

## Al-Qaeda: A continued threat – 12 September 2016

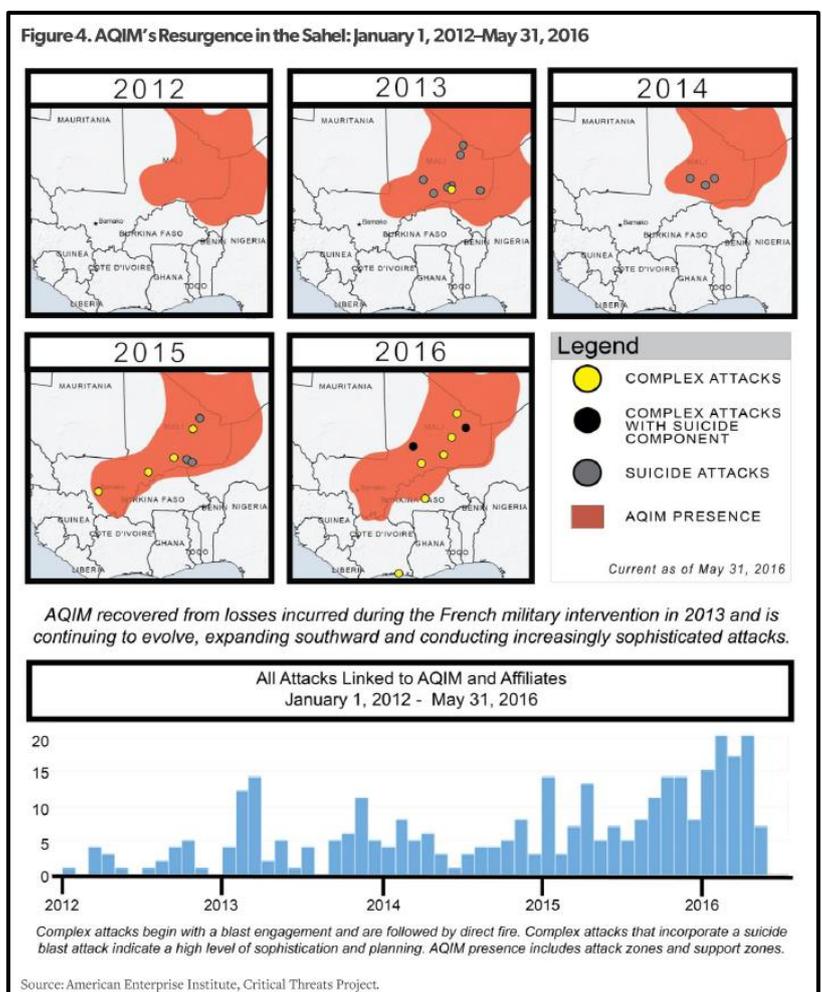
Close to the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by al-Qaeda (AQ) it is generally the Islamic State group (ISG) that continues to attract the greatest attention of any global jihadist organisation. This is largely due to their control of territory, effective employment of social media, and an ability to direct and inspire attacks, both coordinated and self-initiated across much of the globe. However, the group's hold on territory that they intended to govern, seized predominantly in Iraq, Syria, and Libya from 2014 onwards, appears to be weakening as military pressure against them builds and the flow of foreign fighters to the defence of the 'caliphate' gradually subsides.

At this time, it is important to consider the condition of ISG's principle rival, al-Qaeda. Whilst US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said back in 2011 that the US was "within reach" of defeating AQ, the group currently operate and pose a threat in countries across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Indeed, AQ has defied conventional wisdom by surviving peaceful Arab uprisings that proved Jihad was not the only way to achieve regime change and by maintaining a low-profile, relative to the brashness of ISG; a strategy which may lead to them outlasting their former affiliate.

### Al-Qaeda's African Adventures

AQ's African branch known as Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was established in 2007 when the Algeria-centric Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) aligned itself with AQ. AQIM expanded its reach across the Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert (See map<sup>1</sup>), attracting members from Mauritania, Morocco, Niger and Senegal as well as from within Mali, where it nurtured and increased cooperation with local militant groups and took a leading role in supporting the attempted overthrow of the government which resulted in a French-led intervention in 2013.

