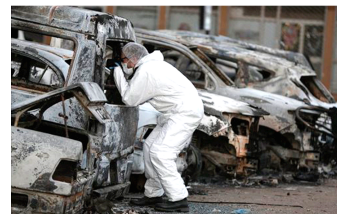


## TERRORISM IN WEST AFRICA: IS GHANA NEXT?

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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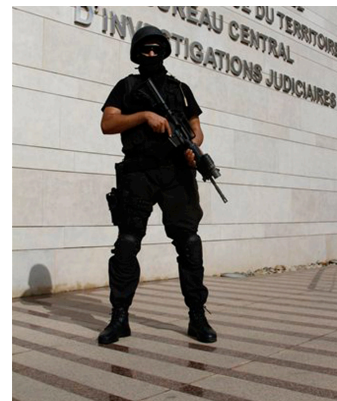
Forensic workers wear protective gear and examine burnt out cars outside the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Sunday, Jan. 17, 2016. The overnight seizure of a luxury hotel in Burkina Faso's capital by al-Qaida-linked extremists ended Saturday when Burkina Faso and French security forces killed four jihadist attackers and freed more than 126 people, the West African nation's president said. (Source: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba.)

## THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS) VS. MOROCCO: PROACTIVE POLICIES LIMIT IS SUCCESS

By Richard J. Pera

On February 19, 2016, Moroccan authorities raided an Islamic State (IS) cell, confiscating substances probably intended to produce [biological or chemical weapons](#). Though alarming, this event reflected the continued success of Moroccan security forces in preempting IS attacks in the Kingdom. How has IS operated in Morocco, what circumstances and actions have limited its success, and what can we expect going forward? [more...](#)

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A commando from Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations stands guard on Monday Sept. 14, 2015, in Sale, Morocco. Morocco's counterterrorism unit has announced the dismantling of a militant cell based in the southern city of Essaouira that was in contact with the Islamic State group. (Source: AP Photo/Paul Schemm.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Terrorism in West Africa: A New Scourge

In addition to the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria and its extension to other countries in the Lake Chad Basin, since January 2016 two major terrorist attacks have fundamentally shaken the security landscape in West Africa, underscoring terrorism as an emerging threat to the region. In January, gunmen [stormed the Splendid Hotel](#) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, taking hostages and holding the hotel for several hours. Security forces were ultimately able to successfully free hundreds of hostages, but not before 29 were killed and approximately 50 injured in the attack. In early March, a similar attack took place in the resort town of Grand-Bassam in Cote d'Ivoire, as gunmen [stormed three separate hotels](#), killing approximately 20 and injuring scores of others.

These attacks are similar in nature to the November 2015 [attack that took place in Bamako](#), Mali, at a Radisson Blu hotel. Gunmen stormed the hotel lobby and held more than 100 guests hostage for several hours. Approximately 21 were killed. The hotel was hosting an international delegation that was working with the Malian government on a peace process to help end the insurgency that has been raging since 2012. Attacks in all three countries focused on locations popular with Western and diplomatic communities.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has [claimed responsibility](#) for all these attacks, stating that they were [in response](#) to the French-led intervention in Mali. Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire both currently [contribute troops](#) to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali, called MINUSMA. Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire have also provided [significant logistical and military support](#) to Operation Barkhane, France's counterterrorism mission in the Sahel.

The attack in Mali was tragic but unsurprising, given that the country has been in direct conflict with Islamist groups. The attacks in Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, however, were jarring. Neither country had ever experienced a terrorist attack until 2016. Many analysts insist that these attacks demonstrate a more sophisticated terrorist capability, as well as the [ability](#) and [desire to extend the terrorist threat](#) to new countries.

## Ghana Next?

In mid-March, less than a week after the Grand-Bassam attack, Ghana's National Security Council, chaired by President John Dramani Mahama, met to discuss the [growing threat of terrorism in West Africa](#). After the meeting, the government declared there to be a credible terrorist threat across the subregion and urged Ghanaian citizens to be vigilant.

In mid-April, a [leaked](#) internal security memo put many in Ghana on edge. According to the memo—originally meant for the country's immigration service—based on intelligence obtained from attackers implicated in the Grand-Bassam incident, Ghana and Togo were believed to be next on AQIM's target list. Ghana in particular has been chosen so as to



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destroy the belief that AQIM could or would only target Francophone countries. The memo recommended enhanced border security, especially at the northern border with Burkina Faso, and profiling of those coming from Mali, Libya, and Niger. President Mahama was quick to address the memo, urging citizens [not to panic](#).

