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The Islamic State's "African Turn": Why the African Continent Is Showing Outsized Importance for IS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Islamic State Central is increasingly publicizing the achievements of its affiliated African provinces, leading to what the FMSO's Foreign Perspectives Brief authors call "The Islamic State's African Turn."
- The authors detail six potential benefits that IS Central might gain with such an "African Turn," as well as what downsides might also accompany such a turn.
- Overall, the authors assess that the Islamic State's African Turn is likely more tied to temporary successes of African provinces than it is an attempt to change the Middle Eastern character of the group.

On 20 June 2022, the Islamic State publicly lavished praise on its "African brothers" in a 12-page article in its weekly propaganda magazine *Al-Naba*. A portion of issue number 343 was dedicated to celebrating the deaths of "soldiers of the crusaders" and civilians caused by its fighters in Mali; later, it lauded the efforts of members of its West African province. Beyond praising these two African affiliates, more broadly—and notably—the article called for followers of the Islamic State to carry out *hijra*, or migration from other corners

of the world, and join the battles of its followers in "African theaters" such as Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), West Africa and the Sahel.¹ In extolling its African provinces, the *Al-Naba* article stated:

"Among the fruits of [the Islamic State's] blessed journey... has been the [establishment] of African provinces.... The scenes that we see today in the land of Africa are the same as we used to see Yesterday, in Iraq and the Levant... but today, God

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willing, they have become the next generation of empowerment in the Land of Africa, which was a symbol of the weakness of Muslims and their contempt and domination by the Christians and the apostates.... We say to the Muslims who did not make hijra previously to the fields of jihad because of various reasons, come [now] to your brothers in the Land of Africa, for it is today the land of hijra and jihad..."²

Days after the release of *Al-Naba* issue 343, on 23 June 2022, the Syrian branch of IS Central also released a video of support aimed at promoting the successes of the Islamic State's African provinces. In the video,³ senior Islamic State figures also called on the *ummah* to join the Islamic State's struggle with its "African brothers" and to carry out organized attacks across the continent.⁴ In particular, the video emphasized the importance of the Sahel theater of operations. Four days later, on 27 June 2022, another video was released, this time from the Iraqi branch of IS Central. The Iraqi branch specifically called upon the "African brothers" to "be harsh upon [their enemies] like hungry lions."

The above-mentioned releases are merely the latest examples of a much longer trajectory of IS Central celebrating, growing, and relying on its African provinces for its overall well-being. While scholars have shown⁵ the increasing prevalence of African provinces in IS Central's media apparatus over the years, in no uncertain terms, as of mid-2022, the African continent has been increasingly recognized as a new center of gravity for the Islamic State, and for good reason. As of June 2022, more than half of all the Islamic State's global provinces are in Africa;⁶ perhaps unsurprisingly then, from January to June 2022, the Islamic State conducted half of its claimed global operations in Africa.⁷ Underscoring this potential long-term shift of

gravity away from the Middle East and towards Africa, during the first four months of 2022, the Islamic State claimed more operations in Nigeria than in Iraq.⁸ And, in even broader terms, the Islamic State's growing presence on the continent has been a fundamental motor⁹ for the African continent's new location as one of the primary locations of jihadist-linked terrorism today.

In the main, this piece asks: In what ways and to what benefit has the Islamic State taken on a new African dimension? It argues that the Islamic State is in the midst of undertaking what the authors describe as an "African Turn," or placing a greater degree of importance on its African provinces than it has in the past. While this African Turn has clear potential benefits for IS Central, it also presents numerous potential challenges. While on one hand IS Central wants to vaunt the successes of its African provinces, on the other, to fully adopt or embrace the achievements of its African branches creates challenges for the Islamic State, which is inherently a Middle Eastern organization. As this piece details, whether the inordinate focus that IS Central has placed on its African affiliates will endure as an intentional, long-term strategy—potentially placing Africa as a coequal space to the Middle East—or rather, if the focus on Africa will fade away if circumstances on the continent change, is a question that observers should follow.

