Evidence to Parliament

The UK’s Response to Extremism and Political Instability in North and West Africa

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Summary and Recommendations

The UK’s initial reaction to the dramatic attack on the Tiguentourine gas facility near In Amenas in southern Algeria in mid-January 2013 has clearly situated it in the context of the threat to the UK of extremism in the Sahel region. Policy considerations that follow on from this attach particular importance to the emergence of al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliates and related groups, and their potential links as far afield as the Boko Haram movement of northern Nigeria and al-Shabaab of Somalia.

In operational terms, these links may be exaggerated, where AQ is not only fragmenting 1, but Islamist groups other than AQ ‘sub-franchises’ are emerging across the region, who may be considered rivals of the original AQ model and its modus operandi. Rather than constituting a coordinated ‘arc of terror’, the shifting array of alliances and influences on these groups make their objectives and ideological rationale circumstantial and opportunistic rather than enduring or narrowly focused on specific targets or types of terrorism.

While the UK’s counter-terrorism (CT) response has initially been appropriate, there are clear limits in terms of the commitments and resources the UK can devote to the broader region. The total of the UK’s budget dedicated to the region (whether the £13 million in aid pledged to Mali bilaterally, or the £110 million for all countries eligible to receive aid under the Arab Partnership Fund 2) is small relative to the estimated US $35 million accumulated over the past 5-6 years by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from smuggling, and above all kidnappings for ransom. The question facing HMG is where to find the leverage to make a difference.

The UK is likely to act primarily as part of EU initiatives, or in support of French and/or US interests in the region. If this entails too close an alignment with combatting AQ activism in the region, there may be future risks to UK interests if policy is not carefully balanced with locally-identified priorities for security and stability.

Given the multi-agency approach of HMG’s counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST, the UK should continue to focus its relatively limited resources on UK-specific objectives. These primarily remain the security of British nationals employed in the oil industry, the regional investments of British companies active in the region (such as BP and British Gas), followed by the risk of regionally-based extremism spreading to the UK. The latter concern is currently remote, but cannot be discarded without a sustained focus on the trans-national links of groups and movements originating in North and West Africa.

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1 As Foreign Secretary William Hague has indicated; see Footnote 3 below.
2 Figures taken from the Foreign Secretary’s speech, as Footnote 3 below.
HMG should also influence EU colleagues and the US to deploy collective resources towards reshaping the enabling environment that has allowed for radical jihadists and terrorists to emerge. Above all this means breaking the bonds of economic subjection that have deprived local populations of both alternative options and the means to combat the parasitical dominance of regional smuggling and criminal networks by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel in recent years.

No remedy to the long-standing and endemic weaknesses of state structures in the Sahel region will be swift. An internationally-coordinated development approach that takes the needs of local populations into account is more likely to succeed in the medium-term than a reliance on previously failing and failed local governments to promote their citizens’ interests and security over their own quest for survival.

This caution applies as much to the new alliances the UK is building in the region, above all with Algeria, which may become subject to a succession crisis in advance of, or at the time of, presidential elections set for the spring of 2014.

Personal Background and Context

I welcome this opportunity to submit evidence on a region close to my professional interests, which I have pursued in over 25 years’ experience of analysing and commenting on political and economic developments in North Africa. This was firstly at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London in the late 1980s, then as Head of the Mediterranean Security Programme at the Centre for Defence Studies, King’s College, University of London from 1995-2001. I subsequently served as Director of the Algeria Project for the International Crisis Group from 2001-02 and am currently the Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House.

In this post, which I have held since November 2005, I have been engaged in confidential security briefings on Algeria as well as publishing analyses of Algerian politics, most recently in the form of ‘expert comments’ published on the Chatham House web-site and in a report on Algeria’s defence and security policy for the World Politics Review (Strategic Posture Review: Algeria, July 2012). I also appeared as an expert witness for the defence at a recent Deportation Appeals hearing in the Special Immigration Appeals Commission on behalf of eight Algerian defendants (December 2102-January 2013). I have also read, and concur with the evidence already submitted to you by my colleague and Associate Fellow at Chatham House.

