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Traditions of maghrebi-saheli statehood and islamic radicalism in Early XXI Century

V.V. Orlov 

Lomonosov State University,
11/1 Mokhovaya St, Moscow, 125009, Russian Federation

✉ alsavlor@yandex.ru

Abstract. The significance of this research topic is due to the relevance of the problems of modern state-building in the public and political life of North and West Africa. The purpose of the research project is to analyze the causes and consequences of the emergence of radical movements of political Islam in the Maghreb and Sahel at the junction of the XX and XXI centuries and their connection with the shortcomings of national statehood inherent in both African regions. At the same time, the author focuses on the incompleteness of the state-building process, the weakness of institutions and the low level of justification for drawing state borders as concrete examples of such shortcomings that affected the socio-political climate in the Islamized areas adjacent to the Sahara. Based on the materials of sources and the theoretical model of regional security complexes (RSC), the author identified contradictions and diversity in the ideological and value views of the North African ruling circles, analyzed the methodological and spiritual and political foundations of the deeply rooted relationship between criminal and Islamist groups on the example of the activities of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation is mentioned) and its leaders — Abd al-Malik Drukdal, Mukhtar Belmukhtar, etc. It is proved that “Islamist internationalism” in the Maghreb and Sahel of the 2000s began to take ethnocultural forms, which was caused by the ‘network’ and ‘umbrella’ nature of the AQIM (an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation).

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Federation is mentioned) structure, in which there was no centralized administrative-territorial management scheme. In addition, the distinctive features of the security policy of modern Algeria are shown and the importance of studying interregional contradictions for characterizing the geopolitical and economic reasons for the strengthening of Islamic radicalism in Africa is revealed.

Keywords: regional cooperation, statehood, North Africa, Sahel

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Традиции магрибо-сахельской государственности и исламский радикализм в начале XXI в.

В.В. Орлов 

Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова,
125009, Российская Федерация, Москва, ул. Моховая, д. 11, стр. 1

✉ alsavlor@yandex.ru

Аннотация. Значимость данной темы обусловлена актуальностью проблем построения современного государства в общественной и политической жизни Северной и Западной Африки. Целью исследовательского проекта является анализ причин и последствий возникновения радикальных движений политического ислама в Магрибе и Сахеле на стыке XX и XXI вв. и их сопряжения с недостатками национальной государственности, присущими обоим африканским регионам. При этом автор фокусирует внимание на незавершенности процесса государственно-государственного строительства, слабости институтов и низком уровне обоснованности проведения государственных границ как на конкретных примерах таких недостатков, повлиявших на общественно-политический климат в исламизированных районах, прилегающих к Сахаре. Опираясь на материалы источников и теоретическую модель комплексов региональной безопасности (КРБ), автор выявил противоречия и разнообразие в идейных и ценностных воззрениях североафриканских правящих кругов, проанализировал методологические и духовно-политические основы глубинной взаимосвязи между криминальными и исламистскими группировками на примере деятельности «Аль-Ка'иды в странах исламского Магриба» (АКИМ) (признана террористической организацией и запрещена в РФ) и ее лидеров — Абд аль-Малика Друкделя, Мухтара Бельмухтара и др. Доказано, что «исламистский интернационализм» в Магрибе и Сахеле 2000-х гг. начал обретать этнокультурно обусловленные формы, что было обусловлено сетевым и зонтичным характером структуры АКИМ (признана террористической организацией и запрещена в РФ), в которой не сложилось централизованной административно-территориальной схемы управления. Кроме того, показаны отличительные черты политики безопасности современного Алжира и выявлена важность изучения межрегиональных противоречий для

характеристики геополитических и экономических причин усиления исламского радикализма в Африке.

