

# SPECIAL REPORT

September 2014

A S P I  
AUSTRALIAN  
STRATEGIC  
POLICY  
INSTITUTE

## The new frontiers of Islamist extremism Understanding the threat that al-Qaeda affiliates pose to African security

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### Executive summary

It would be easy for the public to believe that al-Qaeda inspired terrorism is a new feature of the African security landscape, yet the ideology, personnel and links between groups have been growing for the past 25 years. That said,

it's really over the past decade that various groups that had been operating with a predominantly nationalistic agenda have increasingly become aligned with al-Qaeda in name, ideology, methodologies of attack and tactics. A new jihadism is spreading across Africa. This paper examines three of those groups—Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM),



In this 17 February 2011 file photo, al-Shabab fighters march with their weapons during military exercises on the outskirts of Mogadishu, Somalia. AP Photo/Mohamed Sheikh Nor via AAP.

al-Shabaab and Boko Haram—and the way they’ve evolved, especially in the linkages between them and al-Qaeda’s ideology and tactics. All of these groups are separate from the al-Qaeda core. They haven’t taken up the al-Qaeda model because they’ve been told to, but they’re emulating it. They’re all looking to become dispersed, decentralised movements that frame local grievances in the language of the global jihad. They’re sharing tactics, training and personnel to further their respective causes while operating across national boundaries to escape capture and raise funds through criminal activities. Their attacks are becoming more ambitious and audacious and if left unchallenged could lead to the formation of terrorist safe havens.

Western governments are genuinely concerned that conflicts from northern Africa, the Sahara, the Sahel to the Horn of Africa are becoming more closely linked. Despite the relative success of the French military intervention in Mali in 2013, evidence shows that Islamist groups in Africa have a growing geographical reach and ambitions.

For the international community, the danger lies not so much in the immediate threat to Western targets from African Islamists, but in the potential future creation of a failed state that would provide a base for training and radicalising large numbers of Islamists, as Afghanistan did during the 1990s and Mali had the potential to do in 2012 and 2013. One of the most dangerous ways that groups in Africa contribute to the global terrorist threat is in the consistent flow of personnel into international combat zones where al-Qaeda/Islamist fighters are needed. Leaders of all the groups discussed in this paper fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s and supplied many fighters to the Iraq conflict in the 2000s. This has continued: around 200 Algerians have fought in Syria, along with 2,000 Tunisians, around 1,500 Moroccans and unknown numbers from Libya, Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, Egypt, Eritrea, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan. The proven capacity of AQIM, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab to train and share fighting and bombmaking skills with new recruits, and then deliver those recruits into intensive front-line fighting roles in areas such as Syria and Iraq, will be the groups’ most immediate international impact.

There are no clear solutions for African states combating the Islamist groups that are ramping up the number, frequency and severity of attacks in the continent, but any solution will necessarily be complex. It will need to address not only the Islamists’ direct security challenge, but also the

underlying socioeconomic drivers that encourage young men to join their ranks. This will require continued investment in strengthening regional cooperation on intelligence sharing and raising the level of border security and policing efforts to minimise the groups’ operating space and ability to raise funds. The key to African nations’ responses will be winning back the hearts and minds of local populations, harnessing their cooperation, and starving the groups of local support and the ability to continue unrestricted cross-border movements.

Unfortunately, if the situation’s allowed to continue, there is danger that we’ll see a rise in instability in the regions where the groups operate, and in their growth and ambition.

## A shifting target—al-Qaeda 2.0

Al-Qaeda’s shift in geographical focus (if there ever truly was one) has well and truly been completed. Rather than creating a conventional terrorist network in the mould that most would conceive, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri had always intended that they would provide the ideological motivations, funding, contacts and expert advice for other militant organisations, wherever their location. In 2004, before most analysts had foreseen this shift, Jason Burke outlined the shape of the al-Qaeda to come:

There is no longer a central hub for Islamic militancy. But the al Qaeda worldview, or ‘al Qaedaism,’ is growing stronger every day. This radical internationalist ideology ... has adherents among many individuals and groups, few of whom are currently linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him. They merely follow his precepts, models, and methods. They act in the style of al Qaeda, but they are only part of al Qaeda in the very loosest sense.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade, a growing number of these groups have adopted elements of the ideology of al-Qaeda and the tactics and the motivations of the original core group of jihadists in Afghanistan. Some analysts assumed that al-Qaeda had been defeated with the death of bin Laden in 2011. Public rejoicing in the US was symptomatic of a drawn-out, costly and hard-fought battle to eradicate the instigator of 9/11 and the tormentor of US political and military power.

Following a perceived lull in activity after its leader’s death, the al-Qaeda that has emerged is one with a number of

centres of gravity. The most significant is in Syria, where estimates suggest that as many as 12,000 individuals from 81 nations have joined various Islamist groups (including those with close ties to al-Qaeda) fighting in the civil war since it began.<sup>2</sup>

This activity also resembles the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s, where it all began. Iraq continues to suffer extremely high numbers of casualties from attacks by those who in the past or currently have links to al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, based in Yemen, still presents a threat within Yemen and to international targets, despite the death of its most notorious ideologue and recruiter, Anwar al-Awlaki. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operates in vast portions of the Maghreb and Sahel regions of Africa, having expanded from its traditional base in Algeria, and was on the cusp of creating its own safe haven in northern Mali in 2013 before France intervened. Al-Shabaab, based in Somalia, continues to be a major problem, having instigated a horrific attack on the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi, and Boko Haram is squarely in the spotlight after its recent abduction of 200 schoolgirls and a spate of bombings and shootings that claimed almost 2,000 lives in the first half of 2014 alone.

This has led the current director of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, to state that he thinks that 'al-Qaida is becoming more dangerous as it decentralizes, and through its franchises it has a bigger footprint today than on September 11, 2001'.<sup>3</sup> The US State Department's 2013 global terrorism report appears to back this up, highlighting that the decentralisation and spread of al-Qaeda drove a 43% rise in worldwide terrorist attacks from 2012 to 2013.<sup>4</sup> This trend is concerning and appears to demonstrate that, far from being in decline, al-Qaeda is re-emerging as a loose affiliation of dangerous groups with little if any direction from the al-Qaeda core element in Pakistan.

While there's a great deal of analysis of many of these groups, the African al-Qaeda affiliates have begun to receive increasing scrutiny in recent months after demonstrating their willingness to strike international targets, move across international boundaries and use extreme violence to highlight their cause.

This paper shows AQIM, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram are sharing tactics, training and personnel to further their

respective causes while operating across national boundaries to escape capture and raise funds through criminal activities. Their attacks are becoming more ambitious and audacious and if left unchallenged could lead to the formation of terrorist 'safe havens'.

