Jihadism Spreads like Wildfire Across Africa

In recent years, the discussion about the rapid spread of Islamic radicalism across Africa has been consistently making front pages of most of the local and international media sources.

Among the most active and most radical terrorist organizations operating in Africa one can single out Boko Haram that has been enjoying close ties with ISIS that has been outlawed by authorities of a handful states, including Russia. Boko Haram has been operating in the Lake Chad region and a number of gray zones that exist along Chad’s, Niger’s and Nigeria’s borders. However, northern regions of Nigeria remain a veritable hotbed of radicalism, since local terrain allows small well-organized groups of terrorists to both lose a pursuing force or launch a surprise attack against local settlements.

However, in spite of the rigid opposition to the activities of Boko Haram mounted by local governments, with up to 7 thousand members of the terrorist group arrested in Nigeria, 800 in Cameroon, and up to 1400 in Niger and Chad combined, this threat to the regional stability doesn’t seem to go anywhere. In the period from December 2017 to February 2018, according to the UN, the group committed 93 terrorist attacks, which constitutes a 50% increase in Cameroon alone.

Last February, Boko Haram would kidnap more than 100 students from the Dapchi Science and Technical College in Nigeria, following this crime with a massive assault was launched against a UN humanitarian mission stationed in a refugee camp within Cameroon’s borders in March. Further still, the group assassinated three local employees of UNICEF, while kidnapping yet another person. Acts of terrorism committed by Boko Haram is a daily occurrence in the region, since those radicals are not only persecuting Christians, but actively fueling the tensions between local
Sunni and Shiites by attacking the former.

One of the most recent criminal acts of this terrorist group was a coordinated assault in the immediate vicinity of Nigeria's capital last July. This assault resulted in 96 people killed and some 20 injured. Additionally, a total of 70 administrative and residential buildings was burnt to the ground. Thus, Boko Haram has put its combat capabilities on display so the officials of this African country have a taste of what they're dealing with.

At the same time, one can't argue that such massive organizations as Boko Haram could appear out of nowhere. The process of radicalization of the region south of the Sahara began a long while ago, as a matter of fact it was triggered back in 80s by an abrupt decline of communist sentiments. Back then, especially after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, Islam began to start playing an increasingly important role in the day-to-day of the African population that craved to fill the void left behind by the collapsing USSR. In practice, what this process led to was a growth of racial and religious tensions between Christians and Muslims in such countries as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Nigeria. The development of an Islamic identity across Africa was greatly facilitated by the missionary activities of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar that reached its height two decades ago. Those countries would provide generous donations to newly established Islamic universities and schools, along with all sorts of Islamic cultural centers in the areas populated by the growing Muslim communities.

However, radicals were the first to profit from the diminishing influence of leftist secular ideas. The grounds, cultivated by foreign Islamic theologians, turned out to be extremely futile. It was in the late 90's and early 00's, that sleeper cells of the Al-Qaeda started appearing across the African continent, along with such terrorist movements such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia. Such simplistic slogans as "Islam is the ultimate solution" coined by the Muslim Brotherhood masterminds proved to be extremely attractive to large groups of people condemned to living in constant bitter poverty, in communities where the fear for one's own wellbeing was perceived as a given. Geographically speaking, one could observe such living conditions across a vast expanse, stretching from Somalia to Senegal. An extremely low level of education would also play an pivotal role in the rapid spread of radical ideas across Africa.

A new powerful impetus to the spread of extremist ideas and the ideology of radical Islam was created by the so-called Arab Spring movement, that would plunge a total of four MENA countries into a state of perpetual chaos and civil war, creating preconditions for the rise of the most radical terrorist group to date – ISIS.

At the initial stages of its formation back in 2014, the Islamic State manifested little to no attention to the African continent, confining itself to forming militant groups deep in the territory of Libya, which remained a failed state in the aftermath of 2011. Ever since the forces of the so-called Western coalition, primarily France and Great Britain, under the pretext of supporting the opposition of Muammar Gaddafi invaded Libya, it transformed in a playground for all sorts of armed groups, which allowed ISIS to gain a foothold in Sirte, and then spread its influence across the rest of the country.

However, after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2015-2017, that was made possible by an intervention of Russia's Air Corps, forced ISIS into exile. However, it wasn't destroyed completely, which meant it started searching for new areas of operations, moving its remaining forces to the Southeast Asia and Africa. However, ISIS warlords wouldn't change their tactics, using the idea of the creation of the Great Caliphate to gain a broader appeal among local residents. The militants of this terrorist group, in spite of suffering a number of sensitive defeats at the hand of the national-patriotic forces led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar in Libya, still managed to redeploy a three zone men strong force from Libya to the Sahara-Sahel zone, while activating the sleeper cells it had in Tripoli and Misurata.

