



Chadian soldiers show a flag of AQIM and weapons recovered after violent clashes with militants

THREATWATCH

AFRICA

Matthew Henman and Verner Ayukegba reveal the region's hotspots and terrorist threats

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQIM)

al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a militant Sunni Islamist group that was founded in Algeria, but operates throughout North Africa and the Sahel as al-Qaeda's regional affiliate. While its original objective of overthrowing the Algerian Government to replace it with an Islamic state under the group's interpretation of sharia (Islamic law) remains, this goal under AQIM is now transnational, reflecting al-Qaeda's transnational Islamist ideology. The group's aim is to create a regional caliphate throughout the Sahel and into West Africa.

AQIM was originally founded as the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et la Combat (GSPC) in 1998 and became AQIM in 2007. It supplemented its ongoing guerrilla insurgency with periodic mass-casualty attacks, typically either coordinated vehicle-borne improvised explosive device or suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks in addition to high-profile kidnap for ransom attacks targeting foreign nationals that provided the

group with significant financial resources. While attacks claimed specifically in the name of AQIM have declined in recent years, its affiliated groups have continued to conduct operations in their specific areas of operation. Notably, al-Murabitoun conducted an SVBIED attack on 18 January 2017 targeting former Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) fighters and pro-Government militiamen in Mali's Gao region, killing 77 people. In March 2017, AQIM's Sahara Emirate, alongside al-Murabitoun, the Front de Libération du Macina (FLM), and Harakat Ansar al-Din, formed Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Mulimin (JNIM). The group has conducted several notable attacks in the Sahel region, specifically in Mali.

HARAKAT AL-SHABAAB AL-MUJAHIDEEN (AL-SHABAAB)

al-Qaeda's Somalia-based affiliate Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen was founded in 2002 by Somali veterans of Afghan training camps run by the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Its goal is the establishment of an Islamic state under its fundamentalist interpretation of sharia in Somalia.

To this end, the group seeks to overthrow the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), expel foreign forces including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and 'purify' Somali society.

In August 2011, al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu under security force pressure and reverted to asymmetric warfare, and it continues to launch regular small and medium-scale attacks throughout Somalia, interspersed with coordinated major suicide attacks inside Mogadishu and mass assaults on isolated AMISOM bases. al-Shabaab has also increased the regularity of attacks in neighbouring countries participating in AMISOM, including attacks in Uganda's capital Kampala and Kenya's capital Nairobi.

BOKO HARAM

The Islamic State's Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyya, previously known as Boko Haram, is a militant Sunni Islamist group fighting for the implementation of its interpretation of sharia in Nigeria, and is primarily active in the Northern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa and to a lesser extent in areas of Chad, Cameroon and Niger adjacent to the Nigerian border. The group conducts small-arms and explosive-based attacks on villages and security forces, and is responsible for suicide attacks on civilian targets.

Having lost control of territory in Nigeria in 2015 and 2016 under military pressure, it has increased its operations in neighbouring Niger and Cameroon in particular, illustrating a continued capability to overrun relatively well-protected military sites despite diminished resources. The group relies heavily on the kidnapping of civilians for ransom and use as suicide bombers and fighters, suggesting that a large portion of its strength comprises people who are likely to lack significant combat experience and skills.

A dissident faction also operates in North-East Nigeria, which remains loyal to the Islamic State, but opposes the local leadership of Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyya.

WILAYAT SINAI

The formation of Wilayat Sinai was announced by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 13 November 2014 following a pledge of allegiance by Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, a militant Islamist group operating in Egypt's North Sinai governorate. Wilayat Sinai's capabilities are mostly concentrated in the Sinai Peninsula, particularly in North Sinai, where it regularly mounts attacks on security forces, often involving improvised explosive devices and small-arms in ambushes or assassinations of soldiers.

Wilayat Sinai also regularly conducts suicide attacks, including the killing of 23 soldiers in a double suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attack South-West of Rafah in North Sinai on 7 July 2017. It has also conducted attacks on civilian targets, notably the downing of a Russian passenger aircraft on 31 October 2015 killing 224 people, as well as Coptic Christians throughout the country, including Cairo and Giza. During its incarnation as Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, the group periodically conducted rocket attacks targeting Israel.

Although the group does not currently possess the capability to topple the national Government or establish areas of localised territorial control in North Sinai, it has significantly challenged the writ of the state, prompting a severe counter-terrorism response.

In tandem with this, Wilayat Sinai is likely also working with Islamic State forces operating in central and Western Egypt, with the wider objective of expanding territorial holdings across the region.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

Southern Africa's two largest economies, South Africa and Angola witnessed major leadership changes at the end of 2017 setting the foundation for profound change in the way both countries are run. South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) chose Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa as its new President to succeed Jacob Zuma in December 2017, while João Lourenço took over as Angola's President from long-serving José Eduardo dos Santos in September 2017. Both changes, together with Zimbabwe's Emmerson Mnangagwa's succession of President Robert Mugabe in November 2017 signal a new dawn, not only for the affected countries but for the whole of the Southern African region.

