



Terra Firma

Risk Management



Islamic State and Kidnap in North Africa

Introduction

Based on a network of ground sources, input from Terra Firma kidnap response advisers and considerable regional experience, this report analyses the proliferation of Islamic State-linked groups in North Africa. It assesses targeting trends as well as strategic intent, and examines the current and future impact on kidnap risks to foreigners. The report offers insights for a range of end users, from security managers with North African portfolios to underwriters of North African risks.

This report covers only the Mediterranean littoral states, and does not cover the Sahel countries.



Islamic State

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant¹ originated in Iraq. It is also known by its acronyms, ISIS or ISIL². The organisation's name is often shortened to 'Islamic State' (IS). This is in some ways increasingly appropriate, given that the influence and reach of the organisation has now moved well beyond Iraq and the Levant.

The spread of groups or individuals pledging allegiance to IS has fundamentally changed the security environment in North Africa. Organisations working in the region now face an array of militant threats and uncertain and fluid political contexts.

Mass shootings of tourists in Tunisia and the rise of IS in Libya have caught much of the media attention. But last year's kidnap and murder of a French national in Algeria, and the more recent kidnap and murder of a Croatian national close to Cairo show that IS presents a wider threat across North Africa.

The Background

Before the rise of IS, kidnaps of foreigners occurred, but were comparatively rare in most of North Africa. Algeria was an exception to this - militant kidnaps have been a feature since the early 1990s and include several high-profile cases targeting foreign nationals, such as the 2003 Sahara hostage crisis³ and the 2013 attack on In Amenas near the Libyan border. Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a predominantly Algerian-led group, and its splinter groups were responsible for a number of kidnaps of foreigners in Algeria and Mali.

Many kidnaps in North Africa were motivated by criminality, or related to domestic political or tribal disputes. This still remains the case. Even after the advent of IS, the majority of North African kidnaps still target local nationals more than foreigners, but the growth of IS-inspired groups has led to an increase in the targeting of foreign nationals and a general rise in the threat of kidnap.

The evolution and scale of IS has differed in each country in North Africa.

Libya. IS has spread most widely in Libya, where the group exploited governance vacuums and now holds territory in some areas of central Libya, including the major town of Sirte. Reporting from Sirte reveals that the fighters number in the hundreds, not the thousands. Despite being comparatively few in number, the group has managed to develop a basic system of governance, combined with a draconian justice system⁴. Outside this area IS (and other Islamist groups') cells have managed to establish a steady tempo of insurgent attacks against both westerners and local targets in almost every major city.

Egypt. Poor governance in Sinai and Egypt's domestic political upheaval over the last four years have combined to create the conditions - the time and space - for radical Islamism to grow in capacity and reach⁵. Egyptian militant group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) pledged allegiance to IS in November 2014, rebranding itself as Wilayet Sinai (Sinai Province⁶). ABM emerged as an amalgamation of various Sinai-based Salafist jihadi militant groups who, following the 2011 revolution in Egypt, began a campaign of low-level attacks on infrastructure.

The group stepped up its activity following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and the violent crackdown launched by the new government on the Muslim Brotherhood. ABM turned its attention to targeting the security services, labelling them apostates for their role in the murder of Muslims. The group was known for kidnapping and killing those it suspected of being informers for the Egyptian army or the Israeli intelligence services. ABM also carried out attacks outside the Sinai Peninsula, most notably the attempted assassination of former Minister of Interior Mohamed Ibrahim in 2013.

Algeria. A history of Islamist extremism is the backdrop to the growth of IS in Algeria. Ideological differences between extremists led to the formation of splinter groups, and one of these groups, Jund al Khilafa ('Soldiers of the Caliphate') pledged allegiance to IS. The group made international headlines when it kidnapped and beheaded French national Hervé Gourdel in mountains to the east of Algiers in early 2015. Jund al Khilafa remains small and, since its rebranding to IS, the Algerian army appears to have contained it effectively.

1. The Levant is usually taken to refer to the area of the Eastern Mediterranean.

2. ISIL and ISIS mean broadly the same thing: in the latter case, the L for Levant has been replaced by an S for Levant's Arabic word 'ash-Sham'. In Arabic, there is no such confusion: the organisation is commonly known as "Da'ish" (taken from its Arabic acronym, "ad Dawlah al Islamiyya fee 'l 'Iraq wa ash-Sham").

