

COMPETITION WITH ISLAMIC STATE PUSHES AQIM TO EXPAND SOUTH OF THE SAHEL WITH A SERIES OF HIGH PROFILE ATTACKS

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While Islamic State now holds the upper hand in the Middle East, Al-Qaeda maintains an advantage in Africa. Al-Qaeda's position, however, has recently been threatened, with IS making significant efforts to expand deeper into the African continent. Over the last three years, there has been an increase in the number of loyal Islamic State cells operating in Somalia, Libya, Nigeria and even Tanzania.

Since the end of 2015, the Al-Qaeda branch known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which traditionally operates in and around northern Algeria and Mali, has demonstrated a new initiative to compete with Islamic State by expanding its reach farther in West Africa with a series of highly mediatized, high profile attacks. On November 20, 2015, two AQIM gunmen killed 20 people when they opened fire on the patrons of the Radisson Blu, a luxury hotel situated in Bamako, capital of Mali. Two months later on January 15, 2016, AQIM and its affiliates attacked the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino café in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, killing at least 29 people. The same groups later killed 18 people on March 13, 2016, on the beaches of Grand-Bassam in Cote d'Ivoire. Following these attacks, domestic counterterrorism operations resulted in the arrests of several high ranking terrorist leaders in Mali and Cote d'Ivoire. Despite being a significant achievement for local security forces, these arrests will not prevent the AQIM from rebuilding and further expanding throughout the region.

It should be mentioned that amidst the string of hotel attacks, all of AQIM's affiliates have continued to conduct what can be considered more traditional operations in Mali, Algeria and Tunisia, including civilian kidnappings and ambushes against military convoys and bases. In fact, the same day as the Burkina Faso massacre, AQIM affiliates Ansar Dine and Emirate of the Sahara carried out two other attacks in which they killed a security officer and a civilian near the town of Tin Akoff by the Malian border and kidnapped an Australian couple from the northern town of Djibo, also near the Malian border.

However, the three mentioned hotel attacks in particular demonstrate a major change in the group's modus operandi. In each of these cases, AQIM targeted luxury establishments that represent an international, and especially Western, presence in West Africa. Because these sites were frequented by members of the local and foreign upper class, the majority of AQIM's victims were business men and women, vacationing families and expatriates from countries all over the world including Mali, Russia, Senegal, Belgium, France, China, and the United States, among others.

This string of hotel attacks also highlights AQIM's expansion into areas previously spared from terrorist activity. Their location alone demonstrates a widening zone of operations. The attacks in Ouagadougou and Grand-Bassam were the first major terrorist plots executed in Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, respectively. Not only had AQIM never before staged an offensive in Cote d'Ivoire, but Grand-Bassam is the farthest from northern Algeria that the group has ever attacked.

The profiles of the terrorist brigades that participated in these attacks further underlines AQIM's growing reach. Several groups with which AQIM has either never worked before, or was previously estranged from, coordinated and participated in the hotel operations. Al-Mourabitoun, one of the most efficient terrorist groups in the Sahel and originally an AQIM breakaway faction, was involved in each of these deadly offensives. The group's rekindling of ties with AQIM, announced by Al-Mourabitoun's leader on December 3, 2015 in an audio message, drastically increased AQIM's operational capacities. Another group that claimed responsibility for ambushing the Radisson Blu hotel was the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), a Mali-based Fulani group with local ambitions that is now known as Ansardin Katiba Macina. Although Ansardin Katiba Macina, is not believed to be very large, only amassing a couple hundred fighters, working with them significantly extends the perimeter of where AQIM can strike. In fact, in a January 2016 interview, the spokesman for the Emirate of the Sahara declared that AQIM no longer needed "to send its fighters to the south" because of the membership of their new "black brothers." The terrorist was presumably referring to Ansardin Katiba Macina fighters. This alliance was officially confirmed in a video released by Katiba Macina on May 17, 2016. The video documents the group's statement of allegiance to Ansar Dine, presenting Katiba Macina as an Ansar Dine battalion that operates in the south.

Evidence of this more permanent AQIM presence in southern West Africa has emerged in the last couple of months through the arrests of several high-ranking members of AQIM affiliates. On March 21, four individuals were arrested in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, for their involvement in the tourist resort attack a week earlier. Later that month, Souleymane Keita, a member of Ansar Dine wanted for his involvement in the Grand-Bassam attack, was arrested in Goundam, situated in the central Malian region of Timbuktu. Reports later emerged stating that Keita was not only involved in the Grand-Bassam attack, but is also the leader of a branch of Ansar Dine that operates in southern Mali, known as "Ansar Dine of the South." One of the most actively sought men in Mali, he commanded a brigade of about 200 men and at one point ran training camp in the southern Sikasso region of Mali. It should be noted that Ansar Dine of the South does not appear to be the same group as Ansardin Katiba Macina. This suggests that AQIM now has two battalions operating in southern Mali through Ansar Dine. Furthermore, on April 21, Al-Mourabitoun's chief of operations, Fawaz Ould Almeida, was arrested by Malian security forces in Bamako. At the time of his arrest, Almeida, a Mauritanian national, was found with a significant amount of explosives and firearms,

which he was reportedly planning on using in an unspecified attack against foreigners in the coming days. The presence of these jihadist commanders in these areas indicate that AQIM's affiliates are maintaining cells throughout southern West Africa. As mentioned earlier, the arrests of several leaders is unlikely to prevent AQIM from further extending its influence geographically.

As such, AQIM's southward extension holds security implications for the entire West African region. Al-Qaeda is now considered a threat in countries where violent Islamist radicalism was, in the past, seen as a foreign issue. Bolstered security precautions, especially in countries that are active in local French-led counterterrorism operations, emphasize the growing concern. Senegal, for example, which is a member of the African Union, is one of such countries. On February 2, 2016, the government created a new interdepartmental body charged with coordinating counterterrorism efforts. Senegalese authorities have also significantly increased arrests related to terrorism since the attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in November of last year. Despite such precautions, US intelligence sources believe that Senegal's capital, Dakar, has a high risk of being a terrorist target in the near future. Ghana is also a potential terrorist target, as is indicated by the reinforced security patrols along Ghana's borders, especially the one with Burkina Faso. Ghana's National Security Council ordered for these reinforcements in April, in a leaked document that also mentioned Togo as a high risk country. In Guinea-Bissau, hotels drastically boosted their security measures after the Grand-Bassam attack, with dozens of police and security guards now on constant patrol. Hotel patrons and vehicles are reportedly searched on a regular basis in the capital.

AQIM's attacks in Bamako on November 20, 2015, in Ouagadougou on January 15, 2016, and in Grand-Bassam on March 13, 2016 suggest a new push to compete with Islamic State by waging high profile attacks and expanding Al-Qaeda's operational zone. These three hotel attacks targeted foreign civilians and threatened foreign economic interests, thereby attracting mass media attention. Their locations, previously spared by AQIM and terrorism in general, indicate that Al-Qaeda is working on widening its reach across West Africa. In the future, we can expect that AQIM will continue expanding its presence throughout Africa and that westerners will remain some of this organization's primary targets.

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