Ключевые слова: региональное сотрудничество, государственность, Северная Африка, Сахель

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Introduction

During the first decades of the 21st century, the Maghreb and Sahel regions — vast and extremely unevenly populated territories stretching from the Mediterranean coast of Africa to the southern borders of the Sahara — have repeatedly acted as a theater of war and armed conflicts among local states and Islamist groups, as well as transnational criminal structures. The scientific community of historians, political scientists and Islamic scholars has formed a stable opinion that the Maghrebi-Saheli region in the early XXI century has become an important center of global terrorist activity, and the areas adjacent to the Sahara are constantly used for recruitment, financing and training of professional militants operating both in the Maghreb and Sahel and outside the African continent [1. P. 39–45; 2. P. 164–165]. In the widespread theoretical model of regional security complexes (RSC)¹ the countries of the Sahel belt (Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea) are considered as border isolation zones. States in such zones (insulators) are not only a part of historically established inter-country complexes, but also are not able, as a rule, to overcome intra-regional contradictions independently [3. P. 224–229]. At the same time, any negative socio-political trends that are rapidly developing in the 21st century Sahel (separatism, outbreaks of armed violence, ethnic, religious or civil conflicts) are usually quickly and easily transferred to neighboring territories.

¹ The basis of the geopolitical theory of the CRS, proposed in the 1990s by B. Buzan and O. Waever, is the assertion that the scheme of security on a global scale is built of some kind of blocks — regional security complexes that predetermine its dynamics in certain, most sensitive regions. The impact of individual CRS on the systemic (global) level of security is due to the fact that the migration of persons and factors threatening security most often take place within one region or a group of bordering regions.

Maghrebi-Saheli statehood in the context of nation-building challenges

The regional community owes much of this state of affairs to the specific features of state-building in the North-West of the African continent. The current conditions of statehood in the Sahel and Maghreb is the result of the imposition and assimilation of colonial rules. Nevertheless, the model of the state-nation familiar to Europe can only to a small extent be correlated with the long historical and cultural context of the sub-Saharan territories [4. P. 25–27]. In Algeria, Morocco or Tunisia national concepts and ideas originated on the local ground in the middle of the XIX century and were relatively developed already in the interwar period. Their supporters had a wide range of opportunities for their expression before the population and party-political representation before the colonial authorities [5; 6]. In the countries of the Sahelian belt and in the post-colonial era, more or less full-fledged versions of national communities, whose members would universally share similar moral and social values (that is, they would feel national identity) and at the same time have a form of political organization — the national state.

The conceptualization of statehood as a marker of national identity in the contemporary Afro-Asian world has long served as a basis for multidisciplinary scientific, ideological and political discussion. We share D.M. Bondarenko's skeptical approach to sovereignty and the level of modernization of the state as markers of the formation of a national community under its aegis. In such a scheme of reasoning, the form of the state is consciously or unconsciously attributed fantastic abilities of a demiurge who alone determines the content of social life. The nation as a special type of social organization appears here no more than as a derivative of the form of the state — moreover, only in the legal, but not in the substantive aspect [7. P. 14–15]. At the same time, the national state is real. It belongs to the sphere of political and legal reality, while any kind of collective (including national) identity can exist only in the mass or even elite consciousness. Due to these circumstances, identity inevitably becomes nothing more than an arena of ideological construction, as B. Anderson showed in his famous work [8].

The dialectical connection between statehood and nation-building has also manifested itself in the Maghrebi-Saheli region. The phenomenon of belonging to a nation inevitably forces an individual or a group to define for itself the possible limits of its specificity, be it mental, international-legal, structural-social, cultural-value, or geographical [9. P. 393–394]. However, in most cases, state building in North-West and West Africa was not accompanied by clearly motivated, historically grounded and approved in the mass consciousness borders. Traditions of clan and tribal loyalty; formal and instrumentalist borrowing of European state institutions and administrative procedures [10. P. 9]; continuous intra-elite struggle for financial and natural resources — all these circumstances were combined with the lack of examples of successful building of national statehood

in the Sahel region before the beginning of decolonization processes in the middle of the XX century [11. P. 9–10]. As a result, political boundaries on the northern fringes of the Sahara up to the present time have been drawn voluntarily and far from what coincided with the real zones of settlement of ethnic, religious or tribal Communities This does not allow us to consider the border clashes of regular troops in the Sahel as international conflicts (In the generally accepted understanding of the term) or to clearly distinguish between international and civilian armed clashes [4. P. 30–31].

