

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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TURKEY: ISLAMIC STATE SHIFTS TACTICS WITH ISTANBUL ATTACK

Alexander Sehmer

A suicide attack on Turkey's Atatürk International Airport in Istanbul on June 28 left at least 41 people dead and more than 230 injured. The attack appears to have been carried out by three suicide bombers who opened fire on passengers and bystanders before blowing themselves up. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim blamed Islamic State (IS) for the attack ([Hurriyet](#), June 29).

Although security measures at the airport, Europe's third busiest, seem to have limited the impact of the attack to a degree, there was little advance warning. Twenty days earlier Turkish intelligence reportedly warned state institutions of a planned IS attack in Istanbul – the airport on the list of potential targets – but that appears to have been the extent of it ([Hurriyet](#), June 29).

Turkey's intelligence services are usually better informed, but in this case IS appears to have purposely involved fewer Turkish operatives. Akhmed Chataev, the one-armed Chechen militant and IS recruiter, is widely thought have masterminded the attack

(see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 1). Turkey has arrested about 30 people in connection with the attack; at least 11 of them are from Russia's Caucasus region ([YeniSafak](#), July 5).

IS has been circumspect about claiming its attacks in Turkey. After the devastating bombings last year in Süruc and Ankara, however, it now appears intent on targeting areas where it can expect high levels of foreign casualties, and in doing so attract greater international attention ([al-Jazeera](#), October 10, 2015). In January, a suicide bomber blew himself up in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square, a tourist hotspot. Eleven people died in that attack, all of them Western tourists ([Hurriyet](#), January 27). In the attack on Istanbul airport, 19 of those killed were foreigners ([Hurriyet](#), June 29).

Turkish media set the attack against the backdrop of Ankara's recent diplomatic efforts to mend ties abroad, including with Israel, Russia, and Egypt ([Hurriyet](#), June 29). In fact, Turkey's diplomatic push is largely due to a weakening of its own position in the Middle East. It can no longer afford to have ambivalent relations with other powers while over the border the Syrian conflict rages and the region grows increasingly chaotic.

Moreover, the conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which resurged following the collapse of a March 2013 ceasefire agreement, is reaching a level of violence not seen since the 1990s. A number of terror attacks – including a mortar attack on Istanbul's Sabiha Gokcen airport in December, which left one person dead – have been claimed by a PKK-linked militant group, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) ([Hurriyet](#), December 23, 2015).

Both Turkey's conflict with the PKK – which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears willing to cultivate, hoping it will win him backing for planned presidential reforms – and the IS attacks have taken their toll. According to the 2016 Global Peace Index, Turkey is now ranked as the most dangerous country in Europe.

BANGLADESH: GULSHAN ATTACK HIGHLIGHTS ON-LINE RADICALIZATION FEARS

Alexander Sehmer

Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for the bloody attack on a popular cafe in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka, which unfolded over about 24 hours on July 1 and 2 and left twenty people dead ([Daily Star](#), July 3). Six gunmen stormed the Holey Artisan Bakery in the Gulshan district of the capital, taking hostages and prompting a massive military operation that culminated in a raid by security forces.

As the standoff with the military unfolded, Islamic State quickly claimed credit for the attack via its Amaq News Agency, releasing gruesome images of dead bodies that it claimed had been taken inside the cafe. When the raid got under way, reports of freed hostages fleeing the scene made it seem possible to discount the images as IS propaganda ([Asia News Network](#), July 02). But with the discovery of 20 bodies in the aftermath, IS' claims became much less easy to dismiss. The attack already bears some of the hallmarks of Islamic State. Foreigners were intentionally targeted – the cafe was in an area popular with expatriates and the majority of those killed were foreigners. The attackers reportedly selected non-Muslims by having the hostages recite parts of the Quran ([Daily Star](#), July 3). If the images are authentic, then the gunmen in the cafe were in contact with IS at the time of the attack, something for which they would only have required an internet connection.

Bangladesh has repeatedly – in the face of a series of killings of activists and liberals – denied that IS, or al-Qaeda, have a hold in the country. The government only seems to have come alive to the idea in the last month, ordering a government crackdown on Islamists, a move that possibly prompted the attackers to bring forward their operation (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 24). Even in the aftermath of the attack, the government appears unwilling to recognize IS' role. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attributed the attack to “a vested local-international quarter... conspiring to obstruct the country's advancement” ([Daily Star](#), July 3).

