Islamic Insurgents in the MENA Region
Global Threat or Regional Menace?
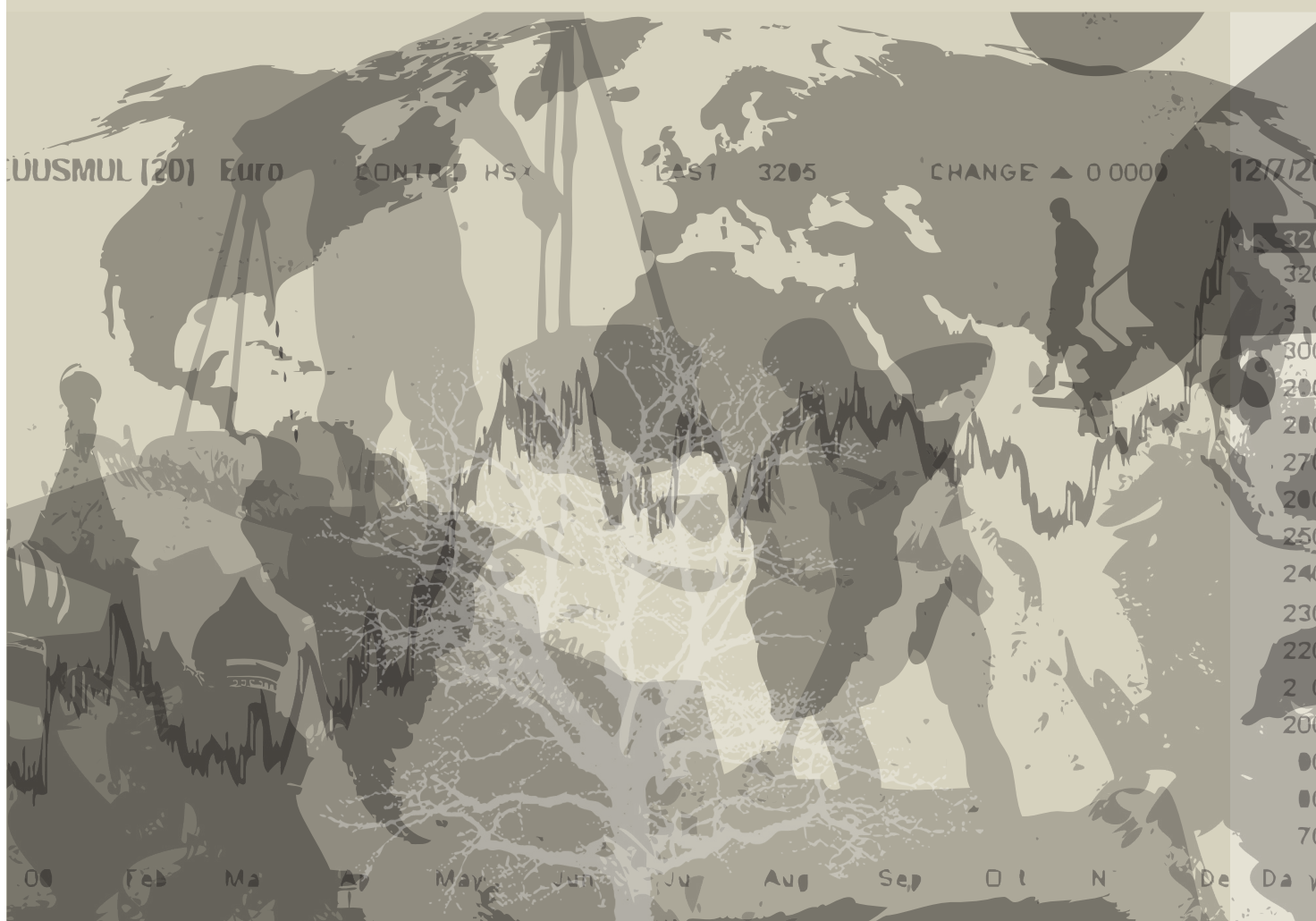
Morten Bøås, Kari M. Osland and Henriette U. Erstad

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Summary

This working paper analyses a broad range of Islamic insurgents, spanning from the Sahel and North Africa to the Middle East, examining the threat that these groups represent on a regional and global scale. We assess their local, regional and global strategies and evaluate the extent to which they make use of Jihadist discourse to further local/regional aims, or whether they are more truly devoted to a global struggle, operationally as well as in discourse and rhetoric. We make use of several analytical dimensions and factors in a way that allows us to develop a threat assessment that seeks to disentangle the local, the regional and the global levels. In doing so, our aim is also to develop a methodological framework that may be used for analytical updates and future research in this region and elsewhere.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the geopolitical stability of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has faced major challenges, with root causes of often to be found in unconventional security threats. With the partial exception of Tunisia, democratic transition processes seem to have come to a halt virtually everywhere. While we have observed a security-driven return to authoritarian politics and repression, many latent and less latent civil wars have flared up. These conflicts have been accompanied or spurred by violent extremism and financed through illicit trade and transnational organised crime (TOC) involving arms, drugs and human trafficking. Not only are these threats interconnected, they are also cross-border, making it imperative to think beyond state-centric approaches to security, development and governance. The magnitude and the dynamics characterising the phenomenon of foreign fighters, for example, have challenged traditional international relations theory and practice (Strazzari 2015). In a similar vein, flows of refugees and commodities are shaking the foundations of traditional security models.

The mainstream approach to the security predicament of the MENA region has been framed in terms of 'ungoverned space', to which the solution is typically to (re-)install government control in the form of capacity-building and assistance to border management (US Department of State 2012a). However, the situation on the ground is far more complex: from the vast Sahel semi-desert landscapes to the plains of Syria and Iraq, we observe various forms of *hybrid security governance* by different, often extra-legal (when not blatantly criminal) non-state or para-state actors that are heavily armed. For the lack of other credible alternatives, local populations often have no other choice than to accept their presence. In this sense, one can plausibly identify the mushrooming of militias and the rise of markets for armed protection as part of the legacy of aborted Arab spring uprisings: Jihadist insurgents act in this context.

This working paper analyses Islamic insurgent groups in the broader MENA region spanning from the Sahel and North Africa to the Middle East, examining the threat that these groups represent on a

regional and global scale.[1] The aim is to improve our understanding of the social landscape of insurgencies in the MENA region, where acts of violence are conducted in 'a complicated set of spaces, emotions, practices, movements and materialities' (Oslender 2013: 378). We do this by examining several analytical dimensions and factors in a way that allows us to develop a threat assessment that seeks to disentangle the local, the regional and the global levels.

Our working assumption is that these groups seek local integration through the appropriation of local grievances to achieve some form of territorial grip. To examine this, we utilise a new comparative framework based on recent work by Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn (2017). With this framework, we have evaluated the local, regional and global strategies of a range of insurgencies in this broad arc of crisis, and thereby assessed the extent to which they are mainly trying to make use of Jihadist discourse to further local/regional aims, or whether they are more truly devoted to a global struggle, operationally as well as in discourse and rhetoric. To our knowledge, such a cross-region and cross-case approach to studying Jihadist insurgents has no precedent: in doing so, the aim of this project has not only been to conduct a timely substantive threat assessment, but also to develop a methodological framework that may be used for analytical updates and future research in this region and elsewhere.

The first and main part of this working paper consists of analysing different Islamic insurgent groups in in the MENA region in order to assess what kind of threat these groups represent. We have included a broad catalogue of armed groups, proceeding with selection criteria that encompass both most-diverse and most-similar profiles, so as to allow considerable variation while controlling potential explanatory factors. This enables us to further explore the comparative framework and its usability for this type of analysis, but it also allows us to highlight the horizontal escalatory trajectory of Salafi Jihadism in the MENA region.

The second part of this working paper explores the potential implications the spread of violent extremism and the constant transformations characterising armed Jihadism in the MENA region may have for Europe and Norway in the middle to long run. Here, we will make use of the comparative analysis to establish an inventory of insurgencies in the MENA region based on the level of threat that they

are most likely to represent, locally, regionally and globally. First, however, some exploration of the background to the topic is needed.

Background[2]

As Olivier Roy (2011) points out, most of the neo-fundamentalist movements stopped discussing the dar-el-Islam (abode od Islam) in territorial terms: they would advocate the revival of *the* Caliphate as an entity that could be restored in short time so long as Muslims decided it existed and pledged loyalty to it. The current Muslim foreign fighters' phenomenon has its deep roots in a qualitatively new sub-current of Islamism — i.e. populist pan-Islamism — that emerged in the 1970s, expanded via a global network of charities for the provision of inter-Muslim aid throughout the 1980s-90s, and gained a global audience over the past decade.[3] Its recent morphing into an armed movement that – in the specific case of the Islamic State (IS) – was able to develop amidst Middle Eastern instabilities to the point of fuelling the proclamation of a caliphate that was not only in control of territory (the so-called 'Sunni heartland'), but also received international association by other Jihadist movements that were in control territory such as Nigeria's Boko Haram. This interrogates Westphalian thinking in a number of ways and calls for a more nuanced study that observes variation, rivalries and interconnections related to material, organisational and ideational resources among different armed groups.

In his seminal 1998 volume *African Guerrillas*, Christopher Clapham (1998) offered an influential typology for examining insurgents, making distinctions between secessionist, liberationist, reformist or warlord movements. Clapham's volume mainly focused on the two most relevant categories: reformist and warlord movements. For Clapham, reform insurgencies were highly disciplined formations, representing a clear ideology and structure. They sought the creation of a new *kind* of state within an existing national territory and are exemplified by groups as Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda, Paul Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), and Meles Zenawi's Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia. In contrast, Clapham considered warlord insurgencies as something different than reformist, secessionist, and liberationist, typically lacking an ideological structure but possessing a highly personalised

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2 This section draws on Bøås and Dunn (2017).
3 For an overview of the history and geography of Islamist movements, see Kepel (2010).

leadership. Examples include Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. By labelling them 'warlord' movements, Clapham sought to focus attention on their leadership, arguing that these leaders were political entrepreneurs exploiting underlying social and economic conditions to create conflicts from, which derived certain benefits (usually economic).

As useful as Clapham's framework was for comparative research, its utility is challenged by recent developments. Conflict zones are rarely stagnant, but fluid and shifting with opportunities as well as external shocks and other types of constraints to livelihoods and social aspirations. Many factors are present, but how much they matter varies in time and space. We also believe it is imperative to be sensitive to historical conditions that may have shaped insurgencies. In many cases, the insurgencies themselves may be newly created— and the ways in which they operate likewise—but the cleavages that they manifest and represent are not. They have their origins in history and the ways in which those histories are remembered and narrated, stretches back to the colonial, as well as pre-colonial, eras. Scholars and security analysts tend to ignore these histories at their peril. Yet, there are also important developments in more recent history that need to be attended to.

On the one hand are the significant economic developments loosely categorised as globalisation. While this label frequently is too broadly employed to provide sufficient analytical purchase, its use does capture the reality that there have been dramatic changes to intertwined economic systems and practices across the globe that require close attention in our analyses. On the other hand, there are equally important developments concerning the Westphalian state, perhaps even reflecting the emergence of a post-Westphalia system (or systems) within world politics. These changes to the Westphalian state and its attendant state system have both shaped the emerging landscape of insurgency and been shaped by it. Indeed, one can see that many of today's insurgencies have their more recent roots in developments starting in the 1990s—such as the coming to life of the predecessor of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which was related to changes in the Westphalian state and state system. This draws our attention to the ways in which armed insurgencies are intimately linked to competing systems of governance.

Analytical framework

A conflict zone is not defined by an absence of governance, but by the presence of competing modalities of governance. In fact, we begin with the observation that armed insurgencies are part of emerging systems of governance. Insurgencies do not exist in isolation from the political, social, and economic dimensions of those systems, nor do they necessarily eclipse those other dimensions. Insurgencies tend to emerge in a context where alternative modalities of governance are in competition, leading to a shifting and, often, unstable landscape of authority and rule. In some cases, armed insurgencies are but one articulation of these emerging and competing systems of governance (see Bøås and Dunn 2017). To take one example, AQIM's rise to prominence in parts of Northern Mali was directly related to its ability to capitalise on the fragmenting systems of governance typified in the warlord system that preceded its ascendancy. Thus, in this case, treating AQIM as a warlord movement or the product of global Jihad could be highly erroneous. In general, to focus exclusively on the military-strategic or religious dimensions of MENA insurgencies would fail to capture the multiple functions that violence is performing in this part of the world.

We understand today's MENA insurgencies to be linked to competing systems of attempted governance. These systems of governance are underpinned by complex configurations of networks of power and rule. Up until the late 1990s, MENA societies enjoyed a level of functionality when those networks were both stable and unchallenged in their dominance. Today, we see that in the cases where armed insurgencies exist, a monopolised system of governance has broken down and competing systems have emerged (Bøås and Dunn 2017). For example, smuggling along frontier zones in the MENA region has a high degree of participation and endorsement by the state authorities who are officially meant to combat and curtail such economic transactions. Furthermore, in most MENA states, there has recently been a failure to deliver on the promises of the patronage system. For various reasons—from the vagrancies of economic neoliberalism to the loss of external patrons—the capacity of ruling elites to maintain the systems of reciprocity that the patron-client relationship relies upon has been undermined. As a result, both a crisis of legitimacy for many ruling elites and the perceived bankruptcy of the established state system have emerged.

As neo-patrimonial practices become unstable, the established modality of governance is thrown into question and begins to fray. While the logic of neo-patrimonialism remains vital, we now see multiple and conflicting networks emerging, often with each constructing a competing system of governance. One can argue that the post-colonial systems reflected a degree of stability because they were tied by their parasitical relationship to formal state institutions. Today's networks, however, are characterised by their flexibility and adaptability, where actors compete for the role of the nodal point in between various networks of attempted informal governance that collaborates, but also competes and at times are in violent conflict with each other over the issue of control (Bøås 2015a). Thus, we maintain that an understanding of contemporary MENA insurgencies requires both an awareness of the ongoing crises of established systems of governance and the realisation that these insurgencies reflect not the absence of authority but the emergence of alternative and competing modalities of rule and governance.