Until recently, Ghana has had little experience with terrorism. In August 2015, a few university-level students [traveled to Syria](#) to join the Islamic State. Beyond this development, there is little to currently suggest that Ghana has any domestic or homegrown terrorism threat yet, although some have expressed concern over the potential [allure of radicalism](#) for Ghana's frustrated (and unemployed) youth. Nonetheless, the country's porous borders and sizable tourism sector suggest that a terrorist attack is not out of the realm of possibility.

Unfortunately, this may be the new reality that many countries in West Africa will begin to grapple with. Ghana, Togo, Benin, and others may find themselves unwitting targets as terrorist groups continue to expand their sphere of influence and impact. Immediate steps that countries in the region can take to combat the spread of terrorism include improved border control and management and increased intelligence-sharing and regional cooperation. These recent attacks have shown that addressing transnational threats requires a concerted group effort.

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On February 19, 2016, Moroccan authorities raided an Islamic State (IS) cell, confiscating substances probably intended to produce [biological or chemical weapons](#). Though alarming, this event reflected the continued success of Moroccan security forces in preempting IS attacks in the Kingdom. How has IS operated in Morocco, what circumstances and actions have limited its success, and what can we expect going forward?

## IS in Morocco

The number of IS fighters in Morocco is unknown. Through December 2015, about [1,200 Moroccans had left to fight for IS in Syria and Iraq, compared to 170 Algerians and 6,000 Tunisians](#). Some have returned to Morocco. These figures do not include IS-pledged Moroccans who emigrated to Europe; one of the November 2015 Paris suicide bombers was a Moroccan citizen.

In Morocco, IS fighters are found among groups of disenfranchised youths in urban areas such as Casablanca, Fez, and Marrakesh. They are also encountered in rural areas, near the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, and Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. The Morocco-Algeria and Algeria-Libya borders have been closed for some time, but that does not seem to have impeded movement of personnel and equipment between Morocco and Libya, where IS is entrenched.

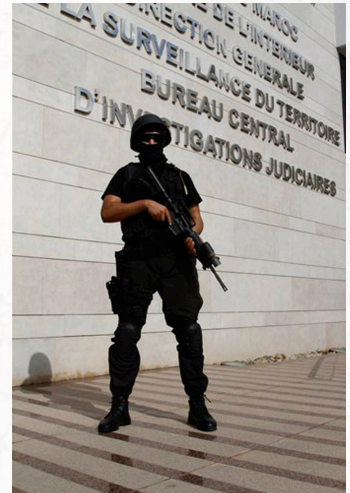
Unlike in Algeria, IS has few affiliates in Morocco. Several [Algerian groups have defected](#) to IS from al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) since 2014. There have been no such defections in Morocco, where AQIM continues pose a threat. In fact, the last major terrorist attack in the Kingdom was the [bombing of Djema al Fna Square](#) in Marrakesh in April 2011; AQIM was blamed for the attack.

IS has supported its followers in Morocco via an aggressive Internet and social media campaign. [IS has called on fighters](#) “to oust the apostate . . . government of . . . Morocco and replace [it] with an Islamic regime based on Sharia law.” IS videos regularly [attack](#) Morocco’s king, government, and religious leaders.

In the [February 2016 raid](#), police arrested 10 IS fighters, including a 16-year-old, possibly an intended suicide bomber, and confiscated computers, communications equipment, foreign passports, uniforms, automatic weapons, ammunition, and substances that [suggest the group](#) may have been [planning to release](#) chemical and biological agents during an attack. The group’s target list included the Sofitel resort hotel in Essaouira, Morocco Mall in Casablanca, and the parliament building in Rabat. The planned attack was [described](#) as a “commando” operation—the “most dangerous ever.”

## The Moroccan Government—Proactive and Effective

Rabat [claimed](#) to have dismantled at least 31 IS-linked cells since 2013. In fact, the only successful IS attack against Morocco took place outside the country: in April 2015, IS detonated a bomb outside the [Moroccan Embassy](#) in Tripoli, Libya, causing minor damage.



A commando from Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations stands guard on Monday Sept. 14, 2015, in Sale, Morocco. Morocco's counterterrorism unit has announced the dismantling of a militant cell based in the southern city of Essaouira that was in contact with the Islamic State group. (Source: AP Photo/Paul Schemm.)