This piece proceeds in two main sections. Following this introduction, it offers a brief chronology of the growth of the Islamic State in Africa to the present; here, it shows how three African provinces—Libya, West Africa, and Central Africa—sequentially underscored to IS Central the benefits that African provinces could provide to its overall project, thus ushering in the current moment of the "African Turn." It also

underscores how, as of mid-2021, members of the international community began to take this turn seriously as well. The next section offers six different benefits that IS Central might expect to receive from undertaking—or embracing—this African Turn, as well as the challenges that such a turn might inadvertently pose. The final section concludes with further considerations regarding IS's long-term projects in Africa and their future implications.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S TURN TOWARDS AFRICA

Before discussing the potential benefits and drawbacks of the current African Turn, it is important to offer a brief chronology as to how we arrived at the current moment of IS prioritizing its African provinces. Given that they were the birthplaces of the Islamic State's project, Iraq and Syria¹⁰ had intuitively been the central focal points for the counterterrorism (CT) community watching the group since 2014.¹¹ However, as global attention was historically focused most acutely on the Islamic State's presence in the Middle East, especially between 2014 and 2019, the Islamic State quietly fostered a network of affiliates across the African continent that now serve as the cornerstone of its global project. By October 2019, marked by the death of the Islamic State's founder, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State had spread and boasted six African provinces: Libya, Algeria, the Sinai, West Africa, Central Africa, and Somalia.

The benefits of the Islamic State's geographic expansion from the Middle East and into Africa—and arguably the genesis of the Islamic State's African Turn—were first most evident in Libya. Between 2014 and 2016, Libya became the strongest Islamic

State province outside of the Middle East. At times, parts of major Libyan cities like Derna, Sirte, and Tripoli were under Islamic State control. By April 2016, U.S. intelligence reported that the Libyan Islamic State grew to between 4,000 and 6,000 fighters,^{12 13} and some observers wondered if IS Central leadership would consider relocating to Libya as a “fallback”¹⁴ from the Middle East. Following a December 2016 intervention by international forces, the Islamic State's hold on Libya vanished; today, the Islamic State's presence in Libya remains degraded, largely defeated, and is currently confined to southern Libya, where it conducts attacks against various militias. Nonetheless, Libya's one-time role as an Islamic State's African juggernaut is arguably the inflection point where potential benefits were realized for an African Turn.

While Libya was the first African province to figure prominently in IS Central's overall calculus, soon, the Islamic State in West Africa (IS-West Africa Province/IS-WAP, based in the Lake Chad Basin) would become the organization's most powerful African outpost. On 7 March 2015, IS Central gained the allegiance of one of the world's deadliest and largest Islamist armed groups in the world, Boko Haram (IS-West Africa Province/IS-WAP, from now on). By 2015, IS-WAP became well-armed thanks in part to illicit arms trafficking in the Sahel, and its fighting force grew to between 7,000 to 10,000.¹⁵ IS-WAP's ability to hold large tracts of northeastern Nigeria persisted. By June 2022, research has shown that IS-West Africa Province has been able to efficiently implement governance tools, such as *diwan* (departments), *zakat* (obligatory charity), and religious police, thus gaining propaganda space both on *Al-Naba* and through videos.¹⁶ As of mid-2022, IS-WAP remains the Islamic State's most populated and strongest

African province. Importantly, 2022 marked the first time IS-WAP in Nigeria¹⁷ surpassed Iraq in the number of attacks claimed by IS Central.¹⁸

