



# AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF

A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM's Sahelian Strategy

BY MODIBO GOÏTA

- ◆ Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is increasingly well integrated with local communities and criminal networks in the Sahel.
- ◆ Counterterrorism efforts among Sahelian governments remain uncoordinated and too narrowly focused to contain and confront AQIM's long-term and sophisticated strategy in the region.
- ◆ To prevent AQIM from further consolidating its presence in the Sahel, regional policies must be harmonized and security forces refocused so as to minimize collateral impacts on local communities.

### HIGHLIGHTS

A sustained upsurge in the frequency of kidnappings, attacks, arrests, and bombings in the Sahel in the past several years has heightened concerns that al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is gaining traction in West Africa. Indeed, AQIM now has a substantial presence over vast stretches of the Sahel. A low-intensity terrorist threat that once lingered on the margins is now worsening at an escalating rate.

Previous AQIM attacks largely consisted of opportunistic kidnappings of tourists and nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers in the Sahel. Recent attacks, however, have demonstrated a greater degree of sophistication and intelligence-gathering capability. For example, the September 2010 over-

night raids by AQIM in Arlit, Niger, resulting in the kidnapping of seven employees and family members from the compound of the French multinational nuclear services firm Areva, benefited from "excellent information" inside the company, according to its security consultants.<sup>1</sup>

Recent attacks also reflect growing operational capacity. Just days after the Niger kidnappings, but approximately 1,200 kilometers to the west, Mauritanian troops engaged AQIM militants and pursued a highly mobile convoy for several days into northern Mali. Weeks before this operation, a suicide bomber's truck exploded into a military barracks wounding several soldiers in Nema, Mauritania. The attack was

notable in that it was carried out farther from sites of previous AQIM operations and in the center of a relatively large Mauritanian town. In January 2011, a Tunisian gunman linked to AQIM threw a home-made bomb at the French embassy in Bamako, Mali. This was followed days later by the kidnapping of two French nationals from a restaurant in Niamey, Niger. The two were later found dead following a failed rescue attempt near the Malian border. In early February 2011, three suspected terrorists were killed and eight Mauritanian troops wounded when two explosives-laden trucks detonated in Nouakchott. Their objective: to assassinate the Mauritanian president.

Previously believed to be relatively weak and isolated, AQIM's advances are the results of a patient effort to cultivate deeper roots in remote regions of the Sahel. AQIM is now increasingly well integrated with local Sahelian communities and many AQIM leaders have established direct collu-

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sive associations with government and security officials. Most ominously, AQIM groups are developing cooperative relationships with regional drug traffickers, criminal organizations, and rebel groups to augment their resources and financing. As a result, AQIM can not only more ably confront and resist government security services but also undermine Sahelian states from within.

If more energetic steps are not taken to confront AQIM's new Sahelian strategy, the eventual establishment of sanctuaries, mini “Waziristans,” in the region is a real possibility. AQIM already operates across a region of several hundred thousand square kilometers. Northern Mali, in particular, is becoming a central redoubt. AQIM's attacks and presence have threatened vital economic activity. Once a popular tourist destination, this region is now largely off limits to foreigners given the risk of kidnapping. Unfor-

tunately, efforts to confront Islamic terrorist groups in West Africa are uneven, uncoordinated, and short lived. A combination of security sector adjustments, development engagement, and international partnerships is needed to comprehensively counter AQIM's strategy and uproot its expanding connections to Sahelian communities.

## **A NEW DIMENSION TO THE THREAT**

Contemporary dynamics among terrorist groups in the Sahel trace their roots to Algeria's political crises during the 1990s. Among the many groups active then, the Armed Islamic Group (AIG) became the most notorious Islamic terrorist organization in Algeria. Its exceedingly violent strategy, however, cost AIG the popular support it initially enjoyed. Eventually a dissident branch called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its French acronym GSPC) eclipsed its predecessor, though it failed to recapture AIG's initial reach or capabilities. Having made little progress on its own, in 2006–2007 the GSPC announced its allegiance to al Qaeda. Operating under a new name, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb shortly thereafter executed a series of large-scale bombings and attacks in Algiers and northern Algeria. However, under intense pressure from Algeria, it was unable to maintain a high operational tempo. AQIM has since been most present and active in the western Sahel—a largely desert and sparsely populated region that spans the borders of Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and parts of Chad.

