Al Qaeda in Africa: The Creeping Menace to Sub-Sahara’s 500 Million Muslims

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ABSTRACT Since 2005, Al Qaeda has co-opted as franchises three armed and violent African Islamist movements that had established footholds in both East and West Africa. These movements have been able to exploit anarchy, instability, hopeless poverty, corruption, and ethnic exclusion to impose medieval Islamic governance that sub-Saharan Africans reject but cannot defeat without outside help. The countries currently directly affected are Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria.

African governments understand the dangers to their sovereignty presented by Al Qaeda affiliates and have demonstrated determination to do whatever is necessary to stamp them out. All African governments welcome American assistance in their resistance to Islamist extremism, but the United States needs to be careful about keeping its military footprint in Africa as small as possible.

KEYWORDS Al Qaeda; Boko Haram; jihad; Mali; Nigeria; Sahel; Somalia; West Africa

Look back a scant seven years to 2005. Sub-Saharan Africa’s half billion Muslims were essentially uncontaminated by extremist Islam in its various forms. Salafists, jihadists, and Al Qaeda recruiters were noticeable by their absence. Quranic missionaries from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have come and gone since the early days of African independence, meeting with little success. Muslim intellectuals told the visitors that African believers needed no instruction in “how to be a good Muslim.”

The overwhelming majority of African Muslims, situated mainly in West Africa, follow the Sufi version of Islam in their worship and family life. This version is tolerant of other religions and makes a strong point of separating faith from politics. For them, “political Islam” is an oxymoron. Moreover, the role of women within African Muslim communities is light-years ahead of what prevails in most of the Middle East.

Certainly, Al Qaeda-sponsored violent incidents have exploded sporadically in Africa since the early 1990s. The lethal bombings of American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998 were reliably attributed to Al Qaeda operatives based in Somalia and the Mombasa area of coastal Kenya. In the same general location, ground to air missiles were launched against an Israeli passenger aircraft, without success, and an Indian Ocean
beach resort hotel, frequented by Israeli vacationers, was bombed with many casualties. But the implanting of Al Qaeda nodes, with the control of territory, did not happen until 2006—in Somalia.

In 2013, Al Qaeda-connected insurgents have significant positions in three African countries: Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria. The U.S. government is taking these threats seriously because all have the potential to morph into international terrorism in the not-too-distant future. At the same time, the countries affected, as well as those in the immediate neighborhood, are suffering from refugee flows, internally displaced persons, and vastly deteriorated human rights situations because of extreme interpretations of Muslim shariah law by insurgents within the territories they control.

The three crisis countries all have profound historic internal problems that have left them vulnerable to Al Qaeda-related infiltration. Let’s look at them individually and consider evidence that links may be developing among them.

**SOMALIA**

Somalia is a member of the Arab League and a failed state that has not had a functioning government since the fall of the Siad Barre military dictatorship in 1991. Situated in the eastern Horn of Africa, on the slimmest part of the Red Sea near the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, Somalia is closely tied culturally and economically to the Arabian peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia and Yemen. After many years of chaos, marked by warlords and their business allies using terror and blackmail to control local populations, it is not surprising that Islamic organizations came out of hiding around the year 2004 to organize communities in Mogadishu, the capital city, and provide a semblance of security, basic justice, and some education for the children. By 2006, these organizations, known as “Islamic Courts” had been fairly successful in restoring normality in a number of neighborhoods. To maintain security, they had to organize armed militias that included militant Islamists.

Unfortunately, the armed militias of these essentially benevolent Islamic organizations were easy prey for extremists able to attract arms and financing from jihadist sources in the Arabian peninsula as well as foreign Muslim fighters from neighboring countries working with recruited unemployed Somali youth. This volatile mix, calling itself “al Shabaab” (the youth), was able to supersede their civilian superiors and take control of much of Mogadishu, the lucrative port of Kismayo near the Kenyan border, and much of central Somalia by 2007. Wherever they ruled, they imposed the strictest form of shariah law, including amputation, stoning, and prohibition of any form of entertainment.

During 2008, “al Shabaab” announced that it had affiliated with Al Qaeda and was determined to control all of Somalia under the most extreme form of Islam.