Finally, what is arguably Islamic State's third major foothold deeper into the continent and a provincial milestone is the emergence of its Central Africa Provinces (IS-CAP). During the Islamic State's geographical expansion into northern Africa, IS-CAP began to take shape further south on the backs of two ongoing African insurgencies. IS Central's first signal of penetrating deeper into the African continent was in 2018 when the late Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, began insinuating the formation of a Central Africa Province.¹⁹ Following al-Baghdadi's statement, Kenya-based IS-linked financier Waleed Ahmed Zein²⁰ allegedly sent 150,000 USD²¹ to the Ugandan/DRC-based, Allied for Democratic Forces (ADF/IS-CAP DRC) which has been in existence since 1996. The finding marked IS Central's first noted Islamic State-related funding scheme to IS-CAP. Proof of the Islamic State's expansion began to take form by April 2019, in which the Islamic State's media claimed its first of many attacks in Beni, DRC, on the back of the local ADF.²² The claims led to al-Baghdadi formally acknowledging the ADF as an Islamic State's *wilayah* (province) in one of the world's most minerally endowed countries.²³ Two months later, in June 2019, the Islamic State extended its claims to Mozambique with its new affiliate, Ansar al-Sunnah (AS/IS-CAP Mozambique). In August 2020, IS-CAP Mozambique gave the Islamic State's brand one of its most significant military victories since the loss of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate when it captured the port town of Mocímboa da Praia, a location of immense gas and ruby reserves.²⁴

Following the 2019 creation of IS-CAP, the African continent has continued to prove itself

a primary location of concern for Islamic State activity.²⁵ Over the past three years, governments, scholars, and international organizations have begun taking notice of the increasing prominence of the Islamic State. The general start of the international recognition of the African Turn could be seen most visibly in June 2021, when members of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, convening in Rome, underscored the need for a new task force specifically focused on Africa.²⁶ This concern was further highlighted in July 2021, when the United Nations Sanctioning Committee released a report²⁷ noting that "the most striking development... was the emergence of Africa as the region most affected by terrorism," outpacing both the Middle East and South Asia during the period under review. Following that report, certain observers, including one of the authors of this article, put forth that Africa had become the "new epicenter for global jihadist terrorism."²⁸

As of 2022, concern around the African Turn continues to grow. In April 2022, the United Nations, amongst other international organizations, began prioritizing and understanding the rationale for Africans joining the Islamic State.²⁹ For its part, the U.S. Treasury Department, in March 2022, made headlines for sanctioning four South Africa-based Islamic State financiers tied to the organization's branch in Somalia.³⁰ In May 2022, the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh highlighted concerns around the African Turn during its first-ever African-focused ministerial meeting.³¹ Moreover, during the gathering, the Africa Focus Group emphasized that Africa has already become the new priority area for the Islamic State's fighting strategy. Later, during the May 2022 African Union Summit on Terrorism, concern was again underlined about the Islamic State—and, more broadly, Islamist insurgencies in general—expansion into the

continent.³² Underscoring that those fears were not unfounded, the Islamic State's intentions to more deeply incorporate Africa into its public expansion strategy came two weeks later when it published an Africa-centric issue of *Al-Naba* described at the beginning of this piece, confirming that indeed, the African Turn was well underway.

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF THE “AFRICAN TURN” FOR IS CENTRAL

Despite having seen in the last section that an African Turn has been years in the making, the question remains: Just why would the Islamic State Central choose to focus its efforts on an African expansion? As the international community seeks to understand the causes and future of the African Turn, we seek to offer insights of why the Islamic State may be leaning more into this new chapter. This article offers six perceived benefits that IS Central may be considering, as well as the potential drawbacks that it might have to reconcile.

1. The Rise of African Provinces Underscores Broad Ideological Appeal: Highlighting African provinces leads to a perception that the IS brand offers “something for everyone”

👍 **Potential Benefits:** The first and broadest benefit of the African Turn is that by publicizing the success of its African provinces, IS Central can demonstrate both *flexibility* and *salience* of its brand.³³ On one hand, by publicizing its African provinces and affiliates' interpretations of the brand, the Islamic State publicly displays its ideological flexibility. The flexibility allows for the unique tailoring of the Islamic State's ideology to speak to local conditions and attract a wider range of recruits.³⁴ One example of tailoring the Islamic State's approaches to local realities is

IS-Sinai where the group substituted IS Central's main target of anti-Shia to be Sufis instead.³⁵ Furthermore, by highlighting the African Turn, the Islamic State is proving the salience of its brand and methodology. Underscoring the breadth, diversity, and successes of its African affiliates, the Islamic State is projecting how its brand of jihad is not only parochial to Iraq or Syria, but globally inclusive. By illuminating its African Turn—particularly by spotlighting IS-WAP,³⁶ IS-GS³⁷ and IS-CAP³⁸—IS Central is proving that its approach and ideology can be internationally applicable.