3. 32 European tourists in seven different groups were kidnapped. All but one (who apparently died of heatstroke) were freed within six months.

4. This is a feature of many Islamist insurgencies. Initially, radical Islamists are welcomed because they are perceived to bring security to areas where there had previously been none. Over time, however, the security is seen to become more intrusive and heavy-handed, and their presence becomes contested.

5. See Terra Firma's report 'Egypt's Unfulfilled Promise', August 2015.

6. The name implies that it is the Sinai Province of the wider Islamic State.



Morocco has emerged thus far unscathed in terms of attacks, although the expansion of IS elsewhere in the region gives rise to justifiable fears that Morocco too could become a target.

Tunisia. Tunisia has been badly affected by high-profile attacks on tourists in Tunis (March 2015) and Sousse (June 2015), as well as by reports suggesting that Tunisia has been the single biggest supplier of fighters to IS in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Assertions that its democratic model has allowed IS ideology to infiltrate Tunisian society are not supported by the evidence. If anything, the inclusion of Islamists in the political fold has reduced the risk of violent extremism. A group calling itself Jund al Khilafa fi Tunis (Soldiers of the Caliphate in Tunisia) did announce itself by claiming the Bardo Museum attack – a claim refuted by the Tunisian Government. More recently, Tunisian authorities are reported to have thwarted another beach attack, arresting members of what was described as a Jund al Khilafa fi Tunis media cell. But the operational depth of the group is questionable, and the more high-profile IS activity to date has been unsophisticated, and largely a product of individual radicalisation. Possibly of greater note is Tunisia’s largest and most active militant group, the Uqba Bin Nafi Brigade, which has been explicit in reiterating its alignment to al Qa’ida and rejection of IS.

Morocco. Morocco has emerged thus far unscathed in terms of attacks, although the expansion of IS elsewhere in the region gives rise to justifiable fears that Morocco too could become a target. Indications of radical Islamist activity, allegedly by IS cells, have been seen in 2015, including a plot to attack westerners in Morocco that was foiled by Spanish authorities in August.

IS Strategy In North Africa

Sectarian divisions in Iraq and Syria offered a natural setting for ISIS. The group drew support from locals as the defender of Sunni rights against Shi’a oppression. Exploiting this support, ISIS expanded using pre-existing militant networks that had been engaged in an insurgent campaign against the Iraqi and Syrian armies for several years.

The North African context is fundamentally different. Its countries are religiously homogenous and, with the exception of Libya, have a relatively functional centralised state and coherent state security apparatus. These circumstances have prompted IS to use different strategies in each country. These contrasting strategies suggest that coordination between different IS franchises may be limited, and notions that IS is spreading because of a uniform operational strategy are probably inaccurate.

Egypt. In Egypt, ABM started what can be described as an ‘economic war’ on the Egyptian state, increasing its attacks on pipelines and targeting a tourist bus near the border with Israel. Despite ABM’s pledge of allegiance to IS and re-naming as Sinai Province, the group did not imitate IS’s brutality towards ordinary citizens. Instead, IS appears to have focussed its efforts on attacks against the security forces and government, and engaged in targeting of foreign nationals in an effort to deter investment.

Both ABM and its successor, Sinai Province, have murdered a number of foreigners, the most recent and high-profile of which was the kidnap and murder of Croatian national, Tomislav Salopek. Salopek was taken by armed men approximately 60km west of Cairo, in ‘6th October City’ on 20 July 2015. Shortly after the kidnap, the Croatian Embassy briefed fellow diplomats that the kidnap was criminally-motivated, rather than the work of militants. A ransom demand was made, but when this was not paid, Salopek was sold on to Sinai Province and subsequently murdered. As one Cairo-based diplomat suggested, “The timing [of Salopek’s murder] was engineered in order to hang over the opening of the new lane of the Suez Canal in an attempt to tarnish President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s flagship project.”