The rise, and threat to surrounding countries, of al Shabaab in Somalia resulted in military intervention by several African armies, including those of Burundi, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya under the auspices of the African Union. As of the end of 2011, this intervention, known by the acronym AMISOM, supported financially by the United States, had blunted the thrust of al Shabaab, and had pushed it back from strategic locations.

By the end of 2012, the African military intervention continued to put pressure on and weaken the al Shabaab fighters. The strategic port of Kismayo had been recaptured, depriving al Shabaab of a major source of revenue.

Nonetheless, al Shabaab has demonstrated regional clout. It has recruited Muslim operatives in neighboring Kenya and Uganda who have set off bombs in crowded areas. It has also recruited a small number of young Somalis living in the United States to come and engage in “jihad,” including becoming suicide bombers. U.S. Homeland Security is worried that some of these indoctrinated young Somalis, most of whom have U.S. passports, may return and engage in dangerous activity in any number of U.S. cities.

In addition to providing financial and arms support to African military interveners in Somalia, American Special Forces have made discrete attacks to eliminate some of the al Shabaab leadership. These forces are based in the neighboring country of Djibouti mainly for the purpose of providing training to African armies, but are also available for pinpoint, in-and-out, quick special missions from time to time.

Despite the steady success of the African Union forces in Somalia, al Shabaab continues to be operational in the countryside. The key to their future disappearance lies in the growth of a legitimate Somali
government that has its own security forces and also has the confidence of the Somali people. During 2012, the first steps toward the establishment of a truly representative government were completed. It is hoped that this time the new group in power will not succumb to the total corruption of its predecessors and, with the help of the international community, will be able to slowly restore civil society and government institutions. As of early 2013, Mogaidshu was showing signs of recovery, with new investments in retail, restaurants, and housing.7

The conclusions we can reach from the Somali experience with Al Qaeda to date are:

- Muslim countries in Africa with corrupt, dysfunctional governments and major unemployment among youth under the age of 30 are vulnerable to infiltration and destabilization by Islamic extremists, both internal and external. When the extremists take over, Al Qaeda central is quickly available to provide financial support and can recruit fighters from the usual sources, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Algeria, and Libya.
- Despite its Al Qaeda franchise, al Shabaab in Somalia was totally unable to capture the hearts and minds of the Somali people. On the contrary, their extremist interpretation of shariah law, including the prohibition of all forms of entertainment (films, music, sports) caused the Somali people to become completely alienated. This was exacerbated by the application of shariah punishments such as death for not attending mosque on Fridays, for not praying five times a day, amputations for theft, and death by stoning for adultery.
- Given sufficient material support, training, and intelligence cooperation, African forces can hold their own and defeat Al Qaeda affiliates. The performance in Somalia of military units from Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Kenya has been commendable.

MALI

Under pressure from their growing populations of educated citizens, most of the independent governments in sub-Saharan Africa began a transition from authoritarian regimes to multiparty democracies starting in the early 1990s. After 20 years, most of the countries showed positive results, especially in the areas of media freedom, open politics, open elections, and improved human rights performance. Nevertheless, only a few were considered to have entered the process of irreversible democracy. One of them was the Republic of Mali. Indeed, by 2006, Mali had become the poster child for successful democratization in sub-Saharan Africa.

Between 1991 and 2006, Mali held three successful elections, all of which were certified free and fair. The constitutional two-term limit for the president was observed: the first elected president, Alpha Konare, stepped down after having served his second term. When asked if he expected to emulate many of his African peers by changing the constitution to be elected to a third term, he said, “I am looking forward to being an ex-president.”

In addition to receiving good grades for democracy, Mali also scored well with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for its economic reforms.

Mali is a vast country about the size of Western Europe. Most of the population, as well as its economic activity, are located in the third of the country south of the Niger River (which traverses Mali in an arc from southwest to southeast). North of the Niger River, Mali has a vast territory within the semi-desert known as the “Sahel.” Only 10 percent of the Malian people live there. Within this 10 percent are found the pastoral group known for its warlike traditions, the Tuareg.

