



Is Global Jihad Coming to North Africa?

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In the last five years, terrorist incidents across North Africa have appeared to be inspired by, if not necessarily coordinated with, international jihadi groups. On March 21st, 2007, the CSIS Middle East Program hosted Hugh Roberts, director of the North Africa Project at the International Crisis Group, for a discussion on whether North Africa will become the next major front for global jihad. Roberts argued that although some jihadi groups in North Africa have publicly aligned themselves with groups such as al-Qaeda, they remain autonomous and locally directed, and common interests and agendas have yet to emerge between them.

Roberts argued that domestic grievances, not external concerns, drive North African jihadi groups. Although their language is cloaked in the rhetoric of global jihad, these groups pursue nationalist agendas where “ideology is the justification for jihad, not the impetus.” Roberts cautioned against narrowly looking for ideological similarities between groups. He argued that such investigations end up obscuring the reality in which these movements are conceived and in which they operate.

As an example, Roberts pointed to the terror attacks in Sinai in April 2006. He argued that the three-bomb strike was “perpetrated by Egyptians against Egyptians” and noted that Egyptians constituted the majority of the victims. Rather than seeking to pressure Western governments, the Sinai attackers focused their grievances against the Egyptian authorities and hoped to extract local concessions.

Despite the provincial concerns of such groups, they increasingly seek to align themselves publicly with groups such as al-Qaeda as a way of gaining legitimacy and standing with local audiences. The most notable al-Qaeda connection to North African jihadists has been with the “Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat,” (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC) in Algeria, which recently proclaimed itself “al-Qaeda in the Land of the Maghreb.” This new branding was accompanied by a savage series of attacks whose targets included foreign companies and tourists—including the first American victim of Algerian violence. While Roberts recognized this as a tactical change, he warned not to assume it has a strategic dimension as well. In the 1990’s the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé* or GIA), the parent group of the GSPC, used similar tactics and rhetoric. Roberts sees their re-adoption as simply “a regression to the modus operandi of the GIA,” noting that they “have been present in the DNA of the GSPC since the 1990’s.” Roberts suggested that the GSPC is responding to a loss of

domestic support, and its members have reacted by “renewing their message, not radically shifting their position.”

The perceived alignment of North African groups with the global jihad has sparked serious concern across Europe, which hosts large numbers of North African immigrants. Roberts admitted that such fear may be understandable, but stressed that the absence of a European attack from a North African group is telling. North African jihadis possess the logistical and organizational capacity to carry out operations in Europe, he argued, but they apparently lack the desire to strike.

Roberts suggested that Tunisians and Moroccans may be the most likely to join a global struggle. Some of this stems from connections to radicalized “diasporas of de-territorialized Muslims” more easily allured to al-Qaeda-like ideologies. Yet even if local populations sympathize with the goals of such jihadis, Roberts warned not to conflate sympathy with practical support.

Roberts finished by arguing that the fear of an immediate threat from global jihad in North Africa is premature. “Each of these jihadist groups has different roots and a different agenda,” he said. Yet he argued that U.S. government strategy in North Africa could complicate things significantly. By relying on local governments for intelligence information, the United States tends to adopt those governments’ views of their enemies. Regional governments have been keen to win U.S. support by applying the terrorist label across a broad spectrum of threats, whether ideological or not. Government-supplied intelligence on certain groups may be unreliable and based more on a desire to win U.S. financial and political support rather than actual facts. Unfortunately as such claims draw Western governments in closer to regional states, they are also likely to further aggravate local feeling against them. As Roberts concluded, “if you wave a red flag around, sooner or later a bull will appear.”