The artificial nature of the state borders, the turbulence of the Sahel countries' development and the ease of internationalization of their internal strife were complemented by a special subculture of political behavior among Maghrebi and Saheli leaders. In their picture of the world, a high level of conflict in relations with neighboring countries, the need to be on guard, and an underlying sense of military threat were quite normal and expected. This frontier psychology gave rise to a tendency in the ruling circles of the Maghreb and the Sahel toward adventurous military and political campaigns. In addition, personal military experience and professional military education were widespread among the leaders of the Sahel and a number of Maghreb countries in early XXI century [12. P. 42]. Their military past has fostered in them the habit of rapid mobilization, as well as the propensity for forceful methods in confronting opponents.

Before and after “Arab Spring”: Hybrid Challenges to Regional Stability

The specific qualities of Sahelian leaders were immediately called upon in the atmosphere of the “Arab Spring”, when the uncontrolled status of the Sahel and the increasing instability of the Maghreb countries mutually cross-projected a threat to the sustainable development of both regions. It is not surprising that during the 2010s the general situation in the Sahara-Sahel zone caused much more concern in the EU and the USA than the development of the political situation in its specific countries [13. P. 102, 117].

The Maghreb and Sahel data of the early 21st century clearly demonstrates the hybrid nature of threats to peace and stability emerging from this macro-region. Challenges to local statehood were usually posed by armed groups formed through the convergence or merger of extremist religious-political structures and criminal networks. Jihadists of the Maghreb and Sahel skillfully used the civil war and economic crisis of the 1990s in Algeria, the imposition of UN sanctions against Libya, the disorganization of border and customs control in West African countries, as well as the high complexity of the relief and diversity of climatic conditions in the Sahel. As a result, the border provinces, which are difficult to access and poorly controlled by governments, have provided religious radicals with a convenient arena for engaging in local

illegal business. This phenomenon applies most notably to the smuggling of drugs (hashish, cocaine), but also to the resale of cigarettes and other authorized goods.

We can note the flourishing of the illegal trafficking and resale of stolen arms and ammunition along the old trans-Saharan trade routes after the escalation of the National Liberation Front's (FLN) conflict with Islamists and the outbreak of hostilities in Algeria (1992). Subsequently, many field commanders of the Maghreb-Saheli jihad were the desert smugglers before. The personal story of Mukhtar Belmukhtar (1972–2016?), one of the founders and planners of the terrorist actions of Al-Qa'ida*² in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM)*, serves as a convincing example of the Maghrebi "career" in the Sahel.

AQIM*, the paramilitary Islamist group, emerged in Algeria shortly before the end of the 1992–1999 civil war. It was formed mainly of Algerian veterans of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), who had solid experience of the war in Afghanistan. At the end of the tragic events of the war, some of the field commanders of the GIA, led by Hassan al-Khattab, founded the «Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat»* (GSPC)*. The Algerian army and intelligence services succeeded in dislodging its units from the country's densely populated coastal areas in 2002–2003. In 2006, the Algerian «national emir» of the GSPC*, Abd al-Malik Drukdel (1970–2020), made contact with the central leadership of Al-Qa'ida*, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri (1951–2022), and declared the collective oath of the GSPC* to the terrorist organization. In January 2007, the structure took the name AQIM* [14. P. 150–151]. This change of name also marked a change in the strategy of the Maghrebi radicals, who included their Sahelian «enterprises» in the interregional scheme of criminal activities of Al-Qa'ida* as the leading organizing force of international terrorism at that time [15. P. 8; 16].

M. Belmukhtar started out as a provincial-scale smuggler. Even before he joined the ranks of local jihadists, he had established a relatively wide network of contacts in Saheli business and security circles. In the early 2000s, he made a considerable fortune in the cigarette trade. In this underground trans-Saharan market with a turnover of hundreds of millions of dollars, he earned the well-deserved nickname «Mr. Marlboro» [17]. However, in 2004–2006, his business shifted to recruiting and transporting Maghribi fighters to Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. Then he assisted A. Drukdel in the ideological and political unification of Islamist groups in North and West Africa. Under his leadership, AQIM* found new and relatively safe havens in the semi-deserts of the Sahel and began to train jihadists from neighboring countries and Europe.