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I will thus endeavour to address issues here that have not already been covered in depth by him.

I would also like to thank the Committee for providing this opportunity to focus on an area that has divided academic as well as policy attention for too long. By this I mean an almost literal division, where academic and policy expertise on the largely Arab states and societies of North Africa (or ‘Maghreb’, meaning the westernmost region of the Arab world, linking it closely to the wider Middle East) rarely combines with specialisms in the Sub-Saharan regions to its south.

To understand the full dynamics of the current situation in the Sahel, it is highly advisable to consult beyond security studies and regional studies experts to cultural anthropologists and historians of the wider region. Too heavy a reliance on security assessments, in a region that has traditionally suffered from poor or politically-motivated intelligence runs the risk of making the UK’s contribution liable to accusations of interference, ‘neo-imperialism’ or complicity with others (above all France and the US) whose strategic intentions across the Sahel have often been locally perceived as highly self-interested.

**France, Mali and Niger**

For now, the French military intervention in Mali in January 2013 is widely seen as having saved northern Mali from the depredations inflicted on its peoples by AQIM, the Movement for Unicity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Eddine – namely, the alliance of jihadist groups (now all listed as terrorist groups at the United Nations) that until early 2013 occupied the Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal triangle in northern Mali. In July 2013, the French mission will hand responsibility over to the newly sanctioned United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which ‘will comprise up to 11,200 military personnel, including reserve battalions capable of deploying rapidly within the country as and when required, and 1,440 police personnel’ according to UN Security Council Resolution establishing it 4.

This peace-keeping and stabilisation mission will replace the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), comprising ECOWAS and African Union (AU) forces, temporarily set up in the aftermath of the French military operation in Mali. Welcomed by the Foreign Office Minister for Africa, Mark Simmonds, MINUSMA will doubtless be a focus for the Inquiry as it develops. However, in noting that it will absorb the c.6,000 African forces already

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operating in Mali, combined with 1,000 French forces remaining from the French military intervention force, it is not yet clear who will contribute the remaining 4,640 military and police personnel.

Despite a wide-ranging mandate, the BBC correspondent Alex Duval Smith based in Mali’s capital, Bamako, observed on April 25th 2013 that ‘the UN force will stretch the definition of peacekeeping to new limits, as there is no peace agreement for it to enforce in Mali’. The BBC’s West Africa correspondent Thomas Fessy amplified as follows: ‘The UN is deploying a force in a country where there is still no peace to keep. The blue helmets are tasked with securing the main cities and roads but they will not be in Mali to engage jihadist fighters. This is left to a 1,000-strong French force, which will continue to “chase terrorists” whenever needed.’

The Mission’s envisaged division of labour, while perhaps reflecting different levels of expertise, risks emphasising the primary concern of France (and by association the UK, as a member of the P-5) with the CT component of its mandate at the expense of its local security and stabilisation dimensions. It is also not yet clear whether ‘chasing terrorists’ will allow the French component (but not other nationalities?) to cross regional borders at will – above all into Niger where France has a critical national interest in safeguarding the Areva uranium plants which supply 20% or more of French nuclear energy generation needs.

French security forces have secured the Areva plants in Niger since January 2013, but they provide an obvious target for future terrorist attacks. Over the short-term, AQIM and its offshoots are on the retreat and the element of surprise that wrong-footed the Algerian authorities in the January 2013 In Amenas attack has now been lost. In 2010, 7 employees of Areva and an associated company were kidnapped by AQIM, of which four still remain in captivity. The French authorities have been widely been suspected of paying up to $17 million in ransoms for captives in the past, a position that while not acknowledging past practice, the Hollande presidency declared in March 2013 does not now apply. When a French hostage, Philippe Verdon, kidnapped in a separate incident in November 2011 in northern Mali, was reported to have been executed on 10th March 2013, there were renewed appeals from the families of the Areva hostages for the French government to act to secure their release.