We argue that new as well as old insurgencies in the MENA region (but also in much of Africa South of the Sahara) do not fit very well anymore with the established categories of insurgencies established by Clapham. Rather, what we suggest is an analytical framework spelled out below, drawing on recent conceptual work by Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn (2017). The new insurgent groups, such as for example AQIM, tend to be local and global at the same time: they effectively appropriate the global discourse of Islamic Jihad, but at the same time remain rooted in local cleavages. This suggests to us that branding has become an ever more important arena of insurgency strategy. It is therefore significant to separate between insurgencies that mainly appropriate such discourses for rhetorical branding purposes to establish an image of global importance and might and those that aim to become operational units in a larger global armed struggle. Another important aspect of the new landscape of insurgencies is their ability to appropriate local grievances. By this we mean their ability to make use of local cleavages as land rights conflicts or disputes over trading rights to further their integration in local communities. An insurgency such as AQIM has fine-tuned such strategies in the Northern Mali periphery for decades (see Bøås 2015b), but also IS in Iraq and Syria has clearly made use of such strategies. Other insurgents seem to rely more on loot and plunder approach to most of the local communities around them. Boko Haram represents an example of this latter approach.

This also suggests that the range of insurgencies in the MENA region is likely to have very different capacities for governing and

governance. Some clearly has this capacity (e.g., IS and – to a lesser degree AQIM), whereas others (e.g., Boko Haram) are basically roaming movements without much stationary territorial control. However, in-between these opposite poles, we also find many insurgencies that operates what we call 'sporadic governance'. This is a type of mobile governance that comes and go. Such insurgencies do not attempt to gain more permanent territorial control, but social control of a targeted population through a combination of unpredictable coercive activities and sporadically offering some governance services. This way, insurgents are able to undermine the social contract between the state and its population, thus challenging the state's key source of legitimacy (see also Grynkewich 2008).

The extent to which insurgencies differ, we hypothesise, is based on their leadership profile, the resources available to them through extraction, taxation and trade, and their level of economic support. We assume this also affects their recruitment strategy and their ability to attract 'foreign fighters', either from the near abroad or globally (e.g. foreign fighters from the Global North, including from Norway). All of this will also affect their fighting and military capacity and the motivation of their rank and file: are they mainly motivated by economic opportunities or are they more genuinely ideologically convinced. Related to this, the last variable that we will utilise in our comparative framework is ideological cohesion and distinctiveness. Everything else being equal, our working hypotheses are that

1) insurgents that score high on a global threat assessment, use branding not only as a discursive device, are good at appropriating local grievances, have a certain governing capacity that makes them more stationary than simply roaming, have recruitment strategies that realistically includes foreign fighters, have a rank and file ideologically motivated, and have ideological cohesion and distinctiveness, are more likely to pose global threats than those that that do not score high on these variables;

2) the landscape of insurgencies across the MENA region remains far from uniform in this regard as there remains considerable local and regional variation, which is not necessarily easily picked up by single-case studies. Nonetheless, as observed in other contexts (e.g. Latin America, the Balkans) the strategic use of violence tends to level the ground: hence, variation tends to be reduced in those contexts that are exposed to higher levels of violence.

Both working hypotheses have been put to scrutiny across cases. We therefore propose to assess the type of threat they may represent in the middle to long term, by studying a selection of insurgencies in the MENA region, based on a set of comparable variables:

1. Ideological orientation (local-regional-global).
2. Intent (discourse or operational).
3. Violent actions (motivations: local grievances or loot and plunder).
4. Governing capacity (low-moderate-high).
5. Organisational capacity (roaming or stationary).
6. Recruitment strategies and potential (local, regional, global).
7. Military/fighting capacity (high or low).
8. Rank and file motivation (opportunistic or ideological convinced).
9. Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness.
10. Operational coherence/fragmentation.[4]

Each of these variables should be considered as continuums, exemplified in the following way:

Figure 1: Ideological orientation
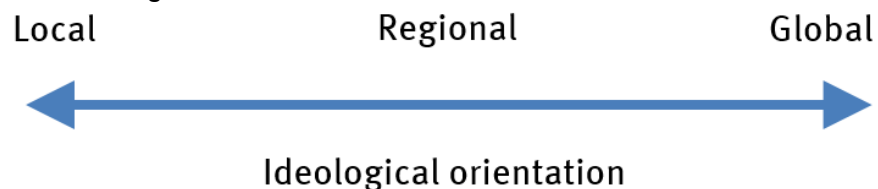
However, to make it more tangible, an operationalisation of the variables is needed. With the first variable, ideological orientation, we refer to the extent to which the groups in question appropriate the global discourse of Islamic Jihad or whether they primarily remain rooted in local conflict dynamics and cleavages. It goes without saying that a globally oriented ideological orientation represents an increased global threat compared to if it is rooted in local conflict dynamics.

The second variable is closely related to the first, but here we consider the purpose behind the branding, whether there seems to be

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4 This variable was not part of the original set of variables developed by Bøås and Dunn (2017).

a real desire to become an operational branch of global Jihad or whether it primarily is used to brand the insurgency to increase its legitimacy nationally, regionally and/or internationally. It may be the case that the insurgency must brand itself differently locally compared to globally – it may go together, and it may not. Here it would be important to look for whether they both talk-the-talk and walk-the-talk. Why this is difficult to assess is exemplified by a letter from Abdelmalek Droukdel (AQIM's emir) found in Timbuktu in 2013, where he tried to guide the AQIM operatives present in Northern Mali to mask their operation and 'pretend' to be a 'domestic movement' under Ansar ed-Dine so as not to draw international attention and intervention' (see Caleb 2015) – an advice they failed to adhere to. In our threat assessment, we assume that an operational intent represents an increased global threat compared to an intent which primarily has a branding purpose.

The third variable focuses on whether motivations for violent actions are tied to appropriate local grievances or mainly loot and plunder. In many cases, it would be both. It is neither so common-sensical nor relevant to tie this variable directly to a global threat assessment. However, seen together with the other variables, in particular the second above, can help indicate how this variable should be assessed in a global threat framework. For instance, if there is an operational intent, violent actions tied to local grievances can be seen as representing an increased threat compared to when the violent action is purely connected to loot and plunder. The reason for this is that an insurgency group would gain much more support and legitimacy locally, and therefore also recruitment potential and strength, if they were seen as local supporters rather than threatening the livelihood subsistence. This variable also serves to exemplify how complex and nuanced this terrain is.

The fourth variable explores whether the governing capacity is high, moderate or low. The assumption is that the less governing capacity, the less will the global threat be. This variable is not just tied to the governing of territory but also understood in terms of controlling the minds of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), often linked to a 'big man' that may offer protection or other necessities to the extent that his or her activities may resemble an alternative social contract – a social contract not based on state and citizenship, but on network patronage. Note that even if 'big man' status in the MENA region most often will be based on an ability to use force, this is not a sufficient criterion. The 'big man' cannot rule solely by force, he or she also must provide (see Bøås 2012; 2015a).

With the fifth variable, the focus is on whether the group primarily is stationary or roaming. We assume that primarily a roaming capacity indicates less organisational strength. However, we do acknowledge that examples of the opposite exist: sometimes it may be a group's capacity to roam that makes it more viable in the long-term. Moreover, roaming groups may pose a higher risk as so-called sleeper cells are often more difficult to detect. IS' current presence in Iraq is an illustrative example of this. Recruitment strategies and their potential to attract fighters and followers is the focus of the sixth variable. The question here is simply whether this is primarily local, regionally, globally – or a combination of these. The more global attraction, the higher global threat potential.

The seventh variable puts the degree of military/fighting capacity under scrutiny. Issues to consider here are command and control, fighting skills, equipment you would have access to and whether you are able to use it, etc. The higher the capacity, the higher the global threat potential. With the eight variable we investigate whether the rank and file motivation is opportunistic or ideologically convinced, or both. An ideologically convinced rank and file motivation is assessed to constitute a higher global threat level compared to what is opportunistic. The ninth variable focuses on whether the group in question is characterised by ideological cohesion or distinctiveness, whereas the last variable looks for degree of operational coherence or fragmentation. For these two latter variables, ideological cohesion and operational coherence would be ranked as higher global threats compared to distinctiveness and fragmentation, respectively. This analytical framework with variables and their relationship with global threat level can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 2: Variables and global threat level
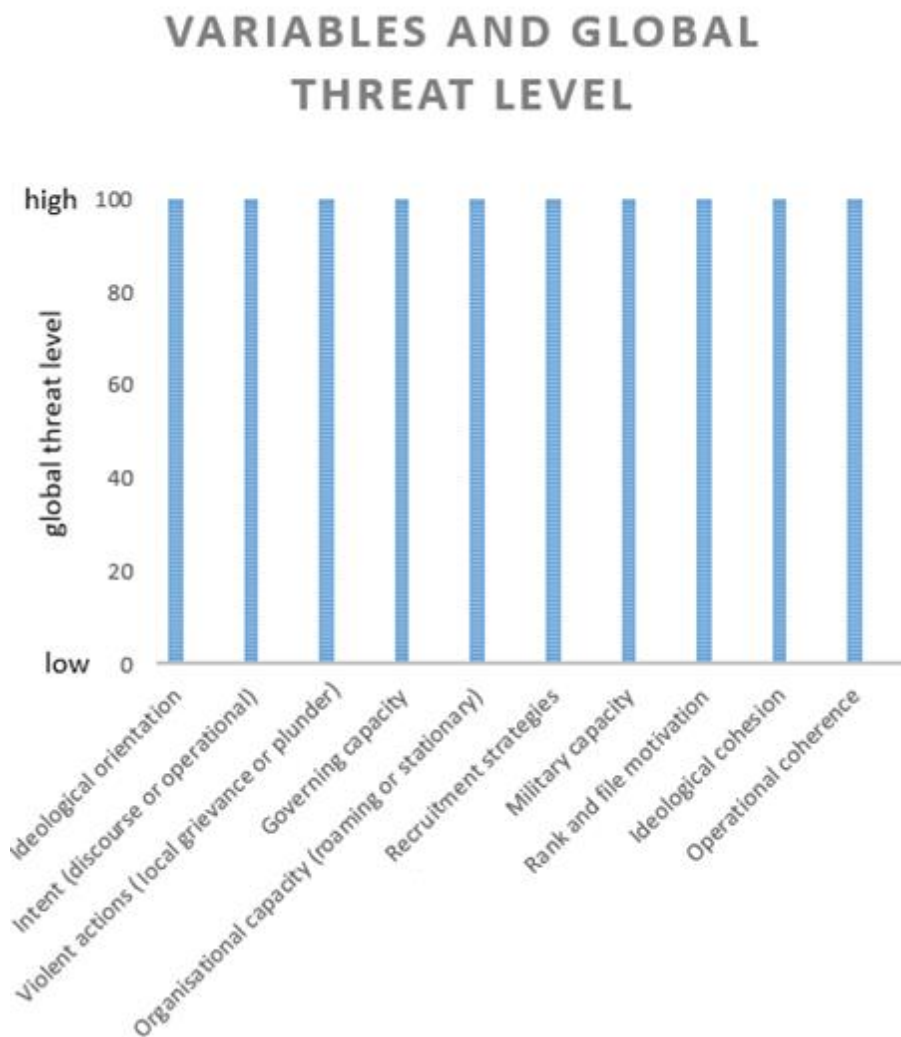
We have used open sources, secondary data, databases, news reports, and primary sources as interviews and field observations as data material in this study. Empirically, this has not been straightforward. A significant challenge is the ever-changing, kaleidoscopic nature of armed groups engaged in terrorism and asymmetric forms of warfare. Great variety exists between the Islamic insurgent groups assessed in this paper, as well as within them, which makes it challenging to achieve a distinct measurement for each group along the outlined indicators. While one aim has been to make the picture more nuanced, by doing such an exercise, we therefore in many ways contribute to the opposite. Moreover, much of the available data is both contemporary and disputed. For example, it is difficult to assess validity of sources – once you start digging into the material it turns out that the same

sources repeatedly refer to each other (in reference loops). Equally important, official statements by relevant actors are not always meant as it is said, and most media outlets reporting on and from an ongoing conflict are biased in some sense.

While we utilise our comparative framework to analyse these insurgents' group by group, it is also important to note the porous and ambiguous nature of these insurgents and their main actors. Certain insurgencies remain almost the same over time, but this is also a highly dynamic field of insurgent groups emerging, establishing themselves, and then either disappearing or re-arranging themselves under new names and acronyms. For example, in the Sahel, in a communication released in early March 2017, it was announced that Ansar ed-Dine, al-Mourabitoun and AQIM had joined forces under a new superstructure, called Jam'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Musilimeen (JNIM).[5] In a video communication the group declared that their new leader would be Iyad Ag Ghaly. He could also reportedly be heard in the communication, declaring allegiance to al-Qaeda and praising its current leader Ayman al-Zawahri and Osama bin Laden, but also curiously the slain Jordanian Abu Mussab Zarqawi (whose al-Qaeda group in Iraq later morphed to become IS). The process of fragmentation and merger of different insurgent groups and factions that we have seen and continue to see in this region may therefore also be a process where different big men struggle to become the nodal point of different networks in the region that in complex processes of collusion and conflict navigate the ambiguous borders between crime, coping and resistance (Bøås 2015b). The latest instalment in this regard is the recent claim by Malian and French authorities that Hamadoun Kouffa, leader of Macina Liberation Front (MLF aka Katibah Macina), had been killed in late November 2018 by a raid led by French soldiers in the centre of the country (Agence France-Presse 2018).

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5 This roughly translates as Support of Islam and Muslims. The MLF was not mentioned in the communication, but its leader Hamadoun Kouffa was present at the meeting when the new insurgent superstructure was announced.

