Jihadi Threats in the Sahara and Sahel

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The autocratic regimes of north-west Africa are beset by the twin ravages of economic underperformance and the political marginalization of a large and growing underclass. Fundamentally flawed, if resilient, systems of governance in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia coupled with grinding poverty are contributing to a host of social ills, not least the appearance of disaffected Muslim youth vulnerable to indoctrination by extremist elements. Conditions are such that al-Qaeda now appears able to penetrate the western reaches of the Islamic world, bringing often unwanted attention to the Maghrebi north-west of Africa and the neighbouring Sahel. There are fears in some quarters about potential spillover effects in oil-rich West Africa, most notably Nigeria, where tension between the mainly Islamic north and the predominantly Christian south has led to open clashes on several occasions. The impact of these developments is being felt in the Mediterranean region as well as in Northern Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

The Long Shadow of the GSPC

To date, the specific incidents of terrorism in north-west Africa have not constituted a grave threat to local or regional stability. The most prominent of the region's jihadi organizations, the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) is trying to transform into a regional actor, which accounts in part for the announcement by the group's leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Wadoud, in October 2006 of an alliance with al-Qaeda and the group's renaming as "The al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb." (The more familiar acronym for the group will be used in this essay.) This "merger" signaled GSPC's role as the leader of jihadi groups in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Spanish intelligence has reported that the network also includes the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Perhaps the most disturbing outcome of this development, as seen in many western capitals, is the creation of a pipeline currently feeding fighters into Iraq that will eventually accommodate the return of veterans to fight in other theaters. The strategic intent of this network has been described by US-based terrorism analyst, Andrew Black, as follows:

> "Integral to [al-Qaeda/GSPC's] plans is the formation of an extensive training cycle, which in essence provides the means by which al-Qaeda can move fighters between Iraq and the Maghreb. This training cycle, which first came to light from sources in Morocco, begins with regional fighters participating in training provided by the GSPC, presumably at one of the group's mobile training camps in the Sahara desert. Following completion of this phase of their training, fighters will move on to fight alongside the GSPC against the Algerian government. In this phase, jihadis gain operational experience, which will serve them well in the next stage of the cycle: the Iraq jihad. Once they have been smuggled in through one of Iraq's neighbouring countries (like Syria), fighters will participate in terrorist and insurgent activities and potentially conduct martyrdom operations. For those select few who complete this stage and survive, they are to return to the Maghreb to await operational orders from al-Qaeda."

Of course much of this analysis is speculative and questions might be raised about the absolute number

of hard core fighters involved in such operations; but as successful attacks in the US and Spain demonstrate, terror plots do no require large numbers of foot soldiers, only dedicated martyrs with the operational experience and support networks to undertake complex missions.

Striking the Apostates in Spain and Morocco

December 2006 saw al-Qaeda's chief propagandist, Ayman al-Zawahiri, refer to the southern Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla as being "occupied" by infidels. In May of 2006, a group identifying itself as Nadim al-Magrebi (a name used at times by an Algeria-based jihadist network) had issued a direct threat to Spanish interests by likening Ceuta and Melilla to "liberation" struggles in Chechnya, Iraq and Kashmir. GSPC/al-Qaeda has also been linked to Moroccan terrorists charged with the 2004 Madrid train bombings.

The Moroccan-based Salafiya Jihadiya, which was spawned by the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), has been charged with many crimes, but its most notorious operation was the May 2003 coordinated attack in Casablanca that targeted a private club (Casa de España) near the Spanish Consulate, the Israeli Alliance Club, a Jewish cemetery, the Belgian Consulate, and a hotel frequented by business travelers. Of the 31 Salafiya Jihadiya members found responsible, 10 were condemned to death penalty while others received lengthy prison terms, including the group's spiritual leader, Mohamed Fizazi, now serving a thirty-year sentence. Some contend that for prosecutorial convenience, the term Salafiya Jihadiya was coined by the Moroccan government to describe a host of Salafist groups operating in Morocco, such as al Hijra Wattakfir, Attakfir Bidum Hijra, Assirat al Mustaqim, Ansar al Islam, and the Moroccan Afghans, and that the term is generally associated with a broader jihadi doctrine that was promulgated throughout the Arab world by Saudi radicals in the aftermath of the Gulf War of 1991. In fact, most Moroccans subscribe to the moderate Malekite strain of Islam. The support of most Moroccans, however, is not a requisite condition for terrorism operations to be mounted.

