The evolving impact of violent non-state actors on North African foreign policies during the Arab Spring: insurgent groups, terrorists and foreign fighters

Michael J. Schumacher & Peter J. Schraeder

To cite this article: Michael J. Schumacher & Peter J. Schraeder (2018): The evolving impact of violent non-state actors on North African foreign policies during the Arab Spring: insurgent groups, terrorists and foreign fighters, The Journal of North African Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2018.1525014

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1525014

Published online: 21 Sep 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 48

View Crossmark data
The evolving impact of violent non-state actors on North African foreign policies during the Arab Spring: insurgent groups, terrorists and foreign fighters

Michael J. Schumacher and Peter J. Schraeder
Department of Political Science, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT
This article explores the evolving foreign policy influence of three violent non-state actors – insurgent groups, terrorist organisations and foreign fighters – in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia during the Arab Spring and beyond. It draws on a unique dataset (1970–2015) compiled by the authors to explore whether countries or geographical regions experiencing various forms of political unrest, such as North Africa during the Arab Spring, exhibit greater levels of violence by violent non-state actors. North African leaders have responded to this violence by making the pursuit of national security their primary foreign policy goal. This response has led to the marginalisation of other expected benefits of the Arab Spring, including socio-economic development, human rights reforms and democratisation. North African leaders – old and new alike – have instead coordinated with regional and international partners in the pursuit of common national security-oriented foreign policy objectives, most notably counterterrorism.

KEYWORDS Insurgent groups; terrorists; foreign fighters; foreign policy; Arab Spring; North Africa

Introduction

One of the most striking foreign policy developments associated with the Arab Spring has been the intensification of violence across North Africa by a proliferating number of violent non-state actors. These include insurgent groups, terrorist organisations and foreign fighters. This development is puzzling; observers generally anticipated that the Arab Spring would result in the socio-economic and political-military transformation of North African societies for the better, contributing to a decrease in violence. The opposite has occurred, even in Tunisia which successfully transitioned from dictatorship to democracy. North Africa’s only democracy struggles with terrorist attacks and insurgencies on its southeastern and southwestern borders. It further stands out as the largest international source of foreign fighters who have
travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Macdonald and Waggoner 2018). Unsurprisingly, other North African countries are struggling as well.

The emergence of violent non-state actors and their influence on North African foreign policy are partially fuelled by the traditional foreign policy dilemmas of porous national borders and expanses of territory lacking effective state control (e.g. see Varin and Abubakar 2017). As Herbst (2000, 11) explains in an analysis of Sub-Saharan Africa with implications for North Africa: ‘The fundamental problem facing state-builders in Africa – be they colonial kings, colonial governors, or presidents in the independence era – has been to project authority over inhospitable territories that contain relatively low densities of people’. All five North African countries have struggled to maintain control over porous borders, especially in the sparsely inhabited portions of their countries that encompass the Sahara Desert. Additional literatures within the Political Science subfields of Comparative Politics and International Relations – most notably those that focus on terrorism – provide additional explanations for the emergence of violent non-state actors. These range from socio-economic factors, such as poverty and unemployment, to identity-based explanations (i.e. the roles of race, ethnicity and religion) and those focusing on regime type (i.e. democracies versus dictatorships) (see e.g. Gassebner and Luechinger 2011; Sandler 2014).

This article instead begins with the basic proposition that countries or geographical regions experiencing various forms of political unrest, ranging from anti-government demonstrations, general strikes and riots, to major government crises and government purges, exhibit greater levels of violence by violent non-state actors (e.g. see Campos and Gassebner 2013; see also Schumacher and Schraeder 2018). Two specific mechanisms are crucial to understanding the relationship between political unrest and the emergence of violent non-state actors, which in turn affect the foreign policies of individual countries. First, political unrest reflects public disenchantment with a ruling regime that can either spawn or be exploited by violent non-state actors in search of additional willing partners. For example, it has been demonstrated that countries experiencing riots are prone to terrorism as well (Schumacher and Schraeder 2018). An excellent case is Egypt in 2013, when rioters clashed with Egypt’s national security forces in the aftermath of a military coup d’etat that overthrew the democratically elected regime of President Morsi. In that year, Egypt not only experienced the largest number of riots (twenty-five) of any North African country, but it also experienced the largest number of terrorist attacks (315 separate attacks) (START 2017).