Mapping and assessment of Islamic insurgent groups in the MENA region

In this section we offer the mapping and assessment of a wide group of representative Islamic insurgents in the broader MENA region. The presentation is organised in the following manner: we start in the western part of the MENA with the insurgents operating in North Africa and the Sahel, before we turn to the eastern part of the Sahel that is represented by Somalia's al-Shabaab, before we turn to groups that operate in the Middle East.

Al-Mourabitoun

Background and overview
Al-Mourabitoun (also called the Sentinels), was established in late August 2013 in Mali. Little is known about its current size, but in 2014 it was estimated to a hundred fighters (Muratet 2014). It operates primarily in the border areas in and around northern Mali, but it has also claimed attacks as far away as Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire. The name al-Mourabitoun refers to the Almoravid reign of North African history, whose leadership concentrated on the search for Muslim unity, Islamic purity and the fight against external enemies (Stanford University 2016). The group was established as a merger between the *Al-Mulathameen* ('Those who sign in Blood'), also called *Katibat al-Muslimeen* ('Veiled Brigade') of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and the *Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJWA) of Ahmed el-Tilemsi, both of which were splinter groups of AQIM (Cristiani 2013). The identity of the new group's leader was not announced at that time, but later identified as an Egyptian named Abu Bakr al-Nasri, who allegedly knew the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri (BBC 2016). French forces reportedly killed al-Nasri in April 2014 in Mali (as was el-Tilemsi) and reports said Belmokhtar assumed leadership after this (BBC 2016).

According to its founding statement, the group aims at pursuing the unity of all the Jihadist groups 'from the Nile to the Atlantic' (Agence Nouakchott d'Information, cited in Cristiani 2013). Here, the group also emphasised its allegiance to al-Qaeda and the Taliban by

greeting 'the leaders of Jihad in this time', al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar. In May 2015, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi released a message swearing al-Mourabitoun's allegiance to the Caliphate of the Islamic State (IS) without consulting Belmokhtar. Shortly after, Belmokhtar released a public statement that explained that Sahrawi spoke on behalf of himself, not al-Mourabitoun, which remained loyal to al-Qaeda. Seventeen months later IS Amaq News Agency officially recognised the pledge of allegiance from al-Sahrawi and his group who after they left al-Mourabitoun calls themselves the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). It is not known why it took IS so long to recognise the pledge of allegiance from al-Sahrawi when they swiftly accepted a similar pledge from Boko Haram.

Reportedly, in March 2017, Ansar Dine, AQIM, and al-Mourabitoun merged to form Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (the 'Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims') (Weiss 2017). We will return to this issue when we discuss JNIM. Belmokhtar himself was not present at this meeting. Since he was last declared dead in 2016 by the U.S., there has been much speculation about whether he is still alive. The main reason for this is that Belmokhtar was also declared dead in 2013 and 2015, only to reappear on the 'frontline' with attacks that drew global attention. Currently credible sources claim that he is still alive, hiding in the border areas between Chad, Niger and Mali, recuperating from the wounds he suffered when he was attacked in 2016 (see Campbell 2018). The uncertainty about him being alive or not only adds to the Belmokhtar myth, and for some this makes him into a 'folk hero'; someone even the mightiest power on the planet cannot easily kill or capture. This is an element of al-Mourabitoun's discursive power that should not be under-estimated.

When we assess al-Mourabitoun in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 1: Al-Mourabitoun

	Variables	Al-Mourabitoun
1	Ideological orientation	Global Jihadi discourse, but regional – aiming to establish Sharia law in North Africa and unite the Jihadist groups operating in the region.
2	Intent	Mainly discourse, not an operational branch.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Neither local grievances nor loot and plunder, seeks prolific targets.
4	Governing capacity	Low on its own.
5	Organisational capacity	Roaming.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Low, but the myth of Belmokhtar is a factor.
7	Military/fighting capacity	In general low, but capacity to implement spectacular attacks.
8	Rank and file motivation	Both opportunistic and ideological convinced.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Leadership: high; rank and file: medium.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	Coherent, proven ability to implement complex operations.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 3: Al-Mourabitoun

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 2: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Al-Mourabitoun

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Sahel: high.
Regionally	North Africa: medium, broader MENA: low.
Globally	Low.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)[6]

Background and overview

AQIM is often viewed as a lynchpin in the 'crime-terror nexus' that has taken advantage of the 'ungoverned space' of the Mali-Sahel periphery. Considered to be an operational branch of the global al-Qaeda structure, it is seen as an organisation that preys on the instability of the region to finance its criminal terrorist activities. However, if we look beyond the global rhetoric employed by AQIM a slightly different picture emerges. AQIM has clear strategies of integration in the Sahel, based on a sophisticated reading of the local context. Its operatives know how to combine the strength of the group's money, guns and prayers. The latter is important in an area where local administration, to the degree that it exists, is generally perceived as corrupt, whereas AQIM operatives present themselves as honest pious Muslims.

AQIM's point of origin is the civil war in Algeria that erupted after the country's military leadership annulled the 1992 elections results when it became clear that the Islamist party would achieve victory. This resulted in a devastating civil war between the military and the armed Islamic opposition known as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Officially, the civil war in Algeria ended with the amnesty act in 1999. However, some fighters were not willing to lay down their arms fled across the border to Mali, and it is they who currently form the core of AQIM. Most of them belonged to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) that split from GIA during the latter stages of the Algerian civil war. During its first decade in Mali the group kept the GSPC name, but this changed in 2006.

When GSPC was established in 1998, it also declared its support for al-Qaeda, only to claim that it had broken away from al-Qaeda in 2001. The GSPC reaffirmed its loyalty in 2003, received the blessing of al-Qaeda in 2003, and then finally took up the al-Qaeda

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6 This section draws on Dunn and Bøås (2017) and Bøås (2015b).

banner in 2007 when the GSPC changed its name to AQIM. They may have done this for ideological reasons, but more pragmatic concerns also played a role. These were men who had lost the war in Algeria and were on the run in the deserts of northern Mali. Neither the Algerian government nor the international community wanted to negotiate with them – so no settlement, not even an honorary surrender, was in sight. They had little to lose and something to gain from taking up the al-Qaeda name: it would make them look more global and powerful in the eyes of local communities.

Currently AQIM operates in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Libya. Its men-at-arms were estimated in 2015 to be around 1000 members, but the exact size is not known and most likely varies considerably (Laub and Masters 2015), as many only take part for a limited period. Since 2004 Abdelmalek Droukdel (aka Abou Mossab Abdelwadoud) has been the overall AQIM emir, but as he is somewhere in hiding in Algeria, most of AQIM's activities elsewhere in the Sahel is directed by the leaders of its various factions (e.g. katibas) (BBC 2013). These leaders act on their own and at times in close co-operation with other AQIM faction leaders, and all of them supposedly under the overall supervision of Droukdel. Effectively, Droukdel's ability to influence not only day-to-day activities, but also more strategic planning is limited due to his inability to meet his commanders regularly face-to-face. In addition to the various attacks claimed by AQIM the group is also well-known for its kidnapping of westerners for ransom in North Africa and is part-time activities in various trafficking activities in the region. It is impossible to estimate its actual wealth, but as early as 2003 it was reported that the German government paid a ransom of five million euro for the release of 32 German tourists. AQIM it therefore with all likelihood, the wealthiest insurgency in the Sahel.

Ranking AQIM in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 3: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

	Variables	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)
1	Ideological orientation	Mainly regional and national. Officially, AQIM's objective is to rid North Africa of Western influence, and overthrow governments deemed apostate, including those of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, and install fundamentalist regimes based on Sharia. However, for the core leadership of Algerian origin, the ultimate price is a return to Algeria.
2	Intent	While this insurgency has wrapped itself in the banner of global Jihad, AQIM remains largely an Algerian organisation focused on Algeria and North Africa. This is still more a branding strategy than a real attempt to become an operational al-Qaeda branch. For AQIM its local integration strategies are more important than global strategies.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Primarily local integration through appropriating local grievances. Little if no evidence of loot and plunder, but the group gain income from protecting/ignoring trafficking.
4	Governing capacity	Medium to high. For almost a year (2012-13) AQIM controlled Timbuktu and managed this city quite well.
5	Organisational capacity	Both roaming and stationary. The Algerian part is based in the Kabylie Mountains in Northern Algeria, but it also roams considerable areas of the Sahel periphery.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Relatively high. It has an effective brand name and it can pay new recruits.
7	Military/fighting capacity	High in asymmetrical warfare. Many experienced leaders and fighters are still alive.
8	Rank and file motivation	Opportunistic and ideological.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	A general level of abstract ideological cohesion, but the cohesion of the leadership can be questioned due to distance between the overall emir Droukdel and the various AQIM faction leaders in the Sahel. This relationship is not always fixed, nor completely non-hierarchical.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	Varies from high when joint decisions can be taken to low when this is not possible.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 4: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 4: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Algeria: high, Mali: high, Burkina Faso, high, Niger: medium, Côte d'Ivoire: medium, Tunisia: low, Mauritania: low, Libya: low to high in the south and Chad: low.
Regionally	North Africa: high to medium; Middle East: low.
Globally	Low.

Ansar ed-Dine

Background and overview

Ansar Dine or Ansar ed-Dine means 'Defenders of the Faith' and was founded in northern Mali, by Iyad Ag Ghaly. Its first reported action was in March 2012. The group reportedly consists of mostly ethnic Tuaregs and is organised according to existing tribal structures. Size estimated at hundreds, but here as well the actual figure is not only unknown, but varies with circumstances and who one counts (IISS 2017). Ansar ed-Dine is a Salafist group that hijacked the more 'secular'-minded Tuareg Movement for the national Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) rebellion in 2012.

Iyad Ag Ghaly, an Ifoghas Tuareg from the Irayaken clan, has been at the forefront of violent Tuareg discontent for more than three decades. Like several young men of Tuareg origin from his generation, Ag Ghaly left Mali for Libya in the early 1980s, because of the growing pressure on local livelihoods caused by the frequent droughts in this period. Here, he joined Muammar Gaddafi's Islamic Legion and fought in Lebanon, among other places. When Gaddafi closed the Islamic legion in the late 1980s, Ag Ghaly returned to northern Mali; in 1990 he launched his first attack against the Malian state, as head of the Popular Movement of Azawad (MPA). At that time, he was a secular rebel. However, after the National Pact of 1992 and the final peace agreement of 1996, Ag Ghaly appears to have come under the influence of the Islamic missionary movement Jama'at Al-Tabligh, which had begun to operate in northern Mali and had a strong presence and influence on the Ifoghas of Kidal. However, this did not prevent Ag Ghaly from playing an instrumental role in negotiating the release of 32 German hostages who had been taken by GSPC. Ag Ghaly's involvement in in these negotiations gave clear indication of his growing importance as a regional Big Man.

In 2006 Ag Ghaly formed the Democratic Alliance of May 23 for Change (ADC) – a short lived rebellion that ended after a couple of months with a peace agreement signed in Algiers. Soon after Ag Ghaly left Mali for Pakistan and the spiritual headquarters of Jama'at Al-Tabligh, spending some time there before the Malian government in 2007 appointed him as cultural attaché to the Malian Embassy Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This decision was probably based on the calculation that having Ag Ghaly on a state salary somewhere else in the world would keep him from joining or organising yet another rebellion in northern Mali. With hindsight, the wisdom of this strategy can be questioned, because in 2010 Ag Ghaly was expelled from Saudi Arabia for unspecified interactions with suspected extremists linked to al-Qaeda. He returned to Mali, and again served as an intermediary in hostage negotiations, this time with AQIM. Later events give rise to questions about what Ag Ghaly did and contributed to in these processes.

When Tuareg fighters started to return to Mali *en masse* after the fall of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, Ag Ghaly was once more called upon by the Malian government – this time to act as a liaison between the government and the returnees. Ag Ghaly used this position to attempt to take over the leadership of the Ifoghas and the MNLA. Failing in both cases – at least partly because the leadership of the Ifoghas traditionally belongs to the noble clan and the warrior clan of

the Ifoghas that Ag Ghaly belongs to – he ended up creating Ansar ed-Dine instead and quickly allied his new insurgency with AQIM.

After the French intervention (Operation Serval and later Barkhane) and the establishment of MINUSMA, Ansar ed-Dine has continued as a rural insurgency. It no longer has the physical control of cities and towns as it had in 2012, but it employs several asymmetrical warfare tactics to weaken its primary targets. Its militants employ suicide attacks, explosive-laden vehicles, rockets, mortars, grenades and rifles. Its primary targets are the French and Malian militaries, the Malian police force and MINUSMA, but it has also contributed to attacks against hotels, restaurants and bars frequented by international personnel at large. Thus, contributing to making the international operation in Mali, one of the world's most deadly. Apart from self-identifying as a Salafi-Jihadist group and having declared that it aims to establish Sharia law across Mali (Sandner 2014),[7] Ansar ed-Dine has never communicated a larger religious-ideological platform or agenda. It collaborates with AQIM, al-Mourabitoun and MLF, to the extent that these group has established a new umbrella organisation, JNIM, but the real depth and co-ordination that this represent is still unclear.

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7 See also ICG (2016).

Ranking Ansar ed-Dine in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 5: Ansar ed-Dine

	Variables	Ansar ed-Dine
1	Ideological orientation	Aims to impose Sharia across Mali.
2	Intent	Ansar ed-Dine wraps itself in the banner of global Jihad but remain mainly local and Malian in operational intent. Its local integration strategies are more important than global strategies.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Primarily local integration through appropriating local grievances. Little if no evidence of loot and plunder, but the group gain income from protecting/ignoring trafficking.
4	Governing capacity	Medium to high – for almost a year (2012-13) Ansar ed-Dine controlled Kidal and managed this town quite well.
5	Organisational capacity	After 2013 roaming, mainly in northern Mali and to lesser extent in Mali's Central Region.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Relatively high. Iyad Ag Ghaly still has a reputation among the Tuareg, and it has some funds available for supporting recruits.
7	Military/fighting capacity	High in asymmetrical warfare. Some experienced leaders and fighters are still alive.
8	Rank and file motivation	Opportunistic and ideological.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	A general level of abstract ideological cohesion, but the ideological cohesion of the rank and file can be questioned.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	High when Iyad Ag Ghaly takes decisions and /or steps into the limelight.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 5: Ansar ed-Dine

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 6: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Ansar ed-Dine

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Mali: high.
Regionally	North Africa: medium, Middle East: low.
Globally	Low.

Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso)

Background and overview
Ansarul Islam operates mainly in the Soum province of Burkina Faso that borders Mali. The group is formally still led by the Burkinabe Malam Ibrahim Dicko (Strazzari 2018).[8] Dicko is a Fulani, born into a

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8 The current whereabouts of Malam Ibrahim Dicko is unknown. Some sources claim that he is still alive, others that he is alive, but wounded, yet others claim that he has died from battle-inflicted wounds. In June 2017, an unauthenticated Facebook

marabout family in a place called Soboulé in Soum province. He studied at various conventional and Koranic schools in Burkina Faso and Mali, and had a short spell in Niger teaching, before he started to preach in villages in Soum and on two popular local radio stations. His skilful anti-establishment discourse drew a large audience throughout Soum province. The little that is known about Dicko is that he was arrested by the French Operation Serval in September 2013 in Tessalit, northern Mali, and that he spent some time in prison in Bamako, before he was released in 2015.

After his release Dicko returned to Soum and Djibo, the main town in this part of Burkina Faso. Here, he formed a new group preaching a radical interpretation of Islam, and it was this group that gradually morphed into a violent insurgency. It started with supporters of Dicko violently interrupting rich weddings in Djibo, calling them un-Islamic. This was followed by attacks by Ansarul Islam against schools, threatening, but also killing teachers that taught in the French language. In November 2016, the conflict escalated to targeted political assassinations against local traditional imams, and larger attacks against military positions in the same area. This trend continued throughout 2017 and into 2018.

The Ansarul Islam insurgency is still at a relatively unknown and its level of operability is limited. Some security analysts tend to see this group as a Burkinabe offspring of the Katibah Macina (or MLF) of Hamadoun Kouffa that operates across the border in Central Mali. There is no doubt that certain connections exist (see Strazzari 2018; Rupesinghe and Bøås 2018), but much more important are the shared grievances of these two border regions, and the sense of abandonment that people feel. The result is an open void into which such insurgents can infiltrate, manoeuvre, and attempt to organise the social landscape.

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page claimed that his younger brother Jafar Dicko had succeeded him as head of the movement. There has been no formal confirmation about his death neither from Ansarul Islam nor from security forces (see also ICG 2017).

Ranking Ansarul Islam in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 7: Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso)

	Variables	Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso)
1	Ideological orientation	Aims to impose Sharia in Burkina Faso and the Sahel.
2	Intent	Ansarul Islam use the language of global Jihad but remain mainly local in operational intent. Its local integration strategies are more important than global strategies.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Primarily local integration through appropriating local grievances. Little if no evidence of loot and plunder, or participation in crime and trafficking.
4	Governing capacity	Unknown, but most likely limited.
5	Organisational capacity	No confirmed permanent bases or fixed control of territory, roams the Soum province and the border areas to Mali.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	In general low, some recruitment potential locally in Soum Province.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Asymmetrical warfare, but lower capacity than its counterparts in Mali.
8	Rank and file motivation	Opportunistic and ideological.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	A general level of abstract ideological cohesion, but the ideological cohesion of the rank and file can be questioned.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	Low due to the uncertainties about current leadership.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 6: Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso)
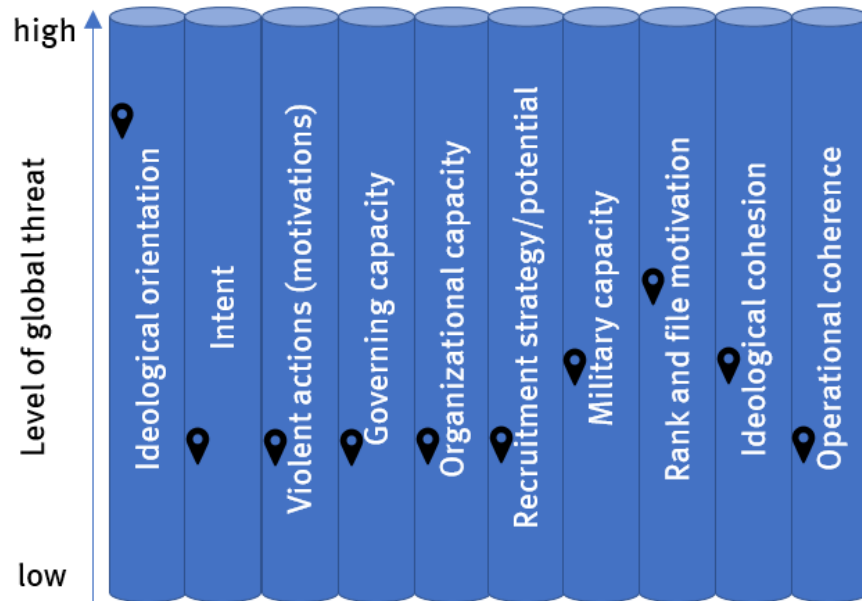
The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 8: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Soum Province: high, Burkina Faso: medium.
Regionally	North Africa/Sahel: low, Middle East: none.
Globally	None.

Macina Liberation Front (MLF)

Background and overview
Central Mali is currently gripped by escalating insecurity, due to an increase in inter-communal conflicts, the proliferation of self-defence groups and armed non-state actors including Jihadist groups and bandits. One of these radical Islamist groups is the MLF or 'Katiba Macina', led by Hamadoun Kouffa, a well-known, respected Islamic Fulani preacher from Niafunké, in Mopti (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2018).[9]

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9 As also mentioned previously in this working paper, Kouffa was reported dead by Malian and French authorities in late November 2018 (see Agence France-Presse 2018). However, as there is still no certainty about this, we believe that our current analysis in still valid. The history of Jihadi insurgents in this part of the world also

Having been active in the region of Mopti for at least a couple of decades, Kouffa developed a following at the Quranic schools he taught. Later in the early 2000s, Kouffa started to cultivate a link with Iyad Ag Ghaly through the Tabligh organisation (also known as the 'Dawa'). When the war came to the Mopti region in 2012/13, Kouffa's following and his connection to Ag Ghaly who by then had become the leader of Ansar ed-Dine could be utilised to start a separate insurgency here, the MLF or the Katiba Macina.[10] While MLF has a connection to the JNIM (the new Sahel superstructure of Salafi-inspired insurgencies) and therefore operates under the mantle of global Jihadist discourse, it ultimately thrives on appropriating local conflict, exploiting resource disputes, and igniting inter-ethnic and intra-communal tension to garner support. However, while the global brand of Jihad is not the major vehicle for recruitment and local affiliation, it provides the MLF with a global-religious identity and legitimacy, access to resources, allies and national and regional networks (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2018).

Mopti and the Inner Delta of the River Niger has historically been a contested space. It is rich in resources, but competing systems of governance challenge each other, and those that loose are the common people of the region. Communal conflict over access to land and water is not new, but is currently exacerbated by population growth, climate change effects and armed Jihadi groups that have developed strategies to appropriate conflicts that a vanishing and dysfunctional state is not able to deal with in a credible and trustworthy manner. When colonial power arrived in this part of Mali after the fall of the Macina Empire in 1864, the French accepted part of the original management system of natural resources, but also undermined it through the establishment of a parallel form of land tenure. Customary chiefs managed land under continuous cultivation, whereas the colonial administration controlled so-called 'unoccupied land' and could grant private property titles. Water and forests were placed under the control of the Water and Forest Agency – the current Direction Nationale des Eaux et Foréts (see Ursu 2018).

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shows that even important leaders quite easily can be replaced. The death of a leader is rarely in itself the demise of a movement.

10 In communities in Mopti, this group is usually just referred to as 'Kouffa's men' or 'the men of the bush'. 'Katiba' refers to combat units, while the 'Macina' refers to theocratic 19th Century Macina Empire that stretched over the floodplain areas of the Inner Niger Delta, in what today are the Malian regions of Mopti and Ségou.

It is the increasing corruption and dysfunctionality of these two competing systems of land governance that the MLF currently is preying on as it allows this insurgency to use land conflicts that increasingly turn violent to achieve local integration and if not control of territory per se at least a sufficient grip on the population. The MLF has for example generated widespread acceptance due to its management and control of the prized 'bourgoutiéres' (e.g. the highly nutritious dry-season pastures that pastoralists depend on for livestock-grazing) by halting access fees, claiming that the land belongs only to 'God'. This is in stark contrast to the rising access fees (sometimes up to 1,000 000 CFA, extracted by the 'Jowros' who are part of the noble Rimbe class, and thereby the gatekeepers of the pastures. Pasture access fees fostered much resentment among herdsmen that perceive the Jowros to be corrupt, and unjust as they pocket the fees for personal gain (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2018). This is but one example from this part of the Sahel that shows that while religion is a vector in the current landscape of conflict, the underlying issues are land rights conflicts.

Ranking MLF in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 9: Macina Liberation Front (MLF)

	Variables	Macina Liberation Front (MLF)
1	Ideological orientation	Mainly local, only sporadically radicalised, more local grievances and opportunism in lack of other livelihood options. However, the global brand adherence gives it allies and access to resources.
2	Intent	Mostly a branding strategy, but its connection to JINM suggest some operational intent.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Local grievances, no evidence of systematic loot and plunder.
4	Governing capacity	Medium to high locally. An ability to administer resource management systems, local courts and collecting trade tariffs at river points.
5	Organisational capacity	Roaming, but it has a presence in this part of Mali that enables some control of population groups.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Relatively high locally.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Relatively high in asymmetrical warfare.
8	Rank and file motivation	Both ideological and opportunistic.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Kouffa's leadership ensure a certain level of ideological distinctiveness.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	It has a good network of informants and networks that provides the leadership with information and gives the organisation a level of operational coherence.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 7: Macina Liberation Front (MLF)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 10: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Macina Liberation Front (MLF)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Mopti and Ségou: high, Mali: medium.
Regionally	Sahel and North Africa: low.
Globally	None.

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

Background and overview
Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) which translated to English means 'Group in the support of Islam and Muslims' was established in Mali in March 2017, as a merger between Ansar ed-Dine, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun (Weiss 2017). JNIM is openly loyal to the old al-Qaeda network and Ayman al-Zawarhi and to Abdelmalek Droukdel (the overall AQIM emir).

Some observers have been sceptical to the ability of the groups to effectively co-operate and conduct joint missions under a strategic framework (Weiss 2017). The main reason is that previous attempts at establishing a joint command of the various Islamic insurgencies in Mali and bordering Sahel periphery has failed. AQIM itself first aspired to such a role, but found it difficult, almost impossible to accommodate several local agendas within its organisation. This led to fragmentation and this may very well be the case again as it will be difficult to reconcile the local agendas of for example Tuareg and Fulani Jihadists. They may agree on some overall religious-political principles, but when it comes to the practical issues that gives them the ability to integrate locally through the appropriation of local conflict these groups tend to be at odds with each other. If they succeed in this matter, the group could grow to be a considerably higher threat than it currently is. The group has the potential for co-ordination of larger regional operations if it successfully pools resources and acts strategically under a joint command. Much will depend on the leadership qualities of Iyad Ag Ghaly (the founder and leader of Ansar ed-Dine) as he is formally in charge also of JNIM. If he succeeds in this regard, it will increase the threat level in Mali, but also in neighbouring Sahel countries as these groups have been behind attacks also in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger in the past.

In the video that was released when the merger was announced, Ag Ghaly did not specifically mention the MLF but as representatives of the latter were present some see this as proof that also MLF is a member of this new superstructure of Jihadism in the Sahel (Joscelyn 2017a). If this is the case it could potentially give the three other groups a social platform south of the River Niger that they previously have not had.

Ranking JNIM in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 11: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

	Variables	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)
1	Ideological orientation	Less local than the groups that makes up this new organisation, leaning towards global issues, but most discourse and statements are national (Mali) or regional (the Sahel). Some rhetorical references to Gaza and al-Quds.
2	Intent	The JNIM superstructure suggest operational intent, but it is by and large regional.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Extracts funding from trafficking and ransoms, but this is for fund-raising for warfare, no evidence of loot and plunder.
4	Governing capacity	Potentially high if co-ordination of resources and actions can be achieved. This remains to be seen.
5	Organisational capacity	Both roaming and stationary as Iyad Ag Ghaly and Ansar ed-Dine has bases in the Kidal area.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	JNIM brings together important Jihadist leader figures. This can increase the recruitment potential if internal contradictions are handled and co-ordination of efforts brought about.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Potentially high.
8	Rank and file motivation	Both ideological and opportunistic.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	In the leadership this is high, the question is if they really can unite ideologically or if other local cleavages will undermine such efforts.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	Potentially high, if effective co-ordination is brought about and becomes sustainable over time.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 8: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 12: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Jama'at al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Mali: high, Burkina Faso: high (in areas bordering Mali), Niger: medium.
Regionally	Other Sahel countries/West Africa: medium.
Globally	Low.

Boko Haram

Background and overview

Observing the violence of Boko Haram from a distance, one may easily conclude that this insurgency is solely composed of ragtag opportunists. While this is not entirely untrue, it also obscures the economic marginalisation, the ethnic component and the ideological structures and that have helped Boko Haram to draw support and rationalise its actions (see Dele-Adedeji 2017). A more fine-tuned analysis suggests that Boko Haram should be seen as an amoebic mode of reaction against the Nigerian state, and this has allowed the group a level of flexibility and adaptation not seen in most other similar Islamic insurgencies. Boko Haram is as a group is youthful in orientation, discourse and membership. As such, as much a rebellion

against the traditional/mainstream Muslim elite of the North as it is a rebellion against the state. As a violent group it is a combination of an insurgency with an ethnic Kanuri core; sleeper cells in cities that are either activated by remote control or activate itself; cross-border networks for sanctuary and support to Chad and Cameroon (Kanuri, but not exclusively); and hired bands of Chadian ex-militants who dwell at the very margin of the Chadian state around Lac Chad – these are used for larger operations, but also operates independently in the North under the smokescreen of Boko Haram.