## Africa as a focus

Al-Qaeda in Africa can be traced back to 1991, when Osama bin Laden settled his family in Khartoum, Sudan, after arriving from Saudi Arabia. From Khartoum, he prepared al-Qaeda to broaden its scope of operations against mainly US targets and expanded his business interests to increase funding to the group. He brought with him his key senior military lieutenants, Abu Ubaydah al-Panshiri and his deputy Abu Hafs al-Masri, along with veterans from the al-Qaeda core, leaving a small staff behind in Afghanistan.

In Sudan, bin Laden trained fighters and built his understanding of other Islamist organisations in Africa that might have been open to support and collaboration. He created a safe haven for Islamist fighters fleeing Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Bosnia, and the large number of Islamic scholars passing through the country fed his thinking about how to advance al-Qaeda's ideology and operations.<sup>5</sup> He also reached out into nearby countries to begin building a network in Africa. In 1993 and 1994, bin Laden supplied weapons to fighters in Somalia, as he felt that country would make the perfect stronghold for al-Qaeda close to the Arabian Peninsula, from where he could build control of the Horn of Africa. In 1992, he sent Khalid al-Fawwaz to Nairobi to build the Kenyan network that eventually carried out the 1998 attacks on the US embassies there and in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

So, while it would be easy to think that al-Qaeda inspired terrorism is a new feature of the African security landscape, the ideology, personnel and links between groups have been growing for the past 25 years. However, it's really over the past decade that various groups that had been operating with a mainly nationalistic agenda have increasingly become aligned with al-Qaeda in name, ideology, methodologies of attack and tactics. The following sections examine AQIM, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram and the ways that they have evolved, especially in the linkages between them and al-Qaeda's core ideology and tactics. All of these groups are distinct from al-Qaeda core, they have not taken up the

al-Qaeda model because they have been ordered to, but they are emulating the al-Qaeda model, namely they are all looking to become a dispersed, decentralised movement which frames local grievances in the language of the global jihad.

### **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—operating across Algeria, Mali, Niger and the broader Sahel region**

AQIM was the first al-Qaeda affiliate to set up officially in Africa. It has the most intimate relationship with al-Qaeda senior leadership, but while clearly inspired and guided by them, remains operationally independent. Its origins can be traced back to the 1990s and the armed Islamist resistance movement targeting the Algerian Government.

The Group Islamique Armé (GIA) emerged after the 1991 Algerian elections were annulled. The military took control when Islamist parties were on the cusp of winning the elections. The GIA launched a brutal campaign against the government and the majority Sunni population, similar to the later campaign against Shia in Iraq by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Its tactics included declaring fellow Muslims to be apostate, beheadings, mutilations and the widespread coercion of

local populations. The GIA's lack of restraint in the use of force tarnished its reputation among many other jihadists, including bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Suri, and as a result the group lost popular support by the mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup> This led to a splintering of the group and one of the offshoots renaming itself the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC) in 1998.

Led by Hassan Hattab, an ex-Algerian paratrooper who had left the GIA after rejecting its policy of attacking civilians, the GSPC refocused on targeting government security forces. Links to the al-Qaeda core can be traced back to evidence that some GSPC leaders and fighters trained and fought alongside the group in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s. Both Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (otherwise known as Abdelmalek Droukdel) and Mokhtar Belmokhtar certainly fought in that country during the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> But the GSPC was largely focused on fighting the Algerian Government rather than global jihad, despite the fact that there had been attempts by bin Laden to forge closer ties with the group as long ago as 2002.<sup>8</sup>

In 2003, due to perceptions of weak leadership, Hattab was replaced as leader by Abu Ibrahim Mustafa. The GSPC had become geographically divided into two clear operational zones, north and south. The land north of the Atlas



An undated grab from a video obtained by ANI Mauritanian news agency reportedly shows former Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) emir Mokhtar Belmokhtar speaking at an undisclosed location. The one-eyed Islamist leader masterminded an assault on an Algerian gas plant that left 37 foreign hostages dead in January 2013. AFP PHOTO / HO / ANI via AAP.

Mountains, where all the key populated areas are, including the capital city, Algiers, was the traditional area of operations for the group as well as its support base. However, new leaders emerged in the south of the country in the Saharan region. The most prominent was Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who was the regional commander in the area and was known to be operating an extremely sophisticated criminal network that specialised in smuggling and kidnapping for ransom. This group was far more international in both its operations and the ethnicities of its members. Fighters were drawn from Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, and the group could operate across a vast geographical area due to the porous or non-existent borders in that part of the country.<sup>9</sup>

Upon Mustafa's death in June 2004, Droukdel took over the leadership role as the GSPC came under a great deal of pressure from the Algerian military, which had driven the group south. Droukdel began to foster stronger ties with the al-Qaeda core because of its ideology and international connections. One way he achieved this was by providing training for a steady stream of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian fighters to Al-Qaeda in Iraq. But the number of GSPC fighters was dropping rapidly due to the Algerian Government's reconciliation movement. It's thought that the numbers dropped from 4,000 members in 2002 to under 500 in 2006.<sup>10</sup> Thus it was that the GSPC formally aligned with al-Qaeda in January 2007 and was renamed Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

The GSPC/AQIM's alignment with core al-Qaeda ideology also broadened its tactics and dramatically widened the area in which it conducted attacks. Before 2007, most attacks were focused in the northern coastal region of Algeria, where most of the government and population are. However, after 2007, attacks began to spread across the Sahel in Mauritania, Mali and Niger. The methods of attack also began to vary, and more frequent, coordinated and sophisticated bombings, including suicide bombings, began. The new tactics included simultaneous car bombings in Algiers on 11 April 2007, which targeted the Algerian Prime Minister's headquarters (killing 33 people) and a police station in the east of the city. The bombing of the UN building in Algiers on 11 December 2007, which left 31 dead and about 170 injured, brought AQIM's metamorphosis to international attention.<sup>11</sup>

Despite its willingness to attack international targets within Africa, AQIM has yet to target mainland Europe. Threats were made to France after its intervention in Mali in 2013,

but haven't yet materialised. This is somewhat surprising, because the GIA and GSPC had conducted attacks in France during the 1990s, so the networks and capability had clearly existed then, and existing al-Qaeda networks could have been harnessed. It may be that individuals with the skills required for attacks like that are in short supply; AQIM doesn't have trouble attracting low-skilled fighters into its ranks, but those capable of acting clandestinely are more difficult to recruit. Strikes in mainland Europe should be possible using the group's vast networks across North Africa and the diaspora in France. However, it's most likely that AQIM hasn't attacked Europe for two reasons: it doesn't want to risk European nations pouring military and counterterrorism resources into its extermination, and it doesn't want to endanger its extensive criminal activities, which not only fund its expansion but also act as a strong recruitment incentive. Local populations are poor, the Algerian state's ability to provide for them is low to non-existent, and AQIM can offer work and a support structure.