Second, political unrest reflects declining regime control, which permits disenchanted, violence-prone actors to move more freely within a given country or geographical region. It therefore should be easier for such actors to carry out terrorist or insurgent attacks against the state. An example is
offered by government purges, in which ruling regimes remove an entire class of individuals from positions of government power for ethnic, religious or political reasons. It should come as no surprise that purged individuals might be willing to undertake violent attacks against the regime that removed them from positions of power. This was one of the many lessons learned in the aftermath of the U.S.-ordered purge in 2003 of tens of thousands of Ba’ath party members from the Iraqi government, including the dissolution of the Iraqi military; purged soldiers in particular used their military training to great effect in undertaking terrorist attacks against the U.S.-backed Iraqi regime (Diamond 2005).

The impacts of these violent non-state actors on North African foreign policies are striking. At the bare minimum, a sharp increase in violent acts since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 that is documented in the following pages has placed growing demands on North African national security bureaucracies. These include the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both established and new foreign policy elites have struggled to find solutions. Second, the solution of choice has been the prioritisation of national security as the foreign policy goal. This priority has led to the marginalisation of other expected benefits of the Arab Spring, including socio-economic development, human rights reforms and democratisation. North African leaders have instead coordinated with regional and international partners in the pursuit of common national security-oriented foreign policy objectives, most notably counterterrorism.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. The first three sections focus on the foreign policy impacts of three violent non-state actors: insurgent groups (Section 1), terrorists (Section 2) and foreign fighters (Section 3). We specifically focus on the evolution of violent acts by each of these actors during the pre-Arab Spring (prior to 2011) and post-Arab Spring (2011-present) eras. All five North African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia) are included in the analysis. Section 4 provides concluding remarks. Our treatment of violent non-state actors is not meant to be exhaustive (i.e. we do not treat every terrorist organisation currently operating in North Africa), nor do we claim to provide definitive in-depth analyses of all three violent non-state actors selected for analysis. We instead provide modest initial reflections about the evolving impact of these groups on foreign policy. A note about data is in order. The North African analysis presented in the following pages draws on an original dataset that the authors compiled as part of a broader project devoted to understanding violent non-state actors in all regions of the world from 1970 to 2015. We specifically collected data on insurgent groups, terrorists and foreign fighters. These data allow us to discern patterns in the foreign policy impacts of violent non-state actors in North Africa.
Insurgent groups

North Africa historically has experienced four types of guerrilla insurgencies, according to a typology developed by Clapham (1998, 7). First, ‘liberation insurgencies’ have been directed against colonial empires unwilling to cede power peacefully. The Algerian War of Independence against French colonial rule is a classic example (Heggoy 1972). Other insurgent groups have sought greater rights for specific regions of already independent North African countries. In the extreme, such ‘separatist insurgencies’ have sought the secession and recognition of their territories as independent countries. For example, the Polisario Front, which started as an anti-colonial insurgency, sought to create an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) from territory claimed and controlled by Morocco. A third set of guerrilla leaders, what are best described as ‘reform insurgencies’, have sought to maintain the territorial integrity of existing countries. They nonetheless are committed to overthrowing existing regimes and reordering state-society relations. The classic North African example involves the Algerian Civil War, in which Islamist insurgent groups emerged in the aftermath of a 1992 military coup d’état that cancelled a second round of legislative elections expected to lead to an Islamist party victory at the ballot box. These and other Islamist-inspired insurgencies are often intent on creating a theocratic form of governance inspired by Islam. Finally, ‘warlord insurgencies’ typically arise in cases where the insurgency is directed towards a change in leadership which does not entail the creation of a state any different from that which it seeks to overthrow, and which may involve the creation of a personal territorial fiefdom separate from existing state structures and boundaries (Clapham 1998, 7).

Typically lacking a coherent vision of the future beyond the more immediate goal of overthrowing the regime in power, such insurgencies in the extreme are unable to reestablish centralised states after achieving victory, often leading to the continuation of conflict among competing insurgent leaders and their respective armies. It would only be in the aftermath of the Arab Spring that the most extreme variant of warlord insurgencies – successful regime overthrow but with rival insurgent factions unable to recreate a functioning centralised state – would be realised in the case of Libya.