When Mohammed Yusuf established Boko Haram in 2002 it was as an open movement preaching against the state. In the end, this resulted in violent confrontations with the state, and the subsequent extra-judicial killing of Yusuf and many of his supporters in 2009. This was the end of the first phase of Boko Haram. The second started in September 2010 with a large-scale attack in the prison in Maiduguri, several inmates were released, including Boko Haram members taken into captivity in 2009. What this underscore is an insurgency with a significant transformational capacity as well as it being comprised by different factions and independent cells. Boko Haram is constantly evolving and adapting to changing circumstances. One example is how it 'played' the 'Chibok affair'. First and foremost, this is an example of something that happened, just because it could happen. However, when it happened Boko Haram used its ramifications to its own advantage, e.g. enabled it to communicate different messages to different audiences – very little of what they communicate is meant for 'us'.

After the 2015 military offensive, Boko Haram does no longer control any cities or much territory *per se*. It has returned to its roots (e.g. before Chibok) and has become yet once more a roaming movement, the new dimension is that it also operates more in Cameroon and Chad - it has gone regional. Boko Haram has taken losses, but that is also the case of the Nigeria army, and it still has the capacity to inflict huge casualties. There is no clear endgame insight yet. Boko Haram still has access to financing, weapons, ammunitions and explosives. This is achieved by raiding military convoys and bases, and extorting money through kidnapping. The two factions that currently comprises Boko Haram,[11] e.g. led respectively by Abubakar

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11 Abubakar Sheakau, who has led Boko Haram since the death of Yusuf in 2009, is in charge of one wing of Boko Haram. This faction primarily targets civilian sites such as mosques, schools and refugee camps. The second wing of Boko Haram is led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi (that claims to be a son of Yusuf), has grown in strength in recent

Shekau and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, will therefore still be able to take advantage of the economic marginalisation of the North East to secure a steady supply of recruits, mainly, but not exclusively anymore from the Kanuri ethnic group.[12]

Ranking Boko Haram in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

years, and attacks military targets more than civilian ones (this is one reason, but not the only one behind this split).

12 Boko Haram is increasingly trying to bring more of the Hausa population into its fold.

Table 13: Boko Haram

	Variables	Boko Haram
1	Ideological orientation	Primarily rooted in local grievances and conflict dynamics, but Boko Haram actively applies 'salafia' as the language of criticism of poor governance. Likewise, it is in the global discourse of Islamic Jihad they find their legitimacy for the use of violence. This is a constant element in this insurgency and a legacy of Ibn Taymiyyah's influence on Boko Haram's first leader Yusuf.
2	Intent	Reportedly, it joined IS in March 2015, without officially breaking former allegiance to Al-Qaeda. The assumed motivation to join IS was publicity and legitimacy harnessing the movement to the global Jihad (after suffering territorial losses). However, little seems to have changed about the organisation's capability, tactics or identity.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	There are genuine local grievances that drive Boko Haram's actions: These can be summed-up as a declining economy and limited educational opportunity have led to an increased impoverishment of citizens in the poorest part of Nigeria. However, Boko Haram do loot and plunder to sustain itself.
4	Governing capacity	Low.
5	Organisational capacity	Roaming.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Still quite high due to the obvious economic and social marginalisation of this part of Nigeria. The current attempt to spread out to Hausa groups, could if successful, even further strengthen its recruitment potential.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Good at using 'fear factors' associated with asymmetrical warfare; much lower capacity to fight more conventionally.
8	Rank and file motivation	Both.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	The ideological cohesion of Boko Haram must be assessed as low. After Yusuf was killed, his followers reportedly splintered into different factions. While the current leader Shekau seems to be focused on fighting the Nigerian government in Borno, other units expanded their attacks in Nigeria and have conducted limited operations in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Hence, there seems to be at least two main factions: one that is focused on local grievances and another that is seeking regional expansion.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	Fragmented operational coherence, with reference to the lack of clear leadership.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 9: Boko Haram

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 14: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Boko Haram

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Nigeria: high, Lake Chad Basin: high, Mali: low.
Regionally	Africa: low.
Globally	Low.

Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)

Background and overview
Ansar al-Shariah (ASL) was formed in 2012 in Libya, following the February uprising against Muammar Gaddafi (Irshaid 2014). ASL was established as a merger between two smaller militant groups, *Ansar al-Shariah in Benghazi* (ASB) and *Ansar al-Shariah in Derna* (ASD), each only a few months old themselves. Officially the group dissolved on 27th May 2017 amidst heavy losses that wiped out most of its formal membership and decimated it fighters. This was a consequence of casualties sustained in combat with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and defections to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in

Libya (ISIL-Libya). However, as the narrative of ASL still lives in Libya much due to its ability to combine a strict Sharia script with fighting capabilities and a humanitarian programme it is of substantial interest to include this group in our review.

The first leader of Ansar al-Shariah was Mohammad al-Zahawi who died from battle wounds in late 2014. He was replaced by Abu Khalid al Madani (Joscelyn 2015). In the beginning, it operated primarily in Benghazi and denied having any presence elsewhere in Libya (Irshaid 2014). Later, it expanded with branches in Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya (Counter Extremism Project 2015; Al Jazeera 2014).

However, despite their union, the two groups that established ASL are reported to have operated somewhat separately underneath the ASL banner and in 2014, the U.S. government listed ASB and ASD individually as designated terrorist organisations (US Department of State 2014).[13] Ansar al-Shariah seems to have some cooperation with IS, yet the groups also compete and in the latter days of its existence ASL lost many members to IS in Libya.

ASL fought to establish Sharia Law in Libya and worked through social efforts (Dawa). It seems like the Dawa work of ASL was on a larger scale compared to other Islamic insurgent groups: their social work was not only conducted towards its traditional constituency in Libya, but also to help the people of 'Bilad al-Sham', e.g. Gaza and Sudan (Zelin 2014). Their social service in Libya consisted of helping the needy, establishing cultural centres, cleaning the streets and regulating traffic – all of which have helped the organisation raise funds in the form of donations (Irshaid 2014). Their work abroad included donations of meat, bread, children's milk, medicine, money, generators, etc.

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13 In this same document, the leaders of ASB and ASD are listed as Ahmed Abu Khattalah and Sufian bin Qumu, respectively.

Ranking Ansar al-Shariah in Libya in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 15: Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)

	Variables	Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)
1	Ideological orientation	Salafist, but primarily local. ASL aimed to establish a strict implementation of Shariah law in Libya and is opposed democracy.
2	Intent	Both, but the group's activities were mainly geared toward the specific case of Libya.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Local grievances, little if no evidence of loot and plunder.
4	Governing capacity	High – its advocacy work shows the group's organisational strength, Ansar al-Shariah operated quite complex social and education programmes to gain support. Its Dawa work abroad also shows organisational resources, financial resources and good connections.
5	Organisational capacity	Stationary.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Relatively high.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Relatively high but chose to fight a conventional war and sustained considerable losses in this regard against the LNA.
8	Rank and file motivation	Ideological.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Relatively strong.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	High until it suffered defeats and lost fighters to IS.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 10: Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 16: Local, regional and global assessment of threat (until 2017): Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Libya: high.
Regionally	Broader MENA: low.
Globally	Low.

Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST)

Background and overview
The Tunisian revolution led to a transformation towards democracy, but also to an increased support for radical Salafism. Since the 2011 revolution, the largest and most influential Tunisian Jihadi-Salafi group has been Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST). Its origins can be traced back to Afghanistan and the Tunisian Islamic Combat Group that was established there in 2000. One of the founders of this group, Saifallah Ben Hassine aka Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, was sentence to 43 years in prison in 2003 under the Ben Ali regime. While in prison Abu Iyadh started to form AST by building a network among prison inmates. After the 2011 revolution, Abu Iyadh and 300 other Jihadists were pardoned and released as part of an amnesty. Some of these men joined the Islamic political party Ennadha, while others with more radical views

joined Abu Iyadh in AST. The official announcement of AST came on May 2011 with a conference attended by about 5000 participants. Here, AST declared its goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Tunisia that was to be governed by Shariah law (Economist 2014; Petré 2015). Even while sharing the name Ansar al-Shariah with groups in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, AST always claimed political and organisational autonomy. In its statement it voiced support for the global agenda of al-Qaeda, but always stressed that it operated on its own.

Initially AST was very successful, and much of its success was built around its charity work: filling lacking government social services with humanitarian work – providing food, medicine to people living in poverty in marginalised areas, rural as well as urban. This gave the group a lot of support in marginalised areas in the south and the interior of the country, but also in poor Tunis suburbs. In addition, AST was highly visible in Tunisian media (not only social media) and gained significant influence in mosques. Its leader Abu Iyadh visited mosques all over the country and in 2014 about 400 mosques were under AST influence, and the movement claimed a membership of approximately 70,000 (Economist 2014).

In its heydays, peaceful proselytising at home, waging violent Jihad abroad was the core mantra of the group. Thus, AST encouraged its followers to travel abroad to fight, particularly in Syria. Its campaigns contributed to large number of young Tunisian Jihadists fighting there – estimated in 2014 to be more than 3000. With this, Tunisia outnumbered all other countries in the broader MENA region in sending foreign fighters to Syria. However, as AST gained popularity, violence also increased in Tunisia. Journalists, artists, teachers and civil society activists seen as enemies of AST's version of Islam were attacked, and the violence culminated with an attack on the United States embassy and the neighbouring American school (14th September 2012). After this attack, the relationship between AST and the Tunisian state and the governing Ennadha party became very tense. An arrest warrant for AST leader Abu Iyadh was issued and in 2013, the Tunisian government banned AST's annual conference. Following two high profile assassinations in 2013, the Ennadha-government designated AST as a terrorist group on 27 August 2013.

This was the starting point of the demise of AST. The government crackdown that followed detained many AST members and forced the organisation underground, bring an end to the successful proselytising and humanitarian programmes that the group had been running. Many AST members are also believed to have left for Syria and

Libya in the aftermath of this. Abu Iyadh fled Tunisia and his current location is unknown, with many unconfirmed reports that he has died (Petré 2015). Thus, even if AST still officially exist, it is mainly dormant, and most likely will remain so until a new leadership emerge. In the meantime, most of its still active supporters have either turned to al-Qaeda aligned insurgencies (those that remain loyal to Abu Iyadh), while others have joined movements that have pledged loyalty to IS, for example in Libya.

Ranking Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 17: Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST)

	Variables	Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST)
1	Ideological orientation	Salafi-Jihadist militant, but flexible as it allowed for different ways of working for the cause, from teaching and social work (Dawa) to military operations; most members did former.
2	Intent	Operational intent, but mainly abroad.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Local grievances, no evidence of loot and plunder.
4	Governing capacity	High, it managed large-scale charity operations
5	Organisational capacity	Stationary.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	High in Tunisia. According to a doctoral student working on the topic, the approach of AST, with an emphasis on religion, charitable work in the community and supporting Jihad abroad, appealed to Tunisians suddenly freedom from dictatorship and forced secularity – and 'Abu Iyadh was a Che Guevara figure to them'.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Relatively low.
8	Rank and file motivation	Ideological convinced.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Strong ideological cohesion.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	Strong when the movement could operate openly, ill-prepared for becoming a clandestine insurgency.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 11: Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 18: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Tunisia: medium.
Regionally	Broader MENA: low.
Globally	Low.

Al-Shabaab (Somalia)

Background and overview

Al-Shabaab (meaning 'the youth' in Arabic), emerged as a radical wing of the Union of Islamic Courts, an armed movement that established control over much of southern Somalia and Mogadishu in 2006. The Union was beaten back by Ethiopian forces, which had been deployed at the request of Somalia's weak transitional government, and with the backing of the African Union (AU) and the United States. In the virtual absence of central government during 2004–12, Somalia was beset by clan warfare and insecurity. Al-Shabaab regarded Ethiopia's intervention as a violation of Somali sovereignty, and, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, initially won popular support by promising to deliver security. There are foreign fighters in the ranks of al-Shabaab, but its

immediate aims are national: to overthrow the Mogadishu government and establish an Islamic state ruled by sharia law. Its international activities have centred on targeting countries whose militaries back the Somali government. Al-Shabaab's primary goal is to topple the Somali government and establish an Islamic emirate within the country based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

The most striking part of the al-Shabaab history is not the frequent use of suicide bombings, the presence of foreign fighters or the various declarations of loyalty to the global al-Qaeda network, but how the insurgency has morphed from one defeat and rebirth to another. Despite external military pressures and internal disagreements, it has maintained relative unity even if many its leaders have been killed, arrested or defected. This points towards a high degree of ideological and organisational coherence that is added by the fact that al-Shabaab is one of very few Islamic insurgencies with a well-functioning and much-feared secret police (the Ammiyat).

The tension between local issues and global Jihad has been in the organisation since its inception. However, even the 'globalists' of the movement as the previous leader Ahmed Abdi Godane (killed in a U.S. strike in 2014) has maintained that al-Shabaab's immediate target must be to establish a power base in Somalia. Thus, its fight is a localised version of a larger defensive Jihad (see Hansen 2013). What this means is practice is that al-Shabaab has a strong focus on justice, portraying itself as an alternative to the corruption of the Somali government. The dismayed state of the Somali police and court system continues to give al-Shabaab and its current leader Ahmad Umar some local support and legitimacy as many Somalis still would rather put their trust in an al-Shabaab court that the corrupt and slow institutions of the state. The Somali army and its allies in AMISOM may have a force capacity superior to al-Shabaab, but this does not translate into security for the rural population. Many of them still must live with al-Shabaab; pay them, support them and send their sons to fight for them to ensure their safety (see Hansen 2018). This means that al-Shabaab still will remain a threat for years to come.

