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INSIGHTS

Signs of a Change in Strategy for AQIM: The Sahel and West Africa as a New Arena of Operation

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May 2016

Since Al-Mourabitoun merged with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in December 2015, the latter has experienced significant momentum.¹ Its increased number of terrorist attacks, its intensified operations in Mali, the move of its activities to other parts of the African continent (especially in the Sahel region² and Western Africa, such as Burkina Faso), and its success in attacking Western-affiliated institutions as well as claiming many lives and destroying property, indicates an increase in AQIM's power. The strengthening of AQIM stands out against the backdrop of the Islamic State's weakening power in various fronts due to latter's strategic distress as a result of strikes by coalition forces in Iraq and Syria. Abu Abdul Ilah Ahmad, a senior AQIM leader, acknowledged in an interview given to the Palestinian jihadist magazine, *Al-Masra*, in March 2016 that the merger of the two organizations had significantly increased the organization's power.³

The attack on the Radisson Hotel in Bamako on November 22, 2015 was considered the first joint attack by the two organizations, as noted by Abd al-Malik Droukdel Abu Mus'ab 'Abd al-Wudud, the leader of AQIM. On January 16, the Splendid Hotel, the "Cappucino" coffee shop next to the hotel, and the "Taxi Brusse" Restaurant in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa, were attacked. 28 people were killed in the attack, including 18 foreign citizens. According to an announcement by the organization, the attack was directed against "the Crusaders who are stealing our treasures and natural resources, and who are damaging our holy places". It added that the attack was preceded by careful and rigorous planning as well as intelligence gathering in the field. According to the announcement, the target of the attack was considered "one of the most dangerous dens of international espionage in



¹ For further information about the reasons for the merger and about Al-Murabitoun, see: <http://www.ict.org.il/Article/1548/The-Unification-between-the-Al-Murabitoun-Organization-and-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Islamic-Maghreb>

² The Sahel region is a region in Africa extending from the western edge to the eastern edge of the continent, and bordered by the Sahara desert in the north and the more fertile, tropical region in the south. It stretches across large parts of the following countries: Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Senegal.

³ *Al-Masra*, issue 7, March 14, 2016, pp. 4-5.

West Africa, especially the Splendid Hotel...from which war against Islam was waged and where deals were made to steal the resources of Muslim lands”. The announcement emphasized that the attack was a link in a chain of terrorist attacks designed to purge Muslim lands of espionage centers, avenge the massacre of Muslim residents of Central Africa, Mali and other African countries, and avenge the debasement of the Prophet Muhammad. The organization added that the attack was intended to serve as a reminder to France and its allies that security is a transient thing and that the people of France will not enjoy security. The announcement concluded with an appeal to the French people to take a stand against the oppressive policies of the French government against Muslims (see banner above).⁴



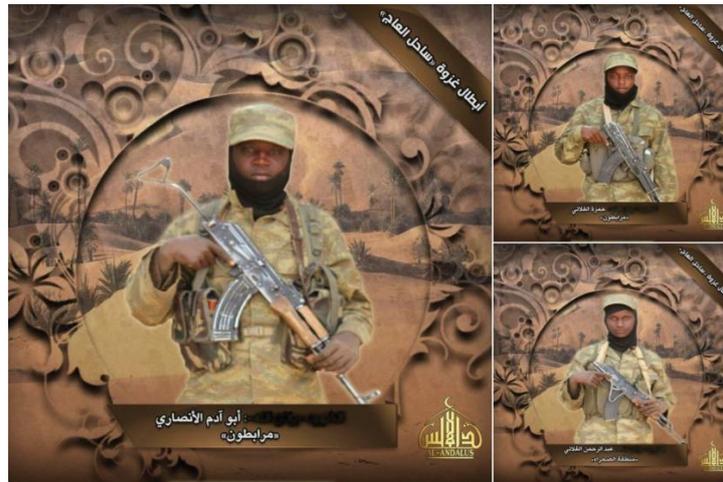
The three terrorists who carried out the attack in Burkina Faso