Though active in various forms for many years, the strength, appeal, and reach of Islamic terrorist groups in West and North Africa have generally ebbed and flowed without achieving critical mass or momentum. However, marked distinctions have emerged between AQIM as previously constituted in the Maghreb and the networks presently active in the Sahel. The earlier organization tended to operate in or base itself near major cities and execute episodic large-scale attacks. In contrast, acts currently perpetrated by AQIM in the Sahel are increasingly a mixture of criminal and low-level terrorist actions. While there have been periodic attacks in capital cities, most incidents have targeted regions distant from government outposts (see figure). In this way, AQIM

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FIGURE: ZONE OF AQIM INFLUENCE



Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Modified by Author.

is taking advantage of Sahelian states' inability to exercise effective control over their peripheral territory. More importantly, AQIM is able to advance its long-term strength and viability by integrating with local communities to gradually deepen its roots, grow its resource base, and develop its operational strength.<sup>2</sup> Without any significant government presence in the Sahel, AQIM faces few challengers.

This strategy of integration is pursued in several ways. Marriage with locals has proven effective in developing strong ties. For example, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an Algerian AQIM leader, married the daughter of one of the chiefs of the Arab Barabicha<sup>3</sup> tribe in northern Mali, thereby consolidating his growing alliances with nomadic groups in the region that run local smuggling routes.<sup>4</sup> AQIM is also attempting to cast itself as an ally and potential protector of local communities. It often fiercely condemns the arrests of locals or civilian casualties resulting from government raids. By the same token, AQIM is exceedingly careful not to inadvertently target local communities and interests in the Sahel.

AQIM's illegal activities also generate income and job opportunities for communities and individuals in the region. Reinvesting ransoms received from

kidnappings, AQIM has hired local bandits and rebels in Niger, Western Sahara, and elsewhere in the region.<sup>5</sup> While many of the Tuareg communities in the Sahel have kept their distance from AQIM, several community spokespersons have noted that declining economic opportunities are driving some "into the arms of AQIM."<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it is AQIM's low-level terrorist attacks and criminal activities that have

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largely contributed to the worsening economic situation in the Sahel. Tourism once drove a significant amount of business activity in the region, but visitor numbers have dropped sharply as a consequence of AQIM kidnappings. A key airline that serviced several Sahelian cities, Point Afrique, recently suspended flights, further isolating the region.

Perhaps most worrying, AQIM is branching out beyond kidnap-for-ransom operations to generate rev-

enue. Moroccan authorities recently arrested a network of 34 individuals attempting to smuggle 600 kilograms of cocaine destined for Europe from Algeria and Mauritania.<sup>7</sup> Among those arrested were members of AQIM, including individuals based in northern Mali. Northern Mali has also become a storage point for much of the cocaine that transits the region. Narcotics traffic is likely to yield much higher revenues than other AQIM activities, such as kidnapping.<sup>8</sup> While AQIM is thought to have received a total of \$70 million in kidnapping ransoms since 2006, the 600-kilogram cocaine shipment would have sold for some \$60 million at wholesale prices in Europe.

With deepening roots in local communities and the regional economy, AQIM is developing enhanced resilience against counterterror efforts. The problem, again, is particularly acute in northern Mali, a central staging and planning area and the site of growing numbers of clashes with AQIM. Most ominously, local leaders in northern Mali have felt their influence erode. Recently, the council of local leaders in the Kidal region acknowledged, “the Salafists control the area better than anyone.”<sup>9</sup> In short, AQIM’s long-term Sahelian strategy is beginning to bear results.

## INADEQUATE RESPONSES

Governments in the Sahel have taken some steps to respond to AQIM but have failed to devise a strategy to counter AQIM’s increasingly sophisticated and locally entrenched methods. Some leaders in the Sahel have been hesitant to acknowledge the mounting threat. Decisions are often made for short-term gains with little regard for long-term implications. Cooperation among neighboring countries is improving somewhat, but disagreements and challenges remain.

Among the Sahel’s statesman, Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré has been the most forthcoming regarding the true extent of the terrorist threat in his country. On the occasion of Army Day in January 2010, he announced, “in our country, the problems of insecurity, particularly due to drugs, terrorism, and cross-border banditry, in all their complexity, have generated a profound need to identify their causes and strategies to curb their perverse effects.”<sup>10</sup> Touré has gone so far as to say, “Certain lo-

cal elected officials are well acquainted with the drug traffickers, bandits, and even terrorists.”<sup>11</sup>

A “total struggle” against AQIM pledged by President Touré, however, has yet to be fully realized. Official reaction to setbacks is often unsettling silence, as with AQIM’s abduction, execution, and refusal to return the body of customs official Lieutenant Sidi Mohamed Ag Acherif in August 2010.<sup>12</sup> The government has also released AQIM prisoners in response to demands and threats to kill hostages. The rise in AQIM kidnappings and the use of safe houses in northern Mali to guard captives has benefited not only AQIM but also many entrepreneurial Malian officials who are often negotiators and go-betweens. Such negotiators retain substantial portions of multimillion dollar ransoms.<sup>13</sup> These factors have further complicated government efforts to tackle the challenge in northern Mali.

