

Monthly Global Security Briefing – June 2012

MALI: THE RISK OF INTERVENTION

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Background

Oxford Research Group's April and May briefings covered the current status of the al-Qaida movement and a loosely related development, the growth of the radical Boko Haram Islamist group in northern Nigeria. The analysis may be summarised thus:

- Al-Qaida as a structured group has declined from its period of maximum activity in the 2001-2005 period.
- While never narrowly hierarchical, it was largely centred on north-west Pakistan after the retreat from Afghanistan, but the death of Osama bin Laden and sustained US drone and Special Forces operations have depleted its leadership substantially.
- The impact of Pakistani opposition to US drone attacks may provide al-Qaida with some respite but, more importantly, associates and derivatives of the movement are active elsewhere, principally in Yemen, Somalia and the Maghreb but with potential for re-emergence in Iraq and clear evidence of activities in Syria.
- Boko Haram has some links with the al-Qaida movement, is increasing in its impact on Nigerian society, and is facing tough suppression by the Nigerian security forces.
- This use of force may be counterproductive unless underlying issues of socio-economic and other disparities within Nigeria are addressed.

Since those briefings, there have been some developments:

- Pakistani opposition to US drone attacks has grown, and Pakistani government anger at the close links that the United States is developing with India means that Pakistan may greatly limit US actions in its territory.
- This may give al-Qaida some room to re-establish itself, quite possibly with younger and more radical elements coming to the fore, but the extent of the damage suffered by the movement suggests that this will take time.
- Al-Shabaab in Somalia has experienced recent setbacks, and the African Union force may make some further progress.
- Against this, the many drone attacks experienced by al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen appear to have increased rather than decreased support for Islamists that now control significant territory in the south of the country.
- Radical Islamist activity in Syria has increased, primarily in the form of large car and truck bomb detonations aimed primarily at government installations.

A key conclusion of the May briefing was that there is now a cohort of young combat-trained paramilitaries with experience of urban insurgency against well-armed professional US soldiers and Marines. The entry of some of these into Syria may be highly significant on the further evolution of that conflict. Yet the influence of this new generation of paramilitaries may yet extend further afield than the Middle East. One issue of concern relates to recent developments in the West African state of Mali.

Developments in Mali – Secession and Coup

Before discussing the Islamist dimension, a brief review of the changes in Mali is appropriate. Although seen as a relatively open and stable state under President Amadou Toumani Touré, Mali, prior to this year's events, had deep-seated problems of poverty, maladministration and corruption, coupled with the relative under-development of the north of the country, a region inhabited substantially, but not solely, by ethnic Tuaregs. About one third of all Tuaregs live in Mali with others spread across Niger, Algeria, Libya and parts of the Sahel. There remains a nomadic aspect to Tuareg society. There have been Tuareg rebellions during the French colonial era, primarily aimed at self-determination, and the secessionist stresses persisted after independence with periodic further rebellions.

A developing rebellion in the north in the early part of 2012 got a substantial boost when President Toure was overthrown on 22 March. The army-led coup failed to get the support of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Speaker of the Parliament, Dioncounda Traorem, subsequently assumed the office of interim President on 12 April, this being supported by ECOWAS on 20 May for the period of one year. In the aftermath of the coup in March, however, a security vacuum in the north of Mali enabled the Tuareg rebels to take control by 1 April and declare independence on 6 April. Independence was not recognised by ECOWAS or other African states.

Part of the reason for the rebels being able to gain and hold territory, including the historic city of Timbuktu, was the presence among their number of several thousand young men who had been mercenaries for the Gaddafi regime in Libya and had returned to Mali after Gaddafi's downfall with both military experience and weapons. One of the main reasons that so many Tuareg rebels fought in Libya is that doing so afforded them better pay and living conditions while the Gaddafi regime remained in power. Even so, the fall of Gaddafi was not alone responsible for the current revolt.