One of the individuals who had been imprisoned for involvement in the Casablanca bombings, Hassan al-Khattab, turned up as the leader of a previously unknown terrorist group, Ansar al-Mahdi, which was uncovered in July 2006 by Moroccan officials. Some 56 people associated with this group were arrested in cities throughout northern Morocco. Most disturbing to government investigators was the discovery that the group had recruited members of the Moroccan military. The military operations wing of Ansar al-Mahdi included five soldiers who served at the primary airbase in Salé. These were young conscripts (perhaps coincidentally, the government ended conscription in August 2006, at the same time there were major purges of the security services) who had been directed by the leadership of the al-Mahdi group to undertake a very bold operation to blow up the airbase, robbing weapons depots before destroying them with explosives. The operation was to include the killing of personnel serving at the airbase.

Moroccan authorities announced in January 2007 that a radical Islamist network recruiting volunteers to fight in Iraq was broken up and 62 people involved in this scheme were arrested. The network was said to have ideological, financial, and operational ties to GSPC.

Continuing the Jihad in Algeria and Tunisia

A recent series of car bombings and other operations in Algeria were staged by GSPC, including a December 2006 attack on a bus carrying personnel working for Brown & Root-Condor, a subsidiary of the US-based contracting firm Halliburton. The attack was lauded by al-Qaeda in Iraq, which issued the following communiqué: "We bless the conquest of Bouchaoui [where the attack took place]; we say to our GSPC brothers continue your Jihad against the apostates in Algeria in order to establish an Islamic State and install the Sharia(…)We call on all Muslims to strike the Crusaders' interests on Muslim land to take revenge for our brothers in Iraq, Afghanistan and everywhere else on Muslim land." Early in 2007, GSPC claimed responsibility for a coordinated wave of car bombings in the Algerian provinces of Boumerdès and Tizi Ouzou. The GSPC also carried out a rocket attack on an Algerian army post in January of 2007 killing five soldiers. A counterattack by government forces in the eastern region of Batna reportedly resulted in the death of 10 jihadists.

During the same period, Tunisian security services engaged in an exchange of fire with gunmen associated with GSPC who apparently planned to attack foreign diplomats. The Tunisian cell was reported to have strong ties to North African networks active in northern Italy. The purported leader of the group, a Tunisian named Lassad Sassi (also know as Abu Hashem), had fought in Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan. He

had been indicted in Milan in April 2005 but slipped out of Italy before likely joining GSPC in Algeria. Sassi was one of twelve operatives killed by government forces. Tunisian Interior Minister, Rafik Haj Kacem, announced that an additional fifteen suspects had been arrested. The arrests also yielded explosives, embassy maps and lists of foreign diplomats. Tunisian human rights groups charged that the police had actually arrested several dozen people, including some young men who had just come out of mosques after prayers.

Indicating the growing expanse of GSPC operations, in late-December 2006, the 10th and 11th stages of the Paris-Dakar Auto Rally race were cancelled on the advice of the French secret service, who believed GSPC might call upon 500 armed followers across the Sahara to carry out attacks.

The broader, potentially global, impact of jihadists in north-west Africa is thought by some – in this instance, Africa watchers at the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies – to result from the convergence of the following:

- indigenous militant Islamic groups that are linked to externally supported local madrassas;
- the migration southwards from Algeria and other North African venues of terrorist movements, most notably [the GSPC], which reportedly has established training bases in Mali and Niger;
- Lebanese trading communities, long-standing support networks for Hezbollah, some of which are reportedly engaged in illicit diamond trafficking, money laundering and the movement of lethal materials; and
- a rising number of conspicuous minimally protected economic installations, especially in the energy sector, that are overtly tied to Western corporate interests. [It is a matter of record that] early in 2003, Osama bin Laden publicly exhorted his followers to make Nigeria a global priority.

Terrorist Threats in the Sahel?

The Sahel is of special interest to Western powers and jihadists alike because its immense size and topography as well as weak governments and porous borders render it virtually ungovernable, a condition not terribly dissimilar to what obtains in the tribal regions of Northwest Pakistan. The centuries-old caravan routes across the vast expanses of Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad now serve as conduits for illegal migration, trafficking in arms and narcotics, and a redoubt for terrorists and criminal elements. Since the early 1990s, there has been a rise in activity by Islamist missionaries and NGOs in all four countries of the Sahel. Chad has been the site of considerable stirrings, with locals reporting the presence of large numbers of foreign travelers carrying false identity papers and infiltration by Islamist networks linked to the Sudan. It is the northern region of Mali, however, that has witnessed a significant influx of foreign Jihadists, with the GSPC penetrating from Algeria and other armed elements moving in from South Asia and the Middle East.

