

The jihadist threat to France and its interests abroad

Philippe Migaux | Researcher on Asymmetric conflicts, Sciences Po, Paris.

Theme

This analysis focuses on the current jihadist threat to France and its interests abroad.

Summary

Since December 1996 –when the last bombing incident took place in the Paris metro, with four people killed– France has succeeded in preventing jihadist attacks on its territory, excepting the seven murders committed by Mohamed Merah in March 2012 in Montauban and Toulouse. Meanwhile, 80 French civilians have been killed abroad in terrorist attacks, while 89 French soldiers have died in Afghanistan and seven in Mali.

The threat to France depends on the capacity of adaptation of the fighting jihadists and of their strategy. Core al-Qaeda now has the support of regional organisations, domestic cells and individual players. It has attempted to make the French army, as well as other leading Western forces, engage militarily against the jihad in new lands in order to weaken them economically and provoke the hostility of their public opinions. Since 2011 the Arab revolutions have been a significant challenge to al-Qaeda to gain new allies amongst the most radicalised rebels and those disappointed by the new regimes. Moreover, the quantitative and qualitative decline of the operational jihad has compelled the Mujahidin to develop three new forms of struggle: (1) the virtual jihad; (2) the kidnapping of hostages; and (3) creating networks for transferring volunteers to the lands of jihad, particularly to Syria, where around 140 French volunteers are fighting under the banner of jihadist organisations that are trying to exploit the situation.

The new players that threaten France find inspiration in the lands currently engaged in the Jihad. The main crisis-point for French interests is in the Sahel. Jihadist networks in Mali have now been dismantled, but their elements remain active. Operation Serval neutralised the Islamic Emirate of Northern Mali but dissidence within al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has given rise to competition between African jihadists, thereby aggravating the threat. Whether al-Murabitun or AQIM, the first organisation to succeed in striking on French soil will gain a new legitimacy with core al-Qaeda. The threat's centre of gravity is now moving from northern Mali to Libya, through northern Niger, and this is creating three danger zones: to the north-west, the south and the east, all regions where there are

sizeable French communities. French territory is also being targeted for possible action by lone wolves, domestic cells or from abroad by al-Qaeda-linked organisations. In any case, the contacts between militants engaged in other lands of jihad, especially in Syria and Somalia, will reinforce the threats in the future.

Analysis

There are six main reasons why al-Qaeda's networks place France at the forefront of its enemies: its history, from the Crusades to colonisation; its military presence in Muslim countries –such as Senegal, Djibouti, Afghanistan and Mali– that justify a defensive jihad; its support for 'apostate regimes' in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger; the creation of Muslim representative structures in France, particularly the founding of the Consultative Council of Muslims of France in 2006; and the French tradition of secularism, symbolised by the law banning the wearing of the niqab in public spaces in 2010. But perhaps the main reason is revenge against French repression: between 1993 and the present day 1,500 jihadists have been arrested and around 200 of them are still in prison.

Since December of 1996 –when the last bombing incident took place in the Paris metro, with four people killed– France has succeeded in preventing jihadist attacks on its territory, excepting the seven murders committed by Mohamed Merah in March 2012 in Montauban and Toulouse. Meanwhile, 80 French civilians have been killed abroad in terrorist attacks, while 89 French soldiers have died in Afghanistan and seven in Mali.

The sources of the threat: how current fighting jihadist strategies affect France

Al-Qaeda has a strong fighting strategy with an excellent capacity for adaptability. Its development can be summarised in five steps:

- (1) In June 2001 the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's number-three, wrote *The Knights under the Prophet's Banner: Meditations about Jihad*. Four months before 9/11 he asked for three changes in strategy: (a) the priority in the struggle was to be no more the 'close enemy' (the apostate regimes in Muslim countries, that were to be overthrown by the jihad) but the 'far enemy' (the Western countries whose economic, diplomatic or military support prevented the jihad from winning); (b) regional organisations were to be created to support al-Qaeda's jihad on a local basis; and (3) three new forms of action were to be employed in future terrorist attacks in order to gain psychological results rather than material destruction, to hit economic targets –which are the pillars of Western society and its 'Muslim slaves'– and to resort to suicide attacks, because they always hit a target, even if it is not the chosen one, and to call for martyrdom to attract new volunteers.
- (2) In March 2005 the Egyptian Seif al-Adel, then al-Qaeda's deputy chief of operations, wrote *Al-Qaeda Strategy up to 2025*. He proposed attracting Western armies to the lands newly engaged in jihad in order to weaken the

Western countries economically and to provoke the hostility of their public opinions. The idea was relatively effective: according to the US Congress, in January of 2013 the cost of the war in Iraq for the US was US\$750 billion, while certain US NGOs point out that if the reimbursement of loans and pensions to veterans are included, the real cost by 2025 would be US\$6.500 billion.

- (3) In May 2006 the Syrian Abou Moussab, a close follower of Osama bin Laden, wrote *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*. He believed that mujahidin could be identified by the Security Services through their contacts with regional organisations. Thus, he advised jihadist sympathisers to create 'domestic cells' on a local basis and to gain access to jihad techniques from Internet websites. The problem was that at that time such websites were usually in Arabic, while many sympathisers living in Western countries – whether sons of immigration or converts– did not speak the language.
- (4) In March 2010 the Yemeni-American Anwar al-Awlaki provided a solution to the problem by creating *Inspire*, an on-line magazine written in English and divided into two parts: an apologia of martyrdom and a guide to terrorist techniques. At the same time, he considered that local militants could even be detected by contacts within their own domestic cells and advised them to prepare 'lone-wolf' terrorist attacks.
- (5) In January 2011 the international community failed to anticipate the Arab revolutions, but they were an even bigger challenge to al-Qaeda, which had been unable to overthrow any regime in a Muslim country in 30 years of jihad, while unarmed crowds had at last succeeded to put an end to dictatorships after months of demonstrations. The first al-Qaeda leader to react was the Emir of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukhdal. During the Tunisian revolution he sent instructions to his troops to gain the sympathy of the rebels by supporting them, without publicising the jihadist cause. His aim was to exploit the Arab revolutions in order to make allies of the most radicalised rebels and then with the people disappointed by the new regimes. The strategy was effective because Abdelmalek Droukhdal gained new sympathisers among Salafi militants, forging strong links in Tunisia and Libya with new Salafist groups under the common name of Ansar al-Sharia (The Partisans of Islamic Law).

New forms of action

Nevertheless, the quantitative and qualitative decline of the operational jihad has forced al-Qaeda to develop three new forms of action: (1) the virtual jihad; (2) the kidnapping of hostages; and (3) creating networks for transferring volunteers to the lands of jihad.

The development of virtual jihad has five goals: to attract and recruit new volunteers;

providing them with ideological and military training (secrecy and combat tactics); to provide safe communications (with the members of jihadist cells using the same e-mail address, where messages are left as drafts, having access to cryptographic methods and being able to chat in the website discussion forums); to help them prepare operations, as most jihadist attack films begin with the use of Google Earth; and to frighten the enemy by the use of threatening communiqués, hostage declarations, and bomb attack and hostage execution videos.

Today, there are jihadist websites in most Western languages, including French. The administrator of the French website *Ansar al-Haqq* (The Partisans of Truth), a French convert named Romain Letellier, alias Abou Sayad al-Normandy, was arrested on 19 September 2013. His main activity was to translate the on-line English-language magazine *Inspire*. Jihadist militants in France are increasingly using social networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter.

The kidnapping of hostages has six goals: to finance terrorist activities with the ransoms obtained; to gain the release of jihadist prisoners; to maintain a high threat level; to protect terrorist groups with human shields; to create sanctuaries in the lands of jihad; and to maintain regular media coverage. At the beginning of 2013 there were 19 French hostages in the hands of jihadist groups (eight in Mali, eight in Nigeria, one in Somalia and two in Afghanistan). There are seven today (two in Mali, one in Nigeria and four in Syria).