Areva also faces more international competition over uranium mining, where it has previously operated a quasi-monopoly in Niger. Besides increased Chinese investment since 2009, Iranian President Ahmedinejad recently visited Niger, where the Nigerien government is also

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interested in diversifying away from an exclusive relationship with France.\textsuperscript{6}

The sum of these concerns mean that where France had no critical commercial interests to defend in Mali, it may well be drawn in to any future escalation of tensions or incidents arising in Niger, especially if anti-French sentiment among what a growing number of Nigeriens see as French exploitation of their natural resources were to increase. UK policy-makers will be aware of the risks, but they need to be ring-fenced from UK actions in Mali, and any role played alongside, or in support of, French security personnel in MINUSMA.

**The US and the Sahel Region**

The US has long been involved in CT initiatives in the Sahel region, dating back to the Pan-Sahel Initiative of 2002 (involving Mali, Chad, Niger and Mauritania), to the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative in 2005 (expanded to encompass Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal), which was brought under the United States Africa Command (better known as AFRICOM) in 2008. The main aim of these and subsequent initiatives has been to train and assist in coordinating national militaries to respond to suspicious movements across the Saharan region connecting West to North Africa, above all in combatting the criminal networks that have fed the rise of AQIM and other terrorist networks.

The results have not been impressive: according to Anouar Boukhas, in addition to the more than 18,000 African forces trained by France from 1997 to 2007, ‘the US has spent millions of dollars training Malian soldiers only to see many of them flee or defect to the rebels’ side.’\textsuperscript{7} AFRICOM’s most recent efforts to coordinate regional security responses from an Algerian-led joint military command centre (CEMOC: Comité d’Etat-Major opérationnel conjoint) established in 2009 at Tamanrasset in southern Algeria proved to be insignificant when it came to the In Amenas crisis, which was managed entirely as a national Algerian affair.

This raises questions about the advisability of re-inventing policies based on strengthening national military capacities and regional security cooperation under the MINUSMA mandate. The political will of regional governments to professionalise and reward their own armies and combine forces across national borders has proven to be consistently weak after more than 15 years of external interventions. Wolfram Lacher, writing prior to the culmination of the

\textsuperscript{6} See Reuters, April 15\textsuperscript{th} 2013 ‘Ahmadinejad to Visit Uranium Producer Niger’ http://www.voanews.com/content/ahmadinejad-to-visit-uranium-producer-niger/1641527.html

\textsuperscript{7} See Anouar Boukhas ‘The Mali Conflict: avoiding past mistakes’ FRIDE Policy Brief 28\textsuperscript{th} February 2013, p.5 http://www.fride.org/publication/1105/the-mali-conflict-avoiding-past-mistakes
recent crises, points to the complicity of political elites across the Sahel region in the trans-
Saharan smuggling and criminal networks that have become enmeshed in the funding and
opportunistic exploitation of bad regional governance by AQIM and other jihadist groups\(^8\).

The UK currently supports the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, which aims
to train four battalions of 1,800 troops over 15 months. HMG should supplement this by
promoting initiatives derived from a clearer sense of local dynamics and security needs,
rather than the assurances of weak and self-interested national governments. National
reconciliation efforts in Mali are in their infancy and the general elections foreseen for July
2013 are unlikely to resolve Bamako’s long-standing neglect of northern Mali which prompted
the insurgencies there of early 2012.

**New Dimensions of Regional Security Threats**

UK interests were directly and critically affected by the attack on the In Amenas plant, jointly
operated by BP, the Norwegian oil major Statoil, and the Algerian national oil company
Sonatrach. Three British nationals and a UK resident died, and the security of British-
employed personnel has been paramount in the subsequent stepping up of local security
measures in the larger hydrocarbon complex of Hassi Messaoud to the north of In Amenas.
Rumours of planned car-bombs, kidnappings of internationals and further attacks persist,
making it essential that HMG coordinate directly with British companies operating in Algeria,
Tunisia and the wider region, along with the Algerian authorities who retain a jealous control
over national security.