Despite French intervention and the presence of UN peacekeepers, AQ continued its presence in this region of porous borders and from late 2015 began a resurgence of activity. Recently, on 19 July 2016, militants launched a coordinated assault on a Malian military base close to Mali's border with Mauritania. The attack, that killed at least 17 soldiers and left over 30 wounded, is suspected as having been carried out by Islamist militants linked to AQ. The assault was claimed by AQ-linked group Ansar Dine. Should AQ involvement be confirmed, this would only be the latest of over 130 attacks conducted by AQ affiliates in West Africa in 2016 so-far.<sup>2</sup> The incident



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Mali.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Long War Journal: Malian military base targeted in southern Mali – 20 July 2016

is significant because militants were able to successfully overrun a defended military position highlighting AQ's continued, and perhaps increasing, ability to conduct attacks throughout the region.

A dearth of security and governance in many territories in North Africa and the Sahel continues to allow militant groups freedom of movement and action across a vast area. AQ affiliates have also demonstrated that they possess the capability to conduct sporadic attacks against Western-linked interests in Mali's capital Bamako and throughout the region. Recently, such attacks have been conducted against energy infrastructure, hotels and beach fronts, in countries including Algeria, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso.

In East Africa, Somali-based AQ-affiliated organisation al-Shabaab continue to target security forces, the government, and those including Westerners that are suspected of supporting the government, including NGOs, and journalists.

Whilst it is the case that Somali National Army (SNA) and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) operations, have been largely successful in ousting al-Shabaab from major towns and cities since 2011, the group continues to attack military outposts in rural areas, and conduct sporadic attacks in major settlements including the capital Mogadishu. The method of attacks includes the use of suicide bombings, indirect-fire and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Recently, on 26 July, suicide bombers killed at least 13 people when they struck the entrance to AMISOM's main base in Mogadishu, forcing the suspension of flights at the nearby airport. A tactic commonly used by al-Shabaab is to target venues used to host officials such as hotels. On the 25 June, the group attacked the Hablod Hotel in Mogadishu, deploying a vehicle-borne IED and gunmen. At least 15 people were killed in the attack, including a government minister, and 20 wounded.

Despite the presence of the AMISOM peacekeeping force, al-Shabaab remains a substantial threat to security and stability in Somalia, and neighbouring countries including Kenya. Furthermore, they will likely seek to increase their activities in the run up to and during the parliamentary elections (between 24 September and 10 October) and the presidential election, scheduled for 30 October 2016. Unless the international community increase their commitment to stabilising Somalia, then it is unlikely that al-Shabaab's ability to conduct sporadic attacks in the capital and elsewhere will be degraded in the near-term.

AQ's ongoing successes in the African theatre, to the detriment of ISG's prospects for expansion, have been marked by ISG's mediocre performance in their efforts to coerce or persuade AQ affiliates to defect. In May 2015, Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, a member of the Mali-based AQ affiliate Al Murabitoun, released an audio clip which seemingly stated that the entire group's loyalty had shifted to ISG. However, veteran member of Al Murabitoun, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, quickly released a statement in the following days, denying that his group had switched allegiance and reaffirming his support of AQ. ISG's affiliate in the region has since been quiet, with Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) only claiming their first attack, an attack against a gendarmerie post in Burkina Faso, in September 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, ISG have encountered problems in trying to establish a presence in Somalia. Efforts to bribe al-Shabaab into switching allegiances were rejected. Some al-Shabaab members did succumb to ISG's overtures and formed at least four cells of pro-ISG fighters.<sup>4</sup> However, al-Shabaab's "Amniyat" intelligence and security wing launched a ruthless campaign to eliminate these dissident factions, in November 2015, and as a result ISG have managed to establish only a weak presence in Somalia.<sup>5</sup>

## **Al Qaeda in the Middle East**

Al-Qaeda's affiliates in the Middle East, until recently, included one of the pre-eminent militant organisations involved in fighting against pro-Assad forces in Syria. The amicable divorce between the Nusra Front (now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) and AQ has drawn some critics to speculate that this marked a substantial loss for AQ. However, the separation was in part to allow the group to focus on its local fight in Syria whilst Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues to focus on global jihad. AQAP has certainly been one of the more successful branches of Al Qaeda in attacking western assets. Indeed, the Kouachi brothers, who carried out the attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, pledged allegiance to AQAP. The group also claimed responsibility for a plot in 2010 where two packages containing explosives were discovered on cargo planes.