The multiplication of networks for transferring volunteers to the lands of jihad also has five purposes: to recruit new volunteers to support local jihads; to send them to the lands of jihad in order for them to gain fighting experience; to build operational groups once they are back in their own countries; to perpetrate criminal acts (including credit-card fraud and small-scale armed robbery) for financing group activities; and to prepare terrorist activities in their country or abroad. The first network dismantled in France dispatched French citizens with Moroccan roots to Afghanistan in 1993. After training they travelled to Marrakech where they committed an armed robbery at the Atlas Hotel on 30 August 1994, killing two tourists and a cashier, all in the cause of jihad.

At present the main lands of jihad for French mujahidin include Syria, Mali, Somalia and Yemen. In Syria there are 140 French volunteers fighting with jihadist organisations that are trying to exploit the rebellion for their own purposes, such as *Jahbat al-Nusra* and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Nine of them had been killed within one year. In Mali three volunteers were arrested before reaching the north of the country, while three more were killed and two captured during combat operations. In Somalia, a dozen volunteers are still in training at al-Shabaab camps. In Yemen, 80 French citizens are studying at fundamentalist madrasas, five were killed in the local jihad and others wanted to move on to fight in Mali. In Afghanistan and Pakistan there are currently less than a dozen French volunteers, mostly in Pakistan's tribal zones.

Those currently posing a threat to France have been inspired by events in the new lands of jihad. The main crisis-point for French interests is in the Sahel, as shown by the following examples. Abdelmalek Droukhdal tried to manipulate the Tuareg rebellion before the insurrection of January 2012 but failed to take advantage of the National Movement of Azawad Liberation. He therefore supported a maverick but charismatic Tuareg, Iyad Ag Ghali, who had created his own group, *Ansar Eddine* (The Partisans of Faith). By financing *Ansar Eddine*, providing it with troops and organising its propaganda, AQIM used it as a front for the Islamic Emirate in Northern Mali.

But Abdelmalek Droukhdal was cautious and ordered *Ansar Eddine* and its own four 'brigades' or *kataeb*, to exercise moderation and discretion in order to gain the support of local populations and to allow the new Emirate to grow, step by step. However, the instructions were not followed.

Ansar Eddine fought against the National Movement of Azawad Liberation, destroyed some of the mausoleums in Timbuktu and forced the local people to adopt a Salafist lifestyle. Even worse, it decided to pursue its conquest of southern Mali, dispatching 800 mujahidin on 10 January 2013 towards Mopti. But its ambitions were dashed when France reacted immediately to the threat at the request of the Malian authorities and in application of UN resolution 2085.

Meanwhile, the rivalry between the four AQIM-south *kataeb* persisted. In June 2011 part of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's *katiba* broke away and created the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJWA). In September 2012 Mokhtar Belmokhtar was expelled from AQIM for misconduct.

Today, the jihadist networks in Mali have been disrupted but elements of them remain active. Operation Serval neutralised the Islamic Emirate of Northern Mali. The main losses have been registered by the three remaining *kataeb* of AQIM South, which have been reduced to around 250 mujahidin to the north of Timbuktu. Mokhtar Belmokhtar and MUJWA take good care to avoid fighting against French troops. On 23 August they merged into a new organisation, al-Murabitun (AM), which currently has around 300 mujahidin, deployed in three *kataeb* that operate from Gao to southern Libya.