While the government's unwillingness to properly address the issue of IS is a significant concern, a major blind spot has emerged concerning the use of the internet.

Bangladeshi officials appear to have been surprised to find the attackers – all of whom were Bangladeshi and most of whom appear to have been educated and reasonably tech-savvy – had accessed radical material online. In one report, Shahjahan Mahmood, who heads the country's telecom's regulator, was quoted as saying the attack had been an "eye-opener" in that regard ([Channel News Asia](#), July 7).

The regulator has since taken some steps to tackle the use of social media as a means of radicalization, including requesting YouTube remove videos of Jashim Uddin Rahmani, whose radical sermons appear to have inspired some of the recent killings seen in Bangladesh ([NDTV](#), December 31, 2015).

That is a welcome move, but one that indicates there is still quite some distance to go if Bangladesh is to adequately tackle the threat of Islamist militancy.

India Treads a Delicate Line With State-Sponsorship of Anti-Maoist Groups

Sudha Ramachandran

India's controversial anti-Maoist vigilante group, Samajik Ekta Manch (SEM), has announced it will disband. Set up in December 2015 with the stated goal of ridding Chhattisgarh's Bastar region of Maoists and supporting the police in their work, the SEM had claimed to be a peaceful initiative. Nevertheless, it has been accused of carrying out a violent campaign against rights activists and journalists in Bastar, the center of India's Maoist conflict. In one recent incident, a journalist was hounded out of Bastar for her articles on alleged police atrocities; in another incident, an Adivasi (tribal) activist's face was smeared with scalding, corrosive grease for campaigning against extra-judicial killings and rapes by Bastar police ([Scroll.in](#), Feb 8; [The Telegraph \[India\]](#), February 29).

Police patronage of SEM has been evident, with SEM leaders boasting of their "official connections." Their weapons have been traced back to police armories, according to Bibhu Prasad Routray, an expert on the Maoist conflict. [1] Meanwhile, senior police officials have attended the group's public meetings and were captured on camera admitting to "facilitating" and supporting the SEM's work ([India Today](#), April 14).

Media accounts of the SEM's alleged violence are likely just the tip of the anti-Maoist vigilante iceberg. Dozens of state-supported militias operate across areas where the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist), India's largest Maoist group, is active. In Jharkhand, for instance, "terror gangs" like the Jharkhand Jana Mukti Parishad operate with impunity ([Hindustan Times](#), January 24). Unlike in Chhattisgarh, the Jharkhand police use breakaway factions of the CPI-Maoist "to wage a war against the parent outfit." [2]

State-Sponsored Militias

The state's arming and use of vigilante groups to tackle the Maoists is not a recent phenomenon in the conflict. It was already a part of the government's strategy to counter Communist revolutionaries in Telengana in the

1946-1951 period. From the late 1980s, militias like the Kranti Sena and the Nallamalla Cobras were an important part of the Andhra Pradesh police's anti-Maoist strategy. They were used to eliminate Maoists through extrajudicial methods and silence civil rights activists ([Tehelka](#), March 4, 2006). Such state-sponsored anti-Maoist vigilantism reached unprecedented heights in 2005 with the launch of the Salwa Judum in Bastar. The havoc it created prompted the Supreme Court to declare Salwa Judum as "illegal and unconstitutional" in 2011. The court ordered it be disbanded and forbade the Chhattisgarh government from supporting any civilian vigilante force. It was the state's responsibility to prevent the operation of such groups, it said ([The Hindu](#), July 5, 2011). Despite this ruling, the use of vigilantes in the state's anti-Maoist strategy continues. June 2005 saw the emergence of an anti-Maoist "movement" named Vikas Sangharsh Samiti (VSS), which has striking similarities to Salwa Judum ([Indian Express](#), June 13, 2015). Others like the Adivasi Ekta Manch, the Mahila Ekta Manch, and the SEM itself followed. [3]

The Maoist Conflict

When India's decades-old Maoist conflict erupted violently in north Bengal in 1969, the government was successful in crushing that uprising through the use of force, but the armed struggle spread to other parts of the country. The heartland of the conflict has since moved, and it has gone through phases of escalation and de-escalation, with the current phase the most violent.

The CPI-Maoist's aim is to capture state power. It claims to represent India's most deprived—Adivasis, Dalits (former 'Untouchables'), and the rural poor. Its espousal of Adivasi causes is partly motivated by its ideology, but has also developed because its guerrilla strategy requires it to operate from hills and forests, which are inhabited by the Adivasis. It needs their support for survival and fighters, hence its articulation of Adivasi issues. The Adivasis, meanwhile, are aggrieved over the loss of their ancestral lands and access to forests, depriving them of their homes and means of survival. Dams and mining projects have displaced millions. While most Adivasis prefer non-violent activism to a violent confrontation with the state, state repression and the branding of these campaign groups as 'Maoist fronts' has pushed a growing number of Adivasi youth to join the Maoists.

The State's strong opposition to the Maoists – evident from its willingness to use force, including "any element of its national power" against them – is a response to the Maoist's own aims and violent methods ([The Telegraph \[India\]](#), October 18, 2014). At the same time, however, the land that the Adivasis inhabit, swathes of which are under varying degrees of Maoist influence, is mineral-rich. Industry watchdogs have lamented that Adivasi protests and the Maoist insurgency in "mineral rich heartlands" are disrupting the investment plans of mining companies ([Frontline](#), February 13-26, 2010). The state's stepping-up of counter-insurgency operations, and continued reliance on militias despite their illegality, seems aimed not just at eliminating the Maoists, but at forcing the Adivasis off their land in order to free it for exploitation by mining companies.

Armed by the police, Salwa Judum unleashed unprecedented violence on the local population, depopulating entire villages and triggering a massive displacement of the Adivasis ([Scroll.in](#), April 8). As a consequence, around 640 villages "sitting on tons of iron ore" became "available for the highest bidder," according to a government report. [4]

Business interests are also believed to lie behind the recent spurt in vigilante groups in Bastar. VSS took shape soon after Chhattisgarh government officials signed memorandums of understanding over a steel plant and a railway line ([Indian Express](#), June 4, 2015).

Counterproductive Strategy

There are operational benefits to using local Adivasi militias against the Maoists. Bibhu Routray, an expert on the Maoist conflict, observed: "Although not trained, the Adivasi know the terrain and the CPI-Maoist inside out. Deploying Adivasi against Adivasi is an effective way of using the best local resources available against the Maoists." [5]

Adivasi vigilantes may have effectively contributed to the weakening in recent years of the CPI-Maoists, which has lost several leaders and cadres. However, the state's use of vigilantism may also be fueling the Maoist conflict. State backing of vigilante torture and killing has deepened Adivasi disaffection with the state and it is the Maoists who benefit from this alienation.

The impact of the SEM, Salwa Judum, and other vigilante groups on Adivasi society and the Maoist conflict is instructive. Gradually the leaders of such groups begin to operate autonomously, refusing to take orders from the police. The emergence of Salwa Judum led directly to the 'warlordization' of Bastar. The armed conflict there assumed the dimensions of a near civil war. In certain places, such as Dornapal in Chhattisgarh, it was the Salwa Judum rather than the state that called the shots. [6]

There is palpable fear in Bastar that the days of Salwa Judum are back. It is doubtful that the dissolution of the SEM marks the end of vigilantism in Bastar. If history is any guide, state support for such groups will likely ensure it continues, albeit under another name.

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[1] Author interview with Bibhu Prasad Routray, an expert on the Maoist conflict and a former Deputy Director in India's National Security Council Secretariat, New Delhi, June 25 2016.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development, Committee On State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Task of Land Reforms, vol. I Draft Report. Available online at www.rd.ap.gov.in/IKPLand/MRD_Committee_Report_V_01_Mar_09.pdf (accessed on July 3).

[5] Routray, n.1.

[6] Jason Miklian, "The Purification Hunt: The Salwa Judum Counterinsurgency in Chhattisgarh, India," *Dialectical Anthropology*, 33, nos. 3-4 (December 2009), pp. 449-50

Kenya Gambles on Closure of Somali Refugee Camp to Halt al-Shabaab Attacks

Sunguta West

Kenya has announced a plan to close its Dadaab refugee camp, the world's largest refugee settlement, hoping such a move will end attacks by al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab fighters, who Nairobi has long claimed have infiltrated the settlement.

Since Kenyan troops rolled into Somalia to fight al-Shabaab in 2011, terror attacks in the country have increased, with the al-Shabaab militants targeting government installations and police facilities, as well as soft targets such as churches. ([The Star](#), March 13; [Daily Nation](#), September 29, 2015).

Kenya has experienced more than 100 terror attacks since its troops moved into Somali, with incidents in the capital Nairobi, the majority Muslim areas in the coastal region, the cities of Mombasa and Lamu, and the north-eastern region towns of Garissa, Mandera and Wajir ([The Standard](#), August 2014). Officials claim many of these attacks were planned in Dadaab, and for several years Nairobi has warned the camp has become a security threat and an al-Shabaab recruitment ground.

As a consequence, Kenya intends to close the camp and repatriate the hundreds of thousands of displaced Somalis who have congregated there ([Business Daily](#), May 11). Officials say the plan will see the camp closed by November, with its refugee population repatriated either to Somalia or any third-party country that will accept them, an exercise that is expected to cost nearly 20 billion Kenyan Shillings (\$198 million) ([The Star](#), June 24).

Kenya has already allocated funds to the project, but the timetable appears ambitious. Moreover, if handled incorrectly, closing Dadaab could send a flood of desperate people into the arms of al-Shabaab recruiters.

The Dadaab Camp

Dadaab was established 25 years ago by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which built Dadaab as a complex of three camps – Dagahaley,

Hagadera and Ifo –in a desert area just 80km from the border with Somalia. The UNCHR continues to run the camp with funds sourced from the international community.

The three camps were built to accommodate thousands of Somali refugees fleeing the outbreak of clan violence that ensued in the wake of the collapse of Somali President Mohamed Siad Barre's government. Two other camps, Ifo II and Kambios, were opened in 2011 to accommodate the arrival of another 130,000 refugees fleeing severe drought, as well as the onslaught of the then-emergent al-Shabaab.

Daily arrivals of an estimated 1,000 migrants swelled the camp. Today it is home to an official population of 320,000 refugees and, by some estimates, contains as many as 600,000 people when itinerant family members are included ([The Standard](#), May 10). The camp is now considered Kenya's fourth largest city.

The government says the camp's size has made it an economic and environmental burden on Kenya, although Kenya meets only a small fraction of Dadaab's running costs. Furthermore, a 2010 economic report, jointly sponsored by the Dutch, Norwegian and Kenyan governments, found the camp provided its host community with an economic bonus equivalent to \$14 million annually. [1]

Security Fears

For months political leaders, particularly from Garissa County where Dadaab is situated, have been calling for Dadaab to be closed ([Daily Nation](#), April 6, 2015). Nairobi alleges al-Shabaab sneaks its intelligence agents, members of its *amniyat* unit, into the camp posing as refugees and then uses it as a recruiting ground to radicalize young refugees for suicide missions in Kenya and to fight in Somalia ([Daily Nation](#), June 22). According to Kenyan officials, the camp is also a conduit for arms trafficking and a smuggling route for contraband goods, which eventually find their way to the East African market ([Capital FM](#), May 11).

These concerns are set against a backdrop of deadly attacks in Kenya. In April 2015, four gunmen believed to belong to al-Shabaab's Jabha Unit attacked Garissa University College, killing 148 people and wounding 79. The victims were mainly Christian students. The attack

occurred as security agencies were still trying to unravel the earlier Westgate shopping mall attack from September 2013, which saw gunmen sent by the militant group open fire in the upmarket shopping center in Nairobi's Parklands area, killing 67 people and injuring more than 175. Al-Shabaab has also carried out a host of smaller attacks in the north, along the border with Somalia, and in the coastal region, including an attack in Lamu in which 85 people were killed ([The Star](#), July 4).

Senior government and security officials say these attacks, including the Garissa University and Westgate Mall attacks, were planned inside the camp ([Capital FM](#), May 11).

Opposition to Closure

Despite the security concerns, Kenya's decision to close the camp is controversial. The Somali government has criticized the plan, saying it will badly affect the refugees and heighten the threat of terrorism in Somalia and Eastern Africa ([Citizen TV](#), May 12). The international community has also indicated its discomfort, cautioning such a move would go against international law and endanger the lives of the refugees ([Daily Nation](#), June 18). Meanwhile, international NGOs and refugee rights groups have urged Kenya to reconsider, arguing the situation in Somalia is too unsafe for resettlement ([SABC](#), June 14).

That rings somewhat false as, since November 2013, there has been a tripartite agreement in place between Kenya, Somalia, and the UNHCR, intended to encourage the voluntary return of refugees by promising support for returnees. Kenya, though, has grown frustrated at the slow pace of repatriation, saying only a few refugees have taken advantage of the offer ([Daily Nation](#), May 7; [Daily Nation](#), April, 2015).

Now, with plans for the camp to be closed, Kenya has disbanded the Department of Refugee Affairs (DDR) and set up a National Task Force on the Repatriation of the Refugees ([Africa Press Organization](#), April 22), ([The Standard](#), May 14).

Dangerous Gamble

Kenya appears to believe that by closing the camp it is taking care of one of its security challenges and will be able to at least limit al-Shabaab attacks in the country. It

hopes that closing the camp will cut-off the flow of al-Shabaab militants and intelligence agents who have infiltrated Dadaab. It also believes it is cutting off a route for the smuggling of arms and ammunition from Somalia into Kenya.

Kenya's strategy more generally has been to create a security buffer zone near the border in Southern Somalia to check al-Shabaab infiltration. Five-years of military intervention has secured large swathes of Southern Somalia, and nearly 10,000 acres in Jubaland has been set aside for resettlement ([The Standard](#), June 15). Kenyan officials believe the area could become home to the returnees and effectively extend the potential buffer zone ([Somalia Report](#), October 24, 2011; [Capital FM](#), March 23, 2015).

Closing the camp also risks driving desperate returnees to Somalia into the arms of al-Shabaab. Homeless and desperate, they could be easy prey for the group's recruiters promising a purpose and financial support.

On the other hand, if the repatriation is carried out effectively, the influx of potential workers to Somalia could see the refugees become economic agents whose industry could help end Somalia's circle of poverty and insecurity.

With Kenya set on closing the camp, the challenge will be for Kenya, Somalia and the international community to carry out the relocation with sensitivity. If they fail, it could turn the closure of the camp into a crisis that threatens the security of the whole region.

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[1] See 'In Search of Protection and Livelihoods: Socio-economic and Environmental Impacts of Dadaab Refugee Camps on Host Communities', (September, 2010) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/C477129C7D41DCFB852577B3006B2818-Full_Report.pdf

Foreign Assets Under Threat: Is AQIM Preparing an In Amenas-style Attack?

Jessica Moody

In late May, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed it had attacked an Areva-operated uranium mine in Arlit, northern Niger ([Alakhbar](#), May 24). AQIM attributed the alleged assault to its al-Nasser brigade and said the attack was carried out with Grad-type missiles ([Alakhbar](#), May 24). There were no reported injuries or damage as a result of the attack and the Nigerien government even denied the assault had taken place ([Alakhbar](#), May 26). Areva made no comment.

AQIM said its alleged attack had taken place in spite of strict security measures at the facility, although security at the mine has come under some scrutiny in recent years ([Alakhbar](#), May 24). The Arlit facility was bombed in 2013. The attack, which left one person dead and 14 others injured, was blamed on the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and al-Mourabitoun ([Le Sahel](#), May 23, 2013; [Middle East Online](#), May 24, 2013).

The purported rocket attack on the Arlit facility came amid a series of AQIM attacks on soft targets in West Africa that include: a hotel in Bamako, Mali in November 2015; a hotel and a cafe in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in January 2016; and a beach resort near Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire in March 2016 ([RFI](#), November 20, 2015; [le faso](#), January 16; [Koaci](#), March 15).

The Arlit assault, however, also follows a rocket attack carried out on a gas facility run by BP and Statoil in Kechba, Algeria in March. These attacks raise questions about whether the group intends to target more high-profile foreign owned or operated assets going forward and if AQIM has the capabilities to conduct such attacks ([TSA](#), 21 March).

AQIM's Intentions

It is highly likely that AQIM intends to carry out further attacks on infrastructure and extractive facilities in West Africa. Such assaults are key to recruitment efforts, enabling the group to tap into widespread grievances in

the region surrounding resource management and the perceived “theft” of resources by international organizations.

Shortly after AQIM claimed responsibility for the alleged Arlit attack, the group issued a warning to other multinational organizations in West Africa that they were also targets for AQIM attacks. The group stated that the region was “not a place for theft” and that “[their] wealth should not be extorted” ([MEMRI](#), May 26).

This echoes sentiments expressed after the Krechba attack in Algeria in March and the Burkina Faso attack in January. Following the latter assault, AQIM declared that the attack had been carried out as a result of deals being made “to rob the wealth of Africa” in that country ([RCSS Middle East](#), February 3).

The statement appeared to be a reference to the transitional period between late 2014 and early 2016 in Burkina Faso. During this period, numerous demonstrations were launched against foreign mining companies for allegedly stealing local wealth without investing in longer term development ([le faso](#), June 5, 2015).

In the case of Niger, the rocket attack occurred just weeks after Areva was faced with strike action at Cominak, its other uranium mine in Niger ([Pulse.ng](#), May 3). Workers protested over the company’s alleged failure to pay promised bonus payments in full ([Pulse.ng](#), May 3). AQIM likely hopes that the conduct of such attacks will help it to play into these local grievances, potentially assisting the militant group in its recruitment efforts.

Potential for High-Profile Attack

Although the latest infrastructure attacks in Algeria and Niger will have concerned foreign companies, they have not caused nearly as much damage as the 2013 In Amenas attack in Algeria, which left more than 30 foreign hostages at the gas plant dead ([RFI](#), January 19, 2013). It is likely, however, that AQIM will seek to replicate that more effective and conspicuous assault.

Its desire to stage an In Amenas-style attack is closely linked to the way in which AQIM has become bolder and more aggressive in its assaults since it re-allied with al-Mourabitoun following the Bamako attack in November 2015 ([RFI](#), December 5, 2015). The merger of the two groups has contributed to an apparent rejuvena-

tion of AQIM, which had struggled to carry out any significant attacks between 2007 and 2015 and had largely restricted itself to hit and run attacks in northern Mali.

The reunion has brought Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the leader of al-Mourabitoun and the alleged mastermind of the In Amenas attacks, back into AQIM. Belmokhtar, who believes conventional warfare against Western forces is ineffective, and who is known for his penchant for “spectacular” attacks, is likely to push AQIM to conduct ever more high-profile assaults on extractive facilities.

The rivalry between AQIM and Islamic State (IS) will further entice the group to carry out a more significant attack in West Africa. The increasing frequency of AQIM attacks and their timing, which has often coincided with IS assaults, suggests the group is trying to ensure it is not out-done by the more radical agenda of IS.

The Bamako attack, for example, came just 10 days after the IS Paris attacks in November 2015; and the Ouagadougou attack occurred almost immediately after IS carried out an attack in Jakarta, the group’s first assault in Southeast Asia.

A “spectacular” attack similar to In Amenas would likely attract new followers and enable AQIM to draw back some of its support base, which it has been hemorrhaging to IS in recent years (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 3). Several key militant groups in the AQIM stronghold of Algeria, including the al-Ansar Brigade, al-Ghuraba Brigade, and Jund al-Khilafa, as well as Boko Haram in Nigeria, have declared their affiliation with IS since its proliferation ([al-Jazeera](#), September 14, 2014; [al-Jazeera](#), March 8, 2015).

Expanding Militant Network

The attacks carried out in Algeria and Niger, in March and May of this year respectively, display AQIM’s ability to launch missile attacks on extractive and infrastructure facilities in the region. However, as far as the available information shows, the attacks were not particularly effective – neither was reported to have caused any damage or injuries.

This implies that while AQIM might be contemplating an In Amenas-style assault, this type of attack is at present beyond the group’s capabilities. Such an assault would

require extensive planning and personnel and possibly more advanced weaponry. Such requirements could explain why, despite targeting extractive facilities twice in the past six months, AQIM has favored less complex missile assaults in both cases. Neither attack has caused anywhere near as much damage – either physical or reputational – to its foreign targets as the In Amenas assault.

Nevertheless, the task the group faces in conducting a more significant infrastructure attack may become gradually easier over the coming months. AQIM demonstrated during its assaults in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Grand Bassam that it has been expanding its networks and links to local militant groups throughout the Sahel. This expansion has enabled AQIM to carry out attacks some distance outside of its traditional strongholds, including one in southern Cote d'Ivoire in March ([Global Observatory](#), April 6).

Ethnic groups, including the Fulani, the Bambara, and the Songhai, have all been sought out to join the group, and AQIM has formed a number of battalions from these various ethnicities ([MG Africa](#), February 14; [Global Observatory](#), April 6; [al-Jazeera](#), January 17, 2013). Meanwhile, the group has ties to the Force de Libération du Macina (FLM) and Ansar Dine, which are active in central and southern Mali ([Global Observatory](#), April 6).

Under a more aggressive AQIM leadership, an expanded following may be capable of carrying out more sophisticated assaults on infrastructure and extractive facilities. The weakness of security within the region and the vast and increasing availability of weaponry will also make the planning of such an assault feasible in the medium term.

Security forces in West Africa are frequently weak and corrupt; militaries are often undermanned, and borders lack adequate security measures and checks ([Vanguard](#), June 18, 2015). Tracking a single militant can require considerable resources. It has been suggested that all of France's Operation Barkhane's resources have been required to arrest a single insurgent or destroy large caches of weapons. [1] This situation has been exacerbated by the effects of the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the Malian crisis, which have seen weapons and ammunition flood the Sahel, allowing militant groups to easily obtain large stores of heavy weaponry ([Reuters](#), November 24, 2011).

AQIM has also proved itself to be extremely adaptable. Despite Operation Barkhane's efforts to destroy vast quantities of weaponry in the region, the group's members in northern Mali have learned how to build their own bombs using fertilizers. [2] Additionally, the flexibility of AQIM and its use of various divergent cells makes it much harder for security services to predict, prevent, or stop attacks. A Malian military officer in 2009 said that AQIM groups evade capture by ensuring they "move fast and never stay in one place" ([BBC](#), November 23, 2009). Added to this, AQIM's *Katibas* (brigades) operate largely autonomously, meaning that while security personnel may be monitoring the central command, they struggle to track all of the affiliated battalions simultaneously.

Heightened Security

Amid regionally weak security, the effect of the In Amenas attack on multinational organizations and local militaries has almost certainly been to force them to increase their security measures and review risk planning at extractive facilities, ideally better preparing them for a similarly "spectacular" attack.

This was most apparent after the Krechba assault in which security forces reacted quickly, mounting a security operation around the gas field, killing four militants and wounding another three ([Alalam](#), March 21; [PressTV](#), March 20). Both BP and Statoil withdrew their staff from the facility, preventing any hostage situation from unfolding, and Sonatrach employees later claimed that production actually increased in the aftermath of the attack ([Algeria Press Service](#), March 22). Although the withdrawal of BP and Statoil staff was undoubtedly costly and administratively taxing, the level of impact was in stark contrast to the In Amenas attack, which caused much more prolonged reputational and physical damage to the gas plant. Consequently, an attack on the scale of that assault may be much harder for AQIM to carry out now than it would have been for al-Mourabitoun in 2013.

While in the longer term AQIM will aim to carry out a significant attack on foreign extractive assets, such an attack is unlikely in the immediate future. The attacks on soft targets in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Grand Bassam were relatively effective and required limited planning and resources. The likelihood is that these more

“cost-effective” assaults will remain a staple for the foreseeable future, while the group builds its capacity over the next 12-18 months.

Possible Future Targets

AQIM has cited troop contributions to the UN’s MINUSMA mission in Mali and other counter-terrorism operations across the Sahel as its main reason for conducting attacks outside of Mali ([Global Observatory](#), February 29; [Alakhbar](#), May 24). Niger is involved in the peacekeeping mission and is home to a French intelligence and a US-drone base, making the country a key target. It is highly likely that if AQIM is able to conduct a more sophisticated infrastructure assault in the longer term, it will take place in another West African country involved in the peacekeeping mission.

It is also notable that both Algeria and Niger are involved in long-running resource management disputes with their populations. AQIM called the attack in Arlit a response to “crusader thieves” who had “plundered” Niger’s resources ([MEMRI](#), May 26). Facilities in countries with equally controversial resource management regimes provide much more “legitimate” targets for AQIM, enabling the group to more effectively tap into local grievances over resource nationalism.

The purported Arlit rocket attack should serve as a warning to extractive companies that more aggressive insurgent assaults on multinationals are on militant groups’ agendas and are likely to become more pervasive as insurgencies throughout the region gain prominence.

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NOTES

[1] Author interview with Francois Rihouay, freelance journalist based in Bamako (May 16, 2016)

[2]Ibid