The packages originated in Yemen and it is there that AQAP has made substantial inroads. Utilising the power vacuum caused by the power struggle between the Hadi government and the Houthi rebels, AQAP has been able to make substantial ground. In an attempt to position itself as an alternative to the Hadi government, AQAP has focused its attacks against government targets, whilst seizing a number of cities in the east of the country in early 2016. AQAP

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/islamic-states-sahara-branch-claims-attack-in-burkina-faso.php>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12015075/How-al-Qaeda-and-Islamic-State-are-fighting-for-al-Shabaab-affections-in-Somalia.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/africa/somalia/2016/06/27/somalias-al-shabaab-down-but-far-from-out/>

has demonstrated a surprising capability to launch sophisticated attacks as was seen in a complex, yet unsuccessful, assault on the al-Mukallah port on 2 August 2016 involving artillery in concert with an amphibious assault. IEDs often target security forces in the Hadi government's de facto capital of Aden. Nevertheless, a sustained drone campaign by the US has had some success in killing high-level members. The former Emir and founder of AQAP was killed in a drone strike in June 2015. With the fighting worsening in Yemen, AQAP is likely to spread further west and find more success unless it is directly challenged. It is believed that the group is possibly at its strongest ever in terms of men and resources.

An unofficial truce between Saudi Arabia and AQAP following the country's intervention in Yemen fell apart after almost a year when coalition forces entered al-Mukallah forcing AQAP to retreat from the city. The group may now revert to its previous tactic of targeting westerners in the kingdom in order to destabilize the country economically. Historically the group has carried out kidnappings, such as American aerospace engineer Paul Johnson, as well as bomb attacks targeting areas associated with westerners such as the May 2003 attack on three western housing compounds in Riyadh which killed 29.

As in North Africa, AQ and ISG often vie for territory and influence in the Middle East, which again sees them taking a different tack. In Syria, the Nusra Front publically stated that it would not oppress citizens in the same way as ISG was seen to do. AQAP equally took a more nuanced approach to governance in Yemen, implementing a less draconian version of sharia in Murkalla than citizens in ISG territory would be forced to endure, and assimilating pre-existing governance structures.<sup>6</sup> AQAP have also denounced much of ISG's violent activity in Yemen, thereby presenting itself as a more acceptable alternative.

### **Al Qaeda in Asia**

AQ continue to invest in their efforts in South East Asia. In August 2016, the AQ-linked Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) announced the creation of GIMF-Subcontinent. In a statement, GIMF said that its new branch was required as the region was increasing in importance and that it would create new and translate existing jihadist material into languages including Arabic, Bengali, English, Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil.<sup>7</sup>

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is a relatively new branch of the group. In September 2014 they claimed responsibility for the audacious Karachi Naval Dockyard attack where former Pakistan Navy officers attempted to hijack a F-22P naval frigate. AQIS also claimed to be behind a number of high profile murders of secular bloggers in Bangladesh. However, a number of these murders have also been claimed by ISG. Anti-secularism in Bangladesh could become a media battleground between the two groups and could stoke further jihadi-related recruitment in Bangladesh.

The US state department recently described AQIS's networks in Pakistan and Afghanistan to have been "severely degraded in the region" due to considerable pressure from US drone strikes and various counter-terrorism operations targeting its higher leadership roles. However, an article by The Washington Post on 3 June 2016 claimed that AQIS was possibly regrouping in Karachi. The article went on to say that "Counterterrorism officials in Karachi have a list of several hundred active al-Qaeda members, which makes them assume there are at least a few thousand on the streets."<sup>8</sup>

Typically, AQ in Afghanistan and Pakistan has recruited the majority of its support from ethnic Pashtuns and foreign fighters. However, there have been some indications that ethnic Bengalis and other Urdu-speaking Mohajirs have also begun to join the group. Recruitment in India appears to be remarkably low for AQIS, possibly leading to an audio message released on 3 July 2016 by the group calling for lone-wolf attacks similar to that in Paris. The audio message called for supporters to "kill the senior officers of institutions and administrative departments that get (people to) start these riots. Target IAS, and IPS officers. Cause them financial losses."