Internal dissidence heightens the threat

Dissidence within AQIM has given rise to greater competition between the different jihadist groups and this heightens their threat potential. AM has money because part of its members are involved in drug trafficking. Its aim is to build a new regional organisation to cover the area from the Atlantic Ocean to the Nile, linking itself directly to core al-Qaeda in order to carry out its jihad throughout North Africa. The new organisation engaged in its most important operations in 2013, giving it the capacity to attract further volunteers. In Algeria it took hostages at In-Anemas on 16 January, in Niger it launched suicide bombings at the Agadez barracks and against

the French company Areva in Arlit on 23 May and it attacked Niamey prison on 1 June. AM has strong contacts in Tunisia, Libya and Sudan, but also in Egypt, with a new al-Qaeda group, the Partisans of the Holy House (a reference to Jerusalem). The latter is mainly active in the Sinai, but its militants have carried out some highly-publicised operations in the north, such as their attempt to assassinate the Minister of the Interior in Cairo on 5 September 2013. AM also has strong links with Boko Haram in Nigeria, which Abdelmalek Droukhdal blamed for committing random attacks, with much collateral damage to Muslim populations. A French priest, George Vandenbeusch, was kidnapped by Boko Haram in northern Cameroon on 14 November 2013, while AM itself holds a French hostage, Alberto Rodríguez Leal, kidnapped in Mali in November 2012.

AQIM's militants are still being neutralised in Algeria, and the group needs money. It wants to create a new regional organisation in Maghreb, linked with the Tunisian and Libyan al-Ansar al-Charia. At the same time, it is trying to reorganise its three *kataeb* in Mali to maintain a presence in the south. To prove that it retains its capacity for action, from time to time it perpetrates suicide operation in the Timbuktu area, similar to its attack of 29, which resulted in the death of four civilians). With the same aim in mind, it also kidnapped and killed two French journalists, Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon, at Kidal on 2 November 2013. AQIM has links in Nigeria with a radical offshoot of Boko Haram, Ansaru, which largely targets western citizens. AQIM still retains a single hostage, Serge Lazarevic, who was kidnapped in Mali in November 2011.

This competition between different factions and groups presents a new challenge to Europe. When the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat, AQIM's predecessor, was incorporated to al-Qaeda on 11 September 2006 it was given two missions: (1) to spread jihadist ideology from its bases in Algeria and Mali to the west and the south, which it accomplished; and (2) to target Europe, particularly France, which was described as 'The mother of all illnesses'. As a result, the organisation that finally succeeds in being the first to stage an attack on French soil will gain a high degree of legitimacy with core al-Qaeda.

A moving centre of gravity

The threat's centre of gravity is moving from northern Mali towards Libya, through northern Niger, thus giving rise to three new danger zones. Towards the north-west it is Tunisia that is being targeted. Two representatives of opposition movements have been murdered over the past six months and large stocks of weapons have been discovered by the security forces. On 30 October 2013 two suicide bomb attacks failed in the tourist regions of Sousse and Monastir and since June 2013 the Tunisian army has been trying to dismantle a jihadist group on Mount Chaambi, linked to AQIM across the Algerian border. This connection suggests the possibility of further attacks in southern Algeria against Western companies' oil interests.

To the south, Mali will offer new targets with the arrival of European NGOs and private companies for development purposes. Niger is under a dual threat: from

AQIM and AM in the north and from Boko Haram and Ansaru in the south. There is also the risk of attacks, mainly for publicity, in Mauritania, Chad, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Senegal and the Ivory Coast, where there are large groups of French residents. Boko Haram and Ansaru constitute a long-term threat for Nigeria.

To the east, links in the Sudan and Egypt will allow AM to gain a new physical proximity to al-Shebaab in Somalia, which wants to stir up a new regional jihad in East Africa. Somalia is the physical link between Africa, where jihad is on the rise, and the Middle East, where jihad is reviving as a result of the Syrian crisis. Somalia is also a major location for volunteer training camps, run by al-Shebaab, that among others cater to 400 individuals of the Somali diaspora resident in Europe and the US, who have additionally brought 200 Western converts.

All these circumstances heighten the threat level for France and its interests abroad, increasing the risk for French citizens and interests in all these regions of Africa, where the main type of operations could be targeted assassinations, bomb attacks and hostage taking.