In South Africa, the new ANC president Cyril Ramaphosa is highly likely to prioritise replacing Jacob Zuma as head of state in 2018. As current national Deputy President, Ramaphosa would inherit the top job and wants as much time as possible to revive the ailing economy and revive the ANC's fortunes ahead of a strong 2019 poll challenge from the Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters. President Zuma, who is facing numerous corruption probes and legal challenges, is likely to dig his heels in and attempt to ignore any party orders to step down as national President. He may calculate that such a strategy will increase his chances of being offered immunity in some form. However, in recent weeks, Ramaphosa has been so forcefully critical of

AL-SHABAAB CONTINUES TO LAUNCH SMALL AND MEDIUM-SCALE ATTACKS THROUGHOUT SOMALIA

state capture and corruption that it would damage his standing within the party and chances in the 2019 election if Zuma were treated leniently. This suggests the only recourse for Ramaphosa would be to engineer yet another no-confidence vote in Parliament. Without the support of the ANC party machine, Zuma would be highly unlikely to survive. In order to gain support to force out Zuma, Ramaphosa may have to start making his first policy compromises with Zuma-allies in the ANC leadership. Although their loyalty to a lame-duck President is likely to be limited, the likes of ANC Deputy President David Mabuza and secretary-general Ace Magashule may use the opportunity to push for greater inclusion of their populist agenda in Ramaphosa's economic plans than he would want. Pressure for "radical economic transformation" is likely to persist into Ramaphosa's Presidency. Zuma's allies are likely to continue pressure for free higher education, greater shares of black business ownership and local content regulations for reasons of political conviction and personal prestige in order to be seen backing populist policies.

In Angola, although policy-making is likely to remain heavily focused on oil, attempts at economic diversification are likely to intensify under President João Lourenço with Foreign Direct Investment increasingly solicited for the telecommunications, banking and Agro-industrial sectors. The economic

interests of the Dos Santos family are also likely to be increasingly curtailed, with companies linked to the family likely to see their contracts reviewed or cancelled on grounds that they were granted illegally. Former President Dos Santos still heads the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola: MPLA), however, he is likely to be replaced this 2018 by President Lourenço.

NIGERIA

President Muhammadu Buhari's remarkable recovery from the illness that saw him spend over five months in 2017 in London signals a likely bid for a second term in 2019. However, any further medical crisis would sink these ambitions, particularly because there has been no official confirmation of his malady and why he should be considered fully recovered. The defection from the All Progressives Congress (APC) to the former ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) of perennial Presidential challenger Atiku Abubakar, announced on 24 November 2017, strongly indicates that he believes Buhari wants to stand again, in which case there is unlikely to be a serious challenge to him from within the coalition. All policy decisions and initiatives in the coming 18 months in the run-up to elections are therefore likely to be made in consideration of their electoral impact.

On 17 January 2018, the Nigerian House of Representatives approved the long-awaited Petroleum Industry Bill, which now only requires the President's consent to become law. The bill establishes an independent regulatory commission aimed at improving transparency in the industry and reducing the direct influence of Government in solving of regulatory disputes. It also unbundles the Nigerian National

Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) into two limited liability companies, with one holding joint venture assets in the upstream sector and the other holding the production sharing contract assets. The bill prescribes governance and accountability procedures for the new institutions created to ensure transparency and good corporate governance. Finally it offers incentives for local companies to acquire and exploit marginal fields and for international majors to conduct exploration offshore. Improving revenues through a recovering oil price will also be key to allowing the Government to make progress on long-standing but costly plans to overhaul the moribund power and rail sectors.

CAMEROON

Anglophone protests in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions initially demanding a return to federalism and later secession from a currently centralised system are likely to continue as the Government continues to oppose meaningful decentralisation that will allow for regional governance in sectors such as education and the judiciary. President Paul Biya is seeking an additional seven-year term after 35 years in office. He is likely to win elections scheduled for October 2018 due to the over dominance of his party and a fractured opposition. The ruling Cameroon's People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) is also likely to win majorities in Parliament and the senate, posing no challenge to President Biya's power. Rising discontent due to rising living costs and poor governance could, however, easily trigger protests, which together with a low-level insurgency in the Anglophone regions could lead to President Biya being forced out of power. Given Cameroon's location – bordering five countries in Central Africa – unrest and an unconstitutional change in power is likely to have an additional destabilising effect on neighbouring countries ●

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Muhammadu Buhari's recovery from illness indicates that he intends to stand again as President of Nigeria



Picture credit: Getty