France that was presented with the consequences of its own actions, was forced to announce an urgent deployment of its troops to Africa in 2013, in a bid to keep its economic and political interests secured. This was the beginning of the so-called Operation Serval that started in Mali and the neighboring countries, which would be soon replaced by the Operation Barhan in 2015. After deploying over three thousand of its servicemen to Africa, Paris initiated the creation of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which began fully operational back in 2013. This task force unit fields well over 13 thousand servicemen along with two thousand police officers, which most of them coming from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), while the EU provides it with instructors.

The situation was further complicated for Paris by the fact that a Tuareg rebels in Mali announced the establishment of their own Azawad state back in 2013. This force, which was effectively a coalition of various militant groups, started derailing the implementation of the provisions of the peace agreement signed in 2015 in Algeria. At the same
time, those Tuareg established close ties with a number of terrorist groups. The population of the north of Mali still remains fairly loyal to local authorities, but there’s instances of armed confrontation occurring every now and then. As a result, the situation in Mali and in other countries of the Sahara-Sahel region remains highly unstable and volatile, and terrorists are taking full advantage of this fact.

This explains why on top of ISIS the region is being plagued by the activities of yet another outlawed terrorist group and a direct competitor of ISIS - al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM, along with such organizations as Al-Murabitun and the Ansar al-Din Front are now taking every effort to expand their activities to the southern regions of Mali. These efforts are facilitated by a number of factors, such as ethnic violence, separatist aspirations of the Tuareg movement in the north, the difficult social and economic situation the state has found itself in, and overall weakness of the sitting authorities and armed forces.

A situation that drastically differs from the one in Mali can be observed today in Mauritania. It has for the longest time been able to prevent all sorts of terrorist forces from infiltrating its territory. So the fact that it was Mauritania that initiated the creation of the Group of Five for the Sahel (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger) back in 2014 should be of little surprise of anyone. France supported this idea back then because it was panicking over its utter inability to address the situation it created by the destruction of Libya on its own. However, Nouakchott went even further, suggesting in 2015 to form the The Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel in order to confront all sorts of terrorists and extremists.

Since UNAMA is operating in the north of Mali, the JFGFS, which is now being formed on the funds provided by various donors, is going to be tasked with paroling border areas of the five states that created it, since they remain highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks. However, radical militants can easily take advantage of this fact by aggravating the situation in the central areas of Mali, where the central government remains highly unpopular, which increases the risk of terrorist attacks being committed in the nearest future in Bamako.

However, the French media suspects Nouakchott of its desire to use the JFGFS against the people of the Peul, who represent a 50 million people minority that dwells in the territories of Mauritania and Sudan. Peul tribes have started consolidating their forces, which threatens the prosperity of existing local elites. There's been a number of violent raids that Mauritanian armed forces have made in the Peul territories, and authorities were forced to recognize these facts.

Additionally, Mauritania is being accused by all sorts of media sources of striking a deal with Bin Laden back in 2010, since those are unable to explain Nouakchott's ability to keep terrorism in check for almost a decade. According to these wild allegations, AQIM made a plea not to launch any terrorist attacks across Mauritania, if Nouakchott agreed not to prosecute its supporters on its territory, while paying up to 20 million euros to this terrorist group annually. But there's no documents or any other piece of evidence that could prove these allegations true.

These days Islamization is a common problem for both the countries with predominantly Muslim populations (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Chad), and for those that could traditionally be described as Christian (Cameroon, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Tanzania, Eritrea and Ethiopia).

At the same time, the process of Islamization of the non-Arab part of the African continent is accompanied by the expansion of a multitude of various terrorist groups, that differ from one another only in name. Radicals are taking full advantage of the settlements they manage to capture by exploiting the existing infrastructure, while still being engaged in all sorts of illegal activities, such as drug and slave trade, piracy, illegal arms trade, and smuggling.

So, according to the Guinean media, Conakry is being used these days to finance international radical organizations. It is believed that a wide range NGOs, non-governmental funds and commercial banks are involved in this process. Foreign bans operating in Guinea, especially those from the Persian Gulf, are also under suspicion. Additionally, it's now a well-established fact that heavy drugs produced in Latin America are being trafficked through Conakry.

It's clear that things are not looking great for Africa, and there's a number of reasons for pessimism. As long as terrorist manage to play on the differences that various clans and tribal groups cannot put aside, they will always be able to take advantage of these. Additionally, there's no comprehensive framework to facilitate contacts between central governments and local authorities. Massive corruption against the backdrop of catastrophically low income levels in a number leads local residents to search for a better life, even if they were to find it into an ugly and deliberate misinterpretation of the Koran.
The way out of this situation can only be found in a comprehensive and diverse approach to the fight against terrorism, since those cannot be destroyed through armed operations alone, as those can only be effective when there’s economic initiatives that can facilitate economic development of African states. Without those local states are doomed to the status of third-world states that are usually a primary target of all sorts criminal groups. Additionally, the West must drop its polemics about differences between "good" and "bad" terrorists, since no such thing exists. Instead of introducing ill-conceived sanctions again Moscow, Washington could have been working in cooperation with Russia, a state that has a lot of first hand experience in combating terrorism and extremism.

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