On March 13, six AQIM militants carried out another terrorist attack, which targeted two hotels in the resort town of Grand-Bassam, located next to the beach in Ivory Coast. In the attack, the terrorists opened fire on three hotels, killing 16 people, including four tourists from Europe. The organization praised the fighters for their success in attacking the hotels and explained that the attack was in revenge for France’s military intervention in the Sahel region in Africa.⁵ On March 18, the organization attacked the oil and gas field in ‘Ayn Salih, located in southern Algeria, with missiles. Like before, the organization justified the attack as a protest against France’s involvement in Algeria’s participation in the war against Muslims in northern Mali. The organization even threatened to attack Western oil companies in Algeria as a message to the Algerian regime that the organization has the ability to cause great harm to the country. Indeed, this is a strategic target

⁴ January 18, 2016. http://www.sahamedias.net/-/القاعدة-تتحدث-عن-عملية-بوركينافاسو-وتحذر-فرنسا-وحلفائها_a28899.html

⁵ March 15, 2016. http://www.akhersaa-dz.com/la_derniere/129060.html

located 1,300 kilometers south of the capital of Algeria, from which the Algerian national company, the British BP company, and a Norwegian company all operate.



The three terrorists who carried out the attack in Ivory Coast

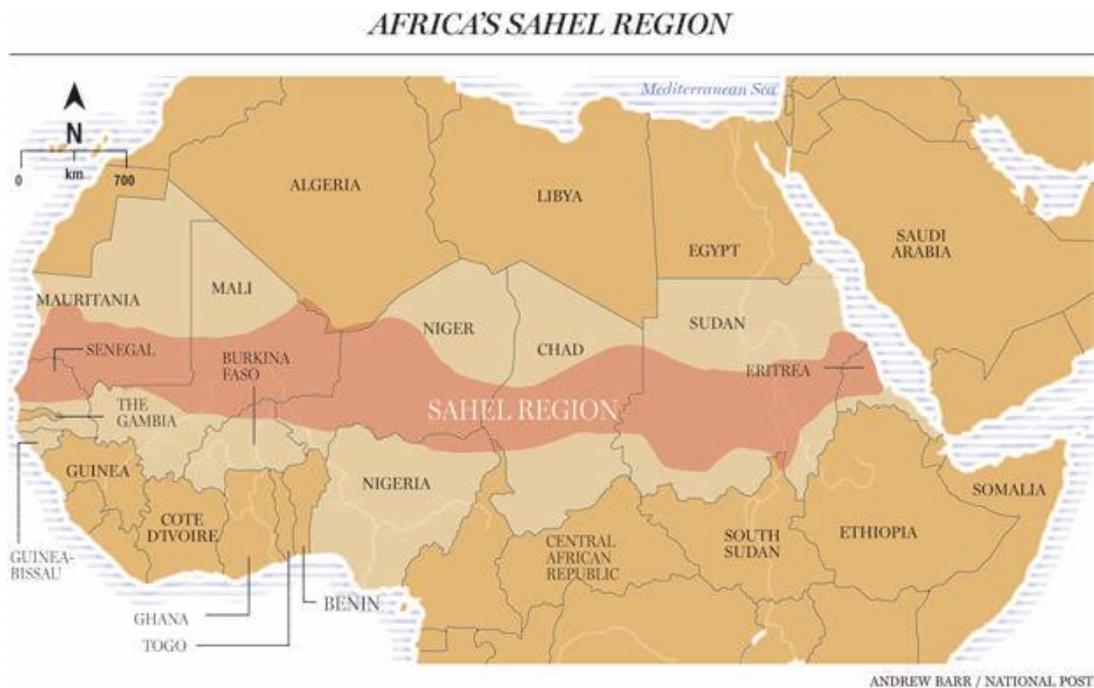
In addition to carrying out terrorist attacks, the organization continued to focus its efforts on abducting western citizens. On January 15, 2016 the organization announced that it had kidnapped two Australian citizens, a husband and wife in their 80's, who ran a clinic in the city of Jibo for over 40 years, on the border of Bukina Faso. The organization stated that the motivation for the kidnapping was its desire to free imprisoned AQIM fighters. Finally, the organization announced that it decided to release the woman, without conditions, as a result of the directive by the leader of Al-Qaeda not to involve women in war.⁶ These types of kidnappings serve as a main financing channel for the organization thanks to the ransom that it receives in exchange for the release of hostages. According to records from the "Drug and Crime Bureau", terrorist organizations in North Africa and the Sahel receive large revenues from the ransoming of captives, as well as drug and weapons smuggling, amounting to 300-400 million dollars.⁷