When ranking al-Shabaab in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 19: Al-Shabaab (Somalia)

	Variables	Al-Shabaab (Somalia)
1	Ideological orientation	A continued tense conversation in al-Shabaab; global in discourse, mostly local in operational intent, e.g. its definition of 'defensive Jihad'.
2	Intent	Mostly global in discourse.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Local grievances, no evidence of loot and plunder. Al-Shabaab gains income from many sources, including activities defined as organised crime, but this is not a 'loot and plunder' movement.
4	Governing capacity	Relatively high as it operates both secret police (the Ammiyat) and courts that many people tend to trust as it is not seen as corrupt.
5	Organisational capacity	Controls territory in rural south Somalia, but also a roaming movement.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Al-Shabaab consists primarily of Somalis, but it also recruits foreign fighters.
7	Military/fighting capacity	High in asymmetrical warfare
8	Rank and file motivation	Both, but the organisational features that include the secret police promotes ideological conviction or suppress too much opportunistic behaviour.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Relatively high, keeps the movement together through various phases of rise and fall.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	High, able to combine suicide missions with larger military operations.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 12: Al-Shabaab (Somalia)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 20: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Al-Shabaab (Somalia)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Somalia: high, Kenya: high, Uganda: medium, Djibouti: medium.
Regionally	Africa: medium.
Globally	Low.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)/Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen (ASY)

Background and overview

In early 2009, al-Qaeda announced a merger of its Yemeni and Saudi Arabian branches and rebranded it al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP is a militant Salafi Jihadist organization and deemed the most lethal branch of al-Qaeda. The group is based in Yemen and has claimed credit for numerous terrorist attacks in the country, the region

and abroad. According to estimates by Yemeni officials, its size was between 6000 and 7000 in 2018 (UN Security Council 2018).[14]

AQAP has proved to be a successful al-Qaeda 'franchise' in fulfilling the aim to attack Western countries for supporting 'apostate Arab regimes' (Zelin 2015). Since 2009, the group has perpetrated deadly suicide bombings and guerrilla-style raids on military and security targets in Yemen to achieve its objective of clearing the Arabian Peninsula of foreign influence and establishing an Islamic caliphate. Internationally, the group is best known for the attack on the locations of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January 2015, as well as for its involvement in terrorist plots in the US, including the 'Christmas Day Bomber' in 2009 and the 'Times Square Bomber' in 2010 (al-Shishani 2012). AQAP continues to encourage 'lone-wolf' attacks against the West (ICG 2017). The group therefore has a global Jihadi discourse.

AQAP has capitalised on the devastating civil war in Yemen the past decade, and particularly the collapse of central governance structures and security services. In 2011 there was an uprising against President Ali Abdullah Saleh and in 2015, there was again chaos, this time caused by a rebellion by the Houthi movement and a Saudi-led air campaign to weaken the Zaidi Shi'a group. In 2011 and again in 2015 and onwards, AQAP took advantage of the turmoil to seize territory in the southeast (BBC 2015; US Department of State 2015). The Saudi intervention has contributed to the strengthening of AQAP's foothold by giving it new access to arms and money, in addition to allowing the group to blend in with the anti-Houthi opposition (International Crisis Group 2017).[15]

According to the UN, since March 2015, when the escalation of the current conflict in Yemen started, more than 4,773 civilians have been killed, 8,272 injured and 21 million Yemenis (82 per cent of the population) are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance (UN OHCHR 2017). Through sponsoring and participating in a range of public services and activities, the group has attempted to frame itself as a humanitarian and governing actor that shields the population from

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14 In comparison, IS/Daesh is reported to command between 250 and 500 members in the country (UN Security Council 2018).

15 Since 2015, hundreds of AQAP's members have been recruited by militias backed by the Saudi-Emirati coalition against the Houthis (Michael, Wilson and Keath 2018). In August 2018, Al Jazeera also reported that AQAP had 'cut deals' with the coalition, which involved the recruitment of hundreds of AQAP's fighters to Saudi-Emirati-led ranks (Al Jazeera 2018).

violence. By demonstrating pragmatism and sensitivity to local concerns, AQAP has increased its ability to gather popular support in vulnerable communities and extract both military and financial resources (ICG 2017: ii). This has helped the group integrate into the population and local governance structures.[16]

AQAP's successes mentioned above have largely been possible through the establishment of ASY in southern Yemen, which has allowed AQAP to balance its global, Jihadist al-Qaeda brand with a local, legitimate presence that eventually has become deeply rooted in Yemen's post-2011 communal structures (ICG 2017). In 2011, AQAP and ASY gained control over significant parts of the Yemeni Abyan province for nearly a year and ran several 'Islamic Emirates' there, inviting journalists there to witness life under 'Sharia rule' (Lia 2015: p. 35). They now govern pockets of territory with sharia courts and heavily armed militia (Counter Extremism Project 2018). The establishment of ASY was allegedly also in response to the growing pro-democracy youth movement in the country, which reportedly had marginalised Salafi-Jihadists who advocated the violent overthrow of the government and the establishment of an Islamic state (al-Shishani 2012). It is somewhat unclear whether ASY is an offshoot organisation or a rebranding of AQAP.[17]

Current leader of AQAP is Qassem Abdo Mohammed, aka Qasim al-Raymi, aka Abu Huraira al-Sanaani (Wassed 2015), following the death in June 2015 of former leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi (Ward 2015), also known as Abu Basir.[18] In 2013, al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri designated al-Wuhayshi as his deputy and the group continued to maintain a focus on Western targets (US Department of State 2013). Estimated size in 2015 was 4000, quadrupled from 2014 according to US Department of State (US Department of State 2014; 2015). AQAP cooperates with al-Qaeda and is allegedly loyal to leadership in Afghanistan/Pakistan. The group supported IS in 2014, but later

16 For example, AAS has provided services ranging from water, electricity, education and a justice system based on Sharia, and even compensated families who had lost their homes in US drone and airstrikes (ICG 2017). According to ICG interviews with locals, they trust AQAP and ASY more than the government in providing a functioning justice system and welfare provisions (ICG 2017).

17 While for instance BBC has called it an off-shot organisation, US Department of State and the Washington Institute has called it a rebranding. ICG has argued that ASY is a parallel group established to separate its local component from its international Jihadist brand to widen domestic appeal. See, for example: al-Shishani (2012); US Department of State (2012b).

18 Nasser al-Wuhayshi was unsubstantiated reported dead in 2011. See Steward (2011).

withdrew support. Allegedly, it has ties with al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam (Stanford University 2015). AQAP is structured hierarchically around a senior leadership whose members are dispersed over committees and councils, such as the media, security and military, in addition to the Shura Council which advises AQAP's emir and reports back to al-Qaeda (International Crisis Group 2017).

When ranking AQAP/ASY in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 21: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)/Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen (ASY)

	Variables	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)/Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen (ASY)
1	Ideological orientation	Global Jihadist agenda, aim is to expel foreigners from Arab peninsula and create an Islamic Caliphate. AQAP is believed to be the al-Qaeda affiliate most ideologically similar to al-Qaeda's core.
2	Intent	Operational intent. AQAP sought (unsuccessfully) permission from the Yemeni government to export crude oil in October and collect a share of the profits, which by some has been interpreted as a sign that AQAP seeks official recognition as a quasi-state.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Both.
4	Governing capacity	High. It has at times been capable of governing cities for a longer period of time (1-2 years).
5	Organisational capacity	Both. Its stronghold is reportedly located in the al-Mahfad area of the Abyan Province in southern Yemen, but it is part of a larger al-Qaeda network and has proven capable of carrying out attacks elsewhere.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	High. In 2010, it launched an English-speaking online magazine, *Inspire.* ASY became popular because it provided services such as electricity, water security, justice and education, contrary to what the central government had been able or willing to.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Relatively high in asymmetrical warfare.
8	Rank and file motivation	To a large degree ideological convinced, but the Saudi-coalition's ability to recruit fighters through financial bribes does point to some of its fighters being opportunistic.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Relatively high ideological cohesion.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	High.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 13: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)/Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen (ASY)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 22: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)/Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen (ASY)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Yemen: high, Libya: medium/high.
Regionally	Middle East: medium/high.
Globally	Medium.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra)

Background and overview
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham ('The Assembly for the Liberation of al-Sham') was initially formed as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) during the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2011.[19] It changed its

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19 Al-Nusra means 'support' in Arabic. It is also known as 'the Front for the Defence of the Syrian People'. See BBC (2013).

name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) in mid-2016 and on 28 January 2017, it merged with four smaller Syrian factions under the new banner Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Rowan 2017). In addition to JFS, it consists of Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna. It operates in Syria, Iraq and Turkey.[20]

HTS's first known attack happened on 23 December 2011, when al-Nusra suicide bombers attacked military intelligence facilities in the city of Damascus (44 killed, 150+ injured) (Stanford University 2017). At the time of writing this working paper, HTS controls somewhere around 60 percent of the rebel-held province of Idlib. Different sources present different its membership numbers to being from 20,000[21] to 31,000 (Rowan 2017). Its first leader was Abu Mohammad al-Jolani or Abu Mohamed al-Jawani but in 2017, he abdicated and became military leader. The new leader is Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh aka Abu Jaber Hashim al-Sheikh aka Abu Jaber aka Hashim al-Sheikh (Joscelyn 2017b). Other members of the leadership come from Jordan, Iraq, Saudi-Arabia and France.

JN was from the start well-known for its alliance with al-Qaeda (AQ), a relationship that became increasingly turbulent as the former prioritised a local rather than global strategy (Lister 2018: 1). Contrary to IS and AQ, JN has taken a somewhat more cautious and local approach without clearly specifying a regional or global strategy beyond Syria (Tønnessen 2015: 55). Despite its local focus, many Syrians still distrusted the group, leading it to distance itself from IS and AQ, eventually resulting in HTS (Lister 2017: 122). The merge embodies this modus operandi, as the purpose of the rebranding reportedly was to '[…] disassociate itself from AQ, which is seen as toxic by other rebel groups as well as the local civilian population' (Rowan, 2017). Through a combination of cooperation and pragmatism towards the local population, the JN leadership has attempted to integrate and embed itself into the Syrian revolutionary milieu rather than the global, Salafi Jihadist network (Lister 2017: 122). This might imply that although HTS deploys a global, Jihadi discourse, and its current focus is local. At the same time, its connections to AQ and associated networks and recent gains may represent a global threat in the long-term (Lister 2018; Tønnessen, 2015: 55). After all, its local

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20 According to IISS's Armed Conflict Database (ACD), see:
https://acd.iiss.org/en/nonstatearmedgroups/jabhat-al-nusra--jn--al-nusra-front-to-protect-the-levant-9180.

21 Interview with anonymous source with in-depth knowledge of the organisation.

focus might strengthen HTS and make it more capable of being a global actor in the long-term.

When ranking HTS in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 23: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

	Variables	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)
1	Ideological orientation	Global, although Abu Mohammed al-Jolani announced in July 2016 that HTS had changed its name and was no longer affiliated to an external agent and wanted to focus on the Syrian cause. Most rank-and-file, if not leaders, focus on Syrian, not transnational concerns, and Nusra leader Jolani has stated that: 'Our mission is to defeat Syrian regime'. However, based on interviews we have reason to believe that it is still globally oriented and al-Qaeda affiliated.
2	Intent	Difficult to assess, but the recent year does indicate that it no longer seeks to become an operational branch of global Jihad. This might however be due to constraints rather than lack of ambitions and might change if they lose their current foothold in Syria.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Violent actions are both characterised by loth and plunder and being rooted in local grievances.
4	Governing capacity	High. It has apparently divided Syria into 9 regions, where a prince/Emir is appointed to be in charge. High governing capacity in Syria's Idlib province in particular.
5	Organisational capacity	Stationary. Most of HTS' fighters currently have limited roaming capabilities as they are located in Idlib, which is hermetically sealed.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	High. Reportedly employs strict vetting; many members are veterans of the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Iraq.
7	Military/fighting capacity	High.
8	Rank and file motivation	Likely to be both. Although it seems like the leadership are highly ideologically convinced while fighters might be opportunistic, this is difficult to empirically assess.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	2018 was announced as the year of unification.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	According to unconfirmed sources, HTS seems to have been established to unite, organise and for efficiency regarding manpower/fighters, weapon arsenal and strategies.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 14: Hay-at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 24: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Syria: high, Iraq: medium, Turkey: medium.
Regionally	Middle East: medium/high.
Globally	Medium/low.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

Background and overview
Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), also known as Islamic Jihad Movement ('Harakat al-Jihad al-Islam al-Filastini'), mainly operates in Gaza. It is responsible for a large number of terrorist attacks against Israeli civilian and military targets. It was founded by Fathi Shaqaq and Abd al-Aziz Awada as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1979, reportedly because they were discontent with the movement's commitment to the Palestinian cause, as well as its tendency towards moderateness (Fletcher 2008). Inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution,

they founded PIJ with the aim to fight for the sovereignty of Palestine and freedom from Israel through the deployment of violent means.[22] PJ's goals according to its 'Manifesto of the Islamic Jihad in Palestine', include rejection of 'any peaceful solution to the Palestinian cause' and a belief that 'the Jihad solution and the martyrdom style' are 'the only choice for liberation' (Levin 2018). Moreover, they viewed the group as part of the great pan-Islamic revival in the Middle East (Halabi 2003: 248; Hegghammer and Wagemakers 2013: 307).

Current leader is Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, after his predecessor, PIJ founder Fathi Shaqaq, was killed by Israel's Mossad in 1995 (Aschoff 2013). Ziyad al-Nakhalah serves as Deputy Secretary-General. PIJ is governed by a leadership council, and its leadership has been based in Lebanon, Syria and Iran (Asharq Al-Awsat 2012). While the group claimed to have at least 8,000 battle-ready fighters in Gaza in 2011, the US Department of State claimed it was fewer than 1,000 members (Counter Extremism Project 2016). Its armed wing is named the al-Quds brigades (al-Quds means Jerusalem in Arabic). The Brigades has regional staff commands, with each member within a command overseeing a cell within that command's region. Although PIJ today largely fires rockets into Israel from Gaza, it has also attacked civilian and military targets through suicide bombings and knife attacks.