The Arab Spring clearly had an impact on insurgent activity in North Africa (see Table 1). In the five years preceding the Arab Spring (2006–10), North Africa experienced on average a mere 0.8 insurgent attacks per year (fewer than one insurgent attack per year). The region was therefore relatively stable, at least in terms of insurgent activity. This number increased in the five years (2011–15) following the beginning of the Arab Spring to a regional average of 35.6 insurgent attacks per year. This represented a forty-five-fold increase in insurgent activity from pre- to post-Arab Spring. Insurgent activity
Table 1. Insurgent activity in North Africa (2006–15).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>0.8</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>80</td>
<td><strong>35.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

gradually intensified after the beginning of the Arab Spring, from one insurgent attack in 2011, to five attacks in 2012, 21 attacks in 2013, 71 attacks in 2014 and 80 attacks in 2015 (the last year for which data are available). During this period, all North African countries except Morocco experienced an increase in insurgent attacks. Egypt and Libya were the most affected, experiencing 44 and 28 insurgent attacks, respectively, in 2015. In this same year, Tunisia was marked by 6 insurgent attacks and Algeria was marked by 2.

The Libyan civil war provides one of the most dramatic examples of post-Arab Spring insurgent activity with implications for the shaping of North African foreign policy. As part of this conflict, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) intervened militarily in Libya to initially protect the civilian population and then support rebels (UNSC 2011; see also Tang Abomo 2018). The intervention and no-fly zone over Libya lasted approximately seven months, ultimately resulting in regime overthrow, including the death of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi at the hands of insurgent forces in October 2011. Following their military ‘success’, NATO forces withdrew from the country, which lacked an effective central government. Several insurgent groups fought for control (Kuperman 2013). Libya descended into further civil war and entered the ranks of a ‘failed state’.

Insurgent-backed political factions serve as an important obstacle to creating a stable, unified government and foreign policy (Human Rights Watch 2018). As of July 2018, Libya is divided between a UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in western Libya (headquartered in Tripoli), and a rival Interim Government in eastern Libya. An additional power centre involves Khalid Mishri, who is the elected representative of the High Council of State, which serves as an advisory body to the GNA. Two additional actors allied with the Interim Government include the Libyan National Army (LNA) under the leadership of General Khalifa Haftar, and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, which serves as Libya’s legislative body. The Libyan Speaker of the House is Aguila Saleh Issa. To these core actors can be added dozens of insurgent groups, based on race, ethnicity, ideology or religion.

How do foreign policy arrangements fare in a failed state? The lack of a stable, unified governing apparatus since 2011 makes it difficult for Libya to coordinate an effective foreign policy. The resulting unrest is illustrated by the deaths of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other staff members during attacks on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi in 2012. This event became fodder for Republican Party political action committees intent on criticising the foreign policy record of the Obama administration and specifically Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who emerged as the Democratic Party candidate during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. The absence of a functioning central state also facilitated ISIS’s short-lived ability to establish control over the Libyan city of Sirte beginning in 2015 (Wehrey
This was trumpeted by news outlets as the creation of ISIS’s first ‘colony’ in North Africa (Kirkpatrick, Hubbard, and Schmitt 2015). Trade arrangements with other countries all but collapsed, even in Libya’s lucrative oil economy, which saw oil exports fall to a quarter of what they were prior to 2011. (Oil revenues, however, recently rebounded according to a 2018 statement by the Libyan central bank (Lewis 2018; see also El-Tablawy 2017).) Many foreign investors fled the country in 2012, suspending major infrastructure projects, which were looted as insurgent groups fought for control (Yossef and Cerami 2015). The U.S. Department of State has maintained a travel warning for Libya, stating that Libyan authorities do not have control over much of the country (U.S. Department of State 2018). The lack of effective control over Libyan land and sea borders has exacerbated tense relations with Europe over undocumented immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who use Libya as a transit point.

Egypt has witnessed two forms of insurgent activity. The first involved the spill-over of Libya’s civil war onto Egyptian territory. This activity resulted in an enhanced focus on border security, including a series of Egyptian military airstrikes against ISIS-held territory in Derna after ISIS forces beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians from Egypt (Aboulenein and Elgood 2017). Egypt has also struggled since 2011 with an increase in homegrown insurgent activity on the Sinai Peninsula, which resulted in the deaths of over 100 Egyptian police and security personnel in 2017 (Walsh and Youssef 2017). Insurgent attacks increased after the Egyptian military overthrew the Morsi regime. Some of these insurgent groups are affiliated with ISIS and have received logistical support and weapons from the now-defunct caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Human rights groups have denounced atrocities committed by both the government and insurgent forces. They have especially criticised the Egyptian military over a series of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and the targeting of pro-Islamist civilians in the region (Walsh and Youssef 2017).