👎 **Potential Drawbacks:** However, the same flexibility and salience are potentially a double-edged sword. On the question of flexibility, although African provinces can adopt Islamic State's brand to their realities, by overly publicizing its *flexibility* in the form of the African Turn, IS Central may risk diluting the essence of its brand, which, at its core, adheres consistently from a religious and ideological point of view (*tawhid*). Offering too much flexibility to African provinces can—and has—led IS Central to have conflicts with its African provinces: these have included differing African approaches to questions of governance (IS-GS),³⁹ the use of women and children in combat (IS-WAP),⁴⁰ questions of sectarianism (IS-WAP,⁴¹ IS-Mozambique),⁴² collaboration with Al-Qaeda (AQ) (IS-GS),⁴³ and approaches to takfir (IS-WAP, IS-GS).⁴⁴ The two outcomes that could result: IS Central becomes annoyed about disobedient provinces, thus causing strained relations, or African provinces are chastised and follow IS Central's guidelines, potentially being annoyed at their lack of freedom.

On the question of *salience*, a similar phenomenon could be at play: the Islamic State's brand might lose salience for its most devoted adherents. With more variants of the

Islamic State's ideology in existence around the continent—from Nigeria to Mali to Somalia to Egypt to Mozambique—hardcore devotees might well see local actions by Islamic State groups that diverge from their expectations of what IS Central does. For example, it might be the case that the IS-CAP in eastern DRC could divert its long-term goal from building an Islamic proto-state in the area to simply struggling to overthrow the Congolese regime without intending to reorganize the country according to the departments of the Islamic State.⁴⁵ Would-be supporters would have cause for skepticism.

2. The Draw of a Generally Lackluster CT Landscape: African Islamic State provinces face generally weak African counterterrorism forces and a generally disinterested international community

▀ **Potential Benefits:** A second benefit to the African Turn for IS Central is the fact that in many spaces on the continent, there are limited counterterrorism capabilities both by African states and in international coalitions. Regarding domestic African CT capabilities, undertaking the African Turn allows IS Central to place its brand on a band of insurgencies that have shown the ability to withstand, and in many cases overwhelm, domestic African military capabilities or CT forces. Examples are prominently showcased by IS-GS overwhelming CT forces in both Mali and Burkina Faso between 2013 and 2017;⁴⁶ Islamic State claims of success are further highlighted by the Mozambican government's inability to recapture the territory of Palma from Islamic State insurgents between March and May 2021.⁴⁷ Moreover, IS-WAP's Kuje prison break in Nigeria⁴⁸ and IS-CAP's Kangbaya prison break that freed 1,300 inmates in the DRC,⁴⁹ further highlight the lack of effective CT abilities in local security forces.

Geopolitically too, there are benefits to IS Central in focusing on Africa. Despite playing host to nearly a dozen insurgencies that serve as formal branches of either the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda, the African continent has never risen to become a major priority area for global counterterrorism coalitions. Africa continues to be less central to modern great power competition as compared to other world regions like the Middle East and South Asia, and now, Eastern Europe and the Taiwan Strait. For its part, IS Central appears to be making a wager that great powers are going to focus more on each other⁵⁰ (for instance, on tensions between the U.S.-China⁵¹ and the U.S.-Russia⁵²) rather than putting a premium on combating terrorism in Africa.⁵³ IS Central may also rightly be assuming that CT actions on the scale seen against it in Iraq and Syria between 2014-2019 are unlikely to be pursued in Africa: the continent, it likely assumes, will remain a global backwater where its affiliates can grow in the absence of true global concern. By this logic, if the Islamic State's affiliates stay localized, at a distance from major global powers, and do not grow so big as to be seen as sources of strategic concern for the great powers, IS Central may rightly assume that its affiliates can have the freedom to do as they wish. The ultimate result is the possibility of a sustainable, relatively unthreatened, caliphate and a formation of a safer training and operational area for Islamic State's affiliates.