In Gaza, PIJ both cooperate and compete with the much larger Hamas. Compared to Hamas, PIJ is far more militant and seems to focus on this rather on aiming for mass mobilisation. In other words, PIJ's strength has not been in mobilising support but rather in its ability to entrench militant Islam (Hatina, quoted in Halabi, 2003: 4). PIJ has for example rejected any negotiation or truce with the enemy/Israel, as well as a two-state solution (Brown 2002; Fletcher 2008). The group is therefore viewed as more radical than Hamas, which is also demonstrated through its lauding of martyrdom (and thus, suicide bombings). In 2014, PIJ was also heavily criticised for having fired a round of mortars into Israeli territory in retaliation for the killings of Palestinian protesters on the border, resulting in the biggest exchange of fire over Gaza in four years (CNN 2018). One of PIJ's rockets also hit an Israeli kindergarten, again pointing to PIJ's recklessness towards civilians.

22 In 1979, while still being a student in Egypt, Shaqiqi authored the book 'Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative', leading him to being arrested by Egyptian police for praising the revolution (Al-Ghoul 2013). In 1981, Egypt expelled the PIJ on the grounds that they had close ties with the radical students in charge of the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (Fletcher 2008).

Furthermore, the group has refrained from using its armed resistance brand to gain popular support and legitimacy through the provision of social services or entering the formal political process (Brown 2002; Fletcher 2008). It has however developed a social structure in the way it controls mosques, runs student associations and published several periodicals in Palestine (Hegghammer and Wagemakers 2013: 307). Furthermore, PIJ distributed $2 million in food aid in Gaza on behalf of Iran's Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, a charity based in Beirut (Counter Extremism Project 2017: 2). Some claim that such activities has increased the PIJ's popularity (Fares 2013).

Iran is PIJ's main source of funding, but it also receives some support from Syria.[23] The Assad regime has for example been accused for allowing PIJ to maintain a headquarters in Damascus. Iran's support to PJI is however both material and non-material, as the group looks to Iran for ideological guidance and morale. Throughout its history it has cooperated closely with both Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hizbullah. However, the fact that PIJ has not been engaged in the Syrian civil war despite its close ties to Iran and Hizbullah underlines its local nature. Although it carries a global discourse, there is little evidence that points to the PIJ having incentive to engage outside Israeli and Palestinian territory.

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23 In 2013, PIJ sources claimed that the group received about $3 million per month from Iran (Counter Extremism Project, 2017, p. 3). In 2014, a report published by Center for Iranian Studies in London stated that PIJ receives $100 to $150 million annually from Iran. During the 2012 war between Israel and Hamas, PIJ fired rockets into Israel and hung banners across streets in Gaza that said 'Thank you, Iran.' However, the relationship has allegedly been turbulent the recent years; in 2015, Iran is reported to have cut funding in 2015 because PIJ did not agree to issue a statement in support of Iran in its conflict against Saudi Arabia in Yemen. The financial relationship now seems to have been restored.

Ranking the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 25: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

	Variables	Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
1	Ideological orientation	PIJ aims to create a state based on Sharia in all land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River (including Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). The Palestinian resistance movement in general, and the PIJ in particular, has a fundamentally local character, although a few globalist ideologues do exist.
2	Intent	Operational intent.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Local grievances, little or no evidence of loot and plunder.
4	Governing capacity	Low. Does not participate in formal politics and is a limited social services provider.
5	Organisational capacity	Stationary. PIJ is known for having headquarters in Damascus, and its members' travels frequently to Iran. However, it is largely based in Gaza and the West Bank, and its activities are limited to Palestinian and Israeli territory.
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	Targets potential fighters rather than aiming for a broad membership; its lack of a political or welfare wing also underlines its commitment to specialised militancy rather than mass mobilisation.
7	Military/fighting capacity	Medium to high in asymmetric warfare. Training methods include but are not limited to exercise in suicide operations and battlefield tactics, with annual 'summer camps' drawing as much as 10,000 participants per session.
8	Rank and file motivation	Ideological convinced, although some members in its rank might be opportunistic due to local grievances in Palestine.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	Ideologically coherent, nexus between global Jihadism and Palestinian nationalism.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	High operational coherence.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 15: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 26: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Israel: high, Palestine: medium.
Regionally	Middle East: low.
Globally	None.

The Islamic State (IS)/Daesh

Background and overview
The Islamic State (IS) is a militant Salafi Jihadist group that aims to wipe out the territorial borders drawn by Sykes-Picot and establish a caliphate across the Middle East and parts of North Africa. It is responsible for a number of high-profile terrorist attacks around the globe the recent years. The group emerged as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq in 2013, from an organisation established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi early in the Iraq War under the name Jama'at al-

Tawhid wal-Jihad, known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been the leader of IS since 2010.[24]

Already controlling the city of Raqqa and other territories in Syria, ISIS declared a caliphate and began to style itself as simply the Islamic State (IS) following large territorial gains in Iraq in June 2014.[25] After merging with several organisations with similar aims, it renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq, changing the name in 2013 to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS, with the 'S' standing for 'al-Sham', e.g. the Levant) to reflect its involvement in the conflict in Syria. Its attempt to merge with Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) - which was also created by Baghdadi in 2011 - was criticised by al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, and rejected by JN in April 2013. ISIS was disavowed by AQ in February 2014 but has attracted members from JN and absorbed other Islamist factions. IS has an unclear and changing relationship with Al-Qaeda, has functioned as rival, ally, and affiliate with the group. It has also clashed with other Islamist insurgent groups in Syria and Iraq, who has contested its claim as a caliphate. Yet, as the group gained notoriety different groups have pledged allegiance with varying degrees of actual cooperation.

IIS has captured advanced military hardware from Iraqi security forces, and is funded by 'taxes', transnational crime activities, diaspora support and unknown sponsors in Gulf states, as well as its control over oil wells. It is responsible for attacks against government targets, civilians (particularly non-Sunni Muslims), other rebel groups, journalists in both Syria and Iraq, as well as round the world (IISS 2017). It has been winning recruits in other war zones and has coordinated and/or inspired attacks in the West. However, IS has led massive territorial losses the recent years, resulting in a major setback to its so-called caliphate. The cities the group once controlled in Syria and Iraq have been liberated, and it now only controls a small area in eastern Syria. Despite this, IS continues to carry out lethal attacks with help from sleeper cells. In Iraq, for example, IS frequently targets Hashd al-Sha'abi and Iraqi Security Forces. It is also active in places like Libya, the Sinai, Yemen and Afghanistan. More recently, IS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has emerged in central Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, allegedly led by Abou Walid Al Sahraoui. Despite its military defeat the recent years, IS' ideological appeal endures, and the group remains a global threat.

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24 For more on Al-Baghdadi, see for example McCants (2015).
25 IS is also referred to as Daesh, which is based on the Arabic acronym of their name and has negative connotations.

When ranking IS in accordance with our comparative framework the following results emerge:

Table 27: Islamic State (IS)/Daesh

	Variables	Islamic State (IS)/Daesh
1	Ideological orientation	Global. The goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate based on its extreme interpretation of Islam and Sharia. This has been clear since late 2013, although in its earlier iterations as JTJ and AQI, the group focused more on local goals like driving foreign forces from Iraq.
2	Intent	Operational intent.
3	Violent actions (motivations)	Exploiting local grievances, but a rich organisation funded by 'conflict entrepreneurs' from abroad.
4	Governing capacity	High, although significantly weakened after it lost its territories in Iraq and Syria.
5	Organisational capacity	Both stationary and roaming, although organisational capacity has been significantly weakened the past year(s).
6	Recruitment strategies and potential	High.
7	Military/fighting capacity	High.
8	Rank and file motivation	High ideological motivation among rank and file, although opportunists are of course also drawn to its milieu.
9	Ideological cohesion/distinctiveness	High ideological cohesion.
10	Operational coherence/fragmentation	High operational coherence.

Seen in relation to level of global threat, this can be summarised in the following way:

Figure 16: The Islamic State (IS)/Daesh

The local, regional and global assessment of threat can be presented as follows:

Table 28: Local, regional and global assessment of threat: Islamic State (IS)/Daesh

Assessment of threat	
Locally	Iraq: high, Syria: high, Libya: high, the Sinai: high, Yemen: medium/high, Turkey: medium/high, Afghanistan: medium/high, Sahel (High)
Regionally	Middle East: high.
Globally	Medium/high.

Similarities

While we see that these Islamic insurgent groups are different according to numerous aspects, they also share several characteristics. First and foremost, their establishment is often connected to a particular local conflict or situation: For example, in the case of PIJ, it was established to fight the Israeli occupation of Palestine; in the case of al-Shabaab, it was established to oust the internationally supported transitional Somali government; in the case of Jabhat al-Nusra (later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), it was established to fight President Bashar al-Assad's regime; in the case of LIFG (later LIMC), it was formed to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, and this is also the case for the other insurgencies we have analysed. Their point of origin is to be found in one or more decisive moment(s). Furthermore, the internationalisation of the conflict in question, including foreign

intervention, is the catalyst that turn the organisations raison d'être from a local to a global, as is the case of the emergence of IS.

The aim to expel foreign (and Western in particular) influence from the area in which they operate in is a stated goal of most groups. However, apart from obvious IS and al-Qaida affiliates, the global Jihadi discourse is used as strategic branding while the groups remain mainly local in operational intent. Closely related, almost every assessed group share the characteristic that local integration strategies are more important than their stated global aims, which is demonstrated through the fact that appropriating local grievances is the main priority to gain territorial stronghold and local integration. There are also indicators of a reorientation towards the local among groups that initially used to be even more globally focused in the Middle East. In the cases of AQAP and HTS, for example, there have been a shift in discourse global to local the recent years. By addressing local grievances rather than focusing on global Jihad, these groups have managed to integrate into the local environment and thus achieve some form of territorial grip in a more strategically sustainable manner than both IS and al-Qaeda.

The abovementioned tendency is in line with our assumption that Islamic insurgent groups in the MENA region seek local integration through the appropriation of local grievances. Those that fails on this matter may encounter serious problems particularly if their military strength is weakened. IS for example, which scores high on global ideology, may have failed to properly integrate locally and thus secure a viable lasting foothold. One reason maybe that the group's reign of terror in the name of global Jihad did not have much resonance among the broader segment of the Sunni population in either Iraq or Syria. Islamic insurgent groups in the Middle East with a global Jihadi discourse, HTS and AQAP in particular, are likely to have drawn on lessons learned from IS' failure in this regard, acknowledging that local sensitivity and embeddedness is necessary to get a foothold and to be sustainable in the long term. In contrast to AQ affiliates, IS' affiliates have not yet demonstrated such an adaption.

Thus, and not very surprising, we also see a connection between high governing capacity and high local sensitivity. The sustainability of the groups' appropriation of local grievances, as well as territorial gains, is however uncertain. For natural reasons, their situation might change rapidly. It should also be taken into account that this approach might be a result of the fact that groups such as AQAP and HTS lack sufficient strength and resources to fight enemies both locally/regionally and in Western countries at the same time.

Merely crediting it to a strategic adaption might be an exaggeration. Some of the Islamic insurgent groups may in fact have global ambitions but are restrained by their capacity. In other words, it is not necessarily a lack of will that prevents them. It might also be a method to increase the number of recruits by juggling many causes at the same time, although lack of dedication to one cause in particular might also have the opposite effect. As such, not being operationally intent at the time of writing this working paper does not imply that they do not pose a future threat to the international community. Insurgent groups' ability to appropriate local grievances might in fact strengthen them and increase the likelihood of them focusing on global Jihad in operational terms rather than just discursively in the long run.

To sum up the discussion on the nexus between discourse and operational intent, there are indeed some variation in this regard. However, an overall assessment is that most of the insurgent groups are rooted in a local context or conflict and they have operational intent mainly on a local/national level. Furthermore, having a global Jihadi discourse may appear to be mostly a form of strategic branding in order to gain legitimacy and attract funding and recruits. At the same time, we also see that groups such as HTS have downplayed its global brand in order to win a broader segment of hearts and minds in Syria (with the notable exception of its most AQ-affiliated faction, Hurras ad-Deen). Nevertheless, all groups have in common an ability to successfully demonstrate sensitivity to local grievances, although loot and plunder occur simultaneously among some cases.

Another similarity is that the local grievances they seek to appropriate often are the same local grievances that led to the emergence of these groups in the first place. We see that in most cases, acts of violence are tied to local grievances rather than loot and plunder. This is evident by the fact that all assessed groups have emerged in fragile states, often ravaged by instability and/or new or protracted armed conflict. Low income, deep inequality, and state failure to provide security and basic services are often what initiates armed insurgencies. In lack of other livelihood options, joining an armed insurgent group might be the only alternative to secure an income or to find meaning to a precarious life. Participation in transnational crime activities and struggle over the control of natural resources (diamonds, oil, etc.) often exacerbate the level of violence. Furthermore, ethnic or religious marginalisation in authoritarian and/or neopatrimonial states should also not be understated. For example, it is not unreasonable to argue that it was the marginalisation of Sunnis in post-2003 Iraq that led to the rise of IS. Such local grievances also fuel radicalisation, which again increases the number

of recruits. Loot and plunder must therefore be understood as a symptom rather than a cause.

Without the emergence of more legitimate types of statehood that safeguard the security and basic rights of its people, it will therefore continue to be difficult to fight Jihadi insurgents and delegitimise the proto-states that seek to establish in current MENA theatres of war.[26] Poor governance is what allows for competing governing structures to exist, including those offered by Islamic insurgent groups. As our mapping demonstrate, many have achieved sporadic governance and territorial control, but only as result of the fact that they operate in environments of fragile states without much popular legitimacy. It would be far more challenging for these groups to appropriate local grievances if state sponsored governance and security started to deliver meaningful services to local populations.