### Financing and infighting

Despite AQIM's continuing strikes in the north of the country, most of its attacks since 2009 have been to the south of Algeria, around the intersection of the borders of Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania (see Figure 1). Those attacks have mainly involved the kidnapping of foreign nationals for ransom. It's thought that AQIM and, more to the point, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who was the leading figure in its Sahelian operations, have produced vast revenue streams from such activities. A recent report stated that between 2008 and 2012 revenues from kidnapping were as high as US\$65 million<sup>12</sup>; other reports say that between 2003 and 2013 the group made over US\$200 million in ransoms.<sup>13</sup> AQIM has also been thought to take part in human trafficking and the smuggling of cigarettes. Analysts debate whether it's also directly involved in smuggling narcotics, which arrive from Latin America by ship in West Africa and are then transported across the Sahel to North African ports for distribution into Europe. It's thought that the group allows the drug traffickers to pass through land controlled by it and under its paid protection.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the sources of this money, the vast sums involved mean that the group can not only arm itself and recruit into its own ranks, but can arm, fund and supply other groups across the region—as was evident in the Mali incursion in 2013.

Figure 1: AQIM attacks



Mokhtar Belmokhtar has been central to efforts to enhance AQIM's influence in the Sahel and has increased the lawlessness in the region through his activities. His growing influence and independence from the northern elements of AQIM have made his relationship with Abdelmalek Droukdal very turbulent. This led to a rift between the two leaders in 2012, when Droukdal attempted to pass control of Belmokhtar's area of operations in the south to Abu Zeid. This eventually led to Belmokhtar being expelled from AQIM and setting up his own group, al-Mulathameen ('Masked') Brigade, which is also known as al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam ('Those who Sign with Blood') Brigade. This group was responsible for the In Amenas gas facility attack in January 2013, in which 800 people were taken hostage and 39 were killed in revenge for the French intervention in Mali.

Belmokhtar is hugely influential in the Sahel and has directly influenced politics and other Islamic and tribal groups in the region, especially in northern Mali. He spent most of the 2000s influencing and establishing close relationships with the communities and tribes of the Azawad desert region, marrying into local Tuareg and Arab families to ensure his own security and freedom of movement across this vast expanse of the Sahel. In 2011, he steadily built up his influence in northern Mali to attempt to realise his wish for a regional Islamic caliphate centred there.<sup>15</sup>

### **The attempt to create a caliphate in Mali**

In January 2012, the Malian rebellion began with the return to northern Mali of 2,000–3,000 angry, well-armed, battle-hardened Tuareg fighters who had been serving under Muammar Gaddafi in the previous year's Libyan conflict. The impact of this influx of Tuareg fighters was compounded by the Malian Government's lack of action to counter the problems they were causing. The uprising by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Islamist Tuareg group Ansar Dine began with the killing of many government soldiers in a series of battles, which also led to a humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of civilians fled the fighting. As the fighting intensified, the Malian military became increasingly incensed at what it saw as a lack of political will to end the rebellion and insufficient munitions, supplies and equipment to drive it back. On 21 March 2012, a military-led mutiny culminated in the resignation of President Amadou Toumani Touré and his

replacement by a mid-level military officer, Captain Amadou Sanogo, as the nation's leader.

The appearance of elements of AQIM and increasing numbers of foreign Islamist fighters in northern Mali created unease among observers, who thought that the region was in danger of becoming a new safe haven for al-Qaeda where fighters could train and equip, ready for jihad in the wider Sahel region. The joint declaration of an 'Islamic State of Azawad' by the MNLA and Ansar Dine reinforced that view.

AQIM has been a powerful ally for the MNLA and Ansar Dine, mainly because of the economic power it has accumulated from kidnappings and trafficking cocaine, hashish and cigarettes across western and northern Africa, but also because of the volume of military hardware that it has captured from fleeing Malian forces. This includes American military vehicles and satellite communications technology, as well as abandoned stores of artillery and rocket launchers and large stocks of small arms and ammunition. This combination of economic and military power has led to AQIM, in coordination with the MNLA, Ansar Dine and other allies, having direct influence over about 816,000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory in southeastern Algeria, northwestern Niger, eastern Mauritania and northern Mali.

Initially, all the signs indicated that an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) force would be deployed into Mali to repel Islamist fighters in the north of the country in 2013. Much of the international community appeared reluctant to become embroiled in the fight; it was happy to back a UN mission to the country but not to commit troops, aircraft and vehicles.

In October 2012, the UN passed a resolution asking West African states under the ECOWAS banner to speed up planning for military intervention. It seemed that there was a ready-made force of 3,500 ECOWAS troops available for deployment, backed by logistical support from the US and France. However, as the planning intensified, it was felt that the Malian forces, which ECOWAS would be supporting, would require additional training and strengthening, and that the ECOWAS force wouldn't be ready for deployment until September 2013.

For the various forces holding northern Mali, this was an opportunity not to be missed. The Ansar Dine group began pushing further south, seizing the strategically important

town of Konna. This demonstrated two things: first, the Malian Army had neither the will nor the support to repel the Islamists; second, as Konna is around 400 kilometres northeast of the capital city, Bamako, there was the distinct possibility that the insurgents would arrive at the capital in a short time. French intelligence services had detected plans for a major offensive, organised and coordinated by the local al-Qaeda franchise. This was confirmed when a large convoy of vehicles was seen heading towards the strategic town of Mopti. The possibility of an invasion of the capital city and control of the entire country by Islamists was the final straw for the international community, and especially for France, which has around 6,000 expats living in the country.

Dioncounda Traoré, then Mali's interim president, wrote to both UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and French President Francois Hollande requesting urgent assistance. The French rapidly entered the conflict, providing air support for Malian troops, conducting bombing missions and sending a force of about 550 French troops from neighbouring bases. The prospect of a safe haven for Islamist groups was too much for Hollande, who stated that he had authorised the deployment to prevent Mali becoming a terrorist base on Europe's doorstep.

This decisive course of French action halted AQIM's ability to create a Malian safe haven, which would have spread further across the region as other governments struggled to cope with the group's influence and power. However, while the Islamists have been repelled for the moment, their complete removal will be extremely difficult in a part of the country where enemy forces will be dispersed widely (it's larger than Afghanistan) and that suits those who know the terrain well. Furthermore, the difficulties at the heart of Mali's problems—a disillusioned military, a fragile political situation and a population with little access to sustainable economies and resources—will take some time to solve.

The reaction of AQIM and its partners has been to disperse into neighbouring Sahelian countries, regroup and fight a guerrilla-type campaign in a terrain in which they have extensive operational experience. Borders in that part of the world are highly porous, so the potential for 'overspill' into other regions is high. Belmokhtar demonstrated this when he claimed responsibility for simultaneous suicide and truck-bomb attacks on a French-owned uranium mine in Arlit, Niger, and a military base 150 miles away. This

was despite reports, two months earlier on 2 March 2013, by Chadian state television and the Chadian Army that Belmokhtar had been killed in a raid by Chadian troops on a terrorist base in Mali. He has recently announced a merger with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa to create a new group—al-Mourabitoun—which he claims will 'unify the ranks of Muslims around the same goal, from the Nile to the Atlantic'. This group he has helped form has the potential to become a significant influence in African extremism. Their public statements have clearly indicated an ideological allegiance to al-Qaeda, yet it may never be acknowledged publicly as an affiliate in order not to disrupt al-Qaeda's standing relationship with AQIM. Belmokhtar's renowned aggression and capacity to plan complex attacks on challenging targets indicate that the group has the capacity to garner further prominence in Africa. He's a dangerous figure who has evaded capture multiple times and had a price of US\$5 million placed on his head.

