

The Terrorist Threat in North-West Africa: Part One

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Introduction

After recently returning from the Republic of Mali in West Africa, it became clear that a security risk now exists in the Sahel region of this vast region. The Sahel is an arid belt of land on the Sahara Desert's southern fringe that spans Africa from Senegal to the west, to parts of Ethiopia in the east. Its remoteness lends itself to the establishment of either fixed or temporary bases used by terrorist groups for the purposes of training, logistics or command and control functions.

Terrorism operations are not necessarily a new occurrence in Africa. On August 7, 1998 Al-Qaeda launched its first confirmed attacks outside the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, as well as the 1997 attack on tourists in Luxor, Egypt.

In 2006, a ruthless Algerian terrorist group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, better known by its' French abbreviation, GSPC, announced it was affiliating itself with Al-Qaeda and renaming itself Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Since then, AQIM has stepped up its terrorist activities across the Sahel and North Africa. There is also the possibility that AQIM may also have links to the Black Taliban (Boko Haram) of Northern Nigeria.

AQIM has announced that their specific aim is to expel all westerners in the Sahel and establish an Islamic theocracy with poor countries which have limited resources and weak military forces to react to their insurgency operations. The AQIM is hoping that terrorism activities will destabilize such countries by recruiting extremists to their networks and cells.

AQIM Operations

One of the prime objectives of AQIM is to kidnap soft targets in countries such as Niger, Mali and Mauritania and then seek substantial ransoms or the release of imprisoned AQIM members in exchange for their release. Such targets would include tourists and NGO workers living in these countries. The ransom monies are used to fund day-to-day logistical requirements, and acquire new weapons and military hardware for the insurgents.

AQIM camps are often located in remote desert areas of the Sahel, which are very difficult to locate. North of Timbuktu in Mali the endless desert stretches for over a thousand kilometres to the Algerian border. When Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay were kidnapped in Niger in December 2008, they were evidently transported across the border into Mali. The two Canadians and two European hostages were eventually freed, but a British hostage was beheaded after being captured at the same time. Two Austrian tourists kidnapped in Tunisia were also reported to be taken to AQIM camps in north-eastern Mali. Last summer a French aid worker was killed after being held hostage for over four months. It was reported in the Spanish press that the French intelligence services had led an unsuccessful raid to free the hostages at an AQIM base in Mali.

On June 10, 2009, AQIM teams slipped into Timbuktu, Mali and killed the local army intelligence chief. After several days the Malian Army and a local militia force located an AQIM base 700 kilometres from Timbuktu and killed approximately 30 insurgents. Two weeks later the Army located another AQIM base in the desert. The commander of the force ordered his men to rest for the night. The insurgents, equipped with night goggles, RPGs and high-powered rifles, attacked the sleeping soldiers, killing 29 and capturing three soldiers, weapons and vehicles. When interviewed later,

a sergeant remarked “they must have good sources. Every time we go on a mission, they seem to know how many men we have and where we are going”.¹

In the last several years, a number of European tourists and volunteer workers have been kidnapped and held for ransom in the Sahel. On September 16, 2010, gunmen seized five French workers and two nationals in northern Niger’s uranium fields and transported them to Mali as captives.² At the same time, the Mauritanian Army claimed an offensive against AQIM, whereby it was reported 12 insurgents were killed, along with 8 soldiers.

Recently, the French living or visiting countries in the Sahel region have been targeted by AQIM. Terrorist attacks in Northwest Africa have now spiked to approximately 200 a year, according to a study recently released by the International Center for Terrorism Studies in Arlington, Virginia.³

A number of persons have been identified as AQIM leaders in the Sahel region of Africa. Mokhtar Belmokhtar reportedly negotiated the release of Fowler and Guay. Born in Algeria and trained in Afghanistan, he is known for his ability to deliver money and weapons to his group in Algeria and Mauritania from the revenue gained from ransoms.⁴ Critics argue that he has forged close links with senior government officials in northern Mali.

Recognizing that its capacity to engage AQIM forces is currently limited, it has been suggested that the Malian government has reached an agreement with the local AQIM leadership that it will not interfere with AQIM operations within the country as long as no operations are conducted against Malian interests. Furthermore, the Malian government views the potential of a renewed Tuareg insurgency as more of an immediate threat as compared to the potential for attacks by AQIM.

¹ Geoffrey York, *Globe and Mail*, 17 October 2009.

² *Calgary Herald*, September 23, 2010, p. A-26.

³ *Globe and Mail*, February 4, 2011, p. A-8.

⁴ Geoffrey York, *Globe and Mail*, 14 October 2009.