Tunisia has been affected by insurgent activity that straddles the country’s southeastern border with Libya and the southwestern border with Algeria. Insurgents in the Chaambi Mountains region of Kasserine near the Algerian border have been active since at least 2012. This in part prompted Tunisia to sign a security pact with Algeria to establish joint patrols along the border (Ben Khalid 2015). One of the most devastating attacks occurred in 2014 when insurgents attacked two Tunisian military checkpoints, killing fourteen soldiers and injuring twenty-five. In what became one of the deadliest military confrontations in Tunisia since independence, Tunisian security forces responded by undertaking a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign within the region (Tajine 2014). Like Egypt, Tunisia has experienced spill-over from the Libyan civil war. One of the most prominent examples occurred in 2016 when ISIS militants attempted to seize a military outpost in Ben Guerdane along the Tunisian-Libyan border. Tunisian security agencies have
attempted to work with their Libyan counterparts to solve the border crisis. Such arrangements nonetheless have proved difficult to coordinate due to Libya’s political dysfunction. Tunisia has periodically resorted to closing border crossings to prevent militants from entering the country (Amara and Markey 2016). In 2016, it began construction of a border security wall in coordination with the U.S. Defense Department’s Threat Reduction Agency and the German government (Nkala 2018).

Algeria witnessed a slight increase in insurgent activity during the post-Arab Spring, but it was minor in comparison to the full-blown civil war of the 1990s. The Algerian regime has continued an aggressive counterinsurgency approach in coordination with international partners. It has worked with European partners on the European Union’s (EU) Strategy for Security and Development on the Sahel (EEAS 2016), including launching in October 2017 the inaugural EU-Algeria high-level dialogue on regional security and terrorism (EEAS 2017). The Algerian regime has worked with regional bodies, such as the G-5 Sahel that is comprised of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, as well as the Joint Operational Army Staffs Committee (CEMOC), inclusive of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Relations within these two groups has been strained, as witnessed by the G-5 holding a meeting in March 2018 without Algeria (The North Africa Post 2018). The charge was that Algeria was not doing enough to stem attacks by insurgent groups within the partner countries. Algeria nonetheless is perceived within the international community as an anchor of regional stability. For example, the International Crisis Group (ICG) cited Algeria’s positive role in attempting to mitigate several conflicts in the North African ‘neighbourhood’, including in Libya and Mali (ICG 2015, 13–21).

Morocco is the one North African country that largely has been spared from a growth in insurgent activity during the Arab Spring. Morocco nonetheless has been confronted with a decades-old separatist movement in the Western Sahara that continues to affect Moroccan foreign policy. First, as of July 2018, the SADR is recognised by as many as forty-five states and the African Union. The SADR also maintains a small overseas diplomatic network that challenges Morocco’s sole claim to sovereignty. Algeria is the only North African country that hosts a SADR embassy. This diplomatic step and Algeria’s historic support for the Polisario Front continues to strain Moroccan-Algerian ties (Rosenblum and Zartman 2008). It has further prevented the effective functioning of regional initiatives, such as the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA). Morocco has launched foreign policy initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa, recently rejoining the AU, in the hope of gaining regional support for the Moroccan position that the Western Sahara is an integral part of Morocco (Mohamed 2017). It remains to be seen, however, whether the Arab Spring has affected the foreign policy calculus of either Morocco or the SADR regarding the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict.
only clear conclusion, as demonstrated by our dataset, is that the Arab Spring has not resulted in enhanced insurgent activity in Morocco, including that related to the Western Sahara.

**Terrorists**

Terrorist attacks, the second type of violent non-state acts included in our dataset, dramatically increased in North Africa, from 102 attacks in 2010 (the year preceding the beginning of the Arab Spring) to a peak of 1,158 terrorist attacks in 2015, the last year for which data are available (see Figure 1). The historical context is striking (see Table 2). In the decades preceding the Arab Spring, terrorist attacks in North Africa ranged from an average of 1.5 attacks a year during the 1970s to an average of 24.3 attacks a year during the 2000s. Some of these attacks had devastating consequences. In Tunisia, an al-Qaeda-sponsored suicide attack in 2002 against the El Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Jerba resulted in a sharp decline in tourist visitors. Algeria was the target of the vast majority of terrorist attacks in North Africa during the 1990s and the 2000s, as well as for the year preceding the beginning of the Arab Spring. It averaged a peak of 154 terrorist attacks per year at the height of the Algerian Civil War.

The first year of the Arab Spring actually witnessed a decrease in terrorist attacks in North Africa, from 102 attacks in 2010 to 39 attacks in 2011.