Besides the raid described above, in [April 2015](#), Moroccan police broke up an IS cell near Melilla, arresting six members. In [July 2015](#), authorities arrested eight trained fighters, tasked by IS leaders to establish a “task force . . . to execute terrorist activities.” In [January 2016](#), security forces arrested seven fighters near Casablanca, and in [March 2016](#), authorities broke up an IS cell that was based in Marrakesh and Smara (Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara).

Unique circumstances and government actions have made Morocco effective, limiting IS’s success in the country:

- Geography—Morocco does not share a border with Libya. Therefore, IS personnel who travel to and from Libya normally cross Tunisia and Algeria, which also oppose IS. [Algiers has been particularly effective](#) against IS, and Morocco has benefited.
- High Military Investment—[Morocco ranks 14th worldwide](#) in military expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). By comparison, Algeria ranks eighth. This is a major investment, given that Morocco does not enjoy significant oil and gas revenues like Algeria.
- Well-Integrated Counterterrorism Bureaucracy—In March 2015, Morocco [established](#) the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ), which empowered a single office to conduct terrorism investigations. In May 2015, King Muhammad VI [appointed](#) Abdellatif Hammouchi, already Director General of Territorial Surveillance (DGST; head of domestic intelligence), to be Director General of National Safety (DGSN; i.e., head of the national police). These decisions contributed to an integrated counterterrorism effort: a single Ministry of the Interior (MOI) official—Hammouchi—now oversees domestic intelligence, police operations, and investigations. Of note, the United Nations [described](#) Moroccan intelligence as the “most powerful” in the Middle East.
- Effective International Cooperation—Morocco has redoubled cooperation with Western services. The State Department [described](#) Morocco’s counterterrorism efforts and cooperation as “highly effective.” After the November 2015 Paris bombings, Morocco [provided](#) critical intelligence that allowed French police to locate the Belgian-born Moroccan terrorist who planned the attacks.
- Economic Opportunities—Areas with abject poverty have been breeding grounds for IS recruiters who promise salaries and benefits for fighters. A series of ambitious economic policies in Morocco have [reduced poverty](#) to 9 percent from 16 percent by 2010. In a country of 33 million, 1.7 million Moroccans were lifted above the poverty threshold.
- Positive Democratic Developments—Morocco avoided violence in the 2011 “Arab Spring” in part because the king responded quickly to protestors’ demands. The widely accepted constitution of 2011 ensured power-sharing between the king and parliament and guaranteed human rights. Indeed, the king is not an absolute monarch like his father, King Hassan II. Today, Morocco is a relatively open nation compared with its neighbors; for example, its [Internet penetration rate](#) stands at 58 percent, far higher than Algeria’s (27) and Tunisia’s (48).
- Religious Policies—Morocco has implemented religious policies aimed at countering extremist ideology. The king, who traces his lineage to the Prophet, controls the nation’s mosques and religious instruction; the government has [emphasized](#) Morocco’s *Maliki rite* of Islam, which espouses moderation and tolerance. In 2015, the king [founded](#) the “Institute for the Training of Imams” and the “Foundation for African Ulemas” (Islamic theologians) to help guide religious leaders.

## Future Considerations

*The Times* [described](#) Morocco as the “last safe haven in North Africa,” and the British Foreign Office [indicated](#) that Morocco has a lower risk of terrorist attacks than France and Spain. Indeed, Morocco’s counterterrorism approach against IS has been exemplary. Morocco has emphasized human rights and economic, political, and cultural development. Its security forces have managed to [strike a delicate balance](#): “They want to demonstrate capacity to apprehend suspects without scaring away potential tourists” ([tourism](#) totals over 18 percent of GDP).

Morocco's laudable record against IS likely will come to an end at some point. The worst case scenario would be an attack against a major tourist facility, a major urban economic or cultural center, or government facilities or senior officials in the capital. If such an attack occurs, the king likely will be well positioned to rally the nation and move forward.

In the long term, to help thwart IS recruitment, Morocco should strive to address youth unemployment, which has been climbing and currently stands at [20 percent](#). Likewise, the government should take steps to mitigate [corruption](#). Finally, Rabat must remain vigilant as IS is unlikely to give up its vision of extending the caliphate across North Africa to Europe.

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