Kidnap of foreigners has not historically been a common crime or modus operandi of militants in Egypt but, with the Salopek kidnap, Sinai Province has proved that it is willing and able to make propaganda capital from holding foreigners captive and murdering them (even if Sinai Province probably was not responsible for the initial abduction). This brutal murder, of course, follows the tactics used so often by ISIS in Syria. It remains to be seen whether the crash of the Russian plane over Sinai in early November 2015 was the result of a Sinai Province attack but, if so, it fits both Sinai Province’s targeting approach and IS’s political strategy. It seems likely, therefore, that Sinai Province is more than just an imitator of ISIS – it has the intent, and an increasing capacity, to pursue a similar and, to some extents at least, coordinated strategy.

Algeria. Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) remains the largest and most prolific militant group in Algeria. The IS franchise, Jund al Khilafa, which splintered from AQIM, has been effectively contained by the Algerian security forces. The fact that Jund al Khilafa has been unable to mount a more sustained campaign of violence makes assessments of strategy more difficult.

There have been no major attacks detected that might be attributable to the group since Gourdel’s murder. By contrast, the Algerian security forces have mounted several successful counter terror operations against them. It’s likely, therefore, that any strategy remains embryonic, and the group is perhaps still trying (and apparently failing) to assert itself as a major player on Algeria’s militant landscape.



Current And Future Kidnap Risks To Foreigners

Egypt. The kidnap of the Croatian national marked a step change in the perceived risk to foreigners in Cairo. This may be illusory - it is only one kidnap of a foreigner and, for the moment at least, Egyptian forces are robust enough to prevent a complete collapse of security. Moreover, Salopek's murder has raised risk awareness, prompting a general improvement in basic personal countermeasures among foreigners. Outside Cairo, the threat of kidnapers targeting foreigners has been included in travel advice for many years. Foreigners are advised to be cautious, not to travel alone and not to travel overland through the Sinai Peninsula, between Cairo and Alexandria (a route known for banditry), between Cairo and Luxor (and other areas in southern Egypt) and routes towards Libya.

It is therefore not yet clear that the threat of kidnap of foreigners has significantly increased in Egypt. Sinai Province may attempt to replicate the kidnap and murder of Salopek, aiming not only to deter foreign investment but also to gain the sort of propaganda value that ISIS obtained in Syria in 2014. Moreover, the domestic political situation in Egypt is very fragile: if popular discontent with the government rises, law and order may begin to fail more widely, creating yet more space for radical Islamist groups to expand operations.

Libya. Libya's security and political trajectory look entirely negative. In view of the poor commercial and security climate, foreigners are travelling for essential business only, mainly to Tripoli, Misrata, Bayda and Tobruk. This has reduced targeting opportunities considerably. However, IS has a proven operational reach into all of these cities. Despite no recorded IS kidnaps targeting westerners in Libya, a high risk certainly exists. Outside urban centres, the risk is the highest of any area in North Africa. Moreover, there is little sign of any coherent peace process emerging, and the kidnap threat looks set to continue or increase into 2016.

Tunisia. The outlook for Tunisia is mixed. Tourism is likely to be badly affected by the Bardo and Sousse attacks, although some tourism is likely to continue. Tunisia has already stepped up its security presence in the capital and tourist areas, which may mitigate the kidnap risk to some extent. The lack of tourists is likely to reduce the amount of potential targets for kidnap, and the lack of organisational depth of IS in Tunisian cities may mean that militant attacks, if they occur, will be more rudimentary and unsophisticated.

Outside these areas, however, the situation is somewhat different. Foreigners continue to travel overland in areas where security is less tight, and the prospect of a foreigner being kidnapped should not be discounted.

Algeria. Despite a long and violent history of Islamist militancy, IS may not find it easy to conduct sustained kidnapping operations in Algeria. Presently, the threat of kidnap is known to be high in areas outside Algiers, underlined by Hervé Gourdel's murder. Gourdel was kidnapped whilst out hiking in a high-risk area. But, as a result, awareness of the threat has increased and risk management has improved. The Algerian security forces are also the most adept counterterrorism force in the region, implying that IS will find it difficult to grow substantially in strength. There is a strong argument to suggest that Algeria's long experience of extremely violent radical Islamism may have diluted IS's appeal among the population. In addition, Algeria's jihadi militants have a depth of experience and 'maturity', which might make it less likely for them to swap allegiance to IS. One more factor to consider, however, is President Abdulaziz Bouteflika's declining health. Once Bouteflika dies, a power struggle involving Algeria's security forces may ensue, and there are already signs that this is unfolding behind the scenes. If this occurs, it could offer IS affiliates space to expand.