![Figure 1. Terrorist incidents in North Africa, 1970–2015.](image)

Notes: Data includes successful and thwarted terrorist attacks regardless of casualty count. Countries included in the data are Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. Data is collected from START (2017).
Table 2. Terrorist attacks in North Africa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>154.3</td>
<td>112.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>315.0</td>
<td>346.0</td>
<td>582.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>293.0</td>
<td>730.0</td>
<td>542.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Africa</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>41.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>24.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>102.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>39.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>151.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>659.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>1112.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>1158.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Global Terrorism Database (START 2017).
Optimism soon faded, however, as terrorist attacks increased dramatically. The North African region experienced an average of 624 terrorist incidents per year from 2011 to 2015. Egypt and Libya were the primary regional targets, averaging 262 and 325 terrorist attacks per year, respectively, from 2011 to 2015. Tunisia also witnessed an increase, experiencing an average of 14.6 attacks per year during this period. Only Morocco was largely spared, generating on average less than one terrorist attack per year. This case notwithstanding, the political unrest associated with the Arab Spring contributed to a dramatic rise in terrorist attacks to 1,158 in 2015.

Terrorist acts often have important foreign policy dimensions. To cite but three examples from the particularly violent years of 2014 and 2015: kidnapping for ransom spiked in Algeria as retaliation for the 2013–14 French military intervention in Mali; terrorists successfully targeted the Tunisian tourism industry by killing foreigners at a beach resort in Sousse and the Bardo Museum in Tunis; and an explosive device downed a chartered passenger aircraft flying mostly Russian tourists from Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, to Saint Petersburg, Russia, killing all 224 passengers (Awad and Hashem 2015). Terrorist organisations also develop guiding foreign policy principles. In August 2011, al-Qaeda’s North African branch – al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – released a two-part video that called for Muslims from all Arab Spring countries to join their organisation as an avenue for fighting against their oppressive governments (de Montesquiou 2011). Counterterrorism experts especially note the foreign policy role of ISIS in North Africa, which expanded following the June 2014 announcement of a new ‘worldwide caliphate’ with a capital in Raqqa, Syria (e.g. see Yourish, Watkins, and Giratikanon 2016). ISIS oversaw a small but effective foreign policy machinery that often took credit for terrorist attacks in North Africa. It courted existing terrorist organisations in North Africa to pledge loyalty to ISIS. For example, the Algerian terrorist group formerly known as Jund al-Khilafah fi Ard al-Jazair transformed itself into a branch of ISIS, entitled the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Algeria Province (ISIL-AP). ISIS foreign policy efforts, including recruitment, were facilitated by the publication of Dabiq, an online magazine.

North African regimes and the international community initially focused on the economic dimension of stemming terrorist violence during the first two years (2011–12) of the Arab Spring. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) estimated, for example, that the economic toll of the Arab Spring in North Africa from 2011 to 2013 was $800 billion (Calamur 2013). International partners underscored the need to address the socio-economic shortcomings of North African countries that were perceived as driving the Arab Spring. These proposals included reducing unemployment, especially among youth (World Bank 2014). Europe, the U.S. and Gulf countries offered economic packages to stabilise and re-launch North African economies. They anticipated that economic development would

Less than two years after the beginning of the Arab Spring, it became clear that economic aid packages were not having the desired effect. As described by a 2013 U.S. Congressional Research Services report, ‘tangible joint or coordinated U.S.-European initiatives to encourage political transitions and economic opportunities … have been modest at best’ (Archick and Mix 2013). Economists were concerned that the regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had all but stagnated. Transitional regimes embodied weakened systems of governance, which made it difficult to implement structural reforms that were being recommended by Western financial institutions and development banks. North African countries appeared to be locked in a vicious cycle of economic stagnation and social unrest. Political observers were concerned with the steady increase in terrorist attacks. As demonstrated by our data (refer back to Table 2), there were 659 terrorist attacks in North Africa in 2013, which represented a four-fold increase over the 151 attacks in 2012 and a seventeen-fold increase over the 39 attacks in 2011.