The French military push-back in northern Mali may, for now, have cleared Mali of AQ-linked
jihadist groups, but there are various hypotheses about where they have withdrawn to as their
strongholds in the Adrar Ifoghas mountains become less secure. Libya – or the frontier areas
of Algeria/Niger/Libya – is one possibility, not least since this is the hub of the trafficking
routes through which most heavy weaponry to groups active in the Sahel have passed.
Southern Tunisia, not well-secured by the transition government, is another option; there are
also rumours of links into Saharawi camps at Tindouf in south-eastern Algeria by MUJAO,
which unlike the Algerian-dominated AQIM, draws most of its support from the Sahel states.

Less clear is what the fragmentation and regrouping of groups means in terms of their future
plans and targets; MUJAO is said to be ‘eyeing up’ Niger next, but most recently (April 1st

\(^8\) Wolfram Lacher ‘Organised Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region’ Carnegie
Endowment for International Peace Paper, 13th September 2013
http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/13/organized-crime-and-conflict-in-sahel-sahara-
region/d7jm
2013) nine terrorists belonging to MUJAO (Libyan, Nigerien, Burkinabe, and Malian nationals) were reported trying to enter Algerian territory in two four-by-fours at the border triangle between Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania. They were killed by the Algerian army after an hour with helicopter reinforcements, in a counter-attack Algerian media reported to have been based on Algerian intelligence.

In reporting these incidents, the Algerian authorities are trying to maintain a semblance of control over events, but President Abdelaziz Bouteflika is not well, and has not travelled abroad on official business for 16 months. Most recently he was reported as having been taken to hospital in Paris suffering from a minor stroke. This has limited the amount of high level regional coordination that has been possible without sending proxies to represent the presidency. The ruling FLN party is also in the mist of a leadership crisis, meaning that there is no clear successor to President Bouteflika should he not stand, as seems increasingly likely, in next year’s presidential elections. In security terms, no one is under any illusion that the security effort in southern is controlled semi-autonomously by the Algerian military and the DRS (Algerian military intelligence) at arm’s length from the presidency.

In terms of the impact on local populations of the terrorist attack on In Amenas, a new southern Algerian protest movement, the National Coordinating Committee for the Defence of the Unemployed, has staged a number of demonstrations and protests about Algier’s neglect of the southern provinces – but its coordinators have rebuffed AQIM advances. While not originally a political movement, their recent demonstrations have highlighted constitutional articles in defence of their political rights. This is so far small scale, but a significant development for the UK to watch, given the need to strengthen local capacities and goodwill in CT initiatives.

As for AQIM itself, its appeal amongst Algerians has never been strong, and one theory is that developments over the past couple of years, in the ratcheting-up of AQIM’s activism in Mali, and the In Amenas incident, undertaken supposedly by AQIM dissidents – has been to refocus international attention back from the Arab Spring to jihadism, which was excluded from initial uprisings and risked becoming irrelevant. The strategy would now appear to one of drawing international actors into the region, the better to recruit more local activists to fight foreign incursions.

**The Diversification of Jihadist Movements**

This has not so far appeared to have succeeded, for a number of reasons. Within the dynamics of cross-regional developments since 2011, two schools of thought within the region’s wider salafist and jihadist movements seem to have emerged:
(a) The first is to continue the violent pursuit of jihadist goals and intensify attacks against foreign interests and their foreign client governments (including Algeria). It is notable in this respect that MUJAO has attacked Algerian targets more consistently than have the branches of AQIM based in Mali in recent years; it also seems apparent from reporting of the In Amenas attack that AQIM offshoots or related groups are demonstrating differences of opinion over the choices of targets and local strategies to pursue.