Tunisia. IS activity in Tunisia has been largely the product of individual radicalisation, with little operational depth to attacks. Online IS media outlets have routinely threatened attacks in Tunisia, but the lack of a coherent operational structure in Tunisia has meant that much of the violence has been perpetrated by individuals or small groups. Major attacks to date – the Bardo Museum and the Sousse beach attacks – have targeted tourists. It may be that, as with Egypt, IS is pursuing an 'economic strategy' aimed at undermining Tunisia's tourist industry, which accounts for almost 7.5% of GDP. Attacks on tourists make for high-impact propaganda while being an accessible 'soft-target' for individuals or a small number of lightly-armed attackers. The 24 November attack on a bus carrying the Presidential Guard, which IS has claimed responsibility for, may herald more attacks on government and security forces' targets.

Libya. In central Libya, where IS controls territory, the picture is quite different. The group emulates the Syrian and Iraq model more closely than in any other North African country, albeit under completely different circumstances and with much fewer fighters and resources. In December 2014 and January 2015, there were two separate kidnaps of Egyptian Coptic Christian workers around Sirte. In February, IS released a propaganda video showing their mass beheading. Later in the year, the Eritrean Initiative on Refugee Rights reported that 86 Eritrean migrants had been kidnapped by IS east of Sirte.

IS has operated clandestinely in other urban centres, where the targeting has followed a more familiar insurgent-like strategy. Small explosions outside embassies have been the mainstay, interspersed with occasional higher-profile attacks against foreign and local targets. In Tripoli, five foreigners were among nine killed when two gunmen stormed the Corinthia Hotel in January 2015.

There have been no known IS kidnaps in major urban centres, although other Islamist groups, such as Libya Dawn, an enemy of IS, have kidnapped Tunisian diplomats and Libyan politicians in Tripoli. But the presence of operational cells in Tripoli and elsewhere carries an implied risk, and without doubt, the kidnap and murder of a foreigner would complement its propaganda strategy. Most international organisations have evacuated their expatriate staff, and it may be that the simple absence of foreigners is the major contributing factor to the lack of such incidents.

Outside urban centres Libya is a virtually ungoverned space where IS has a small but established presence. In these areas, the group enjoys freedom of movement and has engaged in kidnapping. In Libya's southern Fezzan Region, IS released a video depicting the mass execution of African Christian migrants kidnapped in April 2015.

Conclusion

IS has expanded in different ways, to different strengths, and in different contexts across the region.

This heterogeneity has prompted a range of strategies in each country. The most pressing concern lies in Libya, where IS strategy and expansion have mirrored ISIS in Iraq and Syria most closely. The result has been a stark increase in the kidnap risk, and several high-profile mass executions of captives. It is possible that IS will continue to expand, owing in most part to a disjointed security sector and ineffective governance.

Elsewhere, high-profile incidents have triggered security responses in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia. In 2016, attacks by IS-linked groups are probably inevitable, and the possibility of high-profile kidnappings is very real. With the exception of Libya, however, security forces across the region are generally robust and may be able in many cases to counter IS. More in question, however, is the capacity of the Egyptian state, and the will of its increasingly polarised population, to withstand the growing IS threat.

Companies with staff working in North Africa should ensure that they are properly trained and fully aware of the political and security context. Strong personal security awareness and informed and appropriate risk management measures can mitigate the kidnap risk, and make kidnapping prohibitively difficult for all but the most determined attackers.

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Terra Firma Risk Management provides risk and crisis management support to businesses, private individuals, governments and organizations worldwide. Our specialist advisers have handled over 650 critical incidents, including kidnapping, wrongful detention, malicious product tampering, extortion and maritime piracy. Our clients receive a discreet and personal service tailored to their needs.

We are retained by XL Catlin a leading global insurance company, to provide their policy-holders with comprehensive pre-incident support and advice and an exclusive, guaranteed crisis response.