AQIM and its associates' activities in the Sahel region are expected to continue, but with less likelihood of contributing to the overthrow of governments due to the continuing French regional presence. As yet, none of these groups has been dealt a knockout blow: they're still operating across the Sahel, and they're morphing all the time.

While AQIM hasn't succeeded in creating a North African/Sahelian caliphate yet, that intent is evident in its recent actions. The group's leadership is highly ambitious but is moderated by prudence—they are willing to play the 'long game'. Its willingness to attack international targets across Algeria and surrounding countries presents a challenge to the international community and businesses that are looking to work in the region. AQIM's links to other Islamist groups in Tunisia, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia and Morocco, combined with its willingness to share weapons, training, finance and knowledge, mean that it presents a serious threat to regional security. And, if AQIM's financial resources continue to grow, so too will its ambition, influence and ability to recruit.

## **Al-Shabaab—operating in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda and Djibouti**

Al-Shabaab grew out of two Somali Islamist groups, the Islamic Union (al-Ittihad al-Islamiya) and the Islamic Courts Union (Ittihad al-Mahkim al-Islamiya, ICU) during the civil war in the early to mid-2000s. It began as a militant youth



wing of the ICU, but gained recognition during the civil war, especially after the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops in 2009. Its original leaders had all received training with al-Qaeda or other Islamist groups in Afghanistan, Kashmir or both. They included Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, Adan Hashi Farah, Mukhtar Robow Ali, Ibrahim Haji Jama and Ahmed Abdi Godane. During 2013 and 2014, Godane became most prominent in the group through a brutal leadership struggle.<sup>16</sup>

Al-Qaeda praised the ICU and then al-Shabaab for a number of years before formally accepting al-Shabaab into the group in 2012. Al-Qaeda had helped to produce propaganda for the ICU, and as far back as 2006 bin Laden had endorsed the ICU in speeches.<sup>17</sup> However, similarly to AQIM, it was around 2008 when al-Shabaab began trying to align itself more formally with al-Qaeda's core ideology and strategies and to integrate itself with the other al-Qaeda elements across Africa and the Middle East. It promised loyalty to bin Laden and offered training camps within Somalia. This was regarded favourably by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who referred to the group as 'my brothers, the lions of Islam in Somalia'.<sup>18</sup> From that time, there was a notable increase in suicide bombings and attacks with improvised explosive devices on

international targets across the country. This also seemed to coincide with an enhancement in bombmaking skills, which was attributed to the numbers of highly trained foreign fighters who were beginning to filter through al-Shabaab's training camps in Elberde and Mogadishu. The merger of the two groups was publicly announced in February 2012 by the al-Shabaab emir and Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, it's possible that the association with al-Qaeda has weakened al-Shabaab. The factions have become more divided about the direction of the group and whether its focus should be on local, rather than international, attacks.

The propaganda effort has also increased since 2008, and the pool of militants involved in al-Shabaab has diversified. The group has established the Kata'ib Foundation as a media wing. It produces online films and propaganda material and runs an English-language Twitter account, which have drawn foreign recruits into its ranks. Al-Shabaab has enjoyed some success in reaching out to the Somali diaspora in the US, Europe, the Middle East and Australia. Michael Adebolajo, one of the killers of British soldier Lee Rigby, was arrested in Kenya by Kenya's counterterrorism police in 2010 for attempting to join al-Shabaab. He was deported back to the UK, but no charges were brought against him. However,



In this 13 February 2012 file photo, an armed member of the militant group al-Shabab attends a rally in support of the merger of the Somali militant group al-Shabab with al-Qaida, on the outskirts of Mogadishu, Somalia. (AP Photo/File) via AAP.

would-be fighters are mostly recruited from neighbouring countries, mainly Kenya.

Until 2013, there had been a positive narrative from the international community about the increasing level of security in Somalia, which had been widely considered a

failed state for over 20 years. In 2013, the EU, with the UK playing a leading role, agreed to provide financial assistance to Somalia for peace and development, with the aim of reversing years of failure by the international community. It was only in September 2013 that the EU announced a €1.8 billion package to assist the Somalian Government's

Figure 2: al-Shabaab attacks



efforts to establish order.<sup>19</sup> At a conference in May that year, the British Government, along with other donors, pledged some £84 million in aid, and Prime Minister David Cameron announced that huge progress was being made in curbing piracy and tackling the Islamist insurgency in Somalia.<sup>20</sup> With so much 'progress' being made, it was hard to understand how al-Shabaab carried out such a destructive attack on the Westgate shopping centre in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, resulting in 62 known deaths and more than 170 injured (see Figure 2).

It appears that the claims of progress were being backed up by the gains that African Union forces (AMISOM) have been making over the past few years. AMISOM wrested back control of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, in 2011, and then in 2013 the southern port of Kismayo, a pivotal strategic position for al-Shabaab, from which it transported shiploads of illegal charcoal and distributed arms and other goods to parts of Somalia and beyond. Indeed, al-Shabaab has been forced to retreat to the rural areas of Somalia's south and is largely fighting a guerrilla campaign, and there are signs that at last Somalia may be able to make some real progress.

The Kenyan attack had its roots in a fierce leadership battle fought over the past year within al-Shabaab, which may explain why it's striking away from Somali borders. This might be an attempt to show strength during a time when the organisation's suffering from dwindling support inside Somalia.

### **Factions and assassinations in Somalia**

The leadership battle was won by Ahmed Abdi Godane, who in June 2013 assassinated four of al-Shabaab's top commanders, including two of the organisation's co-founders. One was Ibrahim al-Afghani, who was closely allied with bin Laden and had fought in Afghanistan. This action led to long-term spiritual leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys surrendering to Somali forces out of fear for his own safety. Aweys is largely against fighting an international jihad and is more concerned with battling Somali Government forces to create an Islamic State of Somalia, whereas Godane aligned more with the international cause of al-Qaeda and is seen as responsible for creating the links between al-Shabaab and the al-Qaeda core.

Godane's takeover didn't stop there. In early September 2013, he killed two other senior figures within the organisation,

both of whom were foreign nationals: Alabama-born US citizen Omar Hammami, known as 'the American' or 'the jihadist rapper', and a British national, Usama al-Britani, were both shot dead by Godane's men in a dawn raid on their hideout. Al-Shabaab isn't centralised or monolithic in its agenda or goals. Its rank and file members come from disparate clans, and the group is susceptible to clan politics, internal divisions and shifting alliances. Most of its members are mainly interested in the nationalistic battle to take over Somalia, but Godane's rise to dominance brought the hardline global jihadist agenda to the fore, as evidenced by the attacks in Kenya.