Targeting French territory

However, there is also a direct threat to French territory, whether by lone wolves, home-grown groups or groups from abroad. As an instance of an attack by a lone wolf, in June 2012 the French national Braham Bahrir travelled to Brussels and stabbed three policemen in the metro in revenge for the banning of the Salafi organisation Sharia@Belgium. There is also a real possibility of a lone wolf acting against France from a neighbouring country. In May 2013 the French convert Alexandre Dhaussy stabbed a member of the armed forces in a shopping centre close to Paris, in what appears to be an attempt to emulate the murder of a British soldier in London by two British citizens of Nigerian origin.

As for home-grown groups, on 7 September 2012 a grenade was launched against a Jewish grocery in Sarcelles (near Paris). The perpetrators were mainly converted French West Indians and were arrested a month later, before they managed to commit any further terrorist attacks against Jewish targets. On 2 March 2013 three petty delinquents were arrested in Martigues (southern France) while they were preparing an explosive device. They planned to perpetrate a car bomb attack for the first anniversary of the death of Mohammed Merah. On 30 March 2013 17 members of a fundamentalist association, *Forsane Alisa* (The Knights of Pride), were arrested. The group itself had been banned a year previously for inciting to terrorism, after which its members had bought AK47s and were preparing to kidnap a judge in Lyon. On 4 September 2013 five jihadist militants who wanted to join Jahbat al-Nusra were arrested after an armed robbery at a McDonald's fast-food restaurant. The proceeds were to be used to finance travelling to Syria.

In relation to jihadist groups from abroad, it should be noted that all the various al-Qaeda organisations have announced their intention of seeking revenge for their

brothers of the Islamic Emirate in northern Mali. There have been several actions prepared in foreign countries. Al-Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula planned to kidnap personnel from the French Embassy in Yemen. Al-Shebaab aimed to target French citizens in Kenya and Ethiopia in retaliation for the failed attempt on 13 January 2013 to free the French Intelligence Officer Denis Alex, who had been kidnapped in Mogadiscio in 2009 and who was killed during the operation.

In conclusion, the links between militants engaged in the lands of jihad are fostering these new threats. The main risk is not Somalia, but Syria, where French militants linked to jihadist organisations are fighting alongside 2,000 Tunisians and 3,000 Libyans. These African jihadists can encourage French volunteers to commit terrorist actions once they return to France. They can also try to recruit them to move discretely around Africa to participate in local jihad operations, using their French passports to gain a greater freedom of movement.

Conclusions

What is the next step? When looking at a map of the world, it can be seen that in three years, by exploiting the Arab revolutions, al-Qaeda's networks have succeeded to spread their ideology over the whole of North Africa and a significant part of the Middle East. This has come about not only because of the failure of the new regime in Libya or the bloody repression carried out by Bachar al-Assad, but also because the jihadist organisations have discretely tapped new sources of finance, mainly extortion and criminal activities in the areas where they exert some sort of influence.

Meanwhile in the Pashtun regions, Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, all linked to the surviving core al-Qaeda, control part of the smuggling networks and tax opium trafficking from the Afghan poppy fields to the Pakistani transformation laboratories. In Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant has succeeded in controlling the illegal sale of oil in the Sunni region. In Sahel, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is paid tribute by all the trafficking networks that cross the desert transporting cocaine from South America, hashish from Morocco, weapons from Libya or illegal immigrant from Nigeria. AQIM's dissident group, al-Murabitun, is directly involved in the trafficking of various types of substances, from Moroccan hashish to cigarettes, as are the militants of the Movement for the Unity of Jihad in Western Africa.

Trafficking provides the jihadi networks with the opportunity to creating maverick alliances, through the corruption of local representatives of public services and tribal leaders. The international community must devise a clear answer to these long-term threats by considering the traffickers accomplices of the jihadist networks and by helping the local authorities to reinforce their efforts against organised crime by enhancing the coordination between the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and the judiciary.