal to international donors or to recast protest or unrest as primarily a security issue. Global threats can take advantage of local grievances as well, Nickels argued, and become a higher priority for responders than addressing the political and security issues at the core of the local grievances.

Not only do threats manifest differently, but political upheaval has also upset traditional patterns of influence between the Maghreb and Sahel, Nickels noted. While these new dynamics could foster security cooperation across regions, Nickels argued, that potential is largely unfulfilled. Security cooperation has so far has been limited to bilateral actions, such as Morocco's training of imams, or through externally supported, region-specific configurations such as the internationally-backed, counterterrorism-focused G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Ultimately external actors such as the United States and France could do more to encourage cooperation between the Maghreb and Sahel as part of their efforts to boost security, Nickels argued. The United States announced several initiatives to strengthen security cooperation in 2014, but such efforts have been overtaken by regional developments, including an international need to respond to acute crises such as the ISG's presence in Libya. Other challenges include a lack of knowledge in assisting transitioning powers and a somewhat dimmed confidence in Washington in the viability of democratic change in the region. Yet, Nickels and Lyammouri agreed that increasing cooperation could bring substantial gains by easing pressures on transitional systems and boosting activity in areas of mutual concern and benefit. Going forward, Nickels warned against U.S. programs that prioritize "building partner capacity" on specific tasks such as counterterrorism at the expense of "building capable partners" through deeper efforts to enable states to achieve security objectives on their own. ■

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