Due to the efforts of M. Belmukhtar and his entourage, AQIM* offshoots in 2006–2010 became intertwined with criminal networks on the outskirts of the

² The sign * indicates organizations designated as terrorist and banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

Sahara. AQIM* militants built networks of illegal trafficking in firearms and drugs, organized counterfeiting of currency and were repeatedly seen in kidnappings for ransom [18. P. 2; 19. P. 18]. In parallel, the foreign economic activities of the Islamist underground were scaling up: in the late 2000s, Latin American drug cartels developed the Maghreb-Sahel region as a platform for cocaine trafficking to Europe and Southwest Asia. According to numerous reports from Arab and Western intelligence agencies, in 2012–2013, AQIM*³ reached a new level of «international cooperation» and concluded an agreement with Latin American criminal structures on a scheme known since the middle of the XX century — bartering drugs for weapons [20. P. 5]. This circumstance fully confirmed the predictions of Russian experts about the imminent shift in the financing of Maghrebi-Saheli radical Islamists towards their further cooperation with international criminal milieu [21. P. 373].

In the second half of the 2010s and early 2020s, West Africa faced the actual destruction of the already uneven and limited state control over Sahara. The collapse of M. Gaddafi's regime in Libya, the unfolding civil war in that country and the outbreak of internal conflicts in Mali turned the Sahel into a zone of widespread domination of organized crime [22. P. 645]. In these circumstances, AQIM* leaders, without abandoning their original Algerian identity, mastered the logistics and organization of terror on a supra-regional scale [23. P. 3]. Drukdel and Belmukhtar's agents recruited volunteers in Niger, Mali and Western Sahara to participate in the jihad in Iraq (and later also in Lebanon and Syria) and established a large-scale presence of AQIM* in cyberspace.

In addition, the establishment of the Maghrebi branch of Al-Qa'ida* has made it easier for Mashreq Islamists to access European Union territory and carry out terrorist attacks in the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar or on its shores. Modern Islamo-extremist groups in Africa tend to perceive local ruling elites as secondary and non principal «near enemies», using the term invented in the 50s of the XX century by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood* theorist Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) [24. P. 121–122]⁴. Taking into account the fact that the leader of the global «Al-Qa'ida*» A. al-Zawahiri was a student and follower of S. Qutb [25. P. 138], the Saheli and Maghribi jihadists projected this ideological category onto their region. They viewed the territories of their countries as a kind of springboard for repeating the medieval experience of Arab conquests or as a rear base for their future violent «success» in the «Christian» (or, in their terminology, «godless») societies of Western Europe.

³ The sign * indicates organizations designated as terrorist and banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

⁴ S. Qutb rhetorically referred to Israel as such, emphasizing that the strength of the "enemies of the faith" was not so much in the existence of the Jewish state as in the "distant enemy," that is, in the weakness of faith and sinfulness inherent in Muslims themselves.

The Saheli Boomerang in Maghreb

As can be seen from the above mentioned, the sub-Saharan provinces of the Saheli states in the 2010s acted as an «engine» of general radicalization among Muslim structures in the region. However, the same trends in the development of the sub-Saharan zone, triggered by the activities of Algerian radicals, were soon projected into the Maghreb. In the first years after the “Arab Spring”, even the most militarily and financially stable states in North Africa were subjected to the onslaught of jihadists. This is evident in the dynamics of terrorist activity in Algeria. On January 16, 2013, a small (no more than 30–35 fighters) Islamist group, “al-muwakki‘un bi-du-damm” (The Signatories of Blood), led by Mukhtar Belmukhtar⁵, destroyed the central production facility of the Tigantourine gas production complex near the town of In Amenas, located in southeastern Algeria near the Libyan border. The terrorists’ tactical breakthrough was presumably due to their high situational awareness due to their alliance with Saheli «colleagues» — mainly Ansar al-Din and Harakat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi-l-Ifriqiyya al-Gharbiyya (Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa, MMJWA).