Insurgency Response from the West

There is no question that the United States is concerned with the growing influence of AQIM in the Sahel. Aside from AQIM's operations in Africa, security officials are concerned that the remote camps in the Sahara could also be used to train fighters for attacks in Europe and elsewhere.

Under the Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership Agreement, small teams of American Special Forces train local soldiers to control their territory.⁵ The FY 2010 U.S. budget proposal for this initiative amounted to \$20 million, including \$350,000 for Mali.

In 2007 a new U.S. command structure was created; known as Africom. The intent of this new command is to co-ordinate all the military deployments on the continent under a unified organization. One of the officers responsible for setting up the new command, which is currently located in Stuttgart, German, stated that it is "recognition of the increasing and growing importance of Africa – mainly due to terrorists and oil." U.S. officials have remarked that Africom will not be about building infrastructure, but co-operating with governments and NGO's to deny terrorists havens in which to operate.

For the FY 2010, the Department of Defence requested \$300 million to cover Africom operations. The administration also requested \$263 million to provide "additional manpower, airlift and communications supply."⁶

In 2009, the U.S. gave Mali more than \$5 million in trucks and military equipment. Senior Malian officials have remarked in the past that their army lacks the necessary arms and equipment to cope with AQIM. In addition, the same officials maintain that increased air support is required to hunt and destroy the AQIM camps in the remote desert locations.

Canada is one of the major supporters of a peacekeepers' training school located in Bamako, the capital city of Mali. It has contributed over \$2 million for its construction and operations. The Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Nova Scotia is one of

⁵ The Economist, June 16, 2007, p. 55.

⁶ D. Volman, African Security Research Project, Washington, D.C.

the school's main partners. The facility currently has two Canadian Forces officers on staff as instructors to the soldiers studying at this institution. In 2009, the school trained 1,850 soldiers, police and civilians from 41 African countries.⁷

Longer Term Security Prospects in the Sahel

There can be no question in the future that a build-up of AQIM insurgency operations in North Africa will impact the economies and aid to countries in this region. In northern Mali, tourism has collapsed. The U.S. and France have pulled out hundreds of oil exploration workers and humanitarian volunteers in a number of countries bordering the Sahara. There is a reluctance of most western nations to pay ransoms for persons kidnapped by the AQIM. As a result such persons are likely killed if the ransom is not paid or a rescue team is sent to extract the prisoner.

Since many of the countries in the Sahel are poor, AQIM is seen by many of the unemployed youth as an attractive option to the Islamic terrorist cause. Many politicians in the region argue that AQIM is only targeting Westerners; therefore the threat is limited and does not justify the pursuit of the insurgents by their respective armies in remote locations.

Others, such as Baba Ould Sheik, a politician in northern Mali, remarked that Mali has no other choice but to confront AQIM quickly and decisively. While Mali shies away from dealing with the conflict, he argues that AQIM is entrenching itself in the Sahara. He stated, "they are even marrying into the local communities and convincing young people of their ideology. If Al-Qaeda is not tackled, the whole of North Africa could be controlled by Al-Qaeda within the next 5 to 10 years."⁸ While the Malian government may be in a position to undertake limited "one-off" attacks against AQIM elements, sustained ongoing pressure will be required to undermine the spread of AQIM throughout the region. At the present time, Mali does not have the capacity to do so.

⁷ Ibid, footnote 1, p. A-20

⁸ The Economist, July 24, 2010, p. 47.

The U.S. and its NATO allies realize that in order to quell the rise of Al-Qaeda in North Africa, it must train and effectively equip the local armies to deal with these insurgents. Satellite detection and U.A.V. drones will likely have to be used to locate and destroy the remote desert camps used by AQIM. Mali, Mauritania, Niger and other countries surrounding the Sahara will have to recognize that the aim of AQIM is to destabilize their governments and insert their own Islamic ideology.

AQIM members are travelling south from Mauritania into Mali. Mauritania appears to also have become a hotbed of AQIM activities, based on increased assassinations and attacks on embassies in that country.

Each year AQIM operations in North Africa are becoming bolder and threatening to destabilize these countries. Although the U.S. and NATO can assist in the training of their armies, these African countries must recognize and take their own appropriate security measures to protect their populations from increased AQIM insurgency operations in the years ahead. AQIM is a regional problem, and not confined to one country. Effective CT efforts will require coordination between countries on a number of fronts, including intelligence sharing and effective border control. The African countries in the Sahel region should cooperate jointly in dealing with this terrorist threat. This threat is real and must be recognized sooner than later by these North African countries.