The net result of rising terrorist attacks against the backdrop of deteriorating economic conditions was that North African regimes and the international community increasingly emphasised the military dimension of counterterrorism, which by 2013 dominated foreign policy discussions (Archick and Mix 2013). In the case of Libya, these initiatives ultimately led in 2016 to a U.S.-supported military operation by Libya’s GNA and militia forces to defeat an expanding ISIS presence that was headquartered in Sirte (ICG 2017). Broader counterterrorism initiatives have been hampered by the lack of an effective Libyan central government. For example, a 2013–14 training effort by Great Britain, Turkey and the U.S. to rebuild a national army (the so-called General Purpose Force) failed, undermined by political-military divisions within Libya. A belief that Libya’s failed state facilitated terrorist activity was captured in a March 2017 hearing of the U.S. Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. ‘Despite the successful Libyan-led campaign against the ISIS stronghold in Sirte, along with other successes by different Libyan-armed groups against ISIS pockets in the west and east, the country remains at risk’, explained Wehrey (2017a), Senior Fellow in the Middle East Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He further warned that ‘scattered ISIS members are regrouping and al-Qaeda affiliated
fers who defected to ISIS are now returning back to al-Qaeda-linked groups, more experienced and battle-hardened’ (Wehrey 2017a).

The cornerstone of Tunisian counterterrorism efforts involved the Tunisian Parliament’s adoption of a new counterterrorism law in July 2015. As explained in the article by Dobbs and Schraeder on civil society actors in this issue of The Journal of North African Studies, local Tunisian and international human rights groups have criticised this legislation as violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Tunisia has sought international security partnerships, officially becoming a ‘major non-NATO ally’ in 2015. The administration of President Beji Caid Essebsi, which assumed office in 2014, approved Tunisia’s inclusion in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL at the UN General Assembly. The Essebsi administration also announced its willingness to serve as a pilot country for the Global Counterterrorism Forum’s (GCTF) International Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism Capacity-Building Clearinghouse Mechanism (ICCM) (U.S. Department of State 2016).

Egypt led a UN effort for more comprehensive coordination against international terrorism. An Egyptian official spoke at the UN in 2014 on behalf of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to denounce terrorism and encourage the international community to remain vigilant. Egypt later took part in the Sixth Committee session in New York to draft a new comprehensive convention on international terrorism (UNGA 2014). Egypt resumed active membership in the AU in 2014, after having been suspended for illegally removing democratically elected President Morsi. The new military-dominated regime led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took part with other AU members in the drafting of a comprehensive policy to combat terrorism in Africa (Allison 2016).

Algeria has adopted an aggressive counterterrorism approach especially in coordination with African partners. These activities have included ‘playing a key role in designing’ the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), serving since 2002 as the African Commissioner for Peace and Security, and hosting the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) and the African Police Organisation (AFRIPOL) (Teevan 2018). Algeria was selected at the end of 2017 as the AU’s counterterrorism coordinator (Middle East Monitor 2017). In this role, Algeria in April 2018 called on all African countries to draw up a continental African strategy to counter terrorism financing (Xinhua News Agency 2018). Algeria additionally has been on the forefront of addressing online radicalisation. It established the National Preventative Organ for the Fight against Infractions Linked to Information and Communication Technology (U.S. Department of State 2015). Algeria’s Ministry of Justice revised the Algerian criminal code to coincide with UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2199 (2015) to punish terrorists who incite violence using information and communication technologies.
Morocco has been the only country to substantially limit terrorism within its borders. Morocco has only experienced 36 terrorist attacks (less than 1 percent) of the 6,290 terrorist attacks that have occurred between 1970 and 2015 in North Africa. The only significant terrorist attack during the Arab Spring was the 2011 Marrakesh bombing that killed 17. This attack prompted adoption of a counterterrorism law that aggressively targeted terrorist cells and individuals suspected of actively aiding in terrorist planning (U.S. Department of State 2011). Moroccan foreign policy regarding terrorism focuses broadly on cooperation, training and intelligence. Morocco is a ‘major non-NATO ally’ and participates in multilateral peacekeeping operations across Africa, including the Phoenix Express maritime exercises and the Flintlock regional exercises. Morocco also hosts the annual African Lion exercises (AFRICOM 2017). Morocco’s efforts, like those of its North African counterparts, is demonstrative of the region’s central focus on counterterrorism measures.

**Foreign fighters**

Foreign fighters, the third type of violent non-state actor included in our dataset, are individuals who leave their home countries to intervene in a conflict on foreign soil. It is estimated that 335,118 foreign fighters have participated in 93 conflicts during the last two centuries, beginning with the Greek War of Independence in 1821 (Malet 2013). Foreign fighters typically join insurgencies to defend some transnational identity, which is either ethnically or ideologically based, or sometimes both. The globe has witnessed four broad types of foreign fighters according to a typology developed by Malet (2013) that delineates types of conflict (ethnic or non-ethnic) and the relationship of foreign fighters to the local fighters (co-ethnic or non-co-ethnic): ‘diasporans’ (co-ethnics fighting in an ethnic conflict), such as Tutsis who travelled from Burundi and Uganda to fight in the 1990–94 Rwandan civil war; ‘encroachers’ (co-ethnics fighting in a non-ethnic conflict), such as those who travelled to fight in the Texas Revolution (1835–36); ‘liberationists’ (non-co-ethnics fighting in an ethnic conflict), such as those who travelled to fight in the Afghanistan War (1978–92); and ‘true believers’ (non-co-ethnics fighting in a non-ethnic conflict), such as those who travelled to fight in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39).

