

## **1267/CTC on ISIL in Africa (7 April 2022)**

Thank you Chairs; Excellencies, colleagues, esteemed participants, I am delighted and honoured to address this joint Committee meeting on ISIL in Africa. I want to thank my absent colleague Nina Marais for all the hard work she put into this, including preparation for me of these opening remarks. She would have wished to be here but was obliged to seize the opportunity to visit Dar Es Salaam for CT consultations with Tanzania.

The genesis of ISIL in Africa can be traced back to 2014, since when ISIL's growth there has been gradual but consistent. Presently ISIL has a footprint in all regions of the Continent, with some of the African provinces being among the most successful ISIL affiliates.

The evolution of ISIL in North Africa was ignited when the Ansar al Charia branch in Sirte, Libya declared allegiance to ISIL in September 2014. At the time Libya was of strategic significance to ISIL, in view of its geographical location at the crossroads between the Middle East, Africa and Europe, a gateway to expanding its so-called caliphate. At the time, Libya's

importance for ISIL was reflected in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's appointment of close aides to lead ISIL in Libya. Al-Baghdadi also sent emissaries to witness the pledge of allegiance by Ansar al Charia.

This was followed soon after by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in the Sinai Peninsula, publicly declaring allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in November 2014. Member States at the time noted that the declaration of loyalty to ISIL was a win-win, allowing ISIL to take credit for ABM's operations and the latter to raise its profile. This phenomenon is even more relevant today.

During the same period, West Africa saw the birth of key ISIL affiliates with Boko Haram claiming to set up a "caliphate" in 2014, followed by their declaration of allegiance to ISIL in March 2015. While Boko Haram had initially operated in Nigeria at the border with Cameroon, only months after its pledge, it initiated its first attacks in Chad and Niger. At the time, Member States noted that since its pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, Boko Haram had intensified its operations and expanded its media communication capabilities with the aim of developing a profile in the region.

Member States also noted that Boko Haram had split into two factions, with one being led by Abubakar Mohammed Shekau and the other by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who developed the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP under the leadership of al-Barnawi had by 2018 become the strongest ISIL affiliate in Africa. By 2019, Member States estimated that Boko Haram had approximately 2,000 fighters, whereas ISWAP has at least twice as many, rivalling the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) as the largest ISIL franchise outside the core area.

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has its roots in Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi's allegiance oath to ISIL in May 2015. It was present mainly in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. On 30 October 2016, the Amaq News Agency announced the loyalty pledge to ISIL by a splinter faction of Al Mourabitoun, under the leadership of al-Sahrawi.

In Somalia, the growth for ISIL took a very different trajectory. Member States noted that recruitment into ISIL was influenced by Somali clan dynamics, with members of the Darod clan forming the bulk of its

membership. While ISIL enhanced its efforts to recruit fighters from Al-Qaida aligned Al-Shabaab, Al-Shabaab warned its members against defection and detained and killed perceived ISIL sympathizers within its own ranks. Whereas ISIL advocates global expansion, leaders of Al-Shabaab continue to concentrate on a national and regional agenda. Despite the inroads made by ISIL in Puntland and southern Somalia early on, ISIL had not expanded as initially anticipated.

The growth of ISIL in Central Africa started in November 2017, when the Madina Tawheed Waljihad (MTW), also known as Madina Tawheed wal Muwahedeen (MTM), a group active in the North Kivu region of the DRC pledged allegiance to the ISIL leadership. Following a speech by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 22 August 2018, calling for fighters to deploy to various locations including Central Africa, Member States began to observe increased activities by the group. In April 2019 the ISIL leadership featured a banner of Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) alongside its affiliates, emboldening fighters in the region to operate under the banner of ISCAP.

In July 2019, under the leadership of Seka Baluku, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), responsible for most of the violent attacks in North Kivu's Beni territory pledged allegiance to ISIL in a video; followed by a statement in September 2020 stating that the ADF no longer existed and was now ISCAP. At the time MS noted that it was unclear how foreign fighters and locals from the ADF and MTM integrated into ISCAP.

In the latter part of 2019, Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama'a (ASWJ), a local group operating in the Cabo Delgado Province of Mozambique was increasingly viewed as another component of ISCAP, following a pledge of allegiance to ISIL by a group of unknown members of ASWJ. ISCAP began combining online footage from Mozambique, DRC and Somalia, reflecting ISIL-core efforts to coordinate and unify the three theatres. At the time, MS observed a striking increase in quality and content of propaganda materials.

The extent of ISIL-core control over ADF and ASWJ is a matter of debate, with regional MS more skeptical than some outsiders. There is however no doubt of the existence of Al Karrar Office in Somalia, the hub of the

ISCAP regional network. The question is how far ISIL's General Directorate of Provinces is able to flesh out these regional structures and how far they influence and enhance the impact of their component parts.