The Islamist Dimension

The main Tuareg movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA in French acronym) is broadly secular rather than Islamist. Yet, across North Africa, and increasingly in West Africa, there is a radical Islamist dimension that is relatively small, apart from Boko Haram in Nigeria, but appears to be gaining some ground. It is very far from a coherent entity, and the connections with the al-Qaida movement may be very tenuous, but it is causing increasing concern to western security forces and was one of the reasons for the establishment of the newest of the US integrated commands, Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007. While the rebellion in northern Mali is primarily Tuareg, there have been alliances formed between MNLA and Ansar Deen (also "Dine" and "Eddine"), a Salafist movement drawing partly from Tuaregs and loosely affiliated to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The leader of Ansar Deen, Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg fighter, who made his reputation in a rebellion in the 1990s, formed the group after he failed in his bid to become leader of MNLA in the autumn of 2011.

In an often chaotic and rapidly changing situation, there have been temporary alliances between elements of the MNLA and Ansar Deen, but this has been primarily for mutual convenience and a formal agreement between them broke down at the end of May. In areas where the Ansar Deen has been in the ascendancy, it has moved to impose strict interpretations of Islamic sharia law in a manner not welcomed by many communities. The sharia law issue was a key reason for the MNLA pulling out of the agreement.

Internal Conflict and Wider Reaction

In spite of these alliances, there is evidence that there is limited internal stability within the rebellion. On 9 June, it was reported that there had been serious clashes between the two groups, principally, but probably not only, around Kidal, following reported protests against the imposition of Sharia law. Two people were killed and many injured, but accurate details on casualties were not available. What the Kidal fighting does show is that the idea of a tightly organised and primarily Salafist uprising is far from the truth, even though there is such an element within it (which also has links with similar groups elsewhere). A further complication is the activity of another militia, the Northern Mali Liberation Front (FLNM in French acronym), which was formed in May and is opposed to MNLA and Ansar Deen.

Even so, a spectre of a major al-Qaida ascendancy has been raised with the fear - in a worst case view of a large part of northern Mali developing into an ungoverned space that can coalesce into a new base for regional Jihad, much as is currently feared in southern Yemen. A recent manifestation of this is ECOWAS seeking a UN Security Council mandate for military intervention in Mali. This is being led primarily by the President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, who has claimed that Afghan and Pakistani paramilitaries are already training young men in northern Mali.

ECOWAS seeks Chapter 7 approval by the UN Security Council for military action if peaceful negotiations fail, and also seeks logistical and other support from the United States and France. The African Union's Peace and Security Council met in Addis Ababa on 23 June and, in parallel with this, a French Foreign Ministry source stated that: "Things should lead very quickly to a decision from the [UN] Security Council, which could launch a military operation by the African Union and the ECOWAS". President Hollande is reported to be willing to support military action, but the US position is less clear, especially as there appears to be recognition within elements of the AFRICOM leadership that military intervention could be complicated and difficult.

The Need for Caution

Military intervention may indeed be complicated and unpredictable, not least because of the heterogeneous nature of the rebellion, but even more important is the need to see this in a wider context. From the point of view of the leadership of AQIM in North Africa, and Boko Haram in Nigeria, military intervention would actually be welcome as further evidence of external interference, in particular if there was French and US involvement.

From that perspective, any escalation would be expected to increase support for their own movements, especially if an early phase of military support included a reliance on armed drones and Special Forces. It is also necessary to factor in the rapidity with which the effects of such intervention, including the inevitable civilian casualties, would be communicated around the world. One of the main lessons of the experience in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past eleven years has been the manner in which events in one region have far greater and more rapid impacts in other areas than even a few decades ago. This is a reflection of changes in commercial, public and social media, but it means that any attempt to impose a military solution in northern Mali should be expected to have a wide impact, not just across northern Africa, but even in the Middle East and beyond.

There needs to be a far greater focus on negotiations. This is a matter of some urgency, given that Malian government defence forces (reportedly with assistance from Ukrainian contract

pilots flying attack helicopters) are already responding with force to recent developments. Negotiations, though, must be undertaken while recognising that the relative underdevelopment of northern Mali and the marginalisation of the Tuareg people and other groups must be addressed. In effect, negotiations may be able to buy time and help avoid military action, with its potentially dangerous consequences, but will not in themselves provide a long term solution.

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