Acquiescence to demands for ransoms and the release of detained AQIM operators has also strained regional ties. Mauritania recalled its ambassador in Bamako for 8 months after Mali released four Mauritanian AQIM detainees in early 2010. Another AQIM mercenary was released by Mali in August 2010 after he was extradited from Mauritania. Despite strong rhetoric, Malian government policy seems primarily aimed at avoiding direct confrontation with AQIM—even its foreign elements—within its territory.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas Mali’s counterterror efforts have been inconsistent, Mauritania typically resorts to overly blunt security responses. Operational blunders and civilian casualties have resulted, playing precisely to AQIM’s advantage. In July 2010, a joint Mauritanian-French special forces operation into northern Mali to rescue a kidnapped French citizen incorrectly identified the camp in which he was being held. Though six AQIM members were killed, the operation was largely viewed as a failure. AQIM later announced in a televised address that it had executed the hostage in retaliation for the attack.

Mauritania’s heavy-handed security responses have also exposed it to other aspects of AQIM’s strategy. During a Mauritanian operation in September 2010, as many as four civilians, including a young girl, were killed when Mauritanian aircraft attacked a convoy of AQIM militants in northern Mali. Nearby fighting also killed and dispersed livestock owned by local

communities.<sup>15</sup> This prompted angry condemnations from local Malian leaders. AQIM released a statement denouncing Mauritania for targeting “innocent and defenseless Muslims.” It also offered “condolences to the families of the dead . . . and all the Berebeche tribes and the proud Tuareg of Azouad” and vowed to “shield our nation.”<sup>16</sup> AQIM’s rhetoric leveraged the civilian casualties resulting from Mauritania’s attacks to further drive a wedge between local Sahelian communities and their national governments.

The Malian government has in the past permitted Mauritania to conduct operations in Mali’s border areas, but the “right of pursuit” remains unclear and is not uniform among Sahelian states. Algeria opposes the right of cross-border pursuit. Mauritania has exercised it without informing neighboring states. Mali has maintained an ambiguous position. AQIM exploits this lack of clarity by operating in border regions to conduct or plan attacks in one state before fleeing into a separate jurisdiction.

For its part, Algeria has sought to lead regional efforts to unify counterterrorism strategies in the Sahel. It hosts the African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism and more recently established a joint intelligence center in its capital, Algiers, and a joint military headquarters in southern Algeria with Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. However, it is much less welcoming of foreign support beyond the continent, which it sees as a possible pretext for foreign powers to establish military bases.

Algeria’s suspicion of foreign assistance has constrained the flow of resources that could improve surveillance in the Sahel’s vast ungoverned areas that serve as AQIM sanctuaries. Resource limitations, in turn, prevent Sahelian governments from adopting a more comprehensive strategy to counter AQIM in the Sahel. As Malian President Touré has noted, it is not enough to focus entirely on security. Rather, in addition to coordination on military and intelligence matters, regional partners should engage in efforts to enhance the quality of development in the region.<sup>17</sup>

## **DEVELOPING COMPREHENSIVE COUNTERMEASURES**

Countering AQIM’s Sahelian strategy requires a range of short- and long-term adjustments across the region.

Governments in the Sahel need to align their currently disjointed counterterror measures. Specifically, the right of pursuit and hostage negotiation policies are priority issues that require harmonization. Determining a precise regional policy regarding the right of pursuit will undermine AQIM’s ability to exploit borders to its operational advantage. This need not require a liberal right of pursuit, but at minimum institutionalized and functional mechanisms to alert neighboring security services to AQIM attacks or movements are necessary. Joint border patrols can also enhance coordination and familiarize security services with AQIM cross-border tactics.

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Ransoms for kidnapped hostages should end immediately. These payments are a violation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1904 and contravene a July 2010 decision by the assembly of the African Union (AU) to “strongly condemn” such practices. Sahelian governments should refuse to facilitate ransom negotiations and investigate and punish officials who engage in them. Additionally, Sahelian states should better align punishments for offenses related to terrorism. This can foster shared confidence and speed the process of extradition.