North Africa historically has had limited experience as a regional setting for civil conflicts that have attracted large numbers of foreign fighters. Among the potential exceptions prior to the Arab Spring that are cited by Malet (2017) include Tunisians who fought for the National Liberation Front (FLN) during the Algerian War of Independence against French colonial rule, and foreign fighters from across the Middle East and North Africa who fought in the Algerian civil war. The Syrian civil war has emerged as the defining Arab Spring example of a heavily foreign fighter-driven conflict. According to our
dataset, at least 30,126 foreign fighters, broken down by 74 different countries of origin, travelled to Syria to fight for ISIS from 2012 to 2015 (the last year for which data are available).

The most fascinating foreign policy aspect of the Syrian civil war for the purposes of this article is North Africa’s role as a major source of foreign fighters to ISIS (see Table 3). Tunisia, with 6,000 foreign fighters, is the largest global source of foreign fighters. The magnitude of this number is demonstrated by the fact that the second country on the list, Saudi Arabia, has served as the source of only 2,500 foreign fighters. Morocco, with 1,500 foreign fighters, is also a major contributor. Egypt and Libya occupy a middle range for the North African countries, contributing 600 fighters each. Finally, Algeria is the source of 170 foreign fighters to ISIS. The five North African countries together have served as the source of 29 percent (8,870) of all foreign fighters to ISIS.

The foreign policy challenge posed by North African foreign fighters does not end when they leave for a foreign conflict. It is magnified when they return home with military training and uncertain intentions. The Tunisian case is once again illustrative: sources note that between 500 and 800 of Tunisia’s foreign fighters have returned home (Gall 2017; BBC 2017). The Tunisian foreign policy establishment, like their counterparts throughout North Africa, view foreign fighter returnees as a threat. The primary concern of policymakers is that foreign fighter returnees, regardless of what they say upon returning home, may remain sympathetic to a radical religious ideology that will potentially spread within their communities. North African security establishments are particularly concerned with those who may attempt to return clandestinely with the intent of undertaking terrorist attacks. As history has demonstrated in the case of Tunisia, for example, it only takes one successful terrorist attack to have a major impact on the Tunisian economy. The foreign fighter returnee challenge for North African foreign policymakers and the global community has intensified due to the ‘exodus’ of foreign fighters and their families following the collapse of ISIS’s caliphate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Foreign Fighters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>2,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>2,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzistan</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

North African Total: 8,870  World Total: 30,126

in Syria and Iraq (Chulov, Grierson, and Swaine 2018). As of July 2018, more than 2,000 foreign women and children associated with ISIS were being held in a ‘legal limbo’ in camps in Syria. Neither their home countries nor the authorities running the camps want them. ‘You told us to leave ISIS and we left, but we are still considered ISIS’, explained Sarah Ibrahim, a 31-year old woman from Morocco who accompanied her foreign fighter husband to Syria. ‘So who is responsible for us? Who will determine our fate?’ (quoted in Hubbard 2018).

North African countries are slowly developing legal frameworks for dealing with individuals who renounce violence and who wish to return home (see e.g. U.S. Library of Congress 2017). A challenge involves determining which national security agency should be taking the lead. Should it be the Ministry of Defense (which typically handles counterinsurgency), the Ministry of the Interior (which typically handles counterterrorism), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which typically handles foreign policy), or some combination of the three? In Tunisia, responding to the foreign fighter returnee dilemma has led to a re-strengthening of the Ministry of Interior, which had been severely weakened in the post-revolutionary environment due to its central role in suppressing the population during the Ben Ali dictatorship. Its resurgence has led to public criticism that the Essebsi administration is resurrecting the mukhabarat-dominated policies of old in the name of counterterrorism. Indeed, the typical regime response across North Africa is to imprison returned foreign fighters as punishment for aiding an international terrorist organisation. This has often created a rift between government security forces and the wider populations of North African countries, with the latter being more willing to welcome home their sons and daughters. The net result is that the foreign fighter’s right to return home – and how they are treated after they arrive – have emerged as a human rights issue (U.S. Department of State 2016).