(b) The second approach has been to gain more ground regionally through what might be termed the ‘Ansar al-Sharia’ model (present, and growing in Tunisia and Benghazi in Libya as the AST and ASB, respectively). This incremental approach to recruiting new adherents is based on the philosophy of ‘dawa’ (or the ‘call’), which focuses primarily on community-based missionary work, and the provision of goods and services neglected by the state.

Lessons appear to have been learnt from Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood in seeking to implement sharia (Islamic law) through gradual means, rather than terrorism (if not occasional violence) – which has enjoyed considerable success in Tunisia, if still limited in overall numbers. AST is estimated to have anywhere between 10,000 to an exaggerated 90,000 members. Armed violence remains an option, but the reference points for these groups go beyond ‘AQ Central’, whose current Emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, appears increasingly wrong-footed by these movements.

New influences have also appeared on the scene to influence the direction these ‘AQ rivals’ take, dating back to the discrediting of the excesses committed in the name of AQ by Abu Musab al-Zarkawi in Iraq in 2006-7. The Jordanian Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi (currently in prison in Jordan) has education and ‘dawa’ at the core of his philosophy, having built up an on-line library of resources to back a gradualist approach. Another on-line influence is the Mauritanian preacher Abu Mundhir Shanqeeti who delivers regular sermons on the minbar al tawheed & jihad (pulpit for unity and struggle) site. Other formative influences on the transnational rise of Ansar al-Sharia groups have been the Libyan Abu Yahia al-Libi (killed in a US airstrike in Pakistan in December 2009) and the Yemeni Anwar al-Awlaki (killed in a US drone attack in Yemen in September 2011).

There is no evidence of this ‘dawa’ approach making headway within Algeria, but the AST in Tunisia was formed in April 2011 when jihadists were released from prison or came back from exile. Its leader, Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi (born in 1970) has followed a typical trajectory of having come under the influence of Abu Qatada whilst in exile in London, before setting up a group of ‘Tunisian Fighting Forces’ in Afghanistan. A similar model applies to the ASB, founded in February 2012 and which came to prominence after the death of the US Ambassador in the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi attributed to ASB. While not fully accepting
responsibility, the ASB leadership now claims the Ambassador’s death was unforeseen and unplanned. Violence is not the whole story of ASB, however: like the AST, they too provide local services, including having being called back by the Libyan government to resume the much-reported security detail their operatives have provided to the main hospital in Benghazi.

**Conclusion**

This background is important for HMG to consider in terms of assessing the fate of AQIM and other terrorist groups in the Sahel; even though the Ansar al-Sharia trend is seen as an offshoot, or development of AQ thinking, including that condoned by Zawahiri, it represents a diversification of that model and offers more choices to would-be jihadists. In Tunisia, for example, the philosophy of Abu Iyad is based on ‘missionary work at home; jihadism abroad’ 9. This means that young disenchanted Tunisians who want to fight go outside Tunisia to do so: 11 Tunisians were among the terrorists at In Amenas and an estimated 150-230 are active in Syria with the forces of Jabhat al-Nusra. In February 2013 alone, the highest number of foreigners who died in Syria were 26 Tunisians, followed by 11 Jordanians.

These developments have resulted in rivalry between AQIM and Jabhat al-Nusrah to attract fighters to replenish their ranks; a number of recently detained Tunisians were found to be carrying leaflets exhorting them to stay and pursue the fight in northern Mali and southern Algeria against western interests and infidel governments; Jabhat al-Nusra was openly blamed for taking them in. On April 6th 2013, Ayman al-Zawahiri broadcast a message to Maghreb youth to ‘support the umma’ in North Africa, and AQIM has also just launched a Twitter account in an attempt to raise its profile. An intelligent HMG strategy would be to follow these developments and seek to influence the demise of AQIM, which as the former Foreign Minister of Mauritania has recently observed, lacks the ideological depth of its new rivals10.

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9 See Aaron Zelin ‘Know your Ansar al-Sharia’, Foreign Policy, 21st September 2012 [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/know_your_ansar_al_sharia](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/know_your_ansar_al_sharia)