Given AQIM’s expanding area of operations and growing boldness, adjustments in the tactics employed by the region’s security forces are also vital. As seen in Mauritania and northern Mali, governments continue to rely on conventional military means to respond to small and highly mobile AQIM units. These imprecise and blunt measures have resulted in civilian casualties or permitted AQIM groups to escape across borders. They are also unsuited to the low-level terrorism and criminal acts that dominate AQIM’s operational repertoire. Governments in the Sahel need to develop smaller,

more agile units that can quickly respond to AQIM attacks and target AQIM units more precisely so as to avoid civilian deaths and collateral damage. While additional training and equipment would improve performance, restructuring security units and adjusting their use-of-force doctrines are practical first steps to developing this capability.

Sahelian governments also need to collect information more systematically on AQIM's involvement in smuggling and kidnapping. Such investigations typically require some degree of police involvement and capabilities. Reliable police involvement would, in turn, enhance the security sector's ability to engage local Sahelian communities in a way that builds trust and recognizes their wariness of collaborating with the government. Military units typically are not adept in building relationships with communities.

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Governments should better use already available intelligence, surveillance, transportation, and communications systems to further improve the effectiveness of their responses. At times, credible information of imminent attacks has been acquired, but poorly disseminated or acted on too slowly. Leveraging intelligence can quicken responses to AQIM attacks and thus undermine its ability to cross into other jurisdictions to evade or slow pursuit.

Governments also need to slow the integration of terrorist groups with local populations by designing and implementing programs that address basic community needs. Initiatives that improve food security, water security, health care, education, and employment, particularly for youths, would offer communities incentives to resist AQIM's settlement in the region. Efforts to contain and reverse the slide in tourism in the Sahel will likely face the least resistance among communities historically wary of government interference. Governments could attempt to rebuild confidence among foreigners wishing to tour the Sahel's remote areas

by identifying safe towns and markets to visit, creating mechanisms to alert travelers to changing security conditions, and establishing ways tourists can quickly reach appropriate government agencies when necessary. Assisting businesses involved in ground and air transportation between major cities and distant communities can also stimulate other forms of trade and interaction. As much as possible, such assistance should favor local businesses in the Sahel and also develop markets and bazaars, which are frequented by tourists and local communities alike.

Corruption is also a significant problem that inhibits government performance across the Sahel, including counterterrorism efforts. For example, Mali's recent and publicly available government audit revealed that a record \$224 million of government funds for rural development, water and food security, transfers to subnational authorities, and other public expenditures were mismanaged or misappropriated in 2009.<sup>18</sup> The audit, however, makes no mention of the military, Ministry of Defense, or Ministry of Internal Security and Civil Protection despite reports that some military officers sell arms and hardware to militant groups, even AQIM.<sup>19</sup> The appropriation of government funds—whether for development initiatives or security sector improvements—should be wholly transparent and accountable to prevent diversion and mismanagement. Such practices also enhance the government's credibility, trustworthiness, and impact. While Mali's audit revealed mismanagement of resources, that the assessment was even undertaken and publicly released are promising steps that other governments in the Sahel should replicate.

International partners beyond the Sahel can also contribute to addressing the growing threat posed by AQIM. The Economic Community of West African States and the AU can provide a venue and leadership to harmonize policies and institutionalize information-sharing and cross-border judicial cooperation. The United States, European Union, and other donors can provide assistance, communications capacity, and training to restructure and improve security forces and livelihoods within the Sahel. Cooperation with foreign gov-

ernments is also essential for confronting AQIM's transnational criminal enterprises, such as rising drug traffic bound for Europe and kidnap-for-ransom that targets foreign tourists, NGO workers, and employees of multinational corporations. Many of the ransoms paid to AQIM have reportedly come from European governments, including at least 12 million euros from Spain, Germany, and Switzerland in 2009 and 2010.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while Sahelian countries must take the lead in shaping a response to AQIM, close coordination with other African and non-African governments is crucial to understanding and confronting AQIM's Sahelian strategy.

## CONCLUSION

While AQIM no doubt still harbors ambitions to conduct operations in North Africa, its name no longer adequately explains its current strategy. Rather, al Qaeda in the Islamic Sahel may be more apt given its deepening connections with communities and rising presence there. Governments in the Sahel should acknowledge this reality and work more closely to prevent the organization from further entrenching itself. Better intelligence, mobility, and community focus by the region's security sectors are needed to respond to attacks and target AQIM units and bases. At the same time, governments need to protect livelihoods and create economic opportunities so as to maintain the divisions that historically have separated indigenous Sahelian communities from Salafist terrorist groups—and which AQIM is actively seeking to bridge. Removing the roots that AQIM is setting down in the Sahel is the only way to contain and reverse the growing threat it poses to the region.

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