Godane is suspected of being behind the bombing of a bar in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, during the 2010 World Cup final; 76 people were killed in the blast. The attack is thought to have been a demonstration of Godane's anger at Ugandan troops operating in Somalia, and illustrates his willingness to place the fight in a regional context and to punish those who dare to stand up to his organisation. Since the June takeover, al-Shabaab has stepped up its bombing campaign with a suicide attack on a UN compound in Mogadishu in June 2013 and an attack in September 2013 on a Mogadishu restaurant where foreign nationals were known to eat; both attacks killed 15 people.<sup>21</sup>

Kenya has suffered from terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda related groups and al-Shabaab before, most notably the 1998 US Embassy bombing in Nairobi and a string of smaller attacks closer to the border with Somalia. However, the Westgate Mall attack was clearly motivated by the presence in Somalia of 4,000 Kenyan troops in AMISOM, which has been driving al-Shabaab away from the major cities. Targeting foreign nationals is a powerful way to gain the world's media attention and demonstrate that al-Shabaab remains a potent force.

But there's an element of this tragic story that's hard to square with the thesis that Godane is behind this attack. It's been reported, but not confirmed, that a number of foreign fighters from the US, the UK, Finland, Canada and Kenya were involved.<sup>22</sup> This wouldn't align with Godane's mistrust of foreign fighters, which led Ibrahim al-Afghani to write an open letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri, criticising Godane for targeting foreign jihadists, imprisoning them in secret detention centres and even killing them. However, the highly combustible combination of a brutal leader who's highly

motivated and an organisation that's being backed into a corner might have led to a change in behaviour. Godane demonstrated that he was prepared to employ new tactics to demonstrate that the organisation wasn't in decline.

The news that Godane had been killed in a US air strike in September 2014, means that al-Shabaab have lost their most influential figure head, who shaped their allegiance to al-Qaeda core, and internationalised their fight. But as General Carter F Ham, the retired head of the United States military's Africa Command, stated about his death:

The effect will be positive, but not decisive... He has proven over the years to be an elusive figure, but one who has galvanized some elements with Al Shabab... His death will remove an effective terrorist leader from Al Shabab's ranks, but it will not cause Al Shabab to suddenly crumble or, probably, to significantly alter course.<sup>23</sup>

Within days the group had announced a new leader, Ahmad Umar, also known as Abu Ubaidah, one of Godane's most trusted lieutenants, and a devout and ruthless hardliner, and reaffirmed their allegiance to al-Qaeda. How this new leadership impacts the internal dynamics and future of the group is uncertain, however, they have already vowed to avenge the death of their leader. Any revenge attacks are likely to take place in Somalia or neighbouring Kenya, which has been increasingly targeted by al-Shabaab.

## Effects on Kenya

There's no doubt that the presence of Kenyan peacekeeping troops in Somalia has led to the increase in attacks in Kenya by al-Shabaab and potentially by people radicalised within Kenya. Since Kenyan troops' arrival in Somalia in 2011, before the attacks on the Westgate Mall, there have been 30 attacks on Kenyan soil involving grenades or improvised explosive devices.<sup>24</sup> They were mainly low-level attacks that were easily ignored by the Kenyan Government, as they hit the relatively poor areas in the northeast of the country, and when they did attack Nairobi the numbers of casualties were relatively low.

However, in the wake of the deaths at the Westgate Mall, there was a series of highly lethal attacks. In December 2013, six were killed and 34 injured in a grenade attack in the capital city. In May 2014, bombs placed in a market in the capital killed 10 and injured 70, and in early May seven were killed and 80 injured in blasts in Mombasa and Nairobi.<sup>25</sup> Most

recently, there's been a spate of attacks on coastal tourist resorts on the eastern seaboard of Kenya. In June, at least 60 people were killed in Lamu, and another 29 were killed in early July. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, although the Kenyan Government claimed that opposition political networks were responsible. The former explanation is more likely to be true, as Kenya has received widespread criticism for its handling of the Westgate attack; it wants to deflect perceptions that al-Shabaab is gaining ground in Kenya and doesn't want its tourism trade collapsing as a consequence of the attacks.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, there's evidence that the quality of the explosive devices being used in Kenya is improving—a further indicator of al-Shabaab assistance, involvement in the attacks or both, as the group's bombmaking is highly developed. This was evident in March 2014, when a Kenyan of Somali descent was arrested and his vehicle impounded. Only later was it found to be packed with 130 pounds of plastic explosive welded into its rear seats, with a mobile phone detonator attached, and an AK-47, multiple rounds of ammunition and grenades. The explosives were thought to be enough to collapse a multistorey building.<sup>27</sup>

The Kenyan security forces' response to al-Shabaab has been accused of being heavy-handed and potentially fanning the flames of recruitment to al-Shabaab within Kenya. In April 2014, under Operation Usalama Watch, thousands of ethnic Somalis were detained on suspicion of being illegal immigrants, and hundreds were deported back to Somalia. Until then, there had been a steady flow of Somali Kenyan fighters returning from Somalia as a direct result of the AMISOM mission in Somalia limiting of al-Shabaab's operational footprint. Those that had returned bought with them the dangerous combination of combat experience and a radicalising message. There's been evidence of radicalisation among Muslim youth in many parts of Kenya, especially in the northeast of the country, in the Nairobi slums and in the Kenyan coastal regions.<sup>28</sup>

Al-Shabaab has shown some resilience in the face of the pressure that the AMISOM forces, US drone strikes and special-forces operations have placed on it in Somalia, but an element of desperation has led to it widening the geographical area of its operations over the past two years to include Kenya, Djibouti and Uganda.<sup>29</sup> Its aims continue to be focused on local Somali grievances in the south-central

part of the country, but there's an increasing need not to underestimate the group's ability to mount cross-border operations to attract international fighters to its cause. One of the greatest concerns is that al-Shabaab is helping to destabilise Kenya. Instability, combined with the inadequate responses of Kenyan security forces, could aid the group's cause. Al-Shabaab will continue to exercise its linkages with AQIM, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, to its own and al-Qaeda's broader advantage.

### **Boko Haram—operating in Nigeria and the border intersection of Niger, Cameroon and Chad**

In 2014, Boko Haram became etched in popular consciousness around the world due to the scale and brutal extremism of its violence, which has led to the deaths of around 1,500 people in the first half of 2014 alone and more than 4,000 in total in the past four years. But it was the kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in Borno, Nigeria's most northeastern state, that brought notoriety to the group and led to global campaigns to release the captives. Boko Haram is complex, and there's a great deal of confusion about its influences, its aims and its inspiration, which appear to have morphed over the years. Although the group has been heavily influenced by the message of al-Qaeda, it approaches

the concept of transnational jihad with a reverent, but unsophisticated comprehension of the underpinning of theological concepts. Its grievances were previously largely localised, but there's evidence that it has attempted to link local grievances to international situations in Mali and Somalia, and since 2010 the increasing influence of al-Qaeda has been evident in its tactics and strategies.<sup>30</sup>

Boko Haram's roots can be traced back to the early 2000s, when it was led by Mohammad Ali, a Nigerian who had been radicalised in Saudi Arabia and, it was claimed, had fought in Afghanistan alongside the mujahideen.