International partners are coordinating with North African regimes to address the foreign fighter challenge. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security dedicated a task force for combating terrorists and foreign fighter travel. This included $10 million in research grants to study and help combat the efforts of foreign terrorist organisations that encourage travel to conflict zones outside of the U.S. (DHS 2016). The UN system is also playing a role. This was demonstrated by UN Security Council Resolution 2178, which underscored that

foreign terrorist fighters increase the intensity, duration and intractability of conflicts, and may pose a serious threat to their States of origin, the States they transit through and the States to which they travel, as well as States neighbouring zones of armed conflict in which foreign terrorist fighters are active and that are affected by serious security burdens (UNSC 2014).
Europe is equally prominent in foreign fighter initiatives related to North Africa. For example, the EU and Switzerland hosted a foreign fighter’s initiative in Brussels in 2014 in which Algeria played an important role (Merz 2016). The International Centre for Counterterrorism at the Hague has established an issue area devoted to foreign fighters. It has increased partnerships with organisations in North Africa, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum chaired by Morocco (ICCT 2017). One of the results of this partnership was the ‘Hague-Marrakesh Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon’ (GCTF 2016). Recommendations focus on how to stop foreign fighters from travelling to fight, and what to do with fighters when and if they return. Although adoption of these recommendations has been slow, every North African country has signed on and has pledged to continue working to address the foreign fighter issue.

**Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this article was to explore the evolving influence on foreign policy of three violent non-state actors – insurgent groups, terrorist organisations and foreign fighters – during the Arab Spring and beyond. It draws on a unique dataset that covers the 1970–2015 period to demonstrate that countries or geographical regions experiencing various forms of political unrest, such as North Africa during the Arab Spring, exhibit greater levels of violence by violent non-state actors. Our findings are striking. North Africa experienced an increase in insurgent attacks from an average of 0.8 insurgent attacks per year in the five years preceding the Arab Spring (2006–10) to an average of 35.6 insurgent attacks per year in the five years following the beginning of the Arab Spring (2011–15). Terrorist attacks similarly increased from 102 attacks in 2010 to 1,158 attacks in 2015. In addition, North Africa is at the forefront of global concerns over foreign fighters. North Africa from 2012 to 2015 has contributed a striking 29 percent (8,870) of the globe’s 30,126 foreign fighters who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS. In short, North Africa has experienced rising levels of violence by violent non-state actors during the Arab Spring.

This article further demonstrates that North African leaders have responded to growing levels of violence by violent non-state actors by making the pursuit of national security their primary foreign policy goal. This response has led to the marginalisation of other expected benefits of the Arab Spring, including socio-economic development, human rights reforms and democratisation. North African leaders – old and new alike – have instead coordinated with regional and international partners to promote common national security-oriented foreign policy objectives, most notably counterterrorism. They have similarly responded to insurgent threats by adopting counterinsurgency programmes. The principal solution
for dealing with foreign fighter returnees is to place them in prison. Together these responses have led to critiques that the mukhabarat-dominated foreign policy tendencies of old have been at best refurbished with a more democratic face, as in the case of Tunisia. They have been at worst strengthened, as in the case of Egypt, where the military returned to power after the 2013 military coup d’état that ended the democratically elected regime of Mohamed Morsi. This is a point deserving of future research.

Notes

1. Three sources in particular were important to the creation of our dataset. The primary source of data on guerrilla insurgencies is the Banks and Wilson (2017) ‘Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive’. Data on terrorist attacks are drawn from the ‘Global Terrorism Database’ compiled by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START 2017). Finally, foreign fighter data are drawn from two sources: the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (Neumann 2015) housed at King’s College London, and the Soufan Group (2015), an independent think tank headquartered in Washington DC.

2. This is an imprecise number, derived from a journalistic source (the following wikipedia page that may not be fully updated). This figure nonetheless captures the existence of an alternative SADR diplomatic network (Wikipedia 2018).

3. Violent non-state actors are characterised as terrorists when they embody three definitional attributes: (1) threatening or killing civilians; (2) having in mind a wider audience as the target of the violent act; and (3) applying that strategy to achieve some political and/or religious end (e.g., Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoeﬂer 2004).

4. Another potential Arab Spring case would be the foreign fighters who have participated in Libya’s civil war. Systematic data on those fighters do not exist.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the U.S. Department of State [Linkage Grant #S-4480T-11-GR-055].

References