Let me turn now to the current threat assessment:

In Mozambique, within the Cabo Delgado province ASWJ greatly increased activity in 2020-2021. There were cross-border attacks into Tanzania; the seizure and control for a year of the port of Mocimboa da Praia; and the brief seizure of Palma a year ago.

Since the deployment of friendly assistance from regional countries, agreed by Mozambique in July 2021, ASWJ has suffered setbacks with the destruction of terrorist bases and camps and the neutralization of insurgents and commanders. There has been an increase in violent attacks on civilians in more remote areas. ASWJ was forced out of some districts but appears displaced rather than defeated. Fighters continue to regroup in small cells, mounting raids, looting villages, beheading civilians, and abducting young girls as sex slaves and boys for recruitment as child soldiers. ASWJ has c.600-1200 fighters, many of

them Tanzanian, and is led by Tanzanian national Abu Yasir Hassan. Regional Member States fear the spread of violent extremism beyond Cabo Delgado both inside Mozambique and across borders in the SADC region.

In DRC, Baluku's branch of ISCAP have increased attacks on civilians and soldiers in North Kivu. But his approach has caused a rift. Jamil Mukulu leads an ADF splinter group that reject alignment with ISIL and denies that ADF is defunct or assimilated into ISCAP. There is some official engagement with this group, indicating negotiations for joining a political process.

Despite DRC military operations targeting ISCAP, they have escalated attacks, expanding into Ituri Province. They are composed of Ugandans and Congolese, with FTFs from Burundi, Kenya, and Tanzania. A Jordanian was arrested in Beni, reportedly contact with ISIL core. The Rwandan government announced in October the arrest of 13 individuals linked to the ADF planning terrorist attacks in Kigali. Uganda experienced four deadly bombings in October and November which bore hallmarks of the ADF. We could be witnessing the ISIL-driven emergence of a regional terror threat.

In Somalia, ISIL Somalia continues to suffer successive losses with its force estimated around 300 fighters. It is no match for Al-Shabaab, the much larger AQ affiliate which dominates the local jihadi landscape. But it appears able to carry out its core task, hosting Al Karrar Office, which if anything is growing more active.

Moving back to the western Sahel and ISGS, their leader was killed in August 2021 and replaced by Abdul Bara al-Sahraoui. ISGS is contesting control of gold extraction in Gourma with JNIM. Following setbacks, ISGS and its 400-1,000 fighters have shifted focus to attacking soft civilian targets instead of military camps.

ISGS is a spoke of the regional network led by ISWAP, based in the Lake Chad Basin, and coordinated by the Al Furqan Office. ISWAP had a major success in 2021 when it tracked down and caused the death of Shekau who led the Boko Haram faction that did not become an ISIL affiliate. It absorbed most of Shekau's followers, confirming its status as numerically the strongest ISIL remote province. Malam Baku replaced Abu Musab al-Barnawi as ISWAP leader, with Barnawi's status unclear. There were disputed reports of his death but



he may have reverted to his previous role as head of AFO. The old shura council has been dissolved and the group's increased, 4-5,000 fighters have been reorganized into four branches: Lake Chad, Tunbuna, Sambisa-Forest and Timbuktu. ISWAP also sought to integrate Boko Haram fighters, but unification has proven difficult. ISWAP has increased attacks outside Nigeria, especially in Cameroon and Niger. Meanwhile, the group's resources have been increased by its tactical gains in NE Nigeria. Its revenues are from war spoils, extortion, fishing and agriculture, and zakat.

In North Africa, despite recent CT successes MS remain concerned about the ISIL threat. In the Maghreb, lone actors continue to be arrested and ISIL cells planning attacks on official targets dismantled. In Libya, terrorist activity has declined with the failure of ISIL to gain new recruits and its continuing slump in numbers. But conflict, organized crime, porous borders and ready availability of weaponry combine to suggest that a resurgence of terrorism in Libya cannot be ruled out. In Sinai, there has been a reduction in activity by Ansar Bayt al-Maydis, the local terrorist group which pledged

allegiance to ISIL. No attacks have been attributed to or claimed by ISIL in mainland Egypt since 2019.

In conclusion, Africa has emerged in recent years as the continent most affected by terrorism, despite some CT successes in North Africa. Today's meeting is focused on ISIL but we should not overlook the threat posed by AQ affiliates Al-Shabaab in Somalia and JNIM in and around Mali. Two of ISIL's most developed regional networks and some of its most successful affiliates are located in the Continent, where they continue to spread their influence and activities, including across national borders. Contagion from Mali into Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Senegal; incursions from Nigeria into Chad, Cameroon and Niger; and from Mozambique into Tanzania suggest that more jurisdictions will come under stress and be destabilized in the near to medium term. CT successes alone cannot keep pace with this challenge: rather it is necessary to build stability, resilience and prosperity. Perhaps more than any other region, Africa is where addressing the causes of violent extremism and seeing CT as part of a wider development agenda will be key.