Kayari Mohammed distinguishes three distinct phases in Boko Haram's history.<sup>31</sup> The first spanned from 2003 to 2005, and was characterised by the group waging guerrilla war against the Nigerian state. Boko Haram first received attention for armed attacks that it launched against police stations and other public buildings in Nigeria's northeastern Yobe state in late 2003 and early 2004. The group was eventually repelled by Nigerian forces and withdrew to a camp in Kanama on the border with Niger, whereupon it raised the Taliban flag, although it had no official links to its Afghan counterparts, and was dubbed the Nigerian Taliban.<sup>32</sup>

Although few in number, the membership of the group illustrated the complexity of the current Nigerian political



This screengrab taken from a video released on YouTube on 12 April 2012 apparently shows Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau (C) sitting flanked by militants. AFP PHOTO / YOUTUBE via AAP.

context: it included children of notable public figures and politicians, alongside children of a local wealthy businessman. The Nigerian Government faces extreme difficulties in restraining Boko Haram, and one of the contributory factors is the way members of the government are at times complicit in Boko Haram's actions and quietly supportive of the group.

The second phase that Mohammed outlines is the period from 2005 to 2009. This began with the ousting of the group from its Kanama camp and ended with the violent Nigerian Government suppression of Boko Haram in 2009. This period, during which the group both swelled and radicalised its membership, was marked by the return of Mohammed Yusuf from exile in Saudi Arabia. Yusuf became the leadership focus for Boko Haram and managed to establish his own mosque and school in Borno's capital, Maiduguri. Many of the new members of the group were refugees from the wars over the border in Chad or jobless Nigerian youths. It isn't entirely clear where the group obtained funding, but it appears that Yusuf was able to attract support from Salafist contacts in Saudi Arabia, and potentially from wealthy northern Nigerians.<sup>33</sup>

The third phase began in July 2009 with a large-scale crackdown by Nigerian security forces, which left the group severely weakened and resulted in the death of Yusuf in police custody on 31 July. The government had decided to meet the violence of Boko Haram with violence of its own. But despite this response and the removal of the group's figurehead, Boko Haram was far from defeated. It went underground, regrouped, expanded its manpower and reinvigorated its leadership, with Abubakar Muhammad Shekau taking over. Then, in 2010, Boko Haram returned with such force that it shocked not only the Nigerian Government but also the international community at large.

### **Boko Haram's changing tactics and its links to other al-Qaeda inspired groups**

The 2010–2014 period has demonstrated how Boko Haram has become ever more aware of the international dimensions of its actions and has been increasingly influenced by the message of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Despite its grievances remaining mainly local, there have been attempts since 2010 to link that agenda to international developments,

particularly in Mali, and evidence that we're seeing the internationalisation of another Islamist group.

Financial links to the al-Qaeda core can be traced to bin Laden's time in Sudan in the early 1990s, when he allegedly met Mohammed Ali, who became his disciple and trained with him in Afghanistan. There are accounts that bin Laden suggested Ali set up a cell in Nigeria and provided him with a budget of perhaps \$3 million in 2000.<sup>34</sup> Since that time, the group's finances have come from multiple sources, including Nigerian benefactors, kidnaps for ransom and other serious criminal activities, as well as from AQIM. Between 2000 and 2002, bin Laden recorded two audio messages calling on Nigerian Muslims to create an Islamic state, demonstrating the links back to the al-Qaeda core. The links were reinforced in November 2012 in a 39-minute video posted on an extremist website by Abubakar Shekau, in which he praised al-Qaeda and the global jihad and spoke of Boko Haram's solidarity with al-Qaeda's leadership. This was not dissimilar to al-Shabaab's 2008 video, which began the process of officially bringing that group under the al-Qaeda banner.<sup>35</sup>

There's also evidence of Boko Haram's increasing links to al-Qaeda franchises, particularly AQIM. In June 2010, the emir of AQIM, Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (aka Abdelmalek Droukdel), stated in an interview that AQIM would provide Boko Haram with weapons, training and other support in order to expand its own strategic reach into sub-Saharan Africa, and to 'defend Muslims in Nigeria and stop the advance of a minority of Crusaders'.<sup>36</sup> AQIM itself has had a number of Nigerian recruits in its ranks and has been keen to bring Nigerian Islamists into its sphere of influence in order to exploit religious and social tensions in Nigeria.

There's evidence that in 2012, before the French incursion into Mali, up to 100 Boko Haram fighters had joined and were training with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (a splinter group of AQIM), and many Boko Haram members had been receiving training in the jihadist training camps in northern Mali.<sup>37</sup> There's also evidence of links between Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. Nigerian security officials have reported that Mamman Nur, who's thought to be Boko Haram's second in command, returned to Nigeria from Somalia in the late spring or early summer of 2011<sup>38</sup>, and those reports were reinforced by a June 2011 statement by a Boko Haram spokesman. African Union forces in Nigeria also

confirmed that Boko Haram members had received training in Somalia:

We want to make it known that our Jihadists have arrived [in] Nigeria from Somalia where they got serious training on warfare from our brethren who made the country ungovernable and forced the interim government to relocate to Kenya. We want to assure all security agencies that we would frustrate their efforts. By the grace of God, despite the armoured carriers that they are boasting of, they are no match with the kind of training we acquired in Somalia.<sup>39</sup>

Nur, who is believed to be the mastermind behind the 2011 bombing attack on the UN building in Abuja, is himself evidence of the growing regionalisation of Boko Haram, having been born in neighbouring Chad. The group has also been recruiting vigorously in Cameroon, and there have been reports that hundreds of young Cameroonians have been trained by the group and are ready to operate within that country's borders.<sup>40</sup> Attacks in the northeast of Cameroon increased during 2014 (the most notable was the kidnapping of the Cameroonian Vice-Prime Minister's wife in July 2014<sup>41</sup>). Along with Chad and Cameroon, Niger and Mali have also had Boko Haram members operating within their borders, and recruitment is taking place in those countries. This illustrates how a previously localised agenda and set of grievances are being internationalised, emulating the al-Qaeda model.