Historically, the Tuareg made their living from raids into the south for the purpose of capturing and selling slaves to the Arab north. The slave trade stopped with the arrival of French colonial rule in 1910, thus relegating the Tuareg to the raising and trading of livestock. After Mali became an independent nation in 1960, the Tuareg rebelled against the central government several times, claiming neglect and noninclusion in the process of economic development. Support for Tuareg uprisings came mainly from Muammar Qaddafi in Libya during his revolutionary period in the 1980s. These uprisings ended with negotiated agreements that were supposed to ensure Tuareg participation in the modern economy. But nothing much happened, and the Tuareg remained alienated.8

Around the year 2001, signs of serious trouble began appearing in this vast northern region.
First, illegal drugs were transiting West Africa between Latin America and Western Europe. Isolated areas, including stretches of desert in places like northern Mali and small islands off the coast of Guinea Bissau, became ideal transit points for illegal drugs carried in small aircraft. The amount of money involved is so large that many African officials cannot resist looking the other way or even cooperating. Mali became one of the countries where the corruption of the drug trade weakened institutions in the northern region, including the army in remote outposts. As early as 2013, there was also growing evidence that the highest political levels of the central government were sharing in profits earned from both the drug trade and kidnapping for ransom.9

Second, the long Islamic insurgency in Algeria spilled over into Mali, as the Group for Call and Combat Salafist rebels were slowly defeated. The few thousand or so hardline Algerian rebels who refused to surrender and take amnesty found refuge in northern Mali where they could mingle with the nomadic tribes and make money through the drug trade and the kidnapping of Westerners for ransom. This did not bother the Malians so much as it did the French and the neighboring countries of Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which were suffering from guerrilla raids and kidnappings. These countries tried hot pursuit, but the Malian military were too busy participating in the drug transit trade to bother. The French were concerned because most of the kidnapping victims were French citizens working for mining companies or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).10

The Algerian insurgents in northern Mali became so emboldened by their successes and publicity during 2005–2010 that they changed their name. In Algeria, they had called themselves “Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat.” In their new incarnation in Mali, their revised name became “Al Qaeda in the Maghreb” (AQIM). Their application for accreditation as an Al Qaeda franchise was accepted without hesitation.

Third, the “Arab Spring” civil war in Libya and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention resulted in unintended consequences that caused a major crisis for Mali that was still unresolved as of the beginning of 2013; it will probably not be resolved before the end of 2013, if then. Al Qaeda is a major element in this crisis. In early 2012, the people of Mali began talking about the elections for president and parliament scheduled for the month of April. At that point, Mali was hit by a perfect storm. The trigger was the “Arab Spring” as it unfolded in Libya.

Anti-regime demonstrations in Libya in mid-2011 turned into full-fledged civil war within a matter of weeks. Not trusting his own army, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi went to his Tuareg friends in Mali and recruited several thousand to become his mercenary force with the mission of mercilessly crushing the rebellion. Qaddafi’s objective was apparently to slaughter the rebels and thoroughly put down the rebellion that had its roots in the eastern city of Benghazi.

The NATO air power intervention prevented mass murder; its support for Libyan rebels resulted in the death of Qaddafi and the end of his 42-year regime. The hated Malian Tuareg mercenaries were forced to flee for their lives. They returned to northern Mali with their vehicles and with their heavy arms. When they entered the major towns of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, they quickly overwhelmed the underarmed Malian army garrisons, which were forced to flee south back to the capital city, Bamako. The fleeing military arrived in Bamako in March 2012, one month before the scheduled presidential election.11

Furious with their corrupt political leaders, the younger officers staged a coup d’etat, creating total chaos in the central government. Pressure from other West African governments persuaded the military to hand power back to civilians, but, as of the end of 2012, the army officers continued to exercise major influence on governmental decisions. Mali’s “irreversible” democracy lay in shambles, at least temporarily.

While politicians and the military in Bamako sought a way back to legitimate government, the rebels in northern Mali wasted no time in establishing a new order. Some nostalgic Tuareg fighters decided to establish a new state known as the Republic of Azawad. While they were establishing this new state that would be separate from Mali, more adept Islamist fighters proceeded to oust the nationalist Tuareg and establish the beginnings of an Islamic state with the ambition of conquering all of Mali. In short order, AQIM joined the fray, thereby implanting a new Al Qaeda node in an African

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country. As of early 2012, the Islamists were in total control of the north.12

The takeover of northern Mali by Islamist forces caused a mass movement of population who became refugees in southern Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso. These people were already living on the fringe because of drought. As refugees, they sank even lower. Meanwhile, those Malian citizens who remained in the north were subjected to the harshest of Islamic law.