▀ **Potential Drawbacks:** If IS Central looks at Africa as being marked by a weak and thus exploitable counterterrorism landscape, this could all change the more the Islamic State's presence grows. Indeed, while Africa has yet to comprehensively be recognized as the new hotspot for international terrorism, the recognition of the threat has led the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh

to make the continent its new priority area, and increasingly—though slowly—African states are working to more effectively coordinate their CT efforts.⁵⁴ Moreover, the transnational nature of the threat could also ensure that African states overcome their differences and work together to more seriously address terrorism. For instance, the fact that Islamic State's affiliates exist and act in border regions (for instance, IS-Mozambique in Mozambique-Tanzania; IS-WAP in Nigeria-Niger-Chad-Niger; and IS-GS in Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger) is compelling more and more cooperation between states. Indeed, as research has shown, African border areas are significantly more violent than spaces further away from them.⁵⁵ As such, the African Turn risks becoming too successful, thus generating more and better-coordinated counterterror efforts against these groups.

Indeed, such a shift is already underway: one need only look to the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh meeting on May 20, 2022, where Africa was named its new priority region.⁵⁶

3. Drawing Attention Away from Iraq/Syria to Allow IS Central to Regroup: Publicizing the activities of African provinces can distract global attention away from IS Central in Iraq and Syria

▮ **Potential Benefits:** The African Turn may benefit the Islamic State by creating a general global focus away from IS Central's core area of operation in Iraq and Syria, and instead disperse counterterror pressure to its African affiliates. While the inclusion and publicizing of the African wilayat has bolstered IS Central's one-time maxim of "remaining and expanding," IS Central may be looking to its African provinces to divert the focus and pressure off core leadership in Iraq and Syria.

To be sure, IS Central seems to be in desperate need of time and space to rebuild. Current

assessments of the Islamic State show a battered, if not crippled, presence in their territories of origin, Iraq and Syria. After the fall of Baghuz in March 2019, IS Central began its devolution at different elementary speeds.⁵⁷ The organization ultimately found its pivot footing as a covert network,⁵⁸ though with arguable discord in its senior leadership after being separated under the pressure of counterterrorism operations. By pointing the spotlight and publicizing the activities of its African affiliates, IS Central may create just enough of a shine to distract any would-be global counterterror coalition and create the respite IS Central could be hoping for. Indeed, such a shift is already underway: one need only look to the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh meeting on May 20, 2022, where Africa was named its new priority region.⁵⁹

Importantly, IS Central may well view its African provinces as sacrificial lambs: history has shown that IS Central has not necessarily rushed to their aid when they are in trouble. For example, little open source evidence has emerged to indicate that IS Central sought to step in to support its affiliates in Algeria or Libya as they began to face counterterrorism forces in December 2014⁶⁰ and August 2016,⁶¹ respectively.

▮ **Potential Drawbacks:** While IS Central might be undertaking the African Turn as a distraction away from the Middle East, the global community will never truly forget about Iraq and Syria as the core of the Islamic State's leadership, especially while considering IS Central's last "call-for-fight in Africa" videos were edited and published from Syria and Iraq. Indeed, even African affiliates themselves seek to ensure some focus remains on the Middle East. For instance, IS Central has been placed at the center of propaganda videos of some African affiliates, as in the case of IS-WAP

in May 2022⁶² and IS-Somalia in July 2022,⁶³ where members called for “avenging the death of the leader in the Middle East” and “wishing the victory to the brothers in Syria and Iraq,” in Hausa and Amharic respectively. Such propaganda points to beyond the ability to use Africa only ever as a temporary distraction: international observers are all too aware that while African provinces may have historically only had loose connections with IS Central, such links still exist, and thus the future of IS provinces in Africa are inherently connected to IS Central.