Weapons have been flowing from Niger, Cameroon, Chad<sup>42</sup> and Libya, which has become a regular source of weaponry across northern Africa and the Sahel since Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011.<sup>43</sup> With highly porous borders in the northeast of Nigeria, the movement of Boko Haram across vast expanses of unmonitored land makes it exceedingly difficult for Nigerian security forces to contain the problem, and in some cases the military crackdown on the group has intentionally dispersed fighters into neighbouring countries in order to push the problem away from Nigeria. Boko Haram members can move easily between nations in the northeast due to the lack of border controls, but also because of shared ethnicity: many fighters are from the dominant ethnic group, the Kanuri, or other ethnic groups that aren't bound by borders.<sup>44</sup>

Since 2010, Boko Haram's tactics and strategies have become increasingly sophisticated, indiscriminate and geographically more widely spread. This could well be a result of the

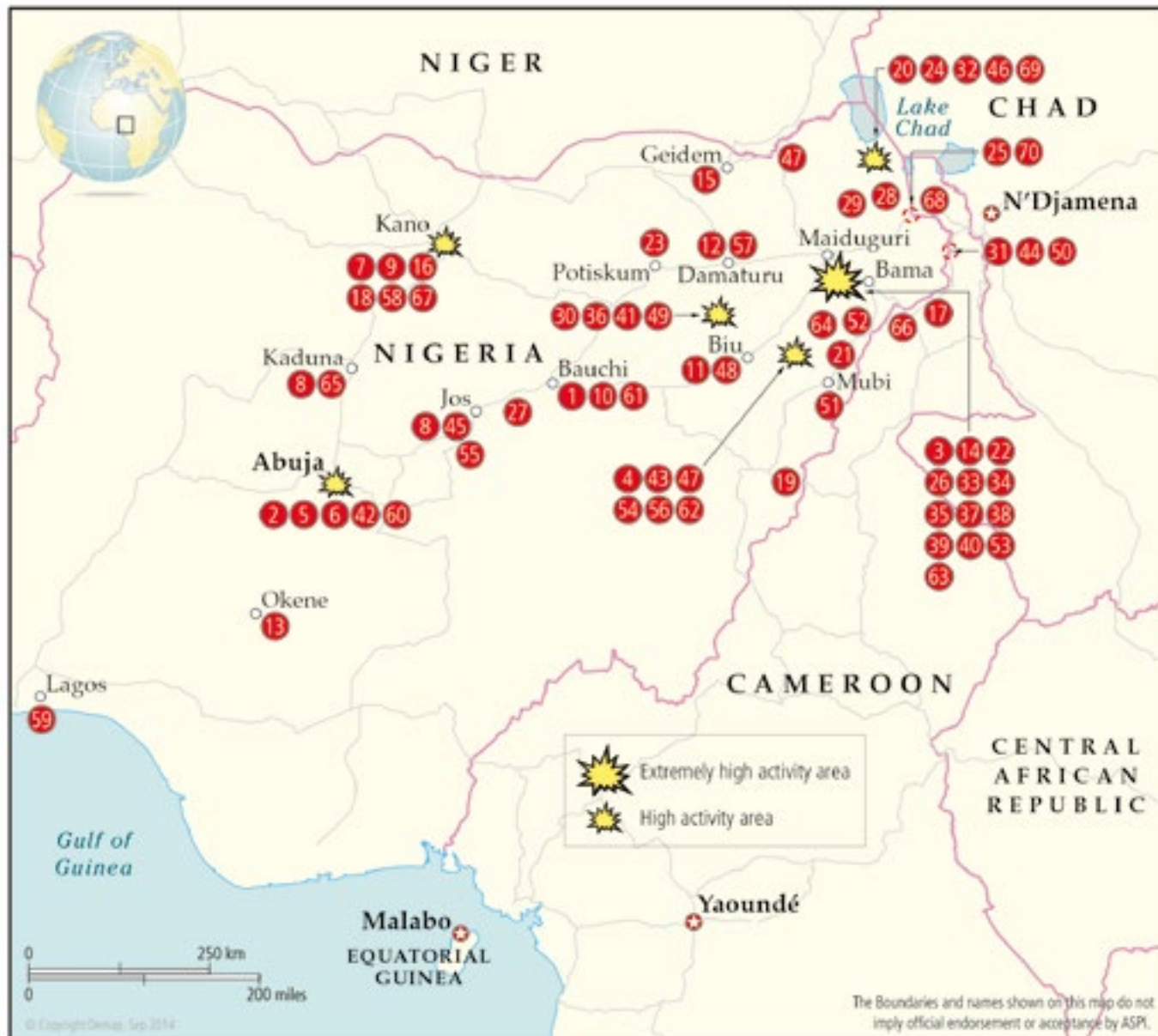
training individuals have received in Somalia and Mali and the growing international influence of the group. Until 2010 and 2011, the group focused mainly on local targets in the northeast of Nigeria, aiming at government workers and security forces. The targets were then expanded to include Christians, critical Muslim clerics, traditional leaders, those suspected of collaborating with the government, bars and schools. The 2011 attack on the UN building in Abuja demonstrated that Boko Haram's ability to reach into the southern parts of the country had increased, as had its desire to strike against international targets. There have also been increases in the number of coordinated bombings and attacks and the numbers of casualties, especially during 2013 and 2014 (see Figure 3).

In many cases, the increase in fatalities has been caused by new methods of attack. Like AQIM in Algeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia years before it, Boko Haram introduced suicide bombing for the first time in Nigeria in June 2011, when a car bomb was used to attack a police barracks in Abuja. This coincided with the return of Boko Haram fighters from training in Somalia and with AQIM. The increasing sophistication of Boko Haram's methods is reflected in the quality and power of the explosives it has used since 2010. Pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN)<sup>45</sup> and triacetone triperoxide (TATP)<sup>46</sup> have been used more frequently in attacks, and often shaped to magnify the explosive power of the charges, which shows how technical knowledge has been shared with the group. Both these explosive types have been popular with al-Qaeda throughout its campaigns.

While the links between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda and its franchises are becoming clearer, so far the group hasn't made a direct request to become a franchise of al-Qaeda. What's also evident is that Boko Haram isn't entirely united, and some have described it as being a 'franchise' in and of itself. This reflects the fact that many different groups operate under its banner as and when it suits them.<sup>47</sup>

There are thought to be six Boko Haram factions currently operating, the largest of which is led by Shekau and is responsible for most of the attacks in recent months. Worthy of note and of most concern to Western analysts is the emergence of the Ansaru group, which announced its formation in January 2012. Its ranks are mainly made up of Western-educated members, led by Abubakar Adam Kamar (until his death in August 2012) and Khalid Barnawi, former

Figure 3: Boko Haram attacks



Yusuf allies who trained with AQIM and al-Shabaab. It has distanced itself from Shekau’s indiscriminate killings and claims to instead want to target Westerners and high-profile authority figures, as is evident from its attacks and activities.<sup>48</sup> What the group has managed to do is to further confuse an already unclear picture in Nigeria. Pantucci and Patel state that:

Having claimed responsibility for attacks in areas traditionally dominated by Boko Haram ... Ansaru has further complicated Western efforts to gain an insight into the psyche of Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria ...