Immediately after the takeover of the north by the Islamists, Malian elites in the capital, as well as the leaders of neighboring governments, expressed a strong desire to do whatever was necessary to recapture the north and drive out the terrorists. This led to a sharp division of opinion in the international community. The French wanted to move quickly by establishing a West African force of 3,000 fighters and transporting them north with international logistical support. Washington was more cautious, asking for a return to legitimacy in Malian politics to preclude any military effort in the north. Algeria, whose own civil war generated the AQIM in the first place, was opposed to the use of force.

The diplomatic discussions were overtaken by events on the ground in Mali in January 2013 when the Islamists decided to move south toward Bamako, the Malian capital city. With the Malian army still in total disarray, and with six thousand French citizens residing in the capital, the President of France decided on a unilateral intervention. French combat units based in Chad, Senegal, and Côte d’Ivoire moved in quickly and stopped the Islamist advance. With additional troops and equipment brought in with the help of American airlift, the French had recaptured the major northern cities as of the end of January 2013.

All of West Africa breathed a sigh of relief after the French intervention, but it was clear that the Islamist threat to the region had not disappeared. The Islamist fighters were not defeated because they changed into normal civilian dress and melted into the population, or retreated to remote desert outposts. It was clear in early February 2013 that the Mali state needed major political and military reforms in order to reduce its vulnerability to the call of “jihad” heard by unemployed Muslim youth.13

What conclusions can we reach from the still ongoing Malian experience with Al Qaeda?

- As in Somalia, Muslim populations in Mali reject totally the medieval fundamentalist view of the Salafists. There is no way the indigenous people of northern Mali can be recruited to fight for AQIM, except possibly vulnerable child soldiers.
- Democracy achieved by African countries with a large percentage of extremely poor people will necessarily remain fragile. The Malian military personnel who were overwhelmed and humiliated by the returning Tuareg mercenaries could not look for democratic solutions to their country’s crisis.
- Muslim West Africa cannot remain fenced off from religious extremism and general instability originating in Arab North Africa. So far, upheavals in Algeria and Libya have spilled over into West Africa with devastating impact. Will Tunisia be next?14
- Whenever the United States or NATO decides to project force in Africa, planning must include actions to cope with the inevitable unintended consequences.

**NIGERIA**

The Federal Republic of Nigeria, on the southern side of the West African bulge, has the largest population of any African country, approximately 150 million people. It is also the largest oil producer in Africa, with a daily output of 2.8 million barrels. Similar to all other oil-producing African countries, Nigeria has not utilized its oil wealth wisely over the years, and the general population has seen few benefits.

Nigeria is divided almost equally between Christian and Muslim populations. The country’s northern half is almost entirely Muslim, and the southern half is almost entirely Christian. A middle belt has mixed multi-confessional populations. Since its independence from British rule in 1960, Nigeria has had very few periods without violence somewhere among its 36 federal states. The violence has been attributed to religious, ethnic, and political issues.

In the late 1960s, political and military elites in Nigeria’s eastern region announced secession under the name “Biafra,” an expression of ethnic nationalism. The ensuing civil war resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and the defeat of the Biafra secessionist movement.
Since the 1970s, religious violence in the middle belt has exploded sporadically. Militancy on the part of both Christian and Muslim clergy has resulted in the tit-for-tat burning of churches and mosques and periodic lethal mob violence. Issues of land tenure and pasturage rights have also been connected to the violence.

In Nigeria’s deep south, where the mighty Niger River empties into the Gulf of Guinea through hundreds of creeks and bayous, oil is king. In this Niger Delta sub-region, deep poverty and heavy oil pollution have led thousands of unemployed youth to lash out at multinational corporations and corrupt politicians. There has been extensive sabotage of oil installations, theft of crude oil from punctured pipelines, kidnapping of expatriate workers for ransom, and lethal ambushes of police and military personnel. These militants have even formed a political organization known as the “Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta” (MENDE). Offshore pirate attacks against cargo ships and the taking of crews for ransom have also become a significant economic activity.

