



Insight

Terror in Northern Africa

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A surge of terrorist activity has been unfolding in northern Africa and its Sahel region. The administration needs to recognize the threat al Qaeda continues to pose and show more urgency in its response. The incoming national security team should heed recent events in crafting a comprehensive strategy for the next phase of the war on terror.

On September 11, 2012, terrorists attacked a U.S. diplomatic complex in Benghazi, Libya, killing Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others. Advances by Islamic militants in Mali prompted military action by France on January 11, 2013. On January 16, 2013, terrorists overran a natural gas facility in Algeria, taking scores of Western hostages including three Americans who were killed.

Three things are clear from the attacks.

1. Al Qaeda and its allies are not on the run. During his reelection campaign, President Obama regularly boasted that al Qaeda was “on the run.” In July 2011, Defense Secretary Panetta said the U.S. victory over al Qaeda was within reach. They were wrong.

The U.S. may have decimated al Qaeda’s core in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, but the organization simply metastasized. Al Qaeda has become diffuse, with shifting ties to local franchises in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and elsewhere. Sometimes it enters into marriages of convenience with local groups. Sometimes local groups align themselves with al Qaeda just to raise their profile.

Events in northern Africa and the Sahel illustrate this complexity. One of the jihadist groups fighting in Mali is Ansar Dine, an ethnic Tuareg group that aims to impose a strict form of Sharia across Mali. These homegrown fighters are joined by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Originally formed in opposition to the Algerian government, AQIM subsequently swore allegiance to al Qaeda and took on the organization’s name and philosophy. The relationship between Ansar Dine and AQIM is unclear and variable.

The Benghazi attack has been linked to Ansar al Sharia, a Libyan militant group with an affinity toward al Qaeda, though it may lack operational ties. AQIM is also suspected in the Benghazi attack.

An Algerian militant named Moktar Belmoktar, whose Al-Mulathameen Brigade has been affiliated with AQIM, took responsibility for the Algerian hostage situation. Some of the militants involved in the Algeria siege are [alleged](#) to have taken part in the Benghazi attack as well.

Al Qaeda is not Burger King. Its franchises are not uniform and are not tightly controlled, which makes it difficult to discern which terrorists are part of al Qaeda and which are not. The more important question, however, is whether a group threatens American interests. The attacks in Benghazi and Algeria show that AQIM and many of its allies fall into that category.

2. We are having trouble keeping up. Events have been unfolding rapidly and the administration seems behind the curve. For example, increased militant activity should have led to revised State Department policies concerning the Benghazi facility long before the attack.

In the case of Mali, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice [effectively](#) postponed an African military mission by several months over concerns about the force's readiness and the messy political situation in Mali. Unfortunately, AQIM didn't wait. It was rapidly approaching Mali's capitol, from which it could preside over an al Qaeda safe haven akin to pre-9/11 Afghanistan. Just think how dire that scenario must have been to prompt a French intervention – a unilateral one, at that.

The U.S. then dithered over French requests for assistance, [apparently](#) out of concerns that the U.S. might be viewed as complicit. Why the administration would worry about “complicity” in striking terrorists is difficult to understand. At any rate, the French [allegedly](#) were taken aback by American stinginess in light of what they understood to be commitments made months ago.

The U.S. cannot and should not send ground troops into every country facing a jihadist threat. But America is still the indispensable nation. We possess enviable military assets and know-how that should be utilized in partnership with our allies against shared threats. Withholding support to our allies in a bid to appease terrorists is naïve and morally bankrupt, especially when groups like AQIM have already attacked us.

The administration also has been unacceptably slow in holding the Benghazi attackers accountable, despite President Obama's promise to do just that. The problem seems to be the administration's law enforcement approach, which thus far has resulted in just one suspect's detention and release by Tunisian authorities. In fact, the only alleged Benghazi culprits to face a day of reckoning were those killed by Algerian forces during that

siege.

When al Qaeda bombed two U.S. embassies in 1998, President Clinton ordered retaliatory missile strikes on suspected terrorist sites in Sudan. When the bombing of a disco in Germany resulted in the deaths of 79 American service members in 1986, President Reagan ordered retaliatory strikes against targets in Libya. However imperfect, these strikes sent a message that America will not sit idly by while terrorists kill our diplomats and service members. That message is not being sent today.

3. Perhaps we are learning. On the positive side, events may provide a wake-up call to the administration. Secretary Clinton testified that the State Department is increasing its pressure on AQIM since the Benghazi attack. American support for the French mission in Mali seems to have been ramped up after the carnage in Algeria. Ambassador Rice has been discussing a possible UN peacekeeping mission for Mali.

And perhaps the administration learned from its errors in linking the Benghazi siege to a YouTube video. Refreshingly, it gave little credence to the Algerian attackers' claim that they were responding spontaneously to the French campaign. It faulted the terrorists for killing the hostages, not the Algerian government's admittedly clumsy response.

President Obama's incoming national security team will need to develop a forward-looking strategy – and budget – for the next phase in the war on terror. Let's hope events in northern Africa have caught their attention.