The most comprehensive counterterrorism program in the region has been launched by United States through the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) and its successor, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), which in addition to the four Sahelian countries includes Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia. These programs are designed to be part of an overarching policy that also strives to advance good governance, economic reform and expansion, and health and education. To date, it has been the military component of the PSI/TSCTI initiatives that has received the lion's share of attention. Critics wonder if such investment is commensurate with the gravity of the terrorist threat. According to risk analysts at UK-based *Oxford Analytica:*

> "The United States fears that Muslim communities in Africa could develop radicalism in the same manner as Indonesia and other peripheral Muslim states. However, with the exception of the Tabliq sect of the Ugandan Allied Democratic Front, the recent incidence of Islamic militancy is actually very low in almost all African states. In fact, traditional African religions are more closely linked to the insurgent warfare on the continent.
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> Muslim communities largely draw on the moderate Suwarian tradition of Sufi Islam, which has not engaged in jihad in Africa since the 19th century. Importantly, these communities remain largely detached towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. Anti-Isareli and pro-Iraqi sentiments are muted throughout western, central, and southern Africa, with minor exceptions in Nigeria and South Africa. Both these states have experienced some radicalization through the influence of Saudi-sponsored mosques, which have encouraged a more extreme Wahhabi interpretation of Islam."

The Belgian-based International Crisis Group (ICG) has also determined that "the Sahel is not a hotbed of terrorist activity." As its report, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction, notes,* "…in this region, few things are exactly what they seem at first glance." A self-described Islamic republic, Mauritania does not tolerate Islamic activity of any kind. Mali, a model of 1990s neo-liberal democratization, "runs the greatest risk of any West African country other than Nigeria of violent Islamist activity." Niger, the world's second poorest country, gives the lie to the notion that poverty breeds religious fanaticism. The government of Niger "has maintained its tradition of tolerant Sufi Islam by holding to an unambiguous line on the separation of religion and the state."

Analysts generally argue that the terrorist threat in the Sahel has been largely exaggerated. Various motives are cited, from the desire of oppressive local governments to silence critics, avoid political reform and attract U.S. dollars (at least on paper, TSCTI represents an annual commitment by the U.S. of tens of millions of dollars), to efforts on the part of Washington to gain more of a military foothold in the region to ensure access to oil (the U.S. is likely to import over 50% of its oil from Africa by 2020). Whatever the motives of the key actors, critics worry that counterterrorism policies that rely heavily on military measures may, in fact, have the opposite effect. The observations of the ICG reflect this concern:

> "The resultant equation [of U.S. policy] is laden with risks, including turning the small number of arrested clerics and militants into martyrs, thus giving ammunition to local anti-American or anti-Western figures who claim [the PSI/TSCTI] is part of a larger plan to render Muslim populations servile; and cutting off smuggling networks that have become the economic lifeblood of Saharan peoples whose livestock was devastated by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, without offering economic alternatives. To avoid creating the kinds of problems the [PSI/TSCTI] is meant to solve, it needs to be folded into a more balanced approach to the region, one also in which Europeans and Americans work more closely together."

Conclusion

Taken in isolation, terrorist operations by jihadists in north-west Africa do not appear to pose a global threat. Their cumulative impact, however, is disruptive to state and society in the region, has caused material damage and economic loss and, most importantly, has cost many lives. Furthermore, as has been amply demonstrated in recent years, even modest training facilities situated in remote desert locations can serve as staging areas for significant attacks, particularly in the immediate neighborhood of the Maghreb and parts of Mediterranean Europe. Terrorist operations also pose potentially grave threats to the energy sector and this does have global implications. With such considerations in mind, it would be foolhardy not to closely monitor operational as well as ideological penetration of the region by radical Islamists as well as the activities of self-radicalized locals. The challenge has been and will continue to be achieving the right balance between counterterrorism operations, which are for the most part reactive in nature, and more proactive efforts at political liberalization and economic reform that go hand-in-hand with "hearts and minds" campaigns. Doing too little to counter the jihadi threat may risk another Casablanca or Madrid style attack, doing too much, i.e., using heavy handed tactics and effectively providing cover for oppressive regimes, risks the possibility of playing into the hands of radical proselytizers and small armies of all too willing assassins.

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