In 2002, a fundamentalist politico-religious Muslim organization, called “Boko Haram” (BH) was established in the far northeast Borno state of Nigeria. Maiduguri is the capital city of Borno. The founder was Mohammed Yusuf, a cleric who was expelled from two mosques in Borno because of his radical ideas. The name “Boko Haram” is a term in the Hausa language that is short for “Western education is a sin.” The announced objective of Boko Haram was, and continues to be, the imposition of Islamic sharia law on all Nigerians, regardless of religious beliefs, and the abolition of all things Western and modern. In short, Boko Haram wants to impose on Nigeria the same type of regime that the Taliban imposed on Afghanistan.

Between 2002 and 2009, Boko Haram engaged in harassing violence against security forces and Christian churches. It had not yet become a major threat to Nigerian national security. In 2009, Mohammed Yusuf was captured in a police raid on one of his hideouts. Instead of bringing Yusuf to police headquarters for interrogation and possible negotiations, the police executed him in cold blood. Boko Haram then really became totally extremist and began a campaign of major terrorism.15

As of the beginning of 2013, Boko Haram terrorist acts have resulted in the deaths of more than 5,000; their bombs have destroyed many government buildings and Christian churches. They reached into the capital city of Abuja where they destroyed the building housing UN agencies. While the police have uncovered a few Boko Haram hideouts, they have essentially been unable to take control of the situation. In late 2012, Boko Haram started to emulate the Algerian AQIM by moving into Christian villages in the dead of night and slitting the throats of every man, woman, and child. The group is now a major threat to Nigerian national cohesion.16

International observers have started to look for evidence of a Boko Haram connection to Al Qaeda. Some indications of coordination between Boko Haram and AQIM are apparent, with BH fighters allegedly going to northern Mali for training in bomb making and other special operations. In meetings with visiting American military commanders, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan requested U.S. assistance in developing a counterterrorist strategy.

For the time being, the U.S. State Department is respecting the Nigerian request that Boko Haram not be placed on the terrorist list. The Nigerians do not want BH to gain the international stature that would result from such a designation. The Nigerians have also vastly increased their budget for security operations.

What does the Boko Haram phenomenon mean for U.S. and Western security interests?

Combined with all of the other organized violence that Nigerians have witnessed in different sub-regions, Boko Haram adds to a growing perception that one of Africa’s most significant and powerful nations might actually disintegrate. This worst-case scenario could result in the destabilization of a large part of Muslim West Africa, thereby establishing a wide opening for multiple Al Qaeda franchises. It is, therefore, in the U.S. national security interest to help the Nigerian security services weaken Boko Haram.

CONCLUSIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

From a zero presence in sub-Saharan Africa in 2005, by early 2013 Al Qaeda had established three sympathetic nodes on the continent. This is troubling, to say the least. A number of conclusions can be drawn:
Corrupt and repressive governance in African countries with majority Muslim populations inevitably open the door to desperate, violent youth who are vulnerable to Al Qaeda infiltration and capture. For example, the elected governors of the northern Nigerian states (majority Muslim population) have demonstrated very little interest in utilizing their share of Nigeria’s oil revenue for the good of their people. The people of the northern Nigerian states suffer from extreme poverty in the midst of considerable oil wealth. The United States needs to apply pressure for this highly unhealthy situation to change.

Room exists for U.S. operational security cooperation in African counterterrorism without putting U.S. military personnel on the ground.

While U.S. support for democratization in Africa should continue, recent events in “democracies” such as Mali and Nigeria should lead U.S. policymakers to give higher priority to transparent governance and more equitable distribution of national resources to reduce poverty.

Having assisted French forces in driving the Al Qaeda-affiliated rebels from the main cities of northern Mali, the United States should provide assistance to rapidly move the West African force of 3,000 troops into place for the longer guerrilla conflict that is about to unfold. In addition to logistic support, the United States can also provide vital intelligence concerning the rebel bases in the mountains of northern Mali. In February 2013, President Obama authorized the establishment of a U.S. Africa Command drone base in neighboring Niger in order to provide intelligence support to the West African forces. This will be very useful, but the presence of 300 American service personnel in an Al Qaeda target country could become too large a footprint. This project should be reviewed. On the political side, the restoration of Malian democracy will take time, but it should receive maximum support.17

Notes

1. “Two US Embassies in East Africa Bombed,” New York Times, August 8, 1998. This incident was the first attack attributed to Osama bin Laden, the late first head of Al Qaeda.
2. “Tracking Islamist Militia and Rebel Groups,” Research Brief 8, February 2013, Robert Strauss Center at the University of Texas, Austin.