In terms of AQIM's selection of targets for the terrorist attacks that it carried out in the countries surrounding Mali, it seems that the organization prefers to focus on attacking tourist locations such

⁶ February 6, 2016. <http://www.almada.org/news/index/171865>

⁷ February 1, 2016. As quoted in: Al-Husayn al-Shaykh al-'Alawi, "The Competition between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa", Al-Jazeera lil-Dirasat Center, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/02/2016217925474124.html>

as hotels, restaurants and bathing beaches that are popular among Western tourists. A possible explanation for AQIM’s focus on Mali’s neighboring countries has to do with the poor security surrounding their tourist spots as well as the organization’s perception of these locations as symbols of French influence in light of their previous status as French colonies. In terms of its modus operandi, the organization prefers to focus on shooting attacks as opposed to explosive devices and suicide bombers.



A map of the Sahel region (in pink)

Reasons for AQIM’s Strategy Change

The increased number of terrorist attacks carried out by AQIM indicates that the organization has succeeded in restoring its power since the French invasion of Mali in 2013, and in expanding the terrorist infrastructure in Mali and its surrounding countries. This is due, in part, to the establishment of an array of alliances with local tribes and collaboration with other jihadist organizations in its areas of operation. Munir Adib, a researcher of Islamic movements, noted that jihadist organizations in North Africa identify more with Al-Qaeda than with the Islamic State.⁸

Ansar al-Din, for example, stands out as a main ally of Al-Qaeda due to a shared ideological basis and agenda, which are manifested in its war of attrition against the Malian army, French army

⁸ March 18, 2016. <http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/890748.aspx>

forces and international forces in northern Mali. During the month of March, for instance, Ansar al-Din claimed responsibility for the launch of missiles at an army base in northern Mali and for the explosion of roadside charges against the Malian army.⁹ The leader of a large tribe among the Tuareg in northern Mali, **Mohamed Ag Attaye**, recently expressed concern over the increasing power of jihadist organizations in the region, and urged the government to start negotiations with local jihadist organizations, such as Ansar al-Din, in order to make peace. According to him, such a step would help to curb the growing power of foreign jihadists in Mali.¹⁰ These statements seem to indicate that AQIM has maximized its appeal among foreign jihad fighters as Mali is again the focus of discourse.

Therefore, it is possible to identify several factors underlying the change in AQIM's strategy and its expansion of power across the Sahel and West Africa:

- A. The organization's withdrawal from its traditional stronghold, namely North Africa, due to successful preventative actions taken by the Algerian and Tunisian intelligence agencies in the area. Abu Abdul Ilah Ahmad, a senior AQIM leader, admitted in an interview in March 2016 that the organization was not strong in Tunisia, and that many Tunisian and Libyan jihadists returning to North Africa were not joining the ranks of the organization.¹¹ The inability to carry out terrorist attacks with wide media coverage on its "home turf" led the organization to move its operations to the Sahel and West Africa region.¹²
- B. The organization's preference to focus on areas with low governability and failed states where government institutions are unable to provide security for all of its citizens, enforce laws in its territory, or defend its borders. Such a reality encourages non-state actors to enter the existing vacuum and build an extensive infrastructure to serve as a platform for recruiting militants and carrying out terrorist attack.
- C. The organization's ability to recruit more easily due to the decades-long neglect, propaganda and exclusion of many residents by the authorities. For example, in Nigeria –

⁹ March 25, 2016. <http://www.alakhbar.info/news/14884-2016-03-25-16-22-00.html>

¹⁰ March 14, 2016. <http://www.echoroukonline.com/ara/articles/276821.html>

¹¹ *Al-Masra*, issue no. 7, March 14, 2016, pp. 4-5.