[T]he broader explosion in violent activity across northern Nigeria since 2012 reinforces the notion that Boko Haram has developed into a brand whose ‘franchise’ has been adopted by all sorts of other organisations.<sup>49</sup>

### The Nigerian Government response

Creating coherent responses to this major security challenge is enormously difficult for the Nigerian Government, which has largely found itself on the back foot in dealing with the problems that Boko Haram has created. The government has been criticised for its sluggish responses to outbreaks of





violence and killing in the north of the country. Furthermore, the Nigerian security forces have been accused of using heavy-handed tactics, creating resentment among the local population in the north.<sup>50</sup>

The government has increased the defence budget in order to provide the military and police with the capability to counter Boko Haram, from around \$625 million in 2010 to \$6.25 billion in 2012. Despite the additional funding, there have been

multiple complaints from the Nigerian military that it lacks adequate weapons to fight Boko Haram, and some soldiers have refused to deploy to the northeast without better equipment.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the government has looked to introduce new counterterrorism legislation, examined the possibility of dialogue with Boko Haram (without success), declared a state of emergency in the northeast and launched major military offensives against the group. The results have

been limited, and the fact that attacks in 2014 have increased in both frequency and numbers of casualties does not point to a successful campaign by the Nigerian Government or a rapid conclusion to the troubles.

What's clear is that the indicators aren't of a group in decline, but of one that's gaining a greater territorial foothold in northeastern Nigeria, where Shekau is confident enough to claim the existence of a caliphate. As yet, it's unclear whether he was declaring that he was part of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call in northern Iraq earlier in 2014, or referring to the re-establishment of a separate Nigerian caliphate, which existed in the 19th century.<sup>52</sup> Regardless, it's clear evidence that if this situation is left unattended by the international community it has the potential to spiral further out of control and have dangerous regional security impacts.

## Grasping at shadows—a region without borders

All the Islamist groups discussed in this paper have the intent and capability to assist one another. They share their members' skills in bombmaking, combat tactics, propaganda methods, radicalisation and recruitment methods, and simple public messaging in support of one another's causes. The network of connections between the groups is of greatest concern to Western and African agencies, as it multiplies capability. Skilled individuals within these organisations are prepared to travel and share their skills with others. This has the potential to create regional turmoil in Africa, slowly but surely sucking other states into the violence, and this longer term trend needs to be closely monitored. If it's allowed to develop further, both the violence and influence over African governments by al-Qaeda inspired groups could increase.

The greatest facilitators of such a transfer of skills and the growth of Islamist groups' memberships and capabilities are the regional geography, porous or non-existent borders, socioeconomic conditions, poor regional governance structures, and easy access to weapons. The 2011 Libyan civil war released an array of small arms and heavy weaponry into the North African and Sahel regions. Those weapons have equipped terrorist organisations operating in those regions, but also circulate far beyond them to fuel further destabilisation. The transnational criminal activity of the Islamist groups outlined in this paper provides the financial resources to procure the weapons and to support a larger

number of fighters. The financial success of the groups indicates that they're capable of supporting a long-term fight within the region. The regions' porous borders allow for a freedom of travel that would confound most Western states and make illicit transfers of weapons and people commonplace and low risk.

The membership of these groups can be transient, making tracking the personnel involved exceedingly difficult. The size and shape of the groups shifts according to their operational needs and the amount of funding available to support larger networks. Extreme poverty in all the countries discussed here means that the groups provide an alternative source of income and support where local governments do not, and they play upon local socioeconomic conditions to further their causes.

None of the groups outlined in this paper is as coherent as some media reports would lead us to believe. They survive through complex networks and loose affiliations that suit the conditions in which they operate. They don't adhere strictly to al-Qaeda's core principles and its international aims of attacking the West. They all follow a localised agenda, in which linkages to al-Qaeda ideology provide additional profile and status. However, the transnational nature of their attacks and operations pull other nations into their centre of gravity, making them dangerous for broader African security.

AQIM, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram are operating across borders, beyond their countries of origin. This destabilises governments struggling to provide for their own national security and economic stability, let alone to deliver counterterrorism strategies against imported threats. This was evident in Mali, where the government failed to deal with the combination of groups taking over in the north of the country and the threat was repelled only because of the international community's response. Nigeria is also a serious cause for concern, as it has an escalating and increasingly transboundary problem in the north; the same can be said of the impact of al-Shabaab in Kenya and the wider region.

For the international community, the danger lies not so much in the immediate threat to Western targets from African Islamists, but in the potential future creation of a failed state, or large ungoverned spaces. That would provide a base for training and radicalising large numbers of Islamists, as Afghanistan did during the 1990s and Mali had the potential to do in 2012 and 2013. Although Islamists no longer control

northern Mali, the French and UN-supported intervention has had limited practical success in dislodging extremists from the more remote unsettled regions. Similarly, the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the rise of militia groups, some of which have al-Qaeda sympathies, means the Libyan Government exercises little control over the country, allowing Islamist militia to develop contacts with regional groups. Similarly, areas which have either suffered disruptive internal conflicts such as the Central African Republic, or lack the resources and broader capabilities to control remote areas, such as Mauritania, Niger and Chad, are potential future targets of regional terrorist groups seeking safe havens.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous ways that groups in Africa contribute to the global terrorist threat is in the consistent flow of personnel into international combat zones where al-Qaeda fighters are needed. Leaders of all the groups discussed in this paper fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, and the groups supplied many fighters to the Iraq conflict in the 2000s. This has continued: around 200 Algerians have fought in Syria, along with more than 2,000 Tunisians, around 1,500 Moroccans and unknown numbers from Libya, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Eritrea, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan.<sup>53</sup>

AQIM, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab have a proven capacity to train and share fighting and bombmaking skills with new recruits, and then deliver those recruits into intensive front-line fighting roles in places such as Syria and Iraq. This will be their most immediate international impact. A recent statement by AQIM reinforced this by addressing the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), praising it for its recent strategic gains in Iraq, calling for reconciliation between ISIS and rival jihadist groups in Syria, and pledging AQIM's support for the group.<sup>54</sup> The relationship between African groups and al-Qaeda versus a relationship with ISIS will require close monitoring.

There are no clear solutions for African states combating the Islamist groups as those groups increase the number, frequency and severity of their attacks in Africa. Any solution will necessarily be complex. It must address not only the direct security challenge posed by the Islamists, but also the underlying socioeconomic drivers that encourage young men to join their ranks. It will require continued investment in strengthening regional cooperation on intelligence sharing, and an increase in border security and policing

efforts to minimise the groups' operating space and ability to raise funds. Winning back the hearts and minds of local populations and harnessing their cooperation will be the key to the response, starving the groups of local support and removing their ability to continue unrestricted cross-border movements.

Unfortunately, if the situation is allowed to continue, there could be increasing instability in the regions in which the groups operate and a growing influence of al-Qaeda and other violent Islamist ideology.

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

AMISOM	African Union Mission to Somalia
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
GIA	Group Islamique Armé (Algeria)
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Algeria)
ICU	Islamic Courts Union (Somalia)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham
MNLA	Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mali)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Benedict Wilkinson and Professor Clive Williams along with a number of experts and academics who generously provided comments on the first drafts. I would also like to thank Rosalyn Turner for her research and work on creating the maps.

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