4. A Way to “Outbid” AQ in Africa: Africa offers an ideal space for IS to “outbid” AQ

▀ **Potential Benefits:** Another benefit of the African Turn is allowing the IS to outbid AQ. 2013 saw the split that led Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the first leader of the Islamic State—to reject the authority of AQ and claim sovereignty over his group, then known as ISIS or ISIL.⁶⁴ Since then, an Islamic State-AQ rivalry has marked the global jihadi landscape. For the Islamic State, the African continent may offer some comparative advantages as it seeks to assert its dominance over AQ. First, the Islamic State has a clear advantage over Al-Qaeda in Africa when it comes to the relative number of formal affiliates: the Islamic State boasts eight provinces compared to AQ’s two. While the numbers of fighters are estimated to be roughly equal,⁶⁵ the Islamic State’s ability to claim a vaster presence with wider brand adoption helps the Islamic State portray its presence as more widespread than AQ. Second, the Islamic State has proven an ability to outbid AQ in Africa by peeling away discontented AQ members who then have created the foundations for new Islamic State affiliates. Both AQ branches in Africa, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and AQIM in Algeria and Mali, have seen members defect to form new Islamic State provinces. In the case of

Al-Shabaab, Abdulqadir Mumin, an Al-Shabaab ideologue, broke away from AQ, and eventually became the leader of IS-Somalia.⁶⁶ Similarly, AQIM has had multiple defections to the Islamic State. For instance, IS-GS and IS-Algeria⁶⁷ were formed by defectors from AQIM. And even outside of formal AQ branches, entire jihadist-leaning insurgent groups writ large have abandoned the AQ orbit and served as the basis for new Islamic State provinces. In the Sinai, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, an AQ-sympathetic group, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and became IS-Sinai,⁶⁸ and similarly, the former Boko Haram, occasionally AQ-sympathetic, would eventually fully renounce the AQ brand and would ultimately become the Islamic State’s most powerful African branch.⁶⁹ Third, the Islamic State has been shown to be outpacing AQ by aggressively entering new spaces on the continent to establish a formal presence where AQ has not. This is most notable, of course, in the case of the Islamic State’s establishment of durable footholds in both the DRC⁷⁰ and Mozambique,⁷¹ the former especially being a place with little clear AQ presence or interest. In short, by claiming a formal presence in so many more spaces on the continent than AQ and poaching AQ members, IS Central has the ability in one of the world’s most important regions to claim what looks to be dominance over its global jihadist rival.

▀ **Potential Drawbacks:** While the African continent offers the Islamic State a space to claim dominance over AQ, this attempt at outbidding a jihadist rival could certainly backfire. In short, by encroaching in spaces where AQ has already established a presence, history has shown that the Islamic State has angered AQ, with its provinces engaging in physical combat against AQ branches. The most notable of these occurred in Somalia, where AQ-affiliate Al-Shabaab attacked and

detained pro-Islamic State members in October 2015.⁷² Similarly, in the Sahel, where the relatively peaceful coexistence between IS-GS and AQIM/JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, an umbrella coalition of al-Qaeda-aligned groups) led certain observers to refer to the relations as “the Sahelian anomaly,” by July 2019 these relations had soured, and IS-GS and JNIM engaged in open combat against one another.⁷³ To the extent that AQ appears malcontent to simply sit back and cede the African ideological space to the Islamic State, its own future looks to have an African character: the United Nations’ Monitoring Team released its thirtieth report, noting that number two and number three in line for succession of the leadership of AQ were actually be two Africans: Abdal-Rahman al-Maghrebi, Yazid Mebrak, the Emir of AQIM, and Ahmed Diriye, the leader of Al-Shabaab.⁷⁴

Intuitively, while outbidding AQ through mere existence is beneficial for the Islamic State, it risks self-harm when outbidding confrontations turn physical, making it put on hold the pursuit of longer-term goals to focus on destroying the rival.⁷⁵ By focusing on outbidding AQ, Islamic State’s provinces are forced to use ammunition, money, and personnel that could be used elsewhere. An additional risk is that in working to outbid AQ, Islamic State’s African provinces might embed themselves in long-term engagements and perpetual violent fighting, as the case of Northern Mali between IS-GS and AQ affiliates has proven.⁷⁶