¹² An exception to this was the In Amenas terrorist attack. For more information about this attack, see: Michael Barak, "The In Amenas Gas Facility Attack – An Analysis of the Modus Operandi", *JWVG Insights*, March 2, 2016. <http://www.ict.org.il/Article/1626/The-In-Amenas-Gas-Facility-Attack>

which is a Christian country – the Muslim Hausa-Fulani group suffers from discrimination by the government.

- D. The ideological factor – the aspiration to strike targets belonging to France and its allies in the African continent due to France involvement in Mali’s internal affairs and its operations against jihadists in the region. In the beginning of January 2016, Abu Yahya al Hammam, the emir of AQIM in the Sahara region, explained the organization’s position regarding France to the Mauritanian news agency, Al-Akhbar. According to him, France is waging a persistent war against the mujahideen in Mali and is interfering in the region in order to prevent the mujahideen from seizing control of Bamako, the capital of Mali. He added that France naively thought it had succeeded in eliminating the presence of the mujahideen in Mali following an extensive military operation that it began in 2013. However, in actuality, it did not accomplish anything. He emphasized that prior to the French invasion, the mujahideen were concentrated in northern Mali but today they are scattered throughout the country, and he stressed that “France has become entrenched in Mali’s mud”. According to him, France failed in its mission to unify Mali under a central government and to establish a unified national army, but that “its most notable achievement in the region was the re-division of Mali into militias, separate armed movements that fight against one another”. He threatened that as long as French involvement in Mali continues, the French people will not enjoy security and will be forced to pay a heavy price for its government’s policies.¹³
- E. The organization’s control over important trade routes that pass through the Sahel and West Africa, and that serve as a central channel for smuggling goods, drugs such as heroin, and even weapons. The use of these trade routes makes it possible for the organization to establish ties and formulate a common economic interest with local smugglers and tribes, such as the Tuareg and Azawad tribes in Mali.
- F. Against the backdrop of the organization’s competition with the Islamic State for manpower, resources and territory, AQIM strives to curb the power of the Islamic State by increasing its appeal among militants in new territories and carrying out sensational terrorist attacks likely to receive wide media coverage. It is likely that the organization also seeks to

¹³ January 10, 2016. <http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html>

prevent fighters from defecting to the ranks of the Islamic State by expanding its operations.

Summary

The move of AQIM's operations from its traditional area of North Africa, especially Algeria, to new regions in the Sahel and West Africa since the end 2015 indicates a change in the organization's strategy. The recent wave of terrorist attacks indicates a significant effort invested in expanding the organization's infrastructure to additional countries in the region that are meant to serve as a platform for carrying out terrorist attacks, recruiting new members and finding additional financing channels.

The organization has demonstrated the ability to rehabilitate itself quickly since it suffered a hard blow by French army forces in 2013. As a result of its collaboration with local jihadist organizations, such as Ansar al-Din, AQIM has managed to renew its operations in Mali and even to expand into new territories. It seems that the competition with the Islamic State is a central factor at the basis of the expansion of AQIM's operations, which are aimed at building an Al-Qaeda support bloc by serving as a "dam" to reduce the number of jihadists being swept into the ranks of the Islamic State. In any event, it seems that the wave of terrorist attacks by AQIM is not going to end, but rather will spread to other countries in the Sahel region and the counties surrounding Mali, such as Senegal. The countries of the Sahel and West Africa should rightly be concerned about the security of their tourist centers, hotels, bathing beaches and institutions that are visited by Western tourists, especially French tourists, or by locals who have adapted a Western lifestyle since the organization believes it must purge Africa of their presence. The wave of attacks will almost certainly continue to wash over West Africa and the Sahel.

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