In Afghanistan, AQ have continued to support the Taliban and in August 2016, Ayman al-Zawahiri swore allegiance to the group, reaffirming this support and calling on all Muslims to support the Taliban, likely in an attempt to counter ISG expansion.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban continue to be a threat, maintaining attacks in Kabul and overrunning entire districts since NATO reduced its direct involvement in the country. ISG have struggled to gain popular support for its "Khorasan province", declared in January 2015, and has seen the Taliban and other opposition restrict its presence to a small area in the eastern Nangahar province. The Taliban also succeeded in eradicating the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan. The IMU were in exile in Afghanistan and Pakistan under the protection of the Taliban and AQ, but were targeted by the Taliban in late 2015 due to them pledging their allegiance to ISG.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.memrijttm.org/aqap-counters-isis-by-showing-a-different-model-of-governance-in-yemen.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/gimf-announces-gimf-subcontinent-for-outreach-to-indian-subcontinent.html>

<sup>8</sup> The Washington Post, 'An offshoot of al-Qaeda is regrouping in Pakistan', 3 June 2016

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/zawahiri-calls-on-muslims-to-support-taliban-reject-islamic-state.php>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13357-the-imu-is-extinct-what-new-for-central-asias-jihadis?.html>

The threat of AQ is also present in Central Asia. On August 30 2016, a suicide-bomber targeted the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan, killing himself and injuring five people. The attack was blamed on an ethnic Uighur militant group called the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which allegedly has links with the AQ affiliate in Syria. The attack highlighted the threat of AQ militancy in Central Asia, which has previously been well prepared to deal with Islamist militancy due to strict security measures.

## **Outlook**

AQ, through its various affiliates and alliances continues to maintain a franchised presence in almost all territories that have experienced recent turmoil and poses a credible threat to many more. AQ will continue to exploit security vacuums and absence of governance in areas of Africa, including the Sahel region, Asia and the Middle East, allowing them to strike out at targets in order to undermine governments and deter foreign involvement and intervention. Attacks, particularly those conducted against hotels and multinational interests, linked to AQIM are of particular concern, as they probably intend to conduct further similar attacks, whilst the increasing sophistication of their activities indicates that they have not only maintained, but possibly increased their capabilities.

As ISG presence in Libya and Syria is being visibly degraded, the probability that groups and individuals currently associated with AQ will defect will likely be reduced, effectively strengthening AQ's current position. Indeed it is possible that ISG militants fleeing from Libya may head south and join AQIM groups in the Sahel.

As the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack (claimed by AQAP) demonstrated, AQ also maintains the capability to conduct attacks in Europe and further such attacks cannot be ruled out. As the world watches for signs of a weakening 'caliphate' the older and established roots of al-Qaeda should be monitored with care for signs of rejuvenation.



**INFORM | PREVENT | RESPOND | INSURE**



Tel +44(0)247 767 0247  
Email: [Operations@scr-ltd.co.uk](mailto:Operations@scr-ltd.co.uk)  
Website: [www.scr-ltd.co.uk](http://www.scr-ltd.co.uk)

**Alert:24** provides your business with risk identification, mitigation and management services as part of your insurance transaction. This helps you to mitigate your risks, deliver effective duty of care and protect your people, reputation and profits.

Special Contingency Risks Limited is a private limited company registered in England and Wales; Registered Number: 617667; Registered Office: 70 Mark Lane, London, EC3R 7NQ. Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

The content of this newsletter is copyright to Special Contingency Risks Limited. Reproduction, retrieval, copying or transmission of the contents of this newsletter is not permitted without our express written consent. This newsletter is intended to highlight matters of general interest and is not intended to apply to your specific insurance needs. Special Contingency Risks Limited and its associated companies do not make any representation or warranty to the reader as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability of the material and expressly disclaim liability for any error or omission contained therein. Some of the information in this publication may be compiled from third party sources we consider to be reliable, however we do not guarantee and are not responsible for the accuracy of such. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Special Contingency Risks Limited or its associated companies.