5. African Provinces as Sources of Propaganda: African provinces serve as generators of propaganda, giving the perception of a widespread Islamic State presence

📌 **Potential Benefits:** Leaning into its African Turn, the Islamic State has begun forming separate

streams of propaganda⁷⁷ creation while expanding geographical claims of its presence.⁷⁸ Since the beginning of 2022, half of the Islamic State’s publicly claimed attacks have been Africa-based,⁷⁹ which have been processed and packaged through Islamic State’s *Al Hayat* propaganda machine for wider consumption. There are four main benefits that African affiliates provide to IS Central as it relates to the production of propaganda. First, when African affiliates produce documentation or content from their activities that IS Central approves of—be it violence, governance, or general outreach campaigns—they create the valuable inputs⁸⁰ and fuel⁸¹ for IS Central’s relatively advanced⁸² international propaganda machine.⁸³ Second, increased content allows IS Central, through its pre-distribution vetting process with its *Al Hayat Media Center*, to strategically⁸⁴ select⁸⁵ content from what can be considered a terrorist highlight reel⁸⁶ to best project an image of a growing,⁸⁷ strong, and successful movement.⁸⁸ Having content that portrays the above will likely lead to the bandwagon effect⁸⁹ in the extremist sphere. Third, the continuous flow of visual proof provided by African affiliates, accompanied by the tailoring of Islamic State messaging, provides credence to the otherwise disputed jihadi claims. In turn, growing content will likely increase the general morale in the Islamic State’s community, potential recruits, and financial supporters in the jihadi ecosystem.⁹⁰ Fourth, having a media outlet that showcases the actions of the Islamic State affiliates may lead to increased risk-taking activities by individuals in the affiliates and encourage more shocking content creation.^{91 92} With Africa’s growing access to smartphones and the internet, the continent will create a particularly fertile growth market in the showcasing, production, and consumption of Islamic State content.^{93 94}

👎 **Potential Drawbacks:** However, the creation of new content by African affiliates does not necessarily translate into an invigorating message. First, and most simply, the more information IS Central disseminates—via propaganda—about one of its affiliated groups, the more targetable that affiliate becomes. History shows that when the Islamic State's provinces have publicized their extreme violence via propaganda, they have often been swiftly targeted: one can recall the quick near-decimation of IS-Algeria following the Herve Gourdel video in 2014. Second, the Islamic State's African provinces may not actually produce quality content.⁹⁵ For instance, IS-Algeria and IS-GS, in their early years, arguably did not produce much usable content at all.⁹⁶ Third, if IS Central disseminates local, African propaganda that covers up or otherwise distorts local hardships faced by Islamic State affiliates—for instance, images of new weapons and new recruits could hide the real difficulties and inconsistencies in the field in finding both, as the case of IS-CAP Mozambique has might show⁹⁷—or ignores the politics of more “local jihad”, it could lead to disillusionment by local groups. Fourth and finally, although IS Central gets the ultimate call on what propaganda it formally disseminates from its African provinces, sometimes affiliates or supporters still produce propaganda—informally—in local languages through local outlets, that may well contradict IS Central's message or contradict IS Central's desires. In this case, without absolute control over the messaging of its affiliates, IS Central can lose control of its desired messaging.

6. A Cost-Effective Growth Market: Africa looks to be a place for cost-effective expansion

👍 **Potential Benefits:** If IS Central is seeking the best return on its investment, a turn towards supporting African affiliates seemingly presents

a tempting option. Many African IS affiliates are in some of the world's poorest areas,⁹⁸ where poverty is underwritten by state indifference or disdain. In spaces where costs of living are low and often minor financial infusions can be attractive, relatively small sums can go a long way. Whether financial, personnel, weapons, advice, or communication, IS Central may rightly perceive that its African affiliates will offer a relatively bigger “bang” for its proverbial buck. Indeed, IS Central has already shown to invest in African affiliates at different points of their growth cycles.⁹⁹ Examples include, but are not limited to, sending emissaries¹⁰⁰ and weapons to Libya;¹⁰¹ training fighters in the Sinai;¹⁰² and sending financial support to IS-WAP¹⁰³ and IS-CAP.¹⁰⁴ If an affiliate is able to grow and pass its infant states, the startup affiliate will potentially reach long-term sustainability and establish independent funding streams through more complex operations such as establishing illegal revenue sources, for instance mining,¹⁰⁵ oil concessions¹⁰⁶ (IS-GS,¹⁰⁷ IS-Mozambique),¹⁰⁸ and taxation of local populations (IS-WAP,¹⁰⁹ IS-CAP,¹¹⁰ IS-Somalia¹¹¹). With IS Central mentorship and networks to bolster revenue streams, African affiliates may become financially independent operations, thus allowing IS Central to invest in other, newer African affiliates and widen their footprint.

If it is true that IS Central is considering its African provinces as cost-effective investments, it may well also be calculating that small investments in various African affiliates could work to create an intra-IS African support system.¹¹² As others have written, IS Central's multiple provinces constitute jihad networks across Africa which might offer affiliates the opportunity for cost-sharing.¹¹³ For instance, IS-Libya has served as a training ground for member IS-WAP¹¹⁴ and IS-Somalia

has served as a dispatch hub for IS-CAP and IS-Mozambique.¹¹⁵ Moreover, *leveraging mutual logistics* and overlapping *supply chains* (as seen by IS-Somalia and IS-GS)¹¹⁶ decreases operational costs for growing affiliates.¹¹⁷ In short, minimal investments allow for the development of an economy inside the Islamic State among the affiliates where groups utilize trusted supply networks and grow in financial freedom while keeping finances¹¹⁸ within the Islamic State's economic system.¹¹⁹

🔱 **Potential Drawbacks:** While IS Central might be able to efficiently allocate resources to invest little money to obtain significant benefits in Africa, there are also challenges. First, a lower barrier to financial entry may mean limited potential returns: the “penny stock” analogy comes to mind. Little investment can lead to minimal (or non-existent) rewards: one may look to the almost defunct Islamic State's province in Algeria, which received little known aid from IS Central, and in turn amounted to very little.¹²⁰ Second, any investment in a group—even a seemingly successful one—could turn out to be a bad one. If the local group turns out to be weak and imposes higher costs (at least reputationally) on IS Central than it benefits it, the group risks becoming an undesired money pit, no matter how small the initial investment in time or money. A potential case is IS-Somalia, which has been receiving financial (as well as logistic) support from IS Central,¹²¹ but it is currently delivering more lackluster results on the ground compared to IS-WAP and IS-Mozambique.¹²² Third, the Islamic State's African affiliates, upon receiving funds, might use those funds differently than intended by IS Central. For instance, rather than using them for *dawah* activities, they might use them to support their profiteering through illicit trade. A potential case might be IS-CAP in

DRC, where the ADF/IS-CAP is still playing a key role in the illicit mineral trade,¹²³ so receiving funds from IS Central—while not being publicly and completely committed to Islamic State's project—could bolster its commercial network by paying for mining labor, bribing local police, and expanding mineral exploration activities.

CONCLUSION

As the Islamic State Central seeks to regroup in the Middle East, this piece has shown the growth in capacity and importance of the group's branches on the African continent. Along with that growth has come the Islamic State's so-called “African Turn,” IS Central's strategy of leveraging its African provinces for at least six benefits described here.

The lingering question remains: what does the future of the Islamic State's African Turn look like? In closing, we suggest that the African Turn, while it may continue, will endure only if featuring its African provinces provides IS Central with the perceived benefits described above. Rather than a planned, concerted effort to actively adopt a genuinely more “African” character, instead, IS Central is strategically capitalizing on a moment of African success. To the extent that those successes stop, the African Turn will likely also. For IS Central, its African provinces are useful, but that no evidence suggests that its center of gravity or overall character will permanently be altered to let its African successes overwhelm its Middle Eastern origins. The African Turn may be the trend of the moment, but its endurance is far from assured.

ENDNOTES

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