We also observe difference between low and high rank as for their ideological orientation. In numerous of these organisations, the higher up in the hierarchy you come, the more globally oriented and devoted to global Jihad, you become. The lower and fresher you are in the system, the more locally oriented you are. Whether rank and file motivations are opportunistic or ideological convinced is however hard to empirically assess. Closely related, a third similarity is the psychology involved when an individual moves up the ranks of the organisation or stay put but have spent some time in that given organisation. Some of these organisations, such as HTS, have a selection procedure for recruitment. Others do not have that and would include all that wanted to join or even force people to join them as foot soldiers, such as Boko Haram.

Independent of the recruitment and selection process, what these organisations have in common, is that when someone becomes part of the organisation, a period of 'socialisation' starts. This process will vary, but normally include story-telling, showing pictures and movies, training to become a soldier, taking part in torturing and killing, etc. The more on the abusive side of the spectrum these activities take the form of, the more you as a person will change. By this follows also a process of legitimisation of your wrongdoings, or rather parallel to having to take part increasingly in such dehumanising acts, you become convinced that it is a legitimate act. According to one Spanish investigator looking into Ansar al-Shariah Tunisia (AST), 'You

26 For more on Jihadi proto-states, see Brynjar Lia (2015).

learn to kill […] that's what you get from radicalisation, and they enhance that in the training camps. It's the cruelty of the act that distorts' (Gall 2014). Our assumption, which needs to be researched further, is that this makes a return to 'normality' difficult and adherence to global Jihad more likely.

A final point regards recruitment: According to a qualitative study based on interviews with 311 young Syrians, their families and community members in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, vulnerability is being generated by an absence of a means to serve basic human needs (International Alert 2017). In many instances, violent extremist groups are effectively meeting these needs. In interviews with Yemenis, as well, have such groups been promoted as being more reliable in providing security and other basic services than the government (ICG 2017). As other credible alternatives are absent, local populations often have no other choice than to accept the presence of these groups. This is also very much the case in the Sahel. This also attracts new recruits; belief in extreme ideologies might in fact be a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group. Religion is providing a moral medium for coping and justification for fighting, rather than a basis for rigid and extreme ideologies. On-going conflict creates the conditions upon which all vulnerability and resilience factors act. We consider main factors that drive vulnerability to be the following:

1. Lack of economic opportunity
2. Disruptive social context and experiences of violence, displacement, trauma and loss
3. Deprivation of personal psychological needs for efficacy, autonomy and purpose
4. Degradation of education infrastructure and opportunities to learn
5. The consequences of climate changes on people's livelihood, which again can lead to violent conflict over scarce resources.

A final point to be highlighted is the substantial role of the leaders. With a few clear exceptions, such as al-Qaeda and IS, while the different groups compositions, aims, names, etc. seem to be of a chameleonic nature, the leaders seem to be more constant. One such example is Mokhtar Belmokhtar, former military commander of AQIM, current leader of Al-Murabitoun and in-between the leader of Al-Mulathameen ('Those who sign in Blood').

To sum up, some insurgencies appropriate the global discourse of Islamic Jihad for rhetorical branding purposes in order to establish an image of global importance while others aim to become operational

units in a larger global armed struggle. The range of insurgencies in the MENA region have very different capacities for governing and governance; some are basically roaming movements, others have territorial control. Their leadership profile, the resources available to them through extraction, taxation and trade, and their level of economic support differ, which affects their recruitment strategy and their ability to attract foreign fighters.

However, is important to recognise how challenging it is to empirically assess the selected groups along the outlined indicators. The data is largely based on available textual material, not all of which has been recently updated. The nature or context of these groups evolve quickly in violent conflict, often overnight. Their secretive nature, as well as the politicised and conflicting narratives that exist in each conflict, also raises challenges in terms of validity and reliability. At the same time, as this section has demonstrated, the analytical framework has indeed proven fruitful in increasing our understanding of the selected cases, as well as the interplay between the outlined indicators.

Implications for Norway and Europe

The potential implications the spread of violent extremism and the constant transformations characterising armed Jihadism in the MENA region may have for Europe and Norway in the middle to long run are several. However, few of the groups assessed in this working paper can be said to pose a direct and immediate threat to either Norway or Europe. First and foremost, they pose challenges to the areas in which they operate.

Table 29: Group and local, regional and global threat assessment

Group	Local	Regional	Global
Al-Mourabitoun	Sahel: high	North Africa: medium, broader MENA: low	Low
Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso: high, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, southern Libya: medium; Tunisia, Mauritania, Chad: low	North Africa: high to medium; Middle East: low	Low
Ansar ed-Dine	Mali: high	Low	Low
Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso)	Soum Province: high; Burkina Faso: medium	North Africa/Sahel: low; Middle East: none.	None
Macina Liberation Front (MLF)	Mopti and Ségou: high; Mali: medium	Sahel and North Africa: low	None
Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)	Mali: high; Burkina Faso: high, in areas bordering Mali; Niger: medium	Other Sahel countries/West Africa: medium	Low
Boko Haram	Nigeria: high; Lake Chad Basin: high; Mali: low	Africa: low	Low
Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)	Libya: high	Middle East and North Africa: low	Low
Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia (AST)	Tunisia: medium	Middle East: low	Low
Al-Shabaab	Somalia, Kenya: high; Uganda, Djibouti: medium	Africa: medium	Low
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	Yemen: high; Libya: medium/high	Middle East: medium/high	Medium
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	Syria: high; Iraq: high; Turkey: medium	Middle East: high	Medium
Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)	Israel: high, Palestine: medium	Middle East: low	None
The Islamic State (IS)/Daesh	Iraq, Syria, Libya: high; Yemen: medium/high	Middle East: high	Medium/high
The Islamic State - Sinai Province (IS-SP)	Egypt: medium/high; Israel: medium/high; Sinai: high	Middle East/North Africa: low/medium	Low

The hardened counter-terrorism effort undertaken by European countries can be given some credit the decrease in attacks in the Western hemisphere the recent year(s).[27] Perhaps equally important is the lack of capacity, not will, among the Islamic insurgents that are committed to global Jihad. However, although Islamic insurgents in the MENA region currently have limited capacity to conduct violent attacks in the Western hemisphere and elsewhere, it doesn't mean that they won't pose a future threat to the international community. According to our assessment, IS and al-Qaida affiliates operating in the Middle East region pose the greatest risk on a global level at the time of writing this working paper.

The stronghold of Islamic insurgencies in the MENA region also has global effects in the field of transnational organised crime, ranging from human trafficking to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Furthermore, the return of foreign fighters, especially IS recruits that have survived the theatres of war in Iraq and Syria, is also of concern. Another contemporary case is that if the Russia-Turkey deal on the rebel-held province of Idlib collapses and leads to a military offensive led by the Syrian regime, the most hardliner HTS fighters in that area might flee across the border to Turkey, and potentially Europe. In addition to the prospect of such individuals engaging in the planning and execution of terrorist attacks on European soil, including Norway, they might also fuel Islamic radicalisation and strengthen existing extremist milieus.

Closely related, violence conducted by insurgent groups might also lead to an increase in migration and refugees into Europe. As the aftermath of the refugee crisis of 2014/15 has shown, this will have an impact on the political landscape of Europe. This has manifested itself in numerous ways, from Sweden in the North to Italy in the South. As the EU's crisis response in the Sahel has demonstrated, this can result in more security-driven foreign policies that again fuel insurgencies, which is a vicious circle that undermines efforts to combat extremist ideologies in theatres of war in the long-term.[28] One cannot defeat ideology on the battlefield, making a 'war on terrorism' towards these groups counter-effective.

In other to understand the abovementioned dynamics, a comparison of IS and Boko Haram might be illuminating. According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index, published by the Institute for

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27 For more on this, see Hegghammer (2018).
28 See, for example, Bøas (2018).

Economics and Peace, Boko Haram was responsible for 6,644 deaths in 2014, compared to the 6,073 deaths that ISIS was responsible for (Delman 2015).[29]

Figure 17: Global Terrorism Database / Institute for Economics and Peace[30]
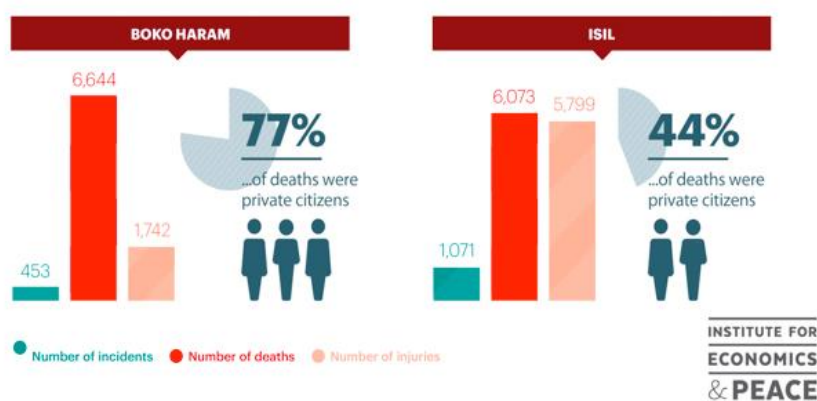
Such numbers may mislead the reader to interpret these as all the same, to be treated the same way. As demonstrated above, Boko Haram is a very different organisation compared to IS. While there are both historical and current links to Islamic fundamentalism, its origins and continued recruitment potential appear to be rooted in grievances over poor governance and sharp inequality in Nigerian society. By treating Boko Haram as an international terrorist organisation, may only seem to have radicalised the group further. Hence, in order to counter their growth, more will probably be achieved if the Nigerian government is encouraged to decrease the economic gap, improve the living standards, provide better education and health-care services in particular in the North, include prominent, locally respected northern Muslims in the cabinet, in addition to engage a broader range of Muslim voices in the North, invite Boko Haram to a dialogue, investigate inter-religious violence, hold perpetrators accountable, promote reconciliations for past conflicts, combat corruption – rather than having a pure militaristic anti-terror approach (Thurston 2016).

This observation can largely be seen in connection with the other groups assessed in this study as well. In general, if the state fails

29 But as noted by the author, the data is from 2014 and does not include for instance the bombing in Turkey that claimed more than 100 lives, the explosion of a Russian airliner over Egypt that killed 224 people and more recently the attacks in Beirut and Paris, not to forget the attacks in Brussels, London and further attacks in Syria and Iraq after that time.
30 Global Terrorism Database: https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

to safeguard the basic needs of its people's livelihood, including welfare and security, popular support for those who can will increase. As AQAP in Yemen is an illustrative example of, locals tend to turn towards insurgent groups because there is little to no other choice. Various forms of political and socioeconomic conditions are also what lead to fighters joining these groups in the first place. Unless local grievances are tackled, such groups and extremist lines of thinking will continue to prosper. Equally important is the lack of governance in countries in which they operate, allowing competing governing structures, including those led by non-state armed groups, to exist. In the cases of groups that are mainly concerned with loot and plunder, these will continue to feed on chaos, making the conflicts they are part of more difficult to solve. Armed insurgents are often a hindrance to peace- and reconciliation processes in their respective countries, thus making efforts of conflict resolution more challenging.

Finding the balance between security and development is therefore key (Bøås 2018). We cannot treat the symptoms without treating the causes. Violent extremism is to a large degree caused by political and socioeconomic conditions, which make a merely security-driven approach to countries in the MENA region inadequate as it is both too narrow and short-term oriented. As we have argued, many of the armed insurgent groups are rooted in local grievances, and the lack of opportunity for people to improve their livelihood. The state should be the actor securing their right to do so, but these groups are currently filling the vacuum caused by such an absence of statehood. As such, the social contract between the state and its citizens are disrupted, as well as the state's monopoly on violence, thus undermining its key source of legitimacy. Political stabilisation and economic development might not eradicate terrorism, but at least such violent acts will not be rooted in public opinion if there are better alternatives to joining or supporting Jihadi proto-states. In any process that aims to achieve this, local knowledge and participation must be central, and a balance between security and development will be crucial.

Concluding remarks

In this working paper, a selection of Islamic insurgent groups in the MENA region was analysed to assess what kind of threat these groups represent. We included a broad catalogue of armed groups, proceeding with selection criteria that encompass both most-diverse and most-similar profiles, to allow considerable variation while controlling potential explanatory factors.

We have argued that more nuances are needed when it comes to violent Islamic groups. One of the reasons is that by putting them in a lump category, it seems to become legitimate to declare a 'war on terror' against all violent extremist groups. By doing so, states blur the distinctions between armed conflict and terrorism, between criminal law enforcement and war-related military action, and ultimately between the legal regimes of international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law (IHRL).[31] Such declarations have had adverse consequences for legal safeguards and rights protections. Further, it fails to address the root causes and see that different instruments and measures are needed to address different problems, and it would risk increasing the level of radicalisation and hence the main challenge.

An overall assessment is that we observe various forms of hybrid security governance by different, non-state actors that are heavily armed, and that the local population has no other alternative to accept. At the same time, we observe discrete patterns of mobilisation among youths that undergo radicalisation, Jihadist indoctrination, recruitment and training – and move across borders to join fighting factions across the region as foreign fighters under the banners of self-styled emirates and caliphates: they increasingly conceive of their border crossing as a hijra, i.e. the emigration to the safe land of the Quran.

We see multiple and conflicting networks emerging, often with each constructing a competing system of governance. These networks are characterised by their flexibility and adaptability, where actors compete for the role of the nodal point in between various networks of attempted informal governance that collaborates, but also competes and at times are in violent conflict with each other over the issue of

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31 For a more elaborate argument along these lines, see Megally (2017).

control. Several of these insurgent groups tend to be local and global at the same time: they effectively appropriate the global discourse of Islamic Jihad, but at the same time remain rooted in local cleavages.

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