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AL-QAIDA – THE POTENCY OF AN IDEA

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There are reasons to suspect that the al-Qaida vision, so widely believed to be in retreat, may actually be undergoing a transition, not least because of developments in West and East Africa. If this is the case, the implications could be considerable.

Introduction

In the course of these ORG briefings, four recent issues have been concerned, directly or indirectly, with the evolution of the al-Qaida idea. May's briefing on the status of the al-Qaida movement world-wide, including paramilitary involvement in Syria, built on the focus of the previous month on Boko Haram in Nigeria. The June briefing assessed the risk of military intervention against Islamists in northern Mali, and the August briefing placed further emphasis on jihadist paramilitaries in Syria.

The current briefing returns to these themes in the light of multiple developments, which point to a **larger-scale renaissance of the al-Qaida vision**. The developments may be dispersed and not greatly connected, but they demonstrate the potency of an idea that may prove to be far more resilient than has recently been believed. Conventional wisdom since the killing of Osama bin Laden and the undoubted impact of armed drone attacks in Pakistan has been that the movement has little future. As a hierarchically-structured organisation that may be true, at least for now, but as a potent idea it may be undergoing a transition to a different entity.

Recent Developments

Nigeria: The Boko Haram rebellion in Northern Nigeria continues without respite, and during October, the Nigerian Army and police staged particularly large-scale and destructive raids against presumed Boko Haram centres of power. Some limited attempts at dialogue have been attempted by the Nigerian government, but these have lacked connections with major stakeholders in northern Nigeria and are paralleled by any serious attempts to address issues of corruption, maladministration and marginalisation, all of which aid Boko Haram as it seeks support. These issues are exacerbated by repression by the Army and police that together conspire to be counterproductive. Boko Haram has a wider regional connection – it is known to recruit from neighbouring countries, including Niger, Chad and Cameroon; Islamist groups are increasing their influence in Mauritania and Niger; and there are indications that Boko Haram supporters have received combat training in Somalia.

Mali: On 11 November, ECOWAS heads of state agreed a proposal for military intervention in Northern Mali against Anser Dine and other Islamist groups. 3,000 troops, principally from Nigeria, Niger and Burkino Faso, will be deployed for a six-month campaign commencing with the establishment of bases in the south. The proposal may have western support, but it is highly unlikely to be effective for two reasons. One is opposition from Algeria but the more significant is that Nigeria will supply the largest contingent of troops and neither it nor the other two states have units that are sufficiently well-trained to do more than take on garrison duties. On their own they will not be able to take over northern Mali.

Because of this, there will be sustained, if covert, support for the ECOWAS military operation from western states, principally, but not only, France. There are already reliable reports of US and UK Special Forces present in Mali, and these may in due course be enhanced, with their actions aided by the use of reconnaissance and armed drones and private military companies. Military sources indicate that some hundreds of Special Forces and other special units will be involved. While there will be denials of such actions, they will be widely reported across the Islamic Middle East, being seen as a further example of western military action against Islam. This will be a potent message building on the history of intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Syria: After protracted and difficult negotiations in Doha, Syrian opposition groups eventually agreed to present a united front under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib. Named the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and overseeing a new Revolutionary Military Council. The main pressure on the many groups to unite was the lack of funding for armed militias, not least because of fears that funds and weapons would end up with radical Islamist militias. Such has been the shortage of funding that militias attempting to gain control of Aleppo have been unable recently to mount offensives because of lack of munitions.

Meanwhile, radical Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Mujaharin have continued to get external support, mainly from benefactors in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. They also have links with opposition elements in neighbouring Iraq. Together with further numbers of recruits entering Syria, these groups have become much more significant and effective in the fighting against the Assad regime. They combine adequate supplies of weapons with combat experience, some of it gained against US and other coalition forces in Iraq.

Even if the new National Coalition becomes effective, which is not too likely given the disparate nature of the militias within Syria, the more radical Islamists are now thoroughly entrenched and it will be very difficult for them not to have a role should a post-Assad environment emerge. Such an environment is now possible, given that the rebel forces have recently been making some significant gains, but the Assad regime may last many months yet, or even longer. What is evident, though, is that the Islamist paramilitary groups are particularly effective, and the longer the conflict lasts, the more significant they will become in a post-Assad Syria.

East Africa and Yemen: After some five years of effort, a combination of African Union forces, Somali groups, US-operated drones and Special Forces has resulted in some improvement in security in Mogadishu and some parts of central Somalia. This improvement may be sustained, but it will take some years to extend it to the rest of the country. Moreover, those areas of Somalia that experience radical Islamist influence continue to connect with other zones of conflict, with indications that Boko Haram paramilitaries have established connections.

Meanwhile, significant developments in neighbouring East African countries include an unexpected undercurrent of Islamist influence further south. The main locations so far have been the Kenyan port city of Mombasa, together with Dar es Salaam on the Tanzanian coast and the island of Zanzibar. In all three cases, Islamist elements are building on perceptions of marginalisation to increase their influence.

In October, an Islamic cleric supposed to have links with Somali Islamists was murdered, and the Kenyan Government has used force to control a secessionist group, the Mombasa Republican Council, which has campaigned against coastal economic marginalisation. In the

same month, Dar es Salaam experienced rioting and the looting of churches, with the government responding by arresting a local Islamic cleric. Zanzibar has experienced more sustained unrest, with radical Islamic leaders building support for separation from the Tanzanian state, based not least on the historical memory of Zanzibar as a largely separate territory prior to Tanganyika's independence in 1961.

The Wider Picture

The individual developments along the East African coast have not merged into any kind of sustained and coherent radical Islamist movement, but they all feed on perceptions of marginalisation and consequent resentment with, in Kenya's case, anger at sustained corruption. While it is therefore unwise to talk of a new "front" for radical Islam as part of an al-Qaida re-awakening, the conditions exist for movements to develop rapidly and unexpectedly. This connects with the underlying factors that enable Boko Haram in Nigeria to maintain its support – relative marginalisation combined with determined suppression by security forces.

Radical Islamist movements do not yet have transcontinental coherence across northern Africa, yet they form part of a phenomenon that is essentially a post-9/11 development and is increasing in intensity and geographical distribution. There appear to be many informal linkages, made far easier by modern communications and new social media, and they therefore connect informally with developments across the Middle East and South West Asia. While it is wise to retain a degree of caution, we may be seeing the further evolution of the al-Qaida idea, even as it retrenches in North West Pakistan.

Implications

There are two significant policy implications that stem from this analysis.

- Repression of Islamist groups, whether in Nigeria, other western African states, Kenya or Tanzania, may prove to be deeply counterproductive, if underlying perceptions of marginalisation are not addressed.
- Military intervention in Mali should be avoided. It will inevitably involve western military units and this will enable Islamist propagandists to concentrate more on their message of repression of Islam by outside forces. The old concept of "the far enemy" of the early 2000s could well get a new and unifying lease of life.

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