Because the In Amenas gas field was jointly operated by the Algerian company SONATRAK, Britain’s British Petroleum and Norway’s Statoil, the Belmukhtar’s militants managed to take 700 Algerians and 134 foreigners hostage. The key demand of the extremists was the withdrawal of French troops, which had been deployed a few days earlier in Mali, and the release of Islamist militants imprisoned in Algeria, Mali and other countries in the region. The January 17–19, 2013 counterterrorist operation resulted in the release of 685 Algerians and 101 foreigners. The rest of the hostages were killed in the course of a massive assault on the complex by the army special forces of PDRA with the support of attack aircrafts [26. P. 9].

Just ten days after the attack on In Amenas, armed Islamist groups targeted the major Buira gas pipeline, which connects to the main natural gas field in PDRA, Hassi-Rmel, and supplies gas to key Maghreb-Europe pipelines and liquefaction terminals on the Mediterranean coast. Systematic attacks by Maghrebi-Saheli extremists on the largest gas fields and distribution centers of the Algerian gas industry have revealed serious security failures in the country, particularly in the central and southern regions of the Sub-Saharan region, which are the backbone of the Algerian economy [26. P. 6].

The escalation undertaken by Africa’s Islamic radicals in the 2010s forced Maghrebi ruling circles to turn to a policy of limited control over the northern fringes of Sahara. They have even intervened periodically in intra-Saharan conflicts,

⁵ This structure, sometimes also called Al-Mulassimun (The Hidden Faces), emerged in December 2012 as a result of a conflict between Mukhtar Belmukhtar and the leader of AQIM’s* central apparatus, Abd al-Malik Drukdel.

thus seeking to pre-empt new jihadist challenges. Such tactics are not new. It was the basis for the active participation of the Libyan armed forces in the civil war in Chad in the 1980s. [27. P. 151]. But against the background of incessant terrorist attacks and Tuareg uprisings in Mali (2012–2013), the proactive approach to the Sahel received a second breath in the Maghreb. It was used by the ruling elites of Mauritania and Morocco, and especially Algeria, which after the change of power and the beginning of the presidency of Abd al-Majid Tebboune (2019) is actively trying to restore its position as a key state in the Maghreb and one of the African leaders [28. P. 80].

Conclusion

The events of the early XXI century and especially the turbulent vicissitudes of the “Arab Spring” have demonstrated the negative dynamics of the military and political ability of the Saheli ruling elites while preserving the administrative and power potential of the ruling circles of the Maghreb (with the exception of Libya). The fragmentation and incomplete character of nation-building processes in the Sahel, racial-ethnic diversity, the prevalence of tribal mentality and the weakness of state institutions provided the criminal-Islamist structures of this region with a wide field for their activities and dragged the Maghreb countries into the abyss of the Sahel crisis.

However, the subversive capabilities of the main opponent of the Maghreb authorities in the Sahara-Sahel belt, Al-Qa’ida*⁶ in the Islamic Maghreb, should not be exaggerated. This criminal-extremist alliance, which emerged shortly before the “Arab Spring”, has had and continues to have the character of a network franchise, lending its name for use by small and medium-sized «vassal» groups. At its core, AQIM* remains quite a phantom structure, as it has not developed a credible control centre over the years. This circumstance constantly leads to internal tensions and conflicts between the Islamist groups that make it up. The study suggests that al-Qa’ida’s* supremacy in the Islamo-extremist environment of the Maghreb and the Sahel is as fragile and unstable as have been the anti-terrorist alliances between the states of these regions that emerged in the 2010s.

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Information about the author:

Orlov Vladimir Viktorovich — Doctor (Historical Sciences), Professor of the Department of History of the Near and Middle East, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University, e-mail: alsavlor@yandex.ru. ORCID: 0000-0002-2649-5422, ELibrary SPIN-code: 6318–4102.