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Middle East Flashpoint

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies
University of Peloponnese

No 61

9 October 2014

Between the Caliphate Soldiers, al-Qaeda, Libyan fighters and a hard place:

THE MAGHREB

Stavros Drakoularakos *

During the past few months, the international community has been following closely the Crimea crisis as well as the events in Syria and Iraq. Due to the latter's explosive nature, the situation slowly developing in the Maghreb countries failed to make a strong impact on the news. Priorities, however, are shifting and interest in the Maghreb - Algeria and Libya in particular - is coming back to the forefront.

* Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese.

Al-Qaeda “Maghreb Edition”

Al-Qaeda has been active in the Maghreb since the late 2000s. In 2007, an Islamist group of Algerian fighters joined the organization and rebranded it as “al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM).¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri – head of al-Qaeda nowadays but second in command at the time – announced the merger. AQIM's objective, from its very beginnings, was to overthrow the Algerian government and replace it with an Islamic state. This objective has not yet been met with much success. Although its name gives it wide aspirations, AQIM's activities are mainly limited to kidnappings, guerrilla-style raids and assassinations of high profile government targets. Kidnappings and ransom demands focus on wealthy Algerian businessmen, tourists and diplomats. This particular set of skills has established the organization apart from others: not only as the official affiliate of al-Qaeda in the region, but also as its wealthiest. One needs to point out that western governments and international organizations, while paying for the safe return of their citizens, are essentially financing AQIM's activities and slowly increasing its clout in the Maghreb region. One of their highest-profile strikes was the four-day long siege, in January 2013, of a major gas plant located in the Algerian Sahara that cost the lives of 40 employees. The plant, operated by BP and Sonatrach, only became fully operational again this September, after an important security upgrade.

Soldiers of the Caliphate: Falling out with al-Qaeda and networking with the Islamic State

On September 14th 2014, a newly-formed militant group called the Soldiers of the Caliphate (Jund al-Khilafah) announced its split from AQIM and its falling in line with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).² The group's leader is a former AQIM commander, known as Khaled Abu Suleiman, who immediately issued a communiqué to jihadi websites stating his support of ISIS's “Head of State” and challenger of al-Qaeda's leadership in the region, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Although AQIM's influence – as mentioned above – is limited and held back by Algerian security forces, it seems that the emergence of the Soldiers of the Caliphate seeks to create a new wave of recruits for the fight in Syria and Iraq. The group's first high profile operation was the recent kidnapping of French tourist Hervé Gourdel, on September 24th 2014, in eastern Algeria. A video was immediately uploaded demanding the halting of France's involvement in Iraq and threatening with Gourdel's execution. Needless to say, the following day, another video was made public, showing the Frenchman's beheading to the world.

One needs to take into account the fact that this act represents the first time in years that a kidnapping from radical extremists in Algeria ended in such a gruesome way. A statement, extremely favorable to the Islamic State of al-Baghdadi, was also read out. It is likewise of note that the group opted to designate itself as the Soldiers of the Caliphate, at a time when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had proclaimed himself the Islamic State's Caliph. Furthermore, one must not forget that presence on the web, carefully selected words and slogans are the main tools with which the jihadist recruitment in Syria and Iraq is working with in the past few years.³ The act of September 24th 2014 confirms that the Soldiers of the Caliphate have irrevocably adopted the hostage-executing methods of the Islamic State. Nonetheless, despite their much-publicized parting of ways with AQIM, this splinter group is only the second one to break away from it - the first one being “Those who sign in Blood” led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and based in southern Libya. The latter is rumored to have masterminded – then as a commander of AQIM – the above mentioned attack on the Algerian oil plant in 2013.

Libya down: Tripoli has fallen

Amidst all the recent developments related to the Soldiers of the Caliphate, al-Qaeda and ISIS, Libya remains in a state of constant turmoil since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 after months of violent struggle. As any hope for a transitional democratic Libya has been put to rest, the country is currently standing on the edge of imploding. Oil plants are under militia control, essentially engaging in blackmail, while the country's economic stability suffers. After Benghazi and Misrata, Tripoli – the Libyan capital and home of its institutions – has fallen into the hands of the various militias as of August 22nd 2014.⁴ As a result, the incumbent government, led by Prime Minister Abudallah al-Thinni, has officially relocated to the city of Tobruk in eastern Libya, 1600 km away from Tripoli, near the Egyptian border. This development can only be described as a major blow to the government's claim to legitimacy in the eyes of the Libyan people as well as the supporters of the Islamist revolutionaries. The official governmental forces are led by General Khalifa Haftar - back from exile to the United States since May 2014 - who aims “to purge the country from terrorists”. The General has baptized his efforts “Operation Dignity”.⁵ Hence, there are two main factions at arms in Libya: the first is comprised of pro-Haftar forces and Zenten militias, while the second, called “Libya Dawn” (Fajr Libya), consists of the Misrata militias, the Muslim Brotherhood and a number of jihadi groups, such as “The ones who sign in Blood”.⁶ However, this does not mean that internal struggle within these factions is ruled out. These alliances, for lack of a better word, are loose, fragile, and temporary at best.

Contrary to what could be commonly assumed, the chaos in Libya has not put the oil production on hold, at least not on the long-term, despite instances where refineries had to be shut down for a while.⁷ Although there is constant fighting over getting or retaining control of oilfields – such as the El Sharara one in the south – and refineries – such as the Zawaiya one in the west – the OPEC oil output led by Libya has reached an unprecedented 810,000 bpd since 2012.⁸ This September, oil supply from Libya was raised by 280,000 bpd, notwithstanding conflict. The competition for oil control between the official government and the Misrata-led alliance has given way to the emergence of two competing governments in the country, with two separate and rival oil ministers.⁹ Additionally, one should take into account the fact that the international community is only recognizing the government in Tobruk - shepherded by Prime Minister Abdallah al-Thinni -, while the rebel militias of the Misrata alliance fight each other for a share of the oil revenues.

To make matters worse, airstrikes of unknown origin targeted Islamist militants in the city of Misrata. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt are believed to be behind these attacks, as both countries are firmly against the idea of Islamist militias gaining power in Libya.¹⁰ On the other end of the spectrum, it seems that Qatar has been helping the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood by sending planes loaded with weapons to a Tripoli airport controlled by Misrata forces. Sudan has been previously accused of attempting to do the same thing. The conflict is gradually unveiling itself as not only a battle for oil and power in Libya, but also as a proxy war between Arab countries.¹¹ The question that remains now is whether other Arab or Muslim countries will tip their hand and reveal their support for either side of the conflict.¹² Time will tell. It seems that the jihadist movement, although omnipresent due to the presence of militias and the Muslim Brotherhood, is being marginalized in favor of a never-ending state of chaos. Foreign interests are encroaching and slowly taking over, making the jihadist threat imminent but also insignificant at the same time. This antithesis is born from the nature of the conflict in Libya: on the one hand, the jihadist rebels keep the country from restructuring, while on the other hand, they are unable to form a genuinely

united front that will enable them to take over. The fact of the matter is that Libya has rather painfully turned into a hub of conflict and interests, on an economic, a military and a diplomatic scale, from which the future